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American Quarterly, Volume 68, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 401-403 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0019>



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# Creating Public Scholars: A Collaborative Project on Environmental and Economic Justice Activism and Scholarship

*David Correia*

When academics speak of community engagement, it's often to describe its difficulties. We talk of bridging the town and gown divide as though there were some inherent barrier between the work we do on campus and the lives our neighbors live outside it. This is particularly true at the University of New Mexico, which recently discontinued its research service-learning program. Helping faculty connect with community organizations is no longer a priority at UNM. But that doesn't mean UNM doesn't see a role in "community engagement"; it's just not one defined by a commitment to social justice. Neoliberal approaches define UNM's version of community engagement. Innovation, entrepreneurship, public-private partnerships, and commercialization define the role the University of New Mexico sees for itself.

And if it's not clear how something called "innovation" might contribute to resolving the problems Albuquerque faces—poverty, income inequality, food insecurity, mass incarceration, environmental racism, and a history of racialized police violence—it's because UNM no longer sees a role for itself in confronting those problems. Instead, we're encouraged to "incubate business ideas," to "take technologies to market," to "leverage" things, and to look for "synergies." All of this takes the form of an enterprise project called "Innovate ABQ," and it represents an enormous investment in money and staff, faculty, student, and administrative time and effort. Established by UNM in 2014 as a nonprofit corporation with an eleven-person board of directors,<sup>1</sup> Innovate ABQ's stated mission is to "strengthen the economic base in the mid Rio Grande region and throughout the state of New Mexico by creating more knowledge-worker jobs for graduates from our educational institutions and experienced workers in our communities. The mission is achieved by commercializing new technologies developed at New Mexico's research universities, by public/private partnering with our national labs, business organizations, civic leaders, nonprofit sector, national and global corporations, and public schools, and by providing en-

trepreneurial education and support.” Its first order of business was to buy a former church near downtown Albuquerque that for years had provided crucial services and free meals to the most vulnerable people in our city. Now, instead of serving food to the homeless as part of a research service-learning course on poverty and homelessness, UNM students can practice their elevator pitches in front of local “entrepreneurs” and “angel investors.” What was once a place for the poor to find help is now “a premier Downtown innovation district for researchers, inventors and entrepreneurs.”

In this campus context, I applied for an American Studies Association Community Partnership Grant. Our goal was to oppose the redefinition of community engagement at UNM and also to examine the human and nonhuman cost of neoliberal development in New Mexico. We proposed a collaboration between the UNM American studies department and *La Jicarita News*, a community-based newspaper that has focused on social and environmental justice struggles in northern New Mexico for nearly twenty years. The newspaper has long directly challenged the logic of neoliberal restructuring in New Mexico. It was the outgrowth of community-organizing efforts over resource conflicts in New Mexico, and its contributors and readers include community activists, scholars, local residents, and elected officials.

There is perhaps no more important environmental justice struggle in New Mexico than Indigenous struggles for land and water. Over the years, *La Jicarita* covered the legacies of uranium mining for Navajo workers and Native communities. In the 1970s, Native student groups at UNM took the lead on environmental justice campaigns. We chose to focus the conference on those leaders and struggles, and bring American studies faculty and students together with social justice activists. In April 2013, in collaboration with *La Jicarita*, the American studies department hosted “Decolonization and Indigenous Liberation: The Remarkable Life and Work of John Redhouse.” Born and raised in Farmington, New Mexico, John Redhouse has been a lifelong Indian-rights activist. He was a leader of the National Indian Youth Council and a member of such radical liberation groups as Indians Against Exploitation, which operated in 1972–73, and the Coalition for Navajo Liberation in 1974. He spent a lifetime on the front lines of Native liberation movements opposing anti-Indian bordertown violence and racism in Farmington and Gallup.<sup>2</sup> Redhouse was and remains an organic intellectual, one fully in the service of his community, focusing on Diné liberation and decolonization movements, always with an emphasis on ongoing grassroots struggles against the extractive resource industries that plague Dinétah’s ancestral homelands. He has writ-

ten extensively about the privatization of Navajo resources and the social and environmental cost of the ongoing neoliberal colonization of Indian Country.

Honoring Redhouse meant understanding his enormous political and intellectual legacy. The conference brought together Native and non-Native scholars (faculty and students) at UNM with political activists, organizers, and public intellectuals such as the Black Mesa community organizer Nicole Horseherder, the longtime Indigenous rights activist and scholar Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, the Black Mesa community organizer and activist Klee Benally, and *La Jicarita* editor in chief Kay Matthews, among others, to talk about Redhouse's influence on their work and on political struggles in New Mexico.

Hundreds of people attended sessions throughout the day that focused on histories of Native liberation struggles in New Mexico and community organizing, and how to put scholarly labor in the service of decolonization struggles, among many other topics. Scores of people traveled from the Dinéyah homeland to hear from John Redhouse and see him honored for his environmental justice activism.

Years later, our collaborations continue. Faculty and graduate students in the Department of American Studies have continued John Redhouse's work and this year organized a series of events around the topic of bordertown violence. The American studies graduate students who presented at the 2013 conference were among the leaders in 2015 of a successful campaign to ban Columbus Day in the city of Albuquerque.<sup>3</sup> What began as an effort to "create public scholars" became, in the neoliberal language Innovate ABQ might understand, an effort to incubate radical activism in the academy and turn UNM into a hub for decolonization struggles in New Mexico.

## Notes

1. The original all-white, all-male, all-CEO board was expanded when many objected to its composition. Now a few white businesswomen and people of color (still CEOs) have joined the board.
2. Bordertown violence refers to the specific forms of state-sponsored or state-tolerated everyday violence against Native people in the towns that surround Native reservations. Bordertown violence and racism reinforces the sociospatial exclusions imposed by brutal histories of settler colonialism.
3. Harlan McKosato, "Anti-Columbus Natives Rally for ABQ's Indigenous Peoples' Day," *Indian Country Today Media Network*, October 15, 2015, [indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/10/15/anti-columbus-natives-rally-abqs-indigenous-peoples-day-162083](http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/10/15/anti-columbus-natives-rally-abqs-indigenous-peoples-day-162083).