

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 10, Issue 2, Article N17, 2014



Research Note:

Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry

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Index Terms: bioethics; colonial history; democratizing science; indigenous governance; Native Americans; oral history; politics of objectivity

Suggested Citation: TallBear, K. (2014). Standing with and speaking as faith: A feminist-indigenous approach to inquiry [Research note]. *Journal of Research Practice*, 10(2), Article N17. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/371>

Note. This research note is part of the thematic section, Giving Back in Solidarity, in the special issue titled “Giving Back in Field Research,” published as Volume 10, Issue 2 in the *Journal of Research Practice*.

This essay discusses my approach to how I inquire in concert with the communities with whom I do research and work. These include communities of scientists, sometimes Native American scientists, science educators, science policy folks, and Native American community members interested in resisting, regulating, or reconfiguring scientific research to serve Native American communities. To characterize my relationships with these communities as reciprocal or as “giving back,” does not capture my method or ethic. I do not, in simpler terms, exchange data for my aid or service to them. I would not even characterize my relationships chiefly as supporting capacity building for say Native American community members to participate more fully in the research process, an important goal of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) that combines research, education, and action in usually elaborately planned approaches involving a research team spanning the research institution and the community. CBPR is an important ethical and methodological innovation and useful across the social, health, and natural sciences. But I tend to work individually or in small teams with graduate students and in conversation with community members. I mean something a bit different. Rather, I am figuring out how to seek out and articulate overlapping respective intellectual, ethical,

and institution building projects—how to share goals and desires while staying engaged in critical conversation and producing new knowledge and insights. Although his community of inquiry is a world away from mine, this approach resonates with fellow contributor Gautam Bhan’s notion of “continuous and multiple engagements with communities and sites of research rather than a frame of giving back.” Bhan inquires in concert with Pushta evictees in Delhi, India—poor communities whose homes were demolished in central Delhi and who were “resettled” on the far periphery of the city (Bhan, this issue).

In thinking about the ethics of accountability in research (whose lives, lands, and bodies are inquired into and what do they get out of it?), the goal of “giving back” to research subjects seems to target a key symptom of a major disease in knowledge production, but not the crippling disease itself. That is the binary between researcher and researched—between knowing inquirer and who or what are considered to be the resources or grounds for knowledge production. This is a fundamental condition of our academic body politic that has only recently been pathologized, and still not by everyone. If what we want is democratic knowledge production that serves not only those who inquire and their institutions, but also those who are inquired upon (and appeals to “knowledge for the good of all” do not cut it), we must soften that boundary erected long ago between those who know versus those from whom the raw materials of knowledge production are extracted. Part of doing this is broadening the conceptual field—thinking more expansively about what counts as risk (ontological harms?) and rightful benefit (institution building and community development?) in the course of building knowledge. It is also helpful to think creatively about the research process as a relationship-building process, as a professional networking process with colleagues (not “subjects”), as an opportunity for conversation and sharing of knowledge, not simply data gathering. Research must then be conceived in less linear ways without necessarily knowable goals at the outset. For the institutions that employ and fund us, we will articulate specific goals but these are only guideposts. A researcher who is willing to learn how to “stand with” a community of subjects is willing to be altered, to revise her stakes in the knowledge to be produced. I should say up front, a multi-disciplinarian or someone eager to challenge disciplinary norms and someone with a varied professional background will see many more opportunities to do this and is more likely to have the skills to carry it off. But then a strict disciplinarian is probably less likely to read this paper in the first place!

“Giving back,” on the other hand, sounds more akin to standing on two sides of a boundary that parties view as pretty much set. We good-intentioned liberal individuals in the broader imperialistic academy agree to negotiate and sign treaties—with individual subjects and sometimes with collectives—across that boundary. We do this in good faith and we figure out ways to do service or help build capacity in the communities in which we work. Over the past decade I have been trying to figure in incremental ways, and within several projects, how to articulate research questions, conceive of subject populations, and approach knowledge production from shared conceptual ground. I want to circumvent dualistic relationships—even if they are not easily read as hierarchical—that more typically characterize academic research and which the concept of *reciprocity*

implies. In this research note, I offer some insights that have helped me to articulate shared conceptual ground and shared stakes with those among whom I build knowledge.

1. Indigenous and Feminist Standpoint and Care for the Subject

My preoccupation with democratizing academic knowledge production began nearly 40 years ago when I encountered Native American thinker Vine Deloria, Jr.'s (1969) ideas about the role of anthropology in the colonial project, but simultaneously the promise of intellectualism in helping us work our way through to another kind of world. My mother, LeeAnn TallBear, exposed me to Deloria's thinking before I could read, when she was an undergraduate student at Northern State College in Aberdeen, South Dakota, United States in the politically turbulent early 1970s. She demonstrated every day for her four children that change and hope for our tribal peoples involves constituting our own narratives from our own lives and histories. She always had alternative history books in the house and shared with us oral historical narratives of our Dakota people to counteract the dominant colonial histories we received in public schools.

Much later, about a dozen years ago, I encountered feminist theorists, including Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding, who challenge standard notions of objectivity that conflate it with neutrality and who seek to produce *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1991, chap. 8) from the "standpoint" of women, traditional cultures, and other marginalized subjects. This means that hypotheses, research questions, methods, and valued outputs, including historical accounts, sociological analyses, and textual interpretations must begin from the lives, experiences, and interpretations of marginalized subjects (Harding, 1991, 2008). If we promiscuously account for standpoints, objectivity will be strengthened. Their language made quick sense to me precisely because Deloria and LeeAnn TallBear had paved the intellectual path.

I am also indebted to feminists who analyze and critique in a manner that "cares for the subject" (Schuurman & Pratt, 2002). They write of intellectual and ethical virtues and benefits that result when one is invested in the knowledges and technologies one critiques, and the shortcomings of critique for critique's sake. Haraway again provided me with a conceptual and pragmatic framework that helps guide me in how to engage critically in high-stakes problems as both an intellectual and as an invested moral agent. She does not just study dog worlds, but she lives there. She participates in everyday technical conversations. She and her companion dogs do agility sports together. She cares for, challenges, critiques, and is generous with her human and nonhuman companions. She inhabits that material and virtual world, she does not just do "fieldwork" there. Likewise, I do not simply study indigenous communities, but I inhabit them, both local and virtual, within and without the academy. I am family, friend, and/or colleague to a stunningly diverse set of indigenous actors in many parts of the world. I participate daily in their—our—social, technical, and cultural conversations related to indigenous governance, science, technology, economies, and cultures. I care about making indigenous lives and institutions better. I critique towards that end. I had been figuring out how to do that work since I was 5 years old and in a previous career as a planner.

Haraway gave additional intellectual language beyond what Vine Deloria, Jr. and my mother gave me to describe my approach and to understand my own ethos.

2. Beyond the Politics of “Giving Back” to “Standing With”

The writing of another feminist intellectual has recently offered me additional conceptual language for enacting the ethical orientation I have come to refer to as “standing with” in the act of inquiry. Neferti Tadiar’s articulation of *sampalataya*, Tagalog for “act of faith,” helps address the outsider/insider disease of angst that results from attending too much to a non-feminist *politics of objectivity* and too little to the politics of research for change within communities (Tadiar, 2001). Tadiar explains the concept as referring in part to being “already caught up in the claims that others act out,” which is different from speaking on behalf of (Tadiar, 2001, p. 73). Rather, one speaks as an individual “in concert with,” not silenced by one’s inability to fully represent one’s people. I read this to be a sort of co-constitution of one’s own claims and the claims and acts of the people(s) who one speaks in concert with. *Sampalataya* involves speaking as faith—as furthering the claims of a people while refusing to be excised from that people by some imperialistic, naïve notion of perfect representation.

Sampalataya guides me in thinking about inquiring on the basis of my commitments to, and experiences among, my fellow Native Americans and other indigenous people. It also helps me articulate my experiences among certain bio-scientists whose projects I have taken a leap of faith to care for. I transfer my ethic of wanting to stand with other indigenous people—to inquire in ways that hook up with their intellectual projects in the service of indigenous sovereignty—to my efforts now to inquire in concert with indigenous bio-scientists in the service of shared causes. That is, I work with them in ways that support their success in scientific endeavors, and simultaneously the development of their critical lenses that I believe can help democratize science from within.

Initially, I viewed this as “studying across,” a term I adapt from Berkeley anthropologist Laura Nader’s groundbreaking call for anthropologists to “study up.” Several years after Vine Deloria, Jr. lambasted anthropology for its colonialism, Nader admonished anthropologists to study “the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty” (Nader, 1972, p. 284 and p. 289). I took this to heart in my study of biological and other physical scientists and their extractive practices of Native American bones, blood, saliva, and hair that give us Natives much trouble. Early on in my academic career I eschewed studying the Native for anti-colonial reasons as well as a sense of personal and social unease. Instead of studying indigenous “perspectives” on genetics (something federal agencies love to fund), I decided to return the gaze and to study scientists. I research from an indigenous standpoint the histories and politics of genetic research practices that implicate indigenous bodies and lives. I am especially attuned to the risks and benefits of genetic research for indigenous peoples as we seek to expand the scope of our governance authorities.

This was an important intellectual step for me. But methodologically and socially, I found that studying up was not easier than the traditional “studying down” of the native. My book, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (TallBear, 2013), is critical of the colonial practices that have made the concept of Native American DNA possible. While I find the science fascinating, I had little positive investment in the particular intellectual projects of the non-indigenous human genome diversity researchers whose work I studied. I could not adequately “care” for them as my subjects, which felt like bad feminist practice (Schuurman & Pratt, 2002). I was in a bind. In addition to enacting an oppositional politics of returning the gaze, I had chosen to study scientists in order to avoid the personal discomfort and social challenges of doing anthropology at home. In studying up, however, I found another sort of discomfort. I could not shake that feminist ethical imperative to study a community in whose projects I could be invested. I had to find a way to study bio-scientists (whose work has profound implications for indigenous peoples) in a way in which I could stand more within their community.

Taking the ethics as the starting place, I conceived of a project where both studying up or across was possible, and where I was able to care. Recently I began to interview and do participant observation with other Native American PhDs, biological scientists. I am interested in their potential roles in both the democratization of their fields and in the development of science-based decision-making and science policy related to indigenous governance. Putting ethics and standpoint first helped me conceive of an original research project that I might not otherwise have thought of and for which I quickly received funding. In this research I put a heavy emphasis on participation over interviews. I find myself moving, in Tadiar’s language, towards faithful knowledges, towards co-constituting my own knowledge in concert with the acts and claims of those who I inquire among. I have become invested in the careers of especially the young Native bio-scientists with whom I study and work—in their development as good scientists in a world historically dominated by White men. Indeed, because I care for them, I have come to engage more productively and confidently in their broader fields. I am in my 3rd year as an ethics advisor for the annual Summer Internship for Native Americans in Genomics (SING) for Native American students and community members who want to learn laboratory genetics. I help teach them about the politicized histories of their fields and explain the links between more collaborative research and indigenous regulation and sovereignty. The aspiring young scientists in SING teach me how someone coming from very specific tribal communities and landscapes could become passionate about bio-science. They help me become even more curious and knowledgeable about the science. Being a genome ethics advisor is certainly useful for my own knowledge production, but it is also an act of support and affirmation of the difficult paths my subjects/colleagues/friends/teachers/mentees have taken. And it is an act of faith in the groundbreaking work that they will do as Native American scientists. I continue to network with and professionally mentor SING graduates as they become professional scientists or ethicists. We quickly become colleagues.

I also write and speak in venues that are not only the best venues for my career advancement and for getting my social science message out there, but also in venues that

bio-scientists frequent and in terms they can understand, and are hopefully moved by. I do this in order to encourage their more democratic vision of what the bio-scientific disciplines can be, but in ways that do not preach. I work in small ways to enact the change that I and other critics envision for the bio-sciences. I engage myself whenever possible in venues in which they are learning science ethics, history, and politics. The more I network, the more I am a useful resource for indigenous scientists. I attended and blogged a critical but supportive review of an annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Native Americans and Chicanos in Science (SACNAS) (TallBear, 2011). The editor of the organization's biannual news magazine quickly asked me to serve on the magazine's editorial board as an advisor on ethics and policy related to Native Americans and science. I blog in order to prompt conversation. In this case I cultivated an opportunity to help shape scientific ethics and policy content in that scientific organization's regular publication for its members and funders. Of course I serve on the editorial board because I was asked to serve. It is a sign that I am being recognized as being a valuable resource in the community. It is also a case of the organization deciding how I should "give back." But I also sit on the board in order to help collaboratively change and build discourse about what is more democratic scientific research and education. I could not do this if I held fast to the misguided ship of distanced objectivity with my research subjects. In the meantime, my blogs—posted to my website—*Indigeneity and Technoscience*—often serve as rough drafts of academic pieces. They serve to get my name out there as an expert in a unique multidisciplinary world that I am helping create by naming it.

These are some of the ways in which I work to overlap my agenda with that of my research subjects. I came to participate in their worlds in these ways not only because they led to fruitful participant observation opportunities, but also because they encouraged change from within the bio-scientific fields I study. I expect that change will come more quickly and profoundly from inside fields and disciplines and not from critical social science and humanities analyses of bio-scientific practices and histories alone. I work with bio-scientists in ways that demonstrate for them feminist and indigenous concepts of *objectivity in action*.

Some readers may find my insights and research methods insufficiently replicable, although I see them as highly pragmatic. Not all researchers will be situated as I have been, a second-career academic with previous training as a community planner, and an indigenous ("insider"?) scholar who circulates regionally, nationally, and internationally. I find it doable to attempt to combine theory with practice for institutional change. Perhaps the key take-home point that will appeal to a wider array of readers is that feminist objectivity—that is, inquiring not at a distance, but based on the lives and knowledge priorities of subjects—helps open up one's mind to working in non-standard ways. It may take you to new and surprising places.

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Received 24 October 2013 | Accepted 17 March 2014 | Published 1 July 2014

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