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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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FEATURE

PLACE AND RELATIONS CAPSTONE: INDIGENIZING EDUCATION

By Susannah L. Smith and Carmen Petit

How can we decolonize the university? For the past four years, Indigenous community members and faculty, staff, and students from the University of Minnesota’s Duluth, Morris, and Twin Cities campuses have developed projects aimed at doing exactly this as part of the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative, funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation. On Friday, April 14, 2023, participants in these initiatives gathered at the University’s Institute for Advanced Study to share their ideas and experiences in the capstone symposium “Place and Relations: Indigenizing Education.” The capstone encompassed topics of higher education, Indigenous sovereignty

and traditional knowledges, and the role of space, place, and land. The speakers touched on the integral intersections in these subjects, as well as their points of divergence and disconnect. Arriving on the heels of the TRUTH Project’s publication (*Towards Recognition and University-Tribal Healing*)—a report which revealed the University of Minnesota’s complicity and facilitation of colonial dispossession and violence—the capstone provided necessary space for Indigenous leaders and thinkers to strategize and share knowledge and methods, and for non-Indigenous community members, listeners, and allies to contend with their potential roles in this contemporary stage of colonialism.



*The landscape adjacent to a water blessing by the Indigenous Women's Water Sisterhood.
Image courtesy of the University of Minnesota Duluth.*

Beginning with Water

The symposium began with a Water Ceremony led by Ojibwe Elder Sharon Day. She set a tone of generosity—and obligation—when she shared that, as a member of the Marten clan, she was taught that her duty is to the care of the family, the clan, the band, the tribe, and eventually all humanity. When we pray, she explained, we pray for everything: the water, the earth, the plants, and everyone. With gifts of water and tobacco, she led a song of love, thanks, and respect for water.



The symposium took place in the Best Buy Theater in Northrop at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. Image courtesy of Nina O'Leary.

TONGVALAND as an Exercise of Colonial Unknowing

Mishuana Goeman, an enrolled member of the Tonawanda band of Seneca, and Chair and Professor of Indigenous Studies, University at Buffalo, gave the keynote address, “Caring for Landscapes of Justice in Perilous Settler Environments.” She presented the work of Native American artists that pushes against colonial geographic erasure in the Los Angeles area, demonstrating the tensions between settler and Indigenous aesthetics. Goeman acknowledges that Indigenous people today are both (in the words of Linda Hogan) “the result of the love of thousands,” and the result of genocide. Rather than let the violence of settler colonialism define who American Indians are, she prefers to write about the life-giving force of Indigenous artists.

Goeman’s talk focused first on the TONGVALAND project, a public-art installation of the work of Tongva artists on seven prominent billboards in the Los Angeles metro area August-September 2021. The Gabrielino-Tongva are the people native to the Los Angeles Basin who were dispossessed by Spanish settlers, Mexican authorities, and the U.S. government in turn. She characterized the TONGVALAND installation as an effort to counter a settler commercial map of Los Angeles, in which land is seen as a resource or something to extract from. The TONGVALAND project is an exercise of colonial unknowing and Indigenous embodied knowing on the settler landscape, reflecting a refusal of settler ordinances and geographies.

The pieces are a display of what Goeman calls “Rematriation,” an Indigenous practice to bring healing: “Our ancestors lived in community with nature; we have a responsibility to restore this.” Cara Romero’s works “Mercedes at Kuruvungna,” “Miztla at Puvungna,” and “Weshoyot” depict Indigenous women plunging into sacred water or holding traditional objects, demonstrating their relationship to the land. Displaying large images of these women in specific locations is an important way to cope with the exploitation of and violence enacted on Indian women’s bodies and the land on which the work was displayed. Other works, such as River Garza’s “What the City Gave Us,” demonstrate how turning land into property and a commodity allowed its desecration. This piece is a collage of images of conventional depictions of Indians, the polluting oil wells that brought settlers, an early mission building, and maps combined with graffiti statements such as “If the land isn’t healthy, we are not healthy.” This piece, Goeman asserts, shows Indigenous presence and refusal of erasure. Goerman also discussed a public art installation by Tongva artist Mercedes Dorame. “Pulling the Sun Back – Xa’aa Peshii Nehiino” creates Indigenous belonging in a public park. This installation demonstrates three elements in Tongva space: home, healing space, and ceremonial space. Goerman sees it as offering a reflection on space and communities of care. Dorame’s work allows us to begin to imagine new landscapes, grounded in Indigenous epistemologies.

The First Panel: Beginning With Indigenous-led Community Projects

The remainder of the symposium comprised three panel presentations. In the first, “Relating with Place: Indigenous-led Community Projects,” three Indigenous women—Maggie Lorenz (enrolled Turtle Mountain Ojibwe and descended

Spirit Lake Dakota), Waziyatawin (Wahpetunwan Dakota), and Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould (Odawa and Ojibwe, Grand Traverse and Little Traverse bands of Michigan)—discussed projects that reclaim Native spaces and ways of working.

Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi

Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi is a Native-led, environmental conservation nonprofit operating in the East Side of St. Paul, Minnesota. Executive Director Maggie Lorenz described the development of this organization from its start in 1997 by a group of non-native, majority white, middle-to-upper class neighbors dedicated to bringing Lower Phalen Creek, which had long been diverted and buried in storm sewers, back to the surface. This work included restoring and cleaning up the land through which the creek would run to the Mississippi, which included heavily polluted land that had been serving for years as an unofficial dump site. The focus of the organization shifted when the site underwent a review required by the National Historic Preservation Act. They discovered that the land included Wakan Tipi cave, a significant Dakota sacred site. What had begun as a relatively straightforward effort to restore a stream, clean up polluted land, and create neighborhood amenities like a dog park and soccer field now became a project of cultural reclamation. At this point, Lorenz noted, the organization had no ties to the Native community, and its members realized that Native input was necessary. As she describes it, their thought process developed from “we should do something special here for Dakota people” to “we should do something special here with Dakota people,” then finally to, “we should turn this project over to Dakota leadership and support that leadership.” Over time, the organization changed its name

from Lower Phalen Creek Project to Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi and its board is now on the cusp of becoming majority Native. Lorenz, who started working with the organization in 2019, said that she had never before experienced this kind of transformation, and she sees similar processes taking place in other organizations.



Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi is a Native-led environmental conservation nonprofit. Founded in 1997 by community activists, the project area stretches from Lake Phalen to the Mississippi River and throughout the East Side River District.

Makoce Ikikcupi

According to Executive Director Waziyatawin, Makoce Ikikcupi is engaged in the project of land recovery and Dakota repatriation. Following the Dakota War of 1862, the Dakota people were dispossessed and exiled from their homelands in Minnesota. The purpose of Makoce Ikikcupi is to buy back small parcels of land and establish communities that practice traditional Dakota ways of being. They use sustainable and regenerative practices to restore the land and honor their ancestors. The organization made its first land purchase in 2019 of 28 acres in Granite Falls, Minnesota, and began building its first village, Zani Otunwe, or Village of Wellbeing. Living in an earth lodge, with the community gathering to sing, drum, process medicinal plants, and practice crafts is, in Waziyatawin's words, a simple and beautiful way to live. In summer



Zani Otunwe is also known as the Village of Wellbeing.



*Waziyatawin shared this intimate view of an earthlodge she and her husband lived in at Enemy Swim on the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota.
Image courtesy of Waziyatawin.*

2022, her granddaughter gave birth in the earth lodge, attended by her mother, a traditional midwife, and surrounded by Dakota people and ancestors. She reckons this child to be the first Dakota baby born in an earth lodge in 300 years. “This is what reclaiming is: reconnecting with our ancestors. We don’t know what outcome of this work will be, but the intention is profound.” As

part of the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community initiative, Professor Vicente Diaz brought his University of Minnesota students to Zani Otunwe to see place-based Indigenous education in action and learn what it is like for an Indigenous population to try to reclaim, recover, and reconnect with the land, offering them a transformative experience.

Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood

Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Associate Professor in the Department of Education and Ruth A. Meyers Center for Indigenous Education at the University of Minnesota Duluth, spoke about the establishment of the Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood as part of the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community initiative. The Sisterhood is a response to the world’s water crisis by Indigenous women, who have always had the responsibility of caring for water. Indigenous peoples lost their relationship to the water of their homelands as land was ceded to settlers. Gould stated that practices of human supremacy, Christianity, and heteropatriarchy reduced water to “it”—yet water is not “it,” but “who.” “As Indigenous people, we are part of Mother Earth. Tributaries flow like the blood in our veins. There is a sacred relationship that binds us.” With this in mind, a small group of Indigenous women founded the Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood to decolonize their water, using traditional and spiritual knowledge to protect the Lake Superior watershed. Their work has included creating children’s curriculum in both English and Anishinaabe and collaborating with the city of Duluth to create an outdoor teaching and ceremony space. Gould finished with the call to action by first water walker Josephine Mandamin: “So what will you do for the water?”



Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood uses collective Traditional and Spiritual Knowledge to raise awareness about and to take actions to improve and protect the sacred Lake Superior watershed.

Reemphasizing the Power of Indigenous Leadership

The projects discussed in this panel demonstrate the power and agency of Native people who are asserting their intrinsic relationship to place and referencing their own traditions and practices in important efforts to restore balance and health to the environment we all share. Their collective expertise illuminated the capacity and need for non-Indigenous, and particularly white, solidarity for leveraging the redistribution of financial

resources, land, and institutional authority to Indigenous peoples. Congruently, they reemphasized the power of Indigenous leadership as it pertains to the protection and stewardship of the lands, waters, and other-than-human kin. Their work has cultivated spaces of Indigenous cultural and political authority and reinvigorated sovereign Indigenous relations and reciprocal care with the land.

The Second Panel: The Humanities Futures Labs

The second panel of the day offered further practical examples, this time in development of humanities curriculum. “Indigenous Pedagogy in Higher Education: The Humanities Futures Labs” featured undergraduate students, faculty, and graduate instructors who have been participating in three one-credit virtual Humanities Labs offered in spring 2023 to students at the University of Minnesota’s Duluth, Morris, and Twin Cities campuses. Humanities Labs, as Professor Becca

Gercken explained, are a new phenomenon and there is little information on how to create and run them. The team of faculty and graduate fellows that designed the three Humanities Futures Labs aimed for the labs to be interdisciplinary, to model and use Indigenous methods, and to drive institutional transformation. They intended not to imitate the sciences, but to ask questions and demonstrate the practical application of the humanities to students.

Examining the Challenges and Benefits of Interdisciplinary Work

The team started work far in advance with a two-week intensive summer workshop in 2022 at which they reviewed models and methods of the (few) existing Humanities Labs that they were able to find. They considered how their methods might differ from science models, weighed the strengths and weaknesses of using a lab format, and examined the challenges and benefits of interdisciplinary work. They examined how lessons are taught and knowledge collectively built in Indigenous communities, using that model for their pedagogical approach. The topics for each lab were developed by the two graduate fellows and one faculty member who would teach that lab, drawn from their own interests and

knowledge, approaching the material with an Indigenous lens using Indigenous research methods. Tyler Seidel, a PhD candidate in Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior, has a long-standing interest in incorporating traditional Indigenous knowledge into science; both are a form of story-telling. The lab he co-taught, “Unearthing Earth Stories,” analyzed Indigenous stories using Text Data Mining to investigate how personal identity and relationships inform Indigenous understandings about the earth and climate. Professor Clement Loo said that his group was interested in running a lab on mining sovereignty, but as they all knew much more about food sovereignty, they developed the lab “Food

and Relationality” instead. Racquel Banaszak, a Master’s candidate in Heritage Studies and Public History, said that her interest in gardening and

another fellow’s background in plants led to the lab “Seeds, Cycles, and Stories.”

Applying Indigenous Knowledge to Traditional Scientific or Western Ways of Thought

The undergraduates particularly appreciated the practical application of Indigenous methods of work. Gavin Zempel, who has a double major in Psychology and Native American & Indigenous Studies, spoke of this as “Indigenizing” topics beyond what he learns in his Indigenous Studies classes. Neo Bhavsar, double majoring in Indigenous Studies and Public Policy, thought

the best part of the lab was applying Indigenous knowledge to traditional scientific or Western ways of thought, to the benefit of the material. Mia Sam, majoring in Native American & Indigenous Studies, appreciated the sense of inclusivity that permeated all aspects of the labs through the perspective of Indigenous ways of knowing.



The Humanities Futures Labs panel. From left to right, Tyler Seidel, Racquel Banaszak, Mia Sam, Gavin Zempel, Neo Bhavsar, Professor Becca Gercken, and Isabel Huot-Link. Professor Clement Loo attended the panel remotely. Image courtesy of Nina O’Leary.

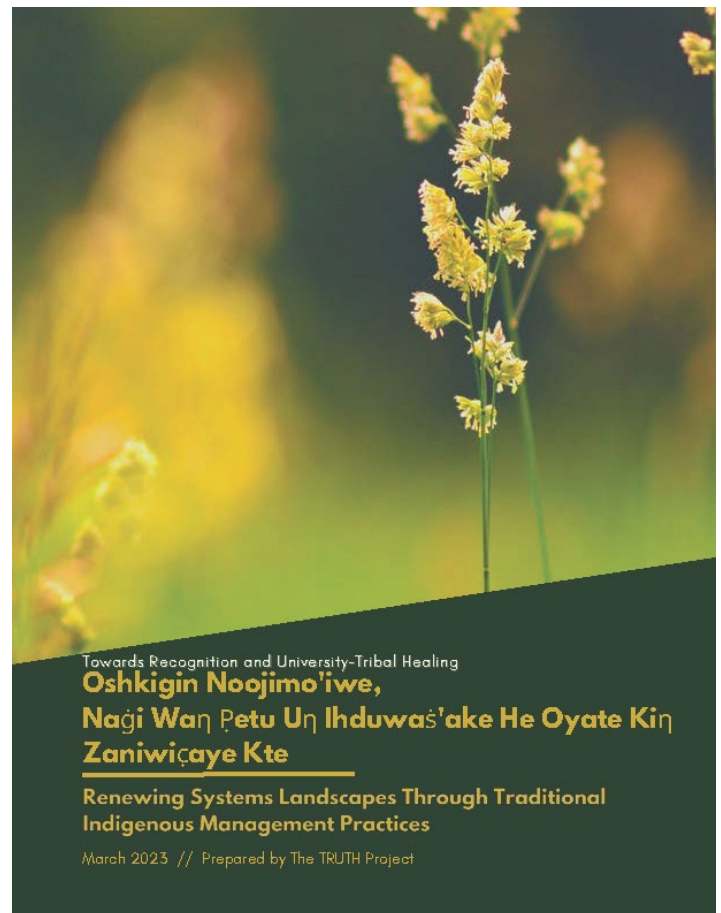
One Credit Is Just Not Enough

What advice or ideas from the labs did the participants have for future work? Both instructors and students thought that a one-credit lab was insufficient; a full-credit course would give space for more material and Indigenous research methods. They also advocated incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems in all subjects and increasing recognition of Indigenous ways in academia. Gercken and Loo both discussed the difficulty of engaging alternate methods of pedagogy and research. The academy is fundamentally hierarchical, productivity oriented, and exclusionary. Pushing against these conventions by engaging

in authentic conversations and relationships brings to light deeply rooted, otherwise hidden barriers. By making these barriers visible, we can figure out how to make those structures better to engage in knowledge generation from a variety of perspectives—which is a profoundly humanistic endeavor. This panel demonstrated that Indigenousizing the curriculum is not only possible, it is appreciated by students and instructors alike. Furthermore, because there are so few models, creating a Humanities Lab is a great opportunity for experimentation.

The Third Panel: TRUTH, Reparations, and Transformation

The final panel of the day, “University Reparations and Transformation: Embarking on a Tremendous Journey,” focused on work to make universities accountable for how they have benefitted from Land Grant/Land Grab funding and for their complicity in exploitation of Indigenous resources, knowledge, and people. Jaime Arsenault (White Earth Ojibwe), Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Repatriation Representative, and Archives Manager for the White Earth Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, outlined her reconciliation work with the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, once the site of an Indian boarding school. This work involves difficult conversations and requires commitment on all sides to build right relationship. Repatriation work is hard at first, but she thinks that everyone who is involved goes through a transformation: “we are smiling more when we get to the end.” Engaging students in this process teaches them how to do ethical work with and guided by community. They learn to



*Front page of The TRUTH Report,
Oshkigin Noojimo'iwe, Nāgi Waŋ Țetu Uŋ
Ihduwaś'ake He Oyate Kiŋ
Zaniwiçaye Kte.*

take risks and not shy away from having difficult conversations. She is hopeful that this process will be repeated as we work with what the TRUTH Report has revealed.

Elizabeth Rule, enrolled member of the Chickasaw Nation and Assistant Professor of Critical Race, Gender, and Culture Studies at American University, discussed her work with Landback Universities, which takes its inspiration from the Land-Grab Universities investigation published by *High Country News* in 2020. Landback Universities is a collaboration of

Indigenous people exploring the central question of transferring land back to the tribes and peoples from whom it was expropriated. They are convening a group of students, higher education administrators, faculty, staff, and members of communities representing Tribal nations to work together to share best practices and strategies for thinking about land return. Including people who are at all ranks and stages, from inside and outside of academia, is crucial to break down the silos that characterize higher education.

Relocation and Land Dispossession Are Directly Linked to Adverse Outcomes

An Garagiola, descendent of the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, University Project Coordinator of the TRUTH Project, and Project Manager in the University of Minnesota's Office of Native American Affairs, discussed the TRUTH Project's work and the recent release of the TRUTH Report. This collaboration between the University's Office of Native Affairs and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council (MIAC) was spurred by a series of resolutions in 2020 by MIAC calling for actions that the University could take to be in better relationship with Minnesota's eleven recognized tribes. Garagiola described piecing together the story of how the University played a role in the relocation of Native peoples, especially her own community of Bois Forte Chippewa. She discovered from University Extension Office records that 36 families from Bois Forte were relocated at the same time as her grandmother; she concluded that her family was part of this relocation. Relocation and land dispossession are directly linked to adverse outcomes for those who were relocated; Garagiola's subsequent family history reflected this. She and other Tribal researchers were able to map

out Native land that the University acquired and trace profits that the University made from the sale of lands and from exploitation of Indigenous resources and knowledge. This constitutes two kinds of violence: externalized violence against Indigenous land and resources, and internalized violence in the devaluation of Indigenous epistemologies and profit from Indigenous knowledge while declaring that knowledge not good enough to use. The Morrill Act called for perpetual holding of the funds derived from sale of the lands, creating the Permanent University Fund (PUF). TRUTH researchers discovered that the University used the PUF to make municipal bonds that were means to support settlement of non-Native peoples and continue to be a source of income for the University. The TRUTH researchers call for Permanent Reparations, breaking up the PUF and sending a steady stream of revenue to be overseen by Tribal representatives and invested in Tribal priorities. Garagiola also spoke about how difficult the process of discovery was for the TRUTH researchers, who were learning about these traumas for the first time.



*Jaime Arsenault and An Garagiola talking with Vicente Diaz.
Image courtesy of Nina O'Leary.*

Indigenous Futures

The three presenters reconfigured deafening losses into potentialities for Indigenous resurgence with the land, both within and beyond the confines of academia. Central to their discussion was the impetus to convene and orient these findings, movements, and intellectual groundings towards Indigenous futures. Arsenault suggested envisioning what we want the world, the land, the

water, the communities around us to look like in seven generations, and then working backward to make it happen. To do real reparative work, Rule suggests coming together with solidarity and allyship as people tied to these institutions, in a way that supersedes and supplants that institutional structure and is mutually reinforcing.

All About Relations

This symposium was exhilarating and thought provoking. One might initially wonder what a discussion of Indigenous-led place-based restoration projects or an installation of public art by Native artists has to do with Indigenizing education, the theme of the symposium. These presentations were all about relations—to one another, to place and the natural world, and to those who have come before us. Education does not occur in a vacuum, but in relationship and community. We cannot Indigenize education without an Indigenous understanding of how to be in relationship and community with one another. This requires a cultural change in the academy, as Clement Loo made clear in his discussion of Humanities Futures Labs. Virtually all of the presenters were Indigenous, and all of the initiatives and work they described—whether on or off campus—are currently led by Indigenous people. This is work that everyone can and should engage in, but if we are serious about Indigenizing the curriculum, we must do this by listening and following Indigenous examples.

As many presenters attested, this work is hard, but well worth the effort. Native people are learning their own history, reestablishing practices,

restoring their relationship to earth and water, and taking control of spaces, places, and narratives. At the same time, settlers are also learning this history; coming to accept, honor, and respect Indigenous ways of knowing and doing; and relinquishing control—preferably by restoring land back. Both Maggie Lorenz and Jaime Arsenault described similar trajectories in the process of developing relationships and coming to a place of true respect and cooperation. An Garagiola made clear that the process of uncovering and learning is extremely difficult for Native peoples; we should be mindful of that trauma. However, it seemed that all presenters looked to the future, refusing to let a history of violence and genocide define them and looking rather, as Mishuana Goeman said, to the life-giving work of their communities.

These speakers and sessions culminated in resounding power, reaffirming the knowledge, persistence, and authority of Indigenous peoples, communities, and leaders. Simultaneously, the symposium shed necessary light on the ongoing need for reparations and repatriation from these institutions steeped in ongoing, violent colonialism in order for collective survival to unfold,

guided by these knowledges and movements. As Vicente Diaz (Filipino-Pohnpeian from Guam and American Indian Studies Department Chair, University of Minnesota Twin Cities) articulated:

like water, Indigenous knowledges have been incarcerated, damaged, polluted, contained, and dammed. It is due time for them to flourish.

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About the Authors

Susannah L. Smith grew up in Winnetka, Illinois less than a mile from Lake Michigan, and now lives by the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. She has served as the managing director of the Institute for Advanced Study, University of Minnesota, since its inception in 2005, which has given her the opportunity to learn from scholars, artists, and practitioners in a wide array of fields, much to her delight. She holds a Ph.D. in European History, with a specialization in Russia.

Carmen Petit is an undergraduate student at the University of Minnesota in the Department of American Indian Studies. From Washington state, she came to Minnesota in 2019 where she lives with her dog, Buffy, and cat, Stevie. She currently works with Birchbark Books and the Bockley Gallery.