

NAIS NEWS

People, News, and Events in Native American and Indigenous Studies at Indiana University

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Highlights:

- Exit Interview with Sonya Atalay (page 1)
- "I grew up in eastern South Dakota. My family would vacation in the Black Hills and later, I came to learn what a contested space that is. I also became aware of the romantic representations of Plains people.. Since [then], I've been interested in questions of the representation and production of knowledge about Native people." Student profile of Sarah Dees (page 3)
- Accolades (page 4)

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SAYING FAREWELL TO SONYA ATALAY

Interview by Sarah Gordon

Sonya Atalay, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and a driving force behind the formation of the Native American and Indigenous Studies committee, will be leaving Indiana University for a new position at the University of Massachusetts starting in the Fall of 2012. Before her departure, she agreed to reflect upon the development and importance of the NAIS program.

What would you like to share about your departure?

I am very excited about all that UMass has to offer, yet there are things I'll miss about IU and living in Bloomington. I learned a great deal from my experience at IU and those lessons will serve me well

throughout my career. I was able to make a lot of connections across campus, in American Studies, Native American and Indigenous Studies, Central and Eurasian Studies, and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. And I also enjoyed working with the First Nations Educational and Culture Center (FNECC). I'm looking to Massachusetts now because there are a lot of things that I can build and contribute to there.

Like what?

The UMass Native and Indigenous Studies

program is already quite established and well-funded. They have an elder in residence program that's really fantastic, where an elder will be on the campus for several weeks, and the university pays them quite well, and students can meet with them and learn about issues that are important in their community or challenges they are facing and would like assistance in researching. The NAIS curriculum is much more focused on community engagement. Quite a few anthropology faculty

are working on community engaged research, service-learning, and they also have a new heritage studies center - a lot of exciting things that I will be able to contribute to and that I can help to grow.

Community-based research is an important area of my work. When I talked to the dean UMass, I

explained that my dream had always been to be able to build a community-based research center so that everyone on campus in any field who does community-based research would have a place to come together and develop research in partnership with communities. The dean explained that they have wanted to build a hub around community-based research and she said, "Let's get working on it!" and started talking about ways to raise funds for such a center. That was really exciting for me.



(photo: IU Anthropology department website)

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1: Sonya Atalay)

That is really exciting. It can be so difficult to do community-based research because there are so few resources and it seems like not many people are trying to work that way yet.

Exactly. That was a big part of my decision to join the UMass faculty. I see it as an opportunity to push myself intellectually by working with an interdisciplinary group of people who are thinking about and working through the same issues. I think that sort of vibrancy and intellectual engagement that is also focused on impacting the communities around us in positive ways is what academia is all about.

It's always hard to leave a place where you've made connections and grown some roots, but I know there are great opportunities for me to have a real impact at UMass, and I feel confident that IU's NAIS program is firmly established and will continue on its path long after my departure.

Could you give an overview of the history of your involvement with the NAIS program?

When I came here in 2007, faculty were just starting to meet and talk about what NAIS might look like at IU. For much of my involvement, I came from the FNECC side of things. When I arrived I met Rebecca Riall, a graduate student in anthropology, and Dennis Lamenti, another Native student in astronomy. I wanted to know about Native issues on campus, and they told me about their efforts to build the FNECC. From that, I began reflecting on my own experiences as an undergraduate at Michigan and a grad student at Berkeley. And I considered those as models of how student services (like the FNECC) could compliment yet remain independent from an NAIS program. Both programs were just being established and I worked hard to be involved in both.

The FNECC was brand new when you arrived.

It had just been established the spring before I arrived on campus in 2007.

Until then, they'd been working as a student group, and the students did a great job with the limited resources they had in building a community. It was an ideal time for NAIS to get off the ground. I think it's most productive to build the two programs in a separate but parallel way. A big part of the struggle at that early phase is that you're trying to get and support Native students, but until you have a critical mass it's hard to recruit more people because Native students don't want to come to a community where they're going to be isolated in their home department and be the only one.

It's the same thing with faculty. And it's always a struggle, it's not just IU. Having a core group of Native faculty is really important. Universities have approached that issue in different ways. Some fund cluster hires, bringing in three to five people within a short period of time; others create a focus for their program to attract scholars from different fields who all share a broad interest on a related issue. But IU hasn't been able to do either. As a result, we have very few Native faculty. Having Native voices (faculty, students, community) is a critical part of Native-focused programs like the FNECC and NAIS, but it's certainly not the whole story. There should be a place for everyone, and in my view, NAIS is at its best when there is broad involvement from across campus. At IU, there is certainly interest and involvement in NAIS from a range of faculty and students on campus. Faculty in folklore, history, American studies, and anthropology have done a great deal of work shaping and building the program.

What is the importance of having an NAIS program specifically? As opposed to encouraging students to do their research under the rubric of, say, anthropology, or history, or some other more-established discipline.

That interdisciplinarity is critical. For example, you might hear an important issue coming from Native communities: what are the critical issues and challenges that people are facing? The interdisciplinary perspective of a NAIS program offers a holistic view to help address those challenges. You end up asking new and really interesting questions that you might not have considered otherwise if you were working within strict disciplinary boundaries. I've found that a great deal of research creativity and inspiration happens precisely at those boundary places or liminal spaces. Within NAIS, you might be an archaeologist who finds yourself in a class with an English student, both of you studying decolonizing methodologies, and you begin to see the challenges through a different lens. You might then find a new approach or a way to frame your question in a way you've never considered. You might also see new challenges that you hadn't anticipated before. But THAT is what's exciting – all of it. You find the same thing in doing research with communities. Everyone involved becomes a teacher and a learner, and together you work to create new knowledge that impacts our world in positive ways. For me, that is the rich intellectual experience you should get from NAIS.

I've never envisioned Native American studies as an "area studies" program for people who study Indians. There's a critical consciousness part of it: of decolonizing research, of pushing scholarship in new directions, and of engaged work with communities.

Did you as a faculty member get to interact with people you probably otherwise wouldn't have?

Certainly! One of my favorite things being at IU has been to participate

as a visiting lecturer to the graduate Intro to Native American Studies courses. It was phenomenal to learn about the different students who were interested in NAIS, how they want their research to contribute to the world around them.

Do you have ideas or hopes for where you'd like to see the NAIS program go in five years even if you're watching from afar?

(Continued on page 4)

NAIS Student Profile:

Sarah Dees,

Religious Studies

Interviewed by Sarah Gordon, NAIS News Editor.

Sarah Dees, PhD student in Religious Studies, is the recipient of the NAIS Fellowship for 2012-2013 and will be editing the NAIS newsletter next year. She agreed to sit down for an introductory profile interview before taking over the helm.

Let's start with an introduction.

I'm a PHD student in the department of Religious Studies. I just finished my third year, so I'm working on a draft of my prospectus and gearing up to do dissertation research. I'm particularly interested in historical studies and media representations of Native Americans, and the impact these historical ideas have had on contemporary understandings of Indigenous religion and culture in the Americas. My research focuses on the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when a number of individuals and organizations produced different ideas about Native spiritual and healing beliefs and practices. Ethnologists raced to document Native cultures they believed were dying out while missionaries encouraged Native communities to give up their traditional practices and adopt Christianity. At the same time, nationally recognized medicine companies were trying to encourage non-Natives to purchase cures labeled "Indian Medicines," and Native activists like Gertrude Bonnin worked to make a space for Indigenous voices in the public sphere.

Do you have a geographical focus?

Not exactly. My geographical purview tends to reflect the areas of focus of those who produce the documents I examine. Although, often, in time period I'm interested in, the Great Plains area

was capturing a lot of attention, so that ends up being an important area I look at. One set of documents I'm examining is the records of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and BAE scholars produced reports on Indigenous groups all over the U.S. and beyond, so my geographical focus is necessarily expansive. I've made an effort to look beyond the U.S. when considering the contemporary impact of my research, to the Americas more broadly.

For the January 2012 issue of the NAIS newsletter, you wrote a piece about some time you spent in Cuzco.

Yes. One of the contemporary issues I track is the debate about non-Native appropriation of Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices, and I was interested to see what form this was taking outside of the U.S. In Cuzco, I examined different forms of spiritual tourism. Non-Indigenous people participate in a wide range of tours and ceremonies—from Ayahuasca ceremonies and ceremonies

to honor the Pachamama to parades drawing on both Catholic and Andean symbolism. While these can all be a meaningful way to learn about Andean culture, only certain groups of people are commodifying and providing the more

mystical experiences to tourists. I was interested in seeing who those people are—those that are providing and participating in mystical experiences. What I found, preliminarily, is that it's people who are interested in a form of spirituality that draws on world religions more generally. Those interested in Andean mysticism are also interested in Hindu and Buddhist mysticism as well. So, Andean spirituality is almost subsumed under a larger category of world religiosity or world spirituality.

I hope to return to Peru in the future, and continue to think about how non-Natives have

drawn on Indian medicine and spirituality in the past and present. Often, scholars attribute these practices to "new agers," and a lot of academics focus on commodification in the U.S., but cultural borrowing started happening much earlier than that and is going on around the world. I think we can expand our understanding of what appropriation is, and how it happens, by looking at these transnational patterns. So, that's my long-term agenda. For my dissertation, though, I want to go back and look at the origins of these representations, to understand how some of those appropriation issues came to be.

So do you envision that your work is going to be mostly archival and historical?

Yes; for purposes of my dissertation, I'm using archival sources and taking a historical approach. Many of the records I'm looking at are government documents, so they're pretty easy to find. I'm

(Continued on page 4)



Photo courtesy of Sarah Dees

I grew up in eastern South Dakota. My family would vacation in the Black Hills, and later, I came to learn what a contested space it is [...] I also became aware of the romantic representations of Plains people. Since [then], I've been interested in questions of the representation and production of knowledge about Native people.

(Continued from page 3: *Becoming An Ancestor*)

also planning on doing some archival work in the National Anthropological Archives in Washington, D.C. over the summer. I'll probably only have a couple of weeks to spend there, but then hopefully I'll get a sense of what they have and then go back to do more research later. I see this historical research as setting a firm foundation for my future work, which will engage more directly in contemporary questions and debates. My dissertation research examine the relationship of Native religion to language and land, so I hope that my work is relevant for people interested in those themes today.

For the purposes of your project, how are you defining or bounding Native religion?

I have a pretty open understanding of what Native religion can be, and part of my project involves looking at how others have defined Native religion and spirituality. I'm teaching an Indigenous Worldviews class right now, and we've been talking about the question of what religion is in relation to culture. My definition is not very fixed, but terminology used in comparative religion can be a good starting point: religious leaders, stories, rituals. Also, some of the sources I've looked at define what *they* mean by a religious system, so I can use their starting point as my starting point.

How did you come to be interested in this stuff?

Well, I'm from Kansas originally, but I grew up in eastern South Dakota. My family would vacation in the Black Hills, and later, I came to learn what a contested space it is. This place was initially what captured my attention: all these different people had different things at stake in the land, and different ideas about its significance. Many debates about the Black Hills are ongoing: the question of whether climbers should be allowed on Devil's Tower,

which some Native communities consider sacred, and debates about the appropriateness of Mount Rushmore, in an area considered to be unjustly obtained. Growing up in this part of the country, I also became aware of the romantic representations of Plains people. Since I first became aware of these issues, I've been interested in questions of the representation and production of knowledge about Native people.

What do you mean by production of knowledge?

Different groups of people—scholars, businesses, politicians—producing knowledge about Native people that they consider to be authoritative and objective. Historically, ideas produced by these parties carried more weight than individuals' and communities' portrayals of themselves. In recent years, in part due to scholarship in the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies, there has been much more knowledge and understanding produced by Native people. Theories and methods, for example, ethnohistory and community-based participatory research, have enabled us to think critically about processes of knowledge production.

You're in Religious Studies, which is an interdisciplinary field. In your experience, what's the benefit of putting that together with another interdisciplinary minor like NAIS?

Participating in these two interdisciplinary fields reinforces the usefulness of drawing on different theories and methods when doing research. In the department of Religious Studies, I have great mentors who are experts in religion in the Americas, and they have helped me lay a theoretical foundation for my work. But it was critical for me to work with NAIS faculty, who are in history and anthropology and other fields, for guidance in the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies. I really value the opportunity we have at IU to

work with faculty from different departments, because it enables students to gain an understanding of many important approaches in the field. ||

(Continued from page 2: *Sonya Atalay*)

Yes. The program has come a long way and I'm pleased to see that. I think there's such an opportunity at IU because of where the campus is located geographically, and because of the resources it has—the Native Studies program here has such great potential, and I hope to see that it reaches that potential. One critical thing is getting more faculty who can teach in the program. I've never envisioned Native American studies as an "area studies" program for people who study Indians. There's a critical consciousness part of it: of decolonizing research, of pushing scholarship in new directions, and of engaged work with communities. That's how Native Studies as a field first got started in the late sixties and early seventies. It would be fantastic if that kind of push in focus could come to this program, but you're going to need more faculty to do it. Perhaps someone in art, and definitely someone in literature.

It's interesting that there's nobody in literature. It seems that to talk about decolonizing methodologies, one of the first things to do is to stop thinking so rigidly about what's literature and what's theory.

That's exactly it. The program and the campus would really benefit from having someone who studies Native and Indigenous literature, as well as a few other critical areas. And a director for NAIS, someone to take things to the next level. I have confidence that the faculty and students who are involved in NAIS will move it in a good direction and I'm looking forward to hearing how it goes. You can be sure I'll still have an eye on IU from afar! ||

ACCOLADES!

NAIS professor **Stacie King** recently received tenure in her home department of Anthropology, and was promoted to Associate Professor. Congratulations, Dr. King!