



WE HAVE WORDS FOR ART

A Symposium on Writing about Art by
Indigenous Peoples of the Americas

12 Point Program

“Native Arts Scholarship – How to, What and Why?”

Nancy Marie Mithlo, Ph.D., Professor, University of California Los Angeles, Department of Gender Studies and Affiliated Faculty, American Indian Studies Interdepartmental Program
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Premise - After generations of scholarly efforts, Native art as an academic field is still marginalized and trivialized. Our inequities have become normalized. Collectively we need to look at these patterns and act on them.

Vine Deloria, Jr.

Well, if I had it to do over again, I'd take an entirely different approach to a great many things. See, I didn't realize until a couple of years ago, the degree to which non-Indians are bound into their own cultural world view. I thought that there were a lot of avenues leading in and leading out and you could kind of draw them through that. But I say there is really no way to do that. What you really have to plan to do is attack the fundamental premises, the way they look at the world in order to even begin to communicate...

What we've got to do is develop a generation of very well-trained, well-educated Indians who can tear social science to pieces, really introduce all kinds of new questions and break up that mind-set as much as possible.

“Words and Place University of Arizona. A Conversation With Vine Deloria, Jr.”

<https://parentseyes.arizona.edu/node/891>

In the late 1970s, videotapes were produced at the University of Arizona in cooperation with KUAT-TV and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

12 Points to bring forward - 12 step program for addiction recovery.

“In Al-Anon we learn that we didn’t cause the alcoholism in our lives, we can’t control it, and we can’t cure it.”

Under decolonialism we learn that we didn’t cause the colonialism in our lives, we can’t control it, and we can’t cure it.

12 Point Program Notes

- 1) **Not one truth** – Multiculturalism is a common tactic to avoid addressing specific harm. Rush to decolonization, impulse to find a “solution.” With 574 + tribes many unrecognized – generalizations can be detrimental. Value of a collective “Indigenous” identity in academia may be a compromised position. Be specific about region, tribe, time period. Consider if group shows are productive. I have curated group shows, many of you have and I don’t mean to diminish the importance of this work, but has it served us?

If we must generalize then build an argument on the basis of an established multi-tribal platform – tribal college (Institute of American Indian Arts), professional organization (Native American Indigenous Studies Association), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the California Indian Basketweavers’ Association, the Indian Relocation Act, etc. In addition, due to massive fraud, adopting Indigenous identity as a general category has created confusion. Realize there are “unreliable” narrators. Do what academics do – research.

- 2) **Find patterns** – Look at what arguments have been made in the past and what arguments we are still making today. Tropes such as “tradition vs. modern,” “We are still here,” “Not a stereotype,” are not sufficient platforms to either produce or interpret Native arts. These are regressive categories of inquiry that, over the past three generations of Native arts scholarship, have not been shown to be productive. A willfully ignorant audience will remain willfully ignorant. Reference: “Entrance narrative” museum studies – visitors leave with the same ideas they had, reinforce their suppositions. Reference: “Seeing American Indians” research with Associate Professor of Cognitive Science Aleksandra Sherman.¹ Make complex art, make difficult arguments. Do not lower the bar for audience expectations. Be brilliant.
- 3) **More does not equal better.** To say that we must produce more scholars, have more Native curators, more exhibits as if in a game of numbers, underestimates both the resiliency of colonial systems of power and the intent of these systems. The exertion of power inherent in the grand master narrative that both commerce (galleries) and the educational platform of the museum follow, (both systems that thrive on purchasing prestige) is real. These institutions are not primarily invested in the sovereignty and health of Native nations.
- 4) **Your job is not to “fix” the museum enterprise or academic disciplines that demand a “rapprochement” between disciplines.** It is OK if systems of power fail. If, as I am

¹ A Sherman, L. Cupero, N.M. Mithlo, “Perspective-taking Increases Emotionality and Empathy but Does Not Reduce Harmful Biases Against American Indians: Converging Evidence from the Museum and Lab,” PLoS ONE 15:2 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0228784>

N.M. Mithlo, A. Sherman, “How Perspective-taking in Museums Can Lead to Increased Bias: A Call for ‘Less Certain’ Positions in American Indian Contexts,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63:3, (2020), pp. 353-369. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cura.12373>

proposing, museums as institutions are irretrievable as places of achieving social equity, why are Native arts professionals continuing to try to redeem them? Reference: “We Have All Been Colonized.”² Native communities did not create the problem of colonial discourse and dehumanizing collection practices, and they should not be expected to “fix” these problems by way of temporary exhibits, interventionist practices, advisory committees, student-curated exhibits, temporary and sporadic purchase practices, summer internships, guest curatorships, mentorships, or feel-good educational programming. I am advocating power sharing on significant levels.

- 5) **Academia will not save you.** Think of the academy as a particular social location that will enable you to gain skills in writing, rhetoric, diplomacy, and even how to navigate negative human traits such as jealousy, greed, delusion. As a student, your task is not to change the academy or to make it better. Your task is to gain your skills and move on as quickly as possible. Any time you spend on rehabilitating the academy can be better spent rewriting your papers, researching and writing. Let the administrators whose job it is to build social equity in the academy earn their salary by doing so. Bus stop. Your investment in time to rehabilitate the academy will not significantly advance you – your writing will.
- 6) **Be clear on intent and purpose of your work** – Know how to answer if someone asks you “How did you come to do this work?” “Why do you do this work?” Remind yourself what your core contribution is and use this as a gauge at every point where you decide to devote your skills and energy. You are beholden to your own path, not a path that an institution tells you to follow. The skill set you want to gain is your own personal and perhaps “best kept private” business. Seek and take opportunities you have identified. You do not need to justify or explain your path. Focus, focus, focus
- 7) **Self-knowledge is key to being a good writer.** This is a lifetime pursuit. The more you feel comfortable in yourself and your role, the stronger a writer you will become. In my experience with students, dependent clauses, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, lack of paragraph structure, even misspellings can be traced to insecurity and poor self-regard. If you regard yourself highly, you will ensure that your goal as a writer is excellence. If you regard yourself highly, you will welcome constructive feedback and edits. If you regard yourself highly, you will even allow yourself to fail. Failure is a part of learning.
- 8) **If you are not failing on a regular basis you are not fully invested OR your mentors are not fully invested.** Too many Native students are not engaged with seriously in their writing because their mentors - those responsible for their assessments - fail to engage their students deeply or meaningfully. Some of this reluctance may involve white guilt or fragility and is not the fault of the student. There is a systematic benefit of maintaining a status-quo and not challenging Native students or those students invested in decolonial practices. There is less risk and less work involved in poorly mentoring students that are directly challenging systems of inequity. “Failing up” is a symptom of status-quo

² Nancy M. Mithlo (2004) “We Have All Been Colonized”¹: Subordination and Resistance on a Global Arts Stage, *Visual Anthropology*, 17:3-4, 229-245.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08949460490468027>

instruction. Edits = love. ADD - Awareness of disabilities – Native students also passed on when what was required was assessment of learning styles and proper supports and accommodations to excel as a scholar.

- 9) **No one can give you a voice and no one can take away your voice.** Proactively network, build community, create, write, curate, edit, journal, exhibit, blog, TikTok! Your everyday manifestation of culture is insurance of your future and the future of the field. A reactive stance will not grow your practice nearly as efficiently. Remember to have fun, seek joy, protect yourself against “energy vampires.”
- 10) **Be aware of systematic oppression.** Racism often functions on the power of pathologizing the individual (individualized deficit theory) and overlooking historic and on-going colonial harms. Those who exert power as museum professionals, non-profit institutions, or scholars in the academy (meaning you simply have a professional position), be vigilant that your assessments are cognizant of lack of resources – journals devoted to Native arts, image banks, fellowships, publication subventions, endowed professorships, availability of faculty, publication series. Actively mentor by including students in every aspect of your work including research, writing, public speaking engagements, funding opportunities. Students - actively ask for these opportunities and actively call out the lack of infrastructure in the Native arts field.
- 11) **Strive for excellence and avoid complacency.** I have noted a tendency to pick the same three artists (or writers) to feature without regard for their training, relevance to a curatorial concept or their representative nature of their placement in the field. Our field veers dangerously toward a popularity contest that draws from youth adoration, trendiness and lack of critical analysis of the work (written or artistic works). Producers and authors – be a rock star, don’t follow. Have a long-term strategy and stick to it. Demand more of yourself and others. In fact, don’t just ask, demand and insist. Stay resilient.
- 12) **Reject exceptionalism arguments** – Native arts writing deserves the same rigorous appraisal and inclusion as other writing. Call out “switching criteria” meaning rejection of work because it is art and not craft, or craft and not art, American art not global art, or modern not post-modern. These tactics are well-known, call them out. If you are a scholar then do the scholarly work required to be conversant and fluid on current literature in the field, just as any other discipline. Indigenous art is a scholarly field, not an exception to an established discipline, not an intervention, not radical. Native arts simply inherently belong. There is no “good fight.” The primary premise that our field is a struggle is a colonial move.

Work together, claim your goals and be excellent. I look forward to reading your writing.