

# THOUGHTS ON THE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR INDIGENOUS/NATIVE STUDIES<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Native American Studies emerged out of the 1960s civil rights movement and in many ways remains the intellectual arm of the larger Aboriginal and Treaty Rights movement. As scholars we are expected to be mediators, translators, and bridges between Indigenous communities and the larger academic world which often places us in the position of meeting two, often disparate and contradictory, sets of standards.

Le mouvement des droits civils pendant les années soixante a suscité des études américaines des autochtones. De plusieurs manières, ce mouvement demeure le bras intellectuel du mouvement plus large des droits des autochtones et de leurs traités. En tant qu'érudits, on s'attend à ce que nous soyons des médiateurs, des traducteurs et des réseaux de communications entre les communautés indigènes et le monde plus large académique. Ceci nous met souvent dans la position où se rencontrent les deux systèmes de standards, souvent différents et contradictoires.

*I believe an Indian education system that incorporates the strengths of our traditional learning patterns practised by our Indian governments long before European contact must form the basis of an Indian education system that will meet the requirements of the Treaties with the Crown.*

Charles Fiddler (Cree) 1992

Over thirty years after Indian/Native Studies emerged in universities as a discipline, the question, "to whom we are accountable"—who we are responsible to and whose standards we are obliged to meet?—still arises. The answer is often hotly debated in terms of degrees, but from the position of many Native scholars, the reality is that we are accountable to two distinct, and often disparate, bodies: our Aboriginal communities, and the university system at large. Indian/Native Studies was created to provide professional training and service to meet the unique needs of our communities and so we are judged by community standards. At the same time we are an academic discipline

which imposes another set of standards on us. While some would scream "not fair!" the requirement that we meet two sets of standards should not be much of

*Education was now going to be the buffalo of the future. Anybody today, I guess, getting their degree, in these old peoples' eyes, are getting their buffalo.*

Chief Barry Ahenakew (Cree), 1992

a surprise, after all, we are "citizens plus," we do want the best of both worlds, and our forefathers anticipated a bicultural education and bicultural future for us when they signed the Treaties. As scholars Indigenous students and faculty are, therefore, expected to be mediators/ translators/ bridges between these two worlds. a location which, as all interpreters know, inherently requires us to become fluent in (at least) two intellectual traditions and cultures. The question then, is not so much who we are accountable to—since that is a given—but how we can meet two, often disparate and contradictory, sets of standards.

The answers can be found within the history of our discipline itself. Indian/Native Studies grew out of the Indigenous rights movements of the 1960s which included Indigenous demands for a voice in universities and colleges.<sup>2</sup> As the academic branch of a larger movement, Native Studies is also about decolonization: It is simultaneously a revolt against colonialist representations of Indigenous life and history, a rejection of colonialist relations and treatments, and the means by which new intellectual pursuits are free to develop. As a vehicle for politicization through education and

skill development, Indian/Native Studies was also perceived as one of the protectorates of Indigenous sovereignty and rights at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

As an academic discipline, Indian/Native Studies was intended to promote the development of new methodologies, theoretical constructs, and curriculum based on Indigenous intellectual traditions and values. Thus, Indian/Native Studies faculty are expected to be committed to Indigenous-based research,

publication, community service and to the creation of graduates who can meet the multifaceted needs for skilled professional workers in Indigenous governments and institutions (Thornton,

1978; Cook-Lynn, 1997; Jaimes, 1987). Ideally, Indian/Native Studies differentiates itself from conventional academic disciplines in two important ways: it emerges from within Indigenous communities, geographies, languages and experience, and it rejects conventional academic treatments (Cook-Lynn, 1997). In opposition to conventional Eurocanadian/Euroamerican academic disciplines that study Native North America as the "Other" object/subject, one of the key objectives of Indian/Native Studies is to create its own unique intellectual foundations from within (Buffalohead, 1970; Forbes, 1998). This is where it is vital that we look within our own traditions for guidance.

Native American knowledge is not neatly compartmentalized in rigid disciplinary confines—when the Old People teach they do not separate laws from politics, economics, social relations or religion. Vine Deloria (Lakota) and Ward Churchill (Cherokee), both

longstanding scholars in American Indian Studies, stress that "it is impossible to arrive at a coherent Indian understanding of law or political science without a firm grasp of the spiritual principles governing Indian life" (Jaimes, 1987). Like life

*Controlling our choice of a path ... [it] is our belief that the Indian must remain an Indian. He cannot realize his potential as a brown white man. Only by being an Indian, by being what he is, can he ever be at peace with himself or open to others.*

Harold Cardinal (Cree), 1969

*Our new storytellers have a big job. They must understand their sacred place and they must also understand the new language and use it to express their stories without losing the thoughts and images that are culturally unique to them. This new storyteller must also be a translator of the old way, so that it will not be lost to a new generation. And all of this must be done on paper, for that is the new way.*

Maria Campbell (Cree Métis), 1985

itself, all things are interrelated and all Indigenous knowledge is grounded in religion. This is most evident when our Elders discuss current issues—they invariably understand, frame and present their stories and analyses in traditional religious terms and within the context of our understanding of the Treaties. Harold Cardinal (Cree) explains further that even our pre-Indian Act governments operated like theocracies in that all the diplomatic and political rules and processes were shaped by and grounded in religious beliefs—our leaders were accountable to their people and ultimately, accountable to the Creator.

Religion serves as the backbone of most societies—it dictates how people should relate to each other, their neighbors, the land, and the universe around them. To strip our intellectual knowledge of its spirituality is colonialist. Thus, one of the decolonizing tasks in Indian Studies is to find ways to approach, understand, and present significant issues within Indigenous conceptual modes, without compromising our traditional or scholarly integrity. This is the paradigm Indian Studies needs to develop more thoroughly in order to go beyond conventional academic approaches and methods. As the late Alfonso Ortiz (Tewa) explained, “new Indian history, among other things, would frame questions and inquiries using Indian terms and categories that reflect Indian realities” (Ortiz, 1988). Indian Studies needs to develop unique intellectual pursuits because if it “is not unique there is no reason for it to be separate” (Thornton, 1978).

Indian Studies is transdisciplinary in order to facilitate the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge. Indian Studies is not ethnography, history, sociology, literature, law, philosophy, or political science—it is simultaneously all of these, yet does not replicate them. While we borrow research methodologies and theory from other disciplines, they cannot rigidly adhere to the strictures of their academic disciplinary homes—they have to be used critically, keeping in mind the holism of Indigenous knowledge and the unique intellectual concerns we face in Indian country. Over and over again it has been demonstrated that many conventional academic teaching and research methods are incompatible with the wide range of concerns in our communities. how then can we justify applying them uncritically in Indian/Native Studies?

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith and other like-minded Indigenous scholars promote anti-colonial research and argue for intellectual decolonization through the development of Indigenous-framed research methods and approaches (see Smith, 1999). One of our greatest challenges, then, is to create new curricula and research methodologies that are grounded in Indigenous intellectual systems and that can accommodate the holism of those systems.

Why is this so important from a community-based perspective? Because history has demonstrated that outside "solutions" for the "Indian problem" simply do not work in our best interests. We are the only ones with the insight and capabilities to identify our "problems" and come up with our own answers. Indian studies is in the business of producing professionals to serve our own people, and given our current realities, our peoples deserve the very best we can offer from both worlds:

It makes no sense to be involved in higher education if one is unwilling to embrace the values and objectives of higher education, including high standards for research and scholarship along with teaching and service. It makes no sense to be involved in Native American Studies without a real understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of Native Americans (Thornton, 1998).

What does this mean for Indian/Native Studies at the university level? It means that our students should be able to expect the highest calibre of academic scholarship in addition to a firm grounding in and respect for Cree, Anishnabe, Dene, Nakoda, Lakota or other Indigenous intellectual traditions from their professors. This notion might be revolutionary in some academic circles but it is nothing less than our forefathers expected way back when they negotiated our Treaties. Our oral histories tell us that our forefathers expected that "education" would promote and support First Nations knowledge in conjunction with Eurocanadian knowledge—traditional knowledge and the "cunning of the White Man"—the best of both worlds.

Like our own Treaty Elders, one of the earliest Lakota scholars, Luther Standing Bear, strongly promoted bi-cultural education. In the 1930s he stressed, "I say again that Indians should teach Indians, that Indians should serve Indians, especially on reservations where the older people remain." He explained his philosophy as follows:

To the end that young Indians will be able to appreciate both their traditional life and modern life they should be doubly educated. Without forsaking reverence for their ancestral teachings, they can be trained to take up modern duties to tribal and reservation life. And there is no problem of reservation importance but can be solved by the joint efforts of the old and the young Indians (Standing Bear, 1978).

Clearly, in order to live up to the expectations of our forefathers and communities, our faculty and students must constantly push themselves to be the best they can be. In faculty terms, this means keeping up with issues at the local, regional, national and even international levels; keeping up with the studies and literature emerging in our fields, and; constantly upgrading

our knowledge and skills beyond the disciplines we received our training in. It also means maintaining strong ties to our communities and our lifelong roles as students or apprentices of traditional teachings because it is our responsibility to provide our students with the finest cutting-edge education available.

*Among us, traditionally, the scholars are the servants of the people.... And so we say—let the people come for help to their own scholars. And let the scholars spend their very lives and energies in the service of their people.*

Rupert Costo (Cahuilla), 1970

We are just as, if not more, accountable to our own communities as we are to the academic community because it is in our communities where the practical work is needed and the benefits are potentially the greatest.

In student terms, it means setting high standards for personal and academic achievement. Striving for and accepting "C" grades indicates a certain level of apathy—average—a willingness to accept the status quo. Average grades tell everyone that the work was not the very best it could be—that something significant was missing, be it creative and/or critical thinking, and/or missing pieces. Our communities deserve the best we can give them—mediocre warriors do not win wars, average leaders do not create change.

Our forefathers had great expectations for us, and they had a powerful belief in our ability to master two sets of knowledge and skills. Their sacrifices ensured that we had access to both worlds and the resources needed to make our communities strong again. Our roles as Indian/Native Studies faculty and students in the decolonization and empowerment of our communities is vital. As scholars we still have much hard work ahead of us and formidable obstacles to overcome. But many will

*How can Native Americans respect Native American Studies if it does not attempt to understand them on their own terms? They will not. They should not.*

Russell Thornton (Cherokee), 1999

benefit from our actions. Keeping in mind that hard work and personal sacrifice were time-honored traits of our forefathers, we should expect no less of ourselves if we are truly committed to their visions.

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was submitted to the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College magazine (Fall 2000).

2. Roger Buffalohead (1970) reminds us that the first attempt at establishing an Indian Studies Department was initiated in 1914 by Senator Robert Owens of Oklahoma. At the urging of a number of Oklahoma Indians, Senator Owens introduced a resolution in Congress to establish an Indian Studies Department at the University of Oklahoma. Senator Owens was unsuccessful in his attempt, as were those who tried again in 1937.

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