What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?

Philip J. Deloria

IN 1992 I took almost a full week—and I mean several hours each day—to read Richard White's *The Middle Ground.* I remember being awed by the depth of the book's historical research, thrilled by its conceptual power, pulled in by its writing. And since I was at that very moment on something like draft ten of the first chapter of my dissertation, I also remember being very, very depressed. There was no way I could ever come close to matching up with this kind of work. How was I to achieve such richness, nuance, and subtlety, such a level of detail and mastery? I took solace only in the fact that some of my friends let it slip that the book had left them in similar despair.

But an odd thing happened over the next few years. Though I was not really aware of it, I started to lose track of the subtleties and specificities of the argument and began to wield "middle ground" as a kind of all-purpose tool for thinking about white-Indian interactions on the terrain of culture. Nor was I alone in this unconscious simplification. The shift was crystallized for me in a conversation with a mutual friend, during which *The Middle Ground* came up. "Richard seems a little down," she said. "People are starting to take the middle ground as a general metaphor, a kind of watered down idea about the mechanisms of compromise in all kinds of social and political situations. Everything is starting to turn into a middle ground."

"Uh, oh," I thought. "I'll bet that I've been guilty of that myself." I returned to *The Middle Ground* then, and I would like to think that I have been more attentive to its issues of power, perception, and cultural production ever since. But I might, in some subsequent instances, have been crude and unsubtle in my use of the middle ground, despite my best intentions. I suspect that in this failure, too, I am not alone. And I would like to use this problematic—that is, the possibility of misreadings by the well intentioned—as a way of reflecting back on the book.

First, it is worth noting that White anticipated this problem and tried repeatedly to bind up this thing called the middle ground. It is not

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acculturation, he insisted. It is not compromise. On the middle ground, as he argued in the introduction, "diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and the practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices."[1] This definition remains, to my mind, one of the best articulations of the practice of new cultural production in cross-social and cross-political contexts. It highlights, above all, the adaptation and creation of culture. Persuasion, perception, misperception, misinterpretation: these are actions that live primarily in the cultural realm of meaning-making, performance, and communicative practice. In this sense the middle ground looks like a particularly dialogic process of cultural production.

On that same page, however, there are at least two other definitions critical to my understanding of the middle ground. The first steps outside culture to insist on a recognition of the social and political contexts of power. The middle ground, White wrote, requires a relation in which "whites could neither dictate to Indians nor ignore them."[2] The analytic structure of the middle ground rests on this distinction. It is not concerned with cultural production occurring within a structure characterized by the possibility of dominating force. Though individual acts of domination occur with some regularity, at a structural and theoretical level the middle ground presumes a relation of power equivalence rather than dominance. Dialogic cultural productions surely take place all the time among parties for whom power is not structurally equivalent. Yet it is precisely the rough equivalence that makes the process of the middle ground so evocative. One might assume that middle grounds come into being when power is structurally equal and that they disintegrate into uneven dialogues when power shifts decisively in one direction or another.

And yet to argue for a simple equivalence of power might lead to an overly rigid and dualistic imagining of social and political boundaries, which in turn might tend to produce oppositional readings of empires (French, British, and American) and Indians (completely outside such modes of identification). A third definitional fragment, then, emphasizes the complexities of the relation between cultural, social, and political productions and identities. The middle ground, White argues, is "the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires

[1] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991), x.

[2] Ibid.

and the nonstate world of villages."[3] As an analytic tool, the middle ground seeks to find a way to talk about relations between the always-blurry nature of cultural production and the shifty boundary-drawing exercises that establish social and political identities (and that do so with increasing rigidity as power tilts in one direction or another). Taken on its own, this "place in-between" definition might seem surprisingly unoriginal. In truth "in-betweenness" is absolutely critical, for it serves as the conceptual thread that subtly knits power and culture together.

My point is that White consciously sought to anticipate the simplifying urges that might have captured people like myself, and he bound up the middle ground in complex and precise definitions. He waged a preemptive fight against those urges in the chapter titled "The Middle Ground," in which historical examples and additional iterations of the concept surely force us to come to grips with its meaning as a process and as a specific historical time and place. I want to leave this point by turning back once again to the text, to a particularly fine definition that integrates the problematics of social-political boundaries, the nature of power dynamics, and the dynamism and creativity of new cultural production: "The middle ground depended on the inability of both sides to gain their ends through force. The middle ground grew according to the need of people to find a means, other than force, to gain the cooperation or consent of foreigners. To succeed, those who operated on the middle ground had, of necessity, to attempt to understand the world and the reasoning of others and to assimilate enough of that reasoning to put it to their own purposes."[4]

As White points out, the book's very argument denies him a rationale for complaining about being misread. The rest of us are not so constrained, though indeed we (OK, I) might be misreading even now. Still, it might be worth probing a little more into why the book lends itself to a particular style of misreading, namely simplification, which is one historians usually dread and would be loathe to imagine themselves practicing on a colleague. White himself points to the relevant issue: middle ground functions as a historical description of a particular time and place as well as an exploration of a process, one that scholars might view as being analytically portable to other times and places.

I want to ask just what kind of analytic tool White has created. To do so I think it is worth returning to one of the many definitional gestures that seeks to bind up the potentially flyaway meanings of the middle ground. In discussing the French-Algonquian alliance, White rejects, in a seamless sentence, two older analytic traditions, insisting instead on a rich

[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., 52.

complexity: "The alliance endured not because of some mystical affinity between Frenchmen and Indians, nor because Algonquians had been reduced to dependency on the French, but rather because two peoples created an elaborate network of economic, political, cultural, and social ties to meet the demands of a particular historical situation."[5]

As I read this passage today, I sense, or maybe I only think I sense, some of the analytic ambitions undergirding the middle ground, which seem to fit within the historiographical context of the period between 1983, when White published *The Roots of Dependency*, and 1991, when he published *The Middle Ground* and *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West*.[6] My own incomplete and retrospective sense of that moment focuses on the cultural turn, the sharpening up of analytic tools old and new, and of the race, class, and gender triumvirate, in particular. Many of these efforts simultaneously gestured to specific and particular histories (of, for example, gender and race) and toward the possibilities of breadth, synthesis, and large-scale thinking.

Why do such categories of analysis (and there are, of course, others) remain critical to us today? It is not just that they offer new angles of vision on older histories that often featured white, male, upper-class protagonists, though they do that quite well. It is also that, in the best histories, the pantheon of race, class, gender, and sexuality—either as individual categories or, more recently, as intersectional analyses—binds together historical narrative across the lines that might otherwise separate out economic, political, cultural, social, environmental, and legal strands. This connective definition is not to say that race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on do not have their own worthwhile histories and rationales, or that economic history, political history, etc., do not also maintain their own integrity. But it is to say that books that often seem to do the most significant work, such as *The Middle Ground*, do more than simply weave together race, class, and gender. They also put in conversation these various arenas of historical analysis.

White's statement about the complexity of the French-Indian alliance can also be read as a statement about the analytic opportunities generated by the concept of the middle ground: "two peoples created an elaborate network of *economic, political, cultural, and social* ties to meet the demands of a particular historical situation."[7] And thus the great power of this book, which knits together, with varying levels of intensity, politics and

[5] Ibid., 33.

[6] Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, Neb., 1983); White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991).

[7] White, *Middle Ground*, 33 [emphasis added].

culture, social relations and economics, and racialization and gender. The knitting and binding power here, however, comes not from the race/class/gender array but rather from the middle ground itself. It is on the middle ground that this complicated interplay becomes visible. Imperial politics mingle with the sex and gender relations of Indian kinship, which mingle with the economic needs and ambitions of Europeans and Indians alike, which are productive of and produced by cultural rituals, in which meaning is negotiated and made . . . and so on. Perched on the middle ground, both as place and as analytic platform, we can continue looping among these figures almost indefinitely, making intricate connections between the social, the cultural, the political, the economic, the juridical, and the environmental.

I think it is fair to say that *The Middle Ground* represents a significant and multifaceted ambition: like much analysis built around race, class, gender, and sexuality, it seeks to destabilize and transform the older and often foundational narratives of early American history, Native American history, and ethnohistory. As important, it offers a figure—the middle ground—that might (and, of course, I have no way of knowing White's intentions) bid to become part of the race, class, gender, and sexuality analytic matrix, an organizing principle with the same kind of power to bind together multiple angles and arenas of analyses. In fact, one might go further and argue that the middle ground actually bids to move beyond that quartet, for on the middle ground (that is, the specific place of the *pays d'en haut*) it is possible to see race, class, gender, and sexuality as secondary categories of analysis, social relations that are simply part of the makeup of the larger practice of human invention described by the middle ground (that is, as an analytic process).

This ambition is the enormous, important, and productive silver lining visible in the idea of the middle ground as a process, one potentially transferable to other times and places. There is, of course, a cloudy part, too: that problem of slippage from analytic capaciousness to the generalization of meaning that would simplify the middle ground to less precise practices of compromise, contest, and negotiation. Maybe it is because the middle ground bids for such a powerful organization of meaning that it can be, paradoxically, emptied of specific meanings and at the same time becoming, at the furthest extreme, simply a trope for human give and take. I suspect that something like this emptying of meaning happened not only to me but also to other readers of good will who passed down a slippery slope from the specifics of time and place, to a complex historical process, to a more general notion of human interaction, and, finally, to a concept drained somehow of its power.

There is a key word lurking here, one that has, on other occasions, been noted as a critical element of White's writing. In adopting the middle

ground, White made a decision, probably out of narrative and analytic necessity, to give the object of his discussion a particularly metaphoric name. Of course the idea gets simplified: in two words it invokes a contest for terrain and a sense of dualistic boundaries that, in relation to one another, produce a middle. The name hints at new cultural production and the structural equilibrium of power, yet its evocations of complexity require White's strong definitional backbone; more likely the title directs the casual reader into a simplified sense of two-party compromise.

As Karen R. Merrill has observed, White uses metaphor to prefigure his work. "He turns to metaphors," she suggests, "in critical moments to clarify the meaning of his narrative." Merrill continues with an apt example: "When he approaches the subject of migration to the West in '*It's Your Misfortune*,' he admits to the difficulty of telling his story and ends up shaping the entire chapter around a metaphor: 'To avoid a narration that simply piles detail upon detail, group upon group, and place upon place,' observes White, 'we must resort to analogy and metaphor.'"[8]

One might well take the very same sentence as a brief for the middle ground. The book is drenched with metaphor, most particularly in the moments in which White clears the ground, builds the foundation, and puts up the framing. In the master narrative of Indian-white relations, he begins, "Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm." The world before the French arrival was a pane of glass, etched first by a knife, then cracked by epidemics, and finally smashed to pieces by the hammer blows of the Iroquois. "Imported imperial glue" will be used to piece together a new world from shattered pieces.[9] The metaphoric fluidity of *The Middle Ground*—in its writing, its analytic sensibility, and its very name—makes it powerful, capable of seamlessly connecting a geographical and historical space with a processual concept. The borrowing of meaning characteristic of metaphor allows the place to inform the process and vice versa. White shows the way that metaphor functions not only descriptively, but also productively in the writing of history. At the same time, however, the metaphoric nature of the middle ground challenges the substantial definitional moorings offered in the book's early pages and allows even well-intentioned readers to dissolve its meanings.

The middle ground failed to escape the problems associated with its high-profile predecessor, the frontier. Whether you take Frederick Jackson Turner's moving frontier or Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson's zone of cultural interaction or even, perhaps, Gloria Anzaldúa's rendering of

[8] Karen R. Merrill, "The Poetics of 'Misfortune': On Richard White's Western History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 147.

[9] White, *Middle Ground*, ix, 2.

border subjectivity and power in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, frontier has similarly been dogged by the slippage between geohistorical place and processual concept. It, too, has had its metaphorical tendencies converted into simplified tropes (as Patricia Nelson Limerick has shown, for anything wishing to be seen as new and challenging).[10] There are few issues as moribund as western history's old debate about whether frontier is place or process. *The Middle Ground*, by refusing to deny or assert the primacy of one or the other, and by refusing to have anything to do with frontier debates, sought to leapfrog out of that tedium. Indeed, the book reads as a quiet rebuke to western history as much as it addresses the histories of Indian people or early America. And yet I fear that in the end the middle ground is more inclined to function like frontier than it is like race/class/gender: an elusive metaphor rather than an analytic connector.

And here at last, I confess to my own willful misreading: I have never been successful in truly disentangling the process from the place and have failed in my efforts to think of the middle ground as process (though not for lack of effort). Indeed, reading the book yet again, I have been surprised to find a language of process that I had missed or forgotten. "The creation of the middle ground," White writes, "involved a process of mutual invention by both the French and the Algonquians. This process passed through various stages, of which the earliest is at once the most noticed and the least interesting. It was in this initial stage that the French, for example, simply assimilated Indians into their own conceptual order."[11]

Deep down, I think I am reluctant to admit to the middle ground as being a process, for to do so places the concept back in league with the frontier, with its suggestion of sequential unfolding across time and space. For all its power to knit together race, class, and gender, the middle ground functions differently from these analytic categories, which makes sense, I suppose, since they do not tend to function metaphorically and are capable of being figured whether power relations are relatively balanced. And more often than not . . . they are not. Indeed, understanding imbalance would seem to be the fundamental aim of these analytic tools.

It seems to me, then, that it is exactly the question of power that hinders the portability of the middle ground as an analytic concept. If you take seriously the idea that the middle ground rests on power relations

[10] Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), 3–13; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, Calif., 1987); Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994–January 7, 1995*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), 67–68.

[11] See, for example, Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), 235 n. 54. White, *Middle Ground*, 50–51.

having a structural equivalence, then it seems like the number of opportunities for applying the concept might be somewhat limited—not impossibly limited, but severely so. If nothing else, finding such portability would require new, and more complex, ways of thinking about the figuring of power relations. Those analyses of power would, one imagines, need to be foregrounded prior to an exploration of the various aspects of (mis)perception and new cultural production that make up the middle ground.

In the end I find myself unsure about the extent to which the middle ground can function without recourse to the specific place of the *pays d'en haut*, though perhaps more optimistic than when I began. The singular strength of *The Middle Ground* is the way it takes a murky terrain of social and cultural ambiguity that has all too easily been named in abstract terms and demonstrates in specific detail exactly how it worked. When scholars are tempted to make the middle ground portable, it may be that they are simply coveting the extraordinary achievement of this book—and hoping to duplicate it by seizing the model.

The Middle Ground has led me to think more seriously about the use of culture as a concept—and cultural analysis more specifically—in finding critical points of relation between Indians and non-Indians that lie outside military conflict, political negotiation, and economic exchange. It has been a guide that has encouraged me to reject the inclination to see culture as something mapped analytically onto preexisting social and political divisions. The book forces us to see that our efforts to understand the imposition of (and resistance to) colonial orders are always doomed to insufficiency if they fail to take complex account, not of cultural decline or preservation, but of new cultural production within the frame of encounter. *The Middle Ground* puts Indian people at the center of a story in such a powerful way precisely because it takes new cultural production as a central focus. Cultures change, White demonstrates, not only in response to internal opinion leaders or external impositions but also in relation to human misreadings and failed efforts to understand.

That argument is portable outside the space and time of the *pays d'en haut*, and it has important consequences for historians of all stripes. Indeed, it points toward new theorizations of cultural production that would allow scholars to recognize middle ground processes even when power relations cannot be considered equivalent. Those theorizations of culture would simultaneously demand new theorizations of the workings of power in cross-social situations that would try to account not only for physical forces but also cultural and ideological ones. Such interlocked theorizations could help make perceptible new kinds of power equivalences that might indeed produce other forms of the middle ground in other times and places.