

Book Review

Alaska Native Education: Views From Within and *Crossing Mountains: Native American Language Education in Public Schools*

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“Why don't we celebrate Columbus Day on the Reservation?” My fourth grade student asked me this during my first year teaching on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. My answer left him unsatisfied. “But we didn't exist until he discovered us,” the student cried.

My student's response exposes the frightening reality of Native American education in the United States. Throughout our educational system, Western perspectives on history, culture, and values supersede Native ones. In my classroom, few of my students understood basic elements of their heritage, such as identifying their family clans, and only two spoke Navajo fluently. Even though we lived on the largest reservation in the United States, my students' knowledge of their cultural heritage was shaped by fetishized stereotypes perpetuated through mainstream culture. New teachers, particularly non-natives like myself, generally lack knowledge, training, and resources to adequately address native students' culture.

Two new books on Native American education address educational issues relating to Native tribes in the United States. *Alaska Native Education: Views From Within* (2010) is a collection that examines the history, culture, language, and religion of native Alaskan tribes through an educational lens. *Crossing Mountains: Native American Language Education in Public Schools* (2012) investigates indigenous language acquisition programs in public reservation schools in Montana. Both of these books are insightful and comprehensive additions to the field.

Alaska Native Education, edited by Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, is a compilation of academic articles, speeches, reports, essays, and other written pieces addressing indigenous education in Alaska. “Many of these essays have been in limited circulation for years as readings for college classes or passed on from person to person, but most have not been readily available to a broad general audience,” the editors note (p. xi). The book offers a broad and diverse perspective on Native Alaska education, unified by a cohesive vision of integrating indigenous knowledge within the framework of a Western educational system.

The book is divided into six thematic sections: “Alaska Native Education: Past, Present, and Future,” “Native Pathways to Education,” “Honoring Indigenous Knowledge,” “Culturally Responsive Curriculum,” “Strengthening Native Languages” and “Education for Self-Determination.” The book incorporates a range of publication dates from 1974 to new works. The format also interweaves voices from the major Alaskan cultures, including the Aleut, Alutiiq, Yup'ik/Cup'ik, Iñupiaq, Athabascan, and Southeast (Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian) tribal regions.

In spite of the diversity within Alaska Native Education, the book coherently addresses the central theme of integrating indigenous and Western knowledge within Alaska's education systems. In the mid-1970s, legislative changes and a lawsuit shifted control of Alaska's schools from federal and state government to local communities, enabling students to attend school in their home communities instead of boarding schools. This also began the reversal of entrenched educational practices that pushed native people to assimilate into

the Judeo-Christian culture of mainstream America. This major policy shift serves as the pivotal issue for the book. This becomes clear when the authors examine the impact of the educational system on native cultures, describe indigenous knowledge and traditional educational systems, and offer suggestions for reforming Alaskan schools to incorporate these values into the traditional Western pedagogy.

One of the most powerful aspects of the book is the deep, thoughtful description of native Alaskan history, beliefs, and knowledge. MacLean writes a perceptive chapter about the cultural heritage of the Iñupiat and Yup'ik people, also known as the Inuits. Her descriptions of whaling season and Arctic ice seamlessly evolve into the role of native language in maintaining cultural identity. In "Meditating Athabascan Oral Traditions," Leonard breaks down traditional folktales of the Deg Hit'an as a means of interpreting the culture. Koyukon burials are the basis of Wright's chapter on the creation and continuation of traditions in Athabascan culture. These pieces provide rich and beautiful insight into the culture of tribes in Alaska.

Woven among the chapters on indigenous knowledge are essays examining the conflict of Western culture and values. Multiple authors identify the deleterious effects of the dominant educational system on natives. Okakok presents the conflict between Western and indigenous knowledge in a particularly compelling example, using the commonly accepted elementary school fact that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. She writes:

In the Arctic, however, the sun behaves differently. Depending on the time of year, it can do almost anything, six examples of which are: (1) it doesn't rise at all; (2) it peeks through the horizon for a few minutes; (3) it rises in the South and sets in the South a few minutes later; (4) it rises in the East and sets in the West; (5) it rises in the North and sets in the North almost 24 hours later; or (6) it doesn't set at all (p. 103).

This strikingly illuminates the significant misalignment between traditional Western worldview and Alaskan knowledge. Kawagley describes the effects on the Yupiaq people in his chapter "Alaska Native Education." He writes, "By not teaching the Yupiaq youngsters their own language and way of doing things, the classroom teachers are telling them that their language, knowledge, and skills are of little importance. The students begin to think of themselves as being less than other people" (p. 81).

Although Western education had significant and long-term negative effects on the native people of

Alaska, the tone of the book remains optimistic. Multiple authors offer a vision for reforming Alaskan school systems in order to preserve traditional, local knowledge. MacLean, for example, proposes the revitalization of the Iñupiaq qargi, "a political, social, ceremonial, and educational institution for the people" that was an association for whaling captains (131). MacLean argues qargis can become the nexus for language and cultural instruction.

Collectively, this book provides a comprehensive overview of Native Alaskan education. It should be an excellent reference source, but is somewhat hampered by the lack of an index. Given the diversity of the essays, an index would be an asset to future editions. Readers would also benefit from additional biographical information about the authors.

One particularly compelling aspect of *Alaska Native Education* is the focus on spoken language in the volume. A recurring theme in the work was the significance of oral traditions in Native Alaskan culture. Multiple authors described storytelling and oral language as the primary means to transfer knowledge in the native communities. It is therefore fitting that a significant portion of the book includes texts that were originally spoken aloud as public speeches.

Crossing Mountains: Native American Language Education in Public Schools by Phyllis Ngai also addresses the importance of preserving native language and culture. Ngai's book describes her grounded theory research of indigenous language acquisition programs of the Salish tribe on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. Through interviews with multiple stakeholders, she investigates the issues of native language programs in public reservation schools. Her research culminates in detailed proposals to facilitate, and in some cases create, effective Salish language programs in public reservation schools.

The Flathead Reservation in Montana is unusual in that only 17% of the population is Native American. The reservation, created in 1855 with the Hellgate Treaty, was originally 20 million acres in size (p. xvii). The United States government gradually reduced these lands through legislation and opened up the reservation to European American homesteading. The Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee states: "Whites quickly outnumbered tribal people on the Flathead Reservation, and assumed a dominating social and economic position. Overnight, the landscape changed" (as cited in Ngai, p. 3). In addition to reducing the size of the reservation, this policy also changed the dominant language from Salish to English. Within a short time, Salish no longer provided economic capital, because English was required to conduct business on the Flathead Reservation.

The Salish tribe was further undermined by the U.S. government's misguided system of boarding schools for Native Americans. Similar to Alaska, it wasn't until the mid-1970s that the Salish tribe regained some control over the education of their youth. Recent legislation, such as the Native American Languages Act and Esther Martinez Native Languages Preservation Act, offered protection and funding to preserve indigenous languages. These laws came nearly too late for the Salish tribe, as the aggressive assimilation policies of boarding schools effectively stripped the Salish people of their language. It is estimated that only 1 - 2% of Native Americans on the Flathead Reservation are fluent Salish speakers today.

Even though Ngai is a non-native outsider, her fundamental argument is the Salish language should be preserved, and the best means for doing so is through the public education system. Drawing from the work of Native American language education advocates including Joyce Silverthorne, Lucille Watahomigie, and Teresa McCarty, Ngai believes language acquisition and preservation require collaboration among all facets of society. Her research thus examines the native language and culture classes in the public schools on the Flathead Reservation. She interviewed 89 stakeholders, native and non-native, across three different districts on the reservation. Employing a modified version of the grounded theory methodology of qualitative research, she “used the constant-comparison approach to generate Indigenous-language education frameworks composed of key program components that are grounded in the context of rural school districts with a mix of American Indian and European American student populations,” (p. 29). Although Ngai informed interviewees that she is a Salish-language preservation supporter, she was able to incorporate conflicting views to create a cohesive text.

Heritage language acquisition, as Ngai describes her work, is the primary focus of *Crossing Mountains*. The book begins with an examination of Salish language education, assessing what is already in place on the reservation that will affect the language revitalization. Then it closely examines three different districts on the reservation. The Churchill School District has an average student population balanced fairly evenly between Native and non-Native students, and is equally ambivalent towards Native language education. The second site, the Elkhorn School District, is primarily Native, and is supportive of Salish language. By contrast, the final site, Mountainview School District, is predominantly European American. Ngai writes, “The district superintendent portrays it as ‘the oasis’ in the middle of the reservation” (183).

In these three chapters, Ngai examines the supportive and oppositional components that affect the Salish language instruction in each district. Ngai identifies the

need to build a cohesive Salish language curriculum with standards and benchmarks, which will provide much needed consistency. She also creates emerging frameworks for each district that support Salish language acquisition and endorses “key program elements that accommodate the socioeconomic, political, cultural, linguistic, and educational conditions faced by mixed districts on the Flathead Reservation” (p. 222). These plans include prerequisites and action steps, as well as many questions for educational and tribal leaders to consider when initiating language reform.

Although heritage language acquisition is the central premise of the book, community participation and collaboration in rural schools emerges as a dominant theme. Through extensive interviewing, Ngai peels back the curtain on the indigenous language program, creating an extensive and challenging portrayal of a community struggling with culture and identity. For example, she reveals participants believe some Salish language teachers lack instructional and behavioral management skills to effectively run a classroom. Community members haven't discussed these problems publicly, however, out of deference for the elderly Salish teachers, even though the lack of adequate instruction appears to decrease the efficacy of the Salish language instruction. Likewise, it could be easy to shy away from data that suggest some Salish families are not interested in preserving their language, as it no longer holds economic value for the tribe. She also observes that fifth generation white settlers believe their European heritage should be taught during Native American Studies lessons. That Ngai is able to hold all of these views and create pragmatic, thorough plans for each community is compelling. These ideas are translatable to other rural communities, where conflicting voices are common within the parameters of education.

Given the cultural sensitivity of Ngai's research, confidentiality is paramount for this book. Ngai protects the identities of her participants by creating fictionalized composite characters, whom she then describes and “quotes” in accompanying chapters. I wondered if there might have been a more effective and less jarring means of narrating the research without jeopardizing the identity of the participants. The book might also have benefited from additional research on the benefits of language acquisition programs for both native and non-native students. The topic is addressed briefly in the conclusion, but I found myself wanting to see additional research that supports her arguments. Despite these issues, *Crossing Mountains* is a thorough and compelling book that provides new insights on heritage languages, native cultures, and school-community collaboration.

Both *Crossing Mountains* and *Alaska Native Education* provide readers with comprehensive

educational perspectives on multiple Native cultures. Each text would be beneficial to researchers and academics investigating Native American education, particularly those studying communities that are seeking balanced methods to incorporate indigenous values with Western practices. The beauty of both of these books, however, is that they reach beyond Native American literature to also address underlying cultural issues surrounding the intersection of community and school identity. *Crossing Mountains* would be valuable for both undergraduate and graduate studies on rural communities, language acquisition, and Native American studies. It also might be beneficial to examine in qualitative methods classes, as Ngai employs a variation of grounded theory to assess the needs of the Flathead Reservation. *Alaska Native Education* goes beyond the bounds of educational policy, and offers an excellent resource for those studying native and indigenous education and cultures. The insights offered in these books would have been a valuable resource for me when I was teaching on the Navajo Reservation. Hopefully, these books will reach a new generation of teachers, and help them create culturally relevant classrooms that value the native knowledge and language of their students.