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"The Fraught Modern in New Mexico: Lawrence's Engagement with Social, Political, and Personal Health at Cultural Interstices"

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**"The Fraught Modern in New Mexico:
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This working paper's intention is to explore more deeply Lawrence's relationship to American nativism in the early 1920s, vis-à-vis national, personal, and cultural health.

Today, I want to seek inspiration and wisdom from my Lawrentian colleagues gathered here today to deepen my own longstanding study of Lawrence's engagements with the political and social phenomena of "nativism" during the American 1920s, specifically during his New Mexico period.

While nativism is not only a United States phenomenon, and I am eager to learn more about its international iterations with their own vocabularies, United States nativism is something I have defined as notable for its "retrogression," "an active or ideological nostalgia for a mythic past of racial uniformity" (Newmark xxii). Paraphrasing historian John Higham, "Nativists are fearful that American will become a messy amalgam of indistinct peoples. Nativists are hostile to change, particularly concerning the complexion [or traditionalism, religion, or politics] of [a new] national people" (xxiii).

Lawrence's travels to North American (to the United States and Mexico) were motivated by his own fraught relationships with modernity, industrialization, primitivism; upon arriving to New Mexico, Lawrence learned that his own somewhat conflicted ideas concerning essentialized notions of national peoplehood (English and other) could resonate in interesting ways with debates concerning nativism and nativity in the United States at that moment. Lawrence had long wondered about "belonging," about what it means to be "native" to a place –whether this attribute is racial, cultural, temporal, geographic, or related to any constellation of the concepts of indigeneity, modernity, traditionalism, and "civilization."

Prior to arriving to New Mexico in the Fall of 1922, Lawrence was already made aware of a certain tri-cultural (the mythos of New Mexico) nuance that undergirded the proposed Bursum Bill legislation, which Mabel Dodge Luhan had enlisted Lawrence to take a stance against (as he did by signing a protest against the bill in September 1922). In very brief terms, the Bill sought to deprive Pueblo peoples of long held land and water rights. Conflicts in the state of New Mexico, concerning the phased residents' –Native, Hispanic, White, settled in the state in that order – feelings of legitimate rights to place reflected larger national concerns in the United States at the time around ideas of nativity and belonging. The significant upsurge in immigration in this period – and the concomitant anti-immigration legislation– created a decidedly nativist political atmosphere on a national scale. On the local level in Taos and environs, in Mabel's milieu, Native peoples were positioned in a very challenging way: as representatives of an ancestral and in-need-of-being-protected way of life at the same time as

tribal lifeways were being constricted by missionary activity and bureaucratic moves, such as the 1887 Dawes Severalty Act which both severed tribal ties to communal land-holding and moved Native children away from their families into Euro-American educational settings.

So, within two years of Lawrence's arrival in New Mexico, one significant piece of legislation concerning Native peoples' rights – the Indian Citizenship Act – was passed. A dozen years later, many aspects of the paternalistic, highly damaging Dawes Era approach to the management of Indian Affairs was revised via the Indian New Deal or, formally, the Indian Reorganization Act, engineered in large part by a contemporary of Lawrence's from the Taos era, about whom Lawrence had strong opinions, John Collier.



I give this somewhat extended context here as a way to involve my colleagues gathered today in the questions I want to continue to pursue, questions that were the foundation of my 2015

book on nativism and counternativism in multiethnic American literature (and I ultimately locate Lawrence in the anti-nativist camp). Several years have elapsed since I wrote that book and as always seems to be the case with nativism, everything old is new again, and in our Trump-informed socio-political context in the United States, the questions around “who belongs here” are as searing as ever. Whenever I hear accounts of anti-immigrant violence, or blame-assigning (always to ethnic others) for illness and contagion, I think about modernist writers’ reactions, especially Lawrence’s. We are naïve to think this has begun with the COVID-19 pandemic; read Priscilla Wald’s *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* for incisive analyses of how literary texts furthered ideas concerning infection and national decline emanating from immigrant Others). Why do I always turn to Lawrence as a kind of lodestar in navigating through these really challenging concepts, especially since *he* never successfully (whatever that means) navigated through them?



Though Lawrence's attitudes concerning Native peoples in the southwestern United States (and Mexico) changes significantly over two years, and after his last departure from New Mexico, I always return to where he began, with thoughts on Native matters he composed between September and October 1922, which Virginia Hyde has explained thus: the "composite piece" he composed in this period "would eventually be broken up into three essays, 'Indians and an Englishman' (about the Apaches), 'Taos' (about Taos Pueblo) and 'Certain Americans and an Englishman' (about the Bursum Bill)." While my interests in Lawrence largely concern his representations of Native people in the southwest and his deployment of rhetorical tropes that deeply conflict and collide with each other with each other regarding racial essentialism, political and spiritual autonomy, and the promises and poisons of modernity, I am also interested in Lawrence's attitudes concerning the "American national scene" – its old-stock immigrants (the native of nativism), its new immigrants, its indigenous populations, its formerly enslaved peoples, and more, and what we can make of his attempts to make sense of this complex "national people."

Why and how could Lawrence help us today, with his own variance and vulnerability concerning a climate, that while very different, has some frustratingly similar attitudes made abundantly clear so regularly? What does Lawrence show us as teachers, about inconclusiveness, about not always "being on the right side of history" perhaps (a phrase that is popular today), about understanding larger national stories that are not always neat? Indeed, our current United States political climate is so polarized, so rooted in right-and-wrong on both sides, and

Lawrence, though he certainly flirted with absolutes, backed away from them almost as regularly.



I ask my colleagues here, then, how can we build a more complete picture – or how can I build a more complete picture – of Lawrence's pre-arrival-to-North-America attitudes concerning nationhood and cohesive "peoples." Indeed, we learn so much from *Twilight in Italy*, *The Boy in the Bush*, and many letters, but how do we constellate all of this? I certainly know across many essays and chapters, I have tried, but I certainly feel there is much more to do, and I feel that there is a need – especially as we always navigate never-ending cycles of nativism-- for us to do so.

Thank you

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