

# Extending the Bounds of Race and Racism: Indigenous Women and the Persistence of the Black–White Paradigm of Race

**Angelina E. Castagno**

---

In this article, I illustrate how the dominant Black–White binary paradigm of race in the United States situates Indigenous women as either racialized Others or White Others in the context of a predominantly White university. Race and racism are thus salient in the lives of Indigenous students in multiple and complex ways—ways which are rarely elaborated upon in the current research literature.

---

**KEY WORDS:** American Indian women; higher education; race.

Much of the literature on American Indian<sup>1</sup> higher education in the United States focuses on cultural differences and the strategies educators can use to bridge the discontinuities between Indigenous students' home cultures and the dominant culture of the school (see, for example, Carney, 1999; Fixico, 1995; Garrod & Larimore, 1997; Tierney, 1992). While understanding these issues is important, an exclusive focus on culture and cultural differences most likely masks the important ways power and oppression impact the educational experiences of Native students (Lee, 1997). Accordingly, some more recent scholars have argued that we must identify the struggles Indian students face *and* the role social structures play in creating and sustaining oppressive educational experiences (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002).

Race is one social construct that structures the educational experiences of Native students throughout the U.S., but because specific social climates vary from institution to institution, individual schools must be studied “to

---

Angelina E. Castagno is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Address correspondence to Angelina E. Castagno, 1194 McClelland St., Salt Lake City, UT 84105, USA; e-mail: aecastagno@wisc.edu.

determine the nature of their racial climate for diversity” (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 49). In addition to exploring the campus climate at particular schools, we also need a more nuanced understanding of the ways race and racism impact the educational experiences of particular groups of students. By examining the racial oppression of Indigenous women at one predominantly White university, I contribute to our broad understanding of race, racism, and the inadequacy of the Black–White binary paradigm of race in the United States.

In this article, I focus on Indigenous women’s narratives about the impact of race, racism, and race relations at Midwestern University (MU).<sup>2</sup> I begin with a discussion of more or less straightforward and explicit racial incidents—that is, with the stereotypes and overt racism experienced by Native women on campus. These examples illustrate that even within the context of a liberal university philosophically (or, at a minimum, rhetorically) committed to creating a safe and welcoming campus climate for students of color, ignorance and racial oppression are pervasive. I continue by arguing that the dominant Black–White paradigm that structures racial discourse in the United States results in very different racialization experiences for Indigenous students depending on the racial identity of those around them. Because Americans have an exclusively binary structure for understanding race, Indigenous students are constructed as Racialized Others by White students at Midwestern but as White Others by non-Native students of color at Midwestern. In other words, Indian students are always *either* blackened *or* whitened in their interactions with most students on campus.

## RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

These findings are based on research I carried out over the 2002–2003 academic year at Midwestern University (Castagno, 2003). Midwestern University is located in a mid-sized city in the Midwestern United States, and students of color make up fewer than 4,000 of the over 40,000 student population. Approximately 0.5% of the students at Midwestern University self-identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and women make up approximately 62% of the Native student population. My primary informants included 12 female Native students with tribal affiliations across the United States.

I used multiple and varied qualitative research methods in order to collect data for this research. I conducted ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) and two talking circles (i.e., focus groups) with Indigenous women students and semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) with Native faculty and staff who work closely with the student community. I engaged in participant observation at various campus-wide Indian events,

Native student organization meetings, and other relevant diversity-oriented events; and I examined documents pertaining to diversity, multiculturalism, and Indigenous issues at the University.<sup>3</sup>

My research design included a number of efforts to increase the trustworthiness of this data. I talked with people occupying different positions within the community (undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty and staff who work closely with Native students), shared my emerging understandings with the participants at various points in the project, and searched for negative evidence for my interpretations of the data. I audio-taped every student interview (and most faculty/staff interviews) and sent the transcripts back to the participants for review. In this attempt at greater collaboration with the participants, I asked the women to look over their transcript(s) and inform me of anything they wished to clarify, change, or expand upon (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In an even further attempt at collaboration, I set up the last talking circle specifically to elicit the women's feedback on my emerging analyses and on the research process itself. These deliberate and explicit efforts at collaboration, member checks, and trustworthiness were especially important given my identity as a White researcher<sup>4</sup> and the oppressive history of White researchers in Native communities (Smith, 1999).

A primary theme I identified in this study was the persistent and multiple ways race structured the experiences of Indigenous women at Midwestern University. In what follows, I illustrate this theme by discussing first, overt stereotypes and racism, second, the blackening of Native students by their White peers, and finally, the whitening of Native students by their non-Native peers of color.

## **THE PERSISTENCE OF STEREOTYPES AND RACISM AGAINST INDIGENOUS STUDENTS**

It should not be surprising that students' social and academic experiences in college are negatively affected by overt racial incidents at school (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Jackson, 1998). Unfortunately, harassment and verbal assaults are common experiences for many Indigenous college students (Ehrlich, 1999; Perry, 2002; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002, 2004). Although it does not appear often as its own category in the higher education research literature, racism is a fairly constant factor in the lives of many Native students at mainstream colleges and universities. As Terry Huffman points out, "there is little research on the role racial prejudice plays as a barrier in the Indian educational experience. Quite often, the racial prejudice encountered by Indian students is simply included under the rather generic

label of ‘cultural conflict’” (Huffman, 1991, p. 25). Huffman concluded from his interview-based study that racism aimed at Indigenous students most often takes the form of verbal derogatory comments aimed at their Indianness rather than the individual, and that it is usually perpetrated by fellow students. The result of this and other forms of racism is often either the departure of Indian students from the institution or the voluntary segregation of these students within tight-knit Indian student communities (Bennett, 1995).

Like others across the country, Native women at Midwestern University frequently confront racist attitudes in the dormitories, classrooms, and other public spaces on campus. Stereotypes about Indigenous people are especially common at Midwestern University, and the women in this study repeatedly talked about the various assumptions others made about them. The most common stereotypes are not surprising to those familiar with popular images of Indigenous people in the media, news, and movies (Berkhofer, 1979; Mihesuah, 1996). Stereotypes the Native women in this study heard included the following:

Like sometimes when people find out you’re Native, and I didn’t grow up real traditional, but they just sit around and wait for you to do something very “Indigenous”—like to wear a feather, or bust out some tobacco. (Nadia)<sup>5</sup>

When most Americans think of “Indians,” they think of reservation Indians or the Indians who rode horses in old Western movies, and too many American kids have made feather headbands when learning about Thanksgiving in elementary school. Summer referred to a similar stereotype of the “noble savage” in the next passage, but her comment then inspired Sarah to reference a very different stereotype she has encountered at Midwestern.

They expect that all Native people are traditional and are in tune with the land and stuff. (Summer)

I actually get the opposite sometimes, where people think that we’re all alcoholics who run casinos. (Sarah)

Thus, other stereotypes portray Indians as excessive drinkers or people only interested in making money in ways to which White Americans are not “privileged.” Since MU is located in a state with a number of reservations and a contentious history of access to gaming rights, these more contemporary issues shape many of the stereotypes the women in this study experienced. Consider Nina’s comment:

People think that I'm either super poor and don't have anything, or they think I'm like loaded and I can afford to pay for everything, or they are just like, "do you drink?" What are you kidding me? Did you really ask me that? (Nina)

Questions about and references to Indigenous people's alcohol consumption are especially ironic on college campuses like Midwestern that have national reputations as "party schools." This culture of drinking among the majority of college students is normalized when positioned alongside the assumption of "the alcohol problem" among Native communities.

Curiously, the women very rarely confronted stereotypes that were specific to Native *women* even though gender-specific stereotypes of Indigenous people certainly exist. Mihesuah notes that "Native women have been portrayed as everything from ugly squaws to beautiful princesses to New Age gurus" and that "although all Natives suffer from stereotypes, Native women were and are especially romanticized and abused" (Mihesuah, 2003, p. 36, 59). The near complete absence of such experiences for the women in my study could be the result of poor interviewing skills on my part, the reluctance of the women to talk about their gender oppression to a White researcher, the failure to see oppression in gendered terms, or the hyper-salience of race for these women within the context of a predominantly White university. While all of these possible explanations may have played some role, the women themselves used the last explanation to explain why they tended to talk about their racialization over, above, and separate from their gendered experiences. In our final talking circle, one woman said, "I think when you talk to people who aren't Native, it's more the focus on the Native part because they see women everyday," and the other women nodded in agreement. Although I am well aware of and agree with the discourse on the matrices of oppression for women of color and the impossibility of separating race from gender from whatever other identity categories are relevant (see, for example, Collins, 2000; Mihesuah, 2003), I think it is important to highlight that for many Indigenous women located within liberal, generally feminist, predominantly White university contexts, race is absolutely more salient than gender in their experiences with non-Natives (Jaimes & Halsey, 1992).

Popular stereotypes about Indigenous people also contribute to the reinscription of signs that sometimes mark Indian women's identities as Native. As Nina noted, these signs can be verbal cues: "maybe I'll say something that tips them off and then they are like, 'oh, what's that?' And then I'll explain it and that's how they figure out who I am." These markers can also be physical, such as a piece of jewelry or a woman's long hair. Nadia explained this well when she said:

I find that when I wear certain jewelry pieces—like this necklace sometime gets attention. Or if I wear turquoise people are immediately “Oh you must be an Indian, you’re wearing turquoise.” Certain jewelry people will definitely notice or say things or, you know, be like “Oh, that’s a really pretty necklace, are you Native? Did you make it yourself?” That sort of stuff. My hair didn’t used to be this long so now that it’s longer, I think people notice more.

But signs such as wearing turquoise or having long hair are based on stereotypical images of Native women, and their presence, therefore, reinscribes such images while they eliminate other more diverse and accurate images of Indigenous women. Journey explained this well when she said that most people “don’t really have a contemporary image of who we are.” So when people do happen to meet an American Indian woman who possesses some of the markers that most Americans are taught to associate with Indigenous people, they are likely to focus on those markers as *the* way of identifying Native women in the future. When these images are reinforced, however, women who do not fit the image (and the majority do not) experience distrust and skepticism when they identify as Indigenous. In other words, “an individual who doesn’t ‘look Indian’ is often suspect for claiming Native identity” (Mihesuah, 2003, p. 106).

In describing the persistence of such stereotypes and race-based assumptions by their peers, the women in this study often used the word “ignorant” and only very rarely named these acts as “racist.” Most of the women told me that they did not think their peers were trying to be racist, but that because they were so uninformed about tribal cultures, they ended up making inaccurate and offensive assumptions unknowingly. As Inky shared in our last talking circle, “they are well intentioned, but they just aren’t okay.” These women’s understandings of racism and resistance to naming certain acts as racist are likely related to the university’s (and the larger society’s) perception of and approach to racism. Many in this society tend to view racism as an individual problem—something that will go away if we simply educate those few individuals who are racist. The institutional and systemic nature of racism, then, becomes invisible. This is especially the case in self-proclaimed liberal communities, such as Midwestern where the community’s reputation rests on the perception of its members being tolerant, colorblind, and committed to protecting the rights of individuals.

Whereas many women in this study often gave their peers the benefit of the doubt about being uninformed or misinformed rather than racist, they were not as understanding when professors acted inappropriately. I was surprised at the regularity with which I heard stories of professors at Midwestern University making explicitly racist comments in class or other public spaces. One professor taught her class the “10 Little Indians” song,

and another pressured a Native woman to “tan animal hides” after she told him that her cultural norms prohibited such activities. Still another said that “[a nearby town] is a safe place to live now that they ran all the Indians out” to a group of students and staff. These incidents are not confined to a particular department or area of campus; of the three I just described, one was in a social science department, another was in a science department, and the other was in a foreign language department. Native women at MU, therefore, confront racism in multiple settings and from various people.

These narratives illustrate that non-Native students and faculty are ignorant of most aspects of Native cultures, including what to call “them” and what “they” look like. Although the diversity among Indigenous nations, communities, and individuals makes any generalization difficult, the popular media is quite successful at convincing Americans what “an Indian” is. From Tonto to Pocahontas, most Americans have seen images of Indians (Deloria, 1998, 1988; Klein & Ackerman, 1995). Ironically, most non-Native Americans do not think they have seen an American Indian or Alaska Native person “in real life”; thus, their ideas about Native people and Native cultures come entirely from movies, books, and television—all of which often convey inaccurate and racist images and ideas about Indigenous people (Hatfield, 2000; Merskin, 2001). This is clearly manifested in the regular occurrence of racist jokes and comments and stereotypical assumptions at Midwestern University.

## A MORE COMPLETE PICTURE

While these stories of stereotypes, ignorance, and racism are important for understanding the experiences of Indigenous students in mainstream, predominantly White universities, they only provide a partial picture. Overt racism and explicit stereotypes are pervasive, but they are coupled with more subtle and perhaps unconscious forms of racialization.<sup>6</sup> Because the litmus test for racism in the U.S. seems to be violence or overt racial slurs, it can be difficult to talk about, name, and legitimate the far more nuanced and subtle forms racism often takes. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to fight oppression absent a language to talk about the diverse and often veiled forms of racism; this is especially true within liberal communities like that of Midwestern University where everybody believes that *they* are not part of the problem. This discussion, then, is particularly necessary to begin to dislodge the dysconscious racism<sup>7</sup> (King, 1991) common among well-meaning liberals who think they are helping by ascribing to a supposedly colorblind ideology. Understanding the persistence of the Black–White

paradigm of race in the United States helps make sense of the multiple ways race is salient in the schooling experiences of Indigenous students.

Scholars have written about the dominance of a Black–White paradigm that shapes, illuminates, and confines racial thought in the United States (Chang, 1993; Davis, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Perea, 1997; Ramirez, 1995). This binary paradigm posits that race consists of only two constituent groups: Black and White. Although I illustrate how the Black–White binary is problematic, it is worth noting that many Americans ascribe to this paradigm because it allows them to simplify and thus make sense of a very complicated racial reality and that some scholars narrow their discussions of race to Black(s) and White(s) and thus implicitly appear to accept the paradigm (see, for example, Bell, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996).

However, a number of scholars are extremely critical of the centrality of the Black–White paradigm of race in the U.S. Perea, for example, argues that the paradigm excludes Latinos, and that their exclusion serves to both perpetuate negative stereotypes of them and reinforce the paradigm itself. He believes that the paradigm encourages distorted understandings about Latinos and serves as an impediment to learning about their histories and current experiences (Perea, 1997). Similarly, Chang argues that the exclusive focus on Black–White relations and racism against African Americans results in incomplete and inaccurate assessments of the roles race and racism play in the lives of Asian Americans. He notes, “to focus on the Black-White racial paradigm is to misunderstand the complicated racial situation in the United States” (Chang, 1993, p. 1267).

Thus, the primary objection to this binary paradigm of race is that it claims universality while really only addressing part of the issue. Society clearly needs a better understanding of how racism is similar and different for diverse groups of people if we hope to fight racial oppression (Martinez, 2004). Indeed, “Latinos/as, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are often marginalized or ignored altogether” because the Black–White paradigm is so widely accepted (Perea, 1997, p. 1220). While I think it is true that the prevalence of the Black–White paradigm serves to marginalize non-African American people of color, I think this statement begs the question of what, exactly, such marginalization entails. My research shows that the form of American Indian women’s marginalization looks very different depending on who the interaction is with: Indigenous people are constructed as Racialized Others by Whites and as White Others by non-Native people of color.

This article, therefore, extends the discussion of racism in higher education by exploring how Indigenous students are Othered in various ways by both White students and non-Native students of color. Grant and Ladson-Billings note that “in multicultural terms, that which is not the same, that

which is Other, is that which is not part of the dominant culture” (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 207). Under this definition, to be an Other is to *not* be a member of the dominant culture, which in racial terms means to be a person of color. On a more visceral level, Arturo Madrid offers a pointed description of his experience of being an Other:

Being *the other* means feeling different; is awareness of being distinct; is consciousness of being dissimilar. It means being outside the game, outside the circle, outside the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even disdained and scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation. (Madrid, 2004, p. 25)

While Indigenous women at Midwestern University are Othered as Racialized beings by their White peers because they are not legitimate members of the dominant White culture, they are also Othered as White beings by their non-Native peers of color because they are not viewed as legitimate members of the minoritized Black community. In Brayboy’s research with Indigenous students at two Ivy League universities, he argues that “the ways individuals become visible are based marginally on the ways they present themselves and more substantially on the background, experiences, and visions of the seer, as well as the context in which they are being seen. The same individuals are seen differently, depending on who is seeing them and when” (Brayboy, 2004, p. 130). The following discussion illustrates how this plays out for Native women at Midwestern University.

## **INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AS RACIALIZED OTHERS AMONG WHITE STUDENTS**

While the previous discussion of explicit stereotypes and racism clearly illustrates one way Indigenous students are racialized by their White peers, these women are also constructed as Racialized Others in more subtle and presumably “innocent” ways. Specifically, Native women at Midwestern University are Othered by White students as despised Others, gangsters, racial curiosities, and ethnic tokens. In each of these examples, Whites position Indigenous students away from their own social location within the Black–White binary paradigm of race.

Indigenous women at Midwestern are positioned as Racialized Others by their White peers in multiple ways given the persistence and dominance of the culture of whiteness on campus. In Cook’s article on Black women in the academy, she uses the term “White academia” to denote not only the White

demographics, but also the White cultural norms and codes upon which universities operate. She states:

Perhaps less obvious is that the value system upon which academic departments routinely function reflect the values of Western European, or White American cultural values. Furthermore, cultural racism within White academia is such that the White cultural values are strictly enforced and built into the power structure of academic departments. (Cook, 1997, p. 101)

Although she is describing how the culture of academic departments affects faculty members, Cook's point can be extended to consider how the culture of the larger university impacts students. One need not search hard to find examples of how White cultural values and ideologies unwelcoming—and sometimes even hostile—to students of color are normalized in the dominant discourses around Midwestern University.

The student newspaper is one site through which White cultural values are strictly enforced. A nearby university with an Indian mascot comes to campus regularly for NCAA games, and corresponding to each visit, Midwestern's student paper prints opinion pieces justifying the Indian mascot and berating Native people for being unreasonable in their objections to the mascot. An article published during the semester I did this research noted, "the arguments frequently made against the [mascot] are often not only completely devoid of facts, but the people who make them often have no appreciation of what [the mascot] symbolizes." The article went on to argue that Native people should feel "honored" to be represented as mascots and that they must not "understand" the true meaning of the mascot. Thus, as both Owens and Shanley note, "Americans" love "Indians" as long as they are hidden from view and conform to the images constructed for them by others (Owens, 2001; Shanley, 2001). That is, Americans are eager to celebrate and honor *particular* representations of Indigenous people, but only those representations that Whites have constructed and that are consistent with White cultural norms and, fundamentally, White supremacy.

The dominant rhetoric characterizing affirmative action as inappropriate, racist, and unfair is another site through which White cultural norms prevail. Students at Midwestern must apply to specific degree programs within the university after having completed their general education requirements, so this issue resurfaces every year when applications are due and decisions are being made. In a recent article in one of the student newspapers about admission to the School of Education, the author argued that "sadly, many likely qualified students who want to become elementary school teachers will not even apply for admission because they have already been told they will

not get into the program. The reason: the students are White.” Articles such as this position students of color as the “despised Other” who infringe upon the rights and privileges of the majority at Midwestern University. Indeed Inky, along with a number of the women in this study, has been told by her peers that she “only got into school here because you are Native and because you are a [woman].” Unfortunately, because Indigenous women consistently encounter such beliefs among White people, some of them come to doubt their own skills and knowledge. Sarah described this feeling well: “you get into grad school, you get your tenure, you get whatever, and you’re asking yourself, did I get this because I was good? Or did I get it because I was Native or did I get it because I was female? You know, why did they pick me? And there is always this feeling like, oh I know it’s because I’m a Native woman. I’ve got two boxes checked.” These examples clearly illustrate how Indigenous students are constructed as despised Racialized Others within the context of a predominantly White university.

Journey shared a particularly poignant example of having been racialized as a “gangster” because of her style of dress—illustrating the power of the Black–White paradigm and how White students often construct Indigenous students as Black Racialized Others because within this paradigm, if a person is not White, she must be considered Black (Martinez, 2004). Journey explains:

I came here and my hair was extremely long and I usually wore it back and I, you know, I had my baggy jeans and my hooded sweatshirt and my sneakers and you know, my roommate one time was talking on the phone and she thought I was asleep and I was not quite asleep yet and I heard her refer to me as, you know, being gangster. Which is like completely off the wall from my personality and you know, it was really unfortunate because we had already been living together for a while and you know, it just kind of was a projection of a stereotype that she had in her mind and that kind of just made me, you know, kind of this nameless faceless person to her...and just this stereotypical object.

Journey’s phenotypic characteristics clearly placed her outside the White half of the Black–White binary, and her style of dress was used to justify this student’s assumption of her as a Racialized gangster. Indigenous students are often constructed in ways that allow them to fit within the paradigm, and as with any paradigm, our discourse is so shaped and limited by this one way of structuring the world that we often fail to see how lived realities do not really fit.

White students’ efforts to fit Indigenous students into the Black–White paradigm of race are also evident in the ways Indigenous women are viewed

as “curiosities” to most White students. The Native women in this study talked frequently about how their racial background was a source of curiosity for White students at Midwestern University. Like others, when Nadia met new people, she felt like they immediately tried to figure out “what she is.” She said, “you know, it’s something visual. I see people and they are like ‘hmmm where are you from?’ and I’m like ‘I’m *from* Wisconsin’...and you get things like that so you know you’re different.” In a similar vein, Alyssa related this: “If you look at me, you don’t necessarily think that I’m Native right off the bat...So um usually, it’s like ‘Are you Latina or are you Mexican?’” For these women, and many others, their interactions with non-Native people at Midwestern seem to center around their racial or ethnic background. Indeed, most of the women told me that it was rare for them to meet a new (White) person on campus and not be asked “where they’re from,” “what they are,” or “what their background” is.

Thus, Native women’s non-White racial background positions them outside the White dominant culture. But although they are constructed as Other—as not White—they are rarely perceived as Native. As Carola noted, “it never crosses [non-Native’s] minds” that American Indian is even an option for their specific racial background. Similarly, Nina said, “It’s funny because people usually think I’m like part Black, Asian, Hawaiian, or something like that...anything but Native,” and Nadia described how when she first met the other students in her dorm freshman year, “people were like ‘are you a foreign exchange student?’” Thus, when the majority at Midwestern thinks about race or people of color, they do not include American Indian as one of the possible categories. The fact that Native is not even within the set of options most non-Natives consider illuminates our assumptions about race in the United States being primarily Black and White.

And once their White peers do “find out” that these women are Indian, they tend to tokenize or construct them as representatives of “the Indian culture.” Journey explained that she was usually “the one novelty Indian that people have met” and she, therefore, became “the spokesperson of Indian people.” Similarly, Inky described how she felt like a “token” when she was introduced with comments such as, “this is my Indian friend.” Inky is very politically active in a number of campus and broader community movements and she explained how even in these “liberal” spaces, she was tokenized: “I sometimes feel like in places I serve as validation for everyone else...because I identify as a Native woman, um, that means that what they are doing is okay for Native people. Like my presence means that I’m like a representative of everyone. Like being at this protest means that Native Americans approve of what they are doing, you know?”

Serving as a token or representative for one’s racial group is a common experience for people of color (Miheuah, 2003; Moraga, 1997; Scales-

Trent, 1997; Williams, 1995), and Inky related the following story about a White woman who lived in her residence hall:

I was on the way out the door and [this girl] comes running across the hall to say, "I just wanted you to know that I disagree with the phrase 'how the West was won'." She's like, "because I don't really feel like it was won. I feel like your people were really hurt and that I identify with you and all your people." I was like "Thanks, what the hell?"...It was totally weird.

Inky later shared the following explanation with me as to why, specifically, she was offended by her peer's remarks:

It offended me because she was projecting her insecurities about her own White guilt onto me. It is not my responsibility as a person of color to pacify and soothe White guilt. I am not the be-all, end-all American Indian person and if she has issues with White people's part in American history, that is for *her* to work out, not me. It made me feel tokenized, which I hate...By attempting to assume responsibility for westward expansion, she was hoping to exonerate herself from her current uncomfortable feelings about Natives or people of color in general. She ceased to see me as an individual at that moment but instead some kind of confessor who could exculpate her uneasy thoughts.

Ceasing to be seen as an individual is not uncommon for many of the Native women at Midwestern University. Although this particular woman probably had good intentions and wanted to show her support for Indian people, she still fell back on ingrained ideas about all Indians being one "people" and assumed that she could "identify" with their struggles.

Other women in this study shared similar stories about the appropriation of Indigenous art and practices and the exoticization of Indigenous people. Nina, for example, described an experience in an American Indian Studies class she took. On the first day of the class, "one girl was saying her name and major and everything and [the professor] was like 'why did you take this class?' and she was just like 'well, I think Indians are cool.' And I was just like—I totally cringed." Similarly, Sarah said, "when people do find out I'm Native, it's the whole, tell me all about being Native thing." And finally, referring to the "liberal" community in which MU is located, Inky said, "in [this town] where there are a lot of hippies, they think that they totally understand our culture and they appropriate everything. They think it's totally okay." Their stories are not unlike Deloria's (1988) critiques in *Custer Died for Your Sins*. He notes sarcastically that "one of the finest things about being an Indian is that people are always interested in you and your 'plight'...People can tell just

by looking at us what we want, what should be done to help us, how we feel, and what a 'real' Indian is really like" (Deloria, 1988, p. 1). But as many of these narratives illustrate, even those with seemingly good intentions are ignorant about Indigenous peoples, cultures, and histories. In other words, Indigenous women at Midwestern University are only visible to their White peers in particular negative and stereotypical ways (Brayboy, 2004). These women are constructed as Racialized Others by the White majority at MU because our binary thinking about race in the United States does not allow space for anything else.

### **INDIGENOUS STUDENTS AS WHITE OTHERS AMONG NON-NATIVE STUDENTS OF COLOR**

The discourse around racial oppression against people of color generally assumes a White perpetrator, but the dominance of the Black–White paradigm of race results in unfortunate assumptions and social relations between Indigenous students and other students of color as well. While Native women are constructed as Racialized Others by their White peers, they are also Othered among non-Native students of color through these students' perception of Indians as White. Non-native students of color construct Indigenous women as White Others by forgetting they are minoritized peoples, by not viewing them as legitimate or real students of color, and by positioning them as a privileged group within the United States. Thus, Indigenous women feel marginalized among both Whites and other people of color on campus.

A number of the women in this study made reference to how they feel like Indigenous people are not recognized as "minorities" or "people of color." Alyssa captured this sentiment well when she said, "even in classes when professors talk about minority groups, a lot of times they don't even mention Indian groups. Which kind of like, annoys me. I guess since I'm Indian, it kind of makes me feel like we don't exist." Being left out of the conversation not only happens in classes, but in more social settings as well. Over and over, women talked about how when race issues were brought up, Native people were left out of the discussion.

Inky was in a scholarship program for students of color that met regularly for various events. She described how even that space, which is institutionally organized to address diversity and multiculturalism, was frustrating for her and other Native students:

We were having a discussion in [my scholarship program] about reparations for African American people, and they didn't consider—they felt they had so much

pain with it, but they didn't remember that Native American people have gone through that stuff too. I'm not saying slavery wasn't horrible. I'm just saying that we went through stuff too...We were slaves of the Spanish, they made us do mining and things. You know, we were slaves too and we went through a lot of horrible stuff too!

Inky felt like the group should have acknowledged that Indigenous people also have a history of slavery, but again, most Americans—regardless of race—are extremely uninformed and/or misinformed about Native histories, peoples, and cultures. It is especially disturbing for a number of the women in this study that even in places specifically designed to address “diversity,” Indigenous issues are “forgotten,” aren't perceived as “mainstream multicultural,” and are “ignored.”

One of the reasons Indigenous people are often left out or forgotten among broader multicultural circles is probably their small numbers as compared to African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. Another explanation, however, and one that the women employed regularly, relates to skin color. Within a Black–White paradigm, being a raced person is one and the same as being Black, but because Native people come from over 500 different tribal nations and possess a range of phenotypic characteristics, they often pass as White. As one woman explained, “when we go to people of color events they are dominated by people of color who are non-Native. Everyone is usually non-Native. I am usually the only Native person and I feel like we are really, really pale and people think we're White.” One of the biggest surprises for me in conducting this research with Indigenous women was the diversity in their appearances, but this diversity is not allowed within the Black–White paradigm of race in the United States. Whereas Whites see Indian students as not White and therefore Black, non-Native students of color see Indian students as not Black and therefore White. This issue was a central part of the conversation during our first talking circle:

*Autumn:* And then coming to [Midwestern], you know, growing up I was thinking and believing I was Native American and then coming and looking so White and nobody even having a clue that I'm Native and you know, when I go to my [student of color scholarship] meeting and everybody is like Hispanic or African American or Puerto Rican or Asian American and then there's like this White girl. And they are all like “Who let the White kid in?”

*Summer:* My favorite thing though, because I'm [in that scholarship program] too, someone even asked me “What are you?” And I was like, “Native American, part of the Menominee tribe” And they are like “Oh.” I was like, “I do belong here. I do.”

*Sarah:* I got that, when the university had the minority study group room at the student union. I walked in one day to study there because it was supposed

to be for minorities and they just kind of looked at me like “why are you here?” I think I look Native. Maybe they didn’t think that Native was minority enough or something. So I never went back. I just didn’t feel it was there for me; it felt like it was there for other people.

This bit of conversation illustrates a common paradox for many Native women at Midwestern University: while their racial/ethnic identities are extremely salient in their interactions with non-Natives, they do not feel welcomed in spaces constructed for racial/ethnic “minorities” on campus.

In addition to being forgotten within student of color communities, Indigenous people are also viewed as less “valid,” “real,” or “legitimate” people of color. As one of the women described, “they don’t consider us to be as valid as pure Black or Asian.” When I asked the women to elaborate on why they thought non-Native people of color held such views, they talked about skin color and passing, but they also related it to the misperceptions and stereotypes about Indians being an historical race. Journey put this well when she said, “they don’t really have a contemporary image of who we are.” The persistence of the Black–White paradigm of race makes it easy for Americans to “forget” or “invalidate” Native people; since they clearly are not Black, they must, therefore, be White. The either-or construction of race within this dominant paradigm is so ingrained in our thinking about race that some of the women in this study even used it to explain their own racialized experiences. Inky, for example, had this to say: “I feel a total invalidation as a person of color because I’m Native. Because if I was Black then I would really be a person of color.” She clearly recognized the dominance of the Black–White paradigm and was able to articulate exactly how it positions her as a White Other in the eyes of non-Native students of color. Here again we see the power of the Black–White paradigm to structure our thoughts and language even when actual lived experiences do not seem to fit within the accepted way of thinking.

And finally, Indigenous women are constructed as White Others among non-Native students of color through their positioning as “privileged.” Discourses of Indigenous people being privileged are evident in popular conversations about affirmative action initiatives, financial support from various federal Indian policies, tax-exempt purchasing on reservations, free health care for Alaskan Natives, hunting and fishing rights, and Indian gaming rights. The popular rhetoric around these issues is one of “special privileges” and “benefits” as opposed to “tribal sovereignty” or “treaty agreements.” Inky illustrated this point well when she said, “Like everyone thinks we shouldn’t have like sovereignty or like, they think we shouldn’t have gaming rights and people are really inflammatory and mean.”

This popular construction of Indigenous people as privileged is tied to the lack of knowledge among most non-Native Americans about Indigenous histories in this country. Again, Inky highlighted this point when she said, “They want to forget that White people ever did that kind of stuff to us. So now that like, they are supposedly not suppressing us anymore—now that it’s over—we’re like White people now or something.” Similarly, in recounting a discussion in her scholarship group about reparations for African Americans and how non-Native students of color in the group were comparing the reparations issue to Indigenous people’s being “given” reservation land, one woman said, “it made me so angry that they were talking about how Native Americans are so privileged.” This issue of Indians as “privileged” especially came to a head a couple months later when the county voters failed to pass a referendum allowing the expansion of a casino near the state’s capitol. Here again the persistence of the Black–White paradigm is evident in that for many people of color, privilege is something White people have, use, and exploit. White privilege is invisible to Whites because they redefine their “privileged” experiences as “normal” experiences or even as “rights” of living in a democratic America (McIntosh, 1988). The rhetoric of Indigenous people as privileged positions them in a similar location as Whites *rather than* in solidarity with other people of color.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, I have illustrated some of the particularities and nuances of racial oppression among Indigenous women in predominantly White universities. Individual acts of racism, ignorance, and stereotyping certainly exist and provide one explanation for the unwelcoming campus climate at Midwestern University, but this is not the whole story. Understanding the dominance of the Black–White binary paradigm of race in the United States allows a more complicated picture of racial oppression to emerge. Within this paradigm, I have illustrated how Indigenous women are constructed as Racialized Others among White peers and faculty and as White Others among non-Native peers of color. Either way, they are marginalized, objectified, and essentialized as something to be gazed *upon* rather than seen, heard, felt, and interacted *with*. In the end, then, Indigenous women at predominantly White universities “are simultaneously visible and invisible to their peers: their differences are visible, while their true identities are invisible” (Brayboy, 2004, p. 147). Crucially, however, they are visible Others in very different ways depending on the identities and positionalities of those around them.

While I have not directly and explicitly assessed the Black–White paradigm of race, the narrative I have developed about the racialization of Indigenous

women within this structure of thinking clearly provides an implicit critique of the paradigm. As with any dichotomous way of thinking and seeing the world, the Black–White binary does not allow for other racial options; Indigenous women are thus socially constructed in ways that superficially force them into either a Black or a White identity in the eyes of others. Further, this paradigm encourages people of color to examine their lives only in relation to whiteness and blackness, thus obscuring the role of language, religion, immigrant status, colonization, and other elements of racism that might not be as relevant to the forms of racism experienced by Black Americans. And as is especially apparent in the discussion above about Indigenous women being constructed as White Others among non-Native peers of color, the Black–White paradigm hides the ways in which White supremacy has pitted groups of color against each other both throughout history and in contemporary American society. African Americans are thus isolated from potential allies, and all individuals of color are threatened by resentment, suspicion, and jealousy from other people of color.

Although my data focuses on the experiences of Indigenous women at a large university in which they are a small minority of the total student population, the pervasiveness of the Black–White binary paradigm of race throughout the United States means that similar patterns may be found elsewhere and among other communities of color. More research would likely uncover such patterns but would also highlight important variations depending on characteristics such as racial, linguistic, and religious identity; geography; and social class. It is, however, already quite clear that by continuing to rely on this binary discourse about race as simply Black and White, the unique experiences of other groups of people are either ignored or misconstrued. I have, therefore, provided a more particular and nuanced exploration of race and racism for Indigenous women at one predominantly White university in the Midwestern United States. My hope is that this more detailed understanding of racism as it affects American Indian and Alaskan Native women will begin to dislodge the hegemony of the Black–White binary paradigm of race and encourage greater understanding and anti-racist coalition building within and between groups and individuals in the United States.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Between the entire MA process and the writing of this particular article, I am thankful for the guidance and support of a number of people. Michael Olneck, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Neema Avashia, and Sarah Robert have all provided me with much needed intellectual and/or social support; and the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE) at UW-Madison provided financial support for this research.

For this, and particularly for the careful reading and current support from Bryan Brayboy and the on-going mentorship of my Advisor, Stacey J. Lee, I am grateful.

## NOTES

1. Throughout this article I use the terms “Indigenous,” “Native,” “American Indian,” “Indian,” and “Native American” interchangeably to refer to the peoples indigenous to what is now the United States. Scholars, educators, and other Indigenous people have not come to an agreement over the use of these terms, and I do not use specific tribal affiliations (the generally preferred practice) in an effort to protect the identities of the women who participated in this study.
2. All proper names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.
3. Relevant documents included official university publications, campus newspapers, and American Indian Studies publications.
4. Researchers’ identities always matter (Fine, 1994; Lee, 1996; Weis & Fine, 2000), and my identity as a non-Native researcher certainly had political, ethical, and practical implications for this study. Although I continue to struggle with this issue, any reasonable discussion of researcher positionality is far beyond the scope of this paper. For more on this topic, see, for example, Brayboy, 2000; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Deloria, 1988; Villenas, 1996.
5. The women who participated in this study chose their own pseudonyms.
6. Another potentially illuminating way to think about these different forms of racism would be within Scheurich and Young’s (2002) framework of overt and covert individual racism, institutional racism, societal racism, and civilizational and epistemological racism. However, space limitations prevent me from expanding on that framework in this article.
7. Joyce Elaine King’s concept of dysconscious racism refers to an uncritical state of mind regarding issues of race. King explains “dysconsciousness” as an “impaired consciousness” that “involves a subjective identification with an ideological viewpoint that admits no fundamentally alternative vision of society” (King, 1991, p. 135). Dysconscious racism, then, is “a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges.” Members of the majority are not even aware of the limited, distorted nature of their perspective—that is, they are dysconscious of it—so they never call it into question.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bennett, C. (1995). Research on racial issues in American higher education. In J. Banks, & C. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 667–678). New York: Simon and Schuster Macmillan.
- Berkhofer, R. (1979). *The White man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the present*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon Publishers.
- Brayboy, B. M. (2000). The Indian and the researcher: Tales from the field. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(4), 415–426.
- Brayboy, B. M. (2004). Hiding in the ivy: American Indian students and visibility in elite educational settings. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74(2), 125–152.

- Brayboy, B. M., & Deyhle, D. (2000). Insider–Outsider: Researchers in American Indian Communities. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 163–169.
- Carney, C. M. (1999). *Native American higher education in the United States*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Castagno, A. E. (2003). *(Re)Contextualizing Indian higher education: A qualitative study of Indigenous women at a predominantly White university*. Madison: Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Wisconsin.
- Chang, R. (1993). Toward an Asian American legal scholarship: Critical race theory, post-structuralism, and narrative space. *California Law Review*, 81(5), 1243–1324.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Cook, D. (1997). The art of survival in White academia: Black women faculty finding where they belong. In M. Fine, L. Weis, L. Powell, & M. Wong (Eds.), *Off White: Readings on race, power, and society* (pp. 100–109). New York: Routledge.
- Davis, A. (1996). Identity notes part one: Playing in the light. *American University Law Review*, 45(3), 695–720.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Deloria, P. (1998). *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Deloria, V. J. (1988). *Custer died for your sins*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Deyhle, D., & Swisher, K. (1997). Research in American Indian and Alaska Native education: From assimilation to self-determination. *Review of Research in Education*, 22(1997), 113–194.
- Ehrlich, H. (1999). Campus ethnoviolence. In F. Pincus, & H. Ehrlich (Eds.), *Race and ethnic conflict: Contending views on prejudice, discrimination, and ethnoviolence* (2nd ed.). Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Feagin, J., Vera, H., & Imani, N. (1996). *The agony of education: Black students at white colleges and universities*. New York: Routledge.
- Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (1st ed., pp. 70–81). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Fixico, D. (1995). American Indians (The minority of minorities) and higher education. In B. Bowser, T. Jones, & G. A. Young (Eds.), *Toward the multicultural university* (pp. 103–124). Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.
- Garrod, A., & Larimore, C. (1997). *First person, first peoples: Native American college graduates tell their life stories*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Grant C., & Ladson-Billings G., (Eds.). (1997). *Dictionary of multicultural education*. Oryx Press, Phoenix.
- Hatfield, D. (2000). The stereotyping of Native Americans. *Humanist*, 60(5), 43–44.
- Huffman, T. E. (1991). The experiences, perceptions, and consequences of campus racism among Northern Plains Indians. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 30(2), 25–34.
- Jackson, L. (1998). The influence of both race and gender on the experiences of African American college women. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(4), 359–375.
- Jaimes, M. A., & Halsey, T. (1992). American Indian Women: At the center of indigenous resistance in contemporary North America. In A. Jaimes (Ed.), *The state of Native America: Genocide, colonization, and resistance* (pp. 311–344). Boston: South-End Press.
- King, J. E. (1991). Dysconscious racism: Ideology, identity, and the miseducation of teachers. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 133–146.
- Klein, L., & Ackerman, L. (1995). *Women and power in Native North America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, S. (1996). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lee, S. (1997). The road to college: Hmong American women's pursuit of higher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(4), 279–305.
- Lomawaima, T., & McCarty, T. (2002). When tribal sovereignty challenges democracy: American Indian education and the democratic ideal. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(2), 279–305.
- Madrid, A. (2004). Missing people and Others: Joining together to expand the circle. In M. Andersen, & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (5th ed., pp. 23–25). Australia: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Martinez, E. (2004). Seeing more than Black and White. In M. Andersen, & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (5th ed., pp. 111–116). Australia: Wadsworth Press.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in Women's Studies. In R. Delgado, & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 291–299). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Merskin, D. (2001). Winnebagos, Cherokees, Apaches, and Dakotas: The persistence of stereotyping of American Indians in American advertising. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 12(3), 159–169.
- Mihesuah, D. (1996). *American Indians: Stereotypes and realities*. Atlanta: Clarity International.
- Mihesuah, D. (2003). *Indigenous American women: Decolonization, empowerment, activism*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Moraga, C. (1997). La guerra. In R. Delgado, & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 471–474). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Owens, L. (2001). As if an Indian were really an Indian: Native American voices and postcolonial theory. In G. Bataille (Ed.), *Native American representations: First encounters, distorted images, and literary appropriations* (pp. 11–25). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Perea, J. (1997). The Black/White binary paradigm of race: The "normal science" of American racial thought. *California Law Review*, 85(5), 127–173.
- Perry, B. (2002). American Indian victims of campus ethnoviolence. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 41(1), 35–55.
- Pewewardy, C., & Frey, B. (2002). Surveying the landscape: Perceptions of multicultural support services and racial climate at a predominantly White university. *Journal of Negro Education*, 71(1/2), 77–95.
- Pewewardy, C., & Frey, B. (2004). American Indian students' perceptions of racial climate, multicultural support services, and ethnic fraud at predominantly White universities. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 43(1), 32–60.
- Ramirez, D. (1995). Multicultural empowerment: It's not just Black and White anymore. *Stanford Law Review*, 47(5), 957–992.
- Scales-Trent, J. (1997). Notes of a White Black woman. In R. Delgado, & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror* (pp. 475–481). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Scheurich, J., & Young, M. (2002). White racism among White faculty. In W. Smith, P. Altbach, & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *The racial crisis in American higher education: Continuing challenges for the twenty-first century* (Revised edition, pp. 221–242). New York: State University of New York Press.

- Shanley, K. (2001). The Indian America loves to love and read: American Indian identity and cultural appropriation. In G. Bataille (Ed.), *Native American representations: First encounters, distorted images, and literary appropriations* (pp. 26–51). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Florida: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.
- Tierney, W. (1992). *Official encouragement, institutional discouragement: Minorities in academe—the Native American experience*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginality, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(Winter 1996), 711–731.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2000). *Speed bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Williams, G. (1995). *Life on the color line: The true story of a White boy who discovered he was Black*. New York: Dutton Press.

Copyright of *Urban Review* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.