

Indigenous Research Methodologies: X-Marks in the Age of Community Accountability and Protection

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Abstract

In an ongoing exchange about the potency and promise of Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs) for academic knowledge production, I respond in this article to Windchief and Cummins. I do so by considering a challenging example of Indigenous knowledge production, clarifying additional misunderstandings between us, and complicating persistent oppositions and essentialisms that are neither intellectually defensible nor characteristic of contemporary Indigenous life and experience. Instead, I propose that IRMs are productively conceived as x-marks (or historical American Indian treaty signatures), which encapsulate the paradoxes, contradictions, and predicaments of modern American Indian life in ways that resist clean oppositions and confound rigid binaries. In this respect, the x-mark signifies that which lies between two readily identifiable options, something new and potentially promising despite the indeterminacy and ambivalence it elicits, if only we will face and embrace such ambiguity.

Keywords

American Indians, Indigenous research methodologies, community accountability, Native American Studies, qualitative research

It is remarkable—and perhaps unprecedented—for a mainstream academic methods journal such as *Qualitative Inquiry* to host an exchange by American Indian scholars about the substance and significance of Indigenous research methodologies (IRMs). Originating in response to my 2014 conference presentation, Windchief and colleagues (2018) published critical reactions and reflections by four co-authors to my Ten Postulates, Three Sets of Key Questions, Eight Misgivings, and Two Take-Home Points about IRMs. Opening with detailed self-location statements, each co-author addressed perceived limitations of my presentation, disputing (for example) my worry that IRMs seem to privilege “form over findings,” questioning the appropriateness of direct critique in Indigenous knowledge exchange, and reaffirming the value and importance of Indigenous ways of knowing for academic inquiry. To this, I responded with a detailed recounting of highlights from my presentation, clarified some areas of possible misunderstanding, and reviewed a classic distinction between orality and literacy for purposes of formulating and advancing IRMs in academic knowledge production (Gone, 2019). Most recently, Windchief and Cummins (2021) published another entry in our exchange, offering their summary of our dialogue, providing additional self-location information, identifying areas of agreement and divergence in our prior contributions, affirming bicultural accountability in the IRM endeavor, and promoting epistemological pluralism

through a stance of “cultural intuition.” I am pleased to contribute this (brief) fourth entry in the series (not including a related publication that appeared outside of this exchange; see Gone, 2017b), in which I consider a challenging example of Indigenous knowledge production, clarify some additional misunderstandings, and complicate persistent oppositions and essentialisms that arise in discussions of IRMs that are neither intellectually defensible nor characteristic of contemporary American Indian life and experience.

A Challenging Example of Indigenous Knowledge Production

Preserving Aaniiih Knowledge

As I write this response, I am editing for publication a collection of the written work of my great-grandfather, *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre tribal member Fred P. Gone

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(1886–1967). From 1941 to 1942, Gone worked for the Montana Writers Project (MWP), a state-sponsored venture funded by the federal Works Progress Administration. As the Gros Ventre “fieldworker” on the Fort Belknap Indian reservation during this time, Gone was employed to interview and document the pre-reservation traditions of our people for a projected publication about the traditional lifeways of several of Montana’s American Indian communities. During his employment, Gone created 400 pages of longhand script addressed to Gros Ventre history, 300 pages addressed to Gros Ventre legends, six sketches associated with this work, and many letters in exchange with officials of the MWP that recount and describe his activities. These writings engage many topics, from biographies of elders to tribal myths, with the crowning achievement being a life narrative of the famed Gros Ventre medicine man, Buffalo Bull Lodge (ca. 1802–1886). A redacted version of this narrative was first published in 1980 by *Aaniiih* tribal member George P. Horse Capture as *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge* (F. P. Gone, 1980). Elsewhere, I have unpacked the origins of this narrative, including the shifting contexts of its telling as mediated by successive generations of Gros Ventres (Gone, 2006).

Due to the onset of World War II, the projected MWP “Indian series” volume was never published. The current collection of Gone’s writing was reportedly rescued from the city dump in Butte, and subsequently deposited in the archives at Montana State University in Bozeman. As a consequence, most of this work has not been accessible to scholars or the public, despite the profound historical, cultural, and literary significance of this collection for exploring many consequential questions in the study of Native North America: the shift from oral to literary traditions within tribal communities, the implications of knowledge production within intra-tribal projects of cultural preservation, the opportunities and challenges of representing tribal narratives for public consumption, and the consequences of such endeavors for American Indian self-determination. It is my hope that eventual publication of this book will enable widespread access to an unusual—and in certain respects, unprecedented—corpus of tribally-mediated (i.e., Indigenous) knowledge. Such access should catalyze innovative scholarly activity in Native American and Indigenous Studies (and related fields) addressed to such questions, while simultaneously providing students and the public with an exciting opportunity to delve more deeply into a remarkable treasury of Gros Ventre knowledge and tradition.

Considering Bicultural Accountability

I introduce this instance of knowledge production partly for purposes of self-location but primarily for considering Windchief and Cummins’ (2021) call for bicultural accountability and community knowledge protection. Specifically,

Fred Gone preserved knowledge obtained from Gros Ventres who experienced pre-reservation life on the northern Plains by creating his extensive archive for posterity during the 1940s. He did so through literacy. As I have described elsewhere (Gone, 2017b), anthropologists also came to Fort Belknap for similar purposes, but a key distinction was Gone’s social location as a bilingual/bicultural tribal member who could converse with his elders in their own language and then “write up” what they told him in English for a broader public. Here I use the term “write up” rather than “write down” because Gone was no mere amanuensis for these elderly “informants” but rather a curator of their knowledge for modern literate audiences. Although he observed key tenets of the oral tradition (such as the prohibition on imaginative embellishment of accounts beyond what details were shared or known), his contribution undoubtedly entailed creative fashioning, especially with respect to literate knowledge production. For example, in observing the conventions of biography, *Bull Lodges Life* sequentially recounts the experiences of this famous *Aaniiih* medicine man in chronological fashion; and yet, it is clear from Gone’s notes that in a few instances he re-ordered some of this material, possibly out of adherence to chronology or perhaps for improved narrative flow (interestingly, Horse Capture edited this account even more extensively for later publication).

With respect to bicultural accountability and community knowledge protection, *Bull Lodge’s Life*—and Fred Gone’s archive more generally—introduces some thorny issues. Gone was very clear about his purpose for writing Bull Lodge’s biography: “To explain what those supernatural powers were and how they worked, it was necessary that the life story of Bull Lodge be obtained” (Gone, 2006, p. 74). Indeed, *Bull Lodge’s Life* is essentially an account of a pre-reservation Indigenous *spiritual journey*, one that is replete with sacred knowledge, ceremonial activities, suprahuman powers, and ritual details. It presumably contains precisely the kind of Indigenous knowledge that Windchief and Cummins (2021) believe should be “kept safe through cultural protocols” (p. XX). And yet, what renders *Bull Lodge’s Life* so fascinating is its possible function as a sort of Indigenous Gospel, in which a gifted holy man accomplishes feats and miracles among his own people prior to becoming the final ritual Keeper of the community’s sacred Feathered Pipe. In fact, Bull Lodge was instructed by Those Above that he would die on a certain day and then be resurrected once the proper ceremony was conducted (it was not; for more details, see Gone, 2006). If one considers that the genre of biography likely came to pre-reservation Gros Ventres from Jesuit missionaries teaching the Gospel of Christ, then this postulated form and function of Gone’s account—crafted by a lifelong Roman Catholic ostensibly for a non-Indian public—seems as plausible as it is intriguing.

Destabilizing “The Community”

Such speculative possibilities are challenging to consider, however, in the face of “protecting knowledge from [tribal] members who might misappropriate their own community knowledge” (Windchief & Cummins, 2021, p. XX). But what exactly is “community knowledge,” and how do we know when “members” are “misappropriating” it? In a letter to the MWP staff following an extended consultation with Bull Lodge’s daughter about the origins of the sacred Feathered Pipe, Gone explained that she offered to “give him” her father’s story, “if I wanted it” (a “gifting of knowledge,” as described by Windchief & Cummins, 2021, p. XX). Furthermore, he indicated that no one else in the community then possessed such rich knowledge pertaining to Bull Lodge and the Feathered Pipe. Based on multiple consultations with her, Gone produced an inspiring, instructive, and intra-tribally mediated text for broader circulation. On one hand, Bull Lodge’s daughter apparently imagined that this knowledge was hers to give—not requiring say-so from certain community leaders or institutions—and moreover that there were perhaps few at that time who might actually “want it.” On the other hand, Gone presumably wrote for the proposed Indian series volume to be published by the MWP for a largely non-Native audience. Although he may have hoped that other Gros Ventres would read this account, his anticipated readership would have extended well beyond the “community.” Finally, it is important to note that Gone’s archive was created for hire with government funding, and so his work exists in the public domain; no individual can claim ownership per se of these written materials.

My intent is to publish this archive for *both* the community and a broader public, and if I succeed then this work will have been one of the few instances in which *Aaniiih* knowledge of this kind and caliber will have been published through a chain of *Aaniiih* curation that must surely be utterly distinctive in the history of Indigenous knowledge transmission. I do so, of course, not by “permission” of the “community” but rather with the support of relatives with whom I have consulted about this project over the years. My late grandmother, Bertha (Gone) Snow, gave me her father’s papers, which remain one important source for this project. Instead of my writing about his life as a Gros Ventre spiritual leader, my late grandfather, Fred V. Gone, encouraged me instead to make his father’s collected writings publicly available. My late uncle, Raymond D. Gone, sat for an interview with me to help craft the Introduction for the anticipated volume. Thus, perhaps it is fair to claim that some of the most esteemed elders of the Gone family supported this effort, though they do not of course speak for the entire Gros Ventre community. In fact, the very idea of an organic and unified *Aaniiih* “community” is itself a fiction because we Gros Ventres are a diverse lot. For example, the

anthropologist Loretta Fowler (1987) published an ethnohistory of the Gros Ventre people that culminated in her on-the-ground observation of a pronounced generation gap between cohorts of Gros Ventre elders and youths. The elder generation at that time believed that Gros Ventre cultural practices had all but disappeared, while younger generations found inspiration from symbols and meanings that they viewed as culturally continuous with the Gros Ventre past.

According to Fowler (1987), these divergent orientations were grounds for intense community conflict (which I can attest to from harkening to the words of Grandma Bertha; see Gone, 1999, 2017a; Gone & Alcántara, 2010; Gone et al., 1999). Unsurprisingly, intra-tribal diversity—and associated conflict—continues today in our community (and, indeed, in any human community). Due to intermarriage, some *Aaniiih* kin are enrolled tribal members and others are not. Some have two Indian parents, others also have White, Mexican, or Black parentage. Some identify closely with traditional Indigenous spirituality, others identify as Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, or Mormon. There are obvious gender differences in tribal leadership, tribal employment, child care obligations, and ceremonial leadership. Increasing numbers of Gros Ventres identify as gender non-binary or “two spirit.” Many Gros Ventres are registered Democrats, some are registered Republicans; plenty are apolitical. Less than half of us live on or near the Fort Belknap reservation. In sum, there are very few issues that all Gros Ventres might be said to agree on, though (as when Fowler spent time at Fort Belknap) there are some issues that most Gros Ventres might be said to have a stake in. In other words, references to Gros Ventres—and by extension to other Indigenous groups—as a “community” that would consensually agree on contentious matters and offer unified guidance and permission to protect knowledge in specific instances is largely a fantasy. Surely Windchief and Cummins (2021) recognize that our tribal communities—especially on the northern Plains—are teeming with conflict. Presumably, then, they’re adopting the term *community* as a shorthand for an undesigned subset of American Indian people (kin? elected tribal leaders? enrolled tribal members?) who support and authorize their views on these matters. Most tribal members would be able to muster such supporters—among their own relatives, at the very least—for any number of causes.

Evaluating Knowledge Claims

Even if American Indian scholars were successful in mobilizing community-based supporters to endorse their perspectives on contentious intellectual issues, is this really an ideal approach for evaluating knowledge claims? The premise of much university-based knowledge production is that ideas, assertions, and arguments are ideally assessed on

their intellectual merits, which typically involves soliciting critiques and rebuttals from scholars with deep expertise in the relevant knowledge domains. As Windchief and colleagues (2018) noted, however, such pointed debate may not characterize traditional Indigenous knowledge exchanges on the northern Plains (or beyond). In my experience, it is somewhat rare for reservation-based community members to publicly express direct contradiction of statements or claims with which they disagree; rather, the polite response is to simply ignore the comment altogether, or perhaps to obliquely set forth an alternative perspective. Moreover, in my experience, the conventions of academic knowledge exchange in university-based forums such as colloquia and seminars has also become less disputatious over the course of my own career. In the end, if community accountability is elusive (or, rather, idealistically but misleadingly manufactured) and if direct critique is unacceptable (as perhaps an intrusion on the sacrosanct autonomy of others; see Darnell, 1981, 1991) how should we evaluate knowledge claims with respect to Indigenous epistemologies and IRMs? And what should this look like when it comes to assessing the aspiration, opportunity, and importance of publishing something like the Fred Gone archive? Hopefully, Windchief and Cummins (2021) can agree on the value of this indigenous knowledge, and would not assert that Fred Gone's writings—addressed as they are (in part) to sacred and ceremonial matters—would have been better off disintegrating in the Butte city dump.

Persistent Misunderstandings About Indigenous Research Methodologies

Since my 2014 conference presentation, and throughout this resulting exchange, I have been pleased to consider, integrate, augment, or dismiss the various ideas and arguments that have been shared. I have grown in my own thinking through this dialogue, which I take to be a primary value of (critical) academic knowledge exchange: a refinement of one's awareness, perspective, approach, and understanding. In the most recent contribution by Windchief and Cummins (2021), I especially appreciated the creative approach described in the "Epistemological Pluralism" section of the article, which (in part) seeks to identify non-literate forms of advancing Indigenous knowledge through scholarship by American Indians. As I noted previously (Gone, 2019), such innovative projects are crucial for overcoming the limitations of literacy in reflecting and representing these knowledge traditions.

Even in this recent contribution by Windchief and Cummins (2021), however, I continue to recognize points of misunderstanding. In my earlier article (2019), I did not use the term *Indigenous epistemologies* interchangeably with the term *IRMs*, but rather I used these terms in distinctive fashion to deliberately reflect my conception of the

former as a foundation for the latter in discussions of IRMs. The two ethical claims I previously described (Gone, 2017b) are better summarized as two distinctive grounds for ethical objection to my having briefly presented the Crow skull medicine traditions at the conference, one based on religious grounds and the other based on anticolonial political grounds (both of which I then proceeded to complicate). My concern about lengthy self-location statements in American Indian scholarship is not at all about a "positivist" removal of bias from interpretation of data. Rather, as a matter of emphasis, I contend that substantive ideas should be foregrounded over author identities in academic knowledge production because most ideas can be critically appraised even with minimal knowledge of the identities of their advocates. I also acknowledge, of course, that different knowledge practices persist in American Indian communities outside of academia, and the substantive point of contention is whether and how to introduce these Indigenous knowledge practices into the academic sphere.

Although I recognize, adopt, value, and promote certain knowledge practices that might be said to comprise a "western academic paradigm" (Windchief & Cummins, 2021), I do not agree that these practices are accurately described as "positivist and quantitative" (p. XX), which is an overly reductive definition that omits long-standing approaches to knowledge production in the humanities and interpretive social sciences. I have already endeavored to destabilize the reified notion of *the community* earlier in this article, and therefore I remain skeptical of the definition of an Indigenous person offered by Windchief and Cummins; there really are no necessary and sufficient criteria by which *all* individuals who lay legitimate claim to Indigenous identity (e.g., unenrolled kin, disenrolled tribal members, transracial adoptees, or White people with limited and distant American Indian ancestry) might be defined. Thus, I am dubious about the four "thought attributes" listed by Windchief and Cummins (p. XX) as characterizing Indigenous "knowers": whether a given knower evidences a "proven commitment" to the community's well-being, lives "in a way that aligns with" the community, or ascribes "to the values of that community" are matters of framing and interpretation (and are thus always open to contestation). If, as they assert, "IRMs include all methods of research that are called for by Indigenous communities" (p. XX), then presumably these encompass knowledge practices from a "western academic paradigm" (such as business, education, and science); at this point, I start to lose track of what we are debating here.

More seriously, Windchief and Cummins (2021) refer to American Indian "faculty trying to play by the rules" who "use scholarship grounded in unethical research practices of a bygone era." These individuals do so apparently to position themselves as inoffensively "safe Indians" who tip-toe "around the fragility of [White] colleagues in power" (p. XX). Windchief and Cummins also describe the need for

“protecting knowledge from [tribal] members who might misappropriate their own community knowledge,” arguing that “to disclose previously published material when the origins of knowledge ‘discovery’ were exploitative is problematic” (p. XX). I wonder who they have in mind here? Me? My great-grandfather? And how do we know when the origins of knowledge are exploitative? Fred Gone contended with deep reservation poverty for his entire life. His knowledge production was compensated by the MWP, which is how he earned his livelihood during 1941 and 1942. Was he exploited through the creation of his archive, and did he in turn exploit Bull Lodge’s daughter or other *Aaniiih* elders in this work? Which American Indian people have ever lived entirely free of exploitative circumstances? By extension, which conditions surrounding Indigenous community knowledge production afford escape from such exploitative circumstances? I will admit to experiencing some of this as troubling innuendo. If my colleagues wish to suggest in print that I have done unethical and cowardly scholarship, then I prefer that they say so directly so we can have that discussion openly and constructively.

Indigenous Research Methodologies as X-Marks

As a constituency of the Blackfoot confederacy on the northern Plains, Gros Ventres were party to a Treaty in 1855 between the confederacy and the USA (Farr, 2001). This Treaty with the Blackfeet (1855) reserved a large part of present-day Montana for the confederacy’s exclusive control. Eight Gros Ventres were signatories to this Treaty during the negotiations that occurred at the mouth of the Judith River, including my great-great-great-great-grandfather. As one of over 60 “undersigned chiefs, headmen, and delegates of the aforesaid nations,” his signature appeared as follows: “Eagle Chief, his x mark” (p. 4). An x-mark is the record of an individual’s assent in the absence of alphabetic literacy. In his seminal work on Indigenous Studies, the Anishinaabe critic Scott Richard Lyons (2010) explained as follows:

An x-mark is a treaty signature. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a common practice for treaty commissioners to have their Indian interlocutors make x-marks as signifiers of presence and agreement. Many an Indian’s signature was recorded by the phrase “his x-mark,” and what the x-mark meant was consent. (p. 1)

For Lyons, however, the significance of the x-mark extends well beyond this narrow function.

An x-mark is a sign of consent in a context of coercion; it is the agreement one makes when there seems to be little choice in the matter. To the extent that little choice isn’t quite the same thing as no choice, it signifies Indian agency. (p. 1)

This idea of coerced consent echoes my earlier consideration of exploitative circumstances.

In this important work, Lyons (2010) endeavored to envision whether and how American Indian identities, cultures, and nations could survive into the future in *nonessentialist fashion*. His solution was to embrace the impurities, liminalities, admixtures, and ironies that structure modern Indigenous life and experience, acknowledging that “there is no way around the hard fact that we live in mutually contaminating times” (p. xi). In this respect:

The x-mark is a contaminated and coerced sign of consent made under conditions that are not of one’s making. It signifies power and a lack of power, agency and a lack of agency. It is a decision one makes when something has already been decided for you, but it is still a decision. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. And yet there is always the prospect of slippage, indeterminacy, unforeseen consequences, or unintended results; it is always possible, that is, that an x-mark could result in something good. Why else, we must ask, would someone bother to make it? I use the x-mark to symbolize Native assent to things (concepts, policies, technologies, ideas) that, while not necessarily traditional in origin, can sometimes turn out all right and occasionally even good. (pp. 2–3)

This conceptual extrapolation of the x-mark thus encapsulates the paradoxes, contradictions, and predicaments of modern American Indian life in ways that resist clean oppositions and confound rigid binaries. Instead, the x-mark signifies that which lies between two readily identifiable options, something new and potentially promising despite the ambiguity and ambivalence it elicits.

With respect to this formulation, I assert that IRMs are x-marks. That is, they emerge from and depend on the intellectual, epistemological, professional, and political tensions that lie between familiar conceptual oppositions. The most foundational of these tensions for IRMs is the Indigenous–Western binary that motivates and mobilizes enthusiasm for IRMs. About this, I already noted:

I strive to avoid the Indigenous–Western binary because all of the Indigenous people and communities I know have been deeply entangled in “Western” institutions and practices for a very long time, and, indeed, what is described as “Western” has been forged through long histories of Indigenous contact, exchange, and appropriation. (Gone, 2019, p. 54)

I also already reflected on the insider–outsider binary that arises in discussions of IRMs, noting that “there is a sense, of course, in which all academics are ‘outsiders’ beyond their own professional communities” but that some of us “preserve and cultivate stakes in community life based on shared social identity, kinship ties, life experience, and long-term commitment that reflect ‘insider’ status” (Gone, 2017b, p. 357). Finally, drawing on Ong (2002), I explicated in some detail the many distinctive features of primary orality

and literacy—which Ong himself described using sharp contrasts such as the evanescence of sound versus the stability of text, or remaining close to the human life world versus a distancing amplification of conceptual abstraction—that advocates of IRMs seek to bridge (Gone, 2019).

Beyond these, many additional binaries appear to (at least implicitly) structure this exchange about the potency and promise of IRMs. Consider the following appurtenant oppositions: traditional versus modern, community-based versus academic, private versus public, political versus analytical, accountable versus exploitative, consensual versus controversial, past versus present, protecting versus contributing, integrating versus dissecting, soliciting approval versus inviting contestation, expressing identity versus arguing ideas, conveying knowledge versus complicating understandings, sidestepping incredible claims versus critiquing others' ideas, and so forth. And yet, it seems clear to me that the full potential of IRMs ultimately depends on our resistance to their breezy association with either pole of these familiar oppositions. Instead, we must insist that IRMs appropriately belong within the messy, ambiguous spaces that structure human actions between such tempting characterizations. This is why I characterized IRMs as *Métis* in my 2014 conference presentation (Gone, 2019): IRMs are akin to the French-Ojibwe communities that emerged through intermarriage during the long fur-trading period, which blended and fused various cultural elements of both societies, resulting even in the development of a new language known as *Michif*. IRMs harbor the potential to become a compelling new language for knowledge production by Indigenous academics, if only we will face and embrace the *nonessentialist* indeterminacies, impurities, admixtures, liminalities, and paradoxes of modern American Indian life. After all, our forebears have done so for a very long time. In signing the Treaty of 1855, Eagle Chief made his x-mark. In creating an *Aaniiih* archive, Fred Gone—a bilingual, bicultural, Catholic Gros Ventre—made his x-mark. As American Indian scholars and passionate contributors to this published exchange, we also are making our x-marks.

Closing

In this contribution to our ongoing exchange, I have responded to Windchief and Cummins (2021) by considering a challenging example of Indigenous knowledge production, clarifying some additional misunderstandings between us, and complicating persistent oppositions and essentialisms that are neither intellectually defensible nor characteristic of contemporary Indigenous life and experience. I do so in the effort to enhance the potential of IRMs to contribute to university-based knowledge production. I propose that IRMs are productively conceived as x-marks, encapsulating the paradoxes, contradictions, and predicaments of modern American Indian

life in ways that resist clean oppositions and confound rigid binaries. Rather, the x-mark signifies that which lies between two readily identifiable options, something new and potentially promising despite the ambiguity and ambivalence it elicits. I hope that this contribution furnishes more light than heat to our generative dialogue thus far.

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