

Colloquium on Violence and Religion
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Surviving Violence: the Potawatomi
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I.

I am a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), an organization that sends small teams trained in nonviolent intervention for violence reduction to support communities working at nonviolent social change. As part of a broader commitment to undoing oppression of all sorts, CPT adopted a practice about eight years ago, an opening ritual for every CPT conference or gathering. As part of the welcome, we ask that someone address three questions about the place where we are meeting. In something from five to twenty-five minutes, they need to tell us:

- (1) Whose land was this?
- (2) How and when did they lose it?
- (3) Where are their descendants today?

We usually expect someone from the area to make this presentation. Nonetheless, we find that this usually requires some research on their part – this information is not, for most of us, on the tip of the tongue.

In the report, the last question challenges common assumptions that this is “history.” That is, knowing where their descendants are today reminds us that the relationship is not “past” or “over.” It may be neglected, but it is ongoing. My contacts on Pine Ridge reservation say this another way: “The Indian wars aren't over.”

I commend to you this practice of bringing this information to the table at the start of your gatherings, for example, future meetings of COV&R. So, for us gathered here, in a few sentences: Before European settlement and conquest, this was Potawatomi land. This land where we are meeting was ceded in a treaty concluded in Chicago August 29, 1821. Over the next fifteen years the Potawatomi were concentrated in successively smaller and smaller reserves, eventually 22 square miles, then finally six square miles around Twin Lakes, in Marshall County (Ind.) just south of here. In 1838 this remaining band was surrounded on a Sunday morning while at mass (the majority were worshipping Roman Catholics at the time) by a militia authorized by the governor and raised in LaPorte, Logansport and South Bend. Shots were fired, and the congregation was held prisoner for several days while outlying members of the tribe were rounded up and brought in. Then, with Chief Menominee in a cage on a haywagon, the Potawatomi were force-marched west. The Indiana militia drove them to the Illinois state line, where an Illinois militia took over. About one in ten died along the way; the Trail of Death arrived in Kansas about two and a half months later, in the middle of winter. Their descendants are today in the Prairie Band, with a reservation in Kansas, and the Citizen Band, with a reservation in Oklahoma. Included in the deportation were some who had specifically been granted private holdings in the treaty of 1821, such as the Burnet family. (The treaty of 1821 granted the Burnet family land near the mouth of the St. Joe River.)

II.

If I were to bring this story to a conference of Girard scholars as a case study in mimetic rivalry and scapegoat violence, I would be criticized for making it too blunt, blatant and simplistic.

Surrounded at mass.

Driven out.

Characteristics of the scapegoat: Different, Powerful, Vulnerable, and Delegitimized.

(Note the role of the treaties in delegitimizing Indian land tenure. At first, much farther east, the US attempted to take Indian land by conquest; the treaty pattern developed when that approach failed.) We could look at the stresses and violence within white society and we would find conflicts that built toward the scapegoating of Indians. I would note also the use of the word “hostile” as a noun, adopted around this time to describe Indians. “Hostiles” denoted those Indians whom the cavalry was sent to subdue.

I believe Girard is useful when looking at the actions of the white settlers. From the perspective of the Potawatomi, however, the stage of white settlement that they experienced was like standing in the surf with a tidal wave coming at you. I'm not sure “mimetic rivalry” is a useful description of their experience.

III.

To review the Potawatomi story of surviving violence, I want to mention the Treaty of Greenville (Ohio), 1795, prior to any on this map. At this treaty, the commitment of the US – and all that the Indians ask for in many of these treaties – is to set a limit to white western expansion. The Indians cede a chunk of territory, and the US undertakes to prevent Euro-American settlement of land recognized as belonging to the Indians. In this case, that land is where we are today.

I want to mention Chief *Wa-nyano-zhoneya* or Five Medals, whose village was for a time about four miles from where I live, south of Goshen (or about forty miles from here). Though he was a signatory to the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and never fought the US after that, and in spite of several trips to the US capital where he received assurances from both Presidents Washington and Jefferson, his village and their crops were burned in 1812 and 1813 by troops under the command of Anthony Wayne, for whom Fort Wayne is named. Among those soldiers was a Lt. John Jackson, who was so taken with the area that he decided to return to live here. He was one of the first white settlers in Elkhart County, staking his claim in 1829. I think that the language of “mimetic rivalry” can describe this.

IV.

I am going to skip over everything from 1838 to 2008 – George Godfrey is a better source for that history. I do want to look yet at two current stories about violence and the Potawatomi.

In 2008 I joined a caravan of about fifteen Potawatomi and five whites who retraced the Trail of Death. Earlier caravans had worked at marking out the trail and getting memorials established at the overnight campsites. (George Godfrey was instrumental in this work.) We had times of sharing at the markers, read from records of the events of the march related to those sites, and occasionally prayers. At one site, after noting the deaths of members of the emigrating party there 170 years earlier, Sister Virginia Pearl commented: “You know, we don't only mourn and remember the ones who died here. We grieve the absence from our tribe today of our cousins, their descendants. Because those few died here on the Trail of Death, we are a smaller tribe today; those who they would have brought into the world were never born, and we miss them.” I am moved by her sense of loss, today, that results from these acts of violence 170 years ago.

My last note about the Potawatomi surviving violence has to do with my high school, Goshen High School, about 35 miles from here. Our sports teams are the Goshen Redskins, the mascot who dances at half-time wears buckskin and a war bonnet. Never mind mimetic desire, I really think the only question that we need to ask is this: “Is 'redskin' a derogatory racial slur?” Unfortunately, though the answer to that question is actually pretty simple, it seems we need to then ask whether it is appropriate

for a public high school in Indiana in 2010 to be using a derogatory racial slur as an identity for its sports teams?

A year ago I convened a group of profs and students from Goshen College, from the Mennonite seminary in Elkhart, and from the Mennonite Church executive offices, for a meeting with George Godfrey. I didn't hear George asking us to give back the land – just to hear their stories, and maybe to recognize and work on our ongoing relationship.