Most of the time when I begin a discussion of Native American Studies, I begin by addressing the past, the educational practices which have failed, the hypocritical goals of assimilationists, the self-serving agendas of those whites who have been in charge of educating America’s first people. This time, however, I would like to begin by talking about the present, by examining the modern influences which have been so astonishingly and profoundly forcing those of us who would like to consider ourselves scholars in the discipline in inappropriate and puzzling directions, both in our intellectual lives as well as our social lives.

I began giving some serious consideration to this influence after I saw the film Dances with Wolves, that movie which genuinely touched me, that movie which so effectively used with subtitles the language of my real life, that film which, without any hesitation whatsoever, I would take my grandsons, who are four and nine years old, to see. It is a movie about Indians which, in the year before the Columbus quincentennial, has made all of America remember that this country once belonged to the Indians and, perhaps, still does.

After the glow of that film showing, however, as is the case in every seduction, I clearly saw the movie as part of the problem, not as a part of the solution. For that reason, I’ve begun to believe that it is important for us to try to disengage ourselves from the distortions so evident in our contemporaneous and professional lives, and to do that we might proceed on the bases that, first, pop culture, as an instrument of social change and intellectual pursuit, is no less dangerous today than it was in 1860 when the soap opera novel Ramona became enormously popular and overshadowed the essential work that Helen Hunt Jackson was doing in publishing A Century of Dishonor; and second, that Indian Studies as an academic discipline can survive its subordination to the popular imagination of America only by carefully examining its true mission in the context of the radicalization of academic thought of the 1960s and early 70s.

First of all, we must start by admitting that popular culture as a vehicle for social change has worked for us as well as against us. Those of us who in the sixties insisted that whatever the intellectual tradition, it had to be validated by our own interests, i.e., our tribal values and histories, are the same people who started out as students and graduate fellows to eventually become the directors of programs, the professors, scholars, writers, researchers. We were the challengers then and we continue to share that legacy today. Some say we have won the first phase, in that Native American Studies centers exist at institutions of higher learning all over the country and abroad. Our demands for relevance in humanistic study which merged with the so-called popular cultures of the sixties brought about the progressive stance of universities across the country which included us, a precious few of us, to be sure, as well as our courses on Indian America, the very courses which have become the core curriculum of the discipline.

The radicalization of the academic consciousness that we all shed blood for back in the sixties brought about Indian Studies as we know it. It achieved visibility by mounting a significant assault upon the narrow-minded notion that there are fixed authorial and western values that distinguish good from bad. We moved away from the idea that we could validate homogeneity of thought by sifting little "homilies" from every historical event, every piece of literature, from all the texts, most of which have been written by the male European thinkers of the past.

Twenty years later, and at its most imperious, the popular imagination which brings us the movies and
fiction and poetry of the nineties seems to suggest that we are still back there, back in the pre-sixties never-never land, where the white man's imagination about Indians was valid. It suggests that we are still at the mercy of those non-Indians who would imagine for us what our histories mean. You know, back when any improbable idea about Indians was legitimate.

The Kevin Costner movie which has invaded the consciousness of all of us, Indian and white alike, seems to suggest that after the Civil War in the mid-1860s there was some bridgeable gap between Indians and whites, if only on an isolated and individual level. It examines a wonderfully poignant notion about justice toward Indians and an appreciation of their cultures as though it really had some significance at that time and in that place. Indians, of course, and Sioux in particular, know that these sentiments are neither clear-eyed nor realistic and probably so rare as to be mythical.

The reason the movie is important and the reason that the discussion of the popular imagination of America is part of our intellectual inquiry in Indian Studies is not because it says something real about history but because it says something significant about the popular culture concerning Indians in this country. It is important because it tells us that America still cannot abide any real disruptive implications about the history that it shares with Indians, that America, in its popular imagination, still wants the simple solutions to the massive racial issues brought about by its own imperialistic origins. Dances with Wolves, is, more than any movie in recent times, a machine for dispensing the congenial implication that the American colonialist is capable of expressions of benevolent humanism.

Well, you ask, what's wrong with that? It, surely, cannot be all bad, to believe that your fellow man is capable of compassion.

What's wrong about it, even dangerous, is that it co-opts the historical fact that the U.S. military machine in the mid-1860s turned its guns on the American Indian in terrible, obscene wars of annihilation, bathing the northern plains in Lakota/Dakota blood, triggering federal policies of extermination which are still in place today, at least they are on the Indian homelands that I know. In light of the recent war, this recognition of the past seems more than ever to be important.

It is absurd to try to have some confidence in this movie's brand of nineties-style boy scout benevolence toward Indians when, in fact, the genocidal policies, the making and breaking of treaties with the Indians, the thefts of land, the political assassinations of Native leadership, the utter contempt shown by scholars, historians, and politicians toward Indian lives have been the dynamic thrust of nearly all intellectual and political pursuits in this country of the last hundred years. This movie asks us to believe that all of the crimes and vices of the American/European colonialist's character are somehow outweighed by Kevin Costner's boyhood wish to "be an Indian."

In this instance, the popular imagination as an instrument for social change will work against us not only because it trivializes our common histories but because there is not one item on any Indian political or cultural or intellectual agenda which can be addressed through the misleading notion perpetuated by this movie that some kind of social cohesion is possible between the murderer and murdered, the thief and the victim, the rapist and the raped. The position that the oppressed and the oppressors are all Americans together is indefensible, especially when the resultant effects of the oppressors, i.e., the paternalism and poverty of modern American Indian life, is rarely addressed and never transcended.

A good example of that is the Black Hills Land Case which the Lakota/Dakota people have had in the courts since the 1920s, a case in which the white politicians in South Dakota are loath to take forward for a political solution even though the Supreme Court in 1980 affirmed that the theft by the federal government was "rank." The modern Sioux are asking for land reform so that they may hold land "in common" as they once did, and so that their economic needs may be addressed in some platform other than beggary. The feds have simply offered a "pay-off" which will keep the Sioux in poverty for the next century as they have been for the last century. A land-base reform measure is essential to alleviating the appalling economic conditions of this Indian nation, yet not one important politician in the state of South Dakota will address the issue on tribal terms.

If the popular culture has failed to achieve a genuine alternative view of the Indian world which may have been expected of it by some of us who are "throw-backs" to the sixties, it is because it is in the charge of the so-called bottom-line, and these days that means it has given in to the economic interests of the world. Movies must make money. Novels will be accepted by filmmakers or for television mini-series development because they offer the easy solutions that American audiences want and sponsors promote, not because they have a lively and realistic grasp of Indian-white relations.

The distortions, then, must be taken up as the intellectual work of those of us who claim a vested interest in developing Native American Studies as an
Scholars have begun to regulate the development of the discipline within various institutional settings by bringing about a number of models, some of which are more appropriate than others. Some models are tribally described, presuming to serve particular communities and interests such as the popular American culture we have just spoken of but, more importantly, because their faculties are generally made up of the tribal intelligentsia, native language speakers, reservation-based scholars, native poets and singers and dancers and writers. Their curricula are generally geared to the economic, political, and cultural realities of the people. Other models are global in their approach to curriculum development. Even other models seem to be geared toward urbanization as an essential and inevitable movement in indigenous life. Some models seem to exist without any input from the native communities at all and they see themselves as mostly informing the non-native student and population about Indians. They center their interests on cultural diversity courses and the discussion of "minority" groups in the United States, discrimination, and racism in America. These models oftentimes seem unconnected, scattered; they are inherently suspect because they are seen as unable or unwilling to enter into the business of political transformation so necessary to Indian Education.

The defensive function of the parameters is most effective in the tribally described models since the discipline is obliged to serve the tribal nation rather than the state or the United States, or the non-Indian populations. They often have their own Indian Board of Trustees, and it is, therefore, the disciplinary model most likely to resist the assimilationist view so prevalent in the educational services available to Indians. These models stress the matters of treaty-making, sovereignty as a concept, the nation-to-nation legal status of tribes, an historical view which is oftentimes ignored in other educational institutions. A reactionary or a merely symptomatic stance in the development of curricula is, of course, a danger in these models but that is generally offset by the transformative function of the discipline, i.e., the research and writing that must accompany the development of any body of thought.

Some of these models in various university settings have thrived, others withered. The survival of many, the birth of others, and the changes rendered in all of them by the educational conservatism and the discriminate budget slashing of the Reagan and Bush years, not to mention the white backlash to Affirmative Action policies, suggest that the next twenty years of development in Native American Studies will face powerful challenges.

The most important question facing Indian Studies professors in the coming decades is, on what terms are we willing to go on with the work in the
American university systems that have emerged from the sixties' radicalization of academia?

Are we content with filmmaker Costner's proposition that a collective benevolent humanism of the nineties erases history? I, for one, am not. I would like to see myself riding (philosophically, at least) from Ft. Yates, North Dakota, to Wounded Knee with the Minneconjou and Oglalla during the Big Foot Commemoration. I want to be part of that historic recreation which took place in December 1990, about which the mainstream media and academia were virtually silent! I want to continue to ask, "What is my responsibility to my ancestors and to my grandchildren, and to what extent can that responsibility relate to the educational goals of America?"

I also want to know whether or not we will be intimidated by the white scholars (as well as some scholars of color--Steele, D'Asuza, Rodriguez) who say that Affirmative Action is a policy which does away with standards of merit and forces upon U.S. institutions our inferiority. If we are intimidated, our young scholars will find themselves doing the slave work of the universities, not the intellectual work of their tribes. They will think that hiring policies, salaries, tenure and promotion problems are the issues of the day. They will ask, How can I advance my career?, not Is what I am doing important to the tribes? There is reason enough to believe that they are, even now, congregating as faculties at these universities for selfish reasons.

Will we address the "token" status which is so much a part of our existence? I am talking about the isolation in which we do our work. I am talking about the extraordinary numbers of hours which our faculty members are obliged to put in serving on every committee on campus simply because we meet the federal requirements for "minority" consultation. We are asked to give lectures in other courses at a rate far higher than the average faculty person, but, of course, we say cynically, "It will look good on my vita." I wonder if we will continue to be all things to all people, the door mats at institutional entrances.

Are we to be distracted by the charge that we in Native American Studies, along with our Black and Chicano brethren, are "ghetto-izing" the concepts of "liberal education" and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge itself? Are we to take seriously the charge that because we are not talking about academic issues but about politics we cannot separate truth from falsehood? I would be much more comfortable in a sober discussion on this argument, and, indeed, I may have even at one time in my career embraced it if it weren't for the fact that I have for too long seen that universities are the "cemeteries of ideas," to use a Chicano colleague's phrase. We cannot allow universities to continue to be the burial places of creative thought. There is simply too much at stake. Therefore, I urge all of us to dismiss the "ghetto-izing" charge as a specious one meant only to keep us from our work.

More important to all Indian people, I think, is the question of whether or not we wish to defend the sovereign right of Indian nations to be in charge of conferring citizenship upon our own people. Indian nations still retain that right, you know. And, we as individuals can possess only what our tribes possess, both in terms of status as well as knowledge. Lately, we seem to be content to let the self-identification method for both faculty and students prevail. It has now become the subject of controversy, secrecy, and fraud (i.e., The Foster Carter The Education of Little Tree Controversy). Why should the university systems of this country and Indian Studies units and publishing houses define who an Indian is? This is absurd. Why not devise Indian Studies as a mechanism which defends the Indian nation's right to do what it has always done. Such a mechanism would defend the notion, too, which is implicit in the definition of our discipline, that Indians themselves must be in charge of this intellectual development which is by its very nature tribally-specific. In the long run such a mechanism would defend us from nefarious and dangerous pretenders who have become numerous as flies in this modern valueless world, writing books and conducting workshops on everything from moon ceremonies for the middle-aged woman to religious-freak pipe ceremonies to how to save the earth, Indian-style.

Though none of the answers to these questions appear to be finalized, it is essential to our future that we pose them. That the next step in the development of Native American Studies appears to politically dangerous is evident. That the white academic communities would like to continue the paternalistic and colonialistic ways of the past is also evident. It is up to this generation of scholars to remember that for most of our history, the issues of our sovereignty as Indian nations has been linked to education in the most oppressive way. We have been asked over and over again, in the name of education, to violate the parameters of culture and history in order to participate in the university system, never to defend them. And many of us have paid that price. Never, until the radicalization of academia in the sixties which, in my mind at least, can in large part account for the advent of Indian Studies, has that educational link been boldly in defense of sovereignty, in defense of our cultures and histories, in defense of the idea that American Indians, alive and well in the twen-
tieth century, can enrich and vitalize the educational institutions of America by their presence.

It is up to this generation of native scholars to continue to believe that the western values as they apply to American Indians which have dominated the intellectual milieu of America, offer us only the narrowest view of humanity, that our exclusion, our domination, our destruction has been the price that we have had to pay for our admission to the universities of this country. As some of the early native scholars reduce their teaching loads as I have done, or go on to writing and research careers, or retire, it is up to the new generation of American Indian academics to develop new and continuing radical alternatives.

No one says it will be easy. It isn’t just a question of victimization, racism, exclusion, poverty, or powerlessness. Nor is it a question of real Indian existence or Indian Studies being co-opted by the influence of Costner's Dances with Wolves, the most recent example of the pop-culture, as we approach the 1492 "discovery." It is a question of embracing the idea that all knowledge is historically and socially conditioned, that it is neither inferior nor superior in that conditioning, nor is it certain or false. It exists and it survives and in doing so it has no claim to special reverence, only a claim to its own integrity. That our knowledge is encompassing those worldviews of indigenous peoples, having survived the colonization period, can no longer be denied us is an ethical idea worthy of representation in the academic institutions of America.

If it is true as Professor Vine Deloria, that consummate Sioux Indian scholar has said in his latest essay, "The most important question that an Indian student can ask him/her self is, *is what I am learning useful to Indians?*, (and I believe it to be), it is even more true that Indian intellectuals must ask, *is what I am teaching and writing and researching of value to the continuation of the Indian Nations of America?*

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**Elan**

*(a poem for the young men who are the Big Foot Memorial Riders of 1990)*

by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

Sometimes after the glare of sunrise
but before the moon shines
they ride the frozen wind,
danse du ventre in killing snow;
he holds the broken heart of a grieving god
in elegaic memory, bears in his gloved had the sacred eaglestaff.
Courage! *Il ne passeront pas!*

Between the monasticism of priesthood and the flaring love
of a warrior’s ways he
holds his whitened breath and
becomes heroic
to the nation he honors.