

Robert Perkinson

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

. . . 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.