

**IMPERIAL IRONY: RORTY, RICHARD HENRY PRATT
AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN GENOCIDE**

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I will consider the parallels between the liberal philosophy of Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924), founder of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania whose views laid the foundation for the post-Civil War genocide of American Indian peoples, and the philosophy of Rorty's liberal ironist project. By looking closely at the implications of a philosophical project like Rorty's as it was applied in the large scale experiment of late 19th century Indian policy, we can see that, rather than serving as a resource for ending cruelty, liberal irony can serve as an instrument for its perpetuation. I first briefly review the place of Pratt's work in the history of American Indian policy. Next, I identify what I take to be relevant aspects of Rorty's position in relation to these concerns. I then argue that Pratt's project has strong parallel commitments and that those commitments led, not to the reduction of suffering and humiliation among American Indians, but rather their increase. Finally, I return to Rorty's project and consider whether Rorty can avoid the worst of Pratt's program by affirming a particular brand of ethnocentrism.

This is a cautionary tale. The work of Richard Rorty has been embraced by many as a liberating vision. In the present world of racial hatred (newly fomented in the US by the rise of the Republican candidate for President and in Europe by increasingly violent anti-immigration politics), such a vision seems both timely and necessary as a means of addressing the cruelty and suffering of those excluded from the successes and opportunities of western democracy. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty affirmed his commitment to "the traditional liberal claim that the only way to avoid perpetuating cruelty within social institutions is by maximizing the quality of education, freedom of the press, educational opportunity, opportunities to exert political influence, and the like" (66-7). Yet closer examination of the ends and means of Rorty's liberal vision reveals potential danger. In this paper, I consider the parallels between the liberal philosophy of Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924), founder of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania whose views laid the foundation for the

post-Civil War genocide of American Indian peoples, and the philosophy of Rorty's liberal ironist project. By looking closely at the implications of a philosophical project like Rorty's as it was applied in the large scale experiment of late 19th century Indian policy, we can see that, rather than serving as a resource for ending cruelty, liberal irony can serve as an instrument for its perpetuation.

However, before considering the parallels between Pratt and Rorty, it is useful to begin by answering the obvious question: why the invidious comparison of Rorty to a character as hated as Pratt? As Rorty said of Kant, "Kant, acting from the best possible motives, sent moral philosophy off in a direction which has made it hard for moral philosophers to see the importance, for moral progress, of ... detailed empirical descriptions" (CIS, 192). The result was centuries of misdirection that, Rorty claims, led to a profound misunderstanding of moral progress and a history that blocked practical efforts to diminish cruelty and humiliation. Earlier attention to the practical effects of Kant's moral project might have saved centuries of suffering.

If Pratt's project is properly a liberal ironist project, then it forms a case study of what can happen when such projects are carried out on a large scale over a long time. Despite the best motives, it is possible that both Pratt and Rorty sent moral philosophy the wrong way. The fact that this misdirection may have first emerged a century ago raises a further question about how philosophers engage such questions in the first place. The historical neglect by philosophers (not to mention politicians and strong poets) of Pratt's work and its place in the history of what Stannard called the "American Holocaust" risks allowing our philosophical and political projects to go forward with a comforting amnesia and, as a result, fail in our shared commitment to making things better. The comparison with Pratt is an effort to take Rorty's work seriously as a vision of social change in world characterized by diversity and conflict—Europe and America in the 21st century. It is also an attempt to hold Rorty's vision to the same sort of standard that he saw as important in his criticism of Kant: the need to

attend to “detailed empirical descriptions” that finally frame our moral progress.

As Rorty says in *Achieving Our Country*, the only reason for the liberal ironist project is that it reduces suffering and humiliation. The worry, in this discussion, is that in the political present, where the histories, present circumstances, and the future of indigenous peoples are recognized as an issue, the viability of liberal ironist projects may be challenged. I first briefly review the place of Pratt’s work in the history of American Indian policy. Next, I identify what I take to be relevant aspects of Rorty’s position in relation to these concerns. I then argue that Pratt’s project has strong parallel commitments and that those commitments led, not to the reduction of suffering and humiliation among American Indians, but rather their increase. Finally, I return to Rorty’s project and consider whether Rorty can avoid the worst of Pratt’s program by affirming a particular brand of ethnocentrism. The argument is somewhat schematic in presentation thanks to its over-large scope and the constraints of space, but I hope it will open a discussion about the implications of Rorty’s social vision in the context of diversity that includes the place of indigenous peoples.

I.

General Richard Henry Pratt (no relation to the author) proposed a vision of American democracy founded on equal opportunity and individual freedom, and which sought to prevent isolation and suffering among its least fortunate members. Pratt and his supporters helped to implement a national program to achieve such a country: the Indian boarding school movement, which set out to address the “forlorn conditions” of American Indians in the decades following the U.S Civil War (1917, 11). Pratt, a soldier in that war, reenlisted after the war and became an officer in the 10th Cavalry, one of the famous “Buffalo Soldier” regiments composed largely of ex-slaves and stationed in Kansas. The 10th Cavalry was assigned to protect new white settlements from

interference by the Native people they had displaced, as well as to participate in campaigns against the Cheyenne, Arapahos, and Comanche. In 1875, Pratt was put in charge of a group of captured Indian warriors accused of leading attacks on settlers as they moved into the region. In order to keep these warriors from “causing trouble,” Pratt and his prisoners were shipped to a prison at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. There, over the next several years, he experimented with various approaches to providing basic literacy and vocational training. Central to his program was a work release system—he called it the “outing system”—that allowed prisoners to take jobs in the city and keep their wages.

Pratt’s program was considered a success and came to the attention of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (who administered treaty-protected lands and reservations). In 1876 Pratt was placed in charge of the American Indian school at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, which had been established as a school for freed slaves in 1868. As he refined his approach to Indian education, Pratt lobbied for the Indian Bureau to establish a separate school for Native people and, in 1879, he was given charge of a retired army barracks in Pennsylvania where he opened the first federal Indian boarding school. At the center of his educational theory, Pratt held that one’s culture, behavior, and language were cultivated habits. “There is no ‘heart language,’” he wrote, “There is no resistless clog placed upon us by birth. We are not born with language, nor are we born with ideas of either civilization or savagery. Language, savagery, and civilization are forced upon us entirely by our environment after birth” (1891, 3). The Carlisle educational program would provide an environment that freed its students from habits that had limited their opportunities and give them new habits adapted to the circumstances of the wider American culture. In establishing the school, Pratt directly challenged established policies that enforced segregation and denied Native people access to education and work. Over the next three decades, Pratt became well known

for his commitment to improving the conditions of American Indians and promoting their integration into the dominant cultural and economic systems of the time.

Despite the widespread support for the boarding school movement by liberal groups like the Indian Rights Association and the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, and the apparent approval of many American Indians, a wider perspective on the history of boarding schools reveals that, rather than being liberatory, they were part of a new program of genocide that emerged in the wake of the Civil War (see S. L. Pratt 2015). This outcome of the liberal Indian education program was most famously captured in an 1892 address to the National Conferences of Charities and Corrections, in which Pratt concluded, "A great General has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense," he continued, "I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (1892, 46). Pratt's stark statement reflected the developing liberal agenda to end military action against Native people and establish a new approach explicitly designed to address the increasingly bad conditions faced by those who had been forced onto reservations.

In 1881, Helen Hunt Jackson helped to mobilize liberal reformers across the country to take up the cause of improving the treatment of American Indians when she published *A Century of Dishonor*. Jackson offered detailed descriptions of treaty violations, the abuse of Native people supposedly protected by the US government, forced removals from traditional lands, and massacres. This history "convicts us," she wrote, of "having outraged the principles of justice; ... having laid ourselves open to the accusations of both cruelty and perfidy; [and] of making ourselves liable to all punishments which follow upon such sins" (1885, 29). "There is," she concluded, "only one way of righting this wrong. It lies in appeals to the heart and conscience of

the American people" (1885, 30). At issue for the activists Jackson inspired was the conviction that Native people would continue to suffer as long as they were held back by an Indian policy that emphasized reservations over education and economic opportunity.

The result of the efforts of these activists was a four-pronged approach to the so-called "Indian problem" implemented over the next 80 years. The first was the establishment of an Indian education system modeled on Pratt's school that would train Native students in English literacy and vocational skills. By 1902, there were 25 boarding schools enrolling nearly 18,000 students (Adams, 1995, 57-8). Second, in order to foster the development of a sense of individualism that would help Native people break free of their conditions, the activists worked with the US Congress to pass the General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act) in 1887. The Dawes act divided up treaty-assigned reservation land and assigned parcels to each member of the tribe for them to cultivate and profit from, freeing them from their dependence on hunting, fishing, and government handouts from the Indian Bureau. If the Indian agent agreed, they could also sell the land and move away from the reservation, using the money to make a new start on their own. The "leftover" areas of reservation land after the allotment were sold to non-native settlers.

The third element of the liberal program was to see that American Indians were made citizens of the United States. Until 1924 when Congress passed the American Indian Citizenship Act, Native people could become citizens only if the government-appointed Indian agent decided that the person was qualified for citizenship. The activists argued that this practice both reinforced tribal membership (since agents often opposed making Indians citizens) and led to abuses (when tribal members sought citizenship in order to vote or have access to the court system). The Citizenship Act, they argued, would bring Indians into the American democratic system, give them a larger loyalty, and decrease the dependence of individual Native people on their tribal affiliations. The fourth prong of the program was the eventual

elimination of tribes as recognized entities. In 1953, Congress passed the first of a series of laws designed to eliminate tribes. The acts, taken together, are known as “Termination” and led to the elimination of more than 100 tribes in the 1950s and 1960s, freeing 2.5 million acres of tribal lands from treaty protection, and the disenrollment of 12,000 people from tribal membership.

In the end, these activist efforts to *better* the conditions of American Indians constituted a new program of genocide, understood in its original sense of “tribe killing” (Wolfe 2006). Whereas the pre-Civil War strategy sought the overt extermination of Native peoples, the policies and practices of post-Civil War America, under the guise of a “humanitarian” program aimed at establishing equal rights and opportunities, nevertheless became a systematic, intentional program aimed at destroying American Indian culture. To peoples whose very lives depended on their relations to others—human, non-human, collective, and placed—the program of the reformers was extermination in another form. The implications of this genocide are not often considered or well understood. Pratt’s program, a central piece of this larger project, shows how it was carried out, not under the label of genocide, but as liberal reform, committed to ending suffering and promoting the development of a robust individualism in which people were free to choose some affiliations and leave others behind.

II.

In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty presents Dewey and Whitman as offering “America” and “democracy” as “shorthand for a new conception of what it is to be human—a conception which has no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority, and in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all” (1998, 18). Rather than imagining “God as the unconditional object of desire,” Dewey and Whitman wanted “the struggle for social justice to be the country’s animating principle, the nation’s soul” (18).

Rorty contrasts Dewey and Whitman with recent writers Leslie Marmon Silko, an American Indian novelist whose *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) conveys “the wholehearted, gut-wrenching disgust for white America,” and James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time* (1962), an African American author who combines “a continued unwillingness to forgive [whites] with a continuing identification with the country that brought over his ancestors in chains” (12).

Silko’s desperate vision provides little light and little hope. Baldwin’s vision, on the contrary, leads to the hope consistent with Dewey and Whitman’s vision where whites and blacks “must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in our duty now,” Baldwin says, “... and achieve our country” (Baldwin, quoted in Rorty, 1998, 13). Such an attitude marks a pride in American possibility. Rorty concludes, such pride “is compatible with remembering that we expanded our boundaries by massacring the tribes which blocked our way, that we broke the word we had pledged in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and that we caused the death of a million Vietnamese out of sheer macho arrogance” (32). Even though imperialism only makes a cameo appearance in Rorty’s discussion, its presence suggests its relevance to the choice of one vision of America or another. The project proposed in *Achieving Our Country* expresses in concrete terms the conception of a liberal nation developed earlier in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.

In both works, Rorty’s project is framed by three commitments: liberal ironism, a distinction between public and private, and secularism. As is well known, Rorty defines liberals as “people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we can do” so that among their “ungroundable desires” is the hope that “suffering will be diminished, that humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (1989, xv). To be an ironist, he claimed, is to be one “who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs

and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (xv). A liberal ironist, then, is one who seeks to diminish cruelty but who also realizes that the ground for such conviction is not found in universal principles. From this perspective, there are "no non-circular theoretical" justifications for the "belief that cruelty is horrible," only convictions fostered by literature and art—by strong poets who can foster sensitivity and a "final vocabulary" that help frame the kind of persons we want to be and what we need to notice about others. The strength of the liberal ironist is two-fold. On one hand, a liberal ironist has an exit strategy both from debates about first principles that can bring reform to a halt and from efforts to persuade disbelievers by using reasoned argument to show that their first principles are mistaken or dangerous. On the other hand, the liberal ironist can begin by recognizing the pain and suffering of others and can take action without being troubled by arguments over whether the sufferer merits our attention.

But liberal irony does not stand alone; it rather sets the stage for social reform that will be taken up in a context that includes both the interests of individuals and the need to coordinate collective action. Since these interests are often at odds, Rorty proposes that balance can be found by recognizing a firm distinction between private projects of self-creation and public projects committed to shared purposes. The dominant view, Rorty observes, is one where the two kinds of projects must be justified in terms of the universal principles of truth, right, and good. Yet, self-creation—as Emerson argued—is not a shared project; it is the work of an individual achieving her or his own meaning and purpose, albeit with the aid of others. Public projects, on the other hand, are predicated on submitting individual interests to the shared interests of the community. Expecting that one set of universal truths will adequately frame both kinds of projects is a crucial mistake. "I want to replace this with a story of increasing willingness to live with plurality and to stop asking for universal validity," he wrote. Instead, common purposes should be

the product of free agreement where the common purposes "are seen against the background of an increasing sense of the radical diversity of private purposes, of the radically poetic character of individual lives, and of the merely poetic foundations of the 'we-consciousness' which lies behind our social institutions" (1989, 67-8). The public/private split provides a means of assuring a pluralism of selves and projects of self-creation, even as it assures the possibility of common agreement.

While it may appear that the split "will not work," "that no one can divide herself up into a private self-creator and a public liberal" (1989, 85), Rorty argues that the split marks distinct projects that need not, in fact cannot, be resolved into a single one. The effort to engage in private self-creation and public efforts to reduce suffering, are approached through a process of description that uses what Rorty calls our "final vocabularies" composed of "the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives" (1989, 73). Such vocabularies can be used for different purposes, some private and some public. "For my private purposes," he says, "I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business" (1989, 91). As a liberal, however, "the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated" (1989, 92). The tension between private and public vocabularies does not mean that the distinction must be resolved in favor of one or the other. "On my account of ironist culture, such opposites can be combined in a life but not synthesized in a theory" (1989, 120). Practically, he concludes, "our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such

private motives" (1989, 194). A pluralism of individuals is maintained even as collective concerns and action remain a real possibility.

The third key commitment, secularism, in Rorty's vision was motivated, at least in part, as a means of escaping the limitations of a theologically constrained public. Rorty aims to replace what he sees as dogmatic commitment to inherited beliefs with an ironist perspective that acknowledges the contingency of such belief. The resulting commitment to secularism provides a kind of postmetaphysical stance that avoids universalism and anything but skeptical affirmation of what is "real." Writing about "German idealists, French revolutionaries, and romantic poets," he declares that "they no longer spoke of themselves as responsible to non-human powers" and so marked the beginning of a "new kind of human beings" (1989, 7). By rejecting theology and its attendant language of powers and interests beyond human experience, Rorty is able to refigure the relation of human beings to the world and transform the received notion of truth as a representation of something outside language to the recognition that truths are only within language and so are not available to serve as a standard for choosing one language or another.

The attitude of liberal irony prepares one to recognize the distinction between public and private, which, in turn, marks both the linguistic turn and the post-metaphysical stance rejecting the recognition of non-human others. The former recognizes private and public final vocabularies with which to frame our projects and describe our lives and circumstances. The latter marks the idea that "we no longer worship anything, ... we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, ... we treat everything...as a product of time and chance" (22). With the spread of the liberal ironic attitude, individuals and the collective nation will find ways to achieve an ongoing balance between private self creation and public efforts to reduce suffering. Through this vision, the liberal ironist may achieve an American nation that echoes Whitman's "By Blue Ontario's Shore," where

All is eligible to all,
All is for individuals—All is for you,
No condition is prohibited—not God's, or any. ...
Produce great persons, the rest follows.

All that can be said in defense of this vision, Rorty concludes in *Achieving Our Country*, "is that it would produce less unnecessary suffering than any other, and that it is the best means to a certain end: the creation of greater diversity of individuals—larger, fuller, more imaginative and daring individuals" (1998, 30).

III.

At the 1917 Lake Mohonk Conference of the Friends of the Indian, Pratt offered "the remedy" to the problem of American Indian suffering. His answer anticipates the liberal vision offered some 70 years later by Rorty. What is the remedy? Pratt asked. "Simply that all Indians have the same individual chances for development into useful citizenship, in the same citizenship environment that every ... other inhabitant of the United States receives and all segregating and bureaucratizing be abandoned" (1916, 12). "Citizenship," for Pratt, like citizenship in Rorty's America, marked the dual commitments of a private individual to self-creation and a public citizen committed to collective national efforts. For Pratt, this vision stood in opposition to the segregation demanded by the established Indian policy and the tribalism demanded by American Indian nations. Addressing a similar tension, Rorty writes, "To take pride in being black or gay is an entirely reasonable response to the sadistic humiliation to which one has been subjected. But insofar as this pride prevents someone from also taking pride in being an American citizen, from thinking of his or her country as capable of reform, or from being able to join with straights or whites in reformist initiatives, it is a political disaster" (1998, 100). Pratt put the point more starkly: "Carlisle has always planted treason to the tribe and loyalty to the nation at large. It has preached against colonizing Indians, and in favor of individualizing them. It has demanded the same multiplicity of chances which all others in the country

enjoy" (1892, 57). He continues: "[T]he Indian is no different from the white or the colored, that he has the inalienable right to liberty and opportunity that the white and negro have. Carlisle does not dictate to him what line of life he should fill, [just] so it is an honest one" (1892, 57).

Given his commitment to citizenship and collective action to improve the lot of American Indians, one might grant that Pratt was a liberal in the proper sense, and still argue that he was not an ironist. Even as US Indian policies began to reduce investment in boarding schools and establish more on-reservation day schools, Pratt remained committed to his approach, lobbying civic groups, churches, and the government long after he was asked to resign from his leadership of Carlisle in 1908. Could an ironist, committed to the contingency of his central beliefs, hold so tightly to his convictions? In fact, apart from his appeals to the evils faced by American Indians and his appeals to the benefits of their becoming part of wider American society in order to address the problems of poverty, hunger and illiteracy, Pratt rarely if ever claimed a commitment to some universal moral law.

It is useful to recognize two operative sorts of irony in Rorty's work. One is a kind of pervasive skepticism toward systematic solutions to problems and efforts to justify them in a principled way. The other is a more or less formal dismissal of foundations. The two are related in that the skeptical attitude that sets aside efforts to justify claims implies a rejection of the idea that claims have foundations that can play a role in their justification. In Rorty, skepticism and the formal rejection of foundations lead to a kind of overt attitude that dismisses some conversations and interests out of hand ("ironically"). Pratt, in contrast, was an earnest character, prone to seeking systematic answers and offering limited justifications for his plans. Although he rejected the received conceptions of Indian abilities and the general program of isolating Native peoples on reservations until they vanished, he does not seem to present his rejection as a matter of skepticism. At the

same time, Pratt, unlike many of his contemporaries, rejected the need for foundations when simple recognition of Indian suffering was sufficient to mark both the reason for action and the measure of its success. So while not an ironist in the way he talked about his work, Pratt was an ironist in the way he carried it out.

For example, while he acknowledged the presence of churches in the system of Indian education and reservation management (the Indian Bureau assigned different regions of Indian country to different Christian denominations to establish reservation schools), he rejected the use of "creeds" as a means of fostering the development of individual Native people. "Church leaders," he said, "have largely led the Government, and are really, as I believe, much more at fault for the present condition of things than the Government is" because their system "compels" the interests of citizenship—that is, the interests of individualization—"to bow to creeds." (1891, 4). Rejecting the established system as a whole, Pratt concluded: "The dissipation, idleness, disease and crime which has reduced [Native peoples], ... are all the direct result of our grossly injudicious system and mistaken liberality" (1909, 9). It was a system, he said, that ought to be judged by "the forlorn conditions it has engendered almost everywhere" (1917, 11).

Pratt's was a practical commitment, much like Rorty's, to addressing ongoing social problems. His educational vision was not one that sought conformity, but rather sought to empower Native students to develop their own purposes, to create their own individual sense of self and direction. This involved not dictating a "line of life" while breaking the hold of Native communities on their individual members. By leaving both the tribe and the church behind, Pratt concluded, Indians—especially Indian youth—would finally have a chance to be free: private ironists who sought their own projects of self-creation and public liberals working to help those who suffer.

The public/private split was central to the educational project at Carlisle and was perhaps best illustrated in the “outing” program. As David Adams observes, Pratt realized that the routines of the boarding school were an obstacle for realizing the goal of fostering individuals. Pratt wrote, “The order and system so necessary in an institution retards rather than develops habits of self-reliance and forethought; individuality is lost. They grow into mechanical routine” (quoted in Adams, p. 157). The outing system placed students, usually in the summer, in the nearby homes of non-native Pennsylvanians. The students would work as farmers or clerks, or help with household chores, receive modest wages and learn to be independent of both the school routine and the constraints of tribal culture. Private experience and interests were thereby fostered in tension with the public concerns of boarding school life and its project of addressing the conditions faced by Native people. Exposure to the lives of Americans already engaged in projects of self-creation provided students with models and opportunities to develop projects of their own. Rather than framing their interests in terms of tribal needs on one hand and the explicit directions of teachers on the other, Pratt was convinced that the outing program could help American Indians become true Americans, to become great individuals. His lectures were filled with the names and stories of Carlisle alumni who, in his view, successfully made the transition from tribal people to individuals. Stripped of Indian culture and its quasi-divinities, Native people would be at last free to achieve the best that American democracy could offer.

IV.

Despite Pratt’s “best possible motives,” his project is now universally regarded as a central pillar of the post-Civil War program of genocide carried out against American Indians. Despite its commitment to liberalism—or because of it—Pratt’s project aimed to eliminate American Indian culture and, with it, American Indian individuals. While

some may resist calling the program genocidal, from the perspective of many American Indian commentators, there is little question that the term is correctly applied. The question here is not whether the boarding school program had such effects, however, but whether, as a liberal ironist project, it diminished or failed to diminish suffering and humiliation of the people it engaged. Setting aside the larger question of the role of violation of treaty rights, the politics of the Indian Bureau, and the economics of land acquisition, can it be claimed that the elements of the program framed by Pratt as a liberal ironist contributed to the perpetuation and increase of the suffering of American Indians? I think that it did in at least two ways.

In 1933, Luther Standing Bear, who was a member of the first class of students to attend Carlisle, published his memoir, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*. Standing Bear was trained as a tinsmith and returned to the Pine Ridge Reservation where, unable to find work, he became a teacher and a farmer and eventually a member of the tribal council. After conflicts with representatives of the Indian Bureau, he left Pine Ridge to be an actor in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and later an actor in early Hollywood westerns. Late in life he became a writer, publishing four books, including two children’s books and an ethnography about the Lakota. In his memoir, he described the Carlisle experience. The process began, he said, “with the clothes.” “The task before us was not only that of accepting new ideas and adopting new manners, but actual physical changes and discomfort [that had] to be borne uncomplainingly until the body adjusted itself to new tastes and habits” (232). Long hair was cut, diet was dramatically changed and each student was given a new name: not a translation of their given name, but a name chosen from a list of acceptable European names, like ‘Luther.’ The results of the transformation were often fatal. “The change in clothing, housing, food, and confinement combined with lonesomeness was too much,” Standing Bear wrote, “and in three years nearly one half of the children from the Plains were dead and through with all earthly schools” (234).

Ultimately, subjecting students to such treatment can only be seen as cruel and clearly not an element Pratt should have embraced as a liberal ironist. Yet one element would, it seems, necessarily remain: the central demand for the construction of a new vocabulary in terms of which the Native children could tell a new story both of themselves as part of their efforts at self-creation and of their people as part of their public interest in addressing the suffering at home. If such a vocabulary was not already present to reframe the children's lives in democratic terms—and Pratt would have argued that it was not—acquiring such a vocabulary required a new language. “At Carlisle,” Standing Bear wrote, “we had been ordered never to speak our own language and I now remembered how hard it had been for us to forego the consolation of speech” (242). Here the suffering of the Native children took on a particular character. Caught between languages, not only did the children suffer, their suffering was inexpressible. Only later was Standing Bear able to remember the character of his suffering, now framed as part of the process of becoming an individual, learning to self-create. In retrospect, in the language of mainstream America, Standing Bear could remember “how lonely we used to get and how we longed for the loved ones at home, and the taking away of speech at that time only added to our depression” (242). Even as Pratt's project found its success in transforming Standing Bear from a Lakota boy to an individual whose life was a model of self-creation, it also failed by creating a kind of suffering that could not be expressed.

Furthermore, Pratt's insistent secularism—its rejection of theological claims both Christian and indigenous—also calls the liberal ironist project into question. The educational goals of Carlisle set out to transform the lives of Native people by reconstructing their relationship to their tribal traditions and the dominant society. It was a humanist project that was not burdened by commitments to what Rorty calls a non-human, “personlike” world. “For as long as we think that ‘the world’ names something we ought to *respect* as well

as cope with something *personlike* in that it has a preferred description of itself,” Rorty said, “we shall insist that any philosophical account of truth save the ‘intuition’ that the ‘truth is out there’” (emphasis added, 1989 21). Non-human persons, for Rorty, stood squarely in the way of the liberal ironist project because their recognition also required the recognition of foundations. Yet it was this narrowing of the human scope of concern by setting aside non-human persons that, for Standing Bear, directly contributed to the failure of the dominant culture's own projects of building a nation. “The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. The roots of his tree of life have not yet grasped rock and soil” (248). Rather than separating humans from the other agents present in America, successful public projects demanded surrender to or at least cooperation with a wide range of non-human powers on whom future life depended. “The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien,” he said. “[I]n the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested ... Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefather's bones” (248). By undermining the Native connection to land and non-human others, Pratt's program undercut the ability of Native people to be at home in their places and to carry out public projects of social change. As Standing Bear makes clear, white efforts to create a sustainable national identity were bound to fail. In adopting a public vocabulary that redescribes America as a world of fungible lands, endless resources available for human use, and consequently, a land of endless human self-creation, the underlying loss becomes inexpressible. Like the suffering of boarding school students who lacked the consolation of speech, the suffering land lost its voice as well.

V.

Yet it is possible that, while Pratt's liberal ironist project failed, Rorty's vision may not. Writing in his 1985 response to Clifford Geertz's address, "The Uses of Diversity," Rorty argues "our bourgeois liberal culture ... is a culture which prides itself on constantly adding more windows [to other cultures], constantly enlarging its sympathies" (204). For Rorty, its "sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance for diversity" (204). The presence of diversity is in part a product of the effort of anthropologists like Geertz who, as sympathetic interpreters, make diversity apparent. In the 19th century, Rorty explains, Americans thought that "[t]he Indians, whether drunk or sober, were non-persons, without human dignity, means to our grandparents' ends" (206). Anthropology "made it hard for us to continue thinking of them this way and thereby made them into part of contemporary America." To be "part of society," he continues, is "to be taken as a possible conversational partner by those who shape society's self image" (206). Encouraged by intellectuals like Geertz, the "media ... have been making such partners of the Indians."

The result of the efforts of anthropologists and others is to foster a kind of ethnocentrism that affirms differences and benefits from them. "We have to start from where we are," he concludes in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The resulting ethnocentrism is not pernicious but beneficial: "it is the ethnocentrism of a 'we' ('we liberals') which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*" (198). But what fosters such enlargement is unclear, and what place impoverished reservation communities occupy remains problematic. Rorty describes his ethnocentrism as like a "Kuwaiti Bazaar," "surrounded by lots and lots of exclusive clubs" (209). But in the reality of a colonized land, such a model either violates the commitments of the liberal or the commitments of the ironist. The commitments of the liberal are violated because the suffering of colonized people is apparent

and it is caused by the flourishing of the dominant liberal society. If it is the liberal's passion to diminish such suffering, "tolerating" such suffering as a private club is to forego this passion.

Such ethnocentrism also violates the commitments of the ironist because if colonized people are seen as "part of us," then their suffering is a present concern, here in "our club," and must be addressed by fostering projects of self-creation at the expense of whatever the traditions of the colonized people may have to offer or lose in the process. Pratt opted for the latter option by seeing Native people as part of the American "we." Rorty's ethnocentric strategy models the former option and points not to Pratt's project but to the project of Pratt's successor, Francis Leupp, who reformed Indian education in order to foster a pluralist toleration of difference. The result, however, was not an end to suffering but, have argued elsewhere, a new version of the project of genocide (Pratt 2015), that is, a new version of the project Raphael Lemkin defined as "*acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.*"

The comparison of the commitments shared by Pratt and Rorty suggests that the political projects of liberal ironists call for further consideration when taken up in the context of the 21st century world, where the history of colonization and genocide is clearly recognized. When the "detailed empirical description" of American imperialism is taken seriously, liberals must reconsider their commitments in that light. Rorty's social hope—as Richard Henry Pratt's before him—may inspire a new politics in Europe and America, but to do so now, by its own lights, requires that it engage its relation to a history of genocide, and seek conversation with those who are committed to decolonization.

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