

# Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures



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and Indigenous Cultures

Edited by

Hsinya Huang and Clara Shu-Chun Chang

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P U B L I S H I N G

Aspects of Transnational and Indigenous Cultures,  
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## INTRODUCTION

# ASPECTS OF TRANSNATIONAL AND INDIGENOUS CULTURES

HSINYA HUANG

In the context of an increasingly transnational globe, the master narratives of time and place are shifting. Especially in (sovereign) Indigenous cultures (which have at all times placed great emphasis on transnational orientations), notions of homeland, territory, migration, diaspora, and time have emerged as central coordinates in the construction of identity, both individual and collective. Simultaneously, methodological borderlines between inquiries into cultural impact, identity and politics, on the one hand, and analyses of aesthetic and stylistic qualities, on the other, are being redrawn, diversifying and complicating the discussion on the current place of Transnational and Indigenous Studies at large. This essay volume seeks to address some of the issues of place and mobility, aesthetics and politics, as well as identity and community, which have emerged in the framework of Global/Transnational American and Indigenous Studies. Specifically, one of its trajectories is the vexed question of what distinguishes Indigenous and ethnic minority literatures in the transnational/global context. What are the consequences of transnationalism for American Studies as well as Indigenous and ethnic studies and for the field of literary and cultural criticism in general? How do Indigenous artistic expressions establish, reshape, challenge, and/or complement the formation of communities and collective cultural (and literary) entities? How, in these processes, do traditional notions of homeland and nation interact with new (or equally traditional) modes of community formation across social/political/cultural borderlines? The transnational turn in American Studies describes the reality of what we often seek in reaching across borders and oceans for consonance or more importantly important perspectives. But how much more complicated that discourse ought to be in relation to transnational realities? This volume with its ten chapters—contributions from the U.S., Germany, Australia,

Canada, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan—aims to conceptualize a comparative/trans-national paradigm for crossing over the national, regional and international boundaries and, in so doing, to imagine a shared world of poetics and aesthetics in contemporary transnational scholarship.

Specifically, in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin put forth the study of America as a transnational cultural production by asking “As the transnational becomes central to American Studies, how will the field change or expand?” (Fishkin 2005). While Fishkin’s powerful discourse opens up the boundary of American Studies to encompass a larger world of transnationalism and globalization, in her introduction to *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, Wai Chee Dimock calls attention to the field of American Studies as “fluid and amorphous, shaped and reshaped by emerging forces, by ‘intricate interdependencies’ between ‘the near and afar, the local and the distant’” (Dimock 2007, 3). Featuring the dynamics between the global/transnational and local/native, Dimock’s venture is not unlike Fishkin’s call for an American Studies that takes “the transnational at its center,” for, both would require that we see “the inside and outside, domestic and foreign, national and international, as interpenetrating” (Fishkin 2005, 21). What roles, Fishkin asks, “might comparative, collaborative, border-crossing research play in this reconfigured field” (Fishkin 2005, 21)? Indeed, an “Americanist” has always hoped to think and write as a “comparatist” (Arac 2007, 20). The comparative paradigm of American Studies delineates a large-scale geography in which “the *prenational* emerg[es], along with the *post-national*” (Dimock 2007, 7). Dimock argues that it is crucial to go beyond an arbitrarily restricted national archive to encompass an “alternative geography—a span of five continents, no less—a world atlas of which the national map is inextricably a part” (Dimock 2007, 8). This geographical spread must, in turn, be complemented by a long history, “cradled by the history of the world” (Dimock 2007, 8). The transnational turn dissolves the field’s “autonomized chronology, meshing it with a continuum still evolving, and stretching as indefinitely into the past as it does into the future” (Dimock 2007, 7). As Philip Curtin insightfully claims, we must try even harder to balance the depth of our own specializations against a wider span of knowledge (Curtin 1984, 9; see also Huang, et. al. 2012).

There are ten chapters in this volume, which can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part, comprising four chapters, focuses on Native American cultural production and asks how the discourses and concepts surrounding transnationalism are circulated, challenged, and re-visioned in Native American/ethnic studies scholarship. The second part with its three

chapters ventures to offer an alternative critical framework drawing on Indigenous experiences and specificities from/across the Pacific to replace the dominant Western discourse of transnationality. Finally, the last three chapters in the third part provide diverse perspectives to look into the contact and contestation between two distinctly different cultures and investigate how the encounters, exchanges, and/or fusion of these cultures can evoke cross-pollination in the transnational context.

Specifically, the first four chapters of this volume restructure transnationalism in terms of Native American experiences and realities and reflect on contemporary scholarship in ethnic and Native American studies. They inquire into how transnationality and Indigeneity in (Native) American scholarship penetrate each other. Transnationalism in American Studies contains a politics—it is anti-exceptionalist, to be sure—but it has also maintained a curious distance from Native American and Indigenous agenda, dancing in its many meanings and uses with words like “international” and “global,” both of which have a tendency to abstract or attenuate the often disastrous workings of power on the ground (Athanasakis and Martinsen 2010). Meanwhile, it is also worth asking why many Native American scholars in literary and cultural studies have “steered clear of the discourse on the transnational” as well as other recent trends in diaspora, trauma, and post-colonial scholarship (Warrior 2009, 119-30). May we create intellectual space where transnationality and Indigeneity intersect and become mutually illuminating by not only articulating and recognizing but theorizing Indigenous experiences and inspiring a paradigmatic shift in how we engage in the world and the contemporary scholarship?

In terms of American Studies as a transnational cultural practice, Native Americans’ Indigeneity transcends the U.S. border to embrace the entire western hemisphere as locus of their cultures and traditions. Recognizing the Americas (rather than any single America) invokes the concept of place as homeland shared by the “first,” “Indigenous” and “original” people of the continent. In fact, the idea of a shared Indigenous world has been articulated by some in Native American Studies since its beginning in the academy in the 1960’s and 1970’s, as Robert Warrior points out in his essay on “Organizing Native American and Indigenous Studies.” As Native American scholars reach extensively toward a sense of the field that encompasses not only Native America but the broad Indigenous world across nations, lands, and waters, Warrior contends, Native writing and Indigenous scholarship continue to unsettle a history that in the minds of many dominant intellectuals is “already complete” (Warrior 2009, 127). In “Native American Critical Responses to Transnational

Discourse,” he calls the relevance of transnationalism to Native American Studies into question, arguing that “many Native people, including Native scholars, rely on the language of nationalism, the language in which the political struggle for their actual social world is being waged” (Warrior 2007, 807) and thus remain wary of an idea like transnationality. From “Indigenous provocations” at the American Studies Association to the organizing of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, Warrior’s tactics of subversion feature double directionality, both from within and from without, to challenge the grids of our profession and push open the borders of our field. Warrior formulates an intellectual home for Native American scholars in the mainstream professional institutions and opens up the field boundary to transcend both national and international grids. The first four chapters of this transnational volume demonstrate exactly this continuous intellectual participation in the cultivation of Indigeneity around values of being and belonging in the world (see also Hsinya Huang, et. al., Introduction. Special Forum on “Charting Transnational Native American Studies: Aesthetics, Politics, and Identity.” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4.1 [2012]: 1-15).

In his chapter, “Conquest Histories and Narratives of Displacement: Civil Rights, Diaspora, and Transnationalism in Ethnic and American Studies,” Philip J. Deloria, 2008-2009 President of American Studies Association (ASA), the first Indigenous president in the ASA history, examines Indigenous differences surrounding recurrent concepts such as “transnational,” “diaspora” and “civil rights,” which “offer critical analytical sites for contemporary work in ethnic studies, and in a broader range of scholarship in humanities and social science.” Deloria recounts the origin story of ethnic studies and traces its changes over time: from the cultural to the multicultural orientation, from the politics of the collective to that of the individual, and finally its trajectory of going global and international. Deloria concludes his chapter by asking what it would look like if ethnic studies was able to conjure a centripetal force, one that “pushed fields together rather than apart—even as we valued the discomfort and unease that comes with relentless interrogation of cherished narratives and concepts.” The internal, intramural and dialogic conversations in the field become valuable precisely because they open up the field to question the conventional assumptions surrounding the concepts and discourses of the “transnational,” “diaspora” and “civil rights.”

In her chapter, “Native American Landscapes on Canvas and Stage,” Birgit Däwes discusses the Native American landscapes in the *documenta* International Art Exhibition in Kassel, Germany, which is not usually a place to expect Native American topics. Founded in 1955 and organized

every five years, the *documenta* is considered the most important exhibition of contemporary art—featuring in its history all the *enfants terribles* of the mainstream, from Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Beuys to Georg Baselitz and Bruce Nauman. Yet beside the usual hubbub of public outrage and scandal that often accompany contemporary art, the *documenta* has also had a history of substantial political statements and finer nuances, which often require a closer look. Däwes uses one of those installations, which was part of 2008 summer's exhibition in Kassel, to illustrate that approaching Native American landscapes is never an easy venture—especially not for non-Native people, and it requires precisely the attention, patience, and willingness to listen to what this work of art promotes.

Joni Adamson's "Gardens in the Desert: Migration, Diaspora and Food Sovereignty in the Work of Native North American Women Writers" explores the growing number of Native North American women writers who are linking food, justice and human rights in their fiction and poetry. These cultural productions are drawing attention to a growing movement that has alternatively been called the "local foods," "slow foods," "food justice," or "food sovereignty movement" and they are provocatively pointing to the emergence of Indigenous groups throughout the Americas which are working to restore traditional foodways. Adamson is able to strike a balance between scholarship and social practice and activism and has contributed significantly to eco-criticism, environmentalism, and the critical discourse of food justice and global commons. Among the authors she examines are Leslie Marmon Silko, Laura Tohe, and Luci Tapahonso.

In his chapter, "'Indians All Over the Place': Diane Glancy, Jim Barnes, and Carter Revard," Robert Lee takes three major contemporary Native American authors, Glancy, Barnes and Revard, to argue that their writings situate Native awareness—and memory—well beyond the United States. Across her voluminous output Glancy can write about not only Cherokee heritage or the rural and small-town midwest, but also Native first-hand encounter with Germany or Australia. Barnes writes France, Germany, Asia into a Choctaw and other Native-shadowed body of verse. Revard brings a long-apprenticed sense of England into relationship with his Ponca/Osage roots and family. The title-phrase—Indians All Over the Place—is from a celebrated Simon Ortiz poem. It carries an apt resonance. The implications are those of "Indians" in the world, indeed the world as "Indian," and in authorship full of memorable turn and feat. This chapter brings together three considerable Native voices, three Native shelves of experience, as they operate under global auspices.

Chapter five to seven form another circle of dialogues and conversations and altogether they provide an alternative rubric of the “trans-Indigenous” to replace the problematic concept of “trans-nationalism.” Whereas recent work in transnational and American Studies questions the hierarchical demarcation of the center and the margin, the “major” and the “minor,” the intellectual endeavors in this volume put forth multiple juxtapositions to formulate Indigenous-to-Indigenous relationships and connections, which significantly make up for the lack in contemporary transnational and American Studies. The three chapters in the second part examine and/or theorize the Indigenous difference in contemporary transnational scholarship by navigating uncharted spaces of the Pacific, exploring notions of Indigeneity as it circulates through geographical, cultural, political, and historical flows of people(s), things, knowledge, power—between islands and continents. The oceanic perspectives put forth in these chapters complement the continental ways of thinking about Indigeneity and transnationality. If the U.S. in effect incorporates a geographical space that is constantly bumping up against and expanding into Latin America and the Pacific Rim, the message from the Native Pacific can be inspiring: Neighboring communities have always exchanged ideas and products, often across vast ocean distances. Along these routes of interconnection was a large world in which the Native peoples mingled, unhindered by boundaries erected much later by imperial powers.

Chadwick Allen’s chapter “Transnational Native American Studies? Why Not Studies that are Trans-Indigenous?” sets up the critical framework for trans-Indigenous criticism and conversations. Allen questions the concept of a “Transnational Native American Studies” and discloses that the conventional theories of the transnational, usually grounded in American Studies, operate on a “vertical binary” with Indigenous peoples on the margins. As we work toward a new model, which Allen calls the trans-Indigenous, we need to look at Indigenous texts on their own complex and evolving terms. Through a series of critical and interpretive engagements with examples of contemporary Indigenous arts and literature from the U.S., Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, Allen offers an alternative rubric of the “trans-Indigenous” for innovative work in Global Indigenous Studies.

In her chapter, “Toward Trans-Pacific Eco-poetics: Three Indigenous Texts,” Hsinya Huang employs Allen’s concept of “trans-Indigenous” as a method to examine the dynamic and shifting relationship between land and sea that allows Indigenous literatures in the trans-Pacific context to be engaged in their eco-poetic complexity. Drawing on Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale* (fictionalized Makah, North American west coast), Witi



Ihimara's *Whale Rider* (Maori, New Zealand/Aotearoa) and Syaman Rapongan's (Aboriginal Taiwan Tao) *天空的眼睛* [*Eyes of the Sky*], Huang aims to convene a shared oceanic poetics across diverse Indigenous cultures in the Pacific region. The "trans-Pacific" and "trans-Indigenous" ecopoetics foregrounds an alter/native model of reckoning space, place, and time that both requires an active and participatory engagement with the Pacific seascapes and invokes the planetary consciousness. In comparative readings of these trans-Pacific texts, Huang joins Allen to shake loose a critical paradigm of center-to-center dialogues, i.e., of trans-Indigeneity vis-à-vis transnationality.

In her chapter, "Ecological Indigeneity in Global Indigenous Discourse," Tzu-I Chung explores the centrality of environmental sustainability to Indigenous community building and belonging in both U.S. and China through cross-cultural comparison across the Pacific. She examines the ways in which popular literary and media representations of ecological Indigeneity and environmentalism are implicated in social justice issues. Amidst the age of global environmental crisis, why has Indigeneity in the United States and China (two of the world's largest consumers of natural resources) been consistently connected to ecological wisdom? She juxtaposes the concept of ecological Indigeneity in Disney's *Pocahontas* and Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* as part of the trans-Indigenous discourse, which intersects with global environmentalist work.

Indigeneity, like globalization, as they pair up in Chung's chapter, is a slippery term, which can be understood in a variety of ways with different political implications. The idea of Indigeneity in the first seven chapters of this volume denotes a grounded and placed sense. Indigenism, in this sense, "derives its meaning not from its contrast with the global, but from substantial autonomous claims to a content that foregrounds an almost absolute attachment to place understood concretely" (Dirlik 16). Contextualizing contemporary Indigenous literatures and arts across national boundaries, we seek to de-center both "America" and the United States in relation to the rest of the world. To think of "Indigeneity" as "articulated" is, as James Clifford insightfully comments, to "recognize the diversity of cultures and histories that currently make claims under this banner" (6). Through envisioning an expanding network of Indigenous coalition, these chapters formulate positive notions of global (trans)-Indigeneity, which in turn feed back into local native traditions.

Our purpose is two-fold. Whereas we emphasize the global/transnational flows of Indigenous ideas and values, to amend the lack of contemporary scholarship on transnationalism, it is equally crucial to recognize and articulate "internal transnationalism" (V. Deloria and Lytle 1984), a story

of trans-cultural conflict, conflation and contestation as migrants and immigrants across national and cultural boundaries encounter one another inside the geography of the settlers' nation-states, specifically, Australia and the United States. The last three chapters look at just how migrants and immigrants put multiple forms of trans-cultural possibility into a transnational context. They put forth ideas and concepts from the perspectives of the migrants and immigrants, which weigh our thinking toward the global and point in different directions from the Indigenous articulation.

In her chapter, "A Migrant in His Own Country: the Early Fiction of E.L. Grant Watson," Angeline O'Neill discusses the difficult yet fruitful position of English writer, biologist and metaphysician E.L. Grant Watson (1885-1970) whose experiences among some of Western Australia's First Nations paradoxically transported him into the position of "migrant" upon his return to England. When he arrived in Western Australia, Watson embodied colonialist values and assumed the superiority of an educated and civilized English mind, apparently reflected in the superiority of a written tradition over an oral tradition. Initially, Watson sought to represent Western Australian landscapes and the Indigenous people who inhabited them: landscapes which, he believed, had not been domesticated by European signification or codified by its ideology, in which it was possible to uncover subtle correspondences between various ways of knowing and writing about Nature and the Self. Utterly disconcerted by his spiritual and socio-cultural experiences, however, he fled Western Australia after only three years. He spent the rest of his life trying to make sense of his experiences there, which had drawn him into a new country, geographically and metaphorically.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's chapter, "'As an American, however': A (Anglophone) Poetics of My Own and the Wit of the Form," illustrates her poetics, politics of her poetics, and tactical poesis by analyzing her own poems, in particular, those that address directly an American present and future and the U.S. national circumstance and refuse to declare their full identity in this American grain. Shaped poem by poem, eclectically receptive to the worlds of poems that arrive from diverse and divergent literary histories, her processual poetics remain fundamentally Anglophone, its materials transnational, and its identity tactically American. The chapter should be viewed as part of the poet's endeavor to organize her life story and to re-form and re-vision her life in terms of her poetry and poetics—Lim puts together a life which overflows national and cultural borders and a story which exceeds the scope of national literary paradigms.

Kun Jong Lee's chapter, "Korean-Language American Literary Studies: An Overview," suggests that U.S.-based scholars have tried to define the cultural identity of Korean America while valorizing Anglophone writings and neglecting Korean-language writings. Lee argues that since Korean-language writings reflect the real voices of the Korean immigrants defining themselves on their own terms, we cannot sacrifice either of the writings in any proper study of Korean American cultural and literary landscape. To neglect either of them would be to miss the significant half of Korean American literature. The two rivers of Korean American literature have met in one of the two homes, Korea, since Korean readers have read Anglophone and Korean-language writings at the same time and Koreanists have started to discuss Korean American literature in Korean *and* English in the same context. The two streams of Korean American literature will meet also in Korean Americans' other home, the United States, when more Korean-language writings are translated into English for the Anglophone reading public and are examined together with Anglophone writings by U.S.-based scholars, who will ultimately enter into a border-crossing dialogue with Korea-based scholars and diversify the critical studies of the transnational literature of Korean America.

Our interest in transnational/Indigenous studies calls for conversations and dialogues across national and cultural borders. The transnational engagement in the ongoing debate over the comparative value of nationalism versus transnationalism is evident. Within the created intellectual space, this volume examines diverse critical approaches to the idea of transnationality vis-à-vis trans-Indigeneity by integrating contributions from scholars in North America, Asia, and Europe. Whereas the study of (Native) America and ethnicities can no longer be confined to the borders of the United States, not even to the transatlantic world, this volume shows timeliness of discussions around the transnational and the Indigenous. The volume addresses the issues of place and mobility, aesthetics and politics, as well as identity and community, which have emerged in the framework of global/transnational (Indigenous) studies. The authors of this volume reorient understandings of transnationality and Indigeneity from diverse angles, providing significant impulses especially in the fields of American and comparative Indigenous studies, ethnic studies, and global cultural studies, which impact on the practice and the transformation of intellectual work in global American Studies.

It is crucial that we embrace a broader scope to see how the critical paradigm of American studies can change and expand by taking part in a broader world of theoretical insights. With critical attention to the problematics of the transnational in relation to Indigeneity, we seek to

reshape, challenge, and/or supplement “transnationalism” as a significant analytical category in relation to Indigenous scholarship. This critical enterprise largely depends on comparative/trans-Indigenous frameworks, through which to continue the never-ending work of interpretive engagements with examples of contemporary literatures and scholarship from the U.S., Canada, Mexico-the U.S. borders, Pacific Islands, the transatlantic world, and from Austronesian and Aotearoa/New Zealand contexts. This is an ambition that demands audacious spirits and rigorous engagements to put “multicultural-transnational”/Indigenous communities across waters and borders in productive dialogues and, in so doing, to de-center the United States in relation to the rest of the Indigenous world.

As a whole, these chapters highlight the significance of conceptualizing a comparative/trans-cultural paradigm for crossing over the national, regional and international boundaries. We push against the binary, hierarchical relationship between the major and the minor, the center and the periphery, to articulate, recognize and/or theorize alternative trans-border and trans-cultural experiences of place and mobility in the Americas and across the Pacific. Such research celebrates the networking and coalition of peoples as well as the circulation of ideas and cultures, which we believe is crucial to contemporary transnational and American studies scholarship. It offers inputs based on local specificities, experiences and realities to supplement transnational approaches to imperialism, diaspora, post-coloniality, and globalization. It seeks to not only present work in transnational Native American and ethnic studies and investigate the transnational dimensions of the field itself but invite further discussions on how the question of the transnational is entwined with those of representation, culture, ethnicity, academic power/knowledge relations, emergent disciplines, discursive formation and field work. No one interpretation holds the whole truth. Finally, we contend that in order for trans-Indigenous/trans-national literature and scholarship to be nested in our academic inquiry, we need to create aggregates that rest on a platform broader and more robustly empirical than the relatively arbitrary and demonstrably ephemeral borders of the nation. These aggregates require alternative geography and alternative histories, which are to be examined, transformed and translated from trans-Indigenous/trans-national experiences and realities. The transnational axis bespeaks a continuum still evolving, and stretching as indefinitely into the past as it does into the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

CONQUEST HISTORIES AND NARRATIVES  
OF DISPLACEMENT:  
CIVIL RIGHTS, DIASPORA,  
AND TRANSNATIONALISM  
IN ETHNIC AND AMERICAN STUDIES

PHILIP DELORIA

**Introduction: Three Scenes**

It is October, 2006, and I am at the American Studies Association Annual meeting in Oakland, California. The theme is “The United States from Inside and Out: Transnational American Studies.” I arrive in Oakland thinking that I have a good working definition of “transnational.” The meeting features almost seventy panels invoking the concept (and though I do not count the uses of “transnational” in individual papers, some attendees do, and they report that the number rivals the high marks put up by “hegemony” in the late 1980s and early 1990s). I leave Oakland in a state of mild confusion. I still think I know what I mean by “transnational,” but I’m not sure I know what anyone else means by it. Transnational blends easily with “international” and “global.” It exchanges meanings with “borders,” “abroad,” “circuits,” “routes,” and the conference theme of “inside and out.” It gestures in substantial ways to “the Black Atlantic,” “diaspora,” and the “postnational.” It links up with many other forms of “trans.” It seems very fashionable and very powerful. I am feeling overwhelmed, and maybe a little bit queasy.

It is June 2007, and I am in Kaohsiung, Taiwan for an international (as opposed, I suppose, to transnational) conference on “Diaspora and Ethnic Studies.” The weather is hot and clear, and I hear expansive work on many different diasporic movements—some of which you will have read in this volume. Following the meeting, many attendees visit two groups of

Taiwan's indigenous people, the Bunun and the Thao. These peoples have endured multiple colonialisms, played out over the course of centuries. The international character of the conference participants—and our shared interest in diasporic movements—stood in stark juxtaposition to the rootedness of these indigenous people. In Taiwan, I was not confused about the central concept of “diaspora.” As in Oakland, however, I departed the meeting feeling uneasy about a popular and productive intellectual tool. How, I wondered, should ethnic studies—and American Indian studies in particular—engage the transnational and the diasporic, with their focused emphases on motion, movement, and the problematization of national geographies and identities?

It is fall 2009, and my daughter's American high school is putting on its annual musical theater production. The school is new, and it is an institution fully informed by the moment of multiculturalism and diversity in American education. It has an African American principal, a diverse workforce, and a student body that is both “hyphenated-American” and international in nature. The show is the 1946 Irving Berlin musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*. It takes as its setting Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and it concerns a romance between the trick sharpshooters Annie Oakley and Frank Butler. During the 1885-86 season, the Lakota Sioux leader Sitting Bull traveled with the Wild West and he came to know and like Annie Oakley—which is how he comes to be one of the characters in the musical. The original script, by Dorothy and Herbert Fields, is rich with the comic schtick that migrated from vaudeville to mid-century stages and film studios, and Sitting Bull serves as one of the primary vehicles for this banter (that's a “heap big heap” of money, he says at one point; or “Great White Father is Indian Giver”—it's that kind of talk). Some of the original material—the song “I'm an Indian Too,” for example—has become so dated that it has been removed from contemporary productions as offensive. Indeed, the high school students perform a 1999 rewrite that aims to ameliorate these kinds of concerns.

Some of the high school parents, however, feel that the rewriting has not gone far enough and that, even if the lines and the lyrics have been mildly updated, the ways in which student actors are performing the Indian characters reflects old stereotypes. They wonder, in public fora, how administrators plan to address these issues, and they are disappointed by the school's response: the music is so good (it is an *Irving Berlin* musical, after all!) and it has been *updated* (said slowly and patiently, as if to a small child) so that anything offensive has surely been removed. In that context, says the school, the overriding issue at stake is not “cultural sensitivities” but rather freedom of artistic expression for the students and



director. Freedom of expression is translated quickly into “freedom of speech,” which means that the exchange becomes (ironically, given the tendencies of the American high school to censor students) an issue of civil rights. And in the context of the multiculturalism wrought by four decades of activism and Ethnic Studies scholarship—the context of the school itself—“civil rights” is a particularly powerful position from which to argue. One by one, most of the parents peel away from protesting group. I am surprised—though not much—at how easily a multicultural school proves unable to imagine that its diversity might include American Indians, or that it might even be accountable to hypothetical Indians. (This, after all, is a school that refuses to let its athletic teams wear black, for fear of the racialized meanings that might inher in football or softball uniforms.) As surprising, however, is the way that the discourse moves so seamlessly from pleas for cultural sensitivity to the First Amendment rights of students and teachers to say, or perform, what they wanted. Two central discourses of multiculturalism—respect and rights—are pitted against one another in ways that make me wonder if the moment of ethnic studies itself has passed, and, if so, what it all meant.

Ethnic studies remains a vital enterprise. But these three moments—each of which started a little “worry bell” in my head—have something in common that speaks to the present moment. Concepts such as “transnational,” “diaspora” and “civil rights” offer critical analytical sites for contemporary work in ethnic studies, and in a broader range of scholarship in humanities and social science fields as well. Even as they become common currency, however, they sit uneasily in relation to indigenous studies. This uneasiness allows us to understand some of the multiple ambivalences present in the collective enterprise we call “ethnic studies.” Indeed, these things might lead us to question the ongoing coherence of the ethnic studies project itself, particularly in relation to the vitality of its constituent fields. For each of these concepts carries within it certain predispositions that play out unevenly across distinct ethnic studies areas. Some of the resulting ambivalences are *internal*, unfolding within discrete areas—Native American studies, for instance. Some of them are *intramural*, revealing fissures among the interdisciplinary groups that have come to make up the familiar institutional models for Ethnic Studies: African American, Latino/a, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander American, Arab American. And some of them are *dialogic*, reflecting broader intellectual currents in the fields that provide disciplinary structures for Ethnic Studies work. Diaspora, transnationalism, and civil rights by no means make up the universe of complication in and around Ethnic Studies. But each of these tropes—and it will be part of my

argument that they function not simply as interpretive tools or political claims, but also as powerful narrative devices—has the potential to reveal something critical about the relation between Ethnic Studies, its constituent areas, and the master narratives that drive our sense of United States history, our understanding of what defines “the human” in a global world, and the ways we think about nations, sovereignty, movement, and rights.

I’ll begin with a recapitulation of what we might call the Ethnic Studies project, then turn to a linked pair of evocative moments in American historical narrative—Patricia Limerick’s western regionalism, and its failure to alter significantly the standard form of the United States history survey course—in order to establish central tensions surrounding “ethnic studies” (and particularly the narrative structures derived from African American studies), American Indian studies, and the concept of “civil rights.” Those tensions, I’ll suggest, are part of a larger discursive world of historical memory and political action, one that also produces parallel unease around concepts such as “transnationalism” or “diaspora.”

## Ethnic Studies

As an institutional practice, Ethnic Studies has an origin story, and anyone involved in the field can recite its outline. The story begins, almost always, in 1968, at San Francisco State University, when student strikes led to the creation of a School (later College) of Ethnic Studies and four constituent departments: Black Studies, Raza Studies, American Indian Studies, and Asian American Studies. The University of California at Berkeley followed suit the next year, and from this point of geographical and political origin, ethnic studies spread to other institutions across the country.

Like any narrative of origins, this particular story lays out a coherent set of shared understandings: Ethnic Studies arises out of political activism aimed at countering a range of repressions directed at specific groups of people. It links itself intellectually to third world decolonization movements. It rests within the academic structure of the university, and is thus concerned with knowledge production and the politics of knowledge itself. It emphasizes—or insists upon—bridges and commitments to local communities. Those communities are defined by identity, and that identity is largely racial, though the process through which groups are marked as “different” requires theories of *ethnos*—and thus “ethnic” studies. In this respect, the post-1968 movement we think of today as “Ethnic Studies” is quite distinct from older intellectual traditions that focused on so-called

“white ethnics”—those Irish, Italian, German, Jewish and other immigrant communities that so often served as the subjects of mid-century sociological studies. The “four racial food groups” so central to the San Francisco State University story established the key categories through which institutional Ethnic Studies could be conceptualized. Though the coherence of each of these groups has been problematized by an increasing recognition of internal diversity and cross-category connections, the four continue to serve as the structural bread-and-butter of the field.

If Ethnic Studies has an origin story, it has only the barest outlines of a master narrative. For if the origin story established certain key concepts, it also served as a point of departure for a variable set of genealogies and beginnings. Older fields, such as African American Studies, looked to histories and institutional structures set in motion long before 1969. In some cases—notably the Universities of Michigan and California, Berkeley—this meant greater strength than other “studies” groups and, in the end, separate and largely autonomous programs in African American or African diasporic studies. A “younger” field (institutionally speaking) such as Asian American Studies found itself trying to make coherent a profusion of national identity groups, and to come to terms with the growing interest and reach of Pacific Islander studies, with which it was often (and often uncomfortably) paired (Diaz 2004, 183-208). Some fields emphasized immigration and movement; others, like Native American Studies, longevity and indigeneity. Some Ethnic Studies programs built strength in the social sciences, while others turned more toward the humanities. In some places, Ethnic Studies became a full-fledged department; in others, an interdisciplinary program; in still others, a set of free-standing units representing the most common Ethnic Studies groups. In short, the coherence found in Ethnic Studies origins is qualified by the profusion of difference and possibility that have accompanied its development. It might even be the case that the apparent commonality rendered by the term “ethnic studies” is largely a fiction, one that only partially organized these disparate interests.

Dare we even try to imagine a history for the field as a whole? We might begin—in the most cautious way—by tracing three distinct changes over time, experienced in various ways by each of the ethnic studies areas: first, a shift from the cultural terrain of the 1960s and 1970s (which, coming at the end of the Civil Rights movement, emphasized race power, coherent identities, and political distinctiveness to the point of separatism), to the new world of the multicultural 1980s and 1990s. This new world looked to incorporate and tame difference, while ostensibly—under the

banner of the keyword “diversity”—offering it a measure of respect and power. For some, the institutional growth within the academy during the later period and the shift to multicultural politics seem like a parallel movement, or perhaps the product of interwoven causes and effects. For others, however, it seems like a devil’s bargain, in which institutional resources for program building were exchanged for an attenuation of more radical political claims. While it is easy to think of these changes as a kind of “sell out,” it is not at all clear that the deal (though it’s hard to believe that anyone actually experienced it as such) was not, in fact, worthwhile in some ways.

Second, one might argue that there has been a slow shift from the politics of the collective to the politics of the individual, with a concomitant rise in self-reflexive questioning of categories that functioned well politically, but that actually hindered deeper understandings of social processes. Even as the rhetoric of “the collective”—and the sincere desire for collective politics—remained, ethnic studies scholars began to interrogate more deeply the category of race itself. They considered it in “intersectional” relations to gender, class, sexuality, and other categories of analysis. They bracketed the relational structure of “white-other” and began to look at relations *between* and *among* the various groups: Black-Asian; American Indian-African American; Latino/a-Asian. They examined “whiteness” as a racial formation in and of itself. They broke down the familiar groups into smaller subcategories. Latino/a studies, for example, has made clear distinctions between Mexican-American and Chicano Studies, and has done so in relation to Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other Caribbean-origin groups, as well as Central American and other Latin American peoples. Scholars interrogated family relations and racial crossing, and began to think of “mixed race” as a new kind of category. In this context, the old questions of racial subjectivity raised by W.E.B. DuBois and Franz Fanon, Jose Vasconcelos and Gloria Anzaldua, Gerald Vizenor, and others took on new power and importance. These questions often had the effect of shifting the subject of ethnic studies to closer focus on the individual, the family, and the community. Microhistories, self-reflections, and experiential ethnography became increasingly important ways of making knowledge.

Third, ethnic studies was swept up in intellectual movements that aimed to rethink histories, sociologies, literatures, and politics in broader, often global terms. At the same time that analyses went small, in other words, they also jumped up to the macro level, with new interests in globalization and post-nationalism, migration and movements, and the regional “basin” studies that took the Atlantic world or Pacific cultural

studies as the objects of analysis. Contemporary interests in diaspora and transnationalism are important dimensions of this global and international intellectual development, which can also be seen as a return to the third world roots of early Ethnic Studies.

If you could extract from such origin stories and historical accountings a singular nugget of shared meaning, you might find yourself pointed toward the continued centrality of politically committed scholarship—expressed across a range of strategies—on the part of ethnic studies practitioners. In this sense, ethnic studies coheres most powerfully around its political functions and commitments—and most particularly, around the politics of knowledge production and teaching that are always central to the academy. Current practitioners in the field take these things as the ground for a sometimes obsessive discussion concerning interdisciplinarity and methodology. There is an unsatisfied hunger, I think it safe to say, for a methodology that is as politically oppositional as the field itself claims to be. If one's goal is to change the world, then it makes sense to ask how history or literary criticism or ethnography can produce such change. And so old methods are discarded; new possibilities are embraced, as ethnic studies scholars seek to negotiate the seeming disjuncture between political dreams and hegemonic methods. The mix is volatile, of course, for there are older strategies that continue to serve perfectly well (despite some inclinations to throw *everything* away) and new innovations (despite hyperbolic boosterism) that fail to live up to their promise. (P. Deloria 2009)

In this context, the power of innovative tropes such as “transnationalism” and “diaspora” is deeply appealing. Something less than actual methods (to say nothing of the philosophical and historiographical structures that characterize *methodology*), “idea tropes” such as “empire,” “borderlands,” and “states of emergency,” energize intellectual exchange, provide powerful critical platforms, and put wide-ranging interdisciplinary fields such as Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and American Studies in productive dialogue. They hold out a promise: perhaps here, conceptually, the food groups can find a common table. Beyond origin stories, field development narratives, and political commitments, then, one also finds an ethnic studies dream of coherence in the linkage of utopian methodological desire and in the concrete idea tropes, conceptual frames, keyword concepts (all reasonable ways of describing these formations) that power intellectual innovation.

These idea tropes are nurtured by shared assumptions and discourses, however, and they function to (re)produce those discourses. They reflect not simply intellectual innovation, but also deeply embedded narrative

choices that point cultural and political analysis in certain directions and not others. When we use these idea tropes, we have no intention of foreclosing other possibilities. And yet, in their function as narrative building blocks, they do in fact point to certain foreclosures—or at least attenuations. This strategy of foreclosure is, quite simply, what narrative does—what it must do—in order to produce relatively intelligible story lines in the face of deep complexity.

It's not simply that when we say "diaspora," we erase other possibilities. We don't necessarily erase anything. We do, however, put a tiny bit of weight on the diasporic side of a scale. As that side of the scale settles slowly under the weight of our collective intellectual work, we begin to naturalize its discourses, to think less about the other possibilities, to establish a common sense—even around concepts meant to open up critical discussion. In other words, the conceptual apparatuses that we build to deconstruct relations of power and meaning (and, on occasion, to build practical politics) have narrative weight and authority that can sometimes take us by surprise. And those moments of surprise may make us a little... well, a little uneasy. As an example of this kind of narrative commonsense, we might recall the protests against the high school musical and to the effective counter offered by the commonsense built around "civil rights." "Civil rights" reveals key logics behind the global notion of "human rights." It offers an important unifying trope for the disparate sensibilities of ethnic studies. It structures the progressive master narratives of U.S. history—which are themselves so often mapped onto the rest of the planet. Who could argue with "civil rights?" To get to this question, I want to take a couple of detours, both designed to illustrate the ways big historical narratives shape the relations among ethnic studies fields.

## **Old Frontiers, New Frontiers**

In 1987, Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest* offered a primer for rewriting familiar American historical narratives through the lens of multiculturalism. Limerick's central target was Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis," which suggested that American character, in the form of individualism and democracy, had been formed on a succession of frontiers. These frontiers plunged white Europeans into the primitive wilderness. As they rebuilt social and political institutions, they retraced the steps of social evolution, building new structures that were distinctly "American." Unfortunately for Americans, as Turner argued, this critical process had ended in 1890, when white Easterners had