the changing profession

Organizing Native American and Indigenous Studies

ROBERT WARRIOR

Introduction

FOR ME, ENTERING THIS PROFESSION INVOLVED THE BROADER CONTEXT OF NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS STUDIES AS WELL AS NATIVE American literary studies. My scholarship, pedagogy, and professional connections have relied on a synergy between texts as Native authors have crafted them and the social, political, and experiential contexts from which those authors and their texts emerged. Though plenty of work in Native literary studies does not draw on the broader field of Native studies, my own approach has most often placed me firmly in the overlapping space between the two.

In a recent *PMLA* state-of-the-art essay, Shari Huhndorf detailed major currents in the scholarship of Native literary studies, including some of the ways that scholarship relates to Native studies more generally. Huhndorf ably argues that Native literary studies have been preoccupied for four decades with "connections between cultural production and anticolonial politics, the relation between Native American writing and other literatures, the contemporary significance of traditions, and the task of the critic" (1619). Showing how these preoccupations have produced a robust, if uneven, critical discourse on Native writing, she concludes by pointing out how much more complicated that discourse ought to be, especially in regard to international Indigenous realities and, most critically, the chronically underdeveloped issue of gender (1624–25).

Huhndorf acknowledges the extent to which these questions have arisen also across the wider interdiscipline of Native American studies. I want to add the perspective that not only are these questions critical, but so are the available spaces in which they can be asked. Since the spring of 2005, a group that I help lead has tried to change the professional terrain of scholarship in Native and Indigenous studies by creating a scholarly association for the field, and I want to address that effort and suggest why the time is ripe for such an organization to provide an intellectual space in which to address the questions Huhndorf and others are asking.

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I will illustrate the shifting intellectual terrain of this moment primarily through a consideration of *sovereignty* as a term of importance to Indigenous peoples.[1] But first I want to set the stage with an outline of the organizational work that is bringing large numbers of Indigenous studies scholars together.

A New Academic Association

We have held two meetings as part of the effort to create a new academic association for Native American and Indigenous studies, in May 2007, at the University of Oklahoma, and in April 2008, at the University of Georgia. While including sessions to discuss the business of forming a new association, these meetings have mainly provided an opportunity for those involved to share their research. We hoped to start with a minimum of 75 people and grow slowly, but over 300 came to Norman and nearly 450 to Athens. These scholars came from across the continental United States and from Hawai'i, Canada, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, India, Hong Kong, Germany, Spain, France, and Switzerland.

The organizational problem the attendees addressed has existed for a couple of generations. That is, Native studies and its counterparts in other parts of the Indigenous world have been around now for decades and continue to grow. Multiple generations of scholars work in the field, and many individual campuses have programs of various sorts and sizes in it. In spite of this growth, those in the field have had to rely on a cobbled-together combination of occasional conferences, groups within existing disciplinary associations, and a few journals.[2]

In 2005 I began wondering what might happen if a small group could convince their campus colleagues in Native studies to host annual meetings and move toward the sort of association that people had talked about for two generations. By the end of the year, this idea had grown to be a six-person steering committee and had won commitments from faculty colleagues on three campuses to serve as hosts of three annual meetings.

The members of the steering committee agreed that the association they sought to start would be scholarly, be interdisciplinary, be open to anyone who worked in the broadly construed field of Native and Indigenous studies, be governed by its members, have annual meetings that rotated among different hosts, and have a national committee that issued calls for papers for the annual meeting and took primary responsibility for the program. Soon the committee issued a call for papers for the first meeting, at the University of Oklahoma.

The meeting was a great success. Sessions were nearly all well attended. The range of the discussions was better than what had been possible in other venues. Beyond topics one might expect, such as Native literature, history, education, and law, the program included sessions on Indigenous feminisms, masculinities, mental health, intellectual history, and same-sex marriage.

An intellectual common cause was palpable throughout but perhaps most evident at a plenary session during which the steering committee presented its scholarly rationale to a room filled with over 250 participants. K. Tsianina Lomawaima led off by arguing that what brought us together was "a commitment to the fundamental concept of sovereignty; a privileging or centering of Native names, experiences, voices, and narratives; an inclusive orientation that favors multiple, complicating, diverse perspectives over a monolithic 'one size or story fits all' approach; a commitment to the health, well-being and vigor of life in Indian country; responsiveness to the central issues and concerns of Native nations; a dedication to transform the institutional structures of the dominant society, such as schools, colleges, and universities—however frustratingly slow and incremental that process can be."

Jean M. O'Brien's remarks focused on what it meant that so many of us in Norman

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were meeting for the first time. "What is for me out of whack is the seamless way that most of us read broadly across topic, region, time, place, and disciplinary perspective (to name but a few)—and the infrequency with which we come together as scholars. . . . Put most simply, how can it be that some of the most influential work that I read is produced by scholars I never have a real chance of running into at a regularly held scholarly meeting?" Later those gathered at a business meeting unanimously supported the steering committee's proposal to develop documents incorporating a new association and to offer them for discussion and potential adoption at the second meeting.[3]

One of the questions we asked in the call for the Athens meeting was, Who are we in Native American and Indigenous studies? We are historians, anthropologists, poets, education scholars, Indigenous-language teachers, linguists, novelists, religious studies scholars, and literary critics—a list anyone might expect. But we are also philosophers, psychologists, film scholars, geographers, sociologists, political scientists, rhetoricians, curators, scholars of social work, and specialists in African American, Chicana and Chicano, and Asian American studies. We are citizens of scores of Indigenous nations and peoples. In short, we are, collectively, the best argument for a new academic association. We are speaking to generational aspirations that are much larger than any one of us.

The Intellectual Challenge of an Indigenous World

Embracing a broader world of Indigenous studies is the new association's largest intellectual challenge. The idea of an Indigenous world has been articulated by some in Native American studies since its beginnings in the academy in the 1960s and 1970s. This is especially true of the idea of Native studies as a hemispheric enterprise.

There are, of course, tens of millions of Indigenous people in the world, many not connected directly to the anglophone regions that have usually been the focus of Native American studies even in its most global forms. Millions live in the Americas south of the United States. The Mayan world, which is in many ways the bridge between North and South America, has experienced important intellectual ferment as part of the political and social changes that have occurred in places like the Mexican state of Chiapas (the center of the Zapatista movement, which emerged in the 1990s) and Guatemala (in the midst of civil war for nearly all the second half of the twentieth century [Montejo]). Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and other nations have Indigenous political movements that play important roles in national politics. Bolivia, of course, in 2005 elected an Indigenous president, Evo Morales.

The political aspects of these Indigenous movements have drawn considerable attention from scholars, but the movements have also had significant literary and cultural components that provide a basis of comparison with those in the United States, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia. Language barriers have prevented comparisons between Indigenous American literature south and north of the Rio Grande, since few Native Americanists know enough Spanish to keep up with the discourses of Indigenous studies in the south. Perhaps as important, many of the literary and scholarly developments occurring around the Indigenous world feature work in Indigenous languages, which create even more formidable barriers.

The broader Indigenous world is not only something that crosses national borders or that is oceans away. Work in Afro-Native studies presents important challenges to established ways of teaching and learning Native studies, as does indigeneity as a category in Chicana/o and Latino/a studies (Miles; Miles and Holland; Cotera). The North American turn toward Indigenous studies, as such, is an opportunity to see a field bounded by something beyond treaties, federal recognition,

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and government-to-government relations. It also exists in the neglected histories of indigeneity in the Americas.

Sovereignty at the Center of Debate

Is Indigenous studies, then, unlimited in its scope? Does it include every possible example, including the minorities of China, the many tribal groups of India, and the various forms of indigeneity in Africa? The United Nations provides a definition of Indigenous peoples and a declaration of their rights, but is the academic field of Indigenous studies restricted by that definition and declaration?

Perhaps the answer to all these questions is yes, but I tend to proceed more phenomenologically by taking in specific examples as they enter my purview, a practice I call a North American version of Indigenous studies. If judged in terms of what it might possibly include, in other words, Indigenous studies is one of those things, like international law, that could mean anything. In fact, other fields have found ways to limit themselves, and I think Indigenous studies can as well. In response to this problem, I have been interested in developing an accretive sense of the field, in which things are added to related things.

The term *sovereignty* offers one way of seeing how this accretive, deliberative process works. Sovereignty has a long history not only as a central term in Native North America and other parts of the Indigenous world but also in Euro-Western political and theological discourses, where it arose and developed.

Those who work in tribal government and law have a working sense of tribal or aboriginal sovereignty and what powers and limitations it creates. That sense is typically bounded by a history of colonial jurisprudence that structures the way tribal or aboriginal power is understood. In such contexts, sovereignty has a function, and, not surprisingly, definitions of sovereignty that arise therein focus on function.

Native American studies scholars who use the term *sovereignty* give it a broad range of applications. Some have analyzed sovereignty as an instrument of governance in the Native and Indigenous world (Wilkins and Lomawaima). Many of the same scholars have likewise produced detailed accounts of the ways Euro-Western courts have decided the legal powers and limits of Native sovereignty (Wilkins; Williams). These accounts are extensions of the discourse on sovereignty that has developed in tribal and First Nations governments and similar contexts.

At the same time, over the past twenty years Native and Indigenous studies scholars have claimed sovereignty as a central category of analysis in literature (Womack), intellectual history (Warrior), film and visual culture (Singer; Raheja), composition studies (Lyons), gender studies (Smith), and other areas.

These differences in sovereignty discourse can be found in back-to-back essays by Joanne Barker and Taiaiake Alfred in Barker's volume *Sovereignty Matters*. Barker's defense of sovereignty and Alfred's critique of its use in *any* form illustrate what is at stake intellectually in creating a new scholarly organization in Native and Indigenous studies. I will also use brief examples from Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia to show how sovereignty is important there and helps create the intellectual ground on which professional development can occur.

Historical Semantics

Sovereignty, for all its complexity, has a fairly straightforward sense of relating to power. Most often it has been the answer to the question of where or with whom ultimate or supreme power lies in a place or relation. Until the latter part of the eighteenth century, the two most common bearers of sovereignty were the Christian deity and that deity's purported representative(s) on the earth. A monarch, in fact, is perhaps the archetypical

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symbol of sovereignty insofar as she or he exercises the divine right of kings and queens.

The etymologists behind *The Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrate how this sense of sovereignty crystallized only after centuries of permutations of *sovereign* in Romance languages. The word came to English from the Old French, and among the examples of sovereigns that the *OED* offers are plenty of kings, queens, and archbishops, but there are also lesser royals, Irish mayors, and husbands. God in heaven, a queen in her castle, a husband in his hovel can all be sovereigns, as, of course, can coins.

Sovereignty has gone from being a description of deific omnipotence and a fluid term describing relationships between people to a fairly rigid term that describes ultimate forms of power. *Sovereignty*, thus, became associated with the ideas that the Christian god delegates power to tyrants, that men in powdered wigs are best qualified to lead human affairs, and, perhaps most important, that political power can be distilled and be dispensed like coins.

How Sovereignty Matters

Given this history, it's a fair question to ask how sovereignty came to be "a particularly valued term within indigenous discourses to signify a multiplicity of legal and social rights to political, economic, and cultural self-determination" (Barker, "For Whom" 1). The answer comes from what occurred vis-à-vis sovereignty in the later modern period. Political revolutions transformed sovereignty from something exercised by monarchs to an expression of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy. Barker argues that modern democratic revolutions helped create the split way of thinking about sovereignty. On the one hand, she argues, modern nations expressed their sovereignty in relation to other states through the law of nations (2). On the other hand, nations are collectivities of individual citizens who have relationships to each other within states.

With neither church nor monarch to mediate a deific power on earth, modern democracies increasingly claimed that their power derived from the people who made them up. Such popular sovereignty is supposed to be inherent in the people themselves. It finds expression in and "emanates from the unique identity and culture of peoples" (3). An inherent right like a purported natural law is a truth claim that requires a leap of faith. All nations or peoples do not necessarily have to take the same leap, but they do need to recognize one another's claims. The primary vehicles for such claims and recognition have been constitutions and treaties, both of which have a long history among modern Indigenous people, especially those in the anglophone world (with some important exceptions).

"This is remarkable," Barker notes, "given the ideological force of theories of civilization and Christian theology that worked against the acknowledgment that indigenous peoples possessed any such rights on the grounds that they lacked proper civility or belief in God" (5–6). In other words, Indigenous peoples in the United States, Canada, and other settler nations managed to win political recognition in spite of the national powers' best efforts to amalgamate or even exterminate them.

Alfred's Critique of Sovereignty

Taiaiake Alfred disagrees; his "Sovereignty" follows Barker's introduction to *Sovereignty Matters*. The essay, an invited follow-up to Alfred's critique of sovereignty in *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, at times seems sanctimonious or smug (as when he argues against a position by saying that his point of view is held by "those who think more deeply" [43]), but he has provided Native and Indigenous studies with a sense of engagement that has too often been missing, especially among those trained in the social sciences.

Alfred finds sovereignty so tangled up in Euro-Western dynamics that its use in

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Indigenous discourses on governance cannot be justified. To apply it there, he asserts, is to fall into the same sort of assertions of dominion that have typified non-Native discourses on sovereignty for centuries. As he says, "Sovereignty itself implies a set of values and objectives that put it in direct opposition to the values and objectives found in most traditional indigenous philosophies" ("Sovereignty" 43). For Alfred, sovereignty talk creates tendencies at odds with traditional Indigenous ways of governance that focus on balance and respect rather than the creation of hegemonic institutions that maintain boundaries between people and their property (48). Alfred argues that it is difficult, if not impossible, to qualify and modify sovereignty and other Euro-Western terms so that they permit Indigenous philosophical concepts to influence contemporary Native governance.

Instead, Alfred avers, two things emerge from the embrace of sovereignty by those who seek redevelopment of Native or Indigenous politics. First, Indigenous peoples who seek states' recognition legitimate the authority that oppresses them. Second, by continuing to support sovereignty, Indigenous peoples reinforce the power and privilege that some Natives enjoy at the expense of others. Alfred writes, "The core problem for both activists and scholars revolves around the fact that the colonial system itself has become embedded within indigenous societies" (41). Thus, according to Alfred, no matter how many ways Indigenous peoples redefine sovereignty to reflect their values, the basic preoccupation with creating hegemonic regimes of power will resurface. Alfred suggests that the challenge is not to redefine sovereignty but "to de-think the concept . . . and replace it with a notion of power that has at its root a more appropriate premise" (47).

Sovereignty and the Power of Words

Barker responds to this critique. In contrast to Alfred's concern that sovereignty talk leads to Indigenous legitimation of colonizing states and entrenchment of corrupt forms of Indigenous power, Barker argues that using sovereignty protects Indigenous peoples from results that can be just as disastrous. She argues that remaining committed to sovereignty allows Indigenous peoples to insist that the treaties colonizing powers sign and the sovereignty they claim to recognize have real force in spite of histories that indicate otherwise. More important, continued insistence on sovereignty opposes "beneficiarism," which makes Indigenous peoples first dependents of colonial states, then clients in a welfare system, then racialized minorities rather than subjects of settler colonialism in their own homelands.

As much as Alfred cautions against the danger of standing behind what he sees as the false protection of Indigenous sovereignty, Barker sees a greater danger in stepping away from that protection only to become welfare recipients undifferentiated from others in a global system of economic exploitation and poverty. She writes, "To the extent that the nation-state can maintain that indigenous peoples are nothing but welfare recipients under its trust, the very notion that indigenous peoples are members of sovereign political collectivities is made incomprehensible." She makes this even more succinct: "The erasure of the sovereign is the racialization of the 'Indian'" (17). To be clear, Alfred never mentions race, but for Barker it is part of the basic problem he fails to confront: in a racialized world, can Indigenous peoples risk ignoring the effect of programs and policies that structure and enforce their racialization?

Who Is Right?

Alfred and Barker describe critical perspectives on sovereignty. Alfred reminds us how deeply this term is inflected by notions of state power and by the risk of replicating the most corrupt forms of tribal government.

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Barker demonstrates that dethinking sovereignty may be naive in its own way, that the recognition of sovereignty may contain protections whose erasure would be just as risky as the worst-case scenario Alfred presents.

While I admire and appreciate Alfred's work and the rare combination of critical intelligence, community engagement, and passion he brings to Native studies, Barker's introduction takes up two issues that make it more compelling. First, Barker evinces a stronger sense than Alfred that "[t]he discursive proliferation of sovereignty must be understood in its historical context" (20). Alfred seems to agree in principle, though his cautionary argument grants words tremendous power to shape our world without his acknowledging that how people use words can give them new shapes. Barker, on the other hand, is clear: "There is no fixed meaning for what *sovereignty* is—what it means by definition, what it implies in public debate, or how it has been conceptualized in international, national, or indigenous law. Sovereignty—and its related histories, perspectives, and identities—is embedded within the specific social relations in which it is invoked and given meaning" (21). I want to hold on to Alfred's caution while understanding that sovereignty continues to be powerful because of its potential as much as its reality.

Even more than this view of the potential of language, I am compelled by Barker's commitment to the intellectual abilities of Indigenous peoples. Throughout her introduction, she is less interested in prescribing ideas than in understanding the ways in which Indigenous people around the globe have articulated their realities into international discourses on politics, law, and justice. Alfred seeks to change the tide while Barker is intent on figuring out the extent to which it is possible to ride the tide and end up where one wants to land. Perhaps that is why she is able to say at the end of her essay, "Sovereignty carries the awful stench of colonialism. It is incomplete, inaccurate, and troubled. But it has also been rearticulated to mean entirely different things by indigenous peoples" (26).

Sovereignty in an Indigenous World

By way of summing up this discussion and how it illustrates what is happening in Native and Indigenous studies, I offer a brief discussion of sovereignty in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Both of these situations involve long and complex histories that can give us perspective on how we talk about it in North America.

Aotearoa provides perhaps the most intriguing case of a treaty-based Indigenous sovereignty claim. In 1840, over five hundred Maori chiefs met with representatives of the British crown and signed the Treaty of Waitangi. The treaty is a mere three articles of one paragraph each and is written in English and Maori. Article 1, at least in the English version, states clearly that the Maori were conveying sovereignty to the British. Article 2, however, can be read as a clear statement that the chiefs who signed it were reserving all previously held powers to themselves, and this is especially true of the Maori version (where such powers are referred to as *te tino rangatiratanga* [Maaka and Fleuras 98]).

While these differing meanings invite opposing interpretations, Roger Maaka and Augie Fleuras argue that an interpretation embracing the bilingual treaty's contradictions yields the most profound meanings. History is difficult to reduce to a scripted text; instead, "words rarely produce results and it is obvious that a clash of interests was inevitable; the terms used in the Treaty lacked a specificity of meaning, were context dependent and situation specific, reflected fundamentally different translations, proved unenforceable and lacked operational validity" (98).

Maaka and Fleuras provide a detailed analysis of how the Treaty of Waitanga has come to typify the situation in Aotearoa. Both

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sovereignty and *tino rangatiratanga* have created new social conditions for Maori-Pakeha (or white) relations. Maaka and Fleuras hope that ongoing political processes will lead to "debates over constitutional change, in part . . . creating a new post-colonial social contract in which the colonizer and colonized can live together differently in a principled manner" (153).

Australia contrasts significantly with Aotearoa. As Indigenous peoples, Maoris and Aboriginals have dissimilar relations to the modern states that colonized them. Instead of a bilingual treaty guaranteeing the rights of chiefs, Aboriginal people in Australia have no treaty and next to no discrete political rights. In spite of these differences, sovereignty is a central category in Australian Indigenous discourse.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a leading Aboriginal scholar, titled her recent collection of essays *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*. A remarkable volume in many ways, *Sovereign Subjects* lays out legal, literary, historical, and policy-based ways of understanding Indigenous sovereignty in Australia. If in Aotearoa sovereignty is backed by a clear treaty and other guarantees, in Australia Indigenous sovereignty lacks clear status within the state.

It is compelling that the Aboriginal scholars in Moreton-Robinson's volume find a sense of strength in their different assertions of sovereignty. Moreton-Robinson, who names Australian sovereignty white and patriarchal, makes a strong case that Aboriginals who hold on to their perspective on sovereignty undermine, rather than legitimate, state power: "our presence cannot serve the legitimacy of patriarchal white sovereignty because we are the source of its insecurity" ("Writing" 99).

In the Australian context, devoid of settled land claims, the Aboriginal body itself becomes the location of sovereignty discourse (hence the name *Sovereign Subjects*). Philip Morrissey describes "Aboriginal people who are still around and whose corporeality bears witness to an earlier sovereignty" (66). For Tracey Bunda, producing literature from Aboriginal bodies is part of such corporeality, and "writing by Indigenous people is thus a sovereign act" (75). This corporeal notion of sovereignty is delineated on the striking cover of the book, which features an Aboriginal woman draped from shoulders to toes in the Aboriginal land rights flag, as if to signify that the Indigenous body—as an extension of the land itself and as having rights in the liberal modern state—is the surest and last link to that older sovereignty.

For all these differences, Australian Indigenous sovereignty discourse shares important similarities with what is happening in North America. As Morrissey argues, "In contemporary Australia, there is a divergence between sovereignty manifested as a corporeal fact—that is, as embodied by Aboriginals in a non-verbalised concordant manner—and sovereignty enunciated as a political strategy, which reflects the interests of diverse strata and collectivities in Aboriginal society" (73). We in North America wrestle over much the same split, though the positions in Australia are more starkly staked out.

Conclusion

If successful, a new scholarly association for Native American and Indigenous studies will provide a forum in which debates and exchanges over terms like *sovereignty* can be sustained. Disagreement and disputation should be part of any scholarly endeavor, and the recent effort to launch a new association must eventually be judged as much by how often its members engage in sharp exchanges over conflicting ideas as by how the members find synergy in like-mindedness. Success will be a matter not only of finding common ground but of finding it through high-quality wrangling over ideas.

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Notes

1. A version of the sections on sovereignty in this essay was part of my contribution to a conference, Keywords in Native American Studies, held at the University of Michigan in January 2008. I want to thank Andrea Smith, Philip Deloria, Gregory Dowd, Margaret Noori, and other organizers and participants for their role in the development of these ideas.

2. Native American studies has three journals that publish across its interdisciplinary terrain, *American Indian Quarterly*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *Wicazo Sa Review*. An earlier effort to create an association in the field began informally in the late 1980s as American Indian and Alaska Native Professoriate (AIANP). That group, now called the Indigenous Professors Association, focuses on organizing Native professors, not Native studies scholars. The American Indian Studies Association, which grew out of the AIANP and brought together directors of Native studies programs, is an informally organized group of individual Native studies scholars and is based at Arizona State University. Even though the recent effort I have been involved in has a different agenda—the formal creation of a scholarly association governed by its members—leaders of both of these other groups were invited to join our steering committee. None elected to participate.

3. At the Athens business meeting, we adopted a constitution and bylaws and elected a nominations committee to put together a ballot of candidates to serve as officers in the new association. If all goes according to plan, those leaders will be elected in the spring of 2009 and will take the reins of the organization at the third scheduled meeting, to be held in Minneapolis at the University of Minnesota in May 2009.

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