

April 25, 2016

To: The Colorado House Bill Hearing Committee,

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Dr. Roger K. Green. I am a professor in the Department of English at The Metropolitan State University of Denver, and I am currently working on a second doctorate in Religious Studies at The University of Denver. Although I am not testifying on behalf of MSU Denver, I believe I have their mission in mind in what I have to present today. I am here to support HB 16-1135. My work as a professor gives me first-hand witness to the ongoing struggles that Native American students face as a result of current and historical domination. I see this against the backdrop of the disproportionate advantages that my non-native students often have. As part of a Hispanic serving institution, I am also regularly attentive to issues in Chicano culture that have blended with Indigenous cultures throughout this region we now name "Colorado" but that both precede and supersede state and national political borders.

My Rhetoric and Composition courses often deal with public issues related to Civil Rights, such as the recent Black Lives Matter campaign, and not just in a thematic way. Issues of language acquisition and literacy are imbricated in political decisions around race, ethnicity, and citizenship. I often also witness the ignorant and naive reactions some people have to such campaigns, especially white people who are unable to yet see how their whiteness is underwritten by legacies of domination. As a white person who recognizes the inheritance of privileges I did not ask for but nevertheless benefit from, I believe it is crucial to the future of our national and local communities to address the ongoing cultural assaults on Native Americans.

Often when first confronted with an issue concerning ethnicity and injustice, uninformed people react at a personal level. This often manifests in kneejerk reactions to issues of difference followed by a defensive statement that shifts blame away from them personally and is followed by universalizing rhetoric. Here is an example: "My family never owned slaves or killed Indians, why should "they" get special treatment? Don't *all* lives matter?" There is a two-part obfuscation at work here: 1) Taking a personal defensive approach to historical injustice that makes a victim out of someone from a background privileged by domination; and 2) a move to generalize or universalize from that personalized and privileged position. Both moves implicitly ignore and deflect attention from marginalized perspectives. Such rhetoric is then often used in politics to claim the marginality of the historically privileged perspectives, missing the point entirely (or *getting* the point entirely and intentionally blocking truly marginalized perspectives). While the majority of public attention concerning marginalized people in the United States adheres to an ongoing struggle most often thematized by the role of African Americans in U.S. society – an argument that goes back to the founding of the nation – Civil Rights rhetoric generally emphasizes the inclusion of previously marginalized voices from groups who *have not had access to civic privileges*.

In one sense, HB-1135 operates in the spirit of inclusive civil rights tradition, but I think it especially important that it is also a way to recognize difference while acknowledging the atrocities that have been committed against indigenous peoples since Columbus and Cabot. The struggles Indigenous Peoples' face precede the institution of the United States, but through legal decisions such as 1823 *Johnson v. M'Intosh* that

earlier legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery informs and is perpetuated by the U.S. government. The struggles of Indigenous Peoples' in the U.S. are therefore unique and not to be confused with other historically marginalized peoples whose struggles nevertheless remain important.

Many Native Americans have often been further marginalized by rhetorics of inclusivity because they have sought to maintain their own cultural fabrics and resisting acculturation. The position by the U.S. government has often been, "join us or perish," while the cultural appropriation of Indigenous Peoples creates stereotype's that frame for the public that American Indians are part of a forgotten and distant past. Reservations and their sovereignty are not recognized in most political maps and certainly not included in any robust way in public education. My literature students, for example, have almost never heard of texts such as the *Popol Vuh*, let alone know that our access to such texts is through the documentation of Native beliefs by missionaries so they could recognize practices and stamp them out. The House Bill is a step toward public recognition of Indigenous Peoples that both includes them in the public consciousness and recognizes difference. I believe it is crucial for not just Colorado but the Nation at large to be more active in this way. Public recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day gives potential venues for Indigenous Peoples' to voice their ongoing heritages *in ways that only they can*. It also allows non-natives a chance to begin owning the past without wallowing in the guilt, obfuscation, and minimization of atrocities that I so often see and hear from those with no background or education on the issue. I will end with a brief analogy to the more public civil rights discourse in the U.S. When Jim Crow laws were struck down in the early 1950s it was largely because the courts recognized that attempts at "separate but equal" were causing U.S. citizens psychological trauma and perpetuating inequality. Not recognizing the distinct indigenous cultures in this country creates complicity in the historic genocides of Native Americans, which perpetuates both trauma and guilt for both natives and non-natives. For the same reasons Jim Crow laws were struck down, our nation needs to be more inclusive of Native Americans; but what needs to be emphasized is their rhetorical and national sovereignty. HB 16-1135 pushes us in that direction. Thank you for hearing my testimony.

Sincerely,



Dr. Roger K. Green  
MSU Denver Department of English