A Historian in the Tribal Digital Village: 'Don't Let This Happen to You!'

This concluding chapter discusses my involvement as an academic and historian working in the Tribal Digital Village, a remarkable achievement of the 18 tribes in San Diego county who, over a 3-year period, built a wireless network that connects each reservation and provides a platform for integrating digital technologies into important facets of tribal life. Taking seriously the recent published work about the decolonization of the roles of today's researchers in partnership with Indigenous peoples, led by Linda Tuwai Smith, Devon Mihesuah, and Angela Cavender Wilson,[1] I comment on issues involved in contributing, as a historian and an academic, to a tribally-directed project predicated on the active participation of tribal members in creating an expression of meaningful sovereignty over tribal education, economic development, and cultural resources.

I began working with the San Diego tribes as a form of outreach to help extend to some of the communities access to resources that the university could provide, and regularly does provide to others. In sum, I wished to explore various ways to bring the La Jolla Reservation to La Jolla – at least to the UCSD campus. After 2 years of work on what had quickly become a mammoth undertaking, the review cycle of the university caught up to me, and my Ethnic Studies colleagues suggested that it might be a good idea to write about the Tribal Digital Village. The added perspective that the subsequent shift from outreach to research subject produced has forced me to confront inherent tensions and intrinsic contradictions between my role as a participant and the expectations of the academy regarding the production of knowledge. Stated as

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[1] See Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies : Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London, New York, Dunedin: New York: Zed Books; University of Otago Press; distributed in the USA exclusively by St Martin's Press, 1999; Devon A. Mihesuah. *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing About American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.; and Devon A. Mihesuah, and Angela Cavender Wilson. *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

propositions: the relationships that made me effective as a participant in the Tribal Digital Village I could not have discovered or developed if I had engaged as a historian doing research from the start; and, the most significant insight of my study, tracing the tribal moves that negotiate technology's connection to the processes and discourses of globalization and modernity by bringing elements of the project out of the public space and making them Tribal, proceeds in the face of the academic production of scholarship in which I am engaged that works to unveil knowledge and bring it into the public sphere.

The Tribal Digital Village involved significant partnerships though the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association (SCTCA), a consortium initially created to pursue Federal government grants and agency contracts that the small size of the individual tribes made difficult to secure. In February 2001, Hewlett Packard Philanthropy announced the award of a $5 million "Digital Village" grant to the SCTCA, in partnership with Indian education, health, and cultural programs, local school districts, community colleges, and the University of California at San Diego. The grant funded a vision of a digitally connected tribal landscape that would in some ways mirror the existing but fragmented relationships that still exist over the region, and in other ways might work to reconnect historical forms of interaction and cooperation since disrupted.

By March 2004, the Tribal Digital Village consisted of a wireless internet network covering over 200 miles of point to point connections in an area of about 75 by 150 miles. The network included 15 sites for radio towers that made up the backbone and relays to reservation sites, connections to almost 50 tribal buildings housing over 900 computers, and regular service to over 1500 users on the reservations. From a data rate of 3 megabytes per second, the backbone team prepared to upgrade the wireless network to 45 mbs, faster than many wired systems. Tribal members had learned to

build, troubleshoot, and maintain the network, and had built the towers on Indian reservation land. Each reservation housed a resource center, a well-equipped computer laboratory integrated with the educational, cultural, and community programs offered by the tribe. Regular training programs provided basic computer and internet skills, professional level network certification, after school educational programs to compliment school curriculum, online education including courses in regional Indian languages, as well as training with digital tools for cultural education, renewal, and preservation. In October 2005 a professional audio and video production laboratory opened at the Tribal Digital Village headquarters at Pala. It enables tribal members to produce their own content for use over the web and in their own communities. The invitation invites tribal members to "record music, archive Tribal stories, create lessons to teach Birdsongs, shoot movies … we built the facilities, you create the content".[2] In broad areas of education, economic development, cultural integrity, and tribal government and community affairs, the Tribal Digital Village represented a dramatic, sustained, and ongoing digital infusion into the structures delineating San Diego county's Indian country.

During the project, I worked in a number of capacities that I can summarize in the following categories:

1. Conceptualized the regions' historical experience as an analogy for the use of digital technology.
2. Served as an active member of the Tribal Digital Village Executive Committee.
3. Liaison for bringing UCSD university resources into the tribal partnership.
4. Coordinated the programs to integrate digital technologies into the development and of cultural resources.

[2] Tribal Digital Village e-mail invitation, "Announcement of Studio Opening. Please Attend", 10/3/2005.

A brief description of the major activities involved follow.

1. Conceptualized the regions' historical experience as an analogy for the use of digital technology.

San Diego County contains 18 Federally recognized reservations, the most of any county in the United States. Today the reservations have relatively small populations distributed over a wide area, speaking four languages along with a number village-level variations. Villages historically housed closely connected family lineages, each holding well-defined territories for planting, hunting, and gathering from the ocean and mountains to the desert. These lineages formed a network of interconnected economic, cultural, and family relations from the northern part of Baja California, east to the Colorado River area, and north well into what is now Orange and Riverside counties.

The history of economic and spatial disruption due to the Spanish mission and rancho system, and then 150 years of Anglo settlement, Indian removal and relocation, and continuous urbanization, have fractured and attenuated, but not destroyed this system. In terms of the cultural and familial relations between Indian peoples within a large area of Southern California, many of the historical connections remain, sometimes dormant, often fitfully active, and increasingly part of the conscious understandings that accompany the development of contemporary tribal sovereignty.

My task was to take this historical understanding, transmitted to me over a number of years of slow engagement and a few preparatory meetings in the fall of 2001, and connect it to Hewlett-Packard's call for a vision of a digitally connected village. The result in part read:

> The San Diego region reservations have a population of approximately 7,675, residing in isolated and scattered communities stretching from the California-Mexico border into Riverside County—an area encompassing 150 miles and requiring 4.5 hours of driving to visit. The current patchwork of reservation lands springs from a history of forced removals, resettlements, and the impoverishment that has come from conscious

> policies of marginalization. These historical processes fractured family lineages that once moved widely over the region while functioning as coherent distributed Kumeyaay, Luiseño, Cupeño, and Cahuilla communities.
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> Inevitably, this legacy has marked the reservations with a number of indices defining an "underserved" population. … Further, although many individual programs function to address portions of these problems, the fragmentary nature of our community results in a non-uniform delivery of services among the various tribal reservations.
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> With the help of an HP Digital Village grant, we will create a distributed digital community that mirrors and amplifies the community and kinship networks that have historically sustained these tribal communities. Our vision relies on using new technologies to enable a multitude of existing community initiatives, partnerships, and programs to achieve a more efficient use of current resources and become more effective in meeting their own goals and objectives. Connecting reservation lands digitally will allow many educational, training, and cultural activities to transcend geographical separation and enable interaction and collaboration among members of tribal areas not previously possible.[3]

2. Served as an active member of the Tribal Digital Village Executive Committee.

The Tribal Digital Village functioned within a complicated governing structure, held together by an Executive Committee made up of TDV staff, representatives from major educational and community partners, and a full time HP Executive working in liaison with the project. Each tribe appointed a TDV representative and alternate, who met periodically as a Steering Committee. They served as conduits to their tribal membership for information about the purpose, opportunities, and activities underway, as well as provided discussion and direction to the Executive Committee. The Tribal representatives also were to keep their Chair and Council members informed. In time, Education, Culture, and Economic Development committees began to meet regularly, attended by the tribal representatives and other active tribal members. The Tribal

[3] Tribal Digital Village grant application to Hewlett Packard *Digital Village* Program, 11/8/2001.

Digital Village brought members from throughout the region together on a regular basis for the first time since the Mission Indian Federation disbanded in the 1930s.

Each of the tribal chairs serves as a board member of the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association (SCTCA), the HP grantee, and the body ultimately responsible for the entire Tribal Digital Village project. A TDV sub-committee of 2 board members and the Executive Director kept tabs on the progress of the grant and made key high-level decisions or recommended them to the board.

In the midst of this swirling set of interconnected governing structures, the Executive Committee worked on moving ahead with the build-out of the wireless internet backbone, training of tribal members and youth in all aspects of technology, and building partnerships, within and among the tribes as well as with educational, county and other groups — lots of meetings.

3. Liaison for bringing UCSD university resources into the tribal partnership.

My position as a professor at UCSD allowed me to evangelize within the university to seek out resources that could complement the enactment of the TDV vision. This meant gaining support to enable the recently hired American Indian Outreach Coordinator to deliver educational resources to the Education Resource Centers that TDV planned to connect to the internet backbone, advocating for student tutors that could serve reservation students remotely, and negotiating educational rates for all kinds of equipment needed to build and outfit internet radio towers and building connections. I worked to plug into the Tribal Digital Village initiatives any glimmer of interest and expertise on campus that could aid the transfer of knowledge and materials to the tribal members working on the project.

4. Coordinated the programs to integrate digital technologies into the development and of cultural resources.

From the beginning of the community organization to develop the vision presented to Hewlett-Packard, the major issue that transcended tribal, regional, linguistic, and other differences involved the use of computer technology to preserve, present, and teach about the culture of Kumeyaay, Luiseño, Cupeño, and Cahuilla peoples. A major part of my duties on the Executive Committee involved the coordination of initiatives designed to build the knowledge of digital technologies selected to enhance the ongoing or desired cultural education, training, and revitalization within each tribe. Selecting the appropriate technology tools engaged community members in an iterative process of: 1) identifying meaningful categories of cultural life — such as the retention of Indigenous languages; 2) becoming familiar with different technological approaches, which then 3) allowed tribal members to refine what aspects they wished to address and how those might be related to other areas of culture and education; and 4) developing training programs by partnering with carefully chosen organizations, around specific digital equipment and methodologies, that could serve these intertwined cultural and educational needs. One or more tribal chairpersons then signed off on all cultural proposals, and the TDV Culture Committee discussed and approved of the plan, as did the SCTCA TDV Executive Committee.

One example of such a program that served the tribal work of "Keeping the Language Alive" developed out of a partnership with the First Voices project (FirstVoices.com) of the First Peoples Cultural Foundation in Victoria, B.C. This web-based Indigenous language preservation tool allows for local entry of dictionaries, each word or phrase accompanied by audio, still, and video examples, and includes elaborate permissions and security that map Indigenous forms of individual and communal ownership of cultural property. The Tribal Digital Village supplied web servers to bring the project online and a diverse language community to test the system,

and First Voices supplied the linguistic and programming expertise, and training sessions held in Canada and in Southern California.

In the realm of "Cultural Techniques", the Tribal Digital Village partnered with the StoryScape Project, part of the Cultural Conservancy in San Francisco to bring digital training in audio and video ethnography to the Tribal Digital Village as a nexus for using community resources to collect and create oral histories, and record cultural materials such as singing. These techniques also enabled the location, digital preservation, repatriation, and repurposing of documents, photographs, and legacy audio and video recordings. All of these initiatives used the "train the trainer" approach to move technical expertise to the active tribal members that could in turn train others on each reservation community.

Finally, all of these programs involved the tribal representatives in a series of discussion about tribal sovereignty over cultural and intellectual property in the age of digital technology that led to a "Proposed Protocol for the Tribal Digital Village Relating to Language and Cultural Materials".

In the midst of all of this activity, after 3 years of engagement with the Tribal Digital Village, I began to ask permission to write a book about the project. I explained my change of heart in both the terms of the academy — my employment evaluation depends on my publishing "research" — and that the accomplishments of the southern California tribes with the Tribal Digital Village raised questions of importance in about the use of digital technologies within the context of globalization, the global marketplace, pressures for modernization and development, and the development and articulation of active and contemporary forms of sovereignty. More to the point, I had witnessed and begun to understand a process by which tribally determined decisions over the breadth of the project had reshaped key goals, as well as altered the actual function of technologies over the life of the project. Elements that began their

development in a very public manner got pulled into the community and transformed in the process. Examples include the complete erasure of Southern California participation from the public face of the First Voices web site, the increasingly tribal Steering Committee and celebratory meetings marking the TDV anniversaries, all "public" gatherings, and the walling off of the public web site of the Tribal Digital Village, covering for the private, internal tribal portal which serves Rez Mail, calendaring, training, and support services available only to recognized members of the tribal digital community. The system is entirely open, once one passes within the wireless network that has quickened and reshaped the human network that deployed it. This seemed to me like a book worth writing.

My request to write and publish a book on the Tribal Digital Village, immediately engaged a history of cultural appropriation and intellectual expropriation by academics and other researchers over the last century, prompted serious discussion about whether I had betrayed the trust that I had built up to that point. Some of the deliberation took place with me in the room, most of it took place out of my direct hearing. In the end, I received the permission to request permission from the series of layers representing the tribal governing structure of the project. At the direction of the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association, I signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the TDV directors and staff in which I described my project, the obligations I would assume, and a process for submitting my proposal to each tribe through both the Tribal Chair and the TDV representatives and alternates, as well as a commitment to receive individual permission from each tribal member that I planned to interview to complete my research. The proposal discussed details concerning returning copies of the research materials to interviewees, my solicitation of a written essay or statement from each participant for inclusion in the final product, the distribution of any proceeds from the publication to TDV educational or cultural

projects, and the review of draft chapters by appointed tribal representatives. Later on, this intricate series of permissions and obligations raised eyebrows of colleagues who openly wonder whether I will ever be permitted to publish at all.

My experience, as a historian in the Tribal Digital Village, suggests that what can develop from not approaching partnerships between academic and tribal entities with a defined academic research goal; what might never take place through the normal procedures and reward structure of the university. Don't try this before tenure! — I say this primarily to illuminate the very tension that my attempted non-research brought to the surface. I want to clarify this point through comments that TDV participants made at the end of the interviews that I conducted, when I asked them why they allowed a non-Indian university professor to coordinate the Culture areas of the project. The first commented on what I brought to the project:

> Well you have and I think are and still will be an intricate thread in pulling these resources together. And you have challenged us, this community, the Southern California tribes in a lot of issues as far as what we're going to share, how we're going to share it. Challenged us to come out of our hiding places in some areas to where, because you're right because there was great controversy, no we're not going to share that and how dare you come in and ask this or how dare you even think of that and throw that on the table. But I think, I hope that what you've learned too is Indians, in general we will sometimes blow up but when we walk away we think about things and when we come back next time we might be a little bit more open to it. And so I think you have been the neutral person to be able to do that with each individual tribe. Because say it was myself in that position, well then because I'm a Luiseño woman but yes I'm Indian I may not get the cooperation or response from another tribe because of political or because of cultural or whatever reasons. And so I think the reason that this project was a big success is because we had a neutral person.[4]

[4] Wendy Schlater (La Jolla) interview, SantaYsabel, 3/17/2004.

The response also provides a shrewd understanding of how truly limited the context is in which a historian might *actually* perform in a neutral capacity. At the same time, other mechanisms worked actively to ensure that my engagement with cultural materials also receded from the possibility of a public gaze, like so many other aspects of the project.

> I don't know, I guess if something is extremely sensitive we just don't tell you. Or if we do tell you with the, I don't know what do you call it, tell you this is information that nobody else is supposed to see. This is information that nobody else is supposed to see. This is information that we don't want nobody else to have. Like some of the recordings we've done you've always given them back. So that's probably why because you've always given back what you weren't supposed to have. Or haven't taken what you weren't supposed to have to where it wasn't supposed to go. You've been trustworthy! [pause] We know where you live.[5]

To restate my second proposition: the tribal moves that manage the negative potential of technology by bringing elements of the project out of the public space and making them Tribal reverses the process by which academic historians produce knowledge and bring it into the public sphere.

Tribal partners instinctively understand the bittersweet relationship between the academic and indigenous communities. At a February 2004 meeting of the TDV Education and Culture Committee, held at the Jamul Indian Village Tribal Hall, a representative asked me to speak about the status my book project. I recounted all of the steps I had completed in the process of asking for permission. Another representative asked what I would call the book. I replied with the suitably academic title that I had used in my permission letters. Another remarked that I should call it "*The Tribal Digital Village: Don't Let This Happen to You!*" After the hearty laughter, I marked the moment as one of those incidents that revealed layers of shared

[5] Melody Sees (Los Coyotes) interview, Los Coyotes, 3/16/2004.

understandings and meaning within the American Indian reservation communities in southern California normally kept invisible during daily interactions between tribal members and those non-Indians not tied in some direct manner to the reservations.

At its most obvious level, the remark referred to the changing of my status from non-Indian participant to non-Indian participant-researcher. Altering my roles in the project in this manner raised thorny questions about community authority and control of intellectual property that I had to negotiate. Why should I, instead of other tribal members, write about the Tribal Digital Village? On another level, the suggestion of this book's alternate title also expressed the deeper ambiguity about my creating a public and permanent document about the activities of tribal members from all over San Diego County. Narratives about Indians have an ugly habit of getting turned against them in some manner, even if the original work proceeded with the best of intensions in the minds of non-Indians. Hornet's nests of controversy within or between reservations, temporarily quieted, can become suddenly stirred up again. From this perspective one might argue that perhaps it is best not to bother with a book. At the same time, tribal members take great pride in what they have individually and collectively accomplished as a part of the Tribal Digital Village, and this impulse ultimately prevailed.

At its deepest, the reticence by tribal members and tribal communities to allow non-members to undertake studies that document the issues and complexities of contemporary life combines the memory of the historical denigration of Native Americans through objectification and subjugation, often at the hands of "researchers," and, as a response, the practice of cultivating privacy and sublimating corrosive experiences, strengthening the tribal community in the process. As a source of an anti-colonialist stance and a de-colonizing impulse, the warning "Don't let this happen to

you!" points to an analogous process that took place within the Tribal Digital Village project as a whole.