

## *Introduction*

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# Navigating the Academic Workplace

“It’s the same everywhere,” a trusted mentor said to me many years ago. We were chatting over coffee after spending time listening to conference papers. I’d been complaining about the run of the mill academic politics. In his trade mark fashion my mentor cut right to the chase, “Go into your class room, close the door, and get on with your teaching. Write, research, and ignore the politics. It doesn’t get any better then where you are.”

I wasn’t really willing to believe him; our department was moving toward a reasonably polite, but stressed, parting of the ways between Sociology and Anthropology. The grass looked greener at a lot of different places. I listened to him anyway, hunkered down, did my academic work, found my research feet, and looking back at it I realize it was one of the best pieces of academic advice anyone ever gave me. My mentor’s advice took me through tenure and finally to promotion as a full professor.

His was hard advice to follow. It is really easy to get sucked into the meaningless webs of gossip, intrigue, accusation, and posturing that constitutes the white noise of departmental politics. There are times that I wished I had paid more attention to his advice as I found my self strangely isolated or pulled into maelstroms of conflict. There are other times when I thought I was following his advice but then

got pulled up short when colleagues took a different view and acted in ways that seemed to suggest I was very much involved. Yet throughout all of this I have tended to effect what I considered to be disinterested engagement with departmental politics. Doing so has in fact allowed me the space to focus on things that matter to me as an Indigenous scholar.

I do a good deal of work on behalf of and within my home community. I also do work with and for other First Nations and Native American Tribes. This is exciting work. It is also work that can be intensely conflictual. University politics still flame out on who can represent. But community conflicts are just as likely to be within community and between neighbouring communities as much as between communities and non-Indigenous people. The stakes are not based in academic prestige. No, in these conflicts real dollars, lives, and community wellbeing are on the table. These are not situations for the faint of heart. They are important and have real implications for Indigenous people and our wider society.

It seems that the contemporary university has a difficult time coming to terms with these critical issues and concerns. Within the university we tend to focus on saying rather than doing. I confess to finding it hard to get excited about wordsmithing forty-word vision statements when many Indigenous

people simply want dignity and respect in life. I want the university to count back home even as I want it to be a real place for debate, discussion, and learning. Yet, I am at times disappointed by the way things turn out.

I've written about these kinds of situations. In one paper, Standing on the Shore with Sabaan, I decry the continued use of our Indigenous communities as sources of data for outsiders to experiment with. In a second paper I discuss the history of collaborative research and point to ways in which anthropology and anthropologists still have a long way to go. In a more recent paper I appropriate anthropological techniques and subsume them fully within my own Indigenous perspective calling attention to the blindness of non-Indigenous colleagues. These are works that can offend and for that I do not apologize: why is the colonized always asked to apologize to the colonizer?

True, there is something about an assertive and vindicationist Indigenous perspective that challenges fellow travelers and opponents alike. It compels me to develop a more interested engagement in university politics. Universities need to be safe places for Indigenous peoples, not battle grounds. But, as our African American cousins are showing us throughout the US universities are not safe spaces for the colonized. We must first engage in order to make over the university.

Almost 20 years after receiving my mentor's advice I realize that part of his directive to close the door on departmental politics was so that I could focus on what it really means to be an Indigenous scholar navigating the foreign waters of the western academy. Let me assure you it can be done: I've managed so far. It can be a rough ride. But with the armour of position, and such little power it might accord me, I shall now turn my gaze onto the mundane word of academic politics so that those who come after me might never experience the same obstacles and injuries my generation has.

With this issue of *New Proposals* we introduce the student showcase section. Here we foreground outstanding work completed by undergraduate and early career graduate students.

The balance of our articles and comments highlight the importance of class struggle politics. This is fundamental to building a new and better world. To ignore social class in the face of a multitude of competing subjectivities is to deny a future possibility of true liberation. In the same way that struggles on the ground are about what counts, about what might make real differences, so too should our progressive intellectual engagements be about identifying ideas and approaches that contribute to further the class struggle that will one day end the tyranny of minority capitalist rule.