

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Future in the Past of Native and Indigenous Studies

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qb4947n>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.17953

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The Future in the Past of Native and Indigenous Studies

Robert Warrior

It's nice to be back in California, and I want to thank everyone who has put together the program today.¹ Thanks for inviting me, and thanks for doing the work that you do here at UCLA. It's nice to be back in Westwood; as a Pepperdine undergraduate I spent a lot of time here.

Going back to some of the issues that we talked about in regard to the beginnings of the field, I want to suggest that we look more precisely at what we mean when we talk about those beginnings. I'm not a big fan of Native people emerging vaguely from the mists of time, but I am always tracing a history of Native studies that goes back further than programs and campuses. This is not, as I say, in the mists of time but rather specific figures and specific kinds of practices within indigenous traditions. In much of my work I have focused on the written tradition that Native people have engaged in over the last couple hundred years in North America. Where do those figures like Sampson Occam and William Apess and others belong in our discussion of the beginnings of the field? We can look at their intellectual examples and what they managed to do absent programs, absent campuses, and in that context how they were able to confront the intellectual problems that they faced as writers.

This isn't to discount the other types of intellectual practices that go on within Native traditions. For me, though, writers are particularly compelling as

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figures because they're doing the same things I'm trying to do. As a writer, as a scholar, I always have to commit my ideas to paper in the way they did, so I find their practice to be one that's consistent with what I'm doing as a contemporary scholar. This is just one example of the precision I'm really interested in pursuing more and more these days because I think, as we move into the next phase of what Native studies is, we need to be really precise.

I've noticed this lately in the overwhelming amount of time that we spend on the issue of ethics in our field. Ethics is crucial as we think about what Native studies is and what it is that we're attempting to do. We're trying to create better ethical environments in which Native communities are better served by the academy. But we've missed out on some of the needs we're trying to address by substituting precision in our ethical discussion with the mass of what we provide. Oftentimes, the mistake that I think we make is to say to ourselves that if we keep talking about ethics long enough we'll feel better about what we're doing when, instead, we should be zeroing in and being very precise about the kind of ethical discussion we need to have. In certain ways, that is what is guiding some of the things I want to say today.

As a program administrator, I spend a lot of time thinking about what programs are and what programs do. I think one easy-to-miss obvious answer to the question of what programs do is that they do what they can. My copanelist, Jace Weaver, sends out a letter every year that details what his institute has done during the course of the year. You would be amazed at what he's been able to build in the space of five or six years at the University of Georgia. The sustained programming that goes on there has led into innovative work that's happening at Georgia where a lot of people might have questioned "why Georgia?" In the programming that he's done he tells you exactly why Georgia.

For that matter, can't we ask "why UCLA?" Why is UCLA's program set up the way that it is? There's a really good answer to that question, and there are answers as to why the program here exists in the way that it does and why it's an independent research unit instead of a department. But some of the things that come up when we look at what programs do and what they do well (and this is what we're really saluting today here at UCLA) are the wonderful things that come out of the kind of engagement that UCLA has been able to do in American Indian studies—and all of those things are actual and real.

I think that sometimes what gets us into problems is when programs try to do things that they can't do. Programs trying to be things that they aren't very good at being leads to problems. Sometimes we've had people, for instance, say, "the field needs x, y, or z, let's provide that as a program." But sometimes the program can't really do that. I've certainly seen that with the creation of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA), which after just a few years has more than seven hundred members and a vibrant annual

meeting.² One of the reasons NAISA has been successful is because we're not tied to a program anywhere. NAISA is its own thing. Our individual members govern the association, and I think that's helped provide an alternative space. I will say a little bit more about that in conclusion.

I think that sometimes on questions of disciplinarity, this is again a place where we need to be really precise. Instead of committing ourselves to a certain model of disciplinarity that says we have to have one method, we have perhaps two methods or maybe two approaches to be able to create something that answers two anxieties, one being, do we, in fact, have a small set of methods that we engage in? Or are we just this open house that will accept anything from anywhere? I don't like the open-house model. I want intellectual control over what it is that we do, but again, I want there to be a precise boundary around this that tells us what it is. I don't like just raising the flag of disciplinarity and saying, "Hey, we're a discipline now." I want a precise answer to what it is that we're buying into when we say that.

As that discussion continues, I think that American Indian studies needs to create an alternative to other kinds of intellectual engagement, not only on campus but also in Native communities. I think that Native studies programs need to be independent, and they need to maintain their independence and that's part of the academic freedom that we enjoy by being on a college campus, which means that we never cozy up too much to anybody inside or outside the institution. It's really important to me that we work with tribal governments, but it's always important to remember that tribal governments do not represent the entire Native world, and that much of what we need to learn more about exists in cities and outside the United States.

As most of us know, tribal governments can be corrupt, and therefore the idea held by some people that we should be working primarily with tribal governments and that we should be addressing Native communities through tribal governments, I think is a big mistake. We need to be more independent, more critical, and we need to be looking very carefully at the relationships we create. Further, we need to be looking for leadership across Native communities rather than simply among those elected or appointed. We need to find out where the leadership within the community is and not assume that the leadership is somehow in an agency or in a building up on a hill. We need to see where the histories of exclusion are in communities that we say we are trying to serve and reach out and find the leaders within those places of exclusion. That way we can find the people that need our help or whom we need to support in various ways.

Finally, we need to focus on how to create new scholarship within the field and renew our commitment to the development of indigenous scholarship. Things are a lot better than they were twenty years ago, but there are

areas—including history, philosophy, and economics—in which we need more Native people. None of us should be satisfied with where we are. We should feel regretful that we haven't been able to do more, and we should be looking to say, "Where in those fields where we've not gotten enough people, like history, can we change those disciplines?"

The last thing I'll mention is NAISA. One of the things the founders of NAISA learned as we organized the association was that we were always behind the curve, trying to catch up to the critical mass in our field, which was very exciting. In Norman, where we had what was essentially an organizing meeting in 2007, we had fifty-two sessions and close to 225 presenters. In Georgia in 2008, when we actually founded the association, we had ninety-six sessions and five hundred people on the program. In Minneapolis, where we had our first annual meeting, we had 124 sessions and seven hundred people. So this thing is really moving, and the field will be better off because of it. I think that the key to me has been the inclusivity and the democracy that we've really created as an association, that we work together and invite everyone to take part in it. Thank you.

NOTES

1. These remarks were derived from a transcript from a panel at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center 40th anniversary conference in October 2009. The author has lightly edited the remarks.
2. See www.naisa.org for more information about the association and its annual meeting.