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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

CONNECTIONS IN PRACTICE

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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Contact Us

Open Rivers | Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054

Fax: (612) 625-8583

E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu

Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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FEATURE

CONNECTING ENVIRONMENT, PLACE, AND COMMUNITY

By Jennifer Gunn, Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Becca Gercken,
Christine Baeumler, and Vicente M. Diaz

“Connections in Practice” is an appropriate theme for this issue of *Open Rivers* highlighting the four years’ work, since 2019, of the Humanities-led Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative. This University of Minnesota initiative is funded, in part, by

a \$1.1M grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (IAS 2019). Professor Jennifer Gunn, then Director of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), has led the grant project throughout, with assistance from IAS staff, including Managing Director Susannah Smith and Project Manager



*Approaching sundown at the Sax-Zim Bog in northern Minnesota, USA.
Image courtesy of Christine Baeumler.*

and *Open Rivers* Editor Laurie Moberg. Faculty leaders from the three participating University of Minnesota (UMN) campuses are named below, in sections focusing on each campus's initiative.

The goals of the Mellon Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative (MESPAC) all have been about connection: connecting Indigenous ways of knowing and practices of environmental stewardship with the humanities; connecting the humanities with pressing environmental justice concerns; connecting three University of Minnesota (UMN) campuses with each other and with Indigenous communities; connecting activism and experiential practice with pedagogy; and connecting

all of these to decolonization and institutional transformation of the university.

Four years ago, a group of UMN faculty started with a question: "What might the impact be if a major research university were to center Indigenous methodologies and approaches in humanities scholarship?" Could we enlarge upon traditional Euro-American humanities scholarship and pedagogy by integrating Indigenous epistemologies and including diverse knowledge bases? We conceived this as a collaborative effort linking the three University of Minnesota campuses that have American Indian/Native American and Indigenous Studies departments—Morris, Duluth, and the Twin Cities—with



The Indigenous Women's Water Sisterhood conducted a water and ground breaking ceremony for an outdoor classroom on the Waabizheshikana (Western Waterfront) Trail on the St. Louis River. Image courtesy of University of Minnesota Duluth.

regional Indigenous communities already dealing with climate change and environmental injustices who could shape our concerns and priorities and share guidance and knowledge. We saw the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing and

research practices informed by the epistemologies and lifeways of Indigenous peoples as critical to advancing research and planting seeds of real institutional transformation. It was also vital for Native and other underrepresented students to



This map illustrates some of the significant Minnesota locations where work occurred as a part of the MESPAC grant.

see their knowledge bases and worldviews reflected in their classrooms and in the curriculum.

As the grant proposal came together in 2019, we focused on the idea of creating a core group—a cohort composed of faculty, staff, graduate students, and community members—across the state of Minnesota that would provide the broad imagination for this project, to be translated and implemented through the leadership of Native faculty and allies on the University of Minnesota’s Morris, Duluth, and Twin Cities campuses. The cohort would be established initially from existing relationships faculty and staff had with community partners engaged in environmental and Indigenous sovereignty issues, concerns,

and activism. We understood that relationship building takes time and trust; to foster this, we envisioned an in-person summer institute for the cohort to come together to meet each other, to hear from Native scholars and community members, to read and discuss together, and to make plans for practical collaboration over the coming years.

And then came COVID-19. A project that was designed to bring people together across campuses and communities around the state and to build relationships in person was forced to shift to Zoom and more locally focused collaborations. Building trust among an expanded network remained a goal, but it took a backseat to relying on



An earthlodge under construction at the Zani Otunwe site. Image courtesy of Waziyatawin.

existing relationships to keep moving. Additional responsibilities, family caregiving, and fatigue imposed by the pandemic and rapidly evolving changes stretched all the participants very thin. We learned that our design for creating equity among participants didn't address the issues involved in adding new work without providing new time to accomplish it. Still, having to rethink our activities also had some benefits: among others, Zoom reading groups and programming could reach more geographically dispersed community members than in-person activities, and, in reconfiguring, we were able to create more significant forms of professional development and leadership roles for graduate students—our emerging humanities leaders. The narratives from the leaders on the Morris, Duluth, and Twin Cities campuses that follow this overview provide more detail about how each campus pursued their distinctive goals within the initiative.

At our first full meeting of the cohort, we debated language: environmental stewardship versus environmental (in)justice, and what words implied about where responsibility lies for caring for all our relatives. Environmental relations and concern about climate change undergirded almost all our projects in some form: the formation and work of the Indigenous Women's Water Sisterhood around the St. Louis River watershed in Duluth; work by students to help establish traditional Dakota permaculture at the Makoce Ikikcupi reparative justice site; environmental storytelling and food sovereignty in three Humanities Futures Lab courses; exploring water and navigation traditions, ecological knowledge, and foodways in experiential learning; and representations of these and other initiatives in issues of *Open Rivers*.

Place—ties to the land and the natural world—grounded much of this work. For some projects, it was obvious, like the land recovery/restoration of Makoce Ikikcupi; the water work in Duluth and along the Mississippi; the exploration of

bogs; and the international collaboration among graduate students and faculty to develop models for ethical, decolonized arts and place-based research. Some more closely connected Indigeneity to our own academic places, such as recognizing that an important aspect of decolonizing the Morris campus is acknowledging and processing the historical trauma of Morris as a former boarding school. Another significant effort has been establishing a Great Lakes Summer Institute for Global Indigenities to expand regional networks for community engagement among both Native American and Indigenous Studies scholars and Indigenous communities.

While the pandemic posed obstacles to building community and trust through in-person interactions, virtual activities offered wider opportunities for engagement in some cases. An early online workshop on activism in pedagogy with professors Nick Estes (citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Oceti Sakowin Oyate) and Jaskiran Dhillon, the co-authors of *Standing with Standing Rock* (2019), was attended by faculty, students, and community members even beyond the state and established itself as one guide for Indigenizing the curriculum. In collaboration with other campus units such as the Institute on the Environment, we held a series of virtual book groups involving community members from across the state doing collective reading and attending author sessions with Martin Case on *The Relentless Business of Treaties* (2018); Christopher J. Pexa on *Translated Nation: Rewriting the Dakota Oyate* (2019); and Diane Wilson on *The Seed Keeper* (2021). Attendees experienced respectful listening, learning directly from Dakota elders invited by Chris Pexa to his author session. Morris's successful decolonization discussion process was shared through the Twin Cities' Office for Public Engagement's monthly Decolonization and Community-Engaged Scholarship roundtable, which reaches a broad community and campus audience. The collaborative "Thinking Spatially: Indigenous Mapping"

symposium was livestreamed to the North American Cartographic Information Society's annual conference, as well as to campus partners and the public.

At its core, our goals for the MESPAC initiative were to advance institutional transformation through collaborative efforts and—to cite the original grant proposal—“to remake the humanities and prepare a new generation of humanities scholars to engage environmental issues by integrating diverse ways of knowing and the participation of the people impacted by these issues” (IAS 2019). Decolonization of the academy, that is, critiquing and changing the legacies of colonialism in the content and structures of higher education and incorporating previously excluded voices and knowledge, is not abstract; it must be embedded in our daily practices, as the Morris listening sessions and roundtables demonstrated.

UMN Duluth—Water Is Life

Faculty leaders: Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Associate Professor, Department of Education and Ruth A. Meyers Center for Indigenous Education; and Wendy F. Todd, Assistant Professor, Departments of American Indian Studies and Earth and Environmental Sciences.

A major focus of UMN Duluth's effort in the MESPAC initiative was development of the Indigenous Women's Water Sisterhood (IWWS), bringing into conversation Indigenous women from around the world who care and speak for water and ceremony. The project grew out of research by Associate Professor Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould (Grand Traverse Band Odawa/Ojibwe), focusing on Indigenous women, their traditions and work to protect their water. Working with Professor Gould on IWWS are UMD faculty Wendy F. Todd (Haida) and Rachael King-Siert, now Red Lake Nation College Minneapolis Site Coordinator (Red Lake Ojibwe Dine); Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Water Resource Technician Arianna Northbird (Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe); City of Duluth Sustainability Officer Mindy Granley; and

At the culminating Place and Relations Capstone, one of the panelists reminded us that we live on Indigenous land and it is incumbent on us all to learn about Indigenous ways of knowing to decolonize our minds. Inclusion is not token acknowledgment—it means having non-native people understand the significance of Indigenous worldviews and learn how to work with Indigenous people and communities. On the same panel, Gavin Zempel, a Morris undergraduate, noted that “the Humanities Futures classes take other topics [not just Native studies] and indigenize it, so it's great to learn it that way....Indigenizing different topics.”

In the following segments, faculty leaders from the three campuses discuss highlights of their MESPAC work, including some of the material benefits of their particular projects.

Red Lake Ojibwe Elder and former Tribal College President Renee Gurneau (Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians).

The IWWS initiative recognizes that the world is out of balance, and that water—the lifeblood of Mother Earth—is in trouble. Only one percent of the world's water is potable, yet it has to supply eight billion people and all beings that rely on fresh water to live. An ongoing vision of IWWS is to engage youth, since it will be their world. Indigenous prophecies always look ahead seven generations; the work we do now will impact seven generations into the future—not only for Indigenous people, but for all. IWWS has created a curriculum for children, written both in Ojibwe, “Nibi Gizaagi'igoo,” and in English, “Water We Love You.” The beautifully illustrated story is

about a “nibi walk,” led by Sharon Day (Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe), along St. Louis River to Lake Superior, asking for healing of the river. In 2022, IWWS co-sponsored a “Nibi Gizaagi’igoo” Earth Day with Fond du Lac Community College, facilitated by Arianna Northbird. The event, repeated in 2023, focuses on highlighting student environmental research and connecting those students with scholars working in the field. In addition, IWWS worked with the City of Duluth on a water and groundbreaking ceremony on April 18, 2023 for an outdoor classroom on the Waabizheshikana (Western Waterfront) Trail on St. Louis River. As Professor Gould describes it, “This is letting Earth and water know we wish to collaborate with them going forward. We want to be in positive relation with them and all the

beings that live in that place....People can use this space to learn about, pray for, and protect the water. Hopefully wherever they travel or reside, they will take this awareness to work, educate, and defend their own watersheds.” The City will erect Ojibwe signage, designed in cooperation with IWWS.

COVID-19 had an impact on the work at UMD. We were hoping to do more face-to-face work initially, but we changed course. We started with ceremony to center us, worked on planning with the City of Duluth, and developed the children’s book. We worked on the website, which will carry us forward from the MESPAC grant to keep people posted on future work. Some of the Sisterhood have moved on. They were there for



In April 2023, IWWS worked with the City of Duluth on a water and groundbreaking ceremony for an outdoor classroom on the Waabizheshikana Trail on the St. Louis River. Image courtesy of University of Minnesota Duluth.

the founding, and now we will bring others in to help do the work. Professor Gould described the concept of “ogimakwe, the person foremost for the job, not seen as a permanent leader. Not seeing it that way, we hope someone else will step up. I’m not concerned about the work continuing. In terms of COVID, it helped us to center our thinking about the health of the earth and water, [and what happens when] we don’t pay attention to instructions given to us to live in good relationship all of creation.”

The grant enabled the establishment of IWWS; we created cohorts with small resources that allowed us to do the work. The grant provided resources and a team with various gifts to support the work. Beyond the life of the grant, the IWWS will continue to work with Indigenous women all over the world, and anybody who is doing water protection work, whether they are scientists, artists, activists, educators, or others. We want everybody to feel they have a part in this work; we all need this for our survival.



*Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Arianna Northbird, Sharon Day, and Mindy Granley on the day of the water and groundbreaking ceremony.
Image courtesy of University of Minnesota Duluth.*

Indigenous women are important to the leadership of this work, but we need everyone, the whole spectrum of gender that is representative of the life of the planet. Traditionally, everyone had an important place in our communities.

Regarding reach and impact, the outreach focuses on the Great Lakes, in the Odawa community in Michigan, and throughout Minnesota, with both Anishinaabe and Dakota communities. With publication of the children's book and curriculum, we believe it will be far reaching. Gould has just published an article in an education studies journal on COVID and White Supremacy. Her

forthcoming book, *Rematriating Her Lifeblood, Decolonizing Our Waters to Restore the Balance*, will include this research, Indigenous women's stories, and interviews.

Our focus at UMN Duluth has been on Indigenous work and rematriating water governance. When we're allowed to care for the natural world, we do a pretty good job. Six percent of people in the world are Indigenous; we hold twenty percent of the land and eighty percent of biodiversity of the planet. It would be advantageous, not only for us, but for the world, to support us.

UMN Morris—A Decolonizing and Indigenizing Cohort: One Model to Work for Change

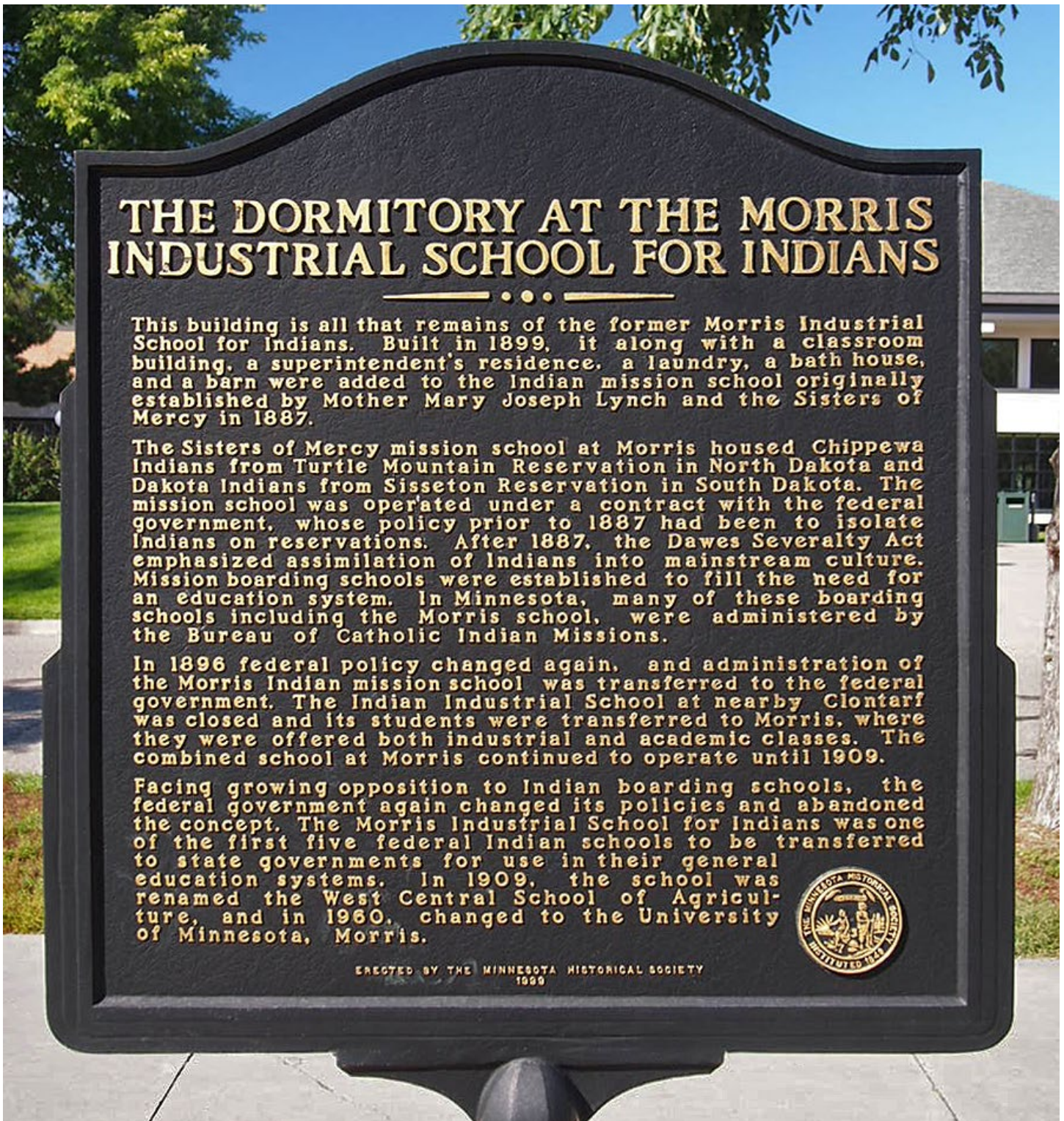
Faculty Leaders: Becca Gercken, Associate Professor of English and Native American and Indigenous Studies; and Kevin Whalen, Associate Professor of History and Native American and Indigenous Studies.

The humanities-led MESPAC Initiative created rich opportunities for institutional change at UMN Morris. The initiative had three main trajectories: curriculum development (integrating Indigenous ways of knowing into environmental education with an emphasis on humanities education and experiential work), community-engaged activism to center Indigenous epistemologies and challenges, and institutional change. As the Morris team was deciding on its central project, it was clear, given the history of the Morris campus and its current demographics, that institutional change was the most pressing—and asked for—need.

For readers unfamiliar with the University of Minnesota Morris, our campus is on the site of

a former Indigenous Residential School. Open from 1887-1909, it was first run by the Sisters of Mercy and then by the federal government. Because of this history, we have a tuition waiver for indigenous people from the United States and Canada, and currently 32 percent of our student population is indigenous. Most are Anishinaabe and Dakota, but we regularly have students from more than 50 nations. We offer a Native American and Indigenous Studies major and minor and are a Native American Serving Non-Tribal Institution.

With the goal of creating a more equitable, inclusive, and culturally competent campus community, the Morris MESPAC team—which also included Clement Loo, Assistant Professor



This plaque is in front of the building that was the dormitory building at the Morris Indigenous Residential School. Image via Gobonobo, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

of Environmental Studies and the Student Success Coordinator for Equity, Diversity, and Intercultural Programs; Simón Franco, Assistant Director of Student Activities, Conferences and Events; Adam Coon, Associate Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies; and Erin Kiyukanpi, recent Morris graduate—offered a yearlong, six-part series devoted to decolonizing and Indigenizing curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular work. Through a series of listening sessions and roundtables, the cohort leads provided resources and support for faculty and staff interested in expanding their knowledge of indigenous epistemologies and lifeways in

order to create change on campus. By centering Indigenous epistemologies and other ways of knowing, we worked to transform how our campus community thinks about relationships with the planet and each other.

A central point of the MESPAC initiative is that content alone does not create change; methods must change as well and thus our cohort approach reflected indigenous values. Workshops 1 and 4 were listening sessions, with the remaining sessions designed to address the cohort's interests, concerns, and challenges as determined by the listening sessions.



*Dormitory at the former Indigenous Residential School in Morris, Minnesota on the University of Minnesota campus, the last remaining building from that era.
Image via Gobonobo, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Morris MESPAC Workshops

1. Introduction and Listening Session
2. Indigenous Theory Reading Discussion
3. Decolonizing Your Classroom and Office
4. Reflection: Takeaways and Resources
5. Building Capacity Reading Discussion
6. Moving Forward and Setting Benchmarks

While it is tempting to share the details of each session, we have instead chosen to highlight those that our cohort described as most transformative. In Session 1, we asked participants to identify areas in which they needed more information and support, and the overwhelming response was readings that would inform a conversation about Indigenous methodologies and ways of knowing and how those methods and ways of knowing could help us reimagine our work as a campus community. Based on the cohort's input, we chose excerpts from Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony* (2008) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson's essay "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm" (2017) for Session 2. Both of these readings focus on the role of relationality in Indigenous research. We talked about applying this idea in the classroom and more broadly in terms of our co-curricular and extra-curricular work; we also talked about emphasizing the responsibilities we have to members of our community, with community imagined in broad terms from classroom to campus to beyond campus. Our core question for this workshop was "how might we approach our work differently if we think of our students, colleagues, and community partners as relatives?"

Our third session, *Decolonizing your Classroom and Office*, built on our previous conversation about relationality and developing a sense of personal responsibility and accountability in

our work to consider how we might transform our spaces and approaches. In this session we began by tackling academic practices that, while grounded in an effort to diversify the academy, often fall short of their goals and in fact may inhibit institutional change.

For example, we are not actually diversifying the university or its population—student, faculty, or staff—if we require codeswitching. We are merely changing demographics. True change can only occur if the institution adapts rather than demanding that historically underrepresented people assimilate. The same is true with our curricula. It is not enough to change content. We also have to change how we approach content.

In this session we also grappled with language that sounds inclusive but may have the effect of exclusion. For example, language such as "I don't see color" or "in my classroom (or lab or office) everyone is equal"—risks erasing the real lived differences of people of color and other historically marginalized persons. They do not stop being Indigenous—or African American or queer or non-binary—because they are in your space.

We talked about how cultural differences could impact how faculty and staff respond to students and how students engage with faculty and staff. As part of the official excused absence policy for family illness or bereavement, our students are asked to provide evidence of the illness or loss. However, in many Native cultures it is problematic and even dangerous to speak about illness and/or death. Thus it can be complicated for students to share reasons for their absences or why they are behind in class. We worked with cohort members to draft syllabus and office protocol language that would signal to students an awareness of these cultural boundaries.

The cohort discussed strategies to create a culturally informed sense of inclusion for Indigenous

students on our campus. One easy way to make change is to work in a circle if possible; have students engage with each other face to face. We also talked about bringing food to share or having food in your office. Food is a sign of welcome and community. We encouraged cohort members to have snacks and water available for visitors and to feed their class or staff to help build community if they had the means to do so.

The inaugural University of Minnesota Morris cohort included 25 members from each of our divisions; 11 of our departments; and at least 6 of our offices, including Admissions, Financial Aid, Residential Life, and Career Services. We have had a positive response from the cohort and, at their request, have continued on-going pop-up sessions and plans for additional workshops. Rachel Johnson, Associate Professor of Biology and Math and Science Division Chair, characterized her cohort experience as follows:

Participating in the decolonizing and Indigenizing series was a transformative experience for me. I learned about how the methodology that I'm using in my teaching can have a huge impact on my students and their learning experience in my classroom. I've restructured how I teach Molecular Biology to incorporate a lot more flexibility and transparency into the class. I also have students make connections between what we're learning in class and issues that impact current events or their day-to-day lives.

If you find yourself interested in creating institutional change, consider the following questions that we asked of our cohort in the early stages of our work together:

- How often do your historically underrepresented students see people that look like them in the front of their classroom? In campus offices?
- How much of their histories, their stories, their lifeways, are reflected in the core curriculum?
- When and where do they see their expressive cultures and their values in the campus's physical places?
- When they hear "we" and "our" statements, how likely are they to feel included? How likely is it that they share the culture and experience being referenced?

These questions, while specific to the Morris campus and its population, could easily be adapted to anything from a K-12 learning environment to a corporate office.

Because of the history and location of the University of Minnesota Morris, it made sense for us to focus on Indigenous epistemologies and lifeways, but we believe this model could be useful to any campus, workplace, or community in terms of fostering a conversation about decolonization. It can also be easily adapted to reflect the demographics of your institution, place of work, or neighborhood. What sort of conversations might be needed to help all community members feel as if they belong on your campus? In your classroom? In your office? In your place of business? We hope that this model from the Morris MESPAC leadership team might help others with that work.

UMN Twin Cities

Faculty leaders: Christine Baeumler, Professor and Chair, Department of Art; Čhaŋtémaza Neil McKay, Senior Teaching Specialist, Department of American Indian Studies; and Vicente M. Diaz, Professor and Chair, Department of American Indian Studies.

Over the course of MESPAC, the Twin Cities campus team carried out a number of initiatives and projects in collaboration with other campus and community organizations. For example, faculty lead Čhaŋtémaza (Neil McKay) and Monica Siems McKay, Assistant Director of the Center for Community-Engaged Learning, led discussions on land acknowledgments and reparations for the University's Office for Public Engagement,

ultimately resulting in the December, 2020 *Open Rivers* article "Where We Stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta Treaty Lands." This article is one of the most viewed articles in the journal, so we have reprinted it in this issue[1].

The accounts below address initiatives related to courses and some research and extracurricular projects carried out as part of MESPAC.

Reparative Justice Project

In one initiative, led by Professor Vicente M. Diaz, faculty and students spent three years building kinship with the Dakota non-profit organization, Makoce Ikikcupi. Cohort member Waziyatawin, Dakota scholar and activist, is the executive director of the reparative justice project that combines land-back, food sovereignty, and restoring traditional Dakota ways. Makoce Ikikcupi centers activities in Zani Otunwe, a 21-acre village of traditional residential lodges, permaculture gardens, and ceremonial sites. Before the pandemic, and definitely thwarted during the height of COVID, Diaz and UMN cohort and community leaders, including

Čhaŋtémaza, and HolyElk Lafferty, James Rock, and Roxanne Gould (members of the Makoce Ikikcupi Governing Council), led undergraduate and graduate students, Twin Cities community members, and UMN faculty participants to establish good relations with, and at, Zani Otunwe. We provided hands-on labor and assistance in land clearing, planting, and weeding, and generally assisted in any work that needed to be done. Students also used their artistic talents and organizing skills by assisting in web design and other media and lobbying needs, producing zines, and other forms of experiential learning.

Graduate Leadership Fellows

Under Diaz' supervision, MESPAC funds were reprogrammed to create a team of graduate student leaders to assist in the Minnesota hosting of the 2023 Summer Institute for Global Indigeneities (SIGI), to be held June 10–15, 2023 on the UMN Twin Cities campus, and to help vision, propose, and begin to fundraise for the creation of a permanent Native Great Lakes–themed institute to include Big Ten and other regional institutions in

summer 2024. The Minnesota SIGI was modeled after the annual SIGI held at the University of Washington Seattle, which is an intensive week-long graduate student professional and intellectual institute that brings together Ph.D. students and faculty from universities that offer comparative Native studies. They hold workshops and engaged activities on the intellectual and institutional challenges of Global Indigenous



Many hands make light work at Zani Otunwe. Governing council member Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould is shown here stripping bark from the many logs used in earthlodge building. Image courtesy of Waziyatawin.

studies, providing epistemological and professional strategies for successfully completing and disseminating research projects not always legible to conventional academic disciplines. Hosting SIGI 2023 will introduce the model to

the University of Minnesota and Big Ten faculty, and Indigenous community partners, allowing us to customize and host a Native Great Lakes/ Mississippi River regional version in 2024, and in the future.

Decolonizing Place-based Arts Research

In spring 2021, Professor Christine Baeumler collaborated with IAS fellow, Professor Mary Modeen (Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design [DJCAD], University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland), on an international symposium, *Decolonising Place-based Arts Research*, with five Ph.D. students from DJCAD, and four University of Minnesota students (two

doctoral students from the Departments of Forest Resources and Theatre Arts and Dance, and two MFA students from the Department of Art). In this three-day interdisciplinary symposium, held on Zoom, they asked questions about the rights and responsibilities of researchers and discussed student projects. Two guest speakers also participated: Professor Tania Ka'ai (Auckland



“Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research,” 2021, Ed. Mary Modeen.

University of Technology) and Dr. Alexandra M. Peck (MESPAC's Visiting Scholar of Critical Indigenous Studies). Dr. Peck was also a guest speaker in the 2021 Visiting Artist and Critics program in the Department of Art, UMN Twin Cities.

An outcome of the symposium was a collaborative book, *Decolonising Place-based Arts Research*, edited by Mary Modeen (2021), with essays by the symposium participants

and two additional German artists. Baeumler contributed the essay, "Reflecting on Backyard Phenology: A Participatory Art and Citizen Science Collaboration." The book was published in December, 2021, by DJCAD (University of Dundee), in association with the Institute for Advanced Study (University of Minnesota) and Te Ipukarea Research Institute (Auckland University of Technology), with additional distribution by Huia Press (Auckland, NZ).

Book Groups and Author Engagement (2020, 2021)

The conversations among the MESPAC faculty cohort on the UMN Twin Cities campus, along with those at UMN Duluth and UMN Morris, were important opportunities for faculty to share their knowledge, challenges, and ongoing projects. With the intent to create broader discussions within the university community and with the general public, Baeumler initiated two book groups through MESPAC. The first book group focused on *The Relentless Business of Treaties: How Indigenous Land Became U.S. Property*, by Martin Case (2018). The opening event, an IAS Thursdays program on February 20, 2020, featured presentations by Case, Čhaŋtémaza (American Indian Studies; MESPAC faculty co-lead, UMN Twin Cities), and Becca Gercken

(Native American and Indigenous Studies and English; MESPAC faculty co-lead, UMN Morris). In addition, Martin Case created five short videos, based on his book chapters, which can be used by classes and groups reading the book.[2]

The second book group focused on Diane Wilson's novel, *The Seed Keeper* (2021). During an IAS Thursdays event held on April 8, 2021, Wilson gave a reading, and Baeumler interviewed her about the book (IAS Thursdays 2021). The online audience was able to discuss the book and ask the author questions at a second Zoom event. Diane Wilson won the 2022 Minnesota Book Award in Fiction for *The Seed Keeper*.

Bog Enthusiasts Symposium

Professor Mary Modeen traveled to Minnesota and spent three weeks in residence during February, 2022, at the IAS as a fellow. While in residence, she traveled with Christine Baeumler to the Sax-Zim Bog, north of Duluth, and met with Professor Brenda Child (UMN Twin Cities Departments of American Studies and American Indian Studies) and artist Jonathan Thunder, to tour the bog in winter, February 4–6. Modeen and Baeumler also met with Dakota author and cohort member Diane Wilson and visited the tamarack bog behind Wilson's house on February

12. As a MESPAC project, Wilson is mapping the bog ecosystem and considering ways to protect the bog and wetland near her home from agricultural runoff. Barr Engineering ecologist, Fred Rozumalski, met with the group at the site to discuss the water quality issues.

On February 10, Modeen and Baeumler hosted a Bog Enthusiast gathering at the IAS for 20 people, which included an interdisciplinary group of artists, activists, undergraduate and graduate students, and faculty who are passionate about



*Mary Modeen takes a picture at the Sax-Zim Bog on a chilly day in February, 2023.
Image courtesy of Christine Baeumler.*

bog ecosystems. Modeen gave a presentation about issues that impact bogs in Scotland and the UK. Afterwards, participants shared their own concerns about threats to bogs and wetlands in

Minnesota. This meeting was intended to build an interdisciplinary coalition of people who want to continue to meet and advocate for bog and wetland ecosystems.

Conclusion

Shortly before this issue of *Open Rivers* went to press, the hybrid “Place and Relations Capstone: Indigenizing Education” brought together faculty leaders and student and community participants to share outcomes of the grant’s work and consider future work to address ongoing issues around university relations with Native communities. The overlapping Humanities Futures Workshop brought Indigenous and other underrepresented undergraduates into conversation with the Capstone presenters, as well as meeting with graduate student mentors and faculty to explore what graduate education in the humanities could offer them. The symposium panels and workshop conversations reflected the learnings and understandings developed during the MESPAC initiative.

Here are some of the lessons we are taking away from the last four years’ work and carrying forward in our individual and collective academic work.

- Experiential learning must be embedded in our pedagogy. This includes giving students opportunities to work with communities, to see the skills they can develop and contribute, to learn from elders as at Makoce Ikikcupi or in the curricula created by the Indigenous Water Women’s Sisterhood in Duluth and the Humanities Futures Labs.
- Practices and processes that reflect Indigenous and other values are as important as the content. The undergraduate Humanities Futures Labs, graduate student mentoring in the Humanities Futures Workshop, and placing graduate

students in leadership roles to design and co-teach the Labs and develop the regional Great Lakes SIGI transformed practices of inclusion and acknowledgment of diverse expertise in a way that went far beyond the initial goals of developing new curricula. Participants practiced collaborative humanities—changes in the working methods of the humanities from solo research production and reliance on texts to collaborative community engagement and relationality, recognition of all our relatives.

- We learned much about how to work for institutional transformation from our own process: the need for time to listen, read, reflect, and not only to build, but to sustain, relationships. We came to understand the ways in which institutional administrative systems and policies can be inhospitable and obstacles to respectful relationships with community partners. This was unintended learning, but no less critical for undertaking the culture change necessary for institutions to foster equity and justice within their own walls and society at large.

As we tackle the challenges of sustaining this work, some of our aspirations have shifted or become more focused. *The TRUTH Report, Oshkigin Noojimo’iwe, Naḡi Waṅ Petu Uṅ Ihduwas’ake He Oyate Kiṅ Zaniwicaye Kte*, which focuses on the persistent, systemic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples by the University of Minnesota, was published the same week as the Capstone Symposium (2023).

Another project financially supported by the Mellon Foundation through the Minnesota Transform Just Futures grant, the TRUTH Report demands a reckoning that will inform our future work as well. From our own projects, we have new visions for what the work of the humanities looks like in communities and in addressing critical social issues; the TRUTH Report is a humanistic work of rigorous, collective historical research and a foundation for new knowledge and research models. These projects necessitate new methods and inclusive content in the classroom, in research, and in graduate education and professional development. Institutional transformation requires cultural change to decolonize

the curriculum, institutional structures, and campus spaces. It also involves finding ways of sharing university resources with communities as genuine partners in pedagogy and research, and sharing across campuses to enhance depth and offerings for students. Pragmatically, the latter would include increased, integrative support for Native American and Indigenous Studies across all the UMN system campuses and expanding the Humanities Futures Lab model and the place-based research and community-engaged experiential learning. Above all, sustainability means continuing to build and nurture the connections, respectful relationships, and collaborative practices that reflect our commitments.

About The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is the nation's largest supporter of the arts and humanities. Since 1969, the Foundation has been guided by its core belief that the humanities and arts are essential to human understanding. The Foundation believes that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence, and freedom that can be found there. Through our grants, we seek to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive. Learn more at mellon.org.

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Footnotes

[1] "Where We Stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta Treaty Lands" is the second most visited article in *Open Rivers* since it was originally published in fall 2020.

[2] *The Relentless Business of Treaties: How Indigenous Land Became U.S. Property* by Martin Case (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018) explores the economic and political motivations of those who, on behalf of the United States, negotiated and signed treaties with Indigenous nations. In this series of five [videos](#), the author introduces each section of the book and offers topics for reading group discussions. Find a wide range of reading group resources from the Institute for Advanced Study and Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota at <https://ias.umn.edu/reading-group>.

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About the Authors

Jennifer Gunn is a former director of the University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study and a faculty member in the Program in the History of Medicine in the Medical School. Of settler descent, raised in the Southern United States, her research is on the history of rural health and medicine in the Upper Midwest in the early to mid-twentieth century, examining the influence of different economic geographies on the organization of and access to health care.

Dr. Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould is Kitchiwikwendong Anishinaabe from the Grand Traverse Band of Michigan. She is an associate professor of Education in the Department of Education-Ruth A. Meyers Center for Indigenous Education. Roxanne's work has extended throughout the Indigenous world with a focus on critical Indigenous education, land and water pedagogy and restorative justice. As a founder of the Bdote Learning Center, Roxanne developed the model for the place-based Dakota and Ojibwe language immersion school. She presently serves on the governing council of Makočé Ikikčupí, a Dakota land recovery project, as elder emeritus for Dream of Wild Health, a Native gardening project; on the Indigenous Roundtable for the Science Museum of Minnesota and the Indigenous Women's Water Sisterhood. In her personal life she is a mother and grandmother with life long relationships through marriage and deep friendships with the Dakota community. As an Indigenous person living on Dakota homeland she is committed to reparative justice for Dakota peoples and homelands as she would want from anyone living in her Anishinaabe homeland of Kitchiwikwendog.

Becca Gercken is an associate professor in English and a founding faculty member of the Native American and Indigenous Studies program at the University of Minnesota Morris, where she has also served as Chief Diversity Officer and Senior Advisor to the Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion. Gercken's research frequently focuses on representations of Indigenous people and Indigenous expressive cultures. Her most recent project is a monograph about historical and contemporary ledger narratives. Gercken received the Horace T. Morse Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education in 2017.

Christine Baeumler is a professor and chair in the Department of Art, a socially engaged/environmental artist, and a co-leader on the Twin Cities MESPAC faculty team. During the grant period, she focused on engagement around issues of environmental stewardship, with an emphasis on place-based arts practices, shared readings, and convenings with graduate students, faculty, staff, artists, and scientists.

Vicente M. Diaz is Pohnpeian and Filipino from Guam. An interdisciplinary scholar, Diaz founded and heads the Native Canoe Program in the Department of American Indian Studies, University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. The program uses Indigenous watercraft for community-engaged teaching and research on Indigenous water traditions. Diaz's research is on comparative Indigenous cultural and political resurgence in Oceania and the Native Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi River region, particularly through the lens of Trans-Indigenous theory and practice, which foregrounds Indigenous histories and technologies of travel and mobility and pan-Indigenous solidarity