

# In Memoriam

## Natale A. Zappia

1974–2023

*Scholar of Environmental and Indigenous History*

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Natale Zappia, who died of a brain tumor on April 27, 2023, at the age of forty-eight, made a career of cultivating gardens, literal and figurative. He planted seeds of community, cared for his students, and nurtured projects to maturity. An outstanding historian, he was also a certified master gardener, a man of action, and profoundly humble. He introduced himself simply as Nat, a straw gardening hat his sartorial signature.

Trained in early American, environmental, and borderlands histories, Nat elucidated patterns of production, trade, and consumption across North America, with an emphasis on the western United States. His research and teaching explored how trade networks, food pathways, and ecologies transformed North America over many centuries. His focus on long-term environmental change intersected with his abiding concern for twenty-first-century food systems and environmental justice.

Nat became interested in these issues at Cornell University, where he studied with historian Robert Venables, whose work with the Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois) introduced Nat to engaged scholarship. Nat lived and worked on American Indian reservations in New Mexico and North Dakota, establishing a lifelong practice of



Portrait: Miles Lewis, Nat, 2023, oil on aluminum panel, 18 × 24 in. Courtesy Miles Lewis (image cropped).

engagement with Indigenous communities. After earning a BS in 1996, Nat completed an MA in history at Claremont Graduate University in 2003. He then earned his history PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 2008. Having cultivated his own mind, he dedicated himself to cultivating students, his research projects, community initiatives, and, of course, the land.

Nat understood teaching to be like planting seeds and bringing a crop to maturity. This view sprang from his work growing food alongside his academic pursuits. Nat began teaching at California State University, Northridge, in 2007. Three years later, he joined the Whittier College faculty, eventually becoming the Nadine Austin Wood Chair in American History and codirecting the Integrated Arts and Humanities Program. He also ran Whittier's Sustainable Urban Farm and energetically participated in multiple off-campus community gardens. In 2019, Nat returned to Northridge as professor of history and director of the Institute for Sustainability. Still, he kept his hands in the soil. Nat led the development of the campus food garden, where he worked alongside students and members of the faculty and staff. He thus continued his unusual career: coaxing food from plants and ideas from minds, not least his own.

Nat was a prolific scholar whose mental garden was an intellectual cornucopia. In addition to a monograph, two coauthored books, and an assortment of book chapters and reviews, he authored or coauthored nine peer-reviewed articles, which appeared in an array of publications. They include the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *California History*, the *California State University Journal of Sustainability and Climate Change*, *Early American Studies*, *Environmental History*, *Pacific Historical Review*, *Southern California Quarterly*, *World History Connected*, and *Nature*.

To read his work is to be awed by Nat's sensitivity to human beings. In *Traders and Raiders: The Indigenous World of the Colorado Basin, 1540–1859* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), he explored the complex interactions among Native Americans, colonists, priests, and traders in the Colorado River Basin while asking, What if we think not of a European core and an Indigenous periphery but of an Indigenous core and a European periphery? In a book about the photographs of Edward Sherriff Curtis, he and coauthor Steadman Upham asked, How do Native American people understand these famous photos? And in *Rez Metal: Inside the Navajo Nation Heavy Metal Scene* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), he and coauthor Ashkan Soltani Stone gave voice to Navajo people who express anger and forge community through heavy metal music.

Nat accomplished many things. Above all, he made the world a better place, not least by planting gardens. He loved to sow, tend, and harvest. He relished introducing others to these pleasures. And he saw in gardening a direct way to address hunger and environmental injustice by growing food and sharing it with those in need. Nat was extraordinary: an insightful scholar, a discerning editor, a master gardener, and a treasured friend. He stood up for what he believed. He defended truth and integrity. He sought to heal the world. He was one of the great ones.

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