If They’re Lost, Who Are We?
By David Treuer

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LEECH LAKE, Minn. I am not supposed to be alive. Native Americans were supposed to die off, as endangered species do, a century ago. And so it is with great discomfort that I am forced, in many ways, to live and write as a ghost in this haunted American house.

But perhaps I am not dead after all, despite the coldest wishes of a republic that has wished it so for centuries before I was born. We stubbornly continue to exist. There were just over 200,000 Native Americans alive at the turn of the 20th century; as of the last census, we number more than 2 million. If you discount immigration, we are probably the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population. But even as our populations are growing, something else, I fear, is dying: our cultures.

Among my fellow Indians, this is not a popular thing to say. Most of us immediately sneer at warnings of cultural death, calling the very idea further proof that “The Man” is still trying to kill us -- this time with attitudes and arguments rather than discrimination and guns. Any Indian caught worrying that we might indeed vanish can expect to be grouped with the self-haters.

Wizipan Garriott

Another heartening exception is the Blackfoot language. The tribe dropped to a population of just over 1,000 in 1900, but they have grown again, and their language is on the upswing -- largely because of the efforts of the Piegan Institute, based on the Blackfoot reservation in northwest Montana, with a mission of promoting the tribe’s language. Once moribund ceremonies are on the verge of flourishing again. But for many tribes -- who struggle to retain the remnants of their land, life ways, sovereignty and physical and mental health -- what is left can’t really be called culture, at least not in the word’s true sense.

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Welcome to UCR for the Fall Quarter 2008.

In the midst of major financial crisis, although with some budget cuts, NASP is still standing. Hopefully we will survive the giant economic crisis the nation is experiencing at this time. Education is the key to survival; therefore I encourage all Native American youth to seriously consider college as an option to succeed in life.

NASP launched another successful Spirit of the Tribes 5K Run/Walk on November 15, 2008 and over 200 individuals participated. Joshua Gonzales, NASP Program Assistant planned, organized, and implemented the event. The 5K Run/Walk is a good way to get the community to come together for a cultural and social exchange. Michael Madrigal from the Cahuilla blessed and sang beautiful Bird Songs. The winners were awarded trophies, medals, and gifts. The weather turned out to be fantastic for the occasion.

NASP also co-sponsored with the Associated Student Program Board and the Music Department “BLACKFIRE” at the UCR noon time event on Wednesday, November 25, 2008. They performed their traditional dance and songs, contemporary songs, and culminated in the Mosh Pitt. The UCR students enjoyed their performance. Members of the BLACKFIRE group are from a well known Navajo family, the Benally. Mr. Jones Benally, the father of the family, in the 60s and 70s resided in Southern California and was well known as an excellent hoop dancer using 22 hoops. They have performed globally and have been featured on many national and international television shows, including the Oprah Winfrey show. The Benally family currently live in Flagstaff, AZ, close to their ancestral land. It was a pleasure having them perform here at UCR.

I am happy to say that the Native American Student Association (NASA) is doing quite well and planning for the Medicine Ways Conference and UCR Pow Wow. NASA plans to split the event into two activities as follows: conference and gathering on April 11, 2009, and Pow Wow on May 23, 2009.

Furthermore, the number of American Indian applicants has dropped this year; therefore we will intensify our recruitment effort in the coming year. Although we have an excellent Summer Residential Program only 30 students attended the program, which focuses on potential future college applicants, and not necessarily to UCR. We encourage you to consider higher education and if you are a parent to urge your children to consider college specifically at UCR. You can contact us at (951) 827-4143.

Sincerely,

Earl Dean Sisto, Director
Native American Student Programs
Thank you to our 2008 Summer Residential Program: "Gathering of the Tribes" Sponsors
Kristy Orona-Ramirez, Medicine Ways speaker, shares a beautiful song with us at the Conference.

Medicine Ways participants mingle and enjoy a great lunch. There were over 400 people that participated in the conference.

Alvino Siva, Cahuilla Elder, smiles for the camera. Alvino was our Keynote speaker for our 27th Annual Medicine Ways Conference.

Left - Right: James Ramos (Chairman of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians), Will Madrigal (Mountain Cahuilla), Bill Madrigal (Mountain Cahuilla).

Mountain Cahuilla Bird singers, led by the Madrigal family, sing bird songs and dance. They really got everyone off their seat to participate.

Left - Right: Jesus Cardenas, Will Madrigal, James Ramos, Josh Gonzales

Jesus, Will, & Josh honor Chairman James Ramos with a gift of appreciation.

Left - Right: James Ramos (Chairman of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians), Will Madrigal (Mountain Cahuilla), Bill Madrigal (Mountain Cahuilla).

UCR students participate through the Question & Answer session with Chairman James Ramos. There was a great dialogue between UCR students and our Medicine Ways speakers.

UCR students enjoy their breakfast just before the 27th Annual Medicine Ways Conference began.

NASA Honors Supporting Staff

John Valdez, Alfredo Figueroa, Earl Sisto

Left - Right: Jesus, Josh, Ocelotl, Will, John, Beyaja, Alfredo, Cinthya, Gabi, Earl

Josie and Lori of the Sherman Indian Museum and Nex’wetem display their beautiful traditional baskets.

Gabe Pimental, NASA Member, poses as he helps out during the conference. Despite his busy schedule, he still finds time to volunteer.

Ben Hale offers his prayers through songs using the Native American Church instruments. Mr. Hale spoke about how the instruments are used to help heal.
Alejandra Mendez, Writing Instructor, helps the students express themselves on paper. The participants learned a lot about themselves as they wrote their personal stories.

Alfonso Taboada, Computer Instructor, helps his students understand the task at hand. The students really enjoyed learning how to improve their computer skills.

Yvonne presents a special blanket to honor the Outstanding Male Award to Paul Donahue.

The students take notes as American Indian Instructor, Chris Ynostroza, talks about the importance of Indian history.

Above: Staff and participants gather together and dance one last round dance before it is time to go back home. The participants learned from each other about all the different tribes and nations they represented. Below: Some participants stop to pose by a large bamboo bush during their hike at the UC Riverside Botanical Gardens.

Group photo of all the 2008 Gathering of the Tribes Summer Residential Program. All the participants and staff had a great week learning and having fun. An experience they will never forget.

2008 Gathering of the Tribes Summer Residential Program
If They’re Lost, Who Are We?

Cultures change, of course. Sometimes they change slowly, in response to warming temperatures or new migration patterns. At other times, cultural changes are swift -- the result of colonialism or famine or migration or war. But at some point (and no one is too anxious to identify it exactly), a culture ceases to be a culture and becomes an ethnicity -- that is, it changes from a life system that develops its own terms into one that borrows, almost completely, someone else’s.

My favorite example of this difference was the question posed to an Ojibwe man by the Indian agent whose job it was to put him down on the treaty rolls. “Who are you?” the Ojibwe was asked, through an interpreter. “Oshkinawe nindaw eta,” he replied, puzzled (“Only a young man”). The Indian agent noted this, and the Ojibwe man’s family still bears his Anglicized response, Skinaway. The man had no thoughts, really, about himself as an Indian or as an individual. The question -- who are you? -- didn’t even make much sense to him because the terms of identity didn’t make any sense to him; they were not his terms.

Nowadays, unlike Skinaway, many of us have come to rely on ways of describing ourselves that aren’t ours to begin with.

In the United States, we Natives now have sets of beliefs that we articulate to ourselves, mostly in English, about what being Indian means. We are from such and such a place; this and that happened on a place; because I eat fry bread, because I go to powwows.)

Without our own languages, however, the markers we use to define ourselves can become arbitrary. One need only change the nouns to see the difference. Instead of “fry bread,” insert “corned beef,” and instead of harking back to smallpox-infested blankets, say “potato famine” -- and you arrive at a completely different ethnicity. American Indians are fast becoming ethnic Americans like the Irish and the Italians and the Scandinavians, to name a few.

The timing is strange: We find our cultures most imperiled just as some (though certainly not most) Indian communities are experiencing a kind of economic rebirth from casino money. Not only do we have some wealth -- the Seminoles of Florida own the Hard Rock Café franchise, and the Mashantucket Pequots own and operate probably the largest casino in the world -- we also have the basis of some political clout. In Great Plains states with dwindling populations such as North and South Dakota, Indians (who are not fleeing to the cities like rural non-Indians) have become a huge voting bloc that can sometimes determine the outcomes of state Senate and House races. Because Indians vote Democratic at a rate of about 90 percent, the power of Indian tribes is unsettling to many Republicans. In 2006, Republican Doug Lindgren ran for a seat in the Minnesota House of Representatives on what can only be called an “anti-treaty” platform that called into question the validity of northern Minnesota’s Red Lake Indian Reservation and its treaty rights. Lindgren hoped to use deep-seated anti-Indian sentiment to consolidate his base. He lost. But our growing wealth and power has in no way guaranteed our survival.

Curiously, it is in the field of “story” that the most ringing claims are made for the continued health and vibrancy of American Indian cultures and lives. But it’s not clear why so many Indian critics and novelists suggest that stories, even great ones, in English by writers whose only language is English are somehow “Indian stories” that store the kernels of culture -- not unlike those fabulous...
Wizipan Garriott

Garriott to become a part of the effort.

Daschle’s recommendation was helpful, as Garriott ended up joining the Obama campaign for president as a Native American outreach coordinator in Sept. 2007. In June, he was officially hired as the campaign’s First Americans vote director. His chief objective was collaborating with tribes and Native groups, trying to get out the Native vote in many states, including New Mexico, Wisconsin, Montana and Michigan.

“For us, the campaign has always been about community empowerment,” Garriott told ICT in late-September.

“We’ve tried to put as many resources as possible into Indian communities so we can help our own people organize and empower themselves. That’s what this is all about.”

He also predicted in the interview that Indian participation in the election would help sway the vote in close swing states.

Garriott is the son of Elizabeth Little Elk, who works for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in the child and family services arena, and Charlie Garriott, a teacher at Todd County High School, located on the reservation in Mission, S.D.

While in college, Garriott served as a peer counselor to younger Native students. Amid controversy over whether there should be ethnic counselors and cultural houses at the institution, he made it be known that he felt such networks are beneficial, especially for reservation youth.

In a December 2002 issue of The Yale Herald, Garriott noted that the majority of reservation youth hail from economically depressed areas, which can make it especially difficult for Indian students to adjust to mainstream colleges, both academically and culturally.

At Yale, Garriott also worked as vice-president of Night Shield Entertainment, a music-focused company founded by one of his Native friends, Gabriel Night Shield. Garriott assisted with promotion and helped with efforts on distribution, talent evaluation and music selection.

Upon learning of Garriott’s new appointment, Night Shield said he and many other tribal members were “really proud of what Wizi has accomplished.”

“We were joking about it the other day – maybe in about 20 years we’ll be voting for Wizi as president,” said Night Shield, who attended high school at St. Francis Indian School with Garriott in South Dakota. Human Services.

After Daschle lost his bid for re-election in 2004, Garriott attended the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law in Tucson, and obtained a law degree there in June. In 2005, he also helped incorporate the He Sapa Leadership Academy, a college preparatory school on his reservation for students in grades eight to 12.

As Daschle became involved with Obama’s campaign, the longtime politician ultimately recommended Garriott to become a part of the effort.

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Thank you to our 2008 3rd Annual Spirit of the Tribes 5K Sponsors
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caves in the Southwest where explorers found seeds thousands of years old that grew when planted. One Indian critic recently rather self-servingly suggested that “English is an Indian language.” He’s wrong. English is not a Native American language; for most of us, it is our only language -- through no fault of our own, owing to a federal policy aimed at wiping out Native American languages. Cultural eradication is a process, and it was precisely through the attempt to stamp out Native American languages that the U.S. government tried to stamp out Native American cultures. To claim that English is a Native language is to continue that process.

More often than not, English was forced on us, not chosen by us. Naturally, one can (and millions do) construct a cultural identity out of whatever is at hand, and no Indian should feel bad (though many of us do) about speaking English. But I don’t kid myself that my writing reflects my culture -- or can save it. My novels are exercises in art, not cultural revitalization or anthropology. And if novels published by large publishing conglomerates, marketed to a general readership that doesn’t know the first thing about our lives, written in English by university-educated writers who by and large live far away from their tribal communities, don’t speak their tribal languages and probably earn two or three times as much as the rest of their people are our best defense against the threat of cultural death, we are in worse shape than I thought.

Perhaps we protect and even beatify stories because we have no real presence in film or popular music, because we have no stand-up comics with their own TV shows, because not one of us is a host on “The View,” because there is no Indian Oprah and no Indian Denzel and no Indian on “Lost.” Stories are all we’ve got. So when an Indian holds a copy of N. Scott Momaday’s groundbreaking novel “House Made of Dawn,” which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969, or Louise Erdrich’s widely popular “Love Medicine,” they hold it gingerly, as though carrying the ashes of a recently deceased grandparent.

Our cultures and our languages -- as unique, identifiable and particular entities -- are linked to our sovereignty. If we allow our own wishful thinking and complacency to finish what George Armstrong Custer began, we will lose what we’ve managed to retain: our languages, land, laws, institutions, ceremonies and, finally, ourselves. And to claim that Indian cultures can continue without Indian languages only hastens our end, even if it makes us feel better about ourselves.

Cultural death matters because if the culture dies, we will have lost the chance not only to live on our own terms (something for which our ancestors fought long and hard) but also to live in our own terms. That Native American cultures are imperiled is not just important to Indians. It is important to everyone, or should be. Because when we lose cultures, we lose American plurality -- the productive and lovely discomfort that true difference brings.

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Tribe given land for
preserve

By Victor Morales, Indian Country Today correspondent

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TEMECULA, Calif. – The Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians will add nearly 1,200 acres of real estate to its reservation.
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Breaking into the Business

entertainment industry. Jane Myers, Comanche, is the center’s executive director. She was instrumental in planning the evening’s events. “Our goals for this event were really twofold,” she said. “One was to gather the Native American entertainment community: there are so many of us spread throughout the city and the event provides a place to network. Another goal was to show the industry just how many Native artists are in this town.” The task force and the American Indian National Center share the same mission: to increase employment opportunities and promote more accurate representations of contemporary American Indian communities.

At “Careers in Focus,” a panel of industry representatives from the four major networks shared some practices and strategies for increasing the visibility and employment of American Indian actors, writers, directors and producers.

The panel assembled included Native actor Adam Beach; writer and writing instructor Geoff Harris; Veena Sud, executive producer/writer/director; Kim Williams, casting director, FOX; Marc Hirschfeld, executive VP of casting, NBC; and Fern Orenstein, VP of casting, CBS.

The panel was moderated by CBS national news correspondent Hattie Kaufman, Nez Perce. Advice was given to a newly arrived actress on how to get an agent, audition dos and don’ts were discussed and tips to writers seeking representation were given.

“Tell a universal story, and everyone can relate,” was some advice from Harris, who conducted the 2007 and 2008 summer TV and film writing workshops at IAIA.

Sud, who currently writes for and produces the CBS series “Cold Case,” told the audience, “Hone your craft – you have to write every day.”

The casting representatives reminded the actors, “Don’t rely solely on your agent. Remember your agent gets 10 percent – you have gotta do 90 percent of the work. You must always be pushing yourself and your own career.”

Beach talked about his experiences and struggles in Hollywood – his success gave hope to the room full of Native artists who seek a career in this industry.

The panel discussion ended and the crowd moved to an outdoor patio area for food and drinks, to mix and mingle: in other words, network.

As Hirschfeld said, “The Native community needs to mobilize, create a critical mass and work together.”

Studi said, “We had an amazing turnout. We had over 200 people in attendance tonight. We wanted an elegant and professional event so the industry can see us as modern-day people and employable talent.”

“It is really up to us,” Myers said. “We have the talent and the capabilities to change the images of Natives in Hollywood. We have writers who can write it, producers and directors who can bring a project to life, and actors who can act in it. It is a very exciting time.”


Indian Times

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