

# Appropriating the Invisible: Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Production and the Native American Other

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## Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu (1993) wrote in his book, *The Field of Cultural Production*, that each position within the field is defined by the 'distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions' (30) and that success within the field is governed by the 'distribution of the capital' (30). Bourdieu made the distinction between the dominant (who possess various forms of capital) and the dominated and detailed their mutual reliance upon the other as a means of maintaining the structure of the field. It is this relationship between dominant and dominated that I am going to examine, primarily through the prism of the Native American Renaissance movement of the 1970s. During this period, several Native American authors came to prominence. However, their ability to possess the different forms of capital, in either of the sub-fields of restricted or wide-scale production, was deficient owing to their oppressed position within American society. I discuss the theory that different forms of capital were granted to Native stories and storytelling, but only when these were appropriated by non-Native producers, and that these non-Natives gained cultural consecration as a direct result of Native work.

## Key Words

Native American; Bourdieu; Field of Cultural Production; Capital; Other; American Indian

## Introduction

In 1983 Kenneth Lincoln's book *Native American Renaissance* was published and in it, Lincoln set out a bold vision of "isolate flecks", these loved and damned bastard words,

fallen to earth and sent skyward again, rise our love medicines, our offspring, our "native Americas" (xvi). It was a call to arms for Native producers and his examination of the resurgence of Native traditions lent its name to the increased interest shown by the wider culture.

Lincoln identifies the birth of this movement in the 1960s, and specifically in 1969 when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. Momaday had achieved an accumulation of capital (economic, cultural and symbolic) not normally seen in Native literature. It was a breakthrough for Momaday's oppressed culture (he is a Kiowa Indian) as well as American Indian cultures more generally and seemed to signal a shift in the dominant/dominated dichotomy.

However, while a small proportion of Native producers were receiving credit for their cultural output, the vast majority were in the same position they had always been in. The various forms of capital were granted to their non-Native counterparts and absorbed by authors and publishers who had appropriated Native stories and storytelling methods. The Renaissance reflected the turbulent history of Native Americans who had continually come up against the 'mixed flotsam and jetsam' (Lincoln 1983, xvi) of American culture, 'clashing, warring, intermarrying, digging and cursing and trashing and blessing the land' (xvi). Their position as invisible inhabitants of Western society persisted.

The powerful succeeded once more in implementing their cultural strategy. In place of direct colonialism, imperialism 'lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere' (Said 1993, 8) and this imperial status quo was kept intact as Renaissance producers were forced to once again wait for a new generation whose voices would somehow affect change in the cultural landscape.

The Native American struggle parallels movements like the Harlem Renaissance and second-wave feminism, movements that rose only to fall but provided significant cultural ballast for future generations. Writers like Tommy Orange wouldn't exist without the authors of the Renaissance and the tectonics of the field of cultural production seem to be shifting now under the increased pressure from Native producers who grew up with Momaday, Erdrich and Silko as their role models.

### **'Material gratification'**

Historically the relationship between economic and cultural capital has been adversarial. The two are set at odds, the former seeming crude in comparison with the high-minded aims of the latter. Artists and producers are divided into two camps, those 'ordinary entrepreneurs seeking immediate economic profit and cultural entrepreneurs struggling to accumulate specifically cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1993, 83).

Bourdieu (1993) refers to the 'heteronomous principle of hierarchization' (38). Those at the top of this hierarchy possess greater economic capital (and inversely very little cultural capital) and producers are more likely to be swayed by external demands made by a mass audience. In 1993, when Bourdieu wrote *The Field of Cultural Production*, large multinational conglomerates had taken a dominant position within the publishing sector and it is these corporations with their profit-driven motivations that most perfectly embody the concept of economic capital.

The Renaissance movement occurred at roughly the same period as the 'synergy phase', a point in time where large corporations looked to publishing houses that seemed like 'attractive acquisitions' (Thompson 2010, 105). This phase would eventually come to an end as corporations became disillusioned with publishing as a result of its lack of profitability and synergistic opportunities.

What was it about this time period that caused such a surge in Native stories and voices? Perhaps it was a reaction to these overtly capitalist aspirations, or maybe it was driven by the New Age spiritualism of the 1960s. Whatever the reason, demand for Native stories (as well as crafts, iconography, spiritualism) was high and publishers and authors alike flocked to the trend.

Publishers like Harper & Row (*House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday, which has been identified as the catalyst for the movement), Penguin (*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko), and Holt, Rinehart & Winston (*Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich) gained economic and intellectual capital from the sale of products that corresponded to a 'pre-existent demand,

i.e. to pre-existent interests in pre-established forms' (Bourdieu 1993, 97). *House Made of Dawn* opened the gates and publishers interested in accumulation of economic capital were primed to walk through.

While not explicitly included in the Native American Renaissance, one book about the Native experience made a huge impact on publishers and readers alike. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1971) tells the story of Native Americans in the American West throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was revolutionary in its portrayal of the American settlers as barbarous and the Natives as victims. It was a bestseller and has since been described as a 'Homeric vision of the American West ... a grim, revisionist tale of the ruthless mistreatment and eventual displacement of the Indian' (*The New York Times* 2002, para. 1).

It would be a concerning level of censorship to state that only Natives are authorised to write about Natives, but it cannot be ignored that Brown and his publishers, Holt, Rinehart & Winston profited hugely from the sale of 'An Indian History'. The book, written by a Caucasian man, altered the way Natives were viewed and changed their cultural representation for decades to come.

The book became the starting point for a literary lexicon of works that spoke of 'this doom period of their civilization [and the Indians who] have vanished from the earth' (Brown 1971, xvi) that exoticized Native culture at the same time as consigning it to the past. As David Treuer (2019) points out 'our cultures are not dead and our civilizations have not been destroyed' (*New Yorker* 2019, para. 3) but a wide audience came to accept that Native Americans were either tragic victims or non-existent.<sup>1</sup>

Here lies the biggest problem when economic capital hinges on the appropriation of marginalised cultures. One successful book, well-intentioned but problematic, can cause a seismic shift in the cultural field. The financial success of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* encouraged the publishing sector to produce yet more books about the sad fate of Natives who were given no more dimensionality than they had when they were considered to be brutal and ignorant savages.

Brown became one of the 'consecrated authors who dominate the field of production [and] also dominate the market... the most readable and the most acceptable because they

have become part of “general culture” (Bourdieu 1993, 108). Publishers sought to recreate this success and authors who were intentionally seeking economic capital or looking for it as a route to ‘self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit’ (Bourdieu 1993, 68) played their part too.

That homogeneity and fetishization is being combatted today by authors like Tommy Orange whose book *There, There* has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list, selected for the *Oprah Magazine* Top 15 Best Book 2018 and been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2019.

Is this simply the newest trend in Otherness? Will publishers revert to the classic tropes or move onto the ‘next ethnicity du jour’ (*PBS News Hour* 2018, para. 15)? It can only be hoped that the power granted by economic capital continues to allow authentic producers to transform the cultural field to more accurately reflect their experiences.

### **‘Sole legitimate profit’**

The cultural field is a series of relationships where ‘every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence... on the other positions constituting the field’ (Bourdieu 1993, 30). Conflict is, therefore, integral to the field and this plays out in the ‘literary canon [which] has explicitly become both the site and the stake of contention as different groups have argued for its rearrangement along lines more favourable to their divergent interests and agendas’ (Bourdieu 1993, 19).

Bourdieu points to ‘the battle between those who have made their names... and are struggling to stay in view and those who cannot make their own names without relegating to the past the established figures’ (106). Edward Said makes this point more explicitly political when he says that the canon should be seen as ‘a polyphonic accompaniment’ to the imperialist expansion (Said 1993, 71). He reminds us that while ‘American expansionism is principally economic, it is still highly dependent and moves together with, upon, cultural ideas and ideologies about America itself’ (350). The canon is one such cultural idea for both

America and Europe and upholds the cultural status quo through exclusion of dissenting voices.

It can be agreed that the authors and publishers involved in the Renaissance largely failed in their inclusive aim. Access to the canon continued and continues to be denied to people of colour (in particular, women of colour) and despite some singular successes like *House Made of Dawn*, the canon is still a reflection of White culture.

The failure to gain cultural capital presents itself in two ways. The first is the inevitable creation of an entirely separate Native American canon that includes the mainstays of Native literature without granting the same level of prestige and authority that white authors like Herman Melville and Walt Whitman have achieved.

This lack of inclusion has been seen most markedly in universities, one of the 'institutions of cultural consecration' (Bourdieu 1993, 136) where Native American literature is consigned to an independent academic discipline (Native American/American Indian Studies or as a module within American Literature courses), but it is also given short shrift in the anthologies that are designed to support learning.

Take, for example, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, currently in its 9<sup>th</sup> edition. The Norton website proudly declares it to be the 'most-trusted anthology for complete work [and] balanced selections' (*W. W. Norton & Company* 2019, para. 2). Over five volumes and 6,500 pages, it covers American literature from its beginnings to the present day; Native works appear on less than 200 of those pages.

Bourdieu refers to institutions that 'betray, in the smallest details of their morphology and their organization, their true function, which is to strengthen the feeling of belonging in some and the feeling of exclusion in others' (236). While he specifically refers to museums, publishers too fall into this category.

When publishers do attempt to rectify this imbalance, they tend to rely on elements that make it more difficult for contemporary Native producers. *Native American Women's Writing 1800-1924*, which is published by Blackwell, is an example of this. The title aims to give visibility to marginalised Native women but does so by using familiar paratextual elements that serve to undermine that message. The front cover is a portrait of Hayne

Hudjihini, aka The Eagle of Delight. She is famous for being the most beautiful wife of Shaumonekuse. She wears beads around her neck, her hair is braided and she evokes the stereotypical image of the Native woman, a handy shorthand for non-Native readers to aid them in identifying the contents of the book (as if the title weren't indicative enough). Hudjihini was not a writer and she is remembered rather for her beauty than for her literary output, and yet Blackwell Publishers have chosen her portrait to adorn the front cover of a book designed to increase visibility of an often-neglected subset of Native producers.

The second method of exclusion comes in the form of a paradox. While European culture was forced upon Natives (a common colonial trait), notable writers operating within European traditions gained capital for their use of Native forms and practices.

Lincoln (1971) points specifically to poets like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams who sought to ground their poetry in 'an American literary rootedness in "native" ways and words indigenous to this Western land' (Lincoln 1971, 4-5). Williams tried to 'hear and shape American literature out of a "language of the tribe"' (Lincoln 1971, 5) and Pound 'resurrected the "ideogrammatic method" of poetry, sparked by... Indian petroglyphs' (Lincoln 1971, 6).

These authors appropriated Native form and structure. They adopted a 'language of the natural self, a sense of aesthetic ground, a participant audience' (Lincoln 1971, 7), aspects common to Native work and gained acclaim and a position of cultural authority for having done so. In stark contrast, Native voices went unheard; they would need to rely on European traditions, such as the novel to make their stories palatable for a non-Native audience. And even that wouldn't be enough to earn a place in the literary annals.

### **'Art for art's sake'**

Bourdieu (1993) considers that 'works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized... by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such' (37). In other words, is art created for the sake of other artists who have the privilege to consecrate.

Within the context of the Native American Renaissance, this attitude is problematic and successfully excludes Native art forms because they do not conform to European standards.

Let's look at oral storytelling. This staple of Native American culture (and indeed, many other dominated cultures) 'points to the split between language as product and language as process' (Lincoln 1983, 25), a false division that does not hold true for many Native tribes. Language and particularly the spoken word is a 'function of memory, imagination, daily and seasonal ritual' (Lincoln 1983, 43). It resists 'Euro-American literary conceptions: the artist as primal word- and world-maker... the printed word as fixed and finite<sup>2</sup>, the poet's craft imposing order on nature' (45).

Within this storytelling tradition, "'Text" is only a stop-time facet of the embracing mode and texture of a cultural performance' (Lincoln 1983, 38), which raises some obvious issues when seen from a publishing perspective. How does one translate oral stories into text? And how much sensitivity should a publisher use in approaching cultures for whom 'print can temporarily ossify the spirit' (Lincoln 1983, 38).

If we are to look to the past, publishers do not appear to have taxed themselves with answering such questions. In 1961, *Black Elk Speaks* was re-released and sold millions. Its original publication in 1932 had been a publishing bust but it appealed to 'a restless postwar generation of American spiritual seekers' who appreciated the 'romantic image of the vanquished native peoples of the North American continent' (Neumann 2016, para. 3).

The book, which told the story of Black Elk through his translator John G. Neihardt, has come up against criticism from the traditional Lakota people (Black Elk's tribe) as well as Native American scholars for its inaccurate representation of Lakota beliefs. This does not appear to have troubled the publisher William Morrow & Company, nor did it trouble University of Nebraska Press until 1988 when they published a new edition with the amended title *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*.

It is the contempt for accurate translation shown by non-Native producers that Lincoln (1983) attempts to redress in his book. He asks for tribal validation as 'spiritual distinctions

must be observed, the energies kept alive, even if this means silence and no translation' (38).

Turning once more to Bourdieu, it is this area that highlights his distinctly European ideas about culture. Native stories are not intended to be art for art's sake any more than they are supposed to be anthropology. Instead they provide a constantly changing and dynamic vision of a tribal world. Lincoln (1983) states that 'texts must not be reduced to market product or cultural oddities' (39) and added to this, they must not be coldly termed art as if they were not 'magically powerful and alive with spirits' (25).

## Conclusion

The Native American Renaissance did not stand the test of time as a cultural and social movement. While many of its key authors continue to produce today, the cultural structures (publishing companies, universities, critics) within which they operate continue to promote White culture, acknowledging Native culture only when it can be subsumed into the mainstream.

As Bourdieu says, 'Words—the names of schools or groups, proper names—are so important only because they make things. These distinctive signs produce existence in a world in which the only way to *be* is to be *different*, to "make one's name"' (106). Perhaps this provides some insight into why the Native American Renaissance failed to fully capitalise upon its temporary popularity. Renaissance implies rebirth (and its Italian origins imply rebirth within European traditions), but Native producers had existed the whole time. They required no such rebirth, but the term gave non-Native producers the opportunity to treat Natives as a discovery.

*House Made of Dawn*, the novel that started it all, concludes with Abel returning to the reservation. He reconnects with his heritage and with the land that is so much a part of his culture. The book started one movement, but its legacy continues as new generations of Native producers stand on Momaday's shoulders seeking their place in the field of cultural production.

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<sup>1</sup> A survey carried out in 2018 found that 40percent of respondents 'didn't think Native Americans still exist' (*Great Falls Tribune* 2018, para. 2)

<sup>2</sup> The irony of a Euro-American attitude towards 'fixed and finite' print would likely not be lost on Native peoples who have seen seemingly fixed tribal treaties and agreements ignored by authorities for years.