

Introduction: Some Critical Challenges for Emerging Indigenous Studies

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Studies focused on the histories, cultures, and languages of the native peoples in Latin America have developed through the apogee, the crisis and the subsequent questioning of the politics of multiculturalism. Multicultural discourse has constituted a modality of limited incorporation of indigenous peoples as “ethnicities” or “ethnic minorities” within the design of the nation states in the region.¹ At the same time, in recent years, many academics have assumed a stronger interest in the promotion of decolonization in their scholarly methodologies and frameworks as they study—and work with—indigenous communities and subjects.

The emergence of a significant group of native intellectuals and scholars, especially in the two past decades, has led to a questioning of neocolonial relations in the very field of intellectual activity.² This critical impulse has created the conditions under which today an important number of non-indigenous scholars aim to establish—as part of an epistemological and methodological decision—collaborative and inter-cultural relationships with their indigenous counterparts. Reflections guided toward fostering this decolonizing endeavor have slowly taken shape in several disciplines, from archeology, anthropology, political science, and law, to linguistics, literature, and cultural studies.

As guest editor of the *On the Profession* section of this issue of *LASA Forum*, I have invited some of the scholars who, in recent decades, have been invested in fostering new ways to critically engage indigenous intellectual agency from within the institutional settings of academia, to engage in reflection and debate on some of the key issues of this decolonization.

Parallel to these collaborative and inter-cultural processes, indigenous leaders, public intellectuals, scholars, writers, and artists have progressively positioned themselves within different disciplines or debates, thus exercising their self-representation as active participants in local and international forums. This is the new conversation on *indigeneidades* that opens up the twenty-first century, in which the work of Nahua, Maya, Quechua, Aymara and Mapuche intellectuals—to name a few—play a critical role in the contemporary academic scene. This conversation finds its antecedents in spaces forged by independent indigenous scholars, mostly outside the institutional university circuits in Latin America. Here I refer to the small, modest and even precarious, but ambitious collectives created by native researchers during the 1980s or by the early 1990s, such as the Taller de Historia Oral Andina, an Aymara research group established in 1983 in La Paz, Bolivia; the Centro de Estudios y Documentación Mapuche Liwen, a Mapuche collective founded in 1989 in Temuco, southern Chile; or, more recently, through the foundations of indigenous and intercultural universities in Ecuador and Bolivia.³

These initiatives are borne by the will of native intellectuals to translate the principle of self-determination into the field of knowledge production, and thus become agents in the formulation of concepts, approaches and narratives in the linguistic, cultural, political, and historical terrains. Directly or indirectly, these endeavors inspire new generations of indigenous students, who pursue degrees in higher education, and, at the same time, situate their research and approaches in engagement with their peoples or communities. The articulation of this new indigenous horizon of intellectual empowerment traces a promising horizon.

As American Indian scholar Robert Warrior states, “The decision to exercise intellectual sovereignty provides a crucial moment in the process from which resistance, hope, and, most of all, imagination issue.”⁴

This new academic conversation, from the vantage point of indigenous studies, has also created intersections between intellectual producers from *Abya Yala* and their peers from the circuit of Native American scholars from the United States and aboriginal intellectuals from other regions of the globe. The recent formation of the Abya Yala Working Group within the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association reflects the reality and the potential of this dialogue.⁵ Previously, the discussion was predominantly oriented toward non-indigenous academic referents of international academia (i.e., postcolonial theory, subaltern studies). Many times these linkages implied a disconnection from the work of scholars and intellectuals from native communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or other regions of the world.

Today it seems that these multiple conversations are taking off within different local, national, and transnational spaces. Collaboration among indigenous and non-indigenous researchers constitutes an intellectually appealing path. Does this trend imply a new academic politics of “recognition” toward indigenous scholarship? Are we witnessing the end of the epistemological and historical cycle of situating native intellectuals as mere *informants*? Do they have much more agency than before in the design and authorship of studies about the languages, cultures, and histories of their peoples? How does the logic of this recognition relate to those individuals who hold the social status of “keepers of traditional knowledge” in their community contexts?

Emerging indigenous studies—outside or within academia—might offer some answers to the aforementioned questions. In this reflection, a basic point of departure is the existence of a native scholarship formation process, certainly still imperfect and precarious, but existing and meaningful. In this respect, the articles by Pablo Marimán (Mapuche) and Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj (Maya) provide insightful elaborations on the present and future challenges for indigenous researchers and intellectuals in the realms of scholarship and knowledge production. These challenges urge us not only to historically look forward, but also to recover and engage indigenous intellectual traditions that have been obliterated by mainstream academic discussions.

This dossier of *LASA Forum* is an invitation to bring attention to this process. It is, above all, an exercise in indigenous and non-indigenous dialogue—an exercise in thinking in intercultural and collaborative ways about issues and questions that are crucial to this field, its relationship to Latin American studies, and to disciplinary and trans-disciplinary trends in global scholarship.

Endnotes

¹ In this regard, see Charles Hale's *Más que un Indio—More than an Indian: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 2006).

² For an excellent and thought-provoking reflection of these neocolonial relations in the sphere of academic knowledge production, see Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's *Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa: una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Tinta Limón, 2010), especially from pages 57 to 69.

³ For an analysis of the intellectual and historical role of the Taller de Historia Oral Andina, see “Forging an Indigenous Counterpublic Sphere: The Taller de Historia Oral Andina in Bolivia” by Marcia Stephenson, in *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2002), pp. 99-118. For an account on the experience of the Centro Liwen, see Pablo Marimán's contribution to this issue of *LASA Forum*.

⁴ See Robert Warrior's *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 124.

⁵ The Abya Yala Working Group was officially institutionalized at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) in its meeting in Sacramento, on May 19-21, 2011. ■