

Reflecting on the 2015 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Meeting

Dina Gilio-Whitaker

From June 4-6, 2015 the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) held its seventh annual conference in Washington D.C., hosted at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Capitol Hill. As academic conferences go, this one is probably small compared to other more mainstream academic disciplines (around 1,000 attendees), but despite the relative youth of the organization the meeting could be said to be well attended. This was the third NAISA conference I've attended—the first being in 2008, which was the second meeting (in Athens, Georgia), where the name of the organization was voted on by the membership. I also attended the conference last year in Austin, Texas. It is obvious to me that the organization is gaining traction and is being taken seriously by scholars outside the United States and Canada.

The location of the meeting offered interesting side events. For example, the day before the conference started, special tours were given at the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). I was not able to attend either of the tours, but I was present for the opening reception, which was held at NMAI. On hand to give opening statements were museum director Kevin Gover (former Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs) and Kevin Washburn, current Assistant Secretary. Both expressed a sense of pride, not only for being able to have the meeting on their "turf" as it were, but the important work being done by Native scholars and upon which officials in the beltway depend for making the kinds of important decisions that affect all of Indian country. Referring to recent anti-Indian rhetoric by Rep. Don Young (R-Alas-

ka), Gover noted the resurgence "of ideas that, frankly, we haven't seen in a very long time." He talked about a lack of understanding about the "Indian thing" among many in Congress, and emphasized the battles currently being waged by the National Congress of American Indians and Kevin Washburn on behalf of Indian country.

While holding the meeting in the power center of the United States (I think of it as the belly of the beast), symbolic of imperialism and histories of domination, the opening of the conference at the NMAI was the logical space to gather Native people and reinforced a sense of Native pride and survival, even if as Gover noted, the battles are still being fought. These aspects of Native life were also evident in virtually all of the research being presented throughout the three days of the conference. As an association member since almost the very beginning, I've observed ways the organization has grown and watched certain trends emerge in terms of the kinds of scholarship being produced. As an example, there seems to be growing attention paid to gender studies within the context of Native studies. Each year the conference features a special presidential session in which the association president can choose any form she/he would like the session to take. This year it was a simple plenary entitled "Feminism, Gender, Queerness, Sexuality: Keywords for Indigenous Studies?" Each of the four panelists—all known for their work in these areas—were queried in advance with a series of questions which they addressed with a prepared statement.

As its name suggests, NAISA tends to privilege research in Native American studies but is enthusiastically inclusive of research

from indigenous peoples outside the American and Canadian contexts. Panels included several from Hawaiian studies; also present were panels from Aotearoa (New Zealand Maori), a few Spanish language panels and presentations in Mexican and Latin American studies, one panel on Taiwanese indigenous studies, one on Japanese Ainu, one on Chamorro studies (Guam), a few on Sami studies, and one on Israeli settler colonialism. Topics encompassed all areas of Native studies including education, healthcare, transnational and comparative indigenous studies, racism, genocide, gender and sexuality, ecology and science, literature, performance and visual art, just to name a few.

Of particular note was a roundtable discussion entitled “Postmortem on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples [WCIP],” featuring Steve Newcomb, Glen Morris, Debra Harry, and Reed Zephier. Most of the panelists were involved in the North American Caucus preparatory process for the 2014 WCIP, which was stymied when these members vociferously called for the withdrawal of the caucus’s participation. The panel topic—implying a death of the UNDRIP and WCIP process—thus represented a rather skewed view of the WCIP (which in actuality was attended by all the other of the seven global regional indigenous groups) since there was no representation from the majority of those who did participate, or those who were in disagreement with this particular cohort. There were many people from the North American region and beyond who did not agree with the withdrawal, and the dissemination of information about the WCIP would have been more well-rounded if some of those perspectives were represented.

I was at the conference to present a paper co-authored by myself and my colleagues at the Center for World Indigenous Studies, Dr.

Rudolph Rýser and Heidi Bruce. The title of the research project is “Fourth World Theory and Methods of Inquiry;” and was recently selected for inclusion in a forthcoming volume titled *Handbook on Indigenous Knowledge and Research Methodologies in Developing Nations* edited by Patrick Ngulube (Ph.D.), professor at the School of Interdisciplinary Research and Postgraduate Studies (SIRGS) and the University of South Africa. The paper began as an idea after I returned from last year’s NAISA meeting in Austin, Texas. Struck by the lack of engagement with Fourth World Theory by Native scholars, I was convinced that the discipline could benefit greatly by being exposed to this important concept and saw the NAISA conference as a good place to begin sharing it. The project was originally proposed (and accepted) as a debate-style roundtable, which all three of us would attend, but plans changed and it was rerouted at the last minute into a panel on Indigenous Pedagogies as an individual paper presentation. The panel might not have been the best fit for our particular paper, but we were fortunate that we could be fit in somewhere else. At the same time, it was not completely inappropriate since Fourth World Theory has pedagogical applications, which we highlighted in the presentation.

All of the other presentations on the pedagogies panel featured case studies about how Native American studies was being taught in various settings, including a K-12 program with Native kids in Canada, a college program in Oregon, and even in a university program in Korea. Not surprisingly, the common thread among all the presentations on the panel was the fact that these programs are being taught from Native perspectives. Even in Korea where the students are both Korean and international, the Korean professor privileges a Native perspective when presenting topics that are

very complex in a foreign context, such as stereotypical media representations. At the end of the panel the chairperson commented that my presentation tied them all together by emphasizing and defining indigenous epistemologies (which all the presenters articulated in similar ways); teaching Native studies necessarily means privileging Native worldviews as we work to decolonize education and reclaim our indigenous knowledge systems.

On the last day of the conference I chaired a session titled “Resisting Boundaries.” As the title implies, presentations focused on ways Native peoples in North America simultaneously negotiate and resist imposed colonial borders of the states that surround them. The presentations pointed out that for indigenous peoples resistance occurs not just to geographically delineated ways of understanding nationhood (as is predominant in the modern state system) but also in Native ways of conceiving of the world: bodies of narratives that describe traditional use of lands, what it means to cross artificially-created borders that bifurcate traditional homelands, and how Native peoples interfered with processes of imperialism and colonialism. Resistance implies the assertion of sovereignty, even in practices such as beadwork and walking the land that counter the colonial politics of recognition. The session concluded with a lively discussion from the audience about the nature of nationhood and statehood, with particular critiques about Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as imagined community.

The conference was exhilarating and intellectually stimulating. The NAISA organization is growing in some very productive and creative ways; next year the meeting is set to be held in Honolulu at the University of Hawaii. It will undoubtedly deepen the bond between the disciplines of Native American studies with Pacific studies, Maori studies, and

Aborigine studies, expanding NAISA’s reach into indigenous communities beyond North America.

About the author



Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) is a writer and researcher in indigenous studies, having earned a bachelor’s degree in Native American Studies and a master’s degree in American Studies from the

University of New Mexico. Her work focuses on issues related to indigenous nationalism, self-determination and environmental justice. She is a frequent contributor to Indian Country Today Media Network, Native Peoples Magazine and was the first topic writer for About.com’s Native American History page. Prior to her writing career, Dina was an award-winning Native American artist (specializing in leather and beadwork and textile art). She has a background in traditional and alternative healing practices and is a certified massage practitioner. She has a special love for surfing and Polynesian dance. Dina is a Research Associate at the Center for World Indigenous Studies. She is currently working on a book project that compares Native American and Hawaiian indigeneity through the lens of American surf culture. More of her work can be viewed at www.dinagwhitaker.wordpress.com.

Cite this article as:

Gilio-Whitaker, D. (2015). Reflecting on the 2015 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Annual Meeting. *Fourth World Journal*, 14(1), 21-23