

Announcement of Doctoral Defense

Jessica Fae Nelson
Monday, May 7, 2018
10:00am
Haury 215



“Pataxó Hãhãhãe: Race, Indigeneity and Language Revitalization in the Brazilian Northeast”

This dissertation explores how anti-Indian racism and ideologies of racial mixture impact the efforts of the Pataxó Hãhãhãe to reclaim an under-documented heritage language that has not been fluently spoken since the 1920s, and an indigenous identity in a place where it is commonly thought that Indians no longer exist. Driven from their reservation by waves of inter-ethnic conflict as soon-to-be “Cocoa Colonels” established their empires in the golden era of Brazil’s chocolate boom, the Pataxó Hãhãhãe returned decades later to confront not only landed elites and their hired guns but also the idea that they were no longer Indians. Brazil’s self-concept as a mixed-race nation is predicated on indigenous erasure: all Brazilians are imagined to share indigenous, African and Portuguese heritage. This common way of thinking about race restricts indigeneity to the past and reinforces racist stereotypes of Indians as primitive, supporting the view that mixed-race, modern, Brazilian Portuguese speaking indigenous people like the Pataxó Hãhãhãe are opportunists seeking unjustified access to fertile reservation lands. This dissertation explores ways in which ideas about race and indigeneity are being remade in the context of this ongoing ideological struggle. Focusing on everyday social and linguistic practices, including uses of Hãhãhãe and other indigenous languages, I reveal how the Pataxó Hãhãhãe construct indigeneities that contradict stereotypes of indigenous authenticity, but that also draw on widely recognized markers of indigeneity. It is a combination that confronts anti-Indian racism and redefines what it means to be indigenous, and Brazilian.