

The State of Native America at the End of the Twentieth Century

by J. Kelly Robinson

When stereotypes of modern Native Americans are brought forward, these usually manifest themselves in visions of poor Indians living on reservations, which are on lands no one else wanted. Modern Native Americans are often stereotyped as drunks or succumbing to the pressure of gamblers to open their reservations to casinos. One place to start in order to disprove these stereotypes is the statistical data. What follows is not an interpretive essay in the classic scholarly vein, but an informative one that provides a picture of the state of Native America at the end of the Twentieth Century based on current statistical data.

Most German students receive very little information on the first inhabitants of what is now the United States. In Germany, as in the United States, high school students learn about the society of the land whose language they are studying. However, the most-used textbook for German students of English devotes only a handful of pages to Native Americans. Two sections of the *English G: Neue Ausgabe* mention Native Americans in brief and an entire section is devoted to Native Americans. However, within this particular section, approximately three pages address Native Americans in general and approximately five more pages provide information on the Navajo in more depth. While the book provides some basic facts about Native peoples, much of this is generalization that may apply to one group but not to another. One of the unstated purposes of this section of the Native American section of the book is to make the students look at the stereotypes of Native Americans and correct them. Eight pages of total text can only do so much and fails to provide the student with the breadth that is Native America.¹

The authors of school readers are not the only ones who generalize about Native Americans. The United States government does as well. The U.S. census, for statistical purposes, divides Americans into racial categories based on ancestral origin. The census, and other organizations who also need to make statistical calculations based on race, use five main categories of racial classification: white, black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American. To which group one belongs is usually a matter of self-identification, a method that the U. S. Bureau of the Census uses.² This system is fraught with difficulties, especially in a multi-ethnic society such as the United States. The very term “race” is over-used and ill-defined, particularly since researchers are now examining population differences at the genetic level, finding that “race” has no substantive bio-genetic base.³ Despite the problems with the classification system, it is the most commonly used system and, for the sake of simplicity, “race” will continue to be used in this paper.

In historical literature, within popular discourse, and even within modern governmental writings, the term “tribe” is used to delineate ethnic identity among Native Americans. “Tribal” is often used to describe the governments of those Native groups as well. In anthropological terms, “tribe” has a specific meaning, one which is generally not used, or should not be used, to describe present-day Native groups. Oftentimes one reads of Native American “nations.” This term is a more appropriate one to use to describe Native groups. It does not have the same connotation as the modern Nation-State as a European would think of it; a geopolitical entity defined by a given land base and centralized government but perhaps featuring an ethnically heterogeneous rather than homogeneous population. Rather, “nation,” as used by Native groups denotes a society whose members are of a particular homogeneous ethnic makeup. The political characteristics of the government are, in this case, more or less irrelevant.

The United States Federal government recognizes 556 Native American nations or, in the wording of the U.S. government, “tribal entities.”⁴ There exist, however, 237 “entities” that are currently petitioning for recognition by the federal government. The most recent successful petitioners for recognition were the Pokagon Potawatomi Indians of Indiana and Michigan, who received their official status as a tribal entity in 1994.⁵

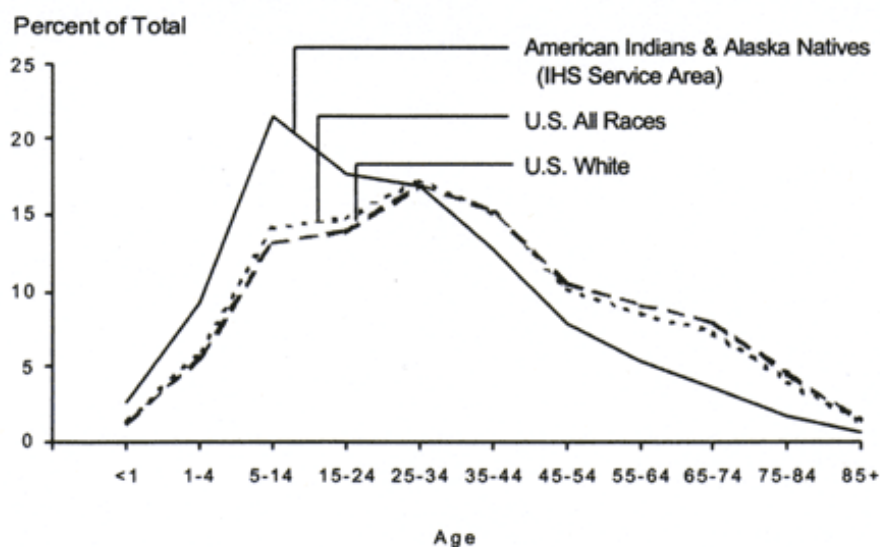
According to the United States census, there were 1.959 million Indians living in the United States in 1990. In the

same year, Americans of all ethnic groups numbered almost 249 million. In other words, Indians made up less than 1 % of the general American population. Blacks, on the other hand, made up 12 % and Hispanics counted as 9 % of the total population of the United States. The census listed Asians as 3 % and whites as slightly higher than 75 % of the population. Indians, the first Americans, are a minority among the minorities.⁶

The tally of 1 % of the American population and a total population of 1.959 million is small compared to the pre-Columbian North American population of Indians, which has been variously estimated as between ten and seventy-five million.⁷ Diseases brought to the Americas by Europeans devastated the Indian population and it has only been within the past century that the population has risen rather than fallen.⁸

The current projections of population growth show that Native Americans have one of the highest growth rates among any racial group in the United States. While the projected growth rate between 1990 and 2000 for white Americans is only 6.3%, the projected growth rate for Native Americans is 13.7%, slightly more than black Americans, whose projected growth rate is 12.9%. Hispanics and Asians, however, have the highest projected growth rates with 29% and 34.3% respectively.⁹ Much of the increase in population is due to a much higher birth rate among Native Americans than the American population as a whole. For the general population, the birthrate is 15.5. The Native American birthrate is 65% higher with 25.6.¹⁰

The higher birth rate among Native Americans is reflected in the fact that Indians are a younger population than the general American populace. Within the overall American population, 22% are younger than fifteen years of age. Among Native Americans, that percentage, 33%, is 10% higher. 13% of the American population is over 65 years of age, while among Native Americans, only 6% are of retirement age. The median age of Americans in general is 32.9 years of age. In contrast, the median age of Native Americans is 24.2.¹¹

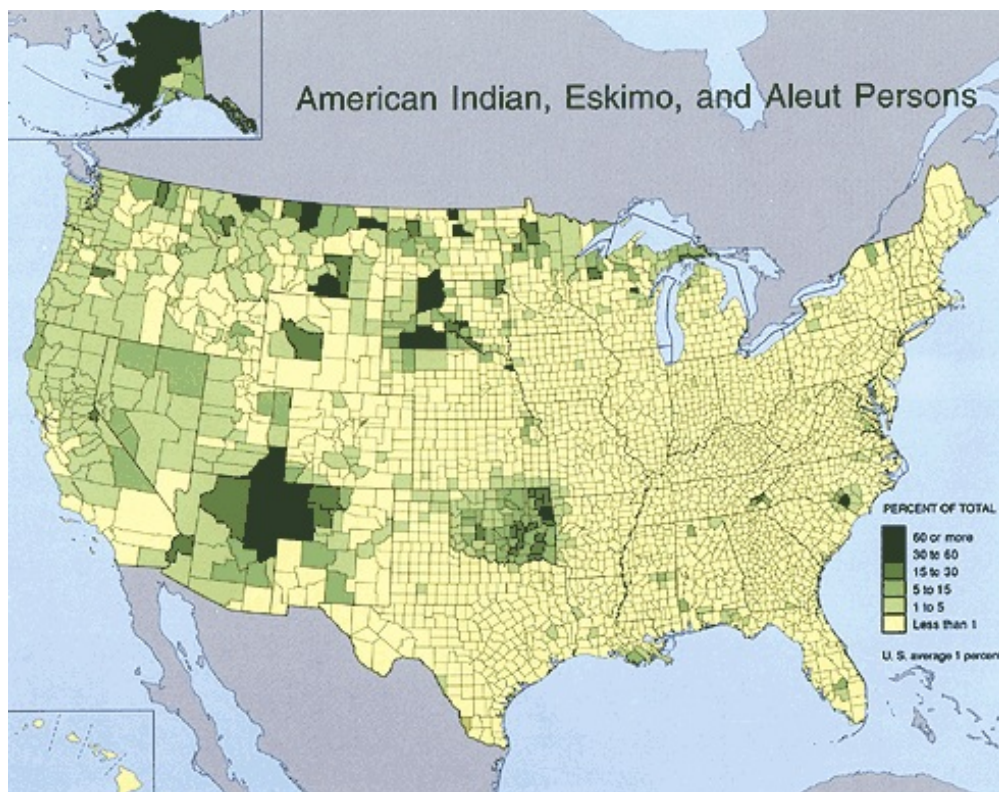


But, the Native American population has not increased in each tribe evenly. Some tribes have gained in population more than others. The largest tribe in the United States today is the Cherokee Nation, with 369,035 members as of the 1990 census. Since the 1980 census shows that the Cherokee population was 232,080, the 1990 figure represents a 19% increase. The second largest tribe in the U.S. in 1990 was the Navajo Nation with 225,298 members, an increase of 35% from 158,633 in 1980. The Yaqui tribe of Arizona still rank within the top twenty-five largest tribes in the United States, despite a population that, as of 1990, was only 9,838. This figure is close to double the 1980 census, however, which recorded only 5,197 Yaquis. So, the difference between the 1980 and 1990 figures represents a 45% increase in population. None of the top twenty-five largest tribes in the United States reported a decrease in population between 1980 and 1990.¹² While all racial groups in the U.S. increased in population numerically, Native Americans as a group far outstripped any other group in percentile population increase.

Most Native American tribes, indeed the majority of the Native American population, live west of the Mississippi River. Most reservations are located in the west of the United States. Most tribes who live on sections of their

original homelands reside in the west. Tribal land ownership east of the Mississippi River comprises a total of almost 2.2 million acres. Individually-owned land that comes under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs adds approximately 140,000 acres. In the west, the tribes own over 43 million acres of land and individual land ownership, again under BIA jurisdiction, affixes 10 million acres to this amount.¹³ The location of the majority of the Native American population stems from the removal programs of the early nineteenth century. The United States Congress, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, gave the executive *carte blanche* to remove those tribes who still remained east of the Mississippi. There were indeed many tribes and a fairly large population in the east, though precise figures are not available. During the period 1830 to 1845, ninety-five treaties of removal were signed between the U.S. government and representatives of the various tribes. Many of these treaties were signed under duress or by individuals who did not represent the majority of the tribe. By 1845, very few Native Americans remained in the east and most of those either lived in hiding, such those who are now known as the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, or fighting against removal, such as group of the Seminole.¹⁴

What would probably surprise most Germans, and perhaps many Americans as well, is that the majority of Native Americans do not live on reservations. Of the total Native American population, 858,700 live in rural area (areas with less than 2,500 people) and slightly over 1.1 million live in urban areas.¹⁵ Native Americans are a mostly urban population. The migration of Native Americans to the cities expanded rapidly during and after World War II. During the war, many people left the reservations to either enter the armed forces or to find work in the booming factories of the war-time. Immediately after the war, the Indian Relocation Program moved many Native Americans from the reservations to cities as part of an attempt to assimilate them and remove the “dependent nation” or ward-ship status of the tribes. During this period, thousands of Native American families were moved to cities, especially western cities such as Los Angeles.¹⁶



While Native Americans are the smallest major ethnic minority in the United States, they are also the poorest. The United States has one of the highest median household incomes in the world, ranking sixth. The United States is on par with Germany, each having slightly more than \$30,000 in median household income. At \$36,000, Switzerland has the highest median income.¹⁷ Native Americans live far below the median level for the United States with an \$19,897 income. In the United States, 13.1% of the total population lives below the poverty level. 31.6% of Native Americans live below that level.¹⁸ This figure is actually an increase from 24% in 1980. Almost 27% of Native American households are headed by single mothers,¹⁹ which may not be a clear indication but perhaps is a good clue to why the poverty level is so high. The percentage of households headed by women in

general in the United States was approximately 16.5% as of 1990.²⁰

The unemployment rate among Native Americans is exceptionally high. In 1990, while the general unemployment rate was 5.6%,²¹ the overall unemployment rate of Indians living on the reservations was 35%. However, unemployment, like population or most other statistics, varies according to region and reservation. In the Pueblo of Cochiti, located just off the freeway between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico, the unemployment rate stood at 6%. This low unemployment rate, consistent with the national average, is understandable considering the location of the reservation. Albuquerque is a large city and Santa Fe maintains a thriving tourist trade. Cochiti reaps the benefits of both economic situations. Also in the Southwest is the Ute Mountain Reservation. The Utes there in southern Utah have a 14% unemployment rate. To the north, on the northern Great Plains, are the reservations of the former horse-culture tribes. On the Lakota (Sioux) reservations of the Rosebud and Pine Ridge, the unemployment rates stand at 45% and 46% respectively. Further west, on the Cheyenne River Reservation, the Cheyenne have an unemployment rate of 77%.²² The differences in unemployment rates among Native Americans can be traced to the economic circumstances of the reservation itself, as well as the surrounding areas. The Cochiti and the other Pueblos along the Rio Grande River in New Mexico are within an economic area marked by growth. The northern Great Plains offer very little in the way of economic possibilities to those who live there, especially on the reservations.

Employment and employability are directly related to educational level. The more education one has, or at least the more focused an education one has, the better chance of gaining good-paying work. In the United States, education is free until the twelfth grade-the end of high school. If one chooses to go beyond the high school level, either to a vocational technical college or a university, then education at this level must be paid for by the student. The long-term benefits of higher education, however, outweigh the short-term disadvantages of having to pay for that education. Those who quit school before finishing high school are relegated to low-paying, unskilled jobs. Those who finish high school have a better chance of gaining better-paid employment, but those who go beyond high school are better equipped for the job market. The job market seeks skilled, educated workers and the more skills one has, the better off one is. Of Americans in general, slightly more than 77% had finished high school and 21.3% had attended the university to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1990.²³ Native Americans lag behind the general population educationally. Only slightly more than 65% have finished high school and less than 10% have gone beyond high school to earn a Bachelors degree.²⁴ This lack of education means that 35% of Native Americans, are employable for only low-paying, unskilled jobs, increasing the likelihood that a greater percentage of Native Americans live in poverty than Americans of all races.

This poverty is reflected in Native American health statistics. The leading causes of death among Native Americans, regardless of sex, are heart disease and cancer, the same as for the population as a whole. But among Native American men, accidents rank with heart disease as the two major causes of death. Indeed, accident-related deaths among Native Americans are 212% greater than among the general American population. Many other causes of death among Native Americans have much higher rates than within the general population. Alcoholism is 579% greater, tuberculosis (once thought to be almost eradicated) is 475% greater, suicide is 70% greater, respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia and influenza are 61% greater and homicide is 41% greater than Americans as a whole. The infant mortality rate is also 30% higher than in the general population. Among Native Americans it is 10.9 and among the general population it is 8.4.²⁵ These causes of death are frequently associated with poverty.

The statistics gathered by the United States government and summarized here reflect a Native American population that is younger and growing at a faster rate than the general U.S. population as a whole. However, the same statistics also point to the poverty, education and health problems among Native Americans. In this sense, some of the stereotypes of Native Americans are indeed true. Indians, in general, are more likely to live in poverty than other racial groups in the United States. They are less educated than other Americans. They are also more likely to die of poverty-related diseases or other causes than the majority of Americans. These statistics, however, also reflect two hundred years of governmental confusion about what to do with Native Americans; how the tribes should be treated, how much invested should be put into the reservations, or indeed if the reservations should be kept at all.

It is not the purpose of the present issue of the *American Studies Journal* to attempt to offer solutions to the many problems of Native Americans at the beginning of the 21st Century. It is, though, the purpose of this issue to examine some of these problems within the historical context. To solve a problem, one must first acknowledge that the problem exists. The statistics summarized here show that problems exist. The next step is to come to an understanding of the origins of the problem.

But statistics can only tell one so much about Native Americans. The statistics do not answer some questions, though they can help illuminate others. In the following section, we will take a look at some of the more ethereal questions that many have about Indians—who they are and how they live. These are not simple questions to answer, however.

One question that often comes to mind, at least in the United States in the present day, is what to call Native Americans. Throughout this paper, I have used both Native American and Indian interchangeably. “Indian,” as every grade school student has been taught, is really a misnomer, given to the peoples of the western hemisphere by an Italian explorer in the employ of the Spanish Crown. Columbus, so the story goes, thought he had landed in India when he actually landed on a Caribbean Island. His mistake in geography persuaded him that the people he encountered were indeed “Indians” from the sub-continent. The name stuck. In these days of political correctness in the U.S., the term “Indian” is seen by some as a derogatory term given by a conquering people. In the meso-American country of Guatemala, the Mayan peoples are called “Indigenas” or Indigenous rather than Indians or “Indios” which is an insulting term. Over the years, the native peoples of the western hemisphere have been called Indians, Native Americans, American Indians, Amerindians, and other general, but none-too-satisfactory terms. Indian, and the other general terms, are artificial constructs to group disparate peoples. Only recently have Native Americans begun to think of themselves as more than simply members of their own specific tribes. Indian or Native American, as general terms, have much in common with the terms European, African or Asian. Peoples of those continents think of themselves as members of a greater union, but only in a general way. A German would think of himself as German first, European second. So it is with Native Americans, as well. The tribe comes first in thoughts of self-identification. I asked a graduate school colleague once how she thought of herself, as Indian or Crow. She replied that she was first and foremost Crow, but that Indian worked as a more general idea. A recent debate on the H-Amindian discussion list also highlights this debate. Most list members saw the need for a general term to denote the aboriginal peoples of the Americas, but reiterated that, when speaking about a specific group or to a member of a specific group, the name of that group should be used.²⁶ In other words, Just as one would say that someone is French rather than European, so one would say Arapaho rather than Indian.

This debate on what to call “Indians” leads to a second question, which is, “who is Indian?” As with the term itself, it depends on who one talks to. The same is perhaps true of other groups that think of themselves, or who others think of them, as a “people.” Anthropologists themselves debate what constitutes belonging to a specific ethnic group.²⁷ One possibility is self-identity. If someone thinks of themselves as belonging to a given group, then that person is of that group. If someone thinks of themselves as Indian or German, then that person is of that group. However, others of that group might not see self-identified persons in the same light. A person who simply says that they are Cherokee, might not be seen as such by another Cherokee. The Cherokee, in particular, make a good example because of their history and of the current requirements to be admitted as a member of the tribe. Currently, the membership regulations to become a Cherokee are stringent. An applicant must apply for a “Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood” (CDIB) from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In order to obtain the CDIB, one must have had an ancestor who appeared on the land rolls during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, during the Dawes Act, land-allotment period.²⁸ It has not always been so hard to become a Cherokee. The Cherokee, like many other eastern tribes, adopted members into their group from other tribes whose membership was dwindling and could not survive as a coherent unit or were seeking refuge or protection from other groups. Such is the case with many run-away slaves, who ended up joining the Cherokee and later become full-fledged members of the tribe. Europeans also married into the Cherokee. Traders often found that their business could be enhanced if they had an Indian wife and so become part of the community rather than be seen as an outsider. The person who joined the tribe became part of the community and was perceived by other members as being of that tribe.²⁹

But if it is the case that an outsider could gain the status of full-fledged member of the tribe, then becoming

“Indian” had far less to do with ancestry than with something else entirely. This something else is that nebulous construct known as culture. Whereas a society is a group of people living together in a village, town, county or country, “culture” is that collection of common traits that bind the people together. According to James Axtell, culture consists of an idealized pattern of meanings, values, and ideas differentially shared by the members of a society, which can be inferred from the non instinctive behavior of the group and from the products of their actions, including material artifacts, language, and social institutions.³⁰

These traits include, but are not limited to religion, language, government, lifestyle. However, a society may have members who are not of the same religions and can still be said to belong to the same culture as other members of the society. So, an outsider might become acculturated, that is, adopt the culture of the tribe, at least in part. In the present-day, those who grew up in or maintain the culture of a tribe, then that person could be considered as a member of the tribe. Again, this is a very nebulous concept and the question that could now be raised is how much of the culture must one have before one could be considered as a member of that culture. Cultures themselves are not static entities. They change over time and oftentimes change rather quickly depending on circumstance or environment.

Another possible interpretation of membership in a group is through heredity. If a person can demonstrate that he has ancestors who belonged to the group, then he himself is part of that group. In the United States among Native Americans, this method of determining tribal membership was called “Blood Quatum.” The percentage of “blood” a person had determined whether or not the person was a member of the tribe. Again, as with self-identity, this method varied from tribe to tribe. Some groups, such as the Cherokee, hung tribal membership on 1/64th blood. That is, if a person’s great, great-grandparent was Cherokee, then that person could be Cherokee as well. Other tribes were more stringent, asking for 1/16— great-grand-parents—or 1/4 blood—grandparents. This method of determining group membership has passed by the wayside in the United States.³¹

Returning again to culture, and statistics, language has often been a determining factor in ethnic categorization. Yet in the United States, the number of Native Americans who speak their ancestral tongue is dwindling rapidly. Approximately 281,990 speak an Indian language at home. Of those, almost 158,000 speak an Athapaskan language such as Navajo or Apache.³² Since the population of Native Americans in the United States is close to two million, only slightly more than ten percent of Native Americans speak their traditional language. If one tried to determine ethnicity based on mother tongue, then there would be few Indians in the United States today.

Getting back to the basics, and to the introduction to this paper, we should take a look at how Native Americans live today. The quick answer would be, just like everyone else. This answer, though, would also be untrue. It is true that many Native Americans, especially those who live off the reservations and in urban areas, do live very much like their non-Indian neighbors. It would, however, be very hard to generalize about how Native Americans live, just as it would be very hard to generalize about how any American ethnic group lives. How one lives is conditional on where one lives, whether one lives in a rural or urban environment, and how much money one has. Nevertheless, there are some general comments one could make about living as a Native American in the present day.

To make these general comments, one might want to compare how various tribes lived traditionally and how they live today. As stated in the introduction of the paper, very few tribes lived in tepees at some point in their history. Those who did were the tribes of the Great Plains and they only adopted the tipi after the coming of the horse, which allowed them more mobility and the ability to follow the buffalo. Housing styles differed from tribe to tribe and from area to area. Among the Iroquois, for example, the common housing form was the long house, constructed with wooden poles that were bent into an upside-down U-shape and then covered with mats of woven grass or bark. There exist some long houses of this style today, but they serve ceremonial rather than living purposes.³³ The Lakota or Sioux, who most people see as the “stereotypical Indian,” lived in tepees up through the early 20th century. Today, even on the reservation, tepees have given way to modern housing, though one sees tepees fairly often, again as ceremonial or short-term housing. Mobile homes are a common sight on the reservations. 14% of the households on reservations are in mobile homes compared to seven percent nationally. Indians on reservations are less likely, however, to live in apartments than Indians off the reservations or the general American population. Only five percent of reservation Indians live in apartments, while 28% of Indians

living off the reservation and 27% of all Americans live in apartments.³⁴ One of the few groups of tribes who live as their ancestors did are the Pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona. The Pueblos, so called by the Spanish because they lived in permanent communities, constructed houses of stone which were then plastered and often rose to five stories in height. These houses were joined together in rows so that the effect is reminiscent of a modern condominium complex. A journey to the Southwest of the United States today would reveal that these towns still exist and are still occupied by their traditional residents. Some alterations, such as glass windows, have been made but many other aspects of traditional living have remained. Acoma Pueblo still has no running water, no electricity and no sewage system. Over a thousand people still live daily in the town, though many have left the mesa-top community to live in outlying villages where running water, plumbing and electricity do exist.³⁵ While the people of Acoma themselves chose to keep modern conveniences out of their town, in other areas poverty dictates who has these conveniences and who does not. Plumbing, electricity and so forth are often taken for granted by Europeans and Americans, though many people, regardless of ethnic group, exist in the United States who still live without them. Indians on the reservation are just as likely to live plumbing as the general population of the United States fifty years ago.³⁶ This phenomenon is not a product of being Indian, but rather a product of poverty.

What all of this information, the statistics and historical information, shows is that the only way to generalize about Native Americans is to create an artificial group, call them Native Americans, and then examine the entire group rather than each distinct ethnic group within the broad racial category. The statistics do show that Native Americans are generally poorer than the majority of Americans. The health statistics bring this poverty to the forefront. What the statistics cannot show, however, is why these statistics are what they are. They cannot show why alcohol consumption is a major cause of death among Native Americans. They cannot illustrate why Native Americans are poorer than other Americans. What is equally important, from the standpoint of a teacher or student interested in Native American history, religion, culture, or literature, is that the statistics cannot demonstrate the variety of these aspects of Native America. The following articles in this issue of the *American Studies Journal* may help to do that and may give teachers, especially, insight into how to teach about Native American history and cultures.

Notes

1 *English G: Neue Ausgabe*, Band A4 (Berlin: Cornelsen Verlag, 1988), 81-93. 2 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 *Census of Population*, General Population Characteristics, B-11.

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4 *Federal Register*/Vol. 65, No. 49/Monday, March 13, 2000/Notices, 13298.

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8 *Ibid*, 27.

9 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P25-1130; and *Population Paper Listing* 57., 20.

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- 22 U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Local Estimates of Resident Indian Population and Labor Force Status Male/Female Indians Living on and Adjacent to Reservations, Summary by Reservation," <<http://www.doi.gov/bia/ifcons95.html>>.
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- 24 U.S. Bureau of the Census, "1990 Census of Population, Characteristics of American Indians by Tribe and Language," ;1990 CP-3-7. Social and Economic Characteristics of the American Indian Population: 1990.
- 25 *Trends in Indian Health* (Department of Health and Human Services, 1997), 6.
- 26 H-Amindian Discussion List, August and September, 2000, <<http://www.asu.edu/clas/history/h-amindian/>>
- 27 John Elliot's "Introduction: Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World," in *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. Nicholas Canny and Anthony Agden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3-14, has some interesting thoughts on ethnicity and identity.
- 28 Information on Registration with Cherokee Nation, <<http://www.cherokee.org/Services/Registration.htm>>
- 29 A discussion of the Cherokee adoption practices can be found in William McLoughlin, "Cherokee Anomie, 1794-1810: New Roles for Red Men, Red Women, and Black Slaves," in *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850*, ed. Mancall and Merrell (New York: Routledge, 2000), 452-476.
- 30 James Axtell, "The Ethnohistory of Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (January 1978): 114.
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- 32 "Characteristics of American Indians by Tribe and Language" (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1994).

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[34](#) “Housing of American Indians on Reservations—Structural Characteristics,” Bureau of the Census, Statistical Brief, 2.

[35](#) See author’s PhD dissertation, John Kelly Robison, “Phoenix on the Mesa: A History of Ácoma Pueblo during the Spanish Colonial Period, 1500-1821,” Oklahoma State University, 1997.

[36](#) “Housing of American Indians on Reservations—Plumbing,” Bureau of the Census, Statistical Brief, 1.

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