

Excerpts from Commentary on Ward Churchill's Scholarship

Howard Zinn:

"I note that aside from the controversy over specific statements Ward Churchill has made with regard to 9-11, there have also been questions raised about his scholarship. I am aware of his writings on native American history, and I have found them to be assiduously researched, making important contributions to a much-neglected part of this nation's history. It is interesting that, with all his years of writing books and articles, it is only after his controversial statements about 9-11, that there suddenly arise questions about his scholarship.

This

suggests political motivations rather than real concerns about the quality of his work."

Blurbing Acts of Rebellion: The Ward Churchill Reader (2003), Zinn also says:

"Ward Churchill is one of our most powerful chroniclers of Indian history – both of the sorry record of the United States government and the extraordinary resistance of the Indian people to policies of removal and annihilation. Each one of his books is an education in itself."

Also blurbing Acts of Rebellion, Noam Chomsky says:

"Ward Churchill has carved out a special place for himself in defending the rights of oppressed people, and exposing the dark side of past and current history, often forgotten, marginalized, or suppressed. These are achievements of inestimable value."

Introducing A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present (1997), David Stannard, Professor of American Studies, University of Hawai'i-Manoa, says:

"Of course, anyone familiar with [Ward Churchill's] voluminous writings during the past two decades – on subjects such as racism in American film and literature, New Age spiritual hucksterism and counterfeit Indians, U.S. government death squads, the damage done to indigenous peoples by the forces of capitalism *and* marxism, and a great deal more – know that Churchill quite audaciously has been courting (and finding) trouble for some time now. But with *A Little Matter of Genocide* he is certain to bring on the enmity of an entirely new and particularly vitriolic collection of critics. And this is a shame because the sentiments of his new book are extraordinarily compassionate and humanitarian, while its overall argument is eminently fair, deliberative, and reasonable. . . . But it is only because of trouble-makers like him that the deadened conscience of this nation might some day begin to stir. May his kind multiply."

Richard Falk, Albert G. Milbank Professor of International Law and Practice, Princeton University:

"I have worked with Ward in the area of human rights, especially the rights of indigenous peoples. We served together on a tribunal in 1993 concerned with the rights of

native Hawaiians, including their right of self-determination. Ward was a real leader in that effort, and exhibited a deep knowledge of this subject-matter.

Ward Churchill is one of the outstanding American scholars in this area of indigenous rights, as well as the linking between oppressive political conditions around the globe and the geopolitical designs of the United States Government. His work is widely known and respected, and he enjoys a deserved worldwide reputation. Ward is an excellent scholar, a powerful thinker, and a strong advocate of positions based on his highly developed sense of justice and injustice.”

Robert A. Williams, Jr., E. Thomas Sullivan Professor of Law and American Indian Studies, University of Arizona:

“... [A]nyone who's followed the field of American Indian Studies for the past three decades would immediately recognize Ward Churchill as an important scholar, writer and advocate, whose published works are widely cited and relied upon. His body of written work and teaching has inspired a generation of younger Native students and activists to unashamedly assert indigenous sovereignty and Indian rights over a broad domain of intellectual and cultural life in American society. In many ways and in many forums, he has helped to shape the discourse of the modern Indian rights movement. He is, in fact, the unquestioned intellectual leader of a vanguard movement of AIS scholars who brandish a no-holds-barred, no compromise form of Indian political rhetoric that upsets and even incites many non-Indians. Professor Churchill also oftentimes challenges Indian people themselves to take responsibility for an unthinking, uncritical adoption of non-indigenous, colonially-dominated ways of thought and talking about Indians and also about contemporary American society. His most challenging writings therefore make him few friends, while earning him many enemies. While at times tendentious and almost always pushing the envelope, if not tearing it to pieces, Professor Churchill, through sheer force of intellect, energy, and a radical reformer's zeal, has established himself as a major scholar and public intellectual when it comes to the field of American Indian Studies. Some people may not like that, but what does one expect of a tenured professor who teaches and writes about American Indians in a highly respected ethnic studies department at a major research university that supposedly values academic freedom -- that he would only have nice things to say about this country in his scholarship?”

Roland Chrisjohn, Ph. D., Director, Program in Native Studies, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick:

“I remember the first time I met Professor Churchill in person. At the time several self-styled "Indian activists" had been accusing him publicly of being an agent for the F.B.I. I shook his hand and asked him whether he could get several more agents assigned to the work he was doing: it was, and continues to be, so central to serious work in Native Studies that I can only wish there were a dozen more of him.

Professor Churchill has made deep, serious, and scholarly contributions to so many areas of

Native Studies that perhaps he is a dozen people. His works on the Cointelpro program are not only the best resource in the area, they are close to the only resource for a topic many would prefer we forget. The starting place for anyone wishing to understand the dangers of the "New Age" movement's expropriation of indigenous culture are his articles on Plastic Medicine Men. If one wishes to dispute the bland assertions that Indians have been in the Americas for 15,000 years at most, one can spend several months going through anthropological and archaeological journals... or one can consult his admirable summary of this work. And if one wishes to understand genocide and the North American indigenous peoples, there is no one who produces such consistently insightful, useful, and engaging work.

However, these examples only scratch the surface. I have personally made use of Professor Churchill's works in virtually every course in Native Studies I have ever taught. I would say that, for anyone seriously interested in Native American scholarship, each new book by Professor Churchill is a major event. His attention to detail and his critical intellect are beyond question, and not only should be congratulated, but emulated."

Robert Jensen, Professor, School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin:

"As a professor of journalism who writes often about race, politics, and history, I have read much of Ward Churchill's work and find it indispensable in my research. Churchill's writing is notable for its breadth and depth, as he moves between history, political analysis, legal research, and cultural criticism. In all these arenas, his scholarship is grounded in thorough research and clear logic.

Beyond that, I have always found Churchill's willingness to engage in discussion and activism around contemporary political issues to be exemplary. He is willing to apply his scholarly work to the world outside the academy, something I believe should be more common among professors. Churchill does it with honesty and commitment. . . .

I believe the current attempts to force Churchill out of his university position are part of a larger project that seeks to tame academics and discourage the independent inquiry that often leads to critique of powerful institutions in society. This constitutes not only a threat to Churchill's career, but to academic freedom."

Kathleen Cleaver, Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow, Emory Law School, Senior Lecturer, African American Studies, Yale University:

"I see Professor Churchill as an outstanding representative of the honorable tradition of scholar activists, such as Howard Zinn, professor of history formerly at Boston University, Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at MIT, and the late Edward Said, professor of literature at Columbia. Like Churchill, these scholars taught at their universities but did not confine their scholarship nor their activism to their specific discipline, nor limit their concern to the campus boundary. . . .

Given the rightward-moving authoritarian orthodoxy that certain politicians have actively

sought to impose on universities for nearly a decade, the insidious campaign to remove Professor Churchill raises cause for alarm. Further, it represents the antithesis of the integrity that Churchill demonstrates in his scholarship and writing, which he devotes to revealing truth and exposing hypocrisy. . . .

Among the valuable works Ward Churchill has published, those I have used most have been his research into the FBI's COINTELPRO, specifically in its operation against the Black Panther Party. . . . In addition, Churchill's work on political imprisonment, notably the anthology *Cages of Steel*, the revised version of which is in press, has also provided extremely helpful to those of us engaged in the heartbreaking effort of defending and seeking the release of political activists unfairly imprisoned within the United States, some of whom have been incarcerated for more than thirty years. . . .

Having suffered during the late 1960s and early 70s the stings of disinformation, infiltration, political repression and the murder of members of my political organization, my take on current political development may differ from many. In the massive campaign to oust Churchill, I cannot help but detect the fine trace of an operation designed to appear 'spontaneous' but actually manipulated to attain a larger political objective."

David McNally, Professor of Political Science, York University, Toronto:

"Ward Churchill's meticulous scholarship of the aboriginal experience in the Americas is widely recognized as a major contribution to study of the history, society, culture and political economy of both North and South America. Anyone who has bothered to consult his major works soon realizes that he has read widely in the relevant scholarly sources. Professor Churchill may sometimes make contentious claims, as much critical, leading edge scholarship often does. But in the best traditions of scholarly work these claims are backed up by close research and documentation. In my own recent book on globalization and global justice movements, I have cited Professor Churchill's work on four occasions. There can be no doubt that Professor Churchill is an important scholar whose rights to free speech and academic freedom ought to be fully respected."

James P. Sterba, Professor of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame (excerpt from letter to University of Colorado Acting Chancellor DiStefano):

"I have been familiar with Professor Churchill's work for a number of years now. I have cited his work approvingly in an essay I wrote for the journal Ethics in 1995 published by the University of Chicago. This journal is probably the oldest and most prestigious journal in the field of ethics and political philosophy published in the the United States. Later, I revised and published a portion of this essay which included the parts that referred to Professor Churchill's

work in my book, *Three Challenges to Ethics*, published with Oxford University Press in 2001. At the time, I asked Professor Churchill to write a blurb for the back of this book which he graciously did. Both Oxford and myself were pleased to have his endorsement of my book. All of this is evidence of my belief, and the beliefs of the editors of *Ethics* and Oxford University Press in the excellence of Professor Churchill's work. There is not even the hint of incompetence here. It is excellence all the way down.”

James Craven (Blackfoot Nation), Professor of Economics, Clark College, Vancouver, Washington:

“Ward [Churchill]'s scholarship is very serious, measured, non-hyperbolic and uses primary sources extensively – in measured and honest ways. As an Indigenous Scholar and activist over almost 40 years, I, like so many others, have stood on the very broad shoulders of the very serious, measured, innovative and daring scholarship of Ward Churchill. Because of the nature of my own scholarship, I have checked primary sources cited by Ward over and over and have never found even one instance of misrepresentation/misuse/over-extrapolation from given sources.

As the son of a Blackfoot mother who was a victim of the U.S. Boarding School system, and as someone who has interviewed literally hundreds of Residential/Boarding School survivors – as a Tribunal Judge dealing with Residential School horrors in Canada and as someone designated by Traditional Blackfoot Authorities to help victims prepare for what they will face in ongoing litigation – I can attest that his work in "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" and other works not only added serious scholarship to this issue, but also corresponded directly and consistently with what I have found in my own research and work with the victims. . . .”

Bruce E. Johansen, Frederick W. Kayser Professor, Communication and Native American Studies, University of Nebraska at Omaha:

“I read in yesterday's Denver Post (March 8) that the newspaper has editorially called for Professor Churchill to be fired (or to resign) because he is (in the newspaper's view), an activist and not a scholar. One major difference between journalism and the professorate (I used to be a newspaper reporter) is that we may "profess" -- that is, we may develop expertise that allows us to take informed positions on issues, political and otherwise. The Denver Post is drawing a line that could be enforced only by making academia a very sterile place.

The present controversy has focused on only a tiny fraction of Prof. Churchill's work. I have read some of his books, and find them to be

well-argued and intensively documented in a scholarly manner. He occasionally has referenced my work, and he has done so properly. I realize that some of what he has written has incited controversy. I believe that engagement in controversy is proper for a scholar; any line between "activism" and "scholarship" is artificial. In my work I have advanced ideas regarding the role of the Iroquois Confederacy in the evolution of democracy that have become the object of intense scrutiny and intense controversy. Controversy and activism are necessary ingredients in the contest of ideas on which the academy should be based."

Robert Perkinson, Assistant Professor, Department of American Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa:

"... I would first emphasize that the most eminent, prolific, and influential Humanities scholars come in different flavors. There are some historians ... who distinguish themselves primarily by bringing to light exhaustive archival research; they make known what was unknown. Others ... gain renown by devoting their entire careers to a particular field, China, slavery, or women's history. Finally, there are academics who are primarily known for their synthesis and interpretation. ...

Ward Churchill clearly falls into this latter camp. Why is this important? Because in order to fairly judge his full body of scholarship, one should focus on his primary area of contribution. In Churchill's case, this means the investigators should be looking at the arguments he has made about genocide, government repression, stereotypes, foreign policy, international law, political theory, etc. ... To focus on Churchill's lack of a dissertation, for instance, ignores the fact that any number of his books would be approved by a dissertation committee in most American universities. To focus on a questionable footnote or a partly replicated passage under murky circumstances ... ignores a phenomenally robust overall body of scholarship than spans thousands of pages.

Public intellectuals write in different forums. Sometimes we crank out op-ed pieces, sometimes we write archive-based monographs, sometimes peer-reviewed journal articles, and sometimes we sound off on an online forum or blog. To suggest that the latter forums require the same level of scholarly care as peer-reviewed publications is to ignore the most basic lessons of source evaluation that we teach our introductory students. Not all sources are created equal, not all of them serve the same purpose.

Finally, I would point out a few of Churchill's contributions that have been largely ignored in this brouhaha.

a) In *Marxism and Native Americans*, for example, (and elsewhere) Churchill was one of the first progressive academics to underline the limitations of Marxist orthodoxy for indigenous scholars and environmental advocates. ... He not only critiques right-wing

ideologues, but quite often tears down leftist conventional wisdom as well. Over the long haul, this book has had a tremendous impact on scholars of indigenous peoples, nationalist movements, environmentalism, and political theory.

b) In *Fantasies of the Master Race*, *Indians Are Us*, and other books, Churchill has distinguished himself as a innovative, witty, and sometimes searing cultural critic of film and literature. While scores of pedestrian academics have written about anti-Indian stereotypes of John Ford-era westerns, Churchill was perhaps the first author to illuminate the discriminatory logic embedded liberal cultural products presumably sympathetic to Indians. His critiques of *Dances with Wolves* and *Black Robe*, for instance, have had a dramatic impact on how those films are taught across the Humanities.

c) In articles like "Genocide: Toward a Functional Definition," Churchill has fundamentally altered the landscape of modern genocide studies. Before the 1990s, genocide scholars rarely challenged the notion that the Jewish Holocaust was a singular historical event. In recent years, however, this has started to shift dramatically, even among scholars of Nazism and Jewish history. This has partly to do with the undeniable horror of recent events, from Kampuchea to Rwanda to Darfur, but is also attributable to the cogent argumentation pioneered significantly by Churchill."

Molefi Kete Asante, Professor, African American Studies, Temple University, and author of Erasing Racism: The Survival of the American Nation:

"Churchill's work is in the best tradition of advancing science and intellectual dialogue and goes directly against the position of those who would keep our minds closed to different points of view; his is the epitome of critical thinking."

Barbara Alice Mann, Ph.D., Author and Lecturer, University of Toledo:

"Ward Churchill is renowned for his leadership in the discipline of Native American Studies, not only in his forthright presentation of Native history, but also for his unflinching review of the lingering effects of European colonialism on North America. Over my several years as a practicing scholar of Native American Studies, I have had countless occasions to note Churchill's citations. In tracking down points referenced by him, I have always found that what he said was there, *was* there, exactly where and as he said it was. I therefore find the recent, incendiary attacks on his scholarship to be highly dubious, emanating as they do from sources who are entirely unknown in the field and who, up to this point, have few credentials and no accomplishments in Native American Studies.

The cavalier misrepresentations of his work now being bandied about can derive from only one of two causes: an inability to read for content, or deliberate misrepresentation.

The first arises from a lack of competence, and the second, from a lack of ethics. I cannot say which is the culprit here, but the purveyors of the invective leveled against Churchill all hie from the right wing, whose agenda it has long been to shout down minorities who challenge any repression of the more seedy aspects of U.S. history, from the seizure of land from Native

Americans to the enslavement of Africans.

I am also disturbed by the blatantly racial content of *ad hominem* attacks I have seen on Churchill. It is bad enough to smear the man, instead of considering his work, but to slur an individual on racial grounds can in no way enhance public discourse. I am old enough to remember Dr. Martin Luther King and the racist vituperation heaped on his head; I am also old enough to remember Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witchhunts. It seems to me that the current political atmosphere has given permission to some of the ugliest elements of American culture to rear their heads again in the public forum. It is incumbent upon Americans to resist the pressure to go with this hateful flow. The alternative is to forfeit what is best in American culture.”

Derrick Jensen, Author, Crescent City, California:

“I am the author of many books, including the highly-acclaimed *A Language Older Than Words* and *The Culture of Make Believe*. The latter was one of three finalists for the Lukas Prize Project Award for Exceptional Works of Nonfiction, sponsored by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, which cited it as a passionate and provocative meditation on the nexus of racism, genocide, environmental destruction and corporate malfeasance, where civilization meets its discontents. My work is commonly lauded for its scholarship and clarity of thought, and because I have the courage to write the truth even when those truths make us uncomfortable.

I did not learn how to be a writer on my own. . . . I learned from the great writers, philosophers, and scholars. I include Ward Churchill among these. Reading his works taught me the importance of impeccable scholarship, utter precision in language, and most of all, that courage to write the truth even when those truths make us uncomfortable.

As a working author whose own works require extraordinary amounts of research, I have learned not to trust other people’s citations. Whenever possible I follow each footnote back to its source, and then follow that footnote to its source, and so on, as far back as I can. I’ve found—and this surprised me at first—that the accuracy of footnotes is maybe 90 to 95 percent, that is, that one out of every ten or twenty footnotes is wrong. Most of these errors are trivial (wrong page, and so on) but sometimes they are more severe. My point as it concerns Ward is that Ward’s accuracy of scholarship is in my extensive experience unparalleled. He is utterly scrupulous in his precision. There are scholars I do not trust with their footnotes, and there are scholars who have earned my trust. I would trust my very life to Ward’s scholarship: it is that solid.”

Scott Michaelsen, Associate Professor and Co-Editor of the New Centennial Review, Michigan State University:

“I’m writing this statement to acknowledge and highlight the significance of Professor Ward Churchill’s scholarship in the area of the Humanities, where he has written outstanding and highly original books and articles over a number of years.

In particular, Ward's book, *Fantasies of the Master Race* (published by Common Courage in 1992, and available in an expanded edition from City Lights as of 1998), is a profound and thoughtful set of interventions regarding the representation of American Indians in literature, film, and scholarship. . . .

Professor Churchill also sets out a more particular historical context regarding American Indians in the Southwest, U.S. mismanagement and malfeasance of the reservation system, and the rise of U.S. Army-sponsored, American Indian "police units." (One thing is always worth mentioning regarding Professor Churchill's work: it is massively documented. Anyone who has ever traced their way back through the notes of one of Professor Churchill's articles will be amply rewarded by his encyclopedic knowledge of both published and archival source materials.)

. . . .[Professor Churchill's] abilities and achievements as a Humanities scholar are, I believe, unimpeachable. He's a brilliant analytical thinker, and has made a mark in this profession that will not be washed away. In a professional where most of what one reads is "business as usual," one can always count on Professor Churchill's work to dig a little bit deeper, to think more clearly about contextual and historical problems in relationship to literature, and to nail precisely the parameters of conventional, cultural narratives. He is (though he might not want to admit it) something of a national treasure in academia."
