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Author

Innes, Robert

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Introduction: Native Studies and Native Cultural Preservation, Revitalization, and Persistence

ROBERT ALEXANDER INNES

At a recent conference, Frances Widdowson presented a critical assessment of Native studies' academic credibility.¹ She asserts in her paper that Native studies rejects the notion of objectivity in favor of subjective truths, and that the "subjective theories and methodologies" offered by Native studies "cannot have universal applicability."² She describes indigenous theories and methods as being based on Native spiritual knowledge and asserts that because "no 'spiritual world' has been shown to exist," these theories and methods are not valid.³ She states that arguments for self-determination, which she maintains are based on indigenous theories and methods, are also invalid. Widdowson goes on to say that, "indigenous theories and methodologies' isolate aboriginal people, both as subjects of study and as political scientists, from everyone else in society." One negative result as Widdowson sees it is that "aboriginal peoples will never be exposed to the challenging ideas needed for intellectual progress. They also will be limited to undertaking research within the field of Native Studies."⁴ Widdowson concludes that "the linkage between the use of Native Studies' approaches and aboriginal liberation is not self-evident; in fact promoting 'indigenous theories and methodologies,'" she claims, "acts to obscure the causes of aboriginal dependency and entrench native marginalization."⁵ In essence, Widdowson's belief is that Native studies, with its emphasis on cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence, plays a significant role in the current deplorable state of Native peoples.

Widdowson's assertions are significant, as I have found only one other person who has provided a critique of Native studies. Wilcomb Washburn's 1975 article outlines his critique of Native studies, which was basically a defense of the discipline of history.⁶ In his article, Washburn questioned the academic capabilities of Native scholars and the viability of Native studies as a stand-alone discipline. However, two years later in 1977, Russell Thornton noted that "no systemic critique of American Indian Studies as a discipline is to be found in the literature." This is not to say that no criticisms existed,

but, as Thornton states, “criticisms . . . often occurred only less formally, in everyday discourse of the academic system, by faculty, by administrators, by students.”⁷ The informal nature of the criticisms directed toward Native studies is confirmed in the literature of the last thirty years. Many Native studies scholars point out that the lack of academic credibility continues to be a major criticism of the discipline. Whereas none of these scholars actually cite these criticisms; they, like Thornton, just note that they exist.⁸ Widdowson is a Canadian political scientist, and therefore her views are not widely known outside of Canada. Most of the contributors to this issue probably have not heard of her. Nonetheless, the kinds of criticism of Native studies she has articulated are widely known by Native studies scholars throughout North America. Significantly, Widdowson’s criticisms are representative of all the criticisms that haunt the hallways of academia.

The criticisms of Native studies made by Widdowson and others reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of Native studies. Broadly speaking, there are three main goals that scholars within the discipline of Native studies strive to achieve:

1. To access, understand, and convey Native cultural perspective(s).
2. To conduct research that benefits Native people and/or communities.
3. To employ research methods and theories that will achieve these goals.

These goals are informed by my experience as a student, researcher, and faculty member in Native studies since 1992 and by the many discussions I have had over the years with colleagues. My articulation of these goals is not meant to be definitive. I understand that Native studies is a diverse discipline, and not all Native studies scholars may agree that these are disciplinary goals. Nonetheless, these goals provide a launching point, a framework, to initiate discussions about disciplinary characteristics that act to unify disparate research topics, such as those addressed in the articles in this issue.

The eight articles presented all offer convincing arguments for Native cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence in a way that conforms to the stated disciplinary goals and provides a counterpoint to the informal criticisms of many scholars and the explicit assertions of Widdowson leveled against Native studies. The authors in this issue were contacted to contribute an article that addresses cultural preservation, revitalization, or preservation in some way. At the heart of this project is the attempt to outline Native communities’ various efforts to preserve their cultures and explain how the Native cultural values and principles inform Native peoples’ actions. *Community* is broadly defined to refer to specific indigenous communities at the microlevel, such as a reservation or reserve, a tribal level, the pan-indigenous level, or to individuals or groups of individuals.

The authors’ approaches to their research are illustrative of the aims of Native studies research and highlight their status as Native studies scholars. What becomes apparent from the articles presented is that in order to come to grips with Native cultural understandings, it is crucial to become familiar with certain central Native cultural concepts. Though the articles cover a diverse range of topics, through the use of various form of stories the authors

convey the importance of maintaining kinship roles and responsibilities. What follows is a brief discussion of each of the disciplinary aims of Native studies. This discussion will not only serve to highlight Widdowson's mischaracterization of the discipline but also provides the context to understand how the authors in this special issue are engaged in Native cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence in a way that adheres to the goals of Native studies.

ACCESSING, UNDERSTANDING, AND CONVEYING NATIVE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Unlike Widdowson, Native studies scholars believe that Native cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence can assist us in gaining a new and better understanding of historical and contemporary events that have and continue to impact Native people. Many Native studies scholars' expressions of Native culture can provide solutions to the current socioeconomic situations plaguing many Native communities. Therefore, being able to access, understand, and convey Native cultural perspectives is critical to Native studies and Native communities. Native studies scholars know that for Native people to maintain their separate identities, they must maintain their separate cultures. They know that Native culture, like Native people, is not simply an artifact from the distant past but a living, contemporary culture.

Contemporary Native communities are complex, with a diverse range of cultural expressions. Some communities continue to adhere to traditional cultural practices, such as traditional ceremonies, high Native-language retention rates, and traditional subsistence. Yet in other communities traditional practices are almost nonexistent. Some communities combine a mixture of traditional and nontraditional cultural practices. Though reservations and reserves are still important places for Native people, the reality is that the majority of Native people in North America reside in urban centers, creating some tensions and cultural differences between city Indians and reserve Indians. Differences even exist between Native urban communities. Some cities, such as Toronto, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, have drawn Native people from various geographical regions, while other cities, such as Minneapolis, Winnipeg, and Saskatoon, have drawn Native people from a relatively close proximity.

Native studies scholars have awareness and appreciation of the diversity of contemporary Native cultures. Whether through interpretations of historical documents or interviews with living people, the greater understanding of Native culture will increase the level of accuracy in conveying Native perspectives. Native studies scholars do not have to adhere to the cultural values embedded within Native communities. However, because Native studies scholars attempt to access the Native perspective, it is essential that they have at least some basic understanding of that perspective. This does not mean that a Native studies scholar has to be Native. Being Native does not automatically mean a person understands the Native cultural perspective, especially, say, if the person was raised alienated from a Native community and has never been

socialized to Native culture as an adult. However, scholars, Native or non-Native, can learn Native culture. Certainly, the more intimate knowledge of the culture, the better. A person not raised in a Native community may initially be at a disadvantage in conveying a Native perspective than someone raised in a Native community. As a person becomes better acquainted with Native culture, his or her skill in interpreting Native cultural perspectives will improve.

Even with the range of cultural expressions there are cultural characteristics that are shared among most Native people. No matter whether they live on the Arctic tundra, in the desert of the Southwest, or in major North American cities; practice traditional or Christian ceremonies; or maintain traplines or Web sites, the ways in which Native people interact with each other are uncannily similar. Kinship relations, for example, have been and continue to be a central component of Native cultures. Not surprisingly, all the authors in this issue invoke the notion of kinship to varying degrees. The emphasis on kinship by many Native studies scholars highlights the role that kinship can play in Native cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence and underscores the importance of being able to access, understand, and convey Native cultural perspectives.

CONDUCTING BENEFICIAL RESEARCH

The ultimate aim of Native studies is to bring positive change to Native people and their communities through research. Native studies is an ethical endeavor that seeks to provide research that benefits Native people, not just the researcher. The benefit can be something tangible such as leading to a multimillion-dollar land claim, improved governance, or a water supply, but it can also be something less pragmatic such as providing a community's history from its perspective in print for the first time. Whatever the benefit, Native studies scholars should have an idea of what the benefit is prior to conducting the research—the benefit should be a part of the initial research plan; it should not occur by chance after the research. This does not mean that there may be other unforeseen benefits, just that researchers should have an idea of the potential benefit of their research to the community prior to conducting the research.

In order for Native studies research to benefit the community, the onus is on Native studies scholars to gain the credibility in the Native and academic communities. Native studies research reflects the aims, aspirations, and perspectives of Native communities. Therefore, Native studies scholars should have a connection to a Native community. Depending on the specific research, researchers should make contact with the potential research community and discuss the research objectives, and develop research protocols that reflect the community and the research needs. A relationship between the researcher and the research community will encourage community confidence in the researcher and facilitate the researcher's understanding of the community's cultural perspective.

That Native studies scholars have a level of responsibility to the Native community does not mean they relinquish their academic responsibility

or their academic freedom. Native studies scholars must produce sound scholarly research that withstands academic rigor. Research that is not well founded will be less likely to improve Native peoples' lives. Presenting the voices and perspectives of the Native community should not silence researchers' own voices and perspectives. Widdowson, in her response to Vine Deloria Jr.'s call for anthropologists to develop linkages with Native communities, derisively remarks, "So, anthropological research should proceed only if findings support the political agenda of the tribe being studied and sufficient bribes are offered to the aboriginal leadership to obtain their cooperation."⁹ Creating linkages between researchers and the Native community does not mean that the Native community has to agree with all of the researcher's interpretations or recommendations. Because Native studies is a critical investigation of the Native experience with the aim of leading to positive change for Native people, there are research contexts that demand a critical analysis and an honest assessment of the shortcomings found within Native communities. Native studies has to guard against simply becoming a mouthpiece for Native governments, organizations, or individuals. Jace Weaver recently addressed this issue: "Commitment to Native community does not mean wallowing in victimhood and guilt. Nor does it mean presenting the most 'Indian' side of everything, in the face of contrary evidence. And it certainly does not mean surrendering our research to tribal councils. It means service to Native peoples. But it also means being committed to truth, accuracy, and academic freedom. Without these, all the words in the world are worthless to us as scholars and ultimately to those for whom we purport to advocate."¹⁰ Identifying shortcomings and providing possible solutions could be of great benefit to Native communities.

RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORIES

In her critique of Native studies, Widdowson asserts that "one of the main distinctive characteristics of aboriginal methodologies . . . is that they do not strive for objectivity."¹¹ For Widdowson, what is most concerning is that the methods and theories employed by Native studies scholars are based on indigenous knowledge. She cites the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which notes that the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conceptions of history is that Aboriginal people see history as cyclical, while non-Aboriginal people see it as linear, in order to support her criticism that Aboriginal people conceptualize history crossing "the boundaries between the physical and spiritual."¹² She asserts that one of the assumptions of Native studies methods and theories is "the existence of a 'spiritual reality.'" However, as she maintains, because this reality does not exist, "it does not make sense to claim that there are methods and theories that can access this realm and increase human understanding."¹³

There are two main problems with Widdowson's contention that indigenous knowledge is the basis of Native studies methods and theories. First, she mistakenly conflates traditional worldviews of community members with Native studies theories and methods. Widdowson characterizes Native studies

scholars as being more concerned with indigenous subjectivities than with truth claims. Her inability to distinguish between indigenous knowledge and Native studies' approaches to research led her to point out apparent contradictions when Native studies scholars make truth claims. She misses the fact that Native communities are complex entities, and that Native studies, generally speaking, is the objective analysis of Native subjectivities.

The second problem with Widdowson's assertion is that she assumes there is agreement on how to incorporate indigenous knowledge into research, and that all Native studies scholars utilize indigenous knowledge. In recent years there has been much discussion regarding how and to what degree indigenous knowledge can be incorporated into academic research. However, we are at the formative stages of this project. This is reflected in the fact that a definition of the term *indigenous knowledge* has not yet been universally agreed upon. By insisting that indigenous knowledge is synonymous with Native studies methods and theories, Widdowson reveals her specific lack of understanding that Native studies scholars utilize a multitude of methods and theories and her general lack of knowledge about the discipline.

Some Native studies scholars have argued that Native studies will not become a distinct discipline until it develops its own theories and methods based on indigenous knowledge.¹⁴ Such scholars are working on ways to incorporate indigenous methods and theories into their academic research activities.¹⁵ Certainly this is one approach that Native studies scholars can deploy to engage in cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence in order to present Native cultural perspectives beneficial to Native communities.

However, I contend that Native studies *is* a distinct discipline predicated on improving Native people's lives and communities. As individuals, how we view the world is influenced by our life experiences. Many Native studies scholars have experienced the direct negative impact of colonization or have become conscious of the impact that colonization has had on Native people. This awareness has propelled Native studies scholars to seek positive change and is foundational to the discipline's goals. Therefore, Native studies scholars ask questions that require accessing, understanding, and conveying Native cultural perspectives that will result in research that benefits Native communities. The specific research questions that are asked dictate the specific methods and theories employed in research projects. A limited number of ways are available to gather data—administer a survey, interview and/or observe people, or collect written documents—depending on the research. Developing an ethical research relationship is more important than how the data is collected. An unlimited number of ways a researcher can interpret and theorize the data exists, shaped and influenced by the researcher's personal and academic experiences. What is significant about the goals of the discipline as outlined is that they allow for various disciplinary approaches. Though Native studies is multi- and interdisciplinary by nature, Native studies scholars are not obliged to employ multi- or interdisciplinary approaches. Some of the authors in this issue use many disciplinary approaches, while others use one. Some use traditional academic methods and theories, while others incorporate indigenous methods and theories.

The topics covered in this issue are varied. Yet what ties these diverse studies together is the authors' implicit desire to fulfill the goals of the discipline. In "Some Elements of American Indian Pedagogy from an Anishinaabe Perspective," Lawrence W. Gross anchors his American Indian pedagogy in the cultural understandings located in Anishinaabe stories that serve to guide students through an unconventional (to some of the students) university learning experience that emphasizes self-confidence and acceptance and encourages self-learning. Sheilah E. Nicholas's "Language, Epistemology, and Cultural Identity: 'Hopi qatsit Aw Unangvakiwyungwa' ('They Have Their Heart in the Hopi Way of Life')"

argues that even though there has been a significant language shift from Hopi to English among young Hopi, Hopi cultural understandings found in traditional Hopi stories have been passed on to the younger Hopi, which is evidenced by their actions that conform to Hopi cultural beliefs. In "A Reading of Eekwol's 'Apprentice to the Mystery' as an Expression of Cree Youth's Cultural Role and Responsibility," Gail A. MacKay examines how traditional Plains Cree cultural understandings are conveyed through a story in a contemporary hip hop song to Native youth. Keavy Martin's "Is an Inuit Literary History Possible?" provides a compelling argument that traditional Inuit stories comprise an Inuit literary history, and that this history supports the notion of Inuit nationhood. In my article, "Elder Brother, the Law of the People, and Contemporary Kinship Practices of Cowessess First Nation Members: Reconceptualizing Kinship in American Indian Studies Research," I contend that contemporary members of the Cowessess First Nation have maintained aspects of their traditional kinship practices conveyed through their traditional Elder Brothers' stories. Theresa McCarthy's "De'Ni:S Nisahgaode?: Haudenosaunee Clans and the Reconstruction of Traditional Haudenosaunee Identity, Citizenship, and Nationhood" applies stories of the origins and purpose of clans to explain how contemporary members of the Iroquois Confederacy are attempting to reinvigorate the sociopolitical dimensions of their clan system and thereby revitalize the integrity of the clans. Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark's "Respect, Responsibility, and Renewal: The Foundations of Anishinaabe Treaty Making with the United States and Canada" outlines the principles of respect, responsibility, and renewal found in the Anishinaabe story, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver," which shed light on the intent of the Anishinaabe treaty relationships with the US and Canadian governments. Sharon Milholland discusses how the traditional Navajo philosophies contained in their stories guide their views of land management, and how these views are incommensurate with the US government land-management laws and policies, in "In the Eyes of the Beholder: Understanding and Resolving Incompatible Ideologies and Languages in US Environmental and Cultural Laws in Relationship to Navajo Sacred Lands"; it further offers potential strategies to integrate the two disparate views.

This issue presents evidence to affirm the importance of relating the central role of Native stories and kinship to Native studies. All the articles present ways in which issues of cultural preservation, revitalization, and persistence can convey Native cultural understandings to the benefits of Native

people and communities. This is what makes them Native studies scholars and gives hope for the future of the discipline of Native studies. I would like to thank all the contributors who not only agreed to submit their works, but also met, with short notice, the initial deadline. I would also like to thank the editors of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* and anonymous peer reviewers whose assistance greatly strengthened the contributions.

NOTES

1. Frances Widdowson, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The Implications of 'Decolonizing the Discipline.'" Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Vancouver, BC, 4–6 June 2008.

2. *Ibid.*, 12.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 12.

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

6. Wilcomb Washburn, "American Indian Studies: A Status Report," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1975): 263–74.

7. Russell Thornton, "American Indian Studies as a Academic Discipline," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 3 (1977): 3.

8. This does not mean there have been no criticisms. E.g., Keith Windschuttle in *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (New York: The Free Press, 1997) was very critical of the way in which cultural studies, including Native studies, have impacted traditional disciplines. However, other than Washburn (cited in n. 6), no specific critique of Native studies has been cited by the following authors: Clara Sue Kidwell, "Native American Studies: Academic Concerns and Community Service," *American Indian Cultural and Research Journal* 1, no. 1–2 (1978): 4–9; Terry P. Wilson, "Custer Would Never Have Believed It: Native American Studies in the Academia," *American Indian Quarterly* 5 (1979): 207–27; Patrick Morris, "Native American Studies: A Personal Reflection," *Wicazo Sa Review* 2, no. 2 (1986): 9–16; M. Annette Jaimes, "American Indian Studies: Toward an Indigenous Model," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 11, no. 3 (1987): 1–16; William Willard and Mary Kay Downing, "American Indian Studies and Inter-Cultural Education," *Wicazo Sa Review* 7, no. 2 (1991): 1–8; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "Who Stole Native American Studies?" *Wicazo Sa Review* 12, no. 1 (1997): 9–28; Mary Katherine Duffie and Ben Chavis, "American Indian Studies and Its Evolution in Academia," *The Social Science Journal* 34, no. 4 (1997): 435–45; Winona Stevenson, "Ethnic Assimilates Indigenous: A Study of Intellectual Neocolonialism," *Wicazo Sa Review* 13, no. 1 (1998): 33–51; Jack Forbes, "Intellectual Self-Determination and Sovereignty: Implications for Native Studies and Native Intellectuals," *Wicazo Sa Review* 13, no. 1 (1998): 11–23; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "American Indian Studies: An Overview Keynote Address at the Native Studies Conferences, Yale University, February 5, 1998," *Wicazo Sa Review* 14, no. 2 (1999): 14–24; Winona Wheeler, "Thoughts on the Responsibilities for Indigenous/ Native Studies," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 21, no. 1 (2001): 97–104; Duane Champagne, "In Search of Theory and Method in American Indian Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2007): 353–71; Jace Weaver, "More Light Than Heat: The Current State of Native American Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2007):

233–55; Chris Andersen, “Critical Indigenous Studies: From Difference to Density,” *Cultural Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 80–100; Clara Sue Kidwell, “American Indian Studies Intellectual Navel Gazing or Academic Discipline?” *American Indian Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2009): 2–17.

9. Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008), 68.

10. Weaver, “More Light Than Heat,” 239.

11. Widdowson, “Native Studies and Canadian Political Science,” 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 4.

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. See, e.g., Jaimes, “American Indian Studies: Toward an Indigenous Model”; Duffie and Chavis, “American Indian Studies and Its Evolution in Academia”; and Champagne, “In Search of Theory and Method in American Indian Studies.”

15. Two recent examples are Shawn Wilson, *Research as Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax, NS, and Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing, 2008); and Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

