Why Indigenous Nations Studies?

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One of the first of several committee assignments we received after joining the faculty as new untenured professors was an appointment to a university task force charged with developing a new master's degree program relating to American Indian Studies. It was exciting to receive this appointment, and we both looked forward to the work. There were about a dozen task force members, reflecting a variety of academic disciplines both within the University of Kansas, and Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU). We remember well how hard it was to develop a consensus mission statement and program proposal, as well as to sell the program throughout the various levels of the university hierarchy. Throughout this process, the most vibrant discussion we recall related to what we would name the program-whether it would be American Indian Studies or something "new." Ultimately, after two years of work, the State Board of Regents approved the establishment of a new master's degree program in Indigenous Nations Studies. The task force then began the search for a new director of the program, which eventually culminated in the selection of historian Donald Fixico, who started in January 1999. In the fall of that year, we enrolled our first class of students.

As would be expected, many people contributed a great deal of their time and effort to the development of the new program.² We cannot speak for the others as to what their aspirations were for the program, but we know that we were pleased by the final wording of the mission statement.³ For the future students and administrators of the program, as well as for others who might be curious, it is worth explaining why the mission statement says what it says and why we decided to call the program "Indigenous Nations Studies."

The Program Mission Statement

Organizational mission statements are quite often so ambitious as to be completely meaningless. The goals set and the objectives anticipated can be so lofty that the very best thing that can be done by those potentially affected by it is to ignore it, lest there be unending feelings of inadequacy. Against this potential pitfall, we believed that it was very important to the new program—both in getting it established and for its long-term success—that there be a usable mission statement. Defining what "usable" meant, however, proved to be harder than it sounds.

We believe that it would be fair to say that we brought a unique perspective to the work of the task force. Both of us are Indigenous nation citizens and we have each spent years of our lives working with our own people in our home territories. These experiences, as we have come to find out, are rare among university scholars and very much shaped our perspective in developing the new program.

I (Rob) came to KU after serving my nation for almost four years as its first attorney general. This was an experience that literally changed my life. Even though I had grown up in my nation, I had been educated at state public schools and thus knew very little about how the United States and the state of New York had appropriated my nation's lands and colonized our people. This was compounded by the fact that I, like many of us, had descended from family members who had been sent to the mission schools that had been established within and near our territory. Having the opportunity to work with our people on intimate matters of law, government, politics, culture, and policy stimulated in me a tremendous surge of commitment to helping my nation grow stronger that, quite frankly, is difficult to describe. The short of it is that by the time I came to KU in 1995, I was fresh from an experience in which I had seen firsthand both the possibilities and challenges associated with revitalizing Indigenous nationhood.

Given our knowledge of the problems facing Indigenous communities, we became enamored with the prospect of what might happen if one of the world's major universities channeled its resources toward the objective of facilitating the redevelopment of those communities. In our view, this was both a practical and a theoretical endeavor because it anticipated engaging in more than just an empirical study of a particular problem but to actually developing solutions to bring it about. This "pragmatic vision," in retrospect, sounds hardly surprising coming from a lawyer and a social worker.

Others on the task force, it seemed, had less of a predilection for applying the academic and theoretical emphases of the university to the end of bringing about change in Indigenous communities. This, we suspect, probably had far more to do with academic discipline and training than a concerted desire to not provide assistance. Nonetheless, we sensed that there was a definite difference in perspective between those on the Task Force who viewed Indigenous peoples foremost as objects of research—e.g., the anthropologists and the like—and those who had a strong interest in ensuring Indigenous survival because we were Indigenous peoples ourselves.

After much discussion, we were able to come to a consensus on the mission statement, with an opening paragraph as follows:

Aspirations. The Indigenous Nations Studies Program ("Program") at the University of Kansas aspires to facilitate the protection and strengthening of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and self-sufficiency. Through a unique course of research, study, and practical experience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the Program are prepared for careers working to strengthen Indigenous communities of the Americas.⁴

We hope that this aspirational statement is as clear as we think it is. It is perhaps critical to fully appreciate the significance of this opening paragraph to know what we believe to be the most important underlying assumption about the future of the Indigenous nations—that Indigenous peoples face the very real threat of extinction due to the colonization of Indigenous lands by non-indigenous peoples. Even a casual understanding of the history of Indigenous-Colonist interaction reveals the inherent truth of this assumption. Since European colonists arrived, millions of Indigenous peoples on the American continent have been exterminated through such seemingly benign mechanisms as disease to such deliberately cruel and self-interested actions as state-sponsored campaigns of cultural and physical genocide.

All of the Indigenous nations that have survived have been weakened by hundreds of years of colonial aggression. The loss of population, lands, language, and culture necessary for survival and growth as distinct societies has been dramatic. For these nations to survive another 500 years, it is critical that efforts be made to confront the horrors of colonization and to embark upon well-thought-out plans. It is at this juncture that we—and many others within the KU and HINU academic communities— hope to focus the energy of the new program. Whatever one calls it—"sovereignty," "self-determination," or "self-sufficiency"—Indigenous peoples need more of it. Without such a focus, we believe, there will continue to be insufficient opportunities to develop the intellectual and practical strategies for the decolonization and indigenization of our nations. We hope to train the minds and develop the skills of our students so that they can be integral players in this process.

To this end, the mission statement continues:

Values. The Program is based upon the desire to revitalize Indigenous culture, values, and ways-of-life and to participate in academic and collaborative efforts with the Indigenous

nations designed to help them realize their chosen future. This process is contingent upon an appreciation and respect for the interconnectedness of all things.

It seemed wholly incongruent, as well as arrogant, and certainly colonial in its own right, to take the position that the university knows what is best for Indigenous communities. Thus, we anticipated the development of symbiotic relationships by which Indigenous nations could grow stronger through the ebb and flow of interaction with the university community. Understanding our position as equals to Indigenous nations—rather than being in a position "above" them—was critical, in our view, to ensuring both the initial orientation of the program as well as its long-term developmental path.

The core of the program is rooted in the historic function of any great university to focus on teaching, research, and service.

Instruction. Through graduate degree offerings, the Program seeks to assist students in developing critical thinking and understanding of the cultural, economic, environmental, political, and social needs of Indigenous people. This focus affords students the opportunity to obtain the skills, knowledge, and sensitivity that they need in order to assist Indigenous communities in preserving their cultural identity. The Program acknowledges that students must have an understanding of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives to protect and enhance distinct Indigenous communities. Therefore, educational methods and resources embracing both perspectives are utilized.

Research. The Program embodies a wide-ranging research agenda based upon the utilization of both academic and traditional Indigenous scholars. Research and teaching are mutually reinforcing, both within the university environment and between the University and Indigenous communities.

Service. The Program serves Kansas, the United States, and the World through teaching, research, and dissemination of knowledge regarding efforts to protect and strengthen the sovereignty of Indigenous nations.

In developing the mission statement, the task force was particularly focused on the Indigenous nations located in the Americas. Invariably, we concluded, the focus of "Indian Studies" programs in the United States is on the Indigenous nations within the United States. We believed that this focus unnecessarily deprived us of the possibility of exploring new learning horizons involving

Indigenous nations to the north and south of the United States. While colonization has caused tremendous distinctions today in the various threats that Indigenous peoples face, the commonality of being peoples colonized by Europeans opens up opportunities for exchanging useful knowledge and experiences. Indeed, global alliances between Indigenous Peoples is macro value that has emerged over the past several years in response to common problems brought on by past and present colonization. Such alliances are valued because they produce commitments of solidarity between Indigenous Peoples with respect to self-determination and sovereignty.

In this sense, the most challenging—and perhaps most depressing given the magnitude of the challenge—aspect of the program mission statement is its last paragraph:

World Impact. In the increasingly complex and diverse global community, the threats to Indigenous existence continue to expand. Finding ways to preserve and strengthen Indigenous sovereignty against the backdrop of competing interests is a global problem in need of redress.

Only time will tell whether the program's mission statement is so ambitious as to be meaningless. As we take this opportunity to review it four years after it was developed, however, we find that it continues to lay out a course of action that is both focused and encompassing. In fairly obvious ways to us, both of us have sought to develop our own scholarship and teaching around the contents of the program's mission statement. Although this may raise the problem of the chicken and egg as to whether we were influenced by the mission statement or it influenced us, it is surely the case that the opportunity to work on such an ambitious collective project so early in our careers played an important role in shaping our professional development. In this wholly unintended way, we hope that others—both our colleagues and our students of today and tomorrow—can draw similar inspiration and energy.

Naming the Program

Because it engendered the most vigorous debate among task force members, it is worth recounting how and why we developed the name of the program. In our efforts to name the program, we discovered that most Native Studies Programs in the United States call themselves American Indian or Native American Studies; few deviate from this practice. While we are not certain why this is, we have speculated some reasons that make sense to us. First, it seems that the current titles of Native Programs exist because these labels have become so institutionalized and commonplace that they are not questioned by Indigenous Peoples.

Second, new names such as First Nations or Indigenous Peoples are foreign to the intellectual vocabulary of most Indigenous scholars educated in the United

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States. In fact, most have advanced their careers by referring to Indigenous Peoples in the United States as American Indians or Native Americans. To change terminology in midstream would be difficult. Third, we believe that because non-indigenous peoples recognize us by these labels and are definitely more in charge of our destiny, we are often forced to accommodate them rather than ourselves, lest we inconvenience them and fall out of favor and lose funding and support for our projects. Finally, we believe that there is an ownership issue at play here where the colonizer can lay claim to us as their "American Indians" or "Native Americans."

This thinking on the part of the colonizer constructs an artificial cultural-politico dichotomy between Indigenous Peoples despite our common experiences under colonial rule. We are treated as the possessions of nation-states, where there is an unspoken but clear attitude that these are "our" Indians and those are "your" Indians and let us make sure we keep them separate. For us, the above issues were troubling and in need of redress and helped guide us toward developing a new name for the program.

For me (Michael), the racial labels issue was settled before I came to Kansas. From 1992 to 1994, I was a member of the faculty of the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada. While there, I had the opportunity to witness the empowerment and recognition that Native Peoples acquired using the labels "Aboriginal," "First Nations," and "Indigenous" when identifying themselves. I discovered that these labels were not just passive, politically correct terms, but rather calculated, intentional efforts at promoting identity empowerment, decolonization, aboriginal title to the land, and sovereignty.

My experiences at UBC were extremely enlightening and helped awaken me from the political coma I had suffered due to the lack of a clear and intelligent, critical discourse concerning the politics of identity and Indigenous Peoples in the United States. Thus, when I left and joined the faculty in the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas in 1994, I brought with me a commitment to advance "First Nations" and "Indigenous Peoples" as empowering generalized descriptors for Native Peoples in the United States.

I settled on these two terms because I felt they are the most appropriate generalized descriptors for Native Peoples in the Western hemisphere. I consistently use them in my work because they are an important part of my intellectual decolonization and liberation from linguistic imperialism. For example, in an essay entitled "Indian, American Indian, and Native Americans: Counterfeit Identities," I state that I prefer the name Indigenous Peoples because it is an internationally accepted descriptor for peoples who are the original inhabitants of the lands and who have suffered and survived a history of colonialism. I like the name because it is accurate and describes who we really are. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1981, defines Indigenous as "having originated in...or living naturally in a particular region or environment," whereas Indian is defined as "a native inhabitant of the subcontinent of India or the East Indies."

I also prefer the label First Nations because it suggests that such persons are the original inhabitants who retain Aboriginal title to the lands they occupy and the right to self-determination. Indeed, Michael Asch (1992) notes, "The United Nations has stated that this right to 'self-determination' is held by colonized peoples everywhere in the world, and that no successor colonial regime can extinguish that right by unilateral claims to sovereignty over the same territory." The term also has a strong spiritual foundation that is appealing and appropriate because it recognizes the relationship that Indigenous Peoples have with the land. In fact, the name was created by tribal elders in British Columbia who maintain the traditions of First Nations including a belief in a Creator who placed their nations on the land to care for and control them.

My first attempts to alter the racial labels used for Indigenous Peoples on our campus began with my colleagues and students in the School of Social Welfare soon after I arrived. I often told them that I was not an Indian or American Indian, nor did I want to be called either name because I was not from India. I told them that if I referred to myself as an Indian I would be uncritically endorsing the prevarication of the Columbus myth of "discovery" and that I did not intend to do that under any circumstance. I also told them I was not a Native American because Indigenous Peoples did not refer to these lands as America and that this name was one that was ethnocentrically imposed by Europeans. I told them that my preference was to be referred to by my specific tribal affiliation. If they wanted to collectively refer to Native Peoples, I strongly suggested that First Nations or Indigenous Peoples were much more empowering labels. Because a major ethical principle of the social work profession is social justice, it did not take long to convert the language of social work students and faculty in my school. In fact, the change was relatively simple because it was easy for all to see that the misnaming of Indigenous Peoples was clearly linked to the oppression of identity, discrimination, and social injustice.

I used the momentum that I had gained in the School of Social Work to engage First Nations students and faculty in a critical interrogation of labels used to name the existing courses and programs on campus. My zeal to quickly and radically shift the racial identity label paradigm away from American Indians or Native Americans to First Nations or Indigenous Peoples on our campus was thoughtfully tolerated by First Nations students and faculty. The feedback from my colleagues and students helped me understand that before such discourse or change could occur, it was necessary that several other issues first receive attention in order to prepare a clear rationale for advancing a new name for the program. At this point, Professor Porter's superb critical thinking skills and strong decolonization framework became invaluable to our discussions. He suggested, among other things, that a starting point should include a critical examination of who we are with respect to our collective and individual Indigenous identities and how that might influence the development and naming of the program.

Several themes emerged through our discussions of what to call the new program. For example, we examined ourselves as nations, colonized peoples, peoples resisting colonization, and/or colonized peoples in various stages of transformation and decolonization. A second set of critical discussions focused on how we felt we were politically positioned in our university and how we were valued for who were are. As part of these discussions, we felt it necessary to examine what the past experiences have been with respect to previous development of a Native Studies Program on our campus. From this history, we were able to estimate the power and allies we had to advance our ideas and priorities for the new program. Our final discussions centered on what could be the guiding theoretical framework of our deliberations and how it could provide a foundation that would give rise to our collective need for empowerment and academic ontological orientations. That is, what is the meaning and purpose of European American education in the lives of Indigenous Peoples and how can it be used to the advantage of First Nations communities?

Discussions were held in our offices, during faculty think-tank potlucks, and through our formal and informal interactions with First Nations students. The discussions produced exciting results and profound insights, with perhaps the most important being our claim to a conceptual framework that featured a fierce, critical, intelligent analysis of colonization and decolonization. For us, colonization represented oppressive, subjugating realities for Indigenous Peoples' communities while decolonization offered hopeful antidotes to these realities. Not all members of the task force participated equally in the discussion of what to call the new program. However, those that were consistently in attendance decided that the names American Indian and Native American were part of the colonial legacy of control and domination and that the program should avoid these and focus on others.

On November 11, 1995, Professor Porter and I submitted a subcommittee report of the goals of the new program to the larger Native American Studies Task Force. In this report, we outlined the goals and purposes of the program and referred to the new program as the "First Nations Leadership Institute." This title was a name that we had discussed beforehand, and we decided that we would use it to see how the rest of the committee would react to it. The name launched a series of intense debates of what the program should be called; some preferred American Indian while others Native American. Often these terms were defended because they were familiar and because, over the years, non-First Nations faculty had developed several courses using these names. Not surprisingly, we were put on another committee that was charged with coming up with a name for the program. It was during this time (over the course of some months) that we began the discussions with First Nations students and faculty and non-First Nations faculty of what the program should be called.

While on this second committee, Professor Porter and several others and I suggested different names that we felt were relevant to the program's mission statement. He first suggested the name "Tribal Sovereignty Studies," which we

felt was consistent with the mission statement of the program. However, others said it did not "convey the appropriate message" of the program and "seems to relate primarily to Law." Committee members argued that the name should be "more general" and not "implicate a narrow scope." During one committee meeting some of the members, exasperated by our detailed discussions of different names, suggested that the program name would neither attract nor turn away students, but the content of the program would. Therefore, we should not be spending so much energy on what to call the program. Again, some suggested that "Native American Studies" was the most appropriate name and should be adopted. Others argued that "American Indian" was equally appropriate. However, these two names did not last long in the discussions because First Nations faculty and students began using the colonization/decolonization framework to argue that these labels were results of colonialism and should be avoided. To use them would be to promote the colonization of the program. Other names that were suggested that had less colonial implications and appeared to be acceptable were Indigenous Peoples Studies, First Nations Studies, and Indian Nations Studies.

Because the aspirations of the program mission statement focused on the facilitation, the protection, and the strengthening of Indigenous sovereignty, selfdetermination, and self-sufficiency, First Nations task force members agreed that "Nation" should be in the title of the program. Professor Porter was instrumental in assuring that this would happen by eloquently stating, "This program is not about studying Indians, it is about promoting self-determination, Indigenous leadership, and the skills necessary to defend and strengthen the sovereignty of First Nations into the twenty-first century." With his leadership and cogent remarks, the final decision of what the name would be for the program came during a meeting of the larger task force membership. The name Indigenous Nations Studies was suggested along with the others and when the final official vote was taken, Indigenous Nations Studies became the name of the new program.

Indigenous Nations was selected for several reasons. First, the name, Indigenous Peoples is accepted by the United Nations. According to the UN definition, Indigenous Peoples are diverse populations who occupy ancestral lands, have a shared lineage with the original inhabitants of these lands, have distinct cultures and language, and consider themselves dissimilar from those who control their lands. Second, the United Nations "Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," reflects an emerging international consensus on the rights of First Peoples around the world. For example operative paragraph 1 of this declaration says, "Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination, in accordance with international law. By virtue of this right, they freely determine their relationship with the States in which they live."7 Operative paragraph 8 states, "Indigenous Peoples have the right to manifest, practise and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies." Operative paragraph 10 says, "Indigenous Peoples have the right to all forms of education, including access to education in their own languages, and the right to establish and control their own educational systems and institutions." Finally, the

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fact that several of the other operative paragraphs in this declaration detail the rights of Indigenous Peoples under international law made the name Indigenous relevant to the mission statement of the program and therefore relevant to the program title.

Ingredients for Change

Through our numerous discussions arose the understanding that it was necessary to redefine ourselves with a more empowering language and to clarify the direction and vision of the program. This included what we should call it. We felt it was important to establish a common language of empowerment relevant to our understanding of how to avoid the colonization of our program. We found that the success for naming the program something new was due to several important ingredients. Among them were focused and intelligent leadership, a well-understood analytical framework, decolonization movements among Indigenous and non-indigenous intellectuals, the preparation and inclusion of First Nations students in critical discussions, a critical mass of students and faculty, clear articulation of our positions, and experience in academia and our own territories.

Leadership was an important ingredient necessary to influence what we would name the program. Leadership came from faculty and students who provided guidance and a vision necessary for change. The quality of the leadership that emerged was intelligent, courageous, and thoughtful. The stereotype of the stoic, quiet Native was often shattered when students and faculty guided task force discussions toward critical questions that demanded lucid answers to support notions of sovereignty and empowerment for Indigenous Peoples. A key factor in our leadership efforts was that few (students and faculty) were willing to defer to the bureaucratic obstructions of the university that would be obstacles to the development of the new program. Rather, positions were taken that if the program was to fulfill its mission statement, courageous and innovative efforts must be pursued by all.

Leadership was made easier because we had settled on a conceptual framework of colonization and decolonization that made it possible to carefully analyze our positions to determine how we would construct the program. As faculty and student became more aware and comfortable with the terminology and thinking inherent in our framework, a language of empowerment began to emerge. We feel that without such a framework our actions and thinking would be scattered and not as relevant to our vision for the program. Our framework enabled us to deconstruct the American Indian and Native American labels and reveal what was being trivialized, ignored, and censored through the use of these names.

Decolonization movements and the fierce critical analysis of colonialism by different Indigenous and non-indigenous intellectuals in the United States and Canada during the early and mid 1990s offered an excellent ingredient for changing the name of our program to something new. Among the works we

studied were Ward Churchill's Fantasies of the Master Race; Howard Adams, A Tortured People; bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress; and Paulo Freire's, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Each of these works enabled us to see that colonization was not in a Post state as many non-indigenous bourgeois intellectuals have proclaimed on our behalf. The call for fierce critical interrogation by hooks, critical consciousness by Freire, and speaking out to white oppressors by Adams engendered in us an ability to pursue necessary changes in the program. These works, along with others, helped us validate our claims about the need to decolonize our disciplines and any future programs that would serve Indigenous Peoples and their communities that were housed in the university.

The fact that we had many engaged, articulate students and faculty as a critical core gave us the ability to promote our ideas and notions of what our program should be named and the direction it should take. However, this group did not just suddenly appear, it was the result of our early and ongoing discussions about the nature and direction of the program and the inclusion of important voices that shared our analytical framework. We were fortunate to have very strong support from several progressive students and faculty from Haskell Indian Nations University. The fact that we both had teaching experiences at Haskell and had collaborated on joint projects with faculty and students, helped them to trust our decisions for the development of the program.

The final ingredient that helped us achieve the passage of the mission statement and naming of the program was the fact that we both were members of our respective Indigenous Nations. We each had grown up in our territories and had much experience working in our communities and with other First Nations Peoples. We found that this combination was not common among First Nations scholars and helped to legitimize our ideas with respect to what may be needed by tribal communities. Because we had experience in academia and in Indigenous communities, we found that our Indigenous peers and students respected us. In addition, we found that it would be difficult for others (especially non-indigenous scholars who were the "experts" on our communities) to argue that we had no connection to tribal communities and therefore our ideas would be out of touch with what Indigenous Peoples needed or thought.

Conclusion

In sum, the experience in developing the new program made it clear that success would have eluded us had there not been a critical mass of Indigenous faculty, buttressed by non-Indigenous faculty and Indigenous students, with an enterprising sense of political and social justice and an understanding of the need for change within our institution. However, we discovered that the biggest challenge was to provide vision and leadership as a counter to the entrenched academic, detached scholar paradigm that resides within academia. For us, ou critical numbers included faculty from Haskell who held progressive viewpoir and understood the language of decolonization. Because many at KU had spe

years trying to develop a degree program like the Indigenous Nations Studies Program, we felt fortunate that we could help contribute to bringing it to fruition. Our hope has always been that this new program will produce students and scholars who will be able to make an important contribution to the survival of our nations.

Notes

1. In addition, Luci Tapahonso, Rita Napier, and I (Rob) learned more than we cared to about

the university's bureaucracy.

The co-chairs of the task force were Luci Tapahonso and Rita Napier. Members of the task force from KU included Bart Dean, Peter Herlihy, John Hoopes, Al Johnson, Peter Mancall, Ray Pierotti, Don Stull, and Akira Yamamoto. Members of the task force from Haskell included Venida Chenault, Leslie Evans, George Godfrey, and Dan Wildcat. There were many other faculty, staff, and students who contributed to the development of the program who should be thanked for their efforts. Special thanks must go to Chancellor Robert Hemenway, Provost David Shulenburger, Dean Sally Frost Mason, and Associate Dean Pete Casagrande for their leadership and support in developing the program.

3. It should be confessed that I (Rob) drafted the mission statement on behalf of the Task Force.

4. Mission Statement, Indigenous Nations Studies Program, University of Kansas, May 30. 1996.

Michael Yellow Bird, "Indian, American Indian, and Native Americans: Counterfeit Identities," Winds of Change: A Magazine for American Indian Education and Opportunity 14 (Winter 1999): 86.

Michael Asch, "Political Self-Sufficiency," in Nation to Nation: Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of Canada, edited by Diane Englestad and John Bird (Concord, Ontario: House of

7. David Suzuki and Peter Knudson, Wisdom of the Elders: Sacred Native Stories of Nature (New York: Bantam Books, 1992). The operative paragraphs were quoted directly from this book.

8. Ward Churchill, Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1992).

9. Howard Adams, A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization (Penticton, BC: Theytus

Books, 1995). 10. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York:

Routledge, 1994).

11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993).