

November 1, 2019

**Dear Members of our Campus Community,**

I am deeply saddened to share with you the news that Professor Inés Talamantez of our Department of Religious Studies passed away on September 27. Professor Talamantez joined our faculty in 1978, and made tremendous contributions to our campus and community over more than four decades. We extend our sincere condolences to her family as well as her colleagues, students, and friends around the world. Our campus flag was lowered in her honor on October 31.

I am honored to share this tribute from our Department of Religious Studies.

**Tribute to Dr. Inés M. Talamantez**

The Department of Religious Studies announces with deep sadness the sudden passing of our colleague Inés M. Talamantez, professor of Native American Religious Traditions, in the early morning of September 27. Professor Talamantez, an internationally renowned scholar who recently celebrated her promotion to Full Professor in July 2019, joined the UC Santa Barbara community in July of 1978 with a joint placement in the Chicana/o and Religious Studies departments. Professor Talamantez was already a well-established figure in the study of Native American Religious Traditions, having studied widely the traditions of Mesoamerica and the Southwest before her arrival. She graduated from UC San Diego with a BA in dance, a passion that never abandoned her. In 1976, she completed an interdisciplinary PhD in Ethnopoetics, Linguistics, and Anthropology at UC San Diego while raising seven children as a single mother. After holding a faculty position at Dartmouth College and completing a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard, she became the first minority and first woman hired to teach in the Department of Religious Studies at UC. Long before beginning her role as a professor, Dr. Talamantez was a social activist focused on creating a world where young women of color could thrive. She brought this activist spirit to UC and, throughout her career, persisted in fighting for full recognition for herself and for minority peoples in the academy. For the past 40 years, she worked to establish a place where students, and specifically Native students, could feel supported individually and as a community. Professor Talamantez created an undergraduate minor in Native American Studies, was a founding member of the American Indian and Indigenous Collective at UC, and was determined to make UC a leader in the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies. Together with her students and early colleagues, Professor Talamantez founded a unit in Native American Religious Traditions within the

American Academy of Religion (AAR) upon the passing of American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978. This legacy would lead her to her place as a Centennial Scholar and leader within the AAR. She was also a founding member of the Society for the Study of Native American Religious Traditions, a collection of scholars from around the globe who work together to advance the scholarship and recognition of Native Peoples in academia.

Over the course of her career, Professor Talamantez has been recognized as a uniquely impactful scholar, receiving awards and recognition for both her community activism and scholarly contributions. In 2006, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) awarded her the Tortuga Award for her “tremendous professional accomplishments and contributions” to Latinx and Indigenous communities. In 2007, she was honored at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting with a session entitled “Native American Religious Traditions: The Future of the Field and the Influence of Inés Talamantez,” which showcased several of her students and mentees whose research in the study of Native American religious traditions demonstrated clear influence and indebtedness “to the scholarship, pedagogy, and example of Inés Talamantez.” In 2017, Dr. Inés Talamantez received the Dixon-Levy GSA Service Award for Mentoring, and in 2018, she received the Chancellor Yang Award in recognition of dedicated scholarship, teaching, and mentorship, as well as exceptional leadership and service to campus and community. In March 2018, she received the UC and Native American Community Award for Elder, Mentor, Teacher, and Friend, and was recognized at an Honoring Mentorship Ceremony at the American Indian and Indigenous Collective Symposium.

Professor Talamantez’s pathbreaking scholarship, passionate teaching, and dedicated mentoring set a standard for the now firmly established field of Native American Religions in the US. Perhaps no other scholar has had the impact of Professor Talamantez in establishing and modeling Indigenous pedagogies for generations of scholars. Her scholarly contributions include a book in press, books of translation, articles, chapters, journal issues, reviews, encyclopedia entries, poetry, and numerous edited pieces and volumes. Her vast body of work established the field of Native American Religious traditions, defined methods within this field, and laid the foundation for future scholarship in diverse areas within Native, Indigenous, and Latinx Studies. Inherent in her approach to the study of Native traditions is the primacy of immersion in Native language, community, and respectful relationships with the natural world. Her articles “Seeing Red: American Indian Women Speaking About Their Religious and Political Perspectives” and “The Presence of Isanaklesh: The Apache Female Deity and the Path of Pollen” are considered both germinal and classics in the field, and have had monumental influence.

In 2018, Professor Talamantez completed her most recent book manuscript, *The Apache Pollen Path: Mescalero Female Initiation Ceremony*, the product of

decades of research. In it, Professor Talamantez synthesizes her knowledge as an Apache woman, her long history with the academic study of religion, and over forty years of experience and field work to explain how the Mescalero Apache produce strong, exemplary women through the ceremony of *Isánáklésh Gotal*. Inés Talamantez's doctoral thesis and her final completed manuscript constitute powerful bookends, as the former work provided a study and retranslation of songs sung during the Mescalero Apache girls' puberty ceremony, and the latter provides a comprehensive account of this most significant ceremony among the Mescalero Apache people.

True to her insistence on approaching Indigenous communities through their language and collaboration, Professor Talamantez, a revered elder and matriarch of her tribe, the Mescalero Apache in New Mexico, created participatory spaces for members of the Mescalero Apache to join her in the production of interpretive knowledge. In doing so, she refused the long legacy of exploitative, hierarchical, and extractive research on Native American and Indigenous spiritual and cultural practices. In accordance with her decolonizing methodologies as a member of the Sun Clan, as a ritual participant, and as a student in Apache protocol, her scholarship was coextensive with her responsibilities to her community. That is, for Professor Talamantez cultural knowledge must not be mined for the exclusive use of members of the academy, but must be reflexive and reciprocal, and therefore scholarship about a given people must be made accessible and intelligible to these same communities.

She elaborated often, eloquently and poetically, on *díiyi*, an expansive Apache concept of the sacred power that moves through and animates all things. She taught us to respect *díiyi* (or its cognate in the other indigenous peoples with whom we engaged); to take how indigenous peoples lived in relationship to *díiyi*, drawing on it, even generating it, in the face of so much disempowerment. Inés herself cultivated *díiyi*; anyone who knew her remembers those moments when at some podium (in class, in some soulless AAR conference room), she radiated *díiyi*.

One day, she took her students out to a still wild and undeveloped part of the Mesa overlooking Hendry's Beach where you can see the whales migrate up and down the coast. (She would later fight to have that piece of land preserved from development as the Douglas Family Preserve.) Out on the bluff, among the coastal pines and the scrub, she taught about what the Koykon called "the watchful world" and instructed the students to take an "eyes walk"—one in which humans perceive everything in the natural world not as "objects" but as "subjects." That is, instead of us focused on looking at the plants, the trees, the scurrying animals, the ocean, the clouds, etc., it was all "looking at us" (the "watchful world")—watching us, perceiving us.

Another day, many years ago, when Ines was in the midst of her first promotion

case at UC, a red-tailed hawk (her spirit animal, perhaps also her Apache clan symbol) smacked into the building right where the Religious Studies department was located. Inés picked up the dead hawk and sang over it and cared for it. She told one of her students with no small amount of relief that now she was going to be okay in her promotion at UC. The red-tailed hawk, who had guided her entire life, had “taken the academic blows for her and absorbed them” so that she would continue for a long time in her career at the University. She did—with great staying power.

In fact, she took the pollen way tradition that encourages women to keep physically fit to heart. She was a surfer in an era when women did not surf, and through the end of her life went swimming almost daily and to work out at the gym. As a member of the Sun Clan, Professor Talamantez observed associated commitments including rising daily to greet the sunrise.

Above all, Inés Talamantez was a masterful teacher and mentor, who inspired creativity, community, accountability, critical engagement, and academic freedom. Here at UC (but also at Harvard, Dartmouth, the University of Southern California, Wellesley, and Carleton—where she held a distinguished visiting professorship), Inés fostered an exceptional circle of students. Beyond her lasting imprint at UC (where she directed undergraduates, PhD students, and colleagues in Native American Religious Studies), she has mentored students across the country. Over the span of her entire career, she mentored and helped produce over two dozen PhD in the field of Native American Religious Traditions. Students with whom she has worked are now teaching at many universities across the US. Inés was not just an advisor; for some students, she became their family. She inspired them to rethink the academy, to make it inhabitable for the responsible study of Native religious traditions. While protecting space for her students, she also kept the door open to everyone. She inspired students from diverse marginalized communities, including first-generation college students, Native and non-Native minority students, and LGBTQ students. Inés had grown up doing migrant worker seasonal harvesting and as a child had worked in the field picking grapes. She had a lot of stories about this—about being a little girl out in the fields and what that was like (getting up at 4 a.m. and then working past dark), and how she never forgot that when she became a professor. She would talk about it, and from time to time, some of her Chicana students would approach her and let her know that they had worked in the fields as children, too. It was such a relief for them to be able to talk about something like that with a professor, no less, and to feel like someone at UC really “saw” them. She loved her students fiercely, and her love was made manifest in her ability to fill them with confidence in their ability to uncover and tell their own stories, the stories of their communities, and the stories of their ancestors.

She was proud to be an activist and a fighter, and was a great mentor and role model. Her legacy lives on in her scholarship, her students, and her family, all of

which have been transformed and uplifted by her *díyi*.

May she be dancing, happy, and surrounded by love, admiration, and respect forevermore.

Sincerely,

Henry T. Yang  
Chancellor