

September 2006

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Recommended Citation

Jaime, A., & Rios, F. (2017). Negotiation and Resistance amid the Overwhelming Presence of Whiteness: A Native American Faculty and Student Perspective. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.10.2.08>

Negotiation and Resistance amid the Overwhelming Presence of Whiteness: A Native American Faculty and Student Perspective

Angela Jaime & Francisco Rios

Introduction

*Home's the place we head for in our sleep.
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams
don't wait for us. We catch them on the run.*

—Louise Erdrich

This opening stanza of the poem *Indian Boarding School: The Runaways* by Louise Erdrich (1984) describes the importance of and comfort with returning to one's home, "the place we head for in our sleep." In this poem, Erdrich describes the dreams of Native students who runaway from their boarding school experiences (for a detailed account of the culturally horrific, indeed even fatal, boarding school experiences, see Spring, 2006). But the runaways are also moving toward something: their homes where they can be culturally, socially, and spiritually nourished. Home is where the center of the soul belongs. Children of the boarding school experience recount how their time there devastated their ability to communicate and connect with their people back home. In many ways the present day experience of Native college students recalls the similar challenges of being away from family and home.

While not wishing to minimize the intensity of the experiences of Native students in boarding schools in the first half of the 20th century, there is much in common with Native students and faculty who find themselves amidst the overwhelming presence of Whiteness on many universities across the U.S. While attendance at the boarding school was forced (indeed, often times children were stolen from their families and homes) and while corporal punishment was used to imprison Native children, the current higher education experience can have many similar psychological influences on Native students and faculty. There is the physical distance of one's homelands. And with this distance comes both cultural isolation and social segregation. It includes attacks on one's ethnicity, one's own identity, and the very

real possibility that one will internalize his/her own oppression. Just like boarding school students, the higher education experience requires both negotiations with oneself and with others to assure that one's integrity is left intact as much as possible. And it sometimes calls for outright resistance to those things and those people who violate one's integrity (Kohl, 1994). It should not surprise us, then, if Native Americans in higher education institutions also voice the challenge of distance from family and the comfort of home on their psychological well being.

The likelihood is that those who successfully negotiate the academic requirements and find themselves on post-secondary campuses will find themselves one of a significantly small few. And while the choice to attend a post-secondary school is voluntary, Native faculty and students must still negotiate the rough cultural, social, and spiritual terrain where they find themselves. This sometimes, as described earlier, also requires one to resist the oppressive social, institutional and societal racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997) that they are sure to encounter.

This study focuses on how one Native faculty member and one Native student negotiated and resisted the cultural context of their primarily White university campus. We will detail the everyday challenges both face as well as the constant psychological struggle each face while interacting with their peers and colleagues. The research question of interest is: How did two Native people (one a faculty member, one a student) negotiate their cultural isolation and still attend to their teaching (for the former) and learning (for the latter) responsibilities? And, when called upon, how did these two participants resist the prejudicial and oppressive phenomena they encountered on their campus? In sum, identifying the oppression and becoming conscious of the efforts to decolonize oneself of the tyranny faced is the phenomena under discussion.

Literature Review

Decolonization

The literature regarding theories of decolonization addresses issues of colonialism,¹ colonization, and capitalist expansion, all of which relate to how power is used and maintained within the dominant culture. Decolonization is the stripping of that which detains us, holds us, and prevents us from negotiating our own destiny and allows us to transcend to a place of balance and peace (Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 2001). The concepts of stripping, detaining, and oppressing are not new in feminist theory by women of color (Hernández & Rehman, 2002), in Native epistemology (e.g., Allen, 1992), and in cultural studies (Grossberg, 1997), and their importance has been established in the structure of Native identity development and, for our purposes, we extend them to Native faculty and students' definition of self and identity.

Decolonization theorists (see, for example, Poupart, 2003) explain that in the process of decolonizing one's identity, moments of realization and change occur. In these moments the individuals come to identify their oppression, they must then make one of two decisions about the way in which they will proceed: acknowledge the

oppression yet do nothing or question and resist the oppression to the eventual point that they are liberated. This has been summarized as a “formulation of decolonization in which autonomy and self-determination are central to the process of liberation and can only be achieved through a self-reflective collective practice” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 8). Self-reflective collective practice recognizes “. . .the transformation of the self, reconceptualization of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 8). When decolonization is valued and pursued, the person must reconsider the perspective of the dominant group on issues by interrogating the heterosexual, patriarchal, colonial, racial, and capitalist influences in their own daily lives (Mohanty, 2003). When individuals begin to question the way society advances stereotypes and deliberate lies about marginalized groups, they come to the point of interrupting the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000) and begin the journey toward decolonization of self.

To define one’s authentic self, one must have the tools and support to do so. Mililani Trask (1995), speaking to the Indigenous Women’s Network, explained that decolonization of hearts and minds must come from the freedom to define self.

Self-determination as an international legal concept refers to the right of peoples to freely determine their political status and to freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development. The exercise of one’s self-determination requires that there be true freedom of choice. This implies not only freedom from the external control of other sovereigns, but freedom from internal controls and psychological obstacles that are the legacy of past colonization. (p. 34)

When the colonized take the opportunity to define themselves, the process of decolonization can occur. Paulo Freire (1970) claimed that freedom of the people from internal controls and psychological obstacles of colonization liberates the people. Following the freedom from internal controls and psychological obstacles, Freire claims the liberation of the oppressed, by the oppressed, from within the oppressed group, must take place in order for there to be a fate and belief in the liberation. It is through this liberation that the oppressed become conscious of the internalized colonization that they have endured and make the choice to liberate themselves or to continue the cycle.

Decolonization of Identity

Our contacts with other people in our daily lives influence our perception of the world and of ourselves. The books we read, movies we watch, and music we listen to have various levels of power over our perceptions of self and others. We internalize the pieces of the world that influence us and help shape us to be who we are. This includes the way in which we interact with others and their influence on us. The oppression we face daily by those around us contributes to the colonization of our identity. As in the cycle of socialization, we must break the continuum of oppression we place on others and that which is placed on us.

Oppression-Resistance-Negotiation-Transcendence is the process of liberation directed at fostering a sense of integrity. The action of resistance as an outsider is the only action to the oppression. Insiders within an oppressive system must achieve a tenuous balance of negotiation and resistance. Learning to find the balance is the challenge. One needs to think critically concerning the current issues of colonization. This is especially difficult given that the dominant culture resists the conversation about and reflection on current issues of colonization of Native people in the United States. To acknowledge and become conscious of the present state of colonization would foster the demand for social justice. To ignore this occurrence or to remain ignorant is to deny a responsibility to social activism.

Context

This study took place at a state university in the mountain west. The state is 89% White with Native Americans make up 3% of the state's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The state is also home of one of the largest Native reservations in the US shared by two Native nations. Notwithstanding, the reservation is nearly 300 miles away from the university which makes the recruitment and retention of Native students to the university campus challenging. Consider, for example, that in 2006, there were only 115 (0.9%) Native students on the campus (University, 2006). The number of Native faculty on the campus was equally problematic. From 2000-2003, there was only one Native faculty member on the campus. In 2003, one Native faculty (untenured) was hired and in 2004 two more were added.

Support for Native students on campus comes primarily from the American Indian Studies program, which offers an academic minor. The Office of Multicultural Affairs employs an American Indian Program Coordinator who provides support by organizing events for Native students, recruiting Native students, and supporting students academically through tutors, grade checks, etc. There are also two other Native groups: Keepers of the Fire and the American Indian Science and Engineering Society.

The two participants of this study were Jeanette and Marie (*pseudonyms*). Jeanette is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education having come to the campus in fall, 2004. Jeanette also served as one of the members of the research team. Her primary teaching responsibility is an educational foundations course with a strong multicultural focus. Marie is a sophomore, a recent enrollee, in the university having moved from New Mexico to the state and was a student in Jeanette's class in fall, 2005. Both agreed to share their perspectives about teaching and learning in a predominantly White institution but to do so during the semester when they were involved in the foundations course so as to reflect upon phenomena, perceptions and interactions of each other.

Methodology

This qualitative study is aimed at getting at the meaning making process associated with phenomena as well as the role of contextual variables (in this instance, place and institutional culture) that impact that meaning making. More specifically the focus is on the teaching and learning experiences of two Native women on the university campus. Critical Ethnography (Ada & Beutel, 1993) was employed to assure that the experiences shared were as real and genuine to the participants as possible. A critical ethnography works to assure that the participants are active in shaping the research methodology (from question construction, to data analysis, to framing of the findings).

Data were collected via interview and an email journal (e-journal). The two researchers carefully constructed a series of questions that would serve as the interview guide. They were loosely structured on Schwab's (1978) four commonplaces of schooling: teachers, students, curriculum and social milieu. The student was interviewed by Ricardo, the non-participant of the research team, to allow the student to freely share her thoughts about Jeanette. Ricardo also crafted a series of questions that he emailed to Jeanette regarding the four commonplaces of schooling. Attention was paid to the timeframe of the email question prompts: beginning, middle, and end of the course. The transcripts (for Marie) and the e-journal (for Jeanette) served as the data source for this study.

The data were compiled and qualitative data analysis followed an emergent grounded research approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We asked ourselves, as we looked at the data, "What is in this material?" We began with initial theoretical assertions anchored to the data. The themes that emerged were juxtaposed and melded to develop more robust, appropriate categories that allowed us to aggregate coded data and formulate hybrid theoretical assertions. Throughout we used each other to help define and understand these themes and theories.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data set. The first theme speaks to the negotiation of one's identity and one's culture within a specific context. The second theme addresses the need to transcend identities through resistance. The final themes are ideas clustered around the connection between culture and pedagogy. These themes will be described and specific elements from the data set will be used to bring these themes to life and provide greater depth of meaning.

The Negotiation of Identity and Culture

The first theme focuses on how one negotiates both his/her identity and culture in the context of an overwhelming whiteness. Important to the identity dimension of this theme is an understanding of how identities are both chosen and ascribed. In the

former, there is an interaction with one's actual "racial" birth with how one chooses to define oneself. Marie's description of this highlights both of these elements:

...my dad he is Latino and Apache and my grandpa he raised me off and on for my whole life and he knew how to speak Apache and he knew how to speak Spanish. So he taught me how to speak both, but mostly I speak Spanish...but I identify mostly as a Native American person because I believe that Latinos, unless they have a lot of Spanish ancestry, are mostly native people to me. So whenever I have to fill out the census or whatever, there is only one option I'll check, Native American. (Interview, 11/05, p. 1)

Along with linkages to one's family lineage, these identities are further affirmed and extended by way of strong cultural and community ties as well as through a spiritual connectedness. Marie describes some of these cultural and spiritual connections critical to her identity as a Native American:

I used to dance at the powwow...and I have a friend, she is a full blood (up on the reservation) and I told her it's hard for me to sometimes have Indian friends because I'm so light skinned, you know, and they might think I'm a Guerra and so she said, "gosh, don't worry about that Marie you have the heart of ten Indians." I think it's all your mentality and the way that you live with it and the way you carry yourself, the way that you speak and your beliefs. (Interview, p. 1)

Along with dancing at the powwow, Marie describes her other cultural activities including engaging in art projects (the making of a rattle from a deer hoof and a turtle shell), the passing of "advice" to younger generations, the food that one eats, as well as the activities she chooses not to engage in (in one instance, dissecting Owl pellets in science class due to the sacredness of Owls for her).

Because one's identity, based as it is on lineage as well as cultural, social, and spiritual connectedness, can be variable, Jeanette is sensitive to identity questions but also provides space for students to negotiate identity on their own terms:

Over the past 8 years, I have had probably less than 20 minority students in my education classes. It is always a struggle for them in a class where they are the minority and we are talking about controversial "isms." I feel defensive for them at times and I find myself protective of them. I have not approached them about their ethnicity but rather opened myself up to the class about my heritage and ethnicity in order to alert them that they are not the only ones in the class. (E-Journal, p. 1)

Jeanette realizes that there is a risk, especially on a predominantly White campus, with revealing one's identity. This is true even for her as the professor in the class:

I sometimes don't tell them I am Native. In fact in grad school as a TA I would tell them in the first 3-4 weeks and then at the end of the semester on my evaluations they would write things like "Jeanette is a bitter Indian woman" or "this Indian has no business in the classroom. I felt bad about myself and really disliked my students for using my ethnicity to try and hurt me. I know it is their ignorance but it was a choice I had in providing them with that information. (E-Journal, p. 2-3)

Both Jeanette and Marie discuss the importance of being true to one's self as well as the need to have a positive cultural self-identity since one's cultural connectedness can provide both a source of comfort and provide an "internal" centeredness. Jeanette when asked what she would hope ethnic minority students would say about what they learned in her class described it thusly:

Maybe they would say Dr. Jeanette was honest with us...Diversity is a no-brainer...they would definitely say they learned a lot about Native education and issues, teaching to a variety of learners and how to break the cycle of socialization. Their own ethnic self? Maybe that they have an ethnic self. I think the students of color are aware of their heritage or ethnic identity... (E-Journal, p. 7)

For Marie, being true to oneself might mean not being part of the mainstream:

...but many of the one's I see are always true to their values regardless if they stick out like a sore thumb, they are going to stay that way because it's been so many hundreds of years that it's the way they have been, you know, why change now and then. (Interview, p. 4)

Because both Jeanette and Marie are light skinned and both are operating in a predominantly White university and local community, both are challenged with the ways in which they can "pass" as being White as well as how others ascribe their identities. While this has the potential to protect one from harm (for Marie she thinks she does not face as much marginalization since "it's easier for me because I'm light skinned," Interview, p. 10), it also is a source of tension and a site of pain. For Marie this includes being told racist things (what Myers and Williamson, 2002, describe as "private racism") because someone thinks you are White: "...when you're light skinned you hear all kinds of stuff and if they don't know where you are from or who you are they will say ugly things. And if you're hearing it, it will break your heart" (Interview, p. 15). Consider the following excerpt from Jeanette as she describes this same challenge to her identity:

For my entire undergrad experience I had...(a non-ethnic last name)...and that in many ways it gave me a place to decide whether I wanted to speak up and identify. It seems to me now to have been a passing game I wish I would never have considered playing, yet I did. (E-Journal, p. 2)

After she married and carried her husband's Latino surname, this challenge continued:

...so I can easily "hide" in my husband's culture. But what does that say about me and my identity when I act as if I am not proud of who and what I am? I was raised better than that and have tried to "hide" my true ethnicity only once. I decided at the beginning of the semester that I would not tell them out-right that I am Native and then ask them at the end of the semester what they thought. Only one student guessed right. She wasn't even confident in her answer, yet said she had a feeling. After class that day I asked her why she guessed Native? She replied, "I am too."

I went back to my office that day and cried. I cried not because I felt ashamed of myself and what I had robbed myself of being true but what I may have done to alienate this young Native woman. Life plays sick games. I realized it wasn't about me telling students what or who I am but how I build relationships with them. I have to be honest with them if they are ever going to be honest with me. I tell my students now that I am Native but I do it in a way that makes me feel comfortable. (E-Journal, p. 3)

For Marie there are the challenges to her identity by other Native Americans (because she is also half White), challenges by White teachers about what represents authentic or beautiful Native American art, and times where she silences herself rather than speaks up. And, she discusses the challenge of taking the harder path by choosing NOT to assimilate into the mainstream. Marie describes assimilation thusly:

The mothers might be like, "well, it's kind of easy to live that way so maybe I'll adapt this and adapt that" and you know what I mean even though it's easier. It's easier to live that way and it's tempting, I mean to do it in my own life too. I don't know, but I think there is a lot of strong native people who do (resist assimilation). Especially the Grammys, the Grammys just outright refuse. (Interview, p. 4)

For both Jeanette and Marie social networks (elders, families, and friends, especially other ethnic minorities) become even more critical. Marie mentions that she has few friends on campus and so turns toward her family as her main social support:

I don't have any friends but, I really haven't been making that attempt to have them. You know, I mostly just focus on my family and my extended family and my friends that I already have. I would like to have friends, but I haven't had a friend that isn't a minority since probably middle school and I'm afraid to try to go that route again. (Interview, p. 15).

For Jeanette the small circle of friends on the campus is vital to her identity and resilience:

I told you I feel like I have found friends and family here who are people of color who have come from similar places and "understand" me. For the first time I feel like I can be myself all the time around them. I am not the only Native in the group...Corky (*another Native American professor*) helps to bring balance in the circle. I have searched out and found diversity which affirms my place in the world on many levels. (E-Journal, p. 5)

The other source of identity support and affirmation comes by way of feeling you can make a contribution to others (both within but also beyond the family). As mothers, both Marie and Jeanette understand the importance of the impact they have on their children's identity and sense of place in the world. But they both, multiple times, discuss the importance of looking out for the next generation. Jeanette says:

I teach about the issues because I am Native and I want my Native children to live in a world I feel I have influenced, even if that is only minimal. The difference

between me and other minorities? I think it is the way I was raised and what I have learned from elders and my culture that makes me different. Essentially I would hope that all of us, minorities, would want the same outcome on our individual issues: recognition that our issues are important and heard as well as our children affirmed. This is simplistic but in a small way true. (E-Journal, p. 4)

For Marie it's the kind of impact she might be able to make especially as a teacher:

Well, I want to get them young, you know, when they...you can still make a good impression on them and kind of give them experiences that they're not going to get unless I'm out there. I'm not saying I'm great or anything but I think I can offer them something that some other teachers might not want to make the attempt or the effort, you know. (Interview, p. 12-13)

Revitalizing Identity Through Resistance

One of the critical aspects of liberation (Harro, 2000) which assists in breaking the cycle of hegemonic socialization is to push against those aspects of racism and prejudice (interpersonal, institutional, and ideological) that violate one's integrity. This is no easy feat since it involves transcending social norms including challenging social group stereotypes. But it is also equally influenced by the purposefulness and direction one can achieve by attending to "uplift" one's culture and nation.

Both Jeanette and Marie discuss the ways in which they both resist the racisms that they encounter in their lives but also the ways in which they attempt to advocate on behalf of their communities. At the center of this resistance is a keen recognition of the role of power. Jeanette described this sensitivity in her e-journal when recounting how students in the class visit the Denver Public Schools whose students are dominantly ethnic minority:

It is inevitable that I will get over half my White students saying how they were the minority in the classroom in Denver...However, contextualizing the way the term minority is used in my class and in the area of social justice/multicultural education/critical race theory the use of the word by my White students is most problematic. I am constantly asking them to problematize their response to "being a minority" in a classroom when they are still the majority. Spatial and physical sense of minority are very different than the mental or consciousness of states, especially when we discuss the issue of power and privilege related to the perspective of ethnic minorities in society. (E-Journal, p. 9)

For both Marie and Jeanette then, resistance becomes a form of strength, something one needs to do for oneself and for others. Marie describes this best in recalling her initial response to being on campus. She wanted to return home. After talking with her husband, however, she decided that she needed to stay on and struggle, for herself and for her daughter:

Then I see my little girl and I figure if I'm hiding out trying to be just around my own people, like in Farmington, it was easy, I always felt comfortable. Here, gosh I just wanted to go home, I just wanted to drop out. And I'm thinking, my little girl, if she sees me struggling and she sees me ruffling some people's feathers, she's gonna see me as strong; she's gonna be the same way... And I look at her and think that's how I'm gonna make it through this place. (Interview, pp. 11-12)

Resistance comes in a variety of forms as Jeanette and Marie detail. There is resistance in the act of self-defining and self-determining one's identity as a Native American. Then the person's mere presence becomes a challenge to the status quo. Jeanette describes it thusly:

How many times do you think my or any other professor's (who is not Native) students have had interactions with an educated, strong, Native woman teaching them about diversity issues? My examples of teaching are different, my experiences are different, my supplemental material in the classroom is different. Too many times I feel like Native people are an afterthought in everyone's minds, the mere fact that I am in front of them with a PhD is testimony that Native people are not all drunks, unemployed and uneducated. (E-Journal, p. 4)

But probably more than anything else, resistance comes by way of speaking out via radical truth telling, critical questioning, and de-centering the master narrative as described by Marie and Jeanette. Marie shares the following:

...I'm just like, "no, I'm gonna speak out" because they need to hear it. And if they get uncomfortable, oh, so what, that's my job. (Interview, p. 3)

Sometimes, this even involves asking the teacher to assure that the Native American viewpoint is included in class lectures. Discussing a human development course she took at a different college, Marie recounts:

In human development, the teacher would always try to just rush through areas...and whenever she tried to do that we would always raise our hands, "Wait, we have something to say about human development from our point of view." (Interview, pp. 9-10)

Jeanette has the additional methods of resistance by way of the opportunity she has to shape the curriculum and advance new knowledge, which necessitates the negotiation of what she studies and how she engages in scholarly activity with her broader pedagogical goals of promoting de-centered/critical thinking among her students, especially the students of color. Jeanette discusses how she works to de-center the dominant group's experiences and to replace it with the experiences of ethnic minorities:

Too often the conversation is focused on White men and women in the center and people of color are discussed only in relation to the Whites. I find this problematic in many ways; I see this same pattern when Native people are discussed in history or even present day, women of color are seen as the followers of the White women

in the feminist movement when in actuality Chicana's and African American women were already struggling and active in the equality movement. Feminism is also a White woman's word and theory. It is exhausting thinking of the overwhelming number of times, in my own life, I have been in circles of people and colleagues where the center of the conversation is always about the White people and we are on the peripheral. In my class, I think the (minority) students realize they are not on the peripheral, but rather the center and White people are discussed in relation to them. (E-Journal, p. 8)

In describing the class they share, Marie describes how Jeanette engages in radical truth telling:

I enjoy her, she makes me laugh because she's not afraid to say things just bluntly. I like that, it makes it funny instead of so serious. (Interview, p. 6)

She goes on to confirm how the center of attention has shifted in Jeanette's class:

Then they're kind of forced, unless they completely plug their ears or block them out. Then they are forced to hear things and think things that they might not have never thought or heard before. (E-Journal, p. 12)

Beyond shaping curriculum, Jeanette realizes she has power as a role model who can show students it is possible to have a strong cultural identity and resist destructive ideologies and still be successful. Jeanette states:

Ideally, my students of color would say they learned to be strong and stand up for themselves. I want them to feel confident and affirmed in my class, without having to fight and struggle for it against the "establishment." They are important and I want them to know that without question. (E-Journal, p. 7)

This resistance against dominant and destructive ideologies is not easy. There are the personal costs associated with such resistance, which can lead, at times, to social ostracization since the net result is that colleagues and peers who have a stake in maintaining the status quo and its supporting hegemonic ideologies find themselves uncomfortable, and even provoked, when their worldviews are challenged. Marie describes students' responses when she offers an alternative perspective in her classes which might challenge the other students' standpoints:

It just depends on how they were raised; some of them get kind of uncomfortable and start shifting around their seat and flipping through stuff and kind of looking down because they are embarrassed or they're uncomfortable and the other ones that are kind of genuine or sincere, at least half way there, will kind of show interest in it and that's about it. (Interview, p. 3)

Connecting Culture and Pedagogy

Because both Jeanette and Marie share a similar professional interest in teaching, the opportunity to discuss teaching and learning was provided to illuminate the ways in which they think about the connection between culture and pedagogy.

They discussed philosophical, relational, pedagogical and curricular dimensions of teaching with a lens on phenomena that promote cultural continuity as well as those which create cultural discontinuity. They also discussed the interaction of ethnic minority teachers with ethnic minority students.

With respect to philosophical considerations around teaching, Marie describes the importance of learning for the sake of passing down wisdom, knowledge and beauty. She says:

I don't know if it just (describes) native people but, I notice that people are not so worried about having authority. You know what I mean? It's not like you get so much pleasure out of that. I think more, especially elderly Native people, get more pleasure out of just sharing but not at that level to where it's out of fear, but it's just out of...beauty. You know? (Interview, p. 6)

She then broadens this out to include ethnic minority teachers:

...when you experience a class with a teacher that is a minority, it seems more like they're not worried about being in control. They're just more worried about getting their point across and learning. (Interview, p. 8)

This speaks to a second dimension of learning associated with teaching: the relational element. There was much discussion about the importance of developing a sense of community, and with it, the importance of respect (openness without pretense). Jeanette describes how respect, a core cultural value for her, plays itself out in her interactions with her students:

I think my heritage has taught me a lot about how to treat people. I respect my students and have learned over the past ten years of teaching college students that showing you care and respect them is essential to them listening and considering what I have to offer them. I am constantly saying in class that they do not have to subscribe to what I am teaching them in class, but I expect them to consider it and reflect on its meaning. I also expect each student to listen to one another and respect each other. (E-journal, p. 8)

Marie, who agrees that respect is a common cultural core value, also points to its importance in the context of schooling despite the fact that she also is quick to share the ways in which she has experienced disrespect in her learning (most notably in her high school experience). However, in describing the class she shared with Jeanette, Marie stated:

...she's just normal, regular; she doesn't try to, you know, she just speaks to us like on our level rather than be afraid of her and things like that. And I appreciate that, cause it doesn't make it feel like she's superior, you have to be afraid of her or things like that. You can just learn from her out of mutual respect rather than just in fear. (Interview, p. 6)

A third element of teaching-learning described by Marie and Jeanette concerns the pedagogical strategies that they find valuable and noteworthy and that

allow for variation and freedom within the classroom. More specifically, Marie identified storytelling, especially real life experiences, as a key pedagogical strategy but most frequently discussed the importance of hands-on/experiential learning, especially outside the classroom. In describing teachers who utilize these strategies, Marie says:

You're excited to go to their class that day instead of dreading it and they give you the opportunities to learn in ways other than just lectures, you learn, learn in ways that are not the familiar ways...you get to learn with your hands on, you get to experience. (Interview, p. 5)

For Jeanette the focus was on a pedagogy associated with spurring dialogue and critical thinking. In considering the impact that this has on ethnic minority students, she relates:

My pedagogical philosophy is to open the classroom up to a discussion of self reflection and dialogue...I really discourage students to write what they think I want to hear. It bothers me to think what I am reading is only to please me and not for them to reflect and learn about their own bias beliefs. I think my students of color are more comfortable in a classroom setting with me as the teacher when they speak up against the tide of the class. (E-Journal, p. 8)

Jeanette also discusses curricular considerations when she teaches. For her, an important knowledge dimension for students in her class is to learn about oppression and resistance. She describes it in this way:

Concerning content: I would like them to say they learned the frustrations and realizations of education through the current political climate, solutions for themselves as to how to survive the frustrations and struggles of education, and to have passion about teaching and advocacy for students.

Concerning themselves: I would like them to say they learned a lot about themselves and what they believe their strengths and weaknesses are when thinking about race, class, and gender. It is my hope they take a journey to discovering things about themselves they either did not know or had not explored beyond the surface. (E-Journal, p. 1).

Marie, at multiple points in the interview, shares her appreciation for teachers that bring diversity into the classroom, teachers she most associated with being ethnic minority:

I think it comes in and out during the whole class...what the class is about. But it comes in a lot more than it would if the teacher had not been a minority, you know, and then relating things that maybe students wouldn't normally relate to that subject matter, they're gonna relate...So I think the subject is not just limited to that subject, but it's fifteen subjects that, you know, feed into that one and that's good. (Interview, p. 12)

As Marie relates, there are special teaching characteristics she associates with

ethnic minority professors. She finds them more attentive to diversity than non-minority professors; she also notices the fostering of cultural continuity that exists within their classrooms. Marie extends her description this way:

It's not only that, it's just that most minorities, I can't say all but I think the majority, have experienced things that are not mainstream. So they have a lot more experience in just the human condition, you know...just living and suffering and loving and all those things are like so much more vivid because we feel them so much harder...It's also you're being enriched with all these things that you can only experience if you have certain blood running through your veins. (Interview, pp. 8-9)

The net result of this cultural continuity is that the students feel more relaxed and able to participate in the class. Marie, in describing her experience in Jeanette's class, relates:

I just feel like...just more relaxed. You know, it's like I raise my hand a lot more in her class than any other class because I don't feel like she's gonna judge me, like maybe some other professor would. (Interview, p. 17)

From Jeanette's perspective, cultural continuity is an important goal that she pursues; yet she also thinks it's important to challenge her ethnic minority students as well:

I think my students of color are more comfortable in a classroom setting with me as the teacher when they speak up against the tide of the class. My only student of color this semester is really shy but I feel like she spoke up because she knew she was not the only one. Additionally, I think the other students did not argue or speak against her because they knew she was Native and that I am Native and that I most likely would have supported her in the class. Now, the two of us having the ethnic and cultural connections that we do did not keep me from challenging my student and her thinking, but in a respectful and positive way. (E-Journal, p. 8)

While having ethnic minority students is welcomed overall, Jeanette has feelings of ambivalence based on her own experiences as "the only" ethnic minority student in a class:

When I see surnames that might be ethnic minority students I get both excited and apprehensive. I am excited because there are so few minority students in my education classes. It is refreshing to have minority students in a classroom where I am not the only minority. I am apprehensive to have minority students in a class where controversial discussions of race, class, and gender are discussed. If the student is physically identifiable as a minority then I am even more apprehensive that the other students will expect them to be experts or that they will hold back asking questions about the topics we discuss. (E-Journal, p. 1)

Because of this, Jeanette is more "protective" of these students:

I never want my students to feel ashamed of their heritage or who they are but I also don't want them to feel as though because they are brown they have to speak

up for everyone else who is brown or to constantly educate the White folks. I have a lot of shit to deal with in my identity and past, but there is one thing I am sure of and that is that I will always protect my students of color from being marginalized and critiqued in my class. Maybe it is my motherly instinct or maybe it is just part of my cultural upbringing. (E-Journal, p. 2)

A special challenge for Jeanette is dealing with those ethnic minority students who have taken what Marie described as the “easy course,” the path of assimilation. Attendant to that assimilation, most frequently, is internalizing the racist ideology that is socialized into them:

Some of the students I have had in the past who have challenged me in my thinking and teaching have been those with internalized racism. What do you say and how do you handle the situation of a student of color who devalues the statistics of how few people of color attend college. I have had a number of women of color who have said that they worked just as hard if not harder to get to college and the “other” minorities should have too as well. What can I say when they voice this in the classroom in front of their White peers—reaffirming the colonialist perspective!!!! For me it means that I have to find another way of presenting the material to them in class or having a conversation with them outside of class. And a few times it means I have lost them. What can I do? There have been a few who I thought I had lost and whom had come back to me years later saying they changed their perspective on life after the class was over. (E-Journal, pp. 6-7)

Describing how she deals with this, Jeanette discussed the importance of not seeming argumentative, of presenting issues in a more open-ended way, and of providing space for student peers to also do some of the educating.

Discussion

The negotiation of identity and culture is difficult and tenuous. Both Marie and Jeanette construct and express their identity through both ascribed and chosen factors. The ascribed factors include birth within the culture, cultural linkages they have been given by their relatives and extended family, and resultant responsibility to pass their culture on to the next generation. All three of these provide a foundation for choosing one’s cultural identity in social settings outside of the family circle. Native people have a choice about how to identify one’s cultural heritage and connectedness to outsiders. It is through these choices Marie and Jeanette have made that we see both assertive and passive resistance to the climate of a predominately White institution. This passive resistance can appear as the mere presence of the person in the classroom as one who identifies herself as Native. The assertive resistance of one’s cultural identity comes when they assert their voices and make it clear where they stand. Both Marie and Jeanette have used their positions in the institution as student and faculty to point out racism and unjust behavior. While they both have explained the situations as uncomfortable,

they also have expressed the responsibility to speak out and stand up for future generations.

The work Marie and Jeanette do within and out of their communities centers them as cultural workers (Freire, 1998) in their daily lives. On one level, their cultural work includes their conviction to educate outsiders in a way that preserves their culture and their Native sense of self. It also includes their work to continue to center “culture” as a critical element that must be understood in the teaching and learning process. At another level, however, being a cultural worker speaks to their commitment to cultural, political and economic justice that are linked in small and large ways to a broader struggle for full democratic citizenship.

The theme Marie and Jeanette continue to return to is the consciousness of their positions as mother, student, professor, wife, etc. These identity positions for Marie and Jeanette are fluid. They move in and out of each, sometimes occupying more than one at a time, with one thing constant: their Native sense of self. Each identity they express is not separate of each other but rather holistic of their cultural identity. Fluidity is a constant in both Marie and Jeanette’s lives. While identity negotiation occurs daily, it comes with psychological and social challenges. Psychologically, Marie and Jeanette resist oppressive acts but at what cost to their own identity? Marie and Jeanette are pushing the boundaries when they speak out against bigotry and the concomitant institutional racism that supports it. But there are costs associated with resistance, such as self-doubt, the anxiety over self-protection (associated with “hiding’ one’s true self) and the attacks to one’s sense of self. Resistance is especially difficult when relationships with White students and colleagues are already fragile. To teach them without causing resistance (let alone getting them to support and understand one’s perspective), Jeanette and Marie must approach these relationships carefully. This does not mean that they have to compromise their beliefs; rather, they must always focus their resistance “in a good way,” in a way that seeks to enlighten and promote critical thought in others and oneself, in a way based on compassion, understanding and unity, and not on animosity, hostility or separation.

Throughout it all, it’s evident that both Marie and Jeanette maintain an optimistic view of themselves, of their professional possibilities and about education in general. Despite a bleak historical picture of education for most Native Americans, a historical framework that fostered education as an agent of colonization, despite the ever present culture of whiteness that devalues American Indian cultural resources, and despite the attempts to de-culturalize and assimilate American Indians, that both participants still value education and bring a sense of agency (rooted in courage) to their work, provides a powerful statement regarding the character of American Indians in general and American Indian women in particular.

We argue that this is possible because both participants are guided by cultural resources that provide the strength to persevere. These cultural resources include core cultural values of respect for self and respect for others, which manifest themselves

in doing all things in a good way. It is also possible, we argue, because of a cultural ontology that is collective and not individualistic. In this ontology, the self is intimately connected to significant others even when these others are not in one's immediate presence. In this way, Marie and Jeanette represent something more than individuals, and that responsibility keeps them going. There is indeed power in their presence. Finally, the participants bring a cultural way of knowing that recognizes the need for an authentic education which results from radical truth telling and de-centering the master narrative. And complicit with that way of knowing is the understanding that greater academic achievement comes from alternative pedagogical strategies that strive to liberate and empower students rather than indoctrinate.

Ultimately, we should inquire about the role of context in Jeanette and Marie's educational experience: how did this particular historical moment (hyper-conservative, anti-diversity, neo-liberal, and globalized) influence their perspectives? How did the rural, isolated, and mostly white, rocky mountain west locale influence their educational experiences? And, how has participating in a predominately white, university-level teacher education program influenced their viewpoints? These contexts illuminate the importance of negotiating the institutions of education, and as such are germane with what was said earlier regarding the Boarding School experience. The feelings of alienation and loss at the Boarding Schools for Native children, and the acts of resistance that strive to retain cultural dignity, even as that culture is being openly denigrated, is a constant struggle for Marie and Jeanette in their present day experiences. We come full circle to understand that while this is a different era, Native people are still struggling with similar acts and issues of oppression.

Imagine, for example, working where you're not the only person of color but one of many because the institution was deeply committed to diversity as an essential educational value. Imagine engaging in a level of discourse with faculty and students wherein all are discussing in a sustained and authentic way opportunities and obligations that we all have to support those struggling to de-center whiteness and hegemonic ideologies, to provide a different perspective or to counter oppressive beliefs and actions as inappropriate to our democratic ideals. Imagine a climate of cultural caring that acknowledged the assets and strengths that these Native women (and, more broadly, racial minorities) bring that is evident in the educational institution.

For just a moment, Marie and Jeanette found cultural recognition, comfort, and strength in each other's presence. So at end, we ask, imagine the possibilities of school as a cultural home. And imagine, no need to runaway.

Note

¹ Colonialism "involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands" (Boehmer, 1995).

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