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# The Tribal Learning Community & Educational Exchange: Examining the Space between the “Us-Them” Binary

*DeAnna M. Rivera*

In the 1950s, during a federal government incentive program called Operation Bootstrap, my father packed up from his home in Boriken and moved to Long Island, New York.<sup>1</sup> Lured by the promise of something different—if not better—he purchased a valuable personal and political narrative that gave him, in exchange, the right to come to the United States. He might not have imagined himself stuffing flyers into newspapers at a grocery store for pennies an hour, but soon after he arrived he met and married an Irish-German-American woman and had three *trigueña* children.<sup>2</sup> He went on to own a small but successful fiberglass company and provided a comfortable, middle-class home for his family.

Now, as a *trigueña* adult, I have also gone on to purchase my own complex, political, and personal—arguably colonizing—narrative. Not altogether different than my father’s unwittingly narcissistic identification with the 1950s,<sup>3</sup> my own academic and professional pursuits are guided by a firm belief in the promise of higher education. Since junior college, I have spent my life in the academy in one way or another, ultimately earning a JD and running a tribal

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DEANNA M. RIVERA (Boriken Taíno) was the inaugural director of the Tribal Learning Community & Educational Exchange (TLCEE), a program associated with the Native National Law and Policy Center at the UCLA School of Law. She taught the American Indian Studies Working in Tribal Communities Series and assisted with the Tribal Legal Development Clinic.

education program at UCLA dedicated to project-based experiential learning in tribal communities. My choices to identify so closely with the academy were both informed by and led me to believe in the import and usefulness of higher education. At the same time, I recognize the colonizing history of education in the United States, a history that led to the types of choices my father made when he left Boriken in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

I am grateful for my father's decisions, because without them I would not be here. I respect my father's choices, his sacrifices, and his unyielding love for learning. That said, this tension between my views of higher education as profoundly useful, as well as part of a larger colonizing narrative, is palpable to me at times. And I am not alone. Many Native academics and students live in a space between the place we critique and the place from which we critique. This essay attempts to honor the questions we live with while we navigate that peculiar space, and suggests that UCLA's Native programs offer an intellectually safe zone to explore some of these questions.

## THE "US-THEM" BARRIER

A few years ago, I sat at a dinner with a large group of Native students and faculty, all of whom gathered as mentors and mentees to engage in an intensive weekend of graduate school preparation. Cutting through the dinnertime clamor, the keynote speaker quickly launched into a critique about how tribal members mitigate the conflict-filled space between the perceived need for higher education and the long-standing stigma against it in tribal communities. He explained that, in his view, Native youth are faced with the unfortunate, inhibiting, and barrier-creating dilemma of having to choose between their tribal communities and school. Speaking directly to the students, he put it somewhat like this: "don't buy into the idea that if you're one of them you're no longer one of us; the same people who mock the fancy degree you'll earn are the same ones who'll say you'd better come home to help when you're done."

I've heard this sentiment over and over in my work with tribal communities and have always understood it as a reframing of the tension I feel about my own pursuit of higher education. My students have heard it too. It baffles them because many of them also have chosen to purchase what they believed was a decolonization narrative through the hope of higher education. Our youth, my students, are faced with mixed signals about the kind of intellectuals they should aspire to be: Native intellectuals or academic intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> They get caught in "us-them" dichotomies which, somehow, they also believe to be false. So, they keep struggling to stay in school. They keep earning degrees.

They also keep driving home for ceremony. And they keep stubbornly living this dichotomy—daily. Yet, while my students have already made the choice to embark on a university education, many Native youth all around the country hover around that choice and get caught in the space between the us-them dichotomy not knowing which identity to own.

The Tribal Learning Community & Educational Exchange (TLCEE) program at UCLA is designed to address this us-them barrier. Indeed, as a program it exists between that barrier. As part of the university setting, it is built into the colonizing narrative and yet aims to address and foster decolonizing narratives. The program functions, however, precisely by allowing productivity in that barrier-like space. TLCEE's vision is to make higher education accessible to citizens of Native nations in several ways: on campus, online, and through in-person workshops in the communities. In each instance, TLCEE provides a space for students/participants to accept their choices to join the academy and look for, examine, and interrogate ways to make that space productive for them and for their communities.

## TLCEE'S DECOLONIZING PROJECT

TLCEE began as a response to a common refrain in Indian country: in order to attract more Native students to the academy, the academy needs to offer more relevant course work that can be attributable to work being done in contemporary tribal communities. The original TLCEE Working Group envisioned a program that would introduce a systematic, culturally informed curriculum to the existing UCLA American Indian studies program.<sup>6</sup> Underlying the plan for such a curriculum was an implicit assumption that by introducing a culturally informed set of classes, TLCEE could provide a space for Native students to garner the tools the academy has to offer while also sharpening the tools they already held from their home communities. Theoretically speaking, TLCEE is premised on the notion that Native students should have a space in which to grow simultaneously as academic as well as native intellectuals. Pragmatically speaking, TLCEE's students learn to listen, respond to, and address issues in tribal communities through experiential courses designed to have students work on projects with their communities. Through these classes, students are urged to move in and out of the academy and tribal communities with equal aptitude despite the often-uncomfortable tensions that exist between the two. In so doing, as I hope this article will demonstrate, they engage in an even larger project—that of indigenizing the academy and promoting the decolonization of their own educations.<sup>7</sup>

## TLCEE IN PRACTICE

TLCEE operates in three spaces: on campus, online, and in the communities. In all three, the objective is to connect the world of the academy with that of the tribal communities in a way that benefits the community members—as the community defines the benefit. On campus, I taught a series of classes called “Working in Tribal Communities” (WTCs), which is open to UCLA undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, and other participants beyond campus through UCLA Extension. The three-part series culminates in several projects a year, each envisioned by the community and implemented in collaboration with faculty and students. Wherever possible, I encouraged Native students to work with their own tribal communities, providing them the opportunity to navigate, elegantly or inelegantly, their journeys between the academy and home. Online, TLCEE offers a curriculum designed with Native professionals in mind, generally people who are already working in tribal communities and feel the need to develop their understandings of specific tribal legal issues. The classes are taught by people who are experts in their respective areas and who also work in tribal communities either directly or through nonprofit organizations. The third class format brings academic information to community settings. UCLA faculty, staff, and student collaborate with community members to deliver workshop-style courses on topics as varied as the communities themselves. For each of the three class styles, TLCEE aims to make tools from the academy available to tribal communities and to introduce the academy, often for the first time, to the workings of contemporary Native nations.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SPACE BETWEEN

Each of the TLCEE class styles requires its participants to engage across many cultural lines and ask the hard questions about the “us-them” dichotomy so prevalent in community-university relations. During my time at UCLA, I was always reminded of the work of critical theorist Homi Bhabha. Bhabha explains his notion of cultural difference in a way that I have found useful to understand the space TLCEE fills both inside and out of the academy. Bhabha crafts an important distinction between cultural difference and cultural diversity.<sup>8</sup> His distinction is rooted in the notion of agency: cultural diversity, Bhabha asserts, is much more of a totalizing project than one might at first imagine. While the phrase *cultural diversity* has elicited metaphors such as a salad bowl, in which every component is visible and voiceful, to Bhabha cultural diversity silences. It allows for a silencing which prohibits the agency of a person, a community, or a culture because it ignores “the intertextuality of [various cultures’] historical

locations.” Cultural diversity operates from the assumption that culture is static, rendering it unidimensional. Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference, on the other hand, is a process that operates from the assumption that culture is itself knowledgeable, authoritative, and dynamic without having to be unitary or, for that matter, totalizing or silencing. Instead of accepting categories and delineations of culture(s), cultural difference “problematizes the binary division of [among other things] past and present, tradition and modernity.”<sup>9</sup> It is this problematizing of the binary that I believe is TLCEE’s underlying project.

I must pause here to note that none of my musings in this essay are to say that TLCEE is and has all of the answers—or that by problematizing the binaries its work is done. That would be falsely romanticizing what any one program is capable of doing, or to use Franz Fanon, I would not want to risk false harmonization.<sup>10</sup> TLCEE’s exchanges between tribes and the academy are places of fruitful awkwardness. It is not TLCEE’s project to shield its student participants from the “violence of the colonial regime” (in this case, arguably, the academy), or for that matter the counter-narratives of Native community members. Instead, TLCEE has the opportunity to serve as a space to cultivate the something else between, the something between the colonial regime and Native narratives about that regime, the something between colonizer and colonized.<sup>11</sup> TLCEE has the opportunity to promote something other than the perception that the communities it serves are mythically monolithic, whether tribal communities or communities within the academy. TLCEE can be the enunciation of cultural difference that opens up the spaces between the parts which make it up, allowing its “[h]ybrid hyphenations [to] emphasize the incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks—. . . of cultural identifications.”<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of each quarter’s class, I emphasized and reemphasized that if the students were not confused or uncomfortable, they were likely not paying close enough attention. TLCEE’s role in handling these binaries is to teach students to question the dichotomy and get at the “stubborn chunks” of cultural identifications, ultimately providing a space for students and communities to create and manage a relevant and collaborative learning process together.

Edward Said discusses a similar in-betweenness when he asserts that in-between the colonizer and the colonized rises a new class of people, the people Fanon might call the native intellectuals, the ones who are enabled to speak to both sides.<sup>13</sup> TLCEE participants on and off campus often discover that this is the role they play: in some instances, they function as the Native intellectual, and in others the academic intellectual, resulting in an ability to speak to both sides. For Bhabha, this ability to speak to both sides is twofold: it is about a desire to make the entity on the other side of the binary more

recognizable—to see where there might be less difference; it is also a desire to foster a moment to strategize together, rather than apart.<sup>14</sup>

Bhabha calls this moment “mimicry.”<sup>15</sup> Mimicking, in Bhabha’s use of the term, is the act of using the space of in-betweenness, that ability to speak to both sides, to experiment with the possibilities that can only come from that vantage point.<sup>16</sup> In TLCEE’s case, the tribal and academic communities meet through the various types of classes and their respective projects, leaving the two entities with a whole new set of possibilities to strategize and create new narratives.

In practice, this space of possibilities allows students to engage in the even larger project I mentioned earlier, that of indigenizing the academy and promoting the decolonization of their own educations. By stubbornly refusing to ignore the often awkwardly stubborn binaries they encounter in their higher education experiences, Native students accept the responsibility of the possibilities they created by engaging in community work. By acknowledging the import of the n/Native intellectuals they meet through their work and including Native narratives in their academic work, students are simultaneously insisting that the academy also acknowledge the import of these counternarratives. By acknowledging the import of the academy’s tools and including them in their interactions with the tribal communities, students are simultaneously urging the communities to recognize the potential usefulness of the academy. Consequently, as ambassadors for both sides of the binaries, students use the us-them narrative to cultivate opportunities for their personal and professional growth by bringing indigeneity to the academy and maybe even carving out a place for themselves back home when they are done with that hard work. Little by little, as this process repeats, the us-them barrier could render itself impotent and alleviate one barrier to higher education for Native people.

In the end, my clamoring views of higher education as being profoundly useful as well as part of a larger colonizing narrative are not quieted. TLCEE’s work, the work of everyone with an interest in drawing down the barriers Native people face to higher education, is far from complete. It could be that, like my father’s acceptance of the Operation Bootstrap narrative, my own firm belief in the promise of higher education is in itself a barrier to a decolonize(ed/ing) education. In my father’s moment, a move to Long Island, New York seemed the right answer. In my moment, TLCEE and its experiential educational model seems a right answer—among many other right answers. At the very least, TLCEE is a space for n/Native intellectuals to strategize about the next generation of ways to undo the all-too-inhibiting barriers and binaries. And in that way, it is a departure from its own colonizing history, and a road toward a decolonizing future.

## NOTES

1. *Boriken* is the indigenous Taíno word for Puerto Rico; “Operation Bootstrap” refers to the period when the United States was encouraging people to move from the island to the continental US to accept jobs with the idea of helping those who come “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Ronald Fernandez, *The Disenchanted Island: Puerto Rico and the United States in the Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 170–71.

2. The term *trigueña* generally applies to the discussion in Puerto Rico regarding the “official racial triad” on the island accepted as fact by anthropologists and archaeologists, which is that all Puerto Ricans are “part Spanish, part African, and part Taíno” and therefore infinitely hyphenated. For a discussion of Taíno identity, see generally *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics*, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College City University of New York, 2001).

3. Homi Bhabha uses this concept in referring to Fanon’s analysis of the exercise of dependent colonial relations in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 126.

4. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999); *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, ed. Devon Abbot Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson (Lincoln: Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

5. While in this sentence I am not using the term *native intellectuals* in the way Fanon uses it, I will use the term that way later in the paper, using a lower case “n” to note the difference. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grover Press, 1963), 64.

6. San Manuel Band of Mission Indians Endowment Agreement Concerning the Tribal Learning Community and Educational Exchange, November 13, 2003 (list on file with author).

7. The phrase “indigenizing the academy” is borrowed from *Indigenizing the Academy*, ed. Mihesuah and Wilson.

8. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 50, note 3.

9. *Ibid.*, 51.

10. Fanon, *The Wretched*, 88, note 3. While Fanon does not say so in this passage, I am using his language of terror in a Lyotardian way; see *ibid.*, note 5.

11. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 313, note 3.

12. *Ibid.*, 313.

13. *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage, 2001), 193.

14. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 121, note 3, and at 129.

15. *Ibid.*, 123.

16. *Ibid.*



