

## ANAYA BARRERA, MARIKO NOJIMA-SCHMUNK, AND DOMINIQUE HANNON

This transcript represents a conversation between Anaya Barrera, Mariko Nojima-Schmunk, and Dominique Hannon.

Two George Mason University undergraduate students, Mariko Nojima-Schmunk (Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians) and Dominique Hannon, interviewed Anaya Barrera, an Apache elder and Road Man, when they were in Hawai'i in 2023. At that time, they also attended the Western Region Continuums of Service Conference in Honolulu and spent time with members of the Nation of Hawai'i, an independent group of sovereign Kānaka Maoli who are located in Waimānalo. The trio discussed the connection to and disconnection from Indigenous cultures experienced by Kānaka Maoli as well as Indigenous peoples on the North American continent (also known as Turtle Island), how Indigenous thinking can be respectfully brought into Western academia, and how to create and maintain reciprocal and authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples. The travel and interview were facilitated by Dr. Thomas Wood of George Mason University.

### Maintaining Connection to Culture

**Dominique Hannon (D):** *What are some barriers you are seeing currently for Indigenous communities inside and outside of academia?*

**Anaya Barrera (A):** When we were talking to [Nation of Hawai'i President] Bumpy [Pu'uhonua Kanahēle], he told us that he has noticed that the children are not as attentive in their cultural things that they do, that children are not as enthused about the old ways. So he has come to understand that having the elders teach the youngsters is a very important part of maintaining the culture.

**Mariko Nojima-Schmunk (M):** *So thinking of the future and with the youth, do you have any advice for those youths who are maybe not as inclined to follow those old ways? You suggested having elders present in those spaces, but do you have other suggestions?*

**A:** That's what it's going to take because the elders are the keepers of the knowledge. And they're the keepers of the wisdom. So the grandparents have to be involved. I first suggest that every eighth grader and under interview their grandparents. You know, both of their sets of grandparents. And then they have an idea of their own heritage.

**M:** *I have a question for those individuals who may have lost that connection. Do you have any advice for those who do not*

*have a connection? Who have no family or a blood relation who is present in their lives, that they could go to?*

**A:** In the villages, in Hawai'i in particular, it'd be very hard to find traditional families, Islander families that don't have some relatives that they could learn from, but there are a lot of organizations that mentor, especially for displaced people. And those avenues are available on all of the islands too.

### Academia and Indigenous Knowledge

**D:** *So, thinking back to our time in Hawai'i, especially when we were on O'ahu, were there any moments where you observed or felt that tension between the Indigenous knowledge and the more traditional academic ways of learning while we were engaged in the conference?*

**A:** The only thing I can think of was that the setting was not very culturally sensitive, and the way that things were scheduled. There was a big difference in the ambiance, and everything related to that—so I think that the welcoming ceremony and beyond should have been done with more Kānaka Maoli peoples' input. For instance, highlighting issues and having the Kānaka Maoli and other Indigenous peoples discuss these issues and conflicts would have centered Indigenous voices more.

*M: In your years of experience, have you noticed a change in the relationships between Indigenous people and academia and other institutions?*

**A:** In the past, you know, people would come and try to get the elders to share spiritual secrets and what-not, instead of sitting down with them and helping the elders establish an archive of history and cultural traditions and beliefs. But now, one of the things that I know is that elders are getting more involved, especially since almost losing the language. There used to be so few who really knew and spoke the traditional languages the old way. So the language resurgence is one example, and it has really gotten a lot of elders involved. I think they always wanted to be involved, but they didn't know how to approach and not offend, and they didn't want to bring shame on somebody that they were offering help to. I think that nowadays it's getting easier and easier on both sides.

## Communication and Understanding: A Bridge Between Two Worlds

*M: I know that lack of understanding is something my father struggles with. Working in the Western world as an Indigenous person highlights the lack of understanding. People who say they want to help have a difficult time listening to the words that he shares. Do you have any suggestions for how to teach or encourage people to truly listen? To make sure that those Indigenous voices are heard?*

**A:** One of the first things that I try to do, I try to create some type of group activity that is going to show off what the Indigenous group is bringing to us. Whatever the activity is, it's based on what they do and aims to get them to want to teach us the way they do things. And then usually, I get a lot of good work out of asking them how they see what they are already doing, and asking them if they want to change something that they either haven't asked about, don't know how to ask, or haven't identified.

So we're always trying to teach non-Indigenous people how to do things like address an elder and certain customs and ways of engaging, and oftentimes they think they understand, but they're so far off, they're out in left field. So it's education in order for them to properly

develop a relationship with Indigenous people and understand ways of living.

*D: Are there any suggestions you have for building and maintaining the relationship between Indigenous peoples, knowledge-keepers, and academia?*

**A:** The relationship is actually like a heart transplant and the complexity of it. If you're going to bring Indigenous peoples into academic culture without educating them and without giving them some life support system, they're going to struggle. It's important to maintain those relationships you build with them. These interpersonal relationships are important, especially when you're trying to present and work with them in a reciprocal way.

The interviewers, Mariko and Domi, are grateful to have the opportunity to jointly remember and discuss their experience with Anaya. They both feel that this interview allowed them to gain precious insight into the work that Anaya has done with Indigenous communities across Turtle Island and how it has shaped his perspective when interacting with groups of Indigenous activists and educators like the Nation of Hawai'i, as well as with the numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, educators, and activists that they met at the Western Region Continuums of Service Conference. Having the insight and ability to communicate with an Indigenous knowledge-keeper about these topics is important, not just for these students personally, but also for those looking to build relationships with Indigenous peoples and to decolonize their academic work.



**Anaya Barrera**, Apache Elder



George Mason students **Mariko Nojima-Schmunk** (Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians) and **Dominique Hannon**