

## Driving East Through Indian Country: Black Hawk Chapter

While I would never argue that stories depicting the tragedy of genocide (e.g. Indian boarding schools, the Trail of Tears) are not centrally important in the telling of American history, their prominence in the discourse becomes problematic when considered in the wider context of *whitestream* consumption. In other words, why are these stories upheld as the prime-time programs in the commodified network of Indian history? What is gained from the proliferation of essentialist portrayals of *whitestream* domination and Indian subjugation?

-Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy*

Seemingly about the 19th century Sauk leader Black Hawk (Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak), this project is in fact mostly not about Black Hawk. We are using the occasion of the 175th anniversary of the Black Hawk “War” to examine how historical narratives function in the present. In other words, which stories are legitimated and which stories are suppressed through commemorative practices such as historical re-enactments, place names, and roadside markers. To be more precise, this project centers on the disconnect between Black Hawk as a symbol and Black Hawk as a human being, and, more importantly, the disconnect between the Black Hawk War as a historical narrative materially inscribed in the landscape and the present-day struggles of American Indian peoples and Nations in the Midwestern United States.

Framed as the “last Indian war east of the Mississippi,” popular accounts of the Black Hawk War imply that the conquest of the eastern half of the United States was absolute, inevitable, and irreversible. Mainstream historical narratives and related commemorative practices – even when sympathetic to Black Hawk’s massacred band – nonetheless situate Indians in a distant and unchanging past. Framing the narrative in this manner obscures the survival, continued presence, and significant contributions of Native peoples, and inadvertently reproduces 19th century ideologies of extermination, pacification, and assimilation.

(Im)mobility is a common theme that links the earlier era of Indian removal to the contemporary period of mass tourism. Marketed as the unfettered freedom (for some) of the open road, tourism – particularly automobile tourism – echoes the logic of westward expansion on an individual and compressed scale. Because one of the primary ways that non-Indians come to form opinions of Indians is through automobile tourism, we have referenced the auto tour throughout this project as methodology, as aesthetic, and as form.

“Re-Collecting Black Hawk” is the first chapter in the larger project *Driving East Through Indian Country*. The project adopts an eastward orientation – a symbolic posture of decolonization – in seeking to uncover, expose, and offer alternatives to the logic of westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, and Indian subjugation writ large in the landscape. We celebrate the more recent struggles and victories of Indian peoples and their allies for self-determination, the protection of treaty rights, and speaking truth to power. Ultimately, we hope to tell a more complicated story – one that fundamentally recognizes American Indians as living peoples with a diversity of experiences and perspectives, who, both in the past and present, actively shape their own lives and the lives of others.

Just as this chapter of *Driving East* is mostly not about Black Hawk it is also intended for a mostly non-Indian audience. That Indians have survived to actively shape their own lives and the lives of others goes without saying in “Indian Country,” where people have been courageously resisting colonization for over 500 years. If the fact of survival comes as a surprise, it is only to the non-Indian, whose “privilege” allows such ignorance and oversight to persist. Indian peoples do not bear the sole responsibility of educating non-Indians. We believe that white people, like ourselves, have a responsibility to think and act beyond guilt and to challenge feelings of impotence engendered by our staggering inability to correct past wrongs. Accepting the past as the inevitable outcome of natural processes beyond our control – both individually and collectively – renders us incapable of mobilizing in the present in order to bring about a more just future.

Symbolic Indians – fabricated out of equal parts ignorance, myth, attraction, and repulsion – have served as cornerstones in the construction of white identity for too long. White people must confront their nostalgia for heroic conflict safely ensconced in the past and their growing uneasiness with glitzy casinos, “special rights,” and Indians who don’t fit the stereotype. We must acknowledge and confront the historical legacy, lingering effects (such as inter-generational trauma, and material disadvantage), and new present-day forms of institutional racism and colonialism that permeate all levels of our society. Dwelling on the past is useful only insofar as we are willing to make connections between historical exploitation, oppression, and genocide and new forms of subjugation, which continue to limit possible futures. The means have changed but Indian peoples and their lands are under assault today as they were at the time of Black Hawk. We are fooling only ourselves by characterizing the Black Hawk War as the “last Indian war east of the Mississippi.” Such acts of selective memory and amnesia only exacerbate latent tensions, thus insuring future conflict. In the end, the struggle of indigenous peoples is inseparable from the larger struggle for a just and sustainable world. It is in our own self-interest, as recent settlers on this land, to honor and uphold the commitments of our ancestors. Anything less will simply perpetuate the violence and injustices of the past.