

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Future of Native Studies: A Modest Manifesto

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4m27h1kq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Nelson, Melissa

Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



The Future of Native Studies: A Modest Manifesto

Melissa K. Nelson

In my presentation at the gathering and celebration of forty years of the American Indian Studies Center, I focused on emerging, positive trends and developments in Native American/American Indian/indigenous studies (NAS) and on areas to move toward as we expand the field in order to make it more current and relevant to the lived experiences of Native Americans today. In this short essay, a humble manifesto, I summarize these trends and encourage further exploration and development of other themes in the unfolding field of NAS. I respectfully offer these observations as an Anishinaabe/Métis woman who has served as a professor of American Indian studies in California for eight years and as the executive director of a Native American indigenous-rights nonprofit organization for seventeen years.

Our field is ever more critical as the number of people identifying as Native American increases and more Native people continue to move to, live in, or grow up in urban centers. The knowledge and understanding of Native Americans in mainstream America continues to be profoundly bereft, and blatant ignorance and stereotypes about Native peoples continue in media and education. As the world faces significant ecological and economic crises, it is Indian lands, resources, and knowledge systems that are being looked at as a last-ditch effort to find sustainable solutions to global food and water scarcity.

First, as Native peoples working in California institutions, we need to focus more on the histories, worldviews, and realities of California Indian peoples.¹ This will literally ground our work in the landscapes where our programs, departments, and universities reside and demonstrate that we honor and recognize the territorial sovereignty of local indigenous communities.

MELISSA K. NELSON is an associate professor of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University and executive director of The Cultural Conservancy. She is Anishinaabe/Métis (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Today profound ignorance about indigenous peoples still exists, especially California Indians—people who have significantly suffered from the ravages of colonialism, politics of erasure, and ongoing claims of extinction. Much more needs to be done by universities and ethnic and Native studies programs in order to bring recognition to the diversity and resilience of Native California Indian peoples.

Native studies departments can develop partnerships and agreements with local tribes so that there is ongoing input and dialogue between the department faculty and the local tribes regarding a particular tribe's issues and concerns. Departments can also create or expand community-service programs; develop advisory councils to assist with California Indian courses and curriculum, as well as faculty research; and support other university programs such as repatriation (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) work, powwows, lectures, performances, and other public educational opportunities. My point is that scholarship is important, but we need to be more engaged beyond our classrooms and campuses and grounded in Native communities. As an advocate for applied scholarship, I believe Native studies can devote more attention to community action.

Second, we need to address more deeply the foundational issues of knowledge production and our understanding of indigenous knowledge systems. Through an interrogation of cognitive imperialism as well as the contentious notion of "tradition," we must expand our notions of intellectual sovereignties and incorporate alternative indigenous epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies in our Native studies programs. Many indigenous teaching methods include learning by doing and embodied ways of knowing. Our programs can do much more to include these multisensory forms of education. For example, new courses and field programs are needed that teach students historical and theoretical knowledge with practical skills in Native science and traditional cultural arts such as basket making, wood carving, and regalia making; Native foodways; and landscape studies. The tacit infrastructure of our Western educational system is based on what Paulo Freire calls the "banking concept of education."² This hierarchical, economic, and, some may say, capitalistic form of education can perpetuate oppressive forms of thought and being and should be questioned if we are to explore and embrace indigenous forms of learning that focus on respecting each learner's distinct learning style and spirit.

This assertion is based on my assumption that, as Native scholars, we have a responsibility to maintain and assert indigenous forms of knowledge production and restore distinct cognitive systems based on indigenous languages and worldviews. I assume that knowledge should be relevant to Native communities today, knowledge should be accompanied by practical skills useful to Native communities, and tools and skills should be taught in order to make students

engaged and useful to tribes, agencies, nonprofits, Native businesses, and other indigenous institutions. I also agree with Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons's statement that "the only people to survive in the future will be those who know how to grow their own food."³ It is imperative that our students learn practical, hands-on skills again, what the Southern Paiute call the "survival arts." Our students may know how to read books, but how many can read the land? In 2010, D-Q University, the only tribal college in California, which has had some challenging times during these past few years, is reemerging and planning a new type of tribal college. "In its current evolution it is becoming a uniting ground as the convergence center for the green movement and the red road," and it will become an "off-the-grid' sustainable village based on permaculture practices and peacemaking principles."⁴

In this exploration and expansion of indigenous knowledge systems and traditional ecological knowledge, it is important that we engage in cognitive decolonization, decoloniality, and what Walter Mignolo calls "epistemic de-linking."⁵ At the same time, it is important to assert and affirm indigenous paradigms encoded in languages, for example, like the work being done by Anton and David Treuer in revitalizing the Ojibwemowin language, and in thought through the Ojibwe-language *Oshkaabewis Native Journal*.⁶

As an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field, NAS faces ongoing methodological challenges. Although there are many publications out about this subject, it is still an open area for further development. Fundamental questions include: How do we do our work? What methods should be used and prioritized? Are conventional forms of measurement, validation, and reliability important concerns to our field, or are there other equally if not more important types of "measurement" and evaluation for Native studies? What are indigenous, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches to research? It seems very important that oral histories are becoming more recognized and used in indigenous research today. Autoethnographies, multivocal ethnographies, and applied community-research approaches are gaining some traction and expanding our notions of research methodologies. The question of recording and documentation is always key in this work. Who and what gets recorded and why? Who has the right to grant permission? What is the difference between recording from within a community and recording from without? These thorny, yet critical, questions regarding cultural sovereignty and intellectual property are deeply significant in any Native studies program, and there needs to be more explicit conversations about them with tribal and community leaders, elders, advocates, and legal experts.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserted in her now classic book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, research is a dirty word in many indigenous communities.⁷ Yet, on another level, indigenous peoples have always "researched" their histories,

genealogies, ancestral lands and sacred places, and the extended relatives with whom they share time and space. To research is to investigate, observe, reflect, explore, and ponder; it is not only to argue, persuade, or convince. Artists do research all of the time when it comes to the feathers they select for regalia, the colors they choose to paint on a canvas, and the mood of a song they choose for a film soundtrack. The whole idea of “indigenous research” continues to be an unfolding, liminal, indeterminate, and exploratory area ripe for fresh ideas and models.

I strongly support the fertile convergence of new indigenous academic research methodologies like reclaiming, remembering, and indigenizing with research strategies used in indigenous movements such as human rights, environmental struggles, and health work. Here the best of decolonial theories and methods can weave together to produce relevant, applied, and incisive Native research. This dialogic approach to research more equally engages the researcher and the researched and creates collaborative partnerships in which the “investigator” becomes part of the community and the community helps to shape and inform the investigation. Collaborations are challenging and fraught with issues of power, privilege, and differences in assumptions and motivations. Yet I believe Native studies programs need to expand their level of collaboration with tribes and Native communities; agencies and organizations; and other academic fields and disciplines. Here greater equality and reciprocity is practiced, and this can help make indigenous research a more rewarding and relevant process for the advancement of indigenous intellectual liberation and knowledge production.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FROM AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

Native Arts

NAS departments and programs need to expand our notion of what a Native arts curriculum looks like. Many introductory texts are still being published and used that address art solely in terms of poetry and visual arts. We’ve expanded far beyond those areas with musical, multimedia, performative, and other innovative works. Our discipline should recognize this expansion, create new scholarship, and offer students more options for studying and creating Native arts. An example of an exciting new publication addressing the intertribal melding of traditional and contemporary Native music is John-Carlos Perea’s upcoming book and CD, *Intertribal Native American Music in the United States*.⁸

Urban Indigeneity

The majority of Native Americans in America today live in urban centers, are of mixed race, and have multiethnic identities. The ongoing conversations and debates about indigenous identity need further exploration and development in the context of urban living and multiethnicity. The distinct multiethnic identity formations, communities, and issues that are arising in cities during the twenty-first century are unique and important, yet they are often marginalized in academia. A growing movement exists—from within both the academy and grassroots communities—that focuses on cultural revitalization and self-determination in order to define *indigeness* in modern contexts. Within Native and ethnic studies programs there is a small but growing awareness of and increased research into Métis, Creole, Mestizo, Hapa, and other mixed-race studies. These self-definitions are critical in gaining a holistic academic understanding of how American Indian peoples maintain and recover “Nativity.” Through a serious questioning of the various assumptions and beliefs pervasively held regarding race, heritage, and identity, this important exploration could entail a radical restructuring of ethnic studies departments and programs. Three important books representing this mixed-race studies approach are Louis Owens’s *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, Andrew Jolivette’s *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity*, and Gabriela Tayac’s *IndiVisible: African-Native American Lives in the Americas*.⁹

Indigenous Sexualities

Although it is absolutely necessary to continue to understand the history and contemporary practice of sexual violence against Native women and to find ways to prevent and heal from it, it is also important to understand Native sexualities in more affirmative ways. Native sexuality has been considered a taboo or has been pathologized and exoticized for too long. It’s essential to recognize the intergenerational trauma of sexual violence and internalized sexism and homophobia as a consequence of colonization and assimilation. It is also necessary to continue to address these histories in healing contexts. Some important new studies and books about Native sexualities are now out, such as *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica*, collected and edited by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, and *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality* by Drew Hayden Taylor, that celebrate the diversity, humor, and joy of indigenous sexualities.¹⁰ The burgeoning Two-Spirit movement is also developing important tools and resources for addressing homosexuality and homophobia within and without Native communities. These are significant trends for increasing awareness and respect for indigenous sexualities, and

hopefully for gaining greater rights and respect for Native peoples who practice alternative sexualities.

Native Environmental Studies

Some key and timely convergences are happening between Native studies and environmental studies programs in tribal colleges and universities across North America and throughout the world. Environmental justice, as a key part of environmental studies curricula today, explicitly acknowledges people of color and indigenous peoples as major stakeholders in conversations about environmental quality. Western scientists, environmental researchers, conservation organizations, land trusts, and environmental groups are recognizing the need to work with affected tribes, Native researchers, and Native organizations in decision-making processes regarding environmental issues. From the history of toxic colonialism to contemporary food and water sovereignty efforts, an exciting movement is happening (based largely on student interest) to understand the unique ecological knowledge and management practices of indigenous peoples even more. Many environmental studies and natural science programs now teach courses about climate change. Many scholars, Native and non-Native, have said that indigenous peoples are the “canaries in the coal mine,” in terms of detecting early signs of climate disruption.¹¹ This means that Native studies programs have an opportunity and a responsibility to address this trend and train our students in the care, management, and restoration of ancestral lands, sacred sites, and other natural and cultural resources. But again, this acknowledgment of the relevance and sophistication of Native sciences and traditional knowledge in university curricula will require a significant epistemological revolution in our Eurocentric academic institutions. It is a long and challenging process, but it is starting to happen across the globe. Critical texts in this emerging field of Native American environmental studies include Greg Cajete’s *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, M. Kat Anderson’s *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California’s Natural Resources*, and my own *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*. Another exciting forthcoming book is Beth Rose Middleton’s *Trust in the Land: New Directions in Tribal Conservation*.¹²

This is truly an exciting and significant time to be involved in the transformation of indigenous education. As an unfolding field we can continue to develop and expand new theories, methods, and teaching processes to create vital and meaningful Native studies programs for Native and non-Native students and communities alike.

NOTES

1. I acknowledge that not everyone reading this manifesto will be working or living in California or the United States. I do strongly encourage, however, that Native studies departments and programs, no matter where they are located, develop some type of working relationship with local tribes and indigenous communities.

2. See the classic Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 72.

3. Oren Lyons, keynote presentation at the Bioneers Conference, October 15, 2008, San Rafael, CA.

4. From an e-mail by Ayse Gursoz, "Gathering of Conjurers at DQ U//Pau-Wau for Future Village Building Convergence," November 13, 2010.

5. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (March/May 2007): 449–514.

6. Anton Treuer, *Oshkaabewis Native Journal*, vol. 1 (Bemidji, MN: Bemidji State University, 1990).

7. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

8. Oxford University Press will publish John-Carlos Perea's forthcoming book and CD, *Intertribal Native American Music in the United States*, in 2012.

9. Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Andrew Jolivette, *Louisiana Creoles: Cultural Recovery and Mixed-Race Native American Identity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Gabriela Tayac, *African-Native American Lives in the Americas* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2009).

10. Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* (Wiarnton, ON: Kegeponce Press, 2003); Drew Hayden Taylor, *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2008).

11. See Allen Parker and Zoltan Grossman et al., *Climate Change and Pacific Rim Indigenous Nations* (Olympia, WA: Evergreen State College, Northwest Indian Applied Research Institute, 2006).

12. Greg Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clearlight Publishers, 1999); M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Melissa K. Nelson, *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future* (Rochester, VT: Bear and Company, 2008); Beth Rose Middleton, *Trust in the Land: New Directions in Tribal Conservation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming).