

## EDUCATION

## A place of belonging



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What is the purpose of language and culture? How can communities that have been marginalized by legal restraint, bureaucratic agents and the weight of censorship find their voices in a world that fears language and culture as a threat to the cultureless American melting pot?

Those questions have haunted and inspired me ever since I entered the academy in 1987 as a re-entry student. I could build a house to code, but I knew very little about the world I lived in. Because I am a tribal member, much of the history I had embraced was colored by traditional stories, ceremonies, and a love for oral tradition.

Early into my academic studies, I read these words by Leslie Marmon Silko:

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]  
They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.  
They are all we have, you see,  
All we have to fight off  
Illness and death.

Those words woke my spirit, and my formal language journey began. After a few years of reading, I wrote a story titled "John Red Eagle," which I dedicated to an Osage Chief who had saved my life from addiction and a certain early death on the streets. The story won an award and drew the attention of native writers. Around this time I went to my first play, called *Black Elk Speaks*, and I experienced what happens when native artists bring language alive in a visual and audio way.

Soon, my stories were being read in publications. The California Department of Education asked me to write a book to help young native people in their workforce programs. It would become my first contact with Adobe apps like Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign, which gave me a platform to fully express myself beyond print. I worked with illustrators Harold Freehand, Ikoshy Montoya and Taylor Barnes. They took my words and stories and began to shade, color, and stretch them across their canvases. My stories became so powerful that state politicians took notice. Terms like "reverse racism" began to emerge as a result of my truth telling. But it was too late; the power of those stories had been unleashed.

As an instructor and the director of the New Media Lab at Mesa Community College, the most difficult dynamic I face is undoing the psychological effects of true colonialism and replacing its grip on inherent tribal sovereignty. True colonialism no longer needs military force, educational indoctrination or harsh punishments to function. True colonialism happens when indigenous peoples unconsciously replace their own God-given identities with those of who would oppress them. In 1978, the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote: "It is the nature of the oppressed to imitate the oppressor, and by such actions try to gain relief from the oppressive condition. We must resist that response to oppression". This may sound like a harsh or ungrateful statement to those who have benefited from tremendous land wealth, political gain and religious bounty under the teachings of Manifest Destiny, but for many of indigenous peoples who have endured euro-centric philosophies, life has been hard.

In response to claims like Freire's, I have dedicated myself to providing creative research learning spaces for our students. Many are tribal members who are struggling with a modern day identity. One of the first writing projects we do in the New Media Lab reinforces inherent tribal identity by asking the questions that Pulitzer Prize winner and Kiowa tribal member N. Scott Momaday asked in his book, *The Man Made of Words*: "Who am I?" and "What are my Songs?" I find that as many of our native students begin to discover their family histories, tribal histories and cultural identities, they begin to feel not only empowered by their discoveries, but they begin to feel like the New Media Lab provides a much needed *Place of Belonging* for our communities.

Together, students begin to transcend their research into short documentary projects. In this newfound learning environment, students are motivated to not only learn, but to take pride in sharing their research stories. In the lab, we call ourselves "truth tellers". Our stories have been shown on PBS and at educational conferences. I have no doubt our truth telling is shaping learning models across America and across Indian Country. Most importantly, students gain appreciation for their own authentic identities. As a result, we create a place of belonging and begin to resolve the differences that often divide us.

Hear Eddie Webb discuss the value of why Faculty should embrace teaching digital literacy skills in this on-demand webinar: <https://adobe.ly/2PTv9Wt>

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