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## Keynote Address: 2004 American Indian Studies Consortium Annual Conference

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## Keynote Address

*David Wilkins*

**G**ood morning. I greet you on behalf of my people, the Lumbee, my clan, and my wife and children. I was flattered when I was invited to join you folks to discuss these important matters last fall, and I readily agreed. Since this is my first time participating in this, your fifth annual conference, I am not really up on what has previously transpired, although I understand that one of the principal reasons for this year's gathering is to draft a set of by-laws and to formally organize an American Indian studies consortium that might lead to the development of an organization that will help establish and accredit Indian studies programs. A laudable and difficult set of goals, to be sure.

I initially thought this conference was part of or somehow connected to the Native professoriate that also began here back in the early 1990s. I attended that gathering the first few times it met, although I eventually became terribly disillusioned and frustrated when I failed to see that body express any real interest, much less action—save for the ethnic fraud issue—in engaging the many other powerful and surging, controversial and debilitating topics confronting Native nations and their citizens, both within and without the academy. Several colleagues and I tried on several occasions to initiate such focused activism but were informed by the organization's leadership that that really wasn't the professoriate's thrust. We were told it was really an opportunity for Native academics, graduate students, and their allies to meet, chat, socialize, and network. I've not returned to it since the mid-1990s.

So, I was quite relieved when Carol Lujan assured me that this body was a separate entity altogether. When I received a copy of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's provocative essay "Who Stole Native American Studies?"<sup>1</sup> which established the ideological framework for this meeting, this just made me want to attend with even more urgency. In 1970, when the first American Indian Scholars meeting took place in Princeton, New Jersey, I was still in high school. But during my freshman year of college in 1972, when I read Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* for the first time, I was reminded of the beauty, the humor, the inherent strengths, and the vitality of our nations. At the same time I saw Deloria tweaking the noses of major segments and particular institutions in American society. It prompted in me a deeper search for my own people's seemingly convoluted history and a desire to learn more about other First Nations cultures, governments, and rights vis-à-vis the United States and its separate states. It also inspired me to engage in what Elizabeth Cook-Lynn refers to as the "defense of indigenous nationhood in America." Although at the time I did not know what the words "indigenous" or "nationhood" meant!

In the years since that transformative period, I have thought, acted upon, researched, and written on tribal sovereignty and self-determination, intergovernmental relations, critical legal theory, and comparative indigenous peoples. I have long been interested in how the American states and the federal government, international states and NGO's, and the various political actors and social, economic, geographical, and cultural forces active in those polities and corporations have set about defining themselves and how their understanding of their own identity has impacted Native peoples. Much of my early research, therefore, focused on how the states and the federal government sought to define who we are; how and why the United States set about creating what became the formal government of the Navajo nation; how and why the Supreme Court arrived at many of its most egregious and occasionally supportive rulings and doctrines that have both diminished and affirmed First Nations' rights; how those rulings have affected our essential lands, powers of governance, cultural identities, and so on. And I have had the good fortune of coauthoring a book with Vine Deloria Jr. on how and why the U.S. Constitution and its amendments still are largely inapplicable to tribal peoples who reside in Indian country, despite two centuries of coercive assimilation and alleged incorporation of Native nations.

While I will continue with this critical line of analysis of these external forces, I have also moved my research interests in other directions: I want to know who we are politically, economically, and legally; how our transformed cultural values affect all these dimensions; how and why we have reacted the way we have to these forces and constraints; what strategies, institutions, and attitudes we employ to cope

with our ongoing internal and still-far-too-dependent relationship with the United States and our ever-fractious relationships with states. But also, as someone trained in comparative politics, I have long been interested in exploring the linkages, similarities, and differences between the global experiences of aboriginal peoples and the states that host us. So when Tom Holm, who had developed just such a course at the University of Arizona, gave me the opportunity to teach it, I jumped at the opportunity and have taught a globally comparative indigenous peoples course ever since.

This course utilizes a bird's-eye perspective, a fourth-world perspective, or what I've lately been calling a "thinking outside the rez" perspective, which, I believe, is critical and should and must always be balanced with what Gunnar Myrdal once referred to as a "frog's-eye perspective," or, in the words of Tsianina Lomawaima, a "talking from home perspective," in which we also maintain a deep focus on each of our respective homelands, our governments, and our peoples' particular needs and aspirations.

In fact, in order to be at our best as Natives who have colonized the academy, I would suggest that we need to be able to navigate effectively between "thinking outside the rez" and "talking from home." When I asked my thirteen-year-old daughter to suggest a creature that had the ability to smoothly make such a transition from the bird's-eye to frog's-eye view, she said, without any hesitation, that a flying squirrel was just the animal. When I first mentioned this at a conference last fall, someone knowledgeable about Cherokee traditions informed me that the flying squirrel plays just this kind of critical mediating role in Cherokee traditional teachings. Needless to say, I felt quite proud, and when I told my daughter about this she just smiled as if to say, "well, it makes sense, Dad!" Ah, the intuitive power of young people!

As Cook-Lynn notes, for many of us, the two major concepts that have served as the guideposts and grounding forces for Native studies are indigenoussness and tribal sovereignty. Our indigeneity, our originality in and sacred relation to a specific place, distinguishes us in a profound way from all others; while our inherent sovereignty—which I would say for the purposes of this gathering is really the unique soul of each First Nation striving for self-fulfillment and maturity, and on every level—governance, economy, and cultural integrity are constantly under assault.

Each of these concepts, and all that they encompass, needs to be clearly understood, embraced, practiced, and defended in the ways our own individual and tribal personalities can best muster. In 1997, Matthew Snipp organized a one-day conference at Stanford University to discuss some of the issues Elizabeth Cook-Lynn raised in her paper. Many of us in attendance were deeply concerned that those of us in the academy were not doing nearly enough—either individually or collectively—in

defense of our respective nation's sovereignty. At the time, I focused my remarks on the critical role that both two- and four-year tribal colleges play in defense of tribal sovereignty. My sense is that those institutions are ideally situated to address the issues and problems associated with tribal efforts to wield "internal sovereignty," given their more practical orientation and their prime location in or near Indian Country. I say this having begun my teaching career at Navajo Community College, today Diné College, the first tribal college in the nation.

If we define "education" as "the whole system of human learning within and without school walls that molds and develops human personality" (the "without" encompassing our families, clans, relationships to the natural world, and so on), a definition paraphrased from Vine Deloria and W. E. B. Du Bois—and if we are Native teachers with a clear sense of responsibility to do our part in understanding, imparting, and strengthening our own tribal histories and cultures, and that is a major *if* for some folk—then I believe that those of us at four-year colleges and universities must look to tribal colleges for some substantive disciplinary as well as moral direction, given their location and their organic charters.

Places like Diné College, the several Lakota colleges, and others that are steeped in particular indigenous knowledge systems and territorial spaces, while still offering a plethora of courses that are generally transferable to nontribal colleges, are good examples. While the thirty-four tribal colleges have formed a very active organization, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), I'd like to see the organization at Arizona State University have as one of its prime directives the establishment and oversight of a research consortium that would link indigenous colleges and their faculty and students (the elders, if you will) and NAS programs and our faculty and students (the youth, if you will). I got this idea after seeing a documentary about W. E. B. Du Bois, the splendid African American scholar and activist. He proposed, I believe in the 1930s, the idea of forming such a consortium between the various black colleges. This consortium would have had as its primary task the development of social science and historically oriented information in an effort to fully explore the history, life, culture, and leadership of the black community. Unfortunately, Du Bois's idea never materialized, for reasons I have not yet uncovered.

But I want to learn more about this proposal because I think it could be an excellent model that tribal colleges could look to and that we in NAS programs must contribute to developing. The organization here could play a key role in the creation of just such a consortium.

This is where we have much to learn from tribal colleges, because most of them were founded to address tribally specific problems and issues as well as to provide a general educational foundation. If we can find a way to link them together with us in a research consortium,

guided by tribal directives and not foundation, federal, or university mandates, I believe we could finally take Indian education in a genuinely Indian direction, where it will truly have some merit and be of real benefit to tribal societies.

Unfortunately, the Stanford conference was a one-shot event, which is why this gathering is most timely. While tribal colleges have as their prime function the enhancement of *internal sovereignty* in a *practical and applied manner*, those of us at large public universities like the University of Minnesota, and other public and private colleges and universities, typically but not always have a different orientation. One could say we more often address the *external sovereignty* dimension, rather than deal explicitly with applied and practical intellectual thrusts, though we do that as well. We are, or should be, more concerned with exercising what Vine has termed a *predictive* role; that is to say we should use our knowledge, the full bounty of resources available to us at our schools, to sketch out a number of predictive scenarios that we would then provide to our respective tribal nations, thus equipping them with the knowledge to make informed and appropriate decisions that will benefit their homelands and peoples. In other words, we and our students, according to Deloria, would be filling the critical role that our peoples' *scouts* played in our not-too-distant past. Scouts did not direct tribal activities or pass themselves off as the leaders of their nations. They provided useful information and made various suggestions that the community's leadership then considered when they were pondering where to plant and when to harvest, appraising hunting possibilities, assessing the size and nature of their neighboring nations, and so on.

But in order for us to serve as effective twenty-first-century scouts for our nations, Deloria notes that we must ask and be willing to be guided by two fundamental questions: (1) *How does what we receive (or give) in our educational experience impact the preservation and sensible use of our lands?* and (2) *How does it affect the continuing existence of our nations?*

It is the way we Native folk in the academy have decided either to act upon these two questions, to try and paraphrase them to suit our own intellectual and emotional needs, or, worse yet, to ignore them altogether, that gets to the heart of where we are now and may be what prompted the stimulating title of Cook-Lynn's essay and was certainly behind the title of an essay Deloria wrote in 1998 called "Intellectual Self-Determination and Sovereignty: Looking at the Windmills in Our Minds."<sup>2</sup> There, he bemoaned the propensity of a number of Native academics who get enamored and then lost in the intellectual thickets of concepts like hegemony, postcolonialism, and intellectual sovereignty, while not paying sufficient heed to the plethora of substantive problems that are still bedeviling First Nations—land fractionation, derogatory images, repatriation, treaty studies, efforts to modernize traditional mechanisms of justice and reconciliation, tribal/state relations,

confronting the powerful academic backlash of those who argue that we are the ones responsible for environmental degradation, flora and fauna collapse, and so on.

In one pointed passage he said that "individual self-determination and intellectual sovereignty are scary concepts because they mean that a whole generation of Indians are not going to be responsible to the Indian people, they are simply going to be isolated individuals playing with the symbols of Indians" (28).

Until and unless we recover our sense of clan and kinship responsibilities, including defense of our homelands and tribal polities, we may never be able to forge any kind of consensus on what constitutes Native American studies, much less produce the kinds of works and forge the kinds and diversity of alliances that will enable us to reclaim our rightful moral status as both landlords and dependents of the lands we claim as our mother.

Such a process is daunting, however, given the intoxicating power of Western capitalism and culture and assimilation's heavy and increasing influence on our peoples, given the stunning level of tribal, economic, religious, and intellectual diversity in Indian Country, which makes it very difficult to find any common ground, given the constraints we face living in the most militaristic and paranoid democracy in the world that practices a politics of "hooh-aah," as one commentator called it, and given the respect of personal autonomy and the noncoercive nature of our philosophies, which have long been hallmark characteristics of Native folk.

I believe one positive aspect, lying relatively dormant in our psyche and institutional practices, is the formal establishment of diplomatic accords that our ancestors engaged in in abundance. Such accords, lodged in tribal ceremonial memory banks, forged kinship relations with sometimes-disparate parties. We need these to be revived between First Nations, between tribal colleges and public/private colleges, between the major Indian interest groups and others. Such diplomatic efforts once held us in good stead. They might still.

#### N O T E S

- 1 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "Who Stole Native American Studies," *Wicazo Sa Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 9–28.
- 2 Vine Deloria, Jr., "Intellectual Self-Determination and Sovereignty: Looking at the Windmills in Our Minds," *Wicazo Sa Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 25–32.