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American Indian Studies as an Academic Discipline

Clara Sue Kidwell

When American Indian/Native American studies (AI/NAS) programs began to emerge in the halls of academia during the late 1960s and early 1970s, some who served as faculty and staff questioned whether they would be one-generation phenomena. Would the programs survive, would they continue to draw students, and could they make an impact on institutional curricula to promote the development of future scholars? Such programs were generally marginalized administratively and suffered from benign neglect by puzzled deans and chancellors.¹

At the University of California at Berkeley, the faculty senate approved an Ethnic Studies Department in 1970 in response to a student strike that shut down the campus for a brief period. The strike was inspired by an administrative decision to cancel a scheduled speech by black activist Stokely Carmichael and was led by black students. The four or five American Indian students on campus were swept up in the momentum of the movement. Student demands for a Third World College were ignored, and the Ethnic Studies Department was administered out of the chancellor's office rather than through one of the academic colleges. Native American studies became part of the Ethnic Studies Department almost as an afterthought. With the smallest faculty of the three units of the department—Chicano studies, Asian American studies, and Native American studies—it was marginalized in an already marginalized unit.

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In the early days of AI/NAS programs, there was a good deal of rhetoric about the inability of the traditional academic disciplines to represent the truth about marginalized and oppressed American Indians. Program faculty declared the need to “correct misinformation,” “counter stereotypes,” and allow previously suppressed or ignored voices of the American Indian people to be heard. In some respects, then, the programs were responses to stereotypes, and their critiques of American society’s ignorance about American Indians were not very subtle.

The major texts that were available for classroom use were *Custer Died for Your Sins* by Vine Deloria Jr.; *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, historian Dee Brown’s revisionist history documenting atrocities against Indians during the wars of the late nineteenth century; and *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt’s heavily edited version of Lakota Holy Man Nicholas Black Elk’s telling of his life story.² Deloria’s book was a scathing and often satirical critique of everything from Christianity to anthropologists; it did not fit the model of scholarly writing. Brown’s history was obviously intended to arouse sympathy for Indians and was too popular and emotionally charged to be considered a scholarly book.

In 1969, N. Scott Momaday’s novel, *House Made of Dawn*, won the Pulitzer Prize, launching what Kenneth Lincoln has called an American Indian Renaissance in literature.³ Momaday’s book became the linchpin of critical scholarship on American Indian literature, and it was this field that found the greatest scholarly acceptance in colleges and universities during the 1970s.

American Indian studies programs survived in colleges and universities largely because of outside perceptions of their usefulness rather than because of their academic credibility. In the era of civil rights activism and desegregation, ethnic studies programs generally were perceived as recruitment tools used to attract more students from underrepresented groups and thus carry out the project of assuring equal access that desegregation promised. During the 1980s, the national rhetoric focused on manpower shortages in science and technology fields that could be filled by increasing the number of minority students in those fields. The emphasis here was on the so-called STEM fields—science, technology (new technologies such as computer science), engineering, and mathematics—but ethnic studies curricula were still seen as recruitment tools.⁴ By the 1990s, the rhetoric had shifted once again to the value of diversity in enriching the college experience for students, a theme reflected in UC Berkeley’s advertising slogan of “Excellence in Diversity.”

Against this backdrop of shifting national and institutional rhetoric about the importance of minority presence in the academy, AI/NAS programs were developing increasingly sophisticated curricula and a body of scholarship to support them. The University of California at Los Angeles was a leader in this

development, primarily because the campus received a significant multiyear grant from the Ford Foundation in order to fund the establishment of four ethnic studies centers. A significant part of the centers was their control of faculty positions that they could allocate to academic departments. As a result, a number of American Indian faculty were recruited to the campus. Under the leadership of Dr. Charlotte Heth, then assistant professor of ethnomusicology, the American Indian Studies Center also launched an initiative to create an interdisciplinary master's degree program, which led to cooperative efforts among the faculty teaching American Indian topics in various departments.

In the early 1970s, a good deal of discussion went on among faculty in AI/NAS programs throughout the country about whether this emerging academic enterprise constituted a traditional academic discipline or even, given its critique of the academy, whether it should be a discipline. Certainly its emergence in highly charged political situations on most campuses made it the object of suspicion in the minds of many faculty and academic administrators, who viewed it as political advocacy rather than rigorous, objective scholarship and clearly not worthy of being considered a discipline.

The celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA clearly demonstrates that AI/NAS was not a one-generation phenomenon. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the growth and maturation of the academic field of AI/NAS. It has all of the trappings of a discipline. There is a core set of intellectual assumptions on which scholarship is built: relationship to land is essential to culture; cultural contact between Indians and Europeans must present both sides of the story; language is a key to understanding American Indian worldviews; contemporary expressive culture, that is, dance, music, and literature, represents cultural adaptation and cultural continuity; and tribal sovereignty is essential to contemporary American Indian political identity. Although these are certainly not the only premises upon which American Indian scholarship is based, they appear often enough in course descriptions in various forms to be considered as the intellectual building blocks of the field. Journals exist that are outlets for scholarship and sometimes for creative works. The *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* and the *American Indian Quarterly* both began publication in 1974, and *Wicazo Sa Review* started in 1985. It has a flourishing professional organization, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, which grew out of a scholarly conference organized at the University of Oklahoma in the spring of 2007. The association was formalized in 2008 at a meeting at the University of Georgia. From an attendance of about three hundred people in Oklahoma to more than seven hundred at the organization's first formal meeting at the University of Minnesota in the spring of 2009, the interest and

membership have grown at a phenomenal rate. It is clearly an effort whose time has come.

The field has also developed a specialized vocabulary to describe concepts that are unique to it. The language is most prominent in the field of literary criticism, where Gerald Vizenor coined the term *survivance* to describe the persistence of American Indian identity in contemporary society. Jace Weaver introduced *communitarism* to describe community as the primary source of identity and to discuss the responsibility that American Indian authors have to their Indian audiences. Craig Womack critiques the term *hybridity* from cultural studies to comment on the culturally mixed backgrounds from which many Indians come. In the field of history, scholars now speak of Indian “agency” to convey the fact that Indians were not helpless victims of a superior white society but exercised their own methods of decision making and resistance to that society. *Literary nationalism* is an increasingly popular phrase in literary studies as scholars emphasize the fact that not all Indians are alike and that tribes have distinctive cultural elements that are increasingly manifest in writing that emphasizes tribal identity over a generic American Indian identity.⁵

Finally, the variety and richness of scholarship and creative work provides for what literary scholar Kate Shanley once described as “self-reflexivity,” which is the basis for intellectual development and growth in an academic field.⁶ In literature, the works of authors such as Gerald Vizenor, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Silko, and N. Scott Momaday are the subject of master’s theses, doctoral dissertations, and articles in scholarly journals.⁷

The field of AI/NAS has proven to be much more than simply a one-generation phenomenon. It is significant that early programs such as those at UCLA and at Arizona began as master’s degree programs, and that Berkeley’s Ethnic Studies Department implemented an ethnic studies PhD program in 1976, in which students could take a specialization in Native American studies. There are now two American Indian studies PhD programs, at the University of Arizona and the University of California at Davis, and the American studies PhD programs at the University of Minnesota and the University of New Mexico have both produced a number of graduates whose work focuses on American Indian topics. From countering stereotypes to sophisticated theories about the nature of American Indian identity in contemporary American society, AI/NAS programs have fostered scholarship that enriches the curricula of many colleges and universities throughout the country. Graduate programs have now produced several intellectual generations of new scholars who are continuing to contribute to the field.

AI/NAS academic programs have survived and even flourished in a number of major colleges and universities. They continue to educate students to be the

scholars of the future. They have made an impact in the academy and achieved a level of academic credibility that is demonstrated by the fortieth anniversary of the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA. Although scholars continue to debate the status of American Indian studies as a discipline, the debate is the mark of a healthy academic enterprise that continues to grow and explore new intellectual territory.⁸

NOTES

1. Duane Champagne and Joseph H. Stauss, *Native American Studies in Higher Education: Models for Collaboration between Universities and Indigenous Nations* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

2. Vine Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Dee Alexander Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971); Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Bison Books, 1961).

3. N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

4. Alexander W. Astin, *Minorities in American Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982); Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life *One-third of a Nation: A Report* (n.p., 1988).

5. Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Craig Womack, "The Integrity of American Indian Claims (Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Hybridity," in *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, ed. Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 91–177.

6. Kathryn Shanley, roundtable discussion on Native American Scholarship, International Congress of Americanists, New Orleans, July 1991.

7. See, e.g., Kimberly M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in Oral Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); and Mark Rifkin, "Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer: Tradition, Sexuality, and History in *Drowning in Fire*," *American Indian Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 443–70.

8. Duane Champagne, "In Search of Theory and Method in American Indian Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 353–72; Jace Weaver, "More Heat than Light: The Current State of Native American Studies," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 233–55; Clara Sue Kidwell, "American Indian Studies: Intellectual Navel Gazing or Academic Discipline?" *American Indian Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1–17.