

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

American Indian Higher Educational Experiences: Cultural Visions and Personal Journeys. By Terry Huffman.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62x8641g>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Poitra, Christie-Michelle

Publication Date

2009-09-01

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/>

Moreover, the authors point to an important transition in the history of the Olympic Games, if not the United States: “a way of dividing the peoples of the world into units defined by their songs, their flags, their history, their custom—their *culture*—not their *race*” (49).

Students of American Indian history will also appreciate the authors’ dialogue with the history of anthropology and the field’s shift of analytical interest from race to culture. Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith’s wonderfully written and personal story of the Fort Shaw Indian school’s women’s basketball team is a welcome addition to the book. One wonders, however, why no one solicited an article that examined the first-ever meeting between the Carlisle and Haskell football teams (a contest won by Carlisle 38-4). Finally, Christine O’Bonsawin’s contribution regarding Canadian Indians at the Anthropology Days brings a welcome transnational analysis to North American Indian history.

William J. Bauer Jr.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

American Indian Higher Educational Experiences: Cultural Visions and Personal Journeys. By Terry Huffman. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. 256 pages. \$89.95 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Contemporary literature examining the experiences of American Indian students in the university setting presents higher education as a social and cultural struggle often yielding either unsuccessful results or a compromise in Native identity. Terry Huffman from the Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at George Fox University diverges from this view in *American Indian Higher Educational Experiences: Cultural Visions and Personal Journeys*. Huffman affirms that “prevailing educational practices reflect non-Indian standards and preferences” and are by nature in conflict with American Indian cultural norms (31). However, the success of many American Indian college students hinges on the maintenance of their ethnic identity and use of Native “culture as a powerful device to propel them through the rigors of mainstream academia” (170).

Utilizing the perspectives of Native college students, the long-term study follows the cultural and academic experiences of sixty-nine individuals at a Midwest non-Indian university. During a five-year period, students participated in multiple open-ended interviews discussing their development and projection of their personal ethnic identity, or cultural mask. To govern interview data, Huffman imposes four categories (assimilated, marginal, estranged, and transculturated) in order to index students’ cultural orientations. Assimilated students are individuals who lack a strong connection with American Indian norms and identify with mainstream American values. Similarly, marginal students have some affinity for mainstream values but continue to desire an affiliation with Native culture. Estranged students project a strong, and deliberate, rejection of mainstream culture. Transculturated students have a secure connection with American Indian culture and an understanding of

mainstream values. Huffman analyzes the cultural masks and unique challenges of identity maintenance within each of the four categories. The study operates on the premise that one of the largest factors in American Indian educational persistence is an individual's ability to develop, adjust, and maintain their Native cultural mask in the non-Indian educational setting.

In order to refine the boundaries of the four categories further, Huffman gauges students' levels of integration into American Indian cultural values, ranging from traditional to nontraditional. *Traditional* is loosely defined as an individual having "intimacy with American Indian cultural ways and beliefs," specifically an individual's experience and degree of understanding of heritage language and religious and ceremonial practices. Many students from the study falling into this category had "some command of a Native language." *Nontraditional* denotes a student's lack of "intimacy with American Indian cultures." Contrasting the traditional and nontraditional labels, Huffman notes that many nontraditional students in the study "could not understand or speak a Native language" (9). Although Huffman clearly states that these terms are to be viewed as a familiar theoretical tool and are inherently flawed, alluding to identity values on the basis of heritage language is not always appropriate given the low rates of language fluency, use, and comprehension within tribal communities. Even communities traditionally known for high levels of Native-language fluency struggle to produce speakers in younger generations. Studies conducted on the Navajo Nation during the 1970s revealed that only 5 percent of kindergarten children were "monolingual in English." However, in 1995 it was estimated that only 4 percent of six-year-old Navajo children were fluent speakers with 38 percent labeled as "passive bilinguals" (Norbert Francis and Jon Reyhner, *Language and Literacy Teaching for Indigenous Education: A Bilingual Approach*, 2002, 49). The lack of fluency is prevalent in many American Indian communities, and as a result, traditionalism cannot be based on tribal-language knowledge. The term *traditional* should be clarified and/or expanded to recognize the contemporary realities of tribal communities in order to assess students' cultural identities accurately.

Giving an excellent overview of the differing theories and opinions, Huffman illustrates the progression of American Indian education thought through a multidisciplinary, layered discussion of the factors impacting Native higher educational persistence. One of the many factors Huffman cites is that the "poor rates of educational achievement among Native students are associated with a lack of educational emphasis on educational achievement among American Indian families," and, moreover, a lack support "cripples personal educational efforts" (47). As a result, the family dynamics and perceptions are useful in understanding students' cultural masks in relation to their educational success. Early in the book Huffman states that the "initial [student] interviews did not include specific questions regarding . . . family relations." Moreover, the postinterview survey questions regarding family connections "were analyzed separately from the information gleaned from the qualitative effort and are not reported in this book" (16). The lack of discussion of family relations and other potential factors was done "to more fully explore the relationship between ethnic identity and the higher educational experience" (171).

The exclusion of family relations from the discussion of cultural mask development, although understandable, limits the depth of the examination of the students' identities. The unique social-cultural connections existing in tribal communities, specifically language, religious and ceremonial practices, and community events, are deeply rooted in traditional familial and clanship ties. For students living on-reservation, it is important to look at cultural identity in conjunction with community relationships. Given that 65 percent of all the students participating in the study have lived, at some point, on a reservation, their cultural masks may be more embedded in American Indian values than allowed by the boundaries of Huffman's categories (23).

The fluidity of Native culture is clearly illustrated by the variance in the self-identity of the students. "Native students are not a monolithic group. The diversity among American Indians arises from the distinct legacies of each American Indian nation, the socioeconomic situation of each reservation and the personal histories of each Native family and individual" (171). In understanding Huffman's definitions of *traditional* and *nontraditional*, the terms seem too fixed and unable to incorporate contemporary cultural expressions such as preparing materials for a family and clan gatherings, engaging in traditional and contemporary community activities, and assuming leadership and/or political roles as determined by clan status, family, age, and gender. Although these actions are not always formalized, ritualistic engagements of "tradition," as historically defined by an etic perspective, arguably they are acts of culture. Given the deep family and cultural connections that remain vibrant within reservation communities, it is reasonable to assume a close alignment between family relations and Huffman's concept of the traditional. Confining culture to a linguistic, religious, and ceremonial definition constricts the student categories and may prove to be inadequate for fully assessing students' levels of integration into American Indian culture. A concept of self-identity based in American Indian communal connections would have deepened the understanding of the students' cultural masks.

Among all categories of students, assimilative students were the youngest and most academically successful. Huffman attributes the success of the group to the students' abilities to integrate smoothly into the non-Indian educational setting. However, it is important to note that the majority of students in the assimilated group were from "middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds" and "had parents who were (and in some cases, they themselves were) professionals or other white-collar workers" (80). Outside of cultural identity adaptation, the obvious implication of having college-educated parents is that children are better prepared to engage and succeed in the higher education setting. Understandably Huffman wants to limit external life factors in order to focus on the cultural mask; however, a discussion of the differences among students' socioeconomic backgrounds is necessary to isolate and identify the impact of the cultural mask. Unfortunately, Huffman does not directly investigate the differences in the social resources and capital available to first-generation college students versus students from a college-educated family, due to the parameters of the study.

Through the categories and terms derived from the interviews with students, Huffman constructs an interesting and intimate glimpse into the American Indian identity and higher educational experience among a diverse group of individuals. An understanding of family relations, and adding a clarified concept of *traditional*, would have created a more dynamic representation of students' cultural backgrounds in relation to the development and projection of their cultural masks. On a side note, Huffman states that many of the Native students were of a nontraditional age (meaning older than the average college student). It would have been interesting to examine the impact of age differences among the student categories (assimilated being the youngest and transculturated being the oldest) in relation to their cultural masks. Given these critiques, the book presents an innovative way to look at contemporary American Indian educational issues. Particularly interesting is the last chapter, which touches on the continued disparities existing among American Indian college students, with one of three students participating in the study leaving the university and only 27 percent graduating at the conclusion of the study (172, 174). Again, Huffman does an excellent job of merging the theoretical interests of academics with the concrete problems existing for higher education practitioners.

Christie-Michelle Poitra

University of California, Los Angeles

American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty. By George E. "Tink" Tinker. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008. 170 pages. \$22.00 paper.

George E. "Tink" Tinker, a professor of American Indian cultures and religious traditions at Iliff School of Theology, takes on the difficult—not to mention, ironic—task of arguing for a proactive role for Christian Indians in their communities' struggle for political rights, decolonization, and revitalization. On the one hand, when one considers that vast numbers of indigenous North and South Americans regard themselves as Christian, the argument for a Native version of liberation theology appears easy to make. On the other hand, insofar as Tinker wants to reach indigenous persons from a variety of Christian, traditional, and nontraditional backgrounds, the route to persuasion becomes noticeably more difficult, particularly when one considers the animosity that many Indians feel toward Christianity for its part in legitimizing the appropriation and exploitation of indigenous lives and lands, from the Spanish *Requerimiento* of 1510 to the US Board of Indian Commissioners of 1869. Yet this is precisely what Tinker has been struggling toward since *Missionary Conquest* (1993). Christian Indians have been wrestling with the unique dilemmas they have faced since Samson Occum (Mohegan) gave his legendary sermon on behalf of Moses Paul, who was sentenced to hang in 1772 for killing a white man, in which Occum condemned the sin but pitied the sinner for enduring a world—colonial New England—in which Paul was surrounded by hypocrites and racial prejudice. At one point, Occum