

Catherine Doiron

Reflection: Teaching Native American History, a National Endowment for the Humanities

Institute

21 August 2017

Teaching Native American History, an institute sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities provided a wealth of information that revealed accurate histories of Native people, helped its participants unpack their misconceptions that had been taught or surmised, and demonstrated many entry points into the topic for teachers. In addition to text resources and supplemental videos and texts, the institute included presenters from a variety of backgrounds. The participants themselves were a resource. Half of the participants hail from a variety of Native nations with unique cultures. Finally, the directors of the Institute demonstrate that people are the keys to revelation of knowledge. Their contacts, resources, background knowledge and experience, together with the other people that were part of the Institute, revealed complexities of Native experiences throughout history since the First Encounter to today. These highlight the importance of teaching Native American history not merely as a footnote at First Encounter time, but as a contributing force throughout history. They also demonstrate the purposeful attempt to exclude the Native nations experience from history.

The settings of the Institute, at the Aquinnah homelands on Martha's Vineyard and in the Mashpee homelands on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, reinforced the concept that history is grounded in Place for the Wampanoags. Place involves cultural and emotional ties to the land, but also includes legal contracts that define that relationship as well as maps and stories that relate to the land. Another key concept of the Institute is that historical trauma has been suffered

by Native people, and continues to affect people today due to the social, emotional, cultural, intellectual, and physical hardships. Trauma can be overcome, released, or integrated into one's being with resultant wellness. The overarching concept of the Institute is that teachers can find and evaluate sources for students, including books, illustrations, and videos. There are tools teachers can use to help determine the valid and appropriate resources to share with students to help them gain a more holistic view of history.

In examining the importance of Place to the Native people, it is important to recall that the lives of the Wampanoag were, and are, integrated with the land; the people could not survive without this tie. The weather, the plants and animals, and the tides determined food sources and what would be done each day. One example is the use of the blooming time of the Shadbush tree as a cue that the time is right to fish for herring. The concept of exclusive ownership of resources did not make sense to the Native people at the time of the First Encounter. Conserving the land by not overusing it and by preserving what it nourishes guarantees the continuity of use. Cattle and sheep using the land interfered with this conservation. More recently, developments of land in Mashpee blockaded access to traditional fishing and shellfishing grounds to the Wampanoags. The statement, "We are this place," demonstrates the enmeshed relationship between the Wampanoag people and the land. (Coombs)

Ties to the land are illustrated by the fact that in spite of discrimination and other prejudicial obstacles, the Wampanoag still live in their Place. Although a great number of people were killed by disease or violence and others were enslaved or driven away, a core group of the Aquinnah and Mashpee Wampanoags have maintained their homeland to this day. Visiting Aquinnah allowed the group to make close examination of the old South Road (Burgess) pastures,

Cranberry Day bog, and Toad Rock, a message exchange place. The tour of this route was accompanied by echoes of the stories of Moshup, which are a combination of religious beliefs and geographical pourquoi stories. Some are creation stories that tell how the People came to be in Aquinnah while other tell of how features such as the island of Nantucket and the cliffs of Aquinnah came to be. Yet other stories credit Moshup for guiding People to schools of fish or to whales (Simmons, p. 182) and even attribute the evening fogs to his pipe smoking. (Simmons).

In Mashpee, the group was fortunate to be able to tour the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Offices and to meet with a tribal elder and former chief, Earl Mills. Touring Mashpee with Mr. Mills revealed a multi-generational society linked in close bonds and lifestyles steeped in tradition. The land and water that sustained the People in the past has continued to nourish them with foods and with resources that they have developed with business savvy. Mills narrated a trip through the village that revealed his personal knowledge of each home, many specific landscapes and plants, each twist in the road, and each resource. His open discussion of ideas and hopes for the future also centered around hard work and using resources in a responsible manner in the interest of future generations. Mills talked about his soul hurting for his people in their problem with the continuing struggle over land. He was critical of the efforts of his people involved with First Light Oysters, thinking that it should be expanded and use state of the art machinery.

Historical trauma is a term coined by Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart, a Lakota. Like those who have post-traumatic stress disorder, some people suffer from stress that is carried over from traumatic events due to colonization that were suffered over generations in the past and that remain today. Braveheart focuses on the Lakota tribe in particular, but similar events were experienced by other Native peoples as well. Tribal trauma includes loss of kin through disease,

displacement, and marginalization. (Braveheart) The decimating diseases around First Encounter were followed by other epidemics due to enforcement of poor living conditions. The enslavements and killings around First Encounter were followed by forced group relocations and removal of children to adoptive homes or to boarding schools. Native people have been labelled by the legal system as requiring custodial care. They have been vilified, portrayed in newspapers, poorly-researched science articles, cartoons, books, and movies in a negative light. These events contribute to hopelessness, disassociation with culture and family relationships, and health issues. This is further exacerbated by poor living conditions and poverty that many Native people experience today.

The Institute focused on a few different aspects of historical trauma. The historic representation of the Native people, which is reinforced by writings and films, is detrimental to the self-image of individuals. For example, Native men are often portrayed as savages and Native women as Indian princesses, some tribes are cast as villains while others are shown as noble. Such racist perspectives without presence of realistic role models cause identity issues. Books that are part of the national curriculum contain such images and offensive vocabulary that are intimidating to students. Institutional racism creates a world image in which there is no place for Native people, their beliefs, and customs. Instead, these are presented as quirky curiosities. Students do not want to identify with their culture when it is presented in this manner in their classroom. (Reese) Finally, the use of Native symbols and caricatures as mascots by sports teams, colleges, and high schools contaminates the images of the Native people in a region. People cling to these as tradition, but the offense and trauma that these cause to Native people

who are compared with these images or need to come to terms with how the image is used as representative of their heritage.

The Pilgrims mention that a Native person called Squanto helped them by teaching them about local methods and sources for fish and meat. They name Squanto as the one who taught them to use fish as fertilizer in their fields. This image of the “one friendly Indian” is part of the First Thanksgiving curriculum in elementary school. Aside from the implication that he was an exception among his people, there have been questions about whether the Native people actually developed this method of fertilization. Lynn Ceci suggests that Squanto actually learned this from other English settlers. (Ceci) To support her claim, she presents several logical arguments as to why Native people would have been unable to fertilize crops in this manner. She calculated the amount of fertilizer that would be needed to be transported, then considered the time necessary to fertilize all of the crops, finding it unreasonable that Native women would have been able to accomplish the feat. Others have pointed out flaws in her logic and assumptions, but this remains an example of negating or disavowal of Native knowledge that permeates history. The Institute encouraged examining the primary sources as well as considering the logic behind the arguments.

Linda Coombs, a Wampanoag, notes that oral histories of the Wampanoag provide additional pieces of history that have been largely ignored or buried because they do not fit into the theme of the narrative of Europeans discovering and developing a new land. (Coombs) The erasing or excluding of the Native people from the history or misrepresenting the Native people as living like “savages” is detrimental to the self-image of whole nations of Native people. (Blancke and Cjigkitoonuppa) Categorizing Native oral stories such as those about Moshup as legends instead

of as religious stories demeans the beliefs of the nations which believe in the messages of the stories. Having these stories narrated by non-Native voices and then placed in a library alongside tales of Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan detracts from their value. These are ways that the Native cultures are marginalized or eliminated from the whole history that we share.

One of the Institute speakers, Jessica Gourneau, is an Ojibwe psychologist who works with Native people who struggle with historical trauma. She has found that successful treatment has involved reintroducing cultural education and healing techniques and helping patients realize that they are survivors and not victims. Because families were separated, many traditions were not taught. As people uncover their ties to their culture, they are able to adjust their vision of themselves. Another speaker, Harlan Pruden, from the Cree Nation, provided an example of how people who reconnect to their culture can regain their self-esteem. Two-spiritedness has been long recognized by Native peoples while people who are anything other than sexually straight in US culture have been stigmatized. Pruden has contributed to helping LGBT Native youths reconnect to two-spiritedness which was lost due to colonization. These people of different Native nations are working to help people overcome the historical trauma introduced by colonization that has haunted their people.

Native American History Institute was designed to help teachers provide students with a more complete view of history by introducing primary sources, tools for evaluating resources, and a glimpse into the struggles, successes, and challenges that Native nations face today. Excerpts of the text resources can be used directly. Debbie Reese, from Nambe Pueblo, has a blog, *American Indians in Children's Literature*, that evaluates children's books. Some criteria she uses include presence/absence of characters the reader can identify with; being tribal specific, i.e. naming a

specific Nation rather than using a collective term like Indian; use of terms that are pejorative; accuracy; and existence in the present, not as an element of the past. This blog will become a central reference for teachers who participated in the Institutes. Other speakers have online presence, and individual tribes have websites, newspapers, radio, and videos. These avenues of exploration provide research that will enable teachers to present a truer version of history and current events.

One presenter in particular exemplifies so many aspects of addressing challenges of the past and present from both an academic and a cultural perspective. Jessie Little Doe Baird, a Wampanoag, is a treasure and role model for her people, academic researchers, and students. Driven by a desire to recover the language of her people, Baird earned a degree in linguistics so she would be able to use pronunciation patterns of related languages and a substantial bank of direct translations of text in English and Wampanoag to piece together an oral and written dictionary and grammar for the language. Today she and her team are educating a group of students who use Wampanoag as their language in early elementary school. Parents and other tribal members are taught the language as well. They have plans to expand to the preschool levels. Baird's work is a model for other Native nations and other people whose languages are endangered. (Fermino)

Teachers who participated in the Institute formed relationships with each other and have communicated electronically so each teacher has gained a wealth of connections with other teachers who are sharing additional resources and ideas. Being able to rely on the academic and personal resources, the primary sources and experiences, will help explore the revelations of uncomfortable truths of history with students. Teachers know to emphasize that people had

established homes before the Pilgrims arrived, and that they are still living here. Cultures that rely on oral traditions and transfer of knowledge experience tragic loss when their population is diminished by disease or ethnic war. Cultures that are tied to the rhythms of nature and their land suffer trauma when they are separated from it. These teachers will benefit from the powerful lessons of the Institute and so will their students.

### Bibliography

Blancke and Cjigkitoonuppa, *The Teaching of the Past of Native American Schools in the US, The Native Past in US Schools*, 1990.

Braveheart, Maria Yellow Horse, *Wakiksuyapi: Carrying the Historical Trauma of the Lakota*, Tulane Studies in Social Welfare, Tulane University, School of Social Work, 2000.

Burgess, Edward S., *The Old South Road of Gay Head*, The Dukes County Historical Society, 1926.

Ceci, Lynn, *Fish Fertilizer: A Native North American Practice?* *Science, New Series*, Vol. 188, No. 4183. (Apr. 4, 1975), pp. 26-30.

Coombs, Linda, *Holistic History: Including the Wampanoag in an Exhibit at Plimoth Plantation*, from *Dawnland Voices: An Anthology of Indigenous Writing from New England*, Siobhan Senier ed., 2014.

Dorris, Michael: *Indians on the Shelf*, from *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, Calvin Martin, ed. 1987.

Fermino, Jessie Little Doe, *You are a Dead People*, Cultural Survival, 2001.