

## Speaking with an Indigenous Voice of Survivance: Genuine Conversation, Refusal, and Decolonizing the Contact Zone

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In 2017, I had the privilege of attending the Philosophy of Education Society's pre-conference institute that brought together scholars whose research explored the relationship between Indigenous philosophy and education. A critical component of the institute included a panel discussion with three Indigenous scholars, all women, from two universities on Coast Salish lands. The panel sought to explore ways that philosophy of education could be critiqued and transformed by Indigenous research. The room was filled with anticipation of how this conversation would go. Our panelists were not philosophers of education by training, and the philosophers were relatively unfamiliar with Indigenous education. The panel began. As expected, we were captivated by what our guests shared about their research. A spirit of goodwill permeated the room. All present seemed genuinely open to learning from each other.

Our spirits remained high until a philosopher posed a question that evoked the concept of the Christian God. This philosopher's intentions seemed good. He desired to learn from our guests. Within a philosophical context, his question was sensible. But for our Indigenous scholars I could see a visible shift in their demeanor. Before the philosopher could complete his question, one panelist extended her hand in defiance. "No," she said calmly, "I will not go there with you. This is a path I cannot go down." Silence filled the room. A feeling of discomfort emerged. Our conversation ended.

I am struck by this act of defiance. As someone who identifies as Native—I am Dakota/Lakota, a citizen of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe—I felt empowered for the first time in my academic career. I have never had the courage to extend my hand in defiance. I usually acquiesce to the expectation of answering the philosophical question. Since then, I have tried to make sense of this experience.

This Indigenous scholar's defiance could be understood through the

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lens of what Mary Louise Pratt calls *contact zones*. Contact zones, writes Pratt, are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath.”<sup>21</sup> Contact zones contest the implicit norms of academic discourse—the principles of cooperation and shared understanding—that inform an imagined community of speakers who assume that the conversation “is governed by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants” (*ACZ*, 38). The imagined community presupposes an ideal speech situation in which all speakers stand as equals. Conflict between speakers emerges in the imagined community, explains Pratt, but “it is assumed that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players” (*ACZ*, 38).

Contact zones problematize the imagined speech community by introducing heterogeneity and complexity into the conversation. Some speakers in contact zones express “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance” that critique the imagined speech community (*ACZ*, 39). Yet, for Pratt, contesting the implicit norms and rules of academic discourse has the potential to generate authentic engagement among speakers. Pratt movingly describes how, “[along] with the rage, incomprehension, and pain,” speakers in these contested spaces can experience “exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom,” what she calls the “joys of the contact zones” (*ACZ*, 39).

In this essay, I want to propose a decolonizing reading of contact zones to understand this Indigenous scholar’s act of defiance. Similar to contact zones, her defiance was a refusal to cooperate in conversations that presuppose dominant group norms and rules that inform an imagined speech community. Her defiance made explicit the asymmetrical power relations pervading the room.

Yet this scholar’s defiance says something more specific about indigeneity. She refused to engage non-Indigenous speakers who failed to recognize the pain and trauma some topics engender for Indigenous speakers. The loss of languages, lands, spiritualities, and cultures that resulted from Christian missionaries, federal policies, Supreme Court decisions, education practices,

land invasions, frontier homicides, and sacred site desecrations characterizes the historical and ongoing settler colonial violence committed against Native peoples and tribal communities. By settler colonialism, I am referring to the structural process of what Patrick Wolfe calls “the logic of elimination.”<sup>2</sup> Settler colonialism says that colonization is not an event in the distant past. As Wolfe describes, “Invasion is a structure, not an event.”<sup>3</sup> In settler colonialism, Europeans and their descendants sought to supplant the Native by establishing their own institutions over Indigenous peoples and their lands. The settler comes to stay, thus “replacing and becoming the Native.”<sup>4</sup> The logic of elimination entails multiple modalities of structural violence to erase the Native—from “military invasions, forced removals, mass killings, and frontier homicides” to “softer” modalities such as the “democratization of tribal nations or racialization of Native groups.”<sup>5</sup>

In her act of defiance—a *politics of refusal*, borrowing Audra Simpson’s phrase—this Indigenous scholar refused to educate the philosopher about the pain and trauma of settler colonialism and structural violence.<sup>6</sup> She refused to bare her emotions in public spaces so the non-Indigenous person could learn what she knew. Her refusal said, “there are places in the conversation we cannot travel together.”

Through refusal, this Indigenous scholar was *decolonizing* the contact zone. Decolonization is a political strategy utilized by Indigenous peoples to interrogate and challenge the domination and exploitation of their minds, bodies, and lands. Decolonization seeks to dismantle “the settler colonial structure and its policies, histories, ideologies, discourses, laws, institutions, strategies, and philosophies.”<sup>7</sup> As an ongoing, historical process, decolonization centers Indigenous ways of knowing and being, revitalizes Native cultures and languages, and reclaims stolen lands and territories, thus restoring “the humanity of Native peoples, their minds and bodies, in connection to lands and place.”<sup>8</sup> This scholar was decolonizing the contact zone by speaking in what I call an *Indigenous voice of survivance*.<sup>9</sup> Survivance not only stands in opposition to the asymmetrical power relations between speakers, much like contact zones; it also stands in opposition to the ongoing structural violence of settler colonialism. This scholar said to

all speakers: “restoring our humanity is for us alone.”

This Indigenous scholar’s refusal seemed to shut down conversation or foreclose possibilities for deeper engagement between speakers. In the unsettling moment that seemed to prevent conversation, this Indigenous scholar did something productive. Her refusal shifted conversation away from ideal speech situations to new “models of community,” as Pratt describes, where “no one [is] excluded and no one [is] safe” (*ACZ*, 39). A decolonizing reading of contact zones allows us to understand the Indigenous scholar’s refusal as a necessary disruption to conversation in order for her Indigenous voice of survivance to speak and be heard. Her refusal reimaged what conversation *can* and *should* be when Indigenous peoples speak.

### GENUINE CONVERSATION

I have often wondered about the philosopher who posed the question to the Indigenous scholar and how he felt about her refusal. I imagine him unsettled. He wanted to include an Indigenous perspective in the conversation. He assumed that making space for a different voice could help him and others better understand the concept of the Christian God. He assumed that the Indigenous scholar would participate in the conversation as he did. Yet her refusal disrupted his assumptions. To the ears of those who genuinely seek to include Indigenous peoples in conversation, refusal can feel harsh, like a punch in the gut. This philosopher put into play his assumptions of what conversation meant, and he was refused.

This philosopher’s assumptions of conversation resonated with the hermeneutic tradition of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. He sought what Gadamer calls *genuine conversation*. According to Gadamer, a genuine conversation contains “its own rhythm, its own to-and-fro movement that carries along the partners.”<sup>10</sup> Speakers become absorbed in the play of conversation, moving back and forth in what Gadamer describes as the structure of question and answer. Gadamer writes, “To conduct a dialogue requires first of all that the partners do not talk at cross purposes. Hence it necessarily has the structure of question and answer. The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring

that the other person is with us” (*TM*, 367). In genuine conversation, we are not trying to one-up the other person. We go along with the conversation, in the way that “one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twist and reaching its own conclusion” (*TM*, 383). A genuine conversation emerges from the back-and-forth interaction between speakers, surpassing their individual consciousness and taking on a life of its own. A genuine conversation, writes Gadamer, “is never the one that we wanted to conduct” (*TM*, 383).

Persons engaged in genuine conversation are absorbed in what Gadamer calls *die Sache*, or the “subject matter.” In genuine conversation, persons engage in the back-and-forth movement of question and answer guided by a topic of mutual concern. As Gadamer describes,

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter [*die Sache*] is at issue in the dialogue and elicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays them into each other.<sup>11</sup>

For Gadamer, a genuine conversation entails that each person brings a particular perspective to the subject matter. The aim is not for anyone to control the conversation but to be led by it. As Gadamer states, “[we] participate in, or fall into, a dialogue or conversation” (*TM*, 383). A genuine conversation is an event that takes over speakers and leads them toward richer understandings of *die Sache*.

Engaging in genuine conversation presupposes that persons have an orientation toward each other guided by three norms. First, a genuine conversation involves persons being *open and willing to listen* to each other. Whereas some approaches toward other persons reduce them to objects, such that we “can make predictions about others on the basis of experience,” and other approaches seek to dominate another person by claiming “to know the other’s claim” better than they know themselves, we should be fundamentally open to listening to what the other says (*TM*, 358, 359). As Gadamer writes,

In human relations the important thing is . . . to experience

the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. (*TM*, 361)

Being open and willing to listen to the other serves an important role in self-understanding. In the encounter with another person, standing within a reciprocal I-Thou relationship, the other person exposes and challenges our prejudices. In genuine conversation, the other person invades our lived experience. Our prejudices about ourselves and the world become unsettled, open to inspection and revision. The other lays us bare, so to speak, where we are able to re-examine our deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and preconceptions. We understand ourselves anew.

Second, a genuine conversation is not a casual encounter between speakers: it involves an “intense, restless, and unending quest for truth.”<sup>12</sup> This *quest for truth* does not mean that persons demonstrate their superiority over the other. Rather, the conversation becomes the means through which truth is discovered, and both perspectives become central in this discovery. A genuine conversation means that speakers are with each other in the pursuit of new understandings regarding the truth of the subject matter. The quest for truth, writes James Risser, “does not rest as long as the conversation continues.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, while the aim of genuine conversations is to discover truth, truth is never guaranteed. New understandings of truth are possible as long as the genuine conversation endures.

Third, to be engaged in genuine conversation entails that speakers come to each other in a *spirit of goodwill*, where they encounter another person in what John Caputo describes as *structural friendship*. Structural friendship is not based on having good personal feelings toward the other. Structural friendship begins genuine conversation with the “implicit vocative or invocation . . . ‘O my friends, listen to what is said, read what is written.’”<sup>14</sup> In a spirit of goodwill,

we approach the other in good faith, saying to another person that our words are truthful and that we seek to be understood. As Caputo explains, “In order to understand each other, we must ask each other to listen and we must try to understand.”<sup>15</sup> The spirit of goodwill accepts what the other says as true and seeks to understand their words.

Furthermore, a spirit of goodwill presupposes that speakers possess certain skills when conversing with another person. It involves building up their perspective and drawing out their strengths rather than illuminating their weaknesses. Gadamer writes, “To conduct a conversation . . . requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other person’s opinion . . . not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength” (*TM*, 367). The spirit of goodwill means that we come to the conversation in humility and modesty toward the other person. Gadamer asks us to take seriously the idea that the other has something significant to say to us, that we could be wrong, rather than believing we possess the answers to the subject matter.

These norms lead to the aim of genuine conversation: to reach *shared understanding* on a given topic. “[Each] person,” writes Gadamer, “opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says” (*TM*, 385). We do not grasp the other’s particularity in genuine conversation. We come to accept the other’s perspective on the subject matter. Engaging in genuine conversation means that we grasp “the rightness of [the other’s] opinion, so that we can be at one with each other on the subject” (*TM*, 385). A genuine conversation means that, in reaching shared understanding on the subject matter, we are “overcoming barriers, achieving agreement, commonality, and reconciliation,” even in conversations when there are seemingly unbridgeable differences between us.<sup>16</sup>

### REFUSAL AND SURVIVANCE

Refusal disturbs genuine conversation. It violates norms; it forecloses understanding. Pratt’s concept of contact zones helps us make sense of refusal

in contested social spaces, in which oppressed groups push back against the assumptions of imagined speech communities. Refusal does what contact zones do, but it does something more productive for Indigenous peoples when they speak. In genuine conversations where Indigenous peoples are included, expected to participate on any topic, welcomed in a spirit of goodwill, where all speakers are open and willing to listen to each other, refusal disrupts the conversation to create a space in which Indigenous peoples can speak in a settler colonial context.

Refusal seems inconsistent. It says, “we must shut down conversation in order to have conversation.” There are times when genuine conversation carries speakers along. Yet there are times in conversation when refusal is necessary. In these moments, refusal makes explicit the historical and ongoing structural violence of settler colonialism that is already pervading the interaction between speakers and the lands on which their interaction takes place. Refusal introduces a distinctive voice that exposes, survives, resists, and decolonizes, what I call an *Indigenous voice of survivance*.

Gerald Vizenor defines survivance as “a native presence, the notion of sovereignty and the will to resist domination.”<sup>17</sup> Presence means Indigenous survival and resistance through the domination and control of the settler colonial society. Survivance illuminates how Indigenous peoples have always resisted and opposed the colonizing forces that limit sovereignty and transform indigeneity through assimilation practices and policies. Survivance is the means by and through which Indigenous peoples assert their sovereign right to remain Indigenous on their lands and places. Arising through narrative and experience and drawn from Indigenous epistemologies, survivance is expressed in subtle and overt ways that empower Indigenous peoples to resist their elimination within the settler colonial structure.

We can see why refusal is necessary for Indigenous peoples engaged in genuine conversation. In her essay, “Refusing the University,” Sandy Grande argues that we need to theorize the academy as “an arm of the settler state” as distinct from theorizing it as a neoliberal, Eurocentric, or patriarchal institution.<sup>18</sup> Universities, explains Grande, were not passive recipients within the settler colonial project. From their inception, universities actively sought to

missionize, colonize, and control the Native; they played a direct and explicit role in establishing structural violence. As an arm of the settler state, universities remain complicit in Native erasure—universities, for example, still benefit from historical land theft and ongoing land dispossession. “[Within] settler societies,” writes Grande, “the university functions as an apparatus of colonization; one that refracts ‘eliminative’ practices, modes of governance, and forms of knowledge production” (RU, 48). The university, despite strategies to include and accommodate Indigenous peoples, maintains structural violence by “[placating] dispossessed people while evading any effort to change the underlying power structure” (RU, 56).

Exposing the university as an arm of the settler state reveals a distinctive form of Indigenous resistance in contrast to anti-racism or social justice strategies. To theorize the university as neoliberal, Eurocentric, or patriarchal is to seek more intensive inclusive strategies within the academy, the “demand for belonging and inclusion . . . [or] for presumed competency” or the sharing or redistribution of power among groups (RU, 58). But refusal does not seek recognition or accommodation from the university, argues Grande. It rejects the gift of belonging and inclusion and calls for a repurposing of the academy in ways that assert “Indigenous sovereignty and peoplehood” (RU, 59). Repurposing is not reform. The aim is not to make the settler university more *Indigenous friendly*. As Grande explains, “The ultimate goal of Indigenous refusal is Indigenous resurgence; a struggle that includes but is not limited to the return of Indigenous land” (RU, 60). For Grande, the university must be refused; it must be decolonized.

Grande’s analysis should give us pause. On her account, there is no hope of reforming the university; there is no benefit of belonging to it. The university was born out of settler violence; it participates in and benefits from this violence through the historical and ongoing dispossession and occupation of Indigenous lands. This is why Grande advocates for a *dialectical co-resistance* between Black radicalism and critical Indigenous studies that centers on decolonization, not inclusion. Both can work together as accomplices, she states, to “[plot] the death but not murder of the settler university” (RU, 60).

I want to position refusal as a necessary strategy that empowers Indigenous peoples to *plot the death but not murder* of genuine conversation. Genuine conversation is the means by which persons communicate their claims and ideas in the academy. All speakers are expected to come to each other in a spirit of goodwill, where ideas are debated, differences are resolved, barriers are overcome, and understanding is achieved. We are made intelligible to others when we engage in genuine conversation. It is the means by which the academy can extend the gift of belonging and inclusion. The academy is able to open the door of the imagined speech community to those groups who have been excluded. Through genuine conversation, the academy invites the stranger into the common quest for truth.

Survivance wants none of this. The genuine conversation and the academy's imagined speech community are neither neutral nor benign. Both represent the settler colonial world. Refusal exposes this neutrality. It unsettles the foundational relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples in genuine conversation. Because settler colonialism constructs and frames this relationship, genuine conversation adheres to the logic of elimination. Refusal lays bare this logic by disrupting the flow of settler colonial violence in all interactions both in the academy and in everyday conversations.

Through refusal, the Indigenous voice of survivance unearths genuine conversation's settler colonial roots—*survivance knows its nature*. Survivance attunes Indigenous peoples to the implications of what engaging in genuine conversation means: *it means participating in their own assimilation, in their own elimination and erasure*. To be understood, Indigenous peoples must accept the norms and rules guiding academic discourse; to be intelligible, they must take up the colonizer's world. Survivance is not interested in debating ideas, resolving differences, overcoming barriers, or achieving understanding. It is only interested in Indigenous resurgence. Survivance seeks to decolonize minds, bodies, and lands, not to find an acceptable place in the academy's imagined speech community. It extends the hand and says "*No!*" to genuine conversation's norms, rules, and assumptions. Survivance makes two moves at once: it unsettles the settler while empowering the indigene. Genuine conversation has no room for survivance. This means it

cannot hear Indigenous peoples speak. Genuine conversation, like the settler university, must come to an end—*it must die*—for Indigenous peoples truly to speak and be heard.

### DECOLONIZING THE CONTACT ZONE

Refusal has edges. It disobeys and violates; it disrupts and disorients. Contact zones help us understand refusal as contested social spaces that reveal the need for all speakers to struggle together in conversation. Contact zones seek to reform the academy so it can work for oppressed groups as much as it works for dominant groups. I am reminded of Pratt's example of marginalized students who spoke back to the university: "I don't just want you to let me be here, I want to belong here; this institution should belong to me as much as it does to anyone else" (*ACZ*, 39). The contact zone, for Pratt, remains captivated by the settler university. The contact zone still accepts the gift of belonging and inclusion.

Contact zones are limited when Indigenous peoples speak with survivance. Survivance does not accept the gift of belonging and inclusion. It must refuse. Pratt's contact zone can point us in the right direction, however. It can help us reimagine conversation spaces in which none are excluded and none are safe. Yet, to facilitate survivance, we must decolonize the contact zone.

Contact zones will not decolonize on their own. They require skilled speakers who possess the know-how of navigating genuine conversations, like our Indigenous scholar. We can imagine that the Indigenous scholar knew how to participate in genuine conversation's rhythm of question and answer. She is as much a product of the settler university as anyone else. Yet survivance equipped her to see two paths. One path said to engage others in a spirit of goodwill while another said to refuse others when genuine conversation evoked settler colonial violence. This scholar danced in the liminal space of participation and refusal. She was too skilled to be fooled by the gift of belonging and inclusion. She watched for the pitfalls that awaited her. This Indigenous scholar employed her survivance voice at the right moment, which she introduced through refusal. *She knew when to facilitate the death of genuine conversation.*

By contrast, the philosopher saw only the path of belonging and inclusion. He was captivated by what genuine conversation could do. All questions were open for debate. He participated in genuine conversation as if the norms and rules were shared equally and available to all. His questions allowed him to abstract from the localities of settler colonial violence. In genuine conversation, he felt safe and comfortable, floating above the concrete and particular. In genuine conversation, he was at home.

Through refusal, this Indigenous scholar disturbed the philosopher's safety and comfort—her refusal brought him down to earth. She revealed that genuine conversation always takes place on stolen Indigenous lands, that he is an inheritor of settler colonialism and benefits from its ongoing violence. She made explicit the settler colonial structure that he never realized already pervaded the room.

This Indigenous scholar shifted genuine conversation from an imagined speech community to a decolonizing contact zone. In a decolonizing contact zone, she drew boundaries around Indigenous peoples and their experiences. Her survivance voice empowered them to speak from their ways of knowing and being in opposition to the dominant group; her voice decentered settler interests and centered Indigenous interests. Yet she was not alone. In this decolonizing contact zone, she created space for *dialectical co-resistance* with others whose histories, identities, and experiences are traumatized, albeit differently, within the settler state. In this space, oppressed groups could build strength, express rage, shed tears, and plot strategies to reimagine what conversation can and should be.

This Indigenous scholar offered wisdom through refusal: If non-Indigenous speakers are receptive to refusal, if they allow their safety and comfort to be disturbed and unsettled by survivance, they are poised to engage in more authentic conversations with Indigenous peoples. They can recognize that there are places in conversation to which they cannot travel; they can accept themselves as inheritors and benefactors of settler colonialism; they can understand why certain questions are off-limits; and they can see how seeking genuine conversation can maintain settler colonialism and ongoing, structural violence.

This willingness to decolonize the contact zone signals to Indigenous peoples a readiness to participate in deeper conversations than genuine conversation allows. Her wisdom says, “we must facilitate genuine conversation’s death in order for you to truly hear our voice.”

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1 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 34. This work will be cited as *ACZ* in the text for all subsequent references.

2 Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocidal Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

3 Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 388.

4 John P. Hopkins, *Indian Education for All: Decolonizing Indigenous Education in Public Schools* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2020), 44.

5 Hopkins, *Indian Education for All*, 45.

6 Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

7 Hopkins, *Indian Education for All*, 68.

8 Hopkins, *Indian Education for All*, 61.

9 Hopkins, *Indian Education for All*, 61.

10 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 383. This work will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references.

11 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David Linge (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 66.

12 Richard Palmer, *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 10.

13 James Risser, “The Two Faces of Socrates: Gadamer/Derrida,” in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 177.

14 John D. Caputo, “Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship: Gadamer, Derrida, and Madison,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 8, no. 2

(2004): 215.

15 Caputo, “Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship,” 215.

16 Richard Bernstein, “The Conversation That Never Happened: (Gadamer/Derrida),” *Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 3 (2008): 588.

17 Gerald Vizenor and Robert Lee, *Postindian Conversations* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 93.

18 Sandy Grande, “Refusing the University,” in *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 47. This work will be cited as *RU* in the text for all subsequent references.