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PRODUCTIVE PATHS: LINKING NATIVE AND ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES





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Introduction to Productive Paths: Linking Native and Academic Communities

Paul V. Kroskrity

From its beginning, Native American studies has rightfully been preoccupied with the relationship between “the rez” and the academy. In the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars at Princeton University, which included Alfonso Ortiz, Vine Deloria Jr., N. Scott Momaday, Bea Medicine, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, these and other Native scholars thought, talked, and otherwise helped to construct the world of Native American studies into existence. The key concerns of this emerging discipline centered on the protection of the land and the indigenous rights of Native Americans.¹ This grounding in Indian homelands naturalized the core relevance of the new academic enterprise: sovereignty and indigeneity. Native Americans were to be understood not just as another oppressed ethnic group with their own minor variants of a narrative of historical trauma and an account of political oppression. Rather, Native American studies, from its very beginning, was to be a field that was devoted to the “endogenous” study of First Nations’ cultures and histories. This clearly involved the location of authority in the indigenous communities rather than tying it to then-current, non-Native academic authorities. As analyzed by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn,

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This meant that this discipline would differentiate itself from other disciplines in two important ways: it would emerge from *within* Native people's enclaves and geographies, languages and experiences, and it would refute the exogenous seeking of truth through isolation (i.e., the "ivory tower") that has been the general principle of the disciplines [then] most recently in charge of indigenous study, that is, history, anthropology, and related disciplines all captivated by the scientific method of objectivity.²

Though this account does not explicitly attend to the growing urban Indian communities of Los Angeles, the Bay Area, New York, and Chicago, this historical sketch provides a sense of the history that has always linked Native and academic communities. Native communities, the indigenous knowledge possessed by their members, and their sacred sites and political struggles were the very central foci of the emerging field of American Indian studies with its decolonizing goals of critiquing master narratives of history and anthropological tropes of culture that tied Indian authenticity to a precontact past.

Today there may be debates about what Native American studies is and should be; all positions confirm the importance of the relationship between Native and academic communities. Native American studies scholars need to understand the indigenous knowledge and expressions of cultural sovereignty manifested in the reservation and *rancheria* communities if their research is to be viewed as relevant and authentic. Although academia still requires considerable further "indigenization," Native communities do need the academic expertise, the access to documentary resources, and even some of the methods of producing knowledge associated with the university and its many professional schools.³

In this session celebrating forty years of American Indian studies at UCLA, we have four outstanding scholars whose work, and whose talks here, effectively represent this special relationship between Native communities and the contemporary academic enterprise of American Indian studies. Justin Richland, a professor of legal studies and anthropology at the University of California at Irvine, tells a story of a failed attempt to compile a Hopi Custom Law Treatise and how this failure produced the opportunity to move beyond mere "listening" to Hopi authorities. This opportunity, realized through The Nakwatsvevat Institute, for future research with the tribe that would be more consultative and more collaborative provides a useful example of the kind of productive partnerships that are possible between tribal and academic communities. Melissa Nelson (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), associate professor of American Indian studies at San Francisco State University and executive director of The Cultural Conservancy, discusses the special responsibilities of scholar activists who are members of Native and academic

communities. Using repatriation issues as a source of instructive examples, she treats the importance of creating Native Advisory Councils and emphasizes the “three Rs” of American Indian studies: respect, relationship, and reciprocity.

Continuing with this important issue of repatriation, a cause that unites the core concerns for indigenous knowledge and tribal sovereignty, is the contribution by Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk Nation), professor of American studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She emphasizes the importance of expanding the criteria used to determine the affiliations of human remains, so that they include more than mere evidence from the physical sciences. These criteria would thus include indigenous tribal knowledge as well as oral histories as a means of establishing “cultural relationships” necessary for repatriation. David Delgado Shorter, a professor of world arts and cultures at UCLA, concludes this set with a discussion of the possibility of extending collaboration to the very training and authentication of scholars through the inclusion of Native authorities on the very academic committees charged with instructing and guiding younger scholars. He offers his own experience with Yoeme cultural authorities as an example of what might be possible with the collaborative training of scholars in the area of American Indian studies. Together, these talks—and these young scholar-activists—on this fortieth anniversary, strongly demonstrate two things: American Indian studies still adheres to the charter of its founding relevances, and the work continues to evolve toward the ends of indigenizing the academy and providing Native communities with the benefits of a more relevant body of academic research and resulting expertise.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “Who Stole Native American Studies?” *Wicazo Sa Review* 12 (1997): 9–28.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. See also, e.g., Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson’s edited volume, *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).