Engaging Students with Native American Community Resources

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THOMAS KING HAS OFFERED US AN ENTERTAINING AND COMPELLING glimpse of contemporary Indian life in Canada in his recent novel *Medicine River*. One morning Will, the local photographer, is visited by his friend, Harlan Bigbear, who introduces him to Lionel James, a tribal elder and religious leader. After the three men share a pot of hot coffee and some bread and butter with strawberry jam, Lionel begins to tell them about his experiences as a traveling Indian:

> People want me to talk about what it's like to be an Indian. Crazy world. Lots of white people seem real interested in knowing about Indians. Crazy world.
>
> So, I go all over the world now, and talk about Indian ways and how my grandparents lived, and sometimes I sing a little. I used to dance, too, but my leg hurts too bad now. Most of the time, I tell stories.
>
> . . . You know, sometimes I tell stories about today, about some of the people on the reserve right now. I like to tell about Billy Frank and the Dead River Pig. All the people back home like to hear that story.
>
> . . . But those people in Germany and Japan and France and Ottawa don't want to hear those stories. They want to hear stories about how Indians used to be. I got some real good stories, funny ones, about how things are now, but those people say, no, tell us about the olden days, so I do.
>
> . . . People are real curious, you know. When I was in Japan, I told them the story about Old Man and Old Woman, and when I was done, everybody stood up and clapped.
>
> . . . You know, it was my wife who knew all the stories. She used to tell them to the kids. Crazy world. Everybody on the reserve knows that story.

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> Those people in Japan just got up and started clapping. Same thing happened in Germany.[1]

A week later Will visits Lionel and his family at their home in a remote part of the reserve; Will describes the experience:

> Later, we sat around in the back yard, and Lionel told stories. There were some about Old Man and Old Woman, and some about Coyote and Raven and the rest of the animals. Lionel told a story about a white fellow from Cardston who tried to sell Alfred Yellow Rabbit a horse that was blind in one eye. He told me about the time my father hid me in a clothes basket at the laundromat and tried to convince my mother that he had put me in the wash by mistake. And he told the story about the fence at the airport and the kid at the hotel.
>
> "It's a crazy world," Lionel said, as he walked me out to my truck, "them people living in the past like that." He looked back at the kids, who were playing on the porch. "They all got up and clapped, Will. Just stood there and clapped. Like they never heard that story before."[2]

Lionel James traveled from his reserve to distant lands and discovered a new world, a world filled with enduring and pernicious misperceptions of Indian people. He learned that many non-Indians are uninterested in contemporary Indian life, that they prefer to cherish their own romantic visions of the past, and that they regard Indians like Lionel as nothing more than a means to an end. Lionel James was both amused and perplexed to find that many people consider the Indian way of life to be an anachronism; they seem to believe, to paraphrase the well-known frontier dictum, that the only authentic Indian is a dead Indian.

Andy Rooney, the television commentator and syndicated columnist, advanced this interpretation of contemporary Indian life in a recent opinion piece. He wrote:

> While American Indians have a grand past, the impact of their culture on the world has been slight. . . . Their genius was for living free in a wild state. . . .
>
> The two million American Indians alive today are reluctant to concede that it's no longer practical to maintain a lifestyle that is an anachronism. The time for the way Indians lived is gone and it's doubly sad because they refuse to accept it.
>
> They hang onto remnants of their religion and superstition that may have been useful to savages 500 years ago but which are meaningless in 1992.
>
> No one would force another religion on them but what if an Indian belief, involving ritualistic dances with strong sexual overtones, is demeaning to Indian women and degrading to Indian children?

> Should they, on Indian land within the United States, be encouraged, with government money, to continue that?[3]

Rooney's invidious cacology reflects his lack of familiarity with Indian people; unfortunately, it also represents attitudes that are common outside of Indian communities.

Many American Indian leaders and writers, along with some non-Indian scholars, have pointed out the prominence of socially constructed representations of American Indians in contemporary society. Rayna Green has called the Indian "a central figure in the New World iconography." This figure is particularly evident in "the expressive forms of American popular culture" that "describe, codify, and present the image of the Indian while defining the set of operative values" non-Indians employ in understanding American Indians.[4] Robert Berkhofer has demonstrated how the idea of the Indian was invented and how it has been perpetuated in every area of discourse, including the social sciences, literature, art, philosophy, and public policy.[5] Commonly held stereotypes of Indian life often go unchallenged because of demographic and geographic realities in the United States; few non-Indians have had personal experience with life in an American Indian family or community.

These enduring and pernicious misperceptions of Indian culture and identity constitute some of the most challenging obstacles encountered in teaching courses in Native American studies. Many students come to the subject motivated more by their interest in environmentalism, tribal spirituality, countercultural morality, or radical political dissent than by any heartfelt desire for developing cross-cultural understanding and respect. Intellectual discourse on the history of these and other socially constructed misrepresentations of Indian life plays an important role in countering exploitative motivations for engaging in Native American studies. But addressing these romanticized and derogatory racial stereotypes is only half the battle; deconstruction must be accompanied by reconstruction. We have attempted to design a relevant and effective pedagogy for teaching contemporary Native American literatures by connecting the university classroom with the local community. We believe that one of the best ways to dispel malicious rumors is to facilitate encounters between our students and "real live" Native Americans.

From a pedagogical perspective, contemporary Native American communities represent an important and rich resource for teaching Native American studies. Native American community resources can be used in

a variety of ways, both by bringing Native American groups and individuals into the classroom setting and by sending students into the local Native American community. This pedagogical approach has been developed collaboratively over several semesters; the activities described below have been used in a lower-division writing course that focuses on Native American literatures.

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We have invited a wide range of Native American leaders, activists, professionals, writers, and scholars to share their experiences and perspectives with our students in the classroom. During one unit, we explored contemporary Native American poetry by several writers, including Ramona Wilson, who came to the classroom and read several of her poems. We discovered Wilson, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, in one of the course texts, a recent anthology of Northwest Native American writing. Her poem "Spokane Museum" begins with these lines:

> These are not relics
> from lost peoples, lost lands.
> I know where they are.
> Give me that digging tool.
> I'll show you where
> in the spring we get roots.[6]

Wilson is an educator and an administrator for the American Indian Child Resource Center in Oakland; she helped the students understand how her poetry relates to her life as a community leader, and they enjoyed discussing the writing process with her.

Preston Arrow-weed is a member of the Kwitcyn (Yuma) tribe and a ceremonial leader and singer for his people. He is also an active playwright, and, one semester, we read his unpublished one act play "A Time of Decay," which recounts the Kwitcyn uprising of 1780 as a story of the Kwitcyn people "who do not deserve the disrespectful way they were written into history."[7] Arrow-weed arranged for some of his friends and family to travel to Berkeley from the Fort Yuma Reservation (six hundred miles to the south) in order to perform the play. We scheduled the performance for a Saturday afternoon at the Student Union building and advertised it in several classes and on campus. The standing room-only audience enjoyed Arrow-weed's interpretation of his own work, which

included several Kwitcyn children dancing to traditional songs. During the next semester, Arrow-weed came to the classroom and read selections from some of his current projects. Our students enjoyed meeting Arrow-weed and also learned about the practical side of writing plays; Arrow-weed earns his living as a security guard.

We have used Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony* as a course text several times, and, one semester, we invited Ken Tiger, a member of the Seminole tribe and a Vietnam veteran, to speak to the class. Tiger helped students understand Tayo's dilemma by describing his own experiences as a Native American serving in the U.S. military. His visit coincided with the Persian Gulf War, during which U.S. military personnel repeatedly referred to Iraqi territory as "Indian country"; Tiger was able to help students understand the persistence of Indian-fighting rhetoric in the armed forces today. He also discussed the discrimination Native Americans face in combat situations as a result of racial stereotypes. Louis Owens has captured the power of this experience in his recent novel *The Sharpest Sight,* in which Choctaw soldier Attis McCurtain sums up the situation when he writes to his brother from Vietnam:

> Do anything you have to. . . . Shoot your big toe off, cut your nuts off, but don't let them bring you here. You know what they do with Indians? They put us on point. The stupid bastards think Indians can see at night, that we don't make any noise, that kind of shit. It doesn't matter if you're a half-breed or full or whatever. They call you chief and put you out in the fucking jungle at night.[8]

Malcolm Margolin, the publisher of *News from Native California,* came to the classroom during a unit on California Indian literatures. Margolin is known throughout the state for his work with California Indian communities, many of which are currently enjoying a remarkable cultural revival. Margolin is also a gifted storyteller. He kept us all spellbound as he described the Bay Area environment and its inhabitants at the time of European invasion and as he related this reality to the lifeways of California Indian people today.[9] Margolin demonstrated the value of stories and the power of imagination in cultivating cross-cultural understanding and respect.

At the end of one semester, we invited Martin Poz, a Mayan from Guatemala who lives in Berkeley, to speak to the class about his people. He showed slides of his village and discussed their contemporary social and cultural life, including the dramatic revival of Mayan ceremonial

traditions in recent years. Poz's presence in the classroom brought an important comparative dimension to the course and enabled students to understand the Native American experience in a wider context.

We have also arranged for several of the Native American students at U.C. Berkeley to come to the classroom for a panel discussion. Native Americans are a small, nearly invisible, and often misunderstood part of the university community; one student described his experience on campus:

> At the place where I live, people have found out that I am Native American. They ask many questions about the little culture that I am aware of and almost congratulate me on being Native. I humor them, but it has gotten really annoying for me because they think I am something special. Recently one revolutionary anarchist and his friends confronted me. They asked me to join their group in fighting issues and causes of the White Man. One told me since I was Native that I should be a revolutionist because of all the bad things done to my people. I was really offended by this because this person says that he wants to fight racism of the whites, but here the white male stereotypically wanted me to join his group because I am a Native American. Although I think a lot about the things done in the past to the Native and the issues of the contemporary Native, I would feel awkward fighting for causes that are unknown to me.

It is important for non-Indian students to acknowledge and to accept the Native American presence on campus and in the classroom. Native American student panelists who visited the classroom discussed their personal backgrounds, their experiences at the university, and their plans for the future. Our non-Indian students discovered similarities they could identify with, as well as differences they could respect.

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We normally assign several research and writing projects that encourage students to make use of Native American community resources outside the classroom. Each student is required to participate in at least one community event during the semester and then to write a short reflection paper describing the experience. At the beginning of the semester, we distribute a list of Native American community events such as powwows, cultural festivals, and ceremonies that are open to the public. We also tell students about some of the organizations that serve the local Native American community, such as the Native American Studies program on campus and the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland, which may have additional

information about community events. We help students prepare for this event by discussing cross-cultural experiences they have had in the past. We alert them to cultural differences in the ways people understand and structure time, space, and interpersonal relationships, and we suggest ways to balance ethnocentrism with openness and respect.

Another important part of the pedagogy is team journal writing, in which students take turns responding to assigned readings, classroom discussions, and course assignments in a collaborative but anonymous format. The team journal notebooks are kept on reserve in the Native American Studies Library, where the notebooks are both accessible and secure. More importantly, students become acquainted with another community resource and are reminded again of the Native American presence on campus.

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We use a variety of multimedia tools that help students appreciate the vitality and authenticity of contemporary Native American life. The Museum of Anthropology on campus has worked with us in developing instructional exhibitions that relate to the literature students are reading. A display featuring a Kiowa pictographic calendar, for example, can shed new light on *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.[10] We challenge students to see the objects in the exhibitions as both past and potential Native American community resources and then to raise questions about the philosophy and morality of storing and displaying these items, many of which were acquired by the university through unethical or illegal activities. Students have responded to the exhibitions on many different levels; some excerpts from team journals include:

> The whole exhibit gave me a greater appreciation for the medicine/ceremony passages in the book [*Ceremony*[11]] and the reader.

> All the articles were beautiful (that word seems quite trite for describing their power). I have problems, though, viewing sacred articles in the Lowie Museum; I often wonder how Native Americans feel about displays like the ones we've seen and will continue to see.

> Even though I'm really glad that I have the chance to see such things, the whole museum thing is so stiff and formal and rather dead. I'm still a child, I guess, because I want to touch and smell and examine. . . . That frustrates me. . . . I found myself looking at the artifacts and wanting to go to a reservation, and see the items in their natural function. They were so out of

> context, sitting under those lights with those tags explaining everything. I want to see them being used: a baby wrapped in the blanket, a girl wearing one, a medicine man grinding sand and rock for his sand painting. I want to see it outside, in the dirt and air and with people. I'm glad I can see it at all, I should be thankful. But it left me wanting more.
>
> I'm really not sure what to think about all those objects behind the glass case. I'm trying to think about what it would be like for me to go to a museum 2000 yrs. from now and see all my belongings w/ numbers of them.
>
> [a drawing of two tubes of cherry Chapstick with the following caption:]
>
> 24. Wax used to prevent chapping of the lips.
>
> Hmmm . . . I don't know. I guess I'd feel a little strange, especially if the objects displayed were really personal.

We responded to students' concerns by discussing an alternative approach to material preservation which has been demonstrated at the Hoopa Tribal Museum in northern California, where cultural objects are maintained in a safe and respectful environment between the times they are used in ceremonies and community gatherings. The Hoopa approach is based on a "living culture philosophy" and is modeled after ancient traditions in which "family regalia and heirlooms are kept together under the care of a family 'curator' who maintains the materials in good repair, attends to the spiritual needs of the items as well, and brings the things out to dance during the ceremonies."[12]

Films and videos featuring contemporary Native Americans give students different perspectives on the literature. The Canadian films "Where the Spirit Lives," "Daughters of the Country," and "I Heard the Owl Call My Name" provide good historical and cultural background for many recent Native American novels. Gerald Vizenor's film "Harold of Orange" brings the Chippewa trickster into the contemporary period. The documentary "People of the Klamath River" surveys the struggles and survivals of contemporary California Indians. "Running on the Edge of the Rainbow" features entertaining and insightful conversations with storyteller Leslie Silko. These resources introduce students to individuals and communities outside the local area and help them appreciate the tremendous diversity among contemporary Native Americans.

Even assigned readings can help students appreciate the complexity of Native American identity in contemporary society. We have used books and articles featuring interviews, correspondence, and autobiographical essays by Native American writers, including Laura Coltelli's book *Winged Words,* as a way of meeting the persons behind the texts.[13] Students gain

insight on published authors' writing processes and are encouraged to reflect on their own approach and to see themselves as writers.

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We have incorporated Native American community resources into our Native American studies pedagogy because we believe it is one of the most effective ways to challenge students as they reflect on questions of identity and community. This approach encourages critical reading and engaged writing and leads to an integrative understanding of the learning process. It affirms the authenticity and validity of personal experience as it liberates the power of human imagination and creativity. Of course, as responsible educators, our ultimate objective is to live in a world which is more just, peaceful, and humane. We want the Andy Rooneys of the world to learn that Native Americans are an important and undeniable part of contemporary society, not tragic, anachronistic savages. And we want the Lionel Jameses of the world to have the freedom to tell the stories they want to tell, stories that all of us need to hear.

NOTES

1. Thomas King, *Medicine River* (Toronto, 1989), 170, 172–73.
2. Ibid., 175.
3. Andy Rooney, "Indians Seek a Role in Modern U.S.," *Sacramento Union,* 11 Mar. 1992. This column also appeared under the title "Team Mascot Names Are Not Tribes' Worst Problems," with a response by Suzan Shown Harjo, "Columnist Speaks from Ignorance, Needs to Unlearn," in *Lakota Times,* 25 Mar. 1992. Rooney responded to the controversy surrounding his misinformed comments by citing excerpts from letters in a later column, but he remained unconvinced of his errors; see "An Apology to Indians, Sort of," *Lakota Times,* 29 Apr. 1992.
4. Rayna Green, "The Indian in Popular American Culture," in *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 4: History of Indian-White Relations,* ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington, D.C., 1988), 587.
5. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978).
6. Ramona Wilson, "Spokane Museum" in *Dancing on the Rim of the World: An Anthology of Contemporary Northwest Native American Writing,* ed. Andrea Lerner (Tucson, Ariz., 1990), 242.
7. Preston J. Arrow-weed, "A Time of Decay" (unpublished manuscript, 1980). Also see Malcolm Margolin, "Preston Arrow-weed, Playwright," *News from Native California* 5 (Nov.–Jan. 1990/91): 18–21.

8. Louis Owens, *The Sharpest Sight* (Norman, Okla., 1992), 20.

9. See Malcolm Margolin, *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area* (Berkeley, 1978).

10. N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque, N. Mex., 1969); Alex and Martha Nicoloff, *A Chronicle of the Kiowa Indians (1832–1892)* (Pamphlet published by R. H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, n.d.).

11. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, 1977).

12. Lee Davis, "Locating the Live Museum," *News from Native California* 4 (Fall 1989): 7, 6.

13. Laura Coltelli, *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1990). Other useful resources include Gerald Vizenor, *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (Minneapolis, 1990); Anne Wright, ed., *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright* (St. Paul, Minn., 1986); and Charles L. Woodard, *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1989).