



COMMENTARY

Kritkausky & Schmidt: UVM hosts lopsided presentation about Vermont's Abenaki

By Commentary May 6 2022

This commentary is by Randy Kritkausky of Middlebury, a historian and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and Carolyn Schmidt of Whiting, Vermont, co-host of the “Indigenous Perspectives” radio show.

Just as we might have thought that threats to the tribal status of Vermont's Abenaki were a dead thing of the past, they are being resurrected, or perhaps more appropriately reappearing as zombies.

Most of us in Vermont gave a sigh of relief when the University of Vermont's president apologized, in 2019, for the institution's role in the state's eugenics program that forcibly sterilized hundreds of individuals of Native American and French-Canadian descent because they were thought to be a threat to the state's demographically shrinking white Protestant gene pool. The Vermont Legislature followed with an apology in 2021.

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These actions followed Vermont's official recognition of Abenaki tribes in 2012. State recognition was hardfought and prized as federal tribal recognition eluded the Abenaki, in large part because they did not have what the U.S. government considered proof of continual occupancy on their claimed territory.

Proof of such occupancy had been erased because family documents proving Indigenous ancestry were destroyed, for reasons of self-protection, during the eugenics program, which ran until the 1950s.

We were therefore shocked to observe a recent University of Vermont history department public presentation titled "Beyond Borders: Unheard Abenaki Voices from the Odanak First Nation." The harmless-sounding title belied an astoundingly vitriolic marathon of accusations by Quebec-based Odanak Abenaki, who argue that all Vermont state-recognized Abenaki tribes obtained their status with fraudulent misrepresentation and that they, Canadian Abenaki, are the rightful and only descendants of the state's original aboriginal people. One official of the Odanak even asserted that Burlington should be considered the Canadian tribe's rightful land.

A brief commentary cannot begin to address the countless outrageous claims leveled against Vermont's Indigenous people. In fact, such arguments would be of little use when those hurling insults have demonstrably given up any effort to be historically accurate.

Most troubling was the litany of personal attacks against prominent Vermont Abenaki leaders, who were named repeatedly. They were accused of appropriating and even stealing and commercializing Abenaki culture, to which the Odanak claim exclusive ownership.

Such assertions would be laughable were they not given an aura of legitimacy because they were delivered as part of an official university symposium.

Indeed, it is UVM's sponsorship that is perplexing. Family and intratribal jealousies and grievances are sadly all too common among Indigenous North Americans. But they are rarely platformed and amplified to a degree that was in evidence during the April 29 program.

A foreshadowing of what was to come was delivered by a college administrator, whose introductory comments noted that it is a university's obligation to air ideas that are sometimes disturbing. Another UVM faculty member delivered a pro forma disclaimer about the content of the program not being the official policy of the university.

We certainly value free speech and value the contribution that institutions of higher learning play in providing opportunities for provocative ideas to be aired. However, mere ideas can have horrific consequences, as acknowledged by UVM's own 2019 apology for its role in providing the pseudo-scientific underpinnings that its professor, Henry Perkins, provided for a eugenics movement that injured Vermonters and attracted the attention of Nazis who studied and expanded upon Perkins' work.

If a university is going to platform highly volatile ideas that it needs to twice distance itself from, it is under another academic obligation. It needs to provide an opportunity for an opposing, or least impartial, panel to question information provided as factual.

No such opportunities were provided. No alternative panel members were given any voice.

We were told that 500 remote viewers witnessed this lopsided presentation. Many or most of them must have been given the impression that a very distorted view of history was beyond challenge.

We were left wondering how UVM could have so quickly forgotten its 2019 apology for a program that contributed to the process of attempted erasure of the Abenaki people and their culture in Vermont.

It is doubly ironic, given that one of the most famous quotations about learning from history hung invisibly over the auditorium, even as it was being ignored by the UVM history department. George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” How far down the path will UVM go with its 21st-century contribution to Vermont Abenaki erasure before it needs to utter yet another apology?

Meanwhile, those of us who value the active presence of the Abenaki in Vermont (the Nulhegan, Elnu, Missisquoi and Koasek Abenaki) should take whatever actions we can to express our support for them.

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