

Crossing religious boundaries at Groton

As a Muslim scholar teaching Indigenous history at an Episcopal boarding school, I have some learning—and unlearning—to do.

by [Celene Ibrahim](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

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Groton School, in Massachusetts, circa 1903; portraits by photographer Edward S. Curtis, including Geronimo in the upper left (Century illustration | Source images: US Library of Congress)

The Nashua River marks the western border of the 480-acre campus of Groton School, established in 1884 on a site planned by Frederick Law Olmsted. Mount Watatic anchors the northwestern skyline. Mount Wachusett, the highest Massachusetts peak east of the Connecticut River, is visible from the bell tower of the high school's imposing Gothic Revival chapel. But long before Wachusett was "New England's most accessible ski resort," and before the turn of the 20th century when the limestone of St. John's Chapel rose above the treetops, and even as Henry David Thoreau eulogized Wachusett as "God's croft," these surroundings were home to flourishing Indigenous peoples with their own recreational activities, spiritual practices, and profound connections to the land.

European settlers established the Groton Plantation in 1655 along a preexisting Indigenous trail, and the settlement functioned as a trading post for exchange with the Nashaway people. For a time, the Nashua River formed a contentious boundary between White and Indian territory; a stone on the edge of Groton School's campus memorializes John Davis, "killed by Indians at his door" in 1704. Residents of the commonwealth eventually annexed all the territory in the wider region, apart from four acres—stewarded to this day by the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Band. And despite the vibrant presence of multiple federally recognized Wampanoag tribes in Massachusetts, the Nipmuc are the sole state-recognized tribe. (Federal recognition is withheld based on Nipmuc "blood quantum" not meeting the exacting threshold specified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

Though our geography and place names attest to the presence of Indigenous peoples, the narratives we offer ourselves often do not. But should they?

It's a question that I regularly pose to my classes in Groton School's Philosophy and Religious Studies Department. Our institutional narrative begins when a cadre of boys arrived in the 1880s with boater hats and tailored suits, eager to study under the tutelage of the Boston-raised but British-educated Episcopal priest Endicott Peabody. The name of each graduate from then to the present is engraved on the wood-paneled walls of the schoolhouse, a testament to the power of intergenerational legacies.

A gift from founding trustee J. P. Morgan to our library includes the full set of 800 prints of Edward S. Curtis, the ethnologist who documented with an empathetic lens the “vanishing race” of the “North American Indian.” My students examine these giant leather-bound folios of Curtis’s photographs and discuss both what they capture of Native life in the early 20th century and what they leave blurry.

We pore over the second print in the Curtis series, a portrait of a man with sun-kissed skin. It is Geronimo, according to the caption, photographed in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, “while the old warrior was in a retrospective mood” the day before the presidential inauguration of Theodore Roosevelt. My students have seen many iterations of the name “Roosevelt” carved into our walls. “Remember the name ‘Carlisle,’” I instruct. We will probe the troubling legacy of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a boarding school founded in 1879—shortly before Groton School—and the flagship institution for executing cultural genocide.

These parallel histories make for a revealing comparison for my students: “Imagine that we had a graveyard on our campus where hundreds of Groton School students who died of malnutrition, abuse, and disease were interred.” A high school curriculum cannot shy away from teaching about atrocities.

Our department is the legacy of Groton School’s founding commitment to the moral and spiritual formation of Christian boys of European ancestry. Today we enroll students from six continents, all genders, and a myriad of religious traditions and ethnic backgrounds, from Anglicans, Baptists, and Christian evangelicals to Xhosa, Yoruba, and Zulu. We also have our predictable share of agnostics, atheists, and teenagers who are more or less indifferent to matters of existential concern, though our resident students each attend a gathering on the weekend in a specific tradition. Current choices include Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim groups. Four weekday chapel services are Protestant in liturgical style but incorporate wide-ranging content from various literary, musical, and wisdom traditions.

According to the school’s former archivist, an alumnus and faculty member whose tenure reached five decades, it is “quite likely” (but officially unconfirmed) that I am the first Muslim-identifying faculty member. I am most certainly the first to occupy a formalized Muslim chaplain role, serving on the Spiritual Life Team instituted by Allison Read, an Episcopal priest and longtime advocate of interreligious learning and pluralism, upon her arrival as chaplain in 2020.

Groton School's graduation requirements include one trimester-long elective in religious studies and philosophy. Our department also collaborates with the History and Social Science Department to offer a global survey of ancient, premodern, and still-living spiritual traditions, a yearlong course for third form (ninth grade). The scope of this course is formidable both for students and for teachers—I am a specialist in Islam and Arabic, not the Inca and Quechua—but with dedicated remedial learning, proficiency navigating one slice of the human experience translates to other regions, periods, and spiritual traditions. We built the curriculum in collaboration with several specialists, including Jennifer Wallace, who has taught history electives on East Asia and the Middle East, and we were recently joined by Azmar Williams, a specialist in African American intellectual history. We are also supported by colleagues who share a commitment to teaching global and US history in ways that highlight Indigenous voices and perspectives where they have been neglected or erased.

Equipping myself to teach Indigenous lifeworlds requires substantial learning—and some unlearning. The 13th-century Egyptian sage Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, a figure famous among Muslims for his pithy axioms, once observed: “It is better to keep the company of an ignorant person who is not self-satisfied than a person of knowledge who is self-satisfied.” As a scholar and teacher, I internalized long ago that to be an educator is to be a lifelong learner. So, in addition to our own departmental attempts to rearticulate Eurocentric categories such as “religion” and “philosophy” to include Indigenous lifeworlds and cosmologies, I've also relied on the expert guidance and generosity of spiritual leaders and Indigenous studies scholars from different Native nations. We compensate experts where possible for their support in curriculum development, but genuine collegiality has also developed. Still, I have made blunders, as learners are prone to do.

On my first encounter with Shannon Rivers—a member of the Akimel O'odham Nation, a prison chaplain for Native peoples in California and Arizona, a mental health advocate, and a longtime Indigenous rights activist—I take in a commanding frame and long silver hair tied back neatly with spaced black bands. I'm overeager to elicit some feedback on a tutorial that I'm codesigning with a Groton School student of Nipmuc heritage. In my enthusiasm, I blurt out something about teaching a Native student at a residential school. Seeing a justified look of befuddlement flash across my interlocutor's face, I quickly reassure him, “Not that kind of residential school!” He gives me both the benefit of the doubt and a haunting poem entitled

“Monster” by the Kamloops Indian Residential School survivor Dennis Saddleman, who offered the poem as part of an event commemorating the Canadian National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2013.

Rivers points me toward resources on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which he shepherded through the final stages of ratification in the early 2000s as a delegate to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and later as cochair of the Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus. The declaration is not legally binding on its signatories but is intended to carry moral and political force. Despite their initial resistance, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have all finally declared support for the declaration. In addition, in 2016 the 35 members of the Organization of American States passed another nonbinding human rights instrument called the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Via Zoom, Rivers discusses these developments with my students, talks about his current Native advocacy projects, and shares some of his own teenage experiences growing up on the Gila River reservation in Arizona—or rather, Ali ṣona-g, a Tohono O’odham word he teaches us that means “place of little spring.”

At a subsequent encounter at a conference hosted by the Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion at the University of Notre Dame, I offer Rivers a copy of a new book on Indigenous environmental action, *Red Alert!* by Daniel Wildcat, a professor at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, where I recently spent a few days as a theologian in residence. He offers me a fragrant sprig of sage and words of greeting in Akimel O’odham. The sounds are hard for me, even with my far-ranging language training. He tells me the greetings and their responses several times before I can even produce something intelligible. In return, I offer him one of my all-time favorite Egyptian proverbs: *Al-tikrār ta’allam al-khimār*, repetition teaches the donkey.

We talk more about what it has been like for him to have to put his body on the line in defense of Indigenous rights. He shows me the video of a recent shooting of one of his fellow Akimel O’odham brothers at a Native demonstration in New Mexico by a MAGA hat-wearing counterprotester. I tell him that I’m afraid of protests and that my pen is my activism. He basically tells me that I’m an armchair activist, which I concede. In a feeble attempt to win back credibility, I contend that teaching is my preferred form of activism. He shares an Indigenous education project he has just begun in collaboration with the California Native Vote Project, funded in part with

money made available during police department restructuring in the wake of the 2020 uprisings for racial justice. His work gives me renewed faith in one of my longtime convictions: that bold, innovative, collaborative curricula might be part of our collective way forward.

My own education and socialization in a mid-Atlantic state involved a dearth of Native voices, and consequently, as a young person I tacitly acquired the woefully inaccurate perception of “Indians” as peoples from the past but not the present. This misperception lingered at least a decade beyond my pilgrim-coloring days. But when I moved to New Mexico as a teenager and visited reservation land for the first time, my world expanded. I remember—perhaps it was on the Nambé Pueblo—watching a woman prepare bread in front of a brush-fired earthen hearth. Upon viscerally sensing the dynamic my curiosity generated, I diverted my eyes and took in a few rusty pickups, pondering how I had traversed an invisible fence into a different nation that was so entirely encompassed by my own. As my gaze traced the length of a dry riverbed, I wondered how people make a living on a rocky, arid tract with so little by way of resources. I started to see the injustices firsthand.

I think back to this experience as I play a video for my class that captures the solemn musings of Standing Rock Sioux scholar, theologian, and activist Vine Deloria Jr. “It is a real travesty,” laments Deloria, “when peoples from cultures that are ten or twenty thousand years old are forced to resort to bingo games to feed their children.” My class listens to his poignant calls for religious freedom and for the need for federal legislative reform. We discuss the Red Power movement of the 1960s and ’70s, including the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island, a piece of history that is notably absent from the legends and souvenirs traded at San Francisco’s iconic Pier 39. We discuss civil disobedience, including the contemporary water protectors’ attempts to save ecosystems from corporate greed.

I pass around a copy of the 2021 Caldecott Medal-winning book *We Are Water Protectors*, written by Carole Lindstrom, a Anishinaabe/Métis writer and enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, and illustrated by Michaela Goade, enrolled member of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. The book prompts a longer conversation about the power of literature to help traverse experiential divides and our worries about recent attempts in the United States to censor youth and young adult books written from the perspectives of racial minorities.

For my own teenage self, lacking accessible literature depicting the lifeways of Native peoples, it was firsthand experiences exploring the Southwest that initially changed my naive conceptions of manifest destiny and narratives of progress. To help detangle this complicated legacy, my class explores the doctrine of discovery and Pope Francis's recent moves—in response to decades of pressure on the Catholic Church from Indigenous nations and their allies—to denounce and distance the Catholic faith from rhetoric used to suppress Native peoples. This is difficult but necessary material with which students must grapple with plenty of bearing on the present. Could “from sea to shining sea” be considered an expression of a genocidal vision?

As a religious studies scholar, I teach about why and how religious concepts become warped into justifications for land acquisition and even murder. As a Muslim interfaith practitioner who came of age in the post-9/11 era explaining to countless audiences that jihad signifies spiritual striving and not heinous criminal acts, I have plenty of experience having conversations about how malicious actors use religious rhetoric to incite and justify violence. Yet even as I teach about the perils of religiously inflected nationalism in our histories and at present, I also teach my classes about interreligious solidarity and peacebuilding. I curate opportunities for my students to interact with other practitioners who are doing restorative work that is informed by their deep spiritual commitments and contemplative practices.

Marcus Briggs-Cloud—a descendant of people who survived ethnic cleansing during the Trail of Tears, a budding Maskoke language revitalizer, a Native spiritual leader, an environmentalist, and a graduate school classmate of mine at Harvard Divinity School—shared generously of his heritage with those of us also preparing for ministry in our respective traditions. He recently Zoom-visited with my students from Ekvv-Yefolecv Maskoke ecovillage, where he is working in Maskoke ancestral homelands to revive language, cultural traditions, and land stewardship practices. Seeing his vision flourish brings me hope for the next generation of Maskoke.

Before the active suppression of Native language by White settlers, hundreds of languages were used in the territory that is now North America. Several dozen remain, thanks in large part to the work of tireless language revivalists like Briggs-Cloud. Each time I teach, I am impressed anew by the linguistic and cultural diversity of the continent before European settlement. I am reminded of another of my teenage excursions at a Diné (Navajo) festival that drew hundreds of Native people. I became mesmerized by the soundscape and the colors. I heard ancient

Indigenous languages spoken around me. I felt the joy of the dancing and festivities. I felt gratitude for the generations who fought the odds to keep these traditions alive.

Through such experiences as a teenager, graduate student, and now educator, I have encountered the vitality and resilience of ancient and living traditions in a way that has rendered visible my own mental fences. It turns out that the rural town I spent much of my life in, Towamensing, is in fact a Lenape word meaning “pastureland,” and the nearby Delaware River, known to this day as the Lifeblood of the Northeast, was named not after the first US state but after the nation whose people stewarded the land long before Swedish settlers landed in the early 17th century. I began to understand myself, a descendant of 18th-century colonizers as well as 20th-century immigrants, as allied in the liberation struggle, ecological vision, and spiritual commitment of the first inhabitants of Turtle Island, or what I was taught to call North America.

At a recent meeting, Natalie Avalos, a colleague of Chicana and Mexican Indigenous descent, introduced me to the Nishnaabeg verb *biskaabiiyang*, which means “returning to ourselves.” Her work on Indigenous futures points me to the work of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer whose book *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* articulates the process of decolonization on Indigenous terms as “re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens.” I find this language of “returning to ourselves” inspiring in the context of framing my broader goals for teaching Indigenous studies: through unlearning colonizing myths and re-appreciating the vitality of Indigenous philosophies and lifeways, we are restoring a vision for our collective existence, a vision wherein plurality—not imposed homogeneity—is our strength. Respect and a sense of indebtedness have informed my desire to teach the histories, cultures, struggles, and wisdom teachings of the peoples who resided and still reside on this continent.

“Dr. Ibrahim!” One of my ninth graders flags me excitedly from across the room. “According to this source, the highway right by my house was a trail constructed by Lenni Lanape!” A few days later, the student essay on my screen reads:

A Lenape trail once ran through modern-day New Jersey. English colonizers incorporated this trail as a section of the King’s Highway, the largest

highway system in the Thirteen colonies. This Lenape trail lives on as New Jersey 27, part of the Lincoln Highway, a national highway which set the precedent for all interstate highways to come.

It concludes with a call for the state to, at minimum, better memorialize the trail:

Our forebears may have attempted to remove and erase Indigenous cultures, but it is our responsibility to uphold the founding values of our nation by acknowledging the contributions of all people who have made us who we are.

My students and I have much more to learn—and likely also to unlearn—than is possible in our relatively brief time together. Yet I hope that they leave my classroom with provisions to undertake their own journeys of self-discovery through the ethical terrains of life. Lead with empathy. Observe closely to detect both what is depicted and what is omitted. Seek truth even when it is messy and brutal; ask probing questions, even when the answers are inconvenient. Seek relationships across identity lines to cultivate human connection and find trustworthy experts, not ideologues. Be humble, yet persistent, so that learning can lead to wisdom.