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Institutional Microaggressions at a Hispanic Serving Institution: A Diné (Navajo) Woman Utilizing Tribal Critical Race Theory through Student Activism

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ABSTRACT

From private to public, from small to large, campus protests and demonstrations have risen across the country to address institutional racism regarding a range of issues including offensive Halloween costumes, university/college seals, lack of faculty color, and racist vandalism. One such example occurred at Southwest University where Native American students were protesting the university seal, which represents settler colonialism and genocide. In this article, we provide a case study of Joy, a Diné (Navajo) young woman, and describe her student activism in regards to the seal and how she utilizes it to connect to her culture, language, and identity. We utilize critical race theory (CRT) and tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) to analyze the institutional microaggressions that Joy experienced on campus. Our main conclusions explain how student activism enables students to address systemic racism and provides a vehicle to create better conditions on university campuses.

The University of Missouri protests organized by Concerned Student 1950, a group of African American students, raised important issues of social justice regarding systemic and structural racism on college campuses and helped spur student activism across the country at more than 70 higher education institutions. These protests addressed a range of issues including offensive Halloween costumes, university and college seals, lack of faculty color, racist vandalism (Jaschik, 2015; Pauly & Andrews, 2015; Rios, 2015; Sanders, 2015), and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults or indignities directed toward people of color, committed both consciously and unconsciously, which reflect everyday systemic racism (Solórzano, 1998; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Although many of these situations reflect African American and Latinx¹ students' encounters with microaggressions, Native Americans also have had to endure them through the use of Native mascots (Castagno & Lee, 2007), having solemn ceremonial songs interrupted by racist, mocking war cries (Galli, 2016), and the perpetuation of stereotypical myths of Native Americans in K-20 curriculum (Pewewardy, 1998).

This article provides a case study of Joy², a Diné (Navajo) young woman and her experiences at Southwest University³ (SU). There is a dearth of scholarship of Native Americans and their experiences in higher education as it relates to recruitment, access, and retention (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). We use tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy, 2005a), which is a subset of critical race theory (CRT), and racial microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998) to analyze Joy's experiences at SU. These microaggressions include a hostile racial climate, continuous displays of racist and dehumanizing depictions of Native Americans, the co-opting of sacred objects for the purposes of research

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or objectification, and marginalized voices excluded from the curriculum. Specifically, we examine how Joy utilizes TribalCrit and student activism to help her navigate and challenge institutional racism. We conclude by illustrating how Joy's social activism connects her to her culture, language, and identity.

Background on Native American populations in the United States

According to the 2010 US Census, there are approximately 2.9 million Native American and Alaskan Natives, as well as an additional 2.3 million people who claim Native American heritage. The federal government acknowledges a total of 565 Native American tribes; however, only 334 are federally or state recognized reservations, excluding the Hawaiian Homelands (United States Census Bureau, 2011). One in four Native Americans continue to live in poverty; for children, the rate is one in three (Executive Office of the President, 2014). Unemployment rates are twice that of the general US population (National Congress of American Indians [NCAI] Policy Research Center, n.d.). In addition to socioeconomic disparities, Native youth attend underfunded schools and have the lowest high school graduation rates, the lowest college enrollment, and highest attrition rates of any subgroup (Camera, 2015; Executive Office of the President, 2014; Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013).

Our case study focuses on a Diné (Navajo) woman, Joy, who has overcome many of these challenges. The Navajo Nation is the largest Native American tribe in terms of both land and population. There are approximately 287,000 tribal members who identify solely as Navajo, and 332,000 members who claim descendancy (The Navajo Division of Health, 2013). With more than 25,000 square miles, it stretches over New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah, and borders Colorado. Anthropologists indicated that the Navajos have settled this area since the twelfth century; however, traditional Diné creation stories such as the four worlds model is what distinguishes the Diné from migration theories and informs their relationship to their land since time began (Begay, 2014; Warhol & Morris, 2014). Unlike their Puebloan neighbors, they were able to resist Spanish efforts to convert them to Catholicism and the annexation of their territory. European colonization changed everything through scorched-earth campaigns that starved Navajos into submission. The most infamous example—the Long Walk—occurred in 1864. Nearly 10,000 Navajos and Mescalero Apaches were forcibly marched by the US Army for 450 miles to an internment camp called Bosque Redondo (Burnett, 2005). During their four-year imprisonment, one-third of those held died from disease, exposure, or starvation. Subsequently, the Navajo Nation was forced to sign a treaty that greatly reduced their lands and were forced into assimilation via boarding school policies (Adams, 1995; Manuelito, 2005) that exacerbated cultural extinction via linguicide, loss of traditional names, and the adoption of blood quantum requirements (Begay, 2014).

Joy was directly affected by these historical events and policies since she “is a direct descendant” from ancestors who lived through the Long Walk and has grandparents who survived the boarding school era. Additionally, Joy has experienced extreme poverty and has faced several barriers during her K-12 schooling experience due to chronic homelessness. She has lived through these obstacles by relying on her strong Native identity and cultural beliefs to resist and survive. These traits have enabled her to become a successful college student. In this article, we reveal how Joy often employed tribal critical race theory (Brayboy, 2005a) to persevere and epitomize resiliency.

Theoretical framework

For scholars of color, theories are not just abstract thoughts and ideas that explain overarching structures of society, but are roadmaps for communities of color and constant reminders for scholars of color to honor our communities and of our individual responsibilities to ensure their survival (Brayboy, 2005a). In this study, we utilize TribalCrit, which is a subset of critical race theory (CRT), and racial microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998).

Critical race theory (CRT)

CRT is multidisciplinary and challenges dominant ideologies by emphasizing experiential knowledge of communities of color by privileging their experiences and conditions, and helping to analyze and reveal

the ways in which race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression intersect (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Although CRT is an important framework for understanding the centrality of race and racism in society, it does not adequately address the needs of Native Americans because tribal “peoples occupy a liminal space” (Brayboy, 2005a, p. 432). An important way to distinguish CRT from TribalCrit is that the former emphasizes the endemic nature of racism, while the latter emphasizes the endemic nature of colonization in our society.

Key tenets of tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit)

TribalCrit is a branch of CRT and is grounded in the “multiple, nuanced, and historically and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005a, p. 427). Brayboy outlines nine key tenets of TribalCrit. However, for the purposes of this article we focus on the following:

1. the liminal space Native Americans occupy as both the legal/political and racialized natures of their identities;
2. alternative ways of understanding through an Indigenous lens;
3. the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future;
4. the importance of honoring Indigenous stories and oral histories as real and legitimate forms of knowledge, data, and ways of being; and
5. the importance of having a component of action or activism—a way of connecting theory and practice in deep and explicit ways.

We focus on these tenets because they help us to better understand Joy’s worldviews and how she relied on her culture, traditions, and beliefs to navigate her life, higher education experiences, and activist work. Furthermore, we center on these tenets because of the significance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and oral stories in Joy’s life. Lastly, we privilege these tenets because they help to explain why Joy is driven by social action.

Brayboy (2005a) discusses how TribalCrit values narratives and stories as important sources of data. By listening to the stories of the oppressed we can move from theory to praxis—utilizing theory to create active change. This is the hope we have in sharing Joy’s stories and experiences. Since she has faced so much physical, emotional, mental, and sexual trauma in her personal life, a college campus should not add to this trauma by further tokenizing her culture, disregarding her lived realities, and blatantly promoting settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012), which functions to displace and eliminate the Indigenous population.

However, Joy also demonstrated through her activism how learning can be a place of resistance (Patel, 2016). Through this resistance, she created a space for survivance, which Vizenor (2008) explains as “a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimary” (p. 1). Moreover, survivance helps to explain how Native Americans have learned to persevere by developing their own self-education process. This process includes preserving and revitalizing Native culture in order to gain self-knowledge and self-determination. In Joy’s case, she practiced survivance by reclaiming and maintaining her language, protesting the university seal, and fighting to preserve tribal lands. Next, we discuss in-depth the concept of racial microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions

Chester Pierce first introduced the concept of microaggressions, which he described as “incessant offensive mechanisms” (Solórzano, 1998; Yosso et al., 2009) that are aimed daily at Blacks. Building upon this concept, Solórzano states racial microaggressions are conscious or unconscious acts of racism and white supremacy that occur through subtle (often automatic) verbal and nonverbal exchanges. Sue et al. (2007) states that there are three main types of microaggressions: microassaults (verbal or nonverbal attacks), microinsults (subtle snubs, digs), and microinvalidations (excluding or negating the experiential realities of people of color). Over time, these stressful assaults can lead to mental, emotional, and physical strain and result in making students doubt their own intelligence, negatively impacting their ability to perform well, and detrimentally affecting students’ mental health (e.g., lowering self-esteem) and physical health

(e.g., increasing blood pressure) (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Rollock, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2009). As a result, students of color have higher rates of dropping out.

Microaggressions in higher education

Approximately half of all college students reported encountering some form of prejudice on their respective college campus (Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001; Boysen, 2012). In a recent study conducted by Johnston-Guerrero (2016) on 40 undergraduate students from mixed genders and various racial backgrounds from two public research institutions on the West Coast, key findings indicated that although many white and Asian students professed to live in a post-racial era, racial microaggressions and biases still permeated on college campuses through overt racist events or subtle microaggressions for Latinx and African American students. At predominantly white institutions, Latinx students encountered the criminalization of brown bodies, continuous exposure to microaggressions, stereotyping from peers, and isolation (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013), and Domingue (2015) found that undergraduate black women leaders endured racial stereotyping based on historical black women archetypes.

In studies of graduate programs, students of color described their interactions with faculty and peers in a variety of ways: (1) hypervisibility (students were expected to be racial experts), (2) invisibility (students' experiences were discounted or unacknowledged), (3) tokenization (symbolic efforts were made to be more inclusive), (4) lowered teacher expectations (different academic standards were applied), and (5) racist/sexist attitudes manifested through microaggressions (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015; Ramirez, 2014; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). As a result of these constant negative interactions, students of color were often relegated to feeling a sense of self-doubt, with an "Am I going crazy?" narrative to explain their tentativeness and insecurities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000). Yosso et al. (2009) found that students were able to challenge these racial microaggressions by creating and finding social and academic counterspaces, in order to foster skills of critical navigation, create a sense of community, and cultivate various forms of resistance in order to be successful in college.

Numerous studies have found a lack of cultural sensitivity and institutional support for Native Americans as well, which can directly affect college access and retention rates (Brayboy, 2005b; Makomenaw, 2012; Mosholder & Goslin, 2013). In sum, a prevailing theme to improve higher education institutions is to increase awareness and understandings of racism by offering a common language and the tools to deconstruct it. Creating support systems, developmental programs, and support services are several ways to enable students to address and combat racial microaggressions as well as providing "safe" places that reflect students' lived experiences and cultural practices (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Minthorn, 2014). Next, we review our methodology.

Methodology

Case study

A case study is a type of empirical inquiry with the purpose of investigating a bounded case, which can be a situation, instance, person, or group of persons, narrow in scope and focus that will examine a real life context for contemporary phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2012). Joy was selected based on her membership in the youth activist group with which the researchers are affiliated, her status as a rising junior at Southwest University (SU), and her role as a student activist. It is important to note that Joy's work in the youth activist group is different from her work in the student group that protested the seal because the former works to create changes in the juvenile justice system while the latter focuses on Native American social justice issues. This case study is bounded to the scope of her individual experiences within her life on and off the reservation as well as her involvement with youth activism at SU.

In the spring of 2015, SU, designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), had 25,816 undergraduate, professional, and graduate students (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU],

2015). Approximately 40% of its student population self-identified as Hispanic, 39% as white, 2% as African American, 3% as Asian, and 5% as Native American. According to the most recent report, SU had an overall retention rate of 76.6%; Native American students had the lowest retention rate of all ethnic groups at 66.3% (SU, 2007).

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected during the fall and spring terms of the 2015–2016 academic year. Data sources included field notes and transcripts from weekly meetings as well as from group debriefings after community events. In addition, we have transcripts from two semi-structured individual interviews with Joy and one semi-structured dyad interview with her and another participant in the activist group. The weekly meetings and interviews were voice recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews lasted between one and three hours and consisted of questions that focused on her work with the youth activist group, her family, ties to her culture, and her experiences at SU, with room for spontaneous or clarifying questions.

All data sources were examined using horizontalization, which allows for data to be examined and given equal weight and, therefore, equal value throughout the data analysis process (Merriam, 2009). Documents were uploaded to the Dedoose data analysis software for additional thematic coding. Themes were organized into 14 main categories such as gender, culture, education, family, and activism. The data were organized using these categories and aided in the creation of thematic memos that were used for analysis.

Participant background information

Joy is a Native American woman, who primarily identifies as Diné (Navajo) with ties to the Mescalero Apache and Comanche tribes. She has strong ties to her maternal family, especially through her grandparents who are traditionally involved. She was primarily raised on the Navajo reservation by her maternal grandparents. In describing living on the reservation, Joy stated she experienced extreme isolation and poverty. Her family's hogan was miles away from other communities, they had no running water, and many family members were unemployed or could no longer make a living traditionally, such as through farming, ranching or artisan work. It is important to note that these descriptions reflect Joy's lived experiences and is not meant to be representative of the entire Navajo Nation.

In her interviews, Joy described herself as a survivor of multiple generations of physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse. She had witnessed and experienced cycles of domestic violence which led to a transient childhood. She frequently moved from city to city, including various parts of the Navajo reservation and the Southwest. Moreover, Joy had to deal with chronic periods of homelessness. This experience strongly shaped her identity as she explained, "When I was homeless on my own at 14, it was hard. Like, I remember feeling very numb. I didn't belong anywhere. If I just died, like no one would care, no one would notice." However, teachers, friends, mentors, and family members helped her navigate this difficult period by providing shelter, provisions, moral support, and resources. Additionally, she drew strength and resiliency from performing her cultural practices and traditional ceremonies. Despite her family struggles with issues of homelessness, domestic violence, and poverty, she has become a highly motivated college student and youth activist in many organizations that focus on Native American and social justice issues.

Researcher positionality

The first researcher, Shiv, is part of the South Asian diaspora and an assistant professor; the second researcher, Andrea, is a Native American PhD candidate. Shiv is the principal investigator of the research project, while Andrea is the graduate student assistant on the project. Both are affiliated with SU. Shiv has been a teacher/teacher educator for more than 16 years, working with marginalized students in various communities. He experienced racial microaggressions as an undergraduate at Rutgers when then

President Fran Lawrence made racially insensitive comments regarding intelligence and testing directed towards African American and Latinx students. As a result of this incident, he partook in marches and rallies that fostered his activism.

Andrea is an enrolled member of the Pueblo of Isleta. She is a second-generation college graduate and educator. As an enrolled member of the Pueblo tribe, she recognizes the privilege of that status and acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of Native identity. She has experienced many racial microaggressions throughout her undergraduate and graduate career such as feeling tokenized and silenced in the classroom, and she has protested racist mascots.

Based on these experiences, we take the role of critical researchers seriously by creating a collaborative, altruistic relationship with Joy that stresses the sacredness of relationships by prioritizing her voice, experiences, and stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Moreover, Andrea's "insider/outsider" perspective allowed us to have rich discussions on how to interpret the data and what should not be included because it is sacred Native knowledge. Lastly, we employed member checking to ensure accuracy, credibility, and validity. Next, we discuss our findings.

Findings and discussion

Joy embodied Vizenor's (2008) concept of survivance that combines survival and resistance. She is also a role model of resiliency for other Native youth who may find themselves reflected in her experiences. We divide the findings into two major sections: first, how Joy articulated the key tenets of TribalCrit through her lived experiences and, second, the microaggressions she encountered at SU. These two sections connect because the former strengthened her Native identity and provided the tools necessary to overcome the racial microaggressions and systemic racism she faced. Throughout this analysis, Joy provided recommendations on how institutional changes can make the university a safe space for all students.

TribalCrit: Liminal space, racialized identity, and language

In this section, we utilize some of Brayboy's (2005a) key tenets of TribalCrit and draw on Joy's lived experiences to discuss how the legal/political and racialized identity of Native Americans impacts individuals. We do this to understand the liminal spaces occupied by Native Americans who live in multiple, and at times contradicting, spaces, to comprehend the effects of language loss on Native identity, and to focus on how Joy's activism helps her connect theory and practice in deep and explicit ways.

The first tenet of TribalCrit is the liminal space Native Americans occupy due to the legal/political and racialized nature of their identities. Native American populations are unique in that they have a legally mandated system of identification called the blood quantum requirement (NCAI Policy Research Center, n.d.). This requirement was instituted by the federal government as a way of identifying who would be legally categorized as Native American. This antiquated system has had long lasting ramifications for Native identity and is a form of institutionalized oppression. Joy explained how this system has affected her personally:

Because of this blood quantum system that tracks you and identifies you as who is Navajo and who isn't Navajo ... that broke up our people ... in many ways that dehumanized us. It very much separated us amongst each other and in our own communities because if you are full Navajo, you get certain benefits compared to if you are half or a quarter ... I identify as maybe being three-fourths Navajo, because that is who I was raised as. But on that paper I am written down as one-fourth. It is this constant conflict within myself as to who am I really.

Joy discussed how others questioned her identity and legitimacy as a Native American person due to the federally mandated blood quantum system. This system can be problematized in a variety of ways (Begay, 2014; Villazor, 2008). First, it creates divisions within families because blood percentage defines tribal membership, which can affect a range of issues such as marriage, inheritance, health care access, property ownership, and tribal voting rights. In fact, the "blood quantum policy was engineered to fracture individual identity leading to fractionized generations" (Begay, 2014, p. 106). Second, due to

the legacies of colonialism and oppression that created this system, tribes have internalized the blood quantum requirements as necessary stipulations for tribal membership. Third, this system is sustained and maintained due to financial, legal, and political advantages that both simultaneously benefit and disadvantage tribal members.

However, Diné identity is centered on the principle of *k'é*, which is a system of clans that establishes kinship, reinforces community relationships, situates the individual in the clan, and establishes “the matriarch as the pivotal inherent marker for identity” (Begay, 2014, p. 123). For Joy, this marks her identity more than the blood quantum requirements. Joy’s strong ties to her Native identity allowed her to rely on it as a source of self-empowerment. She stated, “What kept me going when I was homeless was practicing my culture, like praying and ceremony.”

Native Americans occupy liminal spaces (Brayboy, 2005a). The first is their home sphere, which usually encompasses their immediate and extended families, their communities, and, many times, their reservations. In this space, their Native identity, culture, language, religious beliefs, and ways of life are valued. The second space is the space that is framed within the context of mainstream US identity. These two spaces can often be in conflict with each other and are especially hard for Native people since liminal spaces strongly influence positive identity formation (Brayboy, 2005b). Joy described this conflict below:

The reservation is completely different from city life ... the reservation is where your community, your support, where your family is, and every time you come out here for school, you are not only leaving your community and your family, but you are leaving your culture, you are leaving your language ... Like you are leaving everything behind, for an education.

Joy explained in the above statement how this liminal space impacted her lived experiences because she felt she was leaving her family and her culture behind when she attended the university. Joy affirmed this point when she said, “You don’t want to be there [university] because no one understands you and the place where you come from ... I always have this concept of knowing, this isn’t my home. Like I feel like I shouldn’t be here.” As a result of these experiences, she had a difficult time adjusting to university life because it conflicted with her home teachings, traditions, and cultural practices.

The second tenet of TribalCrit is the alternative ways of understanding through an Indigenous lens. This tenet recognizes the unique perspectives of Native peoples and how this lens allows them to navigate their lived experiences. By living on the reservation, Joy developed a firmer understanding of her history and her culture. She stated,

I have always been very connected [to] my culture and my traditions. I value that more than education, more than anything else. I value education a lot ... But I value my culture and heritage a lot more. And [that’s] partially because I know my history. I know what my grandparents went through. We have Navajo code talkers on my grandma’s side. We had someone that was in the Navajo Long Walk.

Here she articulates that education is more than “simply a mastery of academic content and critical thinking skills” (Lee, 2009, p. 20), and suggests that it occurs through various Native philosophies, customs, and traditions. As Werito (2014) points out, Diné philosophies are part of daily life and are the essence of Diné cultural identity. These philosophies include traditional cultural knowledge and teachings that dictate everyday interactions and are integral in prayers, songs, and ceremonies. Joy utilized such Diné philosophies to center her worldviews and to provide her with the strength and resiliency to overcome her many challenges such as homelessness, domestic violence, and mental, physical, and sexual abuse.

Additionally, she used this unique perspective as a Diné woman with a deep understanding of her own family’s history to make sense of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and the forceful removal of her tribe. She understood how historic trauma impacted her lived experiences and how the cycles of abuse have reverberated throughout her family history. She stated that Native Americans were “slaves in our own homeland” to describe the oppressive nature of how they were historically treated. She advocated for other Natives to deconstruct the structures of settler colonialism by reclaiming their proud heritage, culture, language, and religious practices. In other words, she wanted her peers to recognize how colonization led to genocide, forced removal, land theft, and language loss (Lee, 2017), which in turn exacerbates external and internal oppression.

The third and fourth tenets are related in the ways in which they manifested in Joy's life. The third tenet focuses on the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future. The fourth tenet acknowledges the importance of honoring Indigenous stories and oral histories. Joy problematizes these two tenets when discussing language loss. She stated, "My language is dying on the daily." As a result of colonization and damaging boarding school practices, her grandparents did not encourage learning Diné. She explained, "[My grandmother] just didn't find any value in our [language] ... because she thought that this world is changing ... it is not going to benefit us, other than on the reservation ... and she wanted us to be successful." However, Joy worked hard to reclaim her fluency in Diné because it was a source of strength, fortified her spirituality through ceremony, and allowed her to freely communicate with her grandparents who speak only Diné. In essence, Joy described how "language is vital to cultural continuity and community sustainability because it embodies both everyday and sacred knowledge and is essential to ceremonial practices" (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 109). Moreover, language is vital for sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems, critical for cultural identifications, central to spirituality, and strongly informs the connections to land. Recognizing the significance of language, Joy stated, "How can I recapture my language and my culture because it is beautiful."

Joy acknowledged the importance of oral traditions for Native Americans when she said, "Our form of history as Navajo is not a written language. It has oral stories. Me, I am like a library book because I carry so many different stories within me." She used these stories as sources of strength to critically navigate the liminal spaces and to overcome racial microaggressions, homelessness, and sexual trauma. Joy advocated for the recognition of her own culture, language, traditions, and oral histories as legitimate and important ways of knowing. She encouraged her peers to reconnect with their sense of Native identity and to draw strength from it, as she has done. In other words, she stressed Indigenizing education, which calls for a return to traditional philosophies and approaches, and prioritizes Native communities, beliefs, and experiences in education to transmit culture and values (Lee, 2009).

The final tenet of TribalCrit is that there must be a component of action or activism—a way of connecting theory and practice in deep and explicit ways. Joy is a student activist and worked towards raising awareness about Native issues on campus, as well as striving to support her own community. Despite going against cultural norms by speaking out and being criticized by Native community members, Joy strived daily towards creating a hopeful future instead of dwelling on the past. Joy eloquently stated, "I stand up there and I will voice my opinion ... no one else is. And if I have to look like the bad guy to do it, if I have to be the person who goes against that one thing in our culture, I will. Because that's what we need in order to get by in this other culture that is dominating over us." Later, she explained why she advocated for Native issues, "I don't want any other Indigenous woman, especially a young woman, the way I was, to sit around and feel like they don't have a voice, or that no one is listening to them or advocating for them."

In this section, we have articulated how Joy practices some of the key tenets of TribalCrit in her daily life. By being grounded in these practices, she has developed a strong Native identity that has allowed her to resist and in some ways overcome the many hardships she has endured. Her identity is a core part of who she is. It is no wonder why she vigorously protests the microaggressions she encounters on campus.

Institutional microaggressions at a hispanic serving institution

While Joy has experienced microaggressions on a personal level, for the purposes of this article, we discuss at length the various institutional microaggressions she has encountered via the university seal, the commodification and exploitation of Native art/cultural objects, and finally the presence of racist and stereotypical murals and artwork displayed in prominent places on campus. Joy shared how she does not feel welcomed at SU because of spatial constraints where she can feel comfortable with who she is and be able to practice her culture (see Minthorn & Marsh, 2016, for a similar study at the same university).

A seal that represents settler colonialism

A major point of contention for Joy is the half-century old university seal, [Figure 1](#), on which a "rifletoting" frontiersman and a "sword-carrying" conquistador (Contreras, 2016) appear with a banner below



Figure 1. Image of the official Southwest University Seal.



Figure 2. Graduate student critique of the university seal.

them with the Latin motto, “Lux Hominum Vita” (Life, the light of men). As the official seal, it appears on formal documents (e.g., diplomas), university buildings, and college gear (e.g., notebooks and mugs). Joy expressed how the seal is a microaggression that marginalizes Native students when she stated, “I feel like an outcast. I feel like I don’t belong here. On the daily. Because I just see that image [the seal]. Because I know that [on] this land people were killed. This land belongs to the Pueblo [people]. Not me. And the fact that you [colonizers] just took it, and placed a university on it.” The seal is a symbol of settler colonialism that describes the permanent occupation of Native lands and does not acknowledge the various sovereign nations that occupy this region, nor does it acknowledge the historical trauma and genocide of the Native peoples of the Southwest.

A wave of commotion occurred when a Native graduate student redesigned the official university seal, Figure 2, because he felt that “to have [the seal] on [his] diploma [was] an insult of the highest order” (Quintana, 2016, para 22) because it represented a “celebration of conquest and colonialism” (Contreras, 2016, para 7). In the modified image, Figure 2, one can see the corpses of slain Natives under the caption “What Indians?,” which is meant to critique the seal by raising awareness of settler colonialism. The Native American Club⁴, a student group, and Native American Nation, an advocacy group, were leading the charge in protesting the seal and developed an online petition with suggestions to improve the experiences of Native students on campus. They created the hashtags #AbolishTheRacistSeal and #NoSchoolPrideInGenocide to raise awareness and support for the removal of the current seal. Some of their proposals included the reconstruction of a Native cultural center on campus, demands for more

Native faculty in both tenured and administrative positions, and the creation of a higher education council of tribal leaders.

Through this form of resistance, Joy demonstrated how “fugitive acts of learning” (Patel, 2016) are often found in oppressive, formal, learning spaces. More importantly, it is these fugitive acts of learning that provide sanctuary for critical thought and a shield against microaggressions. Patel also provides insights into how the settler colonial structure promotes narratives of “societal promise, constant opportunity, and self-rationalizing myths of meritocracy” and “are as vital as oxygen to the violent structures of land seizure and attempts to erase Indigeneity” (p. 399). The counterstories Joy learned from her oral traditions and family history strongly shaped her identity, which fueled her activism and enabled her to engage in fugitive acts of learning.

As an executive member of the Native American Club and active member of Native American Nation, Joy, along with other Native students, have met with the Board of Regents and the president of the university to voice their concerns, as well as to discuss how the university can better meet the needs of Native students. In discussing her activism, Joy remarked, “It makes me feel empowered that I can challenge an institution that is racist and dehumanizing.” When Joy looks at the seal, she explained, “The frontiersman put Navajo people through the Long Walk. The conquistador represents Spanish conquest of the Southwest as well as represents Catholicism. It represents complete erasure.” She further stated how the seal does not represent Native people’s history; in fact, it represents their genocide. In discussing her interactions with the president of the university, she was hurt when he stated that their demands were too unrealistic. However, Joy said that the demands were reasonable and attainable. Her organizations presented evidence of other universities, such as Yale who addressed cultural headdresses on campus and Harvard who changed aspects of their seal because it represented slavery.

In addition, the Native student organizations held three community forums to discuss the seal. At these events, Joy recalled how she and her peers encountered several racist statements. In one example, a white male stated that Native peoples should thank conquistadors and frontiersmen for bringing culture and civilization to the Southwest. Thus, even when there is a community dialogue to explain their positions, student advocates were met with microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007) that demeaned their personhood.

The commodification and exploitation of native culture

An example of the university commodifying and exploiting Native culture are the displays of sacred and traditional Native objects located around campus including the student union center and the anthropology building. Joy expounded, “You don’t, you shouldn’t put a totem pole in the middle of campus. Because it is a prayer mark; it is a ceremony. It is part of the culture. It belongs with the people, and with that culture. Not in the middle of a university campus.” She discussed how “heartbreaking” it was that anthropologists from the university have taken remains from Chaco Canyon, a sacred Native American site, and have displayed them in a museum on campus. She stated that traditional objects (e.g., dolls, drums, totem poles) are sacred to Native people and that they should be returned to their communities of origin because they help connect Native people to their land. Joy said, “Quite honestly, whenever they do that it makes me feel like we are already dead. Like that whole display, we are in a museum because we are dead.” In this statement, she expressed the erasure (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013) of Native peoples that occur when the university treats them as objects in the past, instead of living people who still exist today. She wanted the university to honor and uphold the wishes of Native community elders by ceasing the removal of objects from sacred sites to display, which is yet another example of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Joy asked poignantly, “Why is it that my people are so intensely studied? They take our ancestors remains and violate them.” She viewed these acts as institutional microaggressions because she saw them as violations of human rights and Native people’s cultural practices. Additionally, she explained that SU is built on Pueblo land and that Native lives were sacrificed so that the university could be established. This viewpoint affirms what several scholars have stated regarding how space and place strongly inform Native students’ experiences (Lee, 2017; Manuelito, 2005; Werito, 2014). Ultimately, all colleges and universities are constructed on Native land and they must recognize how they participate in the grammar of settler colonialism (Calderón, 2014; Marker, 2011).



Figure 3. Four murals found in the main university library.

Racist and demeaning imagery through art

Likewise, Joy also shared her observations on the racist murals found in SU's main university library, [Figure 3](#) above. There are four murals, which represent the tri-cultures (Native, Spanish, and Anglo) that primarily comprise the population of the state. The university president, which the library is named after, described the murals by stressing stereotypical roles such as Native Americans as artists, the Spanish (i.e., mestizo/as⁵) as laborers and farmers, and Anglos as doctors and scientists (Celsus, n.d.). What is inherently racist about this statement is that Native Americans were perceived as not having anything to offer in the areas of science, agriculture, or architecture. In fact, the Native mural illustrates Native culture stereotypically by depicting a plains teepee, which is not Indigenous to the Southwest, and Native women creating pottery, baskets, and rugs. The Spanish (i.e., mestizo/a) mural shows a man toiling the land, and two women plastering a house, while the Anglo mural shows a doctor holding a baby and two scientists. In the fourth mural, the Anglo man appears in the middle with a mestizo and Native American male on either side, holding hands to illustrate cooperation and peace. The most dehumanizing aspects of the murals are the faceless features of the Native and mestizo/a people.

For Joy, these murals are racist and do not honor people of color. Joy articulated that these murals represent a form of oppression along with the seal because they depict Natives in a narrow stereotypical fashion as working class laborers situated in the past. As a result, she recommended taking them down as a way to value Native people. In sum, these examples of institutional racial microaggressions can and still do affect Native students today by marginalizing their voices and tokenizing their culture, which is a daily reminder of historic trauma and erasure.

Implications and conclusion

Joy values the knowledge of her community, language, and culture. She also understands the complex presence of Eurocentric ontologies that are reified in higher education. As we have illustrated, Joy holds on to traditional epistemologies as a source of strength to confront potentially damaging microaggressions on a daily basis. Joy has created a unique balance between living, studying, and learning, both at home, on her reservation with her community and elders, and in the classroom at the university. Despite all of Joy's overwhelming life experiences, she epitomized survivance (Vizenor, 2008) in that she

is resilient, continues to develop a critical understanding of Native scholarship, and is a strong student activist who engages in fugitive acts of learning (Patel, 2016) to fight for social justice.

As social justice oriented educators, we need to support Joy and the future generations of Native students who attend institutions of higher education through a variety of ways. First, higher education institutions must become more aware of how microaggressions operate at an institutional level. Institutions can self-examine their environment by gauging several areas including how ethnic studies programs are supported or not supported and how and if curriculum reflects diverse perspectives, and they can explore the racial and ethnic makeup of their staff, faculty, and administrators to see if marginalized groups are well-represented (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Second, structural and institutional changes can be made to stop the marginalization of Native students, especially regarding issues such as offensive seals, mascots, and Native artifacts. As suggested by recent events on campuses nationwide, racial incidents will continue to occur; therefore, diversity training, specifically regarding microaggressions, for all faculty and staff can help prepare them for negotiating these tense situations.

Employing strategies such as community forums or implementing a higher education tribal council of elders as an advisory group, as suggested by Joy, can go a long way to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for Native students. Moreover, institutions and their departments need to address the extraction of Native artifacts without consent and enact culturally sensitive protocols for handling cultural objects, which can include the repatriation of artifacts or developing humanizing and culturally appropriate ways to display them. Furthermore, Hispanic Serving Institutions also need to recognize that having such a designation requires critical self-reflection and a commitment to address the issues we have raised in this article (i.e., the seal, the murals, and the tokenization of Native cultural objects).

Native students as well as other students of color can learn from Joy's example on how to draw on their cultural identities in order to be successful in higher education. They can create their own support networks and counterspaces (Yosso et al., 2009). For example, Joy employed spaces like the Native American Studies Department, the Native American Club, and the Native American Nation to help her navigate the university and provide her with support. More importantly, these organizations provided Joy with opportunities to bolster her student activism and strengthen key tenets of TribalCrit, such as navigating liminal spaces, promoting better understandings of Indigenous perspectives, and acknowledging that Native philosophies, traditions, and cultural practices are legitimate forms of knowledge (Brayboy, 2005a). Through this engagement, Joy and other Native peers have begun to not only advocate for themselves, but also have brought attention to the university seal and the state of affairs for all Native students. A testament to their activism is the fact that a recent social media post explained that the Native American Club received an Excellence Award from SU's division of inclusion for helping to abolish the seal. In fact, displays of the seal were not present at graduation this year.

Furthermore, Joy demonstrated through her activism, the potential to work with fellow students to address systemic racism and to provide a vehicle to create better conditions on university campuses. Her activism connected theory and practice in order to create positive changes on campus that many more marginalized students can follow. Ultimately, universities and colleges bear the responsibility; they need to be aware of institutional racist policies and practices that marginalize students of color. At the same time, it is important to promote policies and practices that are attentive to the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of students. To that end, universities and colleges ought to value diverse student backgrounds and have a firmer understanding of how racism and microaggressions impact marginalized students. It is our hope that if institutions create more comprehensive support systems driven by a social justice agenda, then more equitable learning environments can be established. Perhaps, as we have gathered in our study, universities and colleges ought to acknowledge their complicity in settler colonialism and how it continues to impact marginalized students.

Notes

1. We use Latinx to move beyond masculine and feminine gender identifiers of Latino/a. The "x" indicates gender-neutrality, moving beyond gender binaries, and is inclusive of intersecting identities such as transgender, agender

or nonbinary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, and genderfluid. Latinx makes it clear to include the numerous people that comprise the Latinx diaspora.

2. We use a pseudonym to protect the identity of our participant and all participants involved in this protest.
3. We use a pseudonym to protect the identity of the university. In addition, all references to Southwest University have been changed in the reference list.
4. We use pseudonyms for these two organizations to protect the identities of participants.
5. We use this term to describe the colonized ethnic/racial group that resulted from Spanish conquest of Latin America and is the blend of Indigenous, African, and Spanish ancestry and cultures.

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