The Act of Claiming Higher Education as Indigenous Space: American Indian/Alaska Native Examples

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The Act of Claiming Higher Education as Indigenous Space: American Indian/Alaska Native Examples

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This paper examines the concept of claiming postsecondary education as Indigenous space using curriculum, American Indian student services, and digital media. The intention of this manuscript is to address the disparities that are the result of assimilative educational practices in higher education for American Indians and Alaska Natives by employing theoretical strategies grounded in indigenous epistemologies and implementing practices used in creating Indigenous community within the context of higher education to improve student matriculation. American Indian/Alaska Native students can achieve success while maintaining cultural integrity by claiming educational space as their own, participating in American Indian Student Services programs, and sharing their survival tactics online, consequently taking ownership of their own educational experiences.

In a series of informal conversations that took place at an international educational conference in the traditional homelands of Coastal Salish First Nations peoples, we (the authors), who identify as Assiniboine and Hopi respectively, began to see overlap in our academic interests. There were considerable connections in our commitments to our respective home communities as well as the larger Indigenous community, which included our feeling of responsibility to those indigenous spaces that give us our identity. Given our professional positionality, we asked one another, “What can we do to help our communities the most?” We listened, told stories, reciprocated, shared in humor, and came up with a small but important list that has turned into the fuel that feeds the fire. As a result of our conversation, we have worked together while constantly being reminded that we are in positions of scholarly influence, which is informed by our commitment to our home communities to answer this question. In this conversation it became clear that we would be of little use if we did not intentionally serve Indigenous peoples. This ongoing conversation helps us maintain the values that emerged from our experience in the Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO)

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Ambassadors program\(^1\) that empowered us to learn, foster, and implement the four Rs: AIO’s core cultural values of relationships, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution. This paper provides examples of how Indigenous peoples take something from outside, in this case Western education, and work with it our way to provide a good life for oncoming generations. These core cultural values have always been and will continue to be foundational within healthy Indigenous societies. Though the attainment of a credential through higher education is known to improve the quality of life in the American context, we want to acknowledge the experiences of our relatives who also have a connection to values such as the 4 Rs. In doing so, we wish to assert that our quality of life is measured differently to include Indigenous community identity and traditional values that are not part of the higher education paradigm. We celebrate not those who are claimed by educational space, but rather those who choose to claim educational space as their own and use it to contribute to back into their own communities.

INTRODUCTION

Horses, firearms, medicines, tools, and a seemingly endless list of gifts were claimed, used, and adapted by North American Indigenous peoples to serve their community’s well-being. Utilizing something that has originated in another cultural context is not something new within the American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) collective experience. How are tools, ideas, and collective community construction intentionally being used and claimed by AIANs in higher education to support their matriculation and graduation? By examining areas of concern that dis-serve AIANs, including problematic educational policies and the effects of adverse campus climates, it is clear that AIANs experience exclusion. In the act of constructing and implementing familiar and appropriate learning paradigms, AIANs are claiming educational space specifically to support their full participation in, and contributions to, higher learning. While recognizing an abundance of literature related to college success (Arbona & Novy, 1990; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schwartz & Washington, 1999; Willingham, 1985; Yan & Gaier, 1994), there are relatively few of the same resources that are specific to AIANs that consider not only the successful navigation of higher education but include a three-dimensional perspective by considering what Manulani Myers calls “Native Common Sense” (2013)—in other words, learning through the mind, body, and spirit simultaneously. The vigorous enactment of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing while simultaneously participating in postsecondary education is an act of transformation that deserves celebration and promotion.

\(^1\) The American Indian Ambassadors Program began in 1993, when LaDonna Harris (Comanche) and the AIO board recognized the need to pass on their experience or personal “medicine” to the next generation of tribal, national, and international Indigenous leaders. The Ambassadors Program is the only leadership initiative in the United States that encourages participants to weave their traditional tribal values into a contemporary reality. The program provides a creative combination of mentorship, personal reflection, and dialogue with national and international decision makers, community involvement, communications training, and a discovery process into tribal values. Up to 18 participants are selected to participate in the program, which runs for two years. The participants are Native American, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, and are between the ages of 25–35 (Harris, 2015). The authors were fellows in the ninth class and are members of the AIO Ambassador national network.
The data sources used for this inquiry include established programming applied by predominantly white institutions (PWIs) that serve AIAN populations, state legislation in Montana identified as the Indian Education for All Act (IEFA), and the efforts of an online comedy group who incorporate a campaign known as REPRESENT. These sources exemplify the importance of claiming education by maintaining Indigenous cultural integrity (Battiste, 2011; Deyhle, 1995; Tierney, 1999; Wright, 1991) in three identified areas: cultural congruity at the student level, altering curriculum and strengthening American Indian student services at the institutional level, and promoting the successful navigation of higher education by AIANs online at the national level. The authors use examples to show levels of claiming so it isn’t merely the responsibility of the individual student to navigate educational space. The legacy of other students’ claiming of space and service at the institutional level is important and the connection of students nationally as a resource and collective act is supported and admired by the authors.

The primary ambition of this manuscript is to examine how higher education is being claimed by AIANs in ways that align with Indigenous ontologies for the purpose of attaining a college degree. This is important in the 21st century, as education has historically been experienced, and in some cases, continues to be experienced as an assimilative practice by AIAN students. For AIAN peoples in the United States, the policies of the assimilation era (1824–1879) were intentionally created to move Indigenous peoples away from community ontological space and their unique Indigenous identities (Calloway, 2004). This era is rooted in federal policy that has historically facilitated assimilation, for example through federal boarding schools with abusive policies, and subtly continues to do so. Historically, policy makers assumed that American Indian peoples were regressive and substandard to Euro-Americans who were settling and expanding landholdings throughout North America. These stories have become the epitome of settler colonialism and are revisited time and time again in the U.S. national curriculum. The literature in American Indian studies continues to document the Western educational institution’s role in the homogenization of cultures, as stated by Sims (2013):

The policies developed for the Indian education system at the time reflected society’s beliefs in a racial hierarchy and in a national identity of progress that was achievable through individual industry. A system of schools for Indigenous students was developed both on and off reservations that would purportedly help students assimilate into the civilized nation and abandon their backward ways. (p. 81; emphasis added by authors)

Though AIAN communities are no longer experiencing the official “Assimilation Era” of American history, the authors affirm that subtle assimilation occurs in the current era and postsecondary institutions still maintain practices of assimilation.

For example, in a seemingly benign scenario, professors or others in an authoritative role may say to an AIAN student, “You sure are good at school for being Indian,” or, “You are a conquered people but proud.” Racial microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007) like these are the reality of modern-day education and continue a broader assimilationist agenda regarding AIANs. Consequently, identities are internally questioned and students feel excluded or isolated in academia. The insinuation in the scenarios above is that in order to be an excellent student, Indigenous students must set aside their identity to succeed. Often this leads to educational experiences that invalidate Indigenous students’ community-constructed identities. This microaggressive conduct by many instructors and professors leads to inadequate matriculation rates among AIAN students (Evans-Campbell, 2008). The authors postulate that if
the impact of microaggressive episodes is to be undone, it will be by Indigenous students themselves and the communities that support them.

If the purpose for AIAN students is the achievement of an education that preserves a suitable quality of life in their communities, Indigenous scholars must strive to construct an education paradigm that is pertinent and receptive to Indigenous students. This includes adequate preparation for engaging in the culture of higher education, acquiring the financial resources needed to be successful in college, and developing the academic and social wherewithal to maintain one’s Indigenous identity in an unreceptive campus climate (Flynn, Duncan, & Jorgensen, 2012). Non-Indigenous scholars and professionals are a part of the broader agenda, particularly as selfless advocates. However, to engage effectively they may have to de-center their own realities and re-center an Indigenous paradigm, as they relate to their own educational experiences and assume the role of an ally. For both Indigenous scholars and non-Indigenous scholars alike, this work is best facilitated within community, while maintaining that there is a connection between the genuine self and perhaps a propensity to consider the amalgamation of the mind, body, and spirit (Meyer, 2013) while participating in higher education. Furthermore, higher education is a space that may be experienced as one-dimensional: primarily concerned with the mind but lacking in physical and spiritual development, which may lead students to a life in need of balance.

According to Guillory and Wolverton’s (2008) qualitative study on the experiences of 30 American Indian college students at three PWIs, the most essential factors for college retention were campus social support, social events, and tribal support. This information leads the authors to apply a theoretical foundation that centers the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples while considering cultural specificity, including geographic location, urban or rural upbringing, as well as generational and age differences.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The theoretical foundation used for this work is an amalgamation of Decolonizing Methodologies (Smith, 1999), Sandy Grande’s Red Pedagogies (2004), and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005). Of particular concern is the question posed by Smith: “For whom are we doing this work?” To answer this question, and in accordance with Indigenous research methodologies, this document aims to serve Indigenous peoples. Additionally, many of the sources consulted in this project are also intentional about serving Indigenous peoples. In taking care not to lead scholars into believing that the Indigenous experience is the same for all, the authors maintain that cultural distinction is imperative; however, making transcendent collaborations as Indigenous peoples serves as a place of resistance to the loss of important knowledges and can lead to the generation of self-directed communities (Grande, 2004). Also foundational to this manuscript is TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), particularly the tenets related to experiential knowledge; as stated in TribalCrit, “[TribalCrit] values experiential knowledge as a way to inform thinking and research. As a result, narrative accounts and testimonies are valued as key sources of data by CRT scholars” (p. 428). The authors are intentional about combining these philosophies in a way that purposely not only works toward the maintenance of Indigenous community identity but also encourages the development of Indigenous identity to promote claiming nonnative traditional educational terrain as Indigenous space. As Brayboy (2005) notes, “Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions,
and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups” (p. 429).

In addition, critical consciousness, or conscientization (Freire, 1998), is a guiding principle of this manuscript as it is couched within academic success in college and is concerned with the promotion of cultural humility as opposed to cultural competence (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, conscientizing is defined as a concept, based in Marxist critical theory, centered on a deep understanding of the world that allows for the perception and exposure of perceived social and political contradictions. Another theoretical lens applied to this work is culturally responsive pedagogy, that is, pedagogy designed specifically to engage the cultural identity of the student (Gay, 2010; Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Although the realm of this manuscript is specifically higher education, the authors recognize a theoretical connection to primary through secondary education and the importance of these theories as AIAN students transition into higher education.

**MODES OF INQUIRY**

This manuscript includes a combination of observations focusing on AIANs as participants in and contributors to higher education between April 2012 and February 2014. Though AIANs attend multiple institutional types including tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), two-year public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit, as well as four-year public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit institutions (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012), for the purposes of this study the primary units of analysis are limited to predominately white institutions (PWIs) as they had the greatest total numbers of AIAN students (Knapp, 2012).

The observations in this inquiry come from Indigenous perspectives. Both authors are concurrently members of federally recognized tribes and participants in their own unique community cultural contexts, Assiniboine and Hopi respectively. This brings an aspect of authenticity, as both observers actively participate in community gatherings in Indigenous space while simultaneously being immersed in the lived reality of higher education; as stated by Denzin & Lincoln (2003), “All observation involves the observer’s participation in the world being studied”(p. 49). In short, the authors have ethnographic proximity (Rankin & Reason, 2005) to the research and strive to embody the four Rs: relationships, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution.

**DATA SOURCES**

In pursuing data that was impactful to current AIAN students, the authors chose sources that were related to the American Indian student experiences. This includes institutional programming implemented by predominately white institutions (PWIs), Montana legislation known as “Indian Education for All,” and the dynamic efforts of an online comedy group known as the 1491s incorporating a recent campaign that was and continues to be produced by and for American Indians in higher education. This inquiry includes a content analysis of videos downloaded from a well-known video-sharing website, whose content is grounded in Indigenous identity and academia.
Included in the data-gathering portions of this research were valuations of offices and programs within the realm of student affairs that included Native American student services, AIAN student support services units, and campus centers serving AIANs. These offices are often the first point of contact for American Indian students, and their institutionalized programming includes services that reach American Indian students. Lastly, the authors evaluate an online campaign entitled REPRESENT that encourages students to maintain their Indigenous identity while simultaneously navigating the realm of higher education.

Claiming Education

One solution to the difficulties related to assimilation and the resultant loss of Indigenous identity is conscientization and transformation through action (Freire, 1998). The active seeking of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, while concurrently participating in post-secondary education, is a prime example of transformation. This transformation that can happen while navigating higher education is presently happening through multiple avenues. In some cases, it is assisted by state legislation mandating course curriculum that reflects the Indigenous population of the state. In others, transformation results from strengthening the student services available at institutions of higher learning that target the AIAN populations, specifically by recognizing Indigenous identities on campus and by promoting the maintenance of cultural integrity through online activism. The authors describe these as acts of claiming education as indigenous space.

Policy and Curriculum

Possibly the most impactful state legislative act in teaching and implementing culturally relevant pedagogies (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Osborne, 1996; Tippins, Rudolph, & Dubois, 2014) for Indigenous populations in the past 40 years has been the Montana Indian Education for All Act (IEFA). This was an inventive change in the Montana state constitution that included language necessitating that all participants in state-supported public institutions learn about the history and culture of the Indigenous peoples who inhabit the state. The intention of this specific piece of legislation was to expose common misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, dissect misunderstandings, and further understand how these misunderstandings are created and perpetuated to dis-service students. The IEFA act necessitates that Montana teachers and faculty members educate all students regarding Indian history and culture at all points, from kindergarten through college, and consider differences within the various Indigenous populations in the state (Juneau & Broaddus, 2006).

American Indian Student Services

Most college and university campuses with a substantial AIAN population host celebrations that showcase their Indigenous students and communities—from hosted powwows, to athletic competitions, to select movie screenings, poetry readings, elders in residence, and so forth. These activities reflect American Indians successfully navigating the higher education experience and it occurs through campus participation with AIAN students sharing their cultures on
campuses throughout the country. These events are intentional efforts that maintain meaningful relationships with their home communities.

This phenomenon is not without critique. Often the students are responsible for the massive amount of organization, fundraising, and event planning required. Frequently this is seen as both a privilege and a burden, as much of the work falls to the Indigenous students, introducing a potential negative effect on the individual AIAN student’s participation in the classroom while simultaneously allowing the student to assist in the co-construction of a campus community that reflects an appreciation of Indigenous ontological space. One must also consider that Indigenous students’ active participation in creating community in academic spaces also comes with huge responsibility to maintain a level of ethical responsibility to their home communities in determining how, when, and what amount of their own culture can be shared with a broader community. Nonetheless, these celebrations are an example of how students are claiming educational space as their own. These events simultaneously celebrate the American Indian alumni, pull together the current Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and are used to recruit prospective AIAN students. Many of the soon-to-be AIAN students are effectually recruited though these gatherings as they become familiar with a specific university in such a way that they are able to participate with their families and communities. Often AIAN matriculation to a specific institution is the result of having attended an event that was hosted by the AIAN students and their campus. This on-campus experience reflects the importance of Indigenous ontologies as they are applied in higher education.

**Contemporary Digital Activism**

The authors assert that not only AIANs but also all students navigating higher education today are navigating a relatively new space. Participants in education will need to adapt to new and constantly changing technologies in order to contribute to a desirable quality of life for their communities. Schmiede (2009) notes:

> The Internet with its World Wide Web interface has become part and parcel of normal academic life. We have moved from selective “logging on” to the rule of being “always on,” and, as in other areas of work and life, an enormous intensification of information and communication has accompanied this development. (p. 625)

One source of data in this study is the lively, contemporary, and edgy labor of an online comedy group identified as the 1491s and their REPRESENT campaign. The 1491s are a sketch comedy group based in Minnesota and Oklahoma. The authors chose to include an evaluation of this movement specifically because it exemplifies AIAN presence on college campuses. They incorporate images, sounds, and situations of current Indigenous students, and highlight how cultural integrity endures as a result of community-cultivated humor and resilience.

[The 1491s] “are a group of Native Americans who got together to do comedy videos for fun and put them on YouTube.com to see what would happen. The videos, which range from biting cultural satire and serious political statements to just plain goofiness, went viral in Indian country and gained an instant following.” (Wilhelm, 2012)
This online encouragement helps Indigenous peoples in navigating spaces of learning that are centered in non-Indigenous ideologies while perpetuating their own culture and community identity (Nagel, 1995).

The concept of *claiming* is a metaphor for the action segment of how students, faculty, and staff create access to education for AIAN students. Claiming education, its tools, and the spaces associated with it provide the essential skill set that Indigenous communities can use in augmenting notions of tribal sovereignty, quality community life, and Indigenous community educational persistence in the 21st century. This is accomplished by acknowledging the experience as unique and spatial.

The Effects of Claiming Education as Indigenous Space

*Indian Education for All*

As a result of Montana’s passing of state legislation and the subsequent funding in 2005, the act is not only serving Indian peoples and their communities studying their own historical accounts, philosophies, and cultures, but IEFA also requires that ancestral histories and cultures be presented in a “culturally responsive manner” in all state schools K–20. This is accomplished through IEFA’s essential understandings of:

- Tribal Diversity
- Diversity of Indian Identities
- Modern Manifestations of Cultures, Traditions, and Languages
- Reservation Establishment Through Treaty Statute and/or Executive Order
- Federal Policy Periods Affecting AI’s and the Collective Current Situation

Educational curriculum presented from an Indigenous lens highlights the reality of how indigenous students’ experiences often conflict with mainstream curriculums. This perspective also conveys that Indian tribes possess a political identity providing for sovereign powers that are enacted in various ways by diverse tribes.

All too often, the only place in a syllabus where students learn about America’s Indigenous peoples is a small section in the history curriculum rooted in the construction of the United States government. This is problematic because, although the more than 560 federally recognized tribes possess a political relationship as sovereign dependent nations with the U.S. government, the dominant narrative in educational curriculum limits student development to thinking that American Indians are gone or are still living the way they did as described in a historical context. The solution to this problematic system is to include Indigenous perspectives in all aspects of education. Such is the case in Montana. What this means for students, staff, and faculty is that they must consider the cultural perspective of the local tribes concerning historical and contemporary AIAN context by state law. Although the IEFA is instrumental in creating space within state policy to introduce indigenous revisionist history to counter the dominant narrative, the challenge still remains to deconstruct assumptions, generalizations, and stereotypes that teachers and teacher candidates possess about AIAN students and their communities. It is our hope that this legislation and similar policies will benefit from AIAN students, scholars, and practitioners, and follow the lead of Indigenous peoples in the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and similar areas in successfully claiming these spaces in order to bring their...
community experiences to the forefront. Also important in the act of claiming policy and curriculum space is to recognize that all underrepresented minority communities thrive in pedagogy that reflects a nuanced way of recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity in educational systems. These pedagogies continue to be proposed in educational institutions. For example, theoretical frameworks addressing culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally relevant education, culturally responsive schooling, and the funds of knowledge (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) are shifting the educational paradigm to recognize that unique traits of students tied to culture and language are assets rather than deficits.

**Student Services**

Tangible examples of American Indian student services can be found readily by viewing institutional websites and by contacting those institutions that are charged to serve AIAN students. One remarkable example of “claiming” takes place at the University of Montana. Several years ago, students who were conflicted as a result of their participation in an anatomy course, and in particular their belief about touching the deceased, requested a place to participate in tribally appropriate cleansing ceremonies. The university responded in a way that reflects institutional commitment by creating an accessible area near campus for students to participate in their traditional practices.

During the fall of 1997, UM President George Dennison set aside a 1/4-square mile area along the Bitterroot River in Missoula as a site for a sweat lodge for Native American students. The sweat lodge, which is located near campus, allows Native American students the opportunity to participate in their cultures with their families without having to travel long distances. Formerly, Native American students had to return home for healing and to maintain their spiritual connections.

The sweat lodge is open to all in an effort to enhance cultural understanding. (Montana, The University of, n.d.)

This commitment to providing resources in support of AIAN students began as a result of student self-advocacy. The students, who exhibited the courage to voice their concerns in a way that gathered institutional support, continue to influence oncoming generations of students. The accommodation of cultural practice and belief was accomplished by claiming the educational space (the University of Montana) such that the students could include Indigenous common sense (the mind, body and spirit) in their educational process.

**The 1491s**

The act of claiming of education as Indigenous space is becoming more pronounced and universally accessible to AIAN students, in an online format. Additionally, the process of claiming educational spaces, places, and objects as being Indigenous has recently been popularized within Indigenous communities with YouTube and other online venues. The spaces that are claimed are intellectual ones, the places being claimed are those institutions of higher learning, and the objects are those that students use to be successful in higher education. The examples offered here include contemporary vignettes regarding American Indian students in higher education and are comprised...
of contemporary stories about American Indian students maintaining their Indigenous identity as part of a recent campaign known as REPRESENT.

The authors caveat this section by stating that the observations and the subsequent philosophies presented in this manuscript are only some among several possible interpretations.

**Computer Medicine**

In the first example, Mattie Harper, a Bois Forte Ojibwe and a PhD candidate in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley with a fellowship at Dartmouth, experiences a failing computer and subsequent missing paper. She briefly panics and then smudges her computer. As a result it miraculously turns on, and subsequently the viewer sees that all of her hard work is not lost.

In this vignette it makes sense that Mattie experiences stress, as anyone who has attended graduate school has experienced some degree of stress, fear, and tension. In this scenario it is magnified by her dual commitment to her academic discipline and her commitment to her family, home, community, and her own wellbeing. Losing all of one’s academic work through failed technology can be detrimental to student matriculation and eventual success should it hinder their performance; and to have technology fail at the worst possible moment is even more devastating. This experience at its worst has the potential to alter a career trajectory. By drawing on her own Indigenous ontological experiences, Mattie enacts a community-specific ceremony that was passed down to her through her community to revive her computer along with what is believed to be a paper lost forever. In performing this rite, she leans on her confidence in traditional Indigenous ontologies, her belief in who she is, and humor, all of which are centered in her Indigenous identity. By smudging her computer, she is caring for it as a tool that will help provide for her community and family. The practice of burning sacred herbs for ceremonial purposes has raised issues about the religious freedom of AIANs. AIAN students in college dorms, for example, have often faced harassment and been forbidden from smudging due to university policies that prohibit the burning of herbs or incense in college dorm rooms.

**Sacred Library Books**

In another video, Cinnamon Spear, a Northern Cheyenne and graduate student pursuing a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies degree, is exchanging a book from the library. As she hands over the book, she offers it four times before physically giving it to the library employee. The employee seems confused but complies, and as she hands the book back, Cinnamon raises it over her head and turns clockwise as she leaves the area back to the library. These motions are very symbolic and done in a very specific and unique context reminiscent of motions in a context that defines community for some Plains tribes.

The motions that Cinnamon enacts are related to a very specific ceremony. We actively choose not to disclose what these motions mean or the ceremony that they come from. It is important not that we share our understanding of the motions, but rather that Indigenous students connect to it. The motions fall within the context of a very specific community to which neither of the authors belongs and so the authors apply the careful use of abstract
Our intention is to not misrepresent; rather, it is our intent to appreciate the way AIANs are claiming educational spaces, places, and things, as their own. Interestingly, what makes this YouTube video so powerful is that the video connects to a group of students, potential students, and community members who participate annually in a particular ceremony in a way that helps people reframe the relationship they have with library books, and by proxy, education.

**Dancing at Dartmouth**

In a third illustration, a video shows the main administration building at Dartmouth College. Listening to her portable mp3 player is Kayla Gebeck, Red Lake Ojibwe, who studies linguistics and Native American Studies at Dartmouth. In the vignette, she jingle dances across the screen from left to right in front of an administration building. As the video plays, the music stops and it becomes apparent that only she can hear the music. Nonetheless, she continues to dance when the audience only hears her feet strike the ground.

In this example, Kayla performs a jingle dance without her regalia and not at a gathering; she is literally moving through educational space, being who she is, an American Indian woman. She does this as if to say, “I am going to do this, and I am going to do it while being true to who I am, regardless if anyone else can hear the music . . . I will maintain my relationship with home.”

**Re-Creating Home**

The last example offered is set within a dorm room. Holly Miowak Stebing, who is pursuing her doctoral degree in the Department of History at Yale University, walks into her campus dorm room, sits down, puts on her traditional Inupiaq coat and snow goggles, rests next to her tiny dormitory refrigerator, opens the freezer portion, and takes a deep breath and an outbreath of relief, symbolic of her reprieve.

In Holly’s example, her actions speak directly to the community she comes from, and their deep connection to the environment. The coat and traditional goggles are representative of the very things that her community used to live a good life in an environment some would say is inhospitable but is considered home to the Inupiaq people. It becomes clear in watching this video that she is re-creating this sense of home that she needs in order to persist and successfully navigate postsecondary education.

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4 Communicating in a way that simultaneously shares information with a broad audience while maintaining that cultural knowledge is often protected community knowledge. The authors actively code some of the cultural information in this manuscript to protect it from misappropriation by communicating it in an abstract way. This is done in an effort to promote cultural integrity while protecting information that requires a relationship between those who share knowledge with one another.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go85gnun0Rc&index=1&list=PLvDuXGhJcR0WG_cQ5uxBkFzy8iQf0v4k

6 Jingle dance is a contemporary American Indian women’s Powwow dance that has roots within a specific tribal context. The clothing worn for this dance is the jingle dress, which comprises adornment with numerous rows of metal cones that make a jingling sound.

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhmeDtbdypk&list=PLvDuXGhJcR0WG_cQ5uxBkFzy8iQf0v4k&index=7
In the final scene of all of the videos, the word *REPRESENT* is shown on the screen. These videos are produced in a way such that American Indian and Alaska Native students can move forward and continue to study, inhabit traditionally uninhabited spaces as Indigenous people in predominately nonnative institutions, and consequently “succeed” in attaining a degree at prestigious institutions of higher education.

In the vignettes above, the claiming of academic space as Indigenous space happens in four significant ways:

1. Treating educational objects as sacred objects (Computers)
2. Acknowledging a relationship with educational objects (Library books)
3. Engaging in educational space as Indigenous peoples (Dancing at Dartmouth)
4. Creating a sense of home (Joseph & Windchief, 2012) in their academic environment

The students in the vignettes enact the navigation of higher education in relevant ways for AIANs and use technology to communicate to other students and potential students that they are there and being successful while promoting their own community’s ontological space. They are sharing their experiences that make higher education possible while maintaining their cultural integrity and identity as Indigenous people.

There is potential in the above-mentioned YouTube videos for criticism. As the contributors and actors become more well known, they may be questioned by AIAN community members regarding the depictions of ceremony, particularly in Vignettes 1 and 2, which will be explored in the discussion section. Although the performers in the presented videos open themselves up for criticism, interestingly enough, we observe in the comments from viewers of the video that there tend to be few comments of criticism, but more apparent are those that show feelings of being connected to a community that shared common cultural experiences through digital media.

Potential problems are addressed and we offer potential solutions for the purposes of cultural promotion and the mitigation of critique.

**DISCUSSION**

One potential problem in serving AIAN communities in a way that considers the spiritual aspects of their educational experience is couched in the appropriate use of cultural protocol and sacred objects as exemplified in Vignettes 1 and 2 (Computer Medicine and Sacred Library Books respectively). Some Indigenous community members may find such action and representation as inappropriate, especially when shared with those outside of the community, and others outside the community may be unaware of what is happening in the video, as seen in the comment sections of the videos alluding to the fact that many of these ideas are presented in ways that are contextualized within a specific culture and are not intended for those who are not of the same custom.

Possible solutions for institutions serving AIAN students may include methodologies found in museology and museum studies. Indigenous peoples are becoming caretakers of their own sacred objects and stories as opposed to historical (and problematic) museum curation. This phenomenon is well described in *Forging Indigenous Methodologies on Cape Flattery: The Makah Museum as a Center of Collaborative Research*. In this paper, Bowechop and Erikson (2005) called for actions that guard against hegemonic practices. This begs the questions, “What
do the keepers of cultural knowledge say?” and, “Who is a cultural leader?” Though complicated by the fact that the answers differ within and among distinctive Indigenous communities, researchers, scholars, and activists would do well to follow the specific cultural protocol of the local Indigenous communities as well as their own, and be ready to explain how particular knowledges are used. Any explanations should detail the relationship to the person from whom they received specific knowledges/stories/practices. In other words, it serves communities well to (a) contextualize the information that institutions, practitioners, researchers, and students are sharing, (b) explain why they are sharing it, and (c) note from whom permission to share was received. To efficaciously serve AIAN communities, it would be practical for AIANs and PWIs to involve local community knowledge keepers and build relationships with them in such a way that practitioners, researchers, teachers, and scholars would feel comfortable asking for permission to share when appropriate. It is also important to be mindful of multiple perspectives. The implementing of such actions serves to better understand and accommodate AIAN students who have every right to participate fully in higher education at the same level as their non-Indigenous peers.

One solution to the difficulties related to assimilation and the resulting loss of Indigenous identity is the conscious act of seeking Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, while concurrently participating in postsecondary education as an AIAN. This aligns with Brayboy’s (2005) statement:

Maintaining cultural integrity means that experiences in school certainly affect a person, but they need not do so at the expense of their home culture (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1987, 1993). TribalCrit rejects the past and present rhetoric calling for integration and assimilation of American Indian students in educational institutions because, rather than cultivating and maintaining cultural integrity, assimilation requires students to replace this cultural knowledge with academic knowledge. (p. 437).

SIGNIFICANCE FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Claiming education, and the tools associated with it, provides a skill set augmenting notions of tribal sovereignty, quality community life, and community persistence in the 21st century. Indeed, Indigenous students are “drawing on ancient wisdom and community life” (Veintie, 2013, p. 247). There are multiple reasons that Indigenous students and scholars should engage education through their community-specific lenses. Using this lens serves researchers by highlighting that the scholarly investigation of AIAN history necessitates relevant AIAN perspective. Methodologies such as oral histories and other information about history and culture not found in the literature will help to intervene and prevent problematic stereotypes. As stated for researchers, but applicable to all who engage in the process of education in terms of AIAN students, Swisher says, “American Indian scholars need to become involved in producing research rather than serving as subjects and consumers of research. Measures such as these will ultimately introduce more accurate depictions of Indian experience and lifestyles into the classroom” (1996, p. 7). The production of research that Swisher addresses is an act of resistance

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8 A theoretical structure created by Bryan Brayboy that offers a way to address problematic relationships between American Indians and the federal government and begins to think logically about American Indians’ liminality as both racial and legal/political groups and individuals.
by AIANs to becoming subjects and participants of research and is indicative of a movement toward producing research, and for our purposes here, practices in student services. Countering the production and dissemination of research and practice in a Western context serves to shift the dominant educational paradigm in ways that serve AIANs in higher education, by validating their very habitation of academic space, physically and intellectually.

While being mindful of Smith’s (1999) concerns about commodification through digital resources, the concept of “claiming” in this manuscript supports other scholarship regarding the place of Indigenous peoples in cyberspace. Prins (2001) has argued:

Although indigenous peoples are proportionally underrepresented in cyberspace—for obvious reasons such as economic poverty, technological inexperience, linguistic isolation, political repression, and/or cultural resistance—the Internet has vastly extended traditional networks of information and communication. Greatly enhancing the visibility of otherwise marginal communities and individuals, the information superhighway enables even very small and isolated communities to expand their sphere of influence and mobilize political support in their struggles for cultural survival. In addition to maintaining contact with their own communities, indigenous peoples also use the Internet to connect with other such widely dispersed groups in the world. Today, it is not unusual for a Mi’kmaq in Newfoundland to go on the Internet and communicate with individuals belonging to other remote groups such as the Maori in New Zealand, Saami in Norway, Kuna in Panama, or Navajo in Arizona. Together with the rest of us, they have pioneered across the new cultural frontier and are now surfing daily through Cyberia (p. 4).

This further clarifies the idea and emphasizes the urgency of exercising deeply rooted cultural practices in a contemporary context, allowing traditions to continue in a digital era. The act of claiming brings the confidence and empowerment that Indigenous students need to perform their best in the classroom and in contemporary society. This is indeed happening and is evident given the popularity of the four REPRESENT videos and their respective views as counted by YouTube.

1. Treating educational objects as sacred objects (Computers)—18,423 views.
2. Acknowledging a relationship with educational objects (Library books)—18,434.
3. Engaging in educational space as Indigenous peoples (Dancing at Dartmouth)—71,446 views.

From the first day of class to receiving a degree, postsecondary students are at once privileged and dependent upon the use of digital and nondigital tools to successfully navigate educational spaces. It is only appropriate that Indigenous students “claim” these tools as something that will lead to a quality of life that demonstrates a balanced use of nontraditional tools with traditional ideologies for the betterment of future generations of AIAN peoples. In order to do this, students need to align their academic tools with their own community ontologies as Indigenous peoples—they indeed claim the tools and spaces and places of higher education.

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REFERENCES


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