



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at the appropriate resource page ([Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions](#), [Awards for Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#), or [Awards for Faculty at Tribal Colleges and Universities](#)) for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: The Discourse of Sovereignty in American Indian Print Culture

Institution: California State University, San Bernardino

Project Director: David Carlson

Grant Program: Awards for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

**Project Title:** “The Discourse of Sovereignty in American Indian Print Culture”

With the support of an NEH Fellowship, I propose to complete a book manuscript (provisionally titled The Discourse of Sovereignty in American Indian Print Culture) that examines the relationship between various models of sovereignty and contemporary American Indian literature, a relationship mediated through a broader Indian print culture.

The dominant theme in Native American Studies in recent years has been an interdisciplinary call to develop and institutionalize indigenous paradigms for researching and writing about the “Indian” peoples living throughout the Western hemisphere. This term, “indigenous paradigm,” is best understood to refer to an approach to research and critical inquiry that achieves two goals: (1) privileging “native” texts, testimony, and systems of knowledge, and (2) ensuring that projects originating in the academy are conducted with an eye to serving the needs of the communities being studied. In the field of literary studies, this drive to “indigenize” the academy has appeared most clearly in the emergence (during the 1990s) and spread of a “literary nationalist” movement led by writers such as Craig Womack, Robert Allen Warrior, Jace Weaver, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Simon Ortiz, Lisa Brooks, Daniel Heath Justice, and others. For all of these “literary nationalists,” the concept of sovereignty has proven central to understanding the nature and purpose of American Indian literature and the criticism that interprets it.

In my own reading in the field of Native American Studies in recent years (and, generally, in American Indian print culture—newspapers, blogs, etc), I have been struck both by the pervasiveness of the term sovereignty and its fluidity as a signifier. In the United States and Canada, in particular, there appears to be a broad consensus that Indian (or “First Nations”) communities and their political and intellectual leaders must commit themselves to the defense, recovery, and/or extension of their sovereignty. Underneath this apparent unity, however, there is considerable diversity of thought. For some Indian people, sovereignty refers to notions of political autonomy and self-determination derived largely from an Anglo-American legal tradition and tied to the language and institutions of national legislatures and courts. For others, sovereignty is better expressed and pursued through an internationalist framework, the kind embodied in the United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And for still another group, the concept of sovereignty is, by definition, non-indigenous, and thus inadequate for the work of decolonization.

Bearing in mind the range of meanings mentioned here, it becomes clear why claims such as the following, made by Creek scholar Craig Womack in his influential book Red on Red: American Indian Literary Separatism, demand deeper examination: “Native literature, and Native literary criticism by Native authors,” Womack claims, “is part of sovereignty.” One might easily wonder, what is the sense in which Womack using the term sovereignty? And further, how is he connecting his approach to studying Creek literature (and producing it—as he is now a published novelist) with sovereignty as a political concept? The suggestiveness and ambiguity of Womack’s comment is representative of what can be found in the broader scholarly conversation regarding Indian literary nationalism. As such, I would argue, critics in the field of Native American Studies today must more rigorously examine the varied meanings of sovereignty currently in play, while also analyzing the relationship between those meanings and the contemporary literature and criticism identifying itself as indigenous and nationalist. My book project seeks to fill this gap in current scholarship.

In The Discourse of Sovereignty I will provide a critical overview of the various ways

that contemporary Indian writers in the United States are imagining their communities as “indigenous nations” through competing discourses of sovereignty. Such an overview requires me, first, to address the role of an ever-expanding and diversifying Indian print culture in this imaginative process (the creation of an indigenous “public sphere” centrally focused on questions of sovereignty). Building on this foundation, the balance of the book will consist of my own close readings and analyses of a range of contemporary literary and critical texts representing a variety of practical responses to the call for an indigenous-nationalist literature. As I will demonstrate, owing to the complex history of settler colonialism in the United States and to the still precarious legal and political status of native peoples in this country, native scholars and writers have understandably embraced a variety of definitions of sovereignty and indigenous “nationalism.” But while this diversity of thought in the present-day discourse of sovereignty in Indian country does appear to have great advantages (allowing indigenous peoples to explore and test a range of strategies for decolonization), I will argue that those apparent advantages are often not being fully capitalized upon. Indigenous writers engaged in various versions of literary nationalism may find their projects greatly enhanced by better theorizing the ways in which literary forms and imaginative representations of indigenous subjectivity both open up and foreclose specific political possibilities. Each specific model of indigeness being deployed in *literary* nationalist works, I will suggest, carries its own political and legal implications. A failure to fully recognize and account for those implications can lead artists and critics into debilitating contradictions or ideological dead ends. On the other hand, a full accounting of the inter-penetration of legal and literary models of “nation” will enable indigenous writers and critics to produce a more potent “discourse” of sovereignty.

I have conceived the book in two sections. The first three chapters, collectively, seek to establish the range of meanings currently being attached to “sovereignty” in indigenous political thought, to provide an historical overview of the intellectual currents that have led to this diversity, and to trace the contours of the relationship between the varied conceptualizations of sovereignty and Indian print culture. Building on this foundation, the final two chapters of the book will be built around focused textual analyses that reveal the inter-penetration between specific legal/political models of sovereignty and nation and the literary work of some of the most significant figures in contemporary Indian writing (Gerald Vizenor, Simon Ortiz, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn) A more specific chapter breakdown is as follows:

1. Chapter One: The Discourse of Sovereignty and the Indigenous Public Sphere. The book will open with an overview of the varied use of sovereignty as a signifier in contemporary American Indian political thought and a discussion of the implications of this variety for the development of indigenous paradigms for understanding “nation.” This chapter will also provide a general theoretical overview of the relationship between Indian print culture and nation-building in our present moment and consider how present models of Indian nationalism respond to earlier colonial discourses and representations of “tribal” people in U.S. and Canadian Law.

2. Chapter Two: Cold War Activism and the Roots of Contemporary Indigenous Nationalism. Building on the theoretical overview of chapter one, this chapter will examine the contours of the “activist” indigenous politics and scholarship of the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, a period that I see as having laid the foundations for the emergence of the more diversified and global Indian print culture and political thought of today. In this chapter, I will begin to bring the germinal thought and writings of D’Arcy McNickle, Vine Deloria, and Rupert Costo into dialogue with the recent “indigenous” movement. Along the way I will devote

particular attention to the significance of print material, such as the Wassaja newspaper published by American Indian Historical Society (founded by Costo), to this dialogue.

3. Chapter Three: Literary Separatism and Indigenous Print Culture. This chapter will provide a focused examination of the current literary nationalist movement in the United States and Canada. I will direct particular attention toward the ways in which nationalist literary and cultural critics are seeking to intervene in, and employ, today's Indian print culture (both academic and popular) to advance the cause of sovereignty, defined somewhat ambiguously in "separatist" terms. Figures to be considered in this chapter include Taiaiake Alfred, as well as Craig Womack, Daniel Heath Justice and others writers in the self-titled "Native Critics Collective." I will also examine the relationship between print media such as Indian Country Today/This Week from Indian Country and indigenous literary nationalism.

4. Chapter Four: Constitutionalism, Hermeneutics, and Sovereignty. This chapter marks the shift to a series of "case studies" that reveal the various ways in which the discourses of sovereignty are informing contemporary American Indian literature, and visa versa. Chapter four examines a pattern of engagement with the language and institutions of U.S. Indian law in the work of Gerald Vizenor, whose post-modern writing has, surprisingly, emphasized the importance of defending sovereignty partly within the legal framework of Anglo-American constitutionalism. This chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which hermeneutic practices (approaches to/theories of textual interpretation) have been central to Vizenor's assertions of native sovereignty ("survivance," in his language.) Vizenor's recent work as principle drafter of a new constitution for the White Earth Anishinaabeg receives particularly close attention, in this context. (A portion of this chapter will appear in a special issue of Studies in American Indian Literature on "Constitutional Criticism" in 2011.)

5. Chapter Five: Place-Making, International Law, and Indigenous Globalism. This chapter will consider the work of two major literary figures, Simon Ortiz and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, whose writings represents place (and ways of "possessing" place through narrative) in a manner that buttresses a conception of sovereignty consistent with the global discourse of indigenous rights being developed in forums such as the United Nations and the United League of Indigenous Nations. Cook-Lynn's intriguing articulations of the relationship between place, language, and identity (in both her fiction and non-fiction) provide important insights into the nature of the "nomos" (the normative universe disseminated through narrative) of the global indigenous movement. And Ortiz's mediate position between nationalist and global indigenous discourses makes him an ideal figure with whom to end the book.

Portions of chapters one, three, and four will have been written before the beginning of the award period. During the twelve-months between July 2012 and 2013, I propose to complete the remaining chapters and obtain a contract for publication. (b) (6)



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