Comments for "Tearing Down the Myths" Panel
Overcoming Racism Conference, October 29, 2010, St. Paul, MN

Sara Kolstad Axtell

Good afternoon. I am honored to have been asked to speak with you today, and I am honored to be able to hear the words of the other panelists. My name is Sara Axtell. I work at the University of Minnesota as a community liaison, and I am a student at a place called the Cultural Wellness Center in south Minneapolis. I live with my two children in St. Paul.

I have a lot of things that I would like to try to say in a short time, so I've written them down. Please bear with me. My family came to Minnesota from Luster county Norway, along the Sognefjord where the North Sea reaches into the Jotunheim Mountains. Around 1865, my ancestors left Norway for North America, three years after the war between the Dakota Nation and the state of Minnesota. We came through Canada to southern Minnesota, to land that was taken by the state in the 1851 treaty. We settled in a Norwegian enclave near Kenyon, Minnesota, outside of Faribault.

The stories of Dakota families starving less than 200 miles to the west ripple out and interweave themselves into my own family's story, because they laid the foundation for our becoming prosperous enough to move to the city in my grandmother's generation. It was in that generation and in my mother's that we lost our language and became college educated.

In my own experience, college and later graduate school has played an important role. In reflecting back on my formal education, it seems to me now that the central message was about de-valuing my own people's cultural knowledge, as wives tales and superstition, and by extension, de-valuing and marginalizing the knowledge systems of other peoples.

We've been asked to talk about the myths that have shaped our lives and the lives of our people. The myth that I would most like to dispel is that, as European-Americans, we are individuals, without a place, without a history, without a people, barely accountable even for our own actions, much less the actions of our people that have brought us all to this point. It is the myth that we are "white," and that is all we are. But I see whiteness not as a culture or an identity, only as a strategy to coalesce wealth and power for a certain group of people. Somehow through the process of trading our cultural identity for privilege and power, we began to believe that whiteness defines us, and that we have no cultural or spiritual resources to rely on. I am reminded of the argument that European peoples first colonized ourselves, before colonizing other peoples.[1]

And this brings me to the last question I have been asked to address: What is the role of European American people in a decolonization process? Many kinds of important work will be highlighted at this conference, but there are two areas that I would like to focus on—decolonizing ourselves, and getting out of the way so that others can do their work.

[1] Churchill, W. (1994). "Indians are Us?" In *Indians are Us: Culture and Genocide in Native North America.* Common Courage Press, 221-243.

First, I would like to talk about getting out of the way. For this, we need to examine the idea of authority. In my experience, I have been encouraged by powerful societal institutions, like universities, to take too much authority, encouraged to answer questions and make decisions that I really have no business considering. So the first piece of work that I would like to suggest is the work of coming back within a rightful boundary, understanding that any knowledge I bring is a small part of a much larger picture. This work is both deeply personal, changing the ways I interact with people on a moment-by-moment basis, and systemic. We need to work in partnership with other European Americans and people from other cultural communities to change institutions, so that they stop claiming authority over people's lives, and figuratively move over, so that individuals and communities have the room to exercise their own authority. Most of the work I do at the University falls into this category.

Second, we can decolonize our own minds and ways of being, examining and transforming the cultural patterns and values that made colonialism possible. One primary examples of this is our relationship with the land. Our belief has been that land is a commodity that must be "productive," and that land that is not being "used" in this way is somehow "empty" and ours for the taking. This is one of the cultural patterns that paved the way for colonialism. We need to study how these beliefs developed, as well as how we can transform them into something that is healthier. Healthier for ourselves, healthier for the planet, and healthier for our relationships with other peoples.

We can also learn from indigenous peoples and other cultural communities about ways they are preserving, or sometimes re-vitalizing, their cultural knowledge systems and practices, to provide us with clues about how we can try to reconstruct our own earlier knowledge and practices from our pre-colonial past. Knowledge that has eroded and lain dormant, superseded by our colonial ways of thinking.

I believe this is important for a couple of reasons.

First, when we as European Americans think about transforming our destructive cultural patterns, we often think we have to create something from scratch, something out of nothing, something that is new. I believe that this can reinforce our sense of disconnection from the past, and contribute to a false sense of ourselves and the work we are doing as somehow ahistorical, existing only in the present moment.

At other times, in our attempts to transform ourselves we have co-opted or appropriated the practices of other cultural communities, further extending colonialism into the realm of the spiritual and cultural.

But another path is to look to our own past for at least part of our means of transformation. Expanding on our land example, we have in our histories other ways to relate to land, ways that honor the land and provide a sense of connectedness. But we need to resurface and rebuild that understanding, and the practices that flow from it. Learning from the cultural work that indigenous peoples and other cultural communities are engaged in can help us to build the tools we need to do this work.

There is another reason I believe it is important to study our own deep cultural roots. In my own experience, until I was able to begin to see the sacredness in my own culture, I wasn't able to see the sacredness in other cultures, or even understand why a people would hold their culture as sacred, and act to preserve it.

So, in closing, we, as European Americans, need to help our people see themselves as having a culture. This is a powerful way to disrupt whiteness, not just to rid ourselves of something this is destructive, but to reclaim/reconstruct something that is positive, that fills a void, that has the potential to create health and harmony.

In our colonizing mind we have fashioned ourselves as the hub on the wheel of the world's knowledge. We have seen ourselves as outside culture, as purveyors and critics of all the world's knowledge systems—of all the spokes on the wheel. When we see ourselves as cultural beings, when we become aware of the value of the pre-colonial ways of knowing, then all cultures are valued as having wisdom, knowledge, and authority, and we join with others as one spoke on the wheel of knowledge.

I want to express my appreciation to everyone who reviewed and gave me feedback on this piece: Linda Brandt, Lea Foushee, Abebech Girma, Craig Hassel, Karen Redleaf, and Makeda Zulu-Gillespie. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to Janice Barbee, my teacher and elder, for all of her support and guidance, and for suggesting the conclusion to this essay. My deepest thanks to the Cultural Wellness Center for all of your support and nurturance, and for creating the container for this work, as well as to Runehof Kindred and the rest of the Heathen community for all the hard work of re-surfacing our ancestral knowledge.