

Native American Identity and Academics: Writing NDN in Education

by Jameson D. Lopez – October 28, 2015

In light of recent events, it is becoming more important to identify those who are committing ethnic fraud, especially when done for personal gain. Ethnic fraud committed by non-Native Americans posing as Native Americans has been around for years and is not a new subject among Natives. A contribution to a larger solution for identifying those committing ethnic fraud against Native Americans is to use subtle cues in writing, such as humor, to identify those truly from a North American Indigenous background.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up as an urban Native I developed this dry sense of humor about life. I attended White school in north Phoenix where I spent my first 8 years of life thinking I was African American because I was the darkest kid around. My mother laughingly broke the news to me that I was actually Native American. And more importantly, when I was studying with the Kwat'san tribe in Fort Yuma, CA, the teacher called home to inform my mother I was telling my classmates I was Black. Little did I know it at the time, but my experience resembles the common struggle for identity growing up as a urban Native American. It is also something that I carried with me throughout my academic studies.

Something that perplexed me during my first years studying American Indian education in my doctoral program took me back to my teacher preparation program at the Native American college I previously attended. When I first started the program I often interacted with fellow students. Now looking back, it always seemed we both consciously as well as subconsciously examined how Native we were. I always liked to know what kind of experience other Natives have, and where they grew up. By experience, I mean the level of interaction they had with other American Indian people. I always found it important to our identity as American Indians to relate to the way we act, speak, and conduct ourselves to protect us from others who we believed we were perpetrating ethnic fraud against us. By ethnic fraud, I mean people assuming a Native identity for personal gain.

It is becoming more important to identify those who are committing ethnic fraud, especially in light of the Rachel Dolezal scandal. It was alleged that Dolezal lied about her racial identity by self-identifying as African American despite having white parents with European roots. After the controversy was exposed, she resigned her position as president of the Spokane, Washington chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It is still unclear whether Rachel Dolezal made this identification for personal gain or not. However, ethnic fraud among non-Native Americans posing as Native Americans has been around for years (Russell, 2015). This is not a new subject among Natives. We can attest to the professors, students, and other individuals who have committed ethnic fraud for personal gains by claiming to be American Indian. This made me especially upset when I entered my doctoral program. I heard people introduce themselves, write about their lives, and blatantly lie about being Native American. I witnessed scholarships and research grants being granted to non-Natives claiming to be Native. There is not a problem with non-Natives earning scholarships and research grants, instead, the problem occurs when non-Natives prevent a legitimate Native American from receiving funding or other awards designated for our people. A contribution to a larger solution for identifying those committing ethnic fraud against Native Americans is to use subtle writing cues, such as humor, to identify those truly from a North American Indigenous background.

I have always known there are different types of Natives. I have learned this mainly because I grew up in the city, spent summers on the reservation (rez), and traveled to more than a 100 different reservations with my parents because of the nature of their careers. From this diversity, I similarly found all types of researchers who work and write about American Indians. It is probably not the best way to categorize them, but I will split them into two groups: the non-Native researcher, and Native researcher. Non-Native researchers vary in their experience and motivation in their interaction with Natives. Some researchers grew up watching John Wayne movies during their childhood that created a curiosity in Native people. Others were that one White kid who grew up on the rez, and just wanted to give back to his community. Still other researchers see Natives as a marginalized group, and an avenue to create a research agenda for personal gain. Finally, some non-Native researchers recently found out their great grandmother is a Cherokee princess and wants to reach out to their "people."

Similar to the non-Native researcher, Native researchers also vary in their interaction with the community as well. There are urban Native researchers, like myself, who grew up in the city, but went back to the rez for the summer. Other urban Native researchers come from families that left the reservation and never returned. Still other Native researchers that grew up in Farmington and claim they don't know anything about being Native, but neighbor a large reservation. Finally, some Native researchers grew up on the rez, overcame all odds, and are researching as a means of Nation building.

I am not one to decide who is Native and who is not Native, or what category Native and non-Native researchers fall into. However, I do know that there is a need to address this idea of whose cultural survival is being written about. I described different types of American Indian researchers and categorized them on some arbitrary definitions, but in reality there doesn't exist a

universal mechanism that determines the tribal membership of American Indians in the U.S. Individual tribes determine the criteria for their tribal membership. Nonetheless, researchers have often examined the notion of who is Native American based on empirical evidence. The most recent Census found that 7 out of 10 Native Americans live in Urban areas (2010). Considering that the majority of Native Americans live in cities, there are discourses involving what it means to be Indian and what constitutes Native American education (Brayboy, 2006). This development has researchers asking what constitutes a true Native American. Is a true Native American born on the reservation? Are they of ¼ blood quantum? Do true Native Americans have strong Native American family relationships? Or do they have strong community engagement with other Native Americans? There are also multiple definitions of being Native that are based on your life experience. If you have ever been on Facebook, or received an email from someone interested in Native identity, you might have come across some of these criteria on being Native American (or NDN, a shorthand spelling of *Indian*). I took the following Native American identity criteria from a friend's email:

1. If you ever put evaporated milk in your coffee, *you might be a NDN.*
2. If your hot dog bun was ever just a folded piece of bread, *you might be a NDN.*
3. If you know exactly how many more miles you can go once the "gas empty" light comes on, *you might be a NDN.*
4. If you're older than any of her aunts or uncles, *you might be a NDN.*
5. If most of your friends are also cousins, *you might be a NDN.*
6. If your tablecloth, comforter, and curtains are all Pendleton blankets, *you might be a NDN.*
7. If you ever had a couch in the yard but used lawn chairs in the living room, *you might be a NDN.*
8. If you are looking forward to Christmas so you can pawn the good gifts, *you might be a NDN.*
9. If you have a dog bite scar on your face, *you might be a NDN.*
10. If you can start the car, open the truck, lock the doors, and shift with the same screwdriver, *you might be a NDN.*
11. If you ever had a party at your house, but tell everybody to keep it down because your kids are sleeping, *you might be a NDN.*
12. If you prefer powdered eggs to real eggs, *you might be a NDN.*
13. If your girlfriend puckers up to kiss you and you turn around to see who she's pointing at, *you might be a NDN.*

Native American identity is something that Natives discuss in formal, and informal manners. What I have come to understand is that it is hard to speak about Native Americans with blanket statements. I personally believe that most of the research relating to American Indian humor supports Perry Horse's definition that describes American Indian identity as the extent to which one is grounded in the Native American language and culture, cultural identity, genealogy, traditional American Indian worldview, self-concept as an American Indian, and enrollment (or lack of it) in a tribe (2005). For this reason, the humor I am talking about is related to the Native American identity of American Indian researchers who fall into this definition of American Indian identity, and more than likely can relate to the informal criteria listed above.

Based on this definition, I realize it is hard to distinguish by their writing what kind of experience these researchers have working with American Indians as either American Indian researchers or non-Native researchers. I initially thought that their experience would be important because it could be helpful in understanding the analysis of their findings. Unfortunately, I was not able to find a difference between who was a Native researcher and who was not in most of the articles I read. The only reason I could think of why I could not figure out who was a Native researcher was that the American Indian researchers who I studied wrote along the lines of traditional academic writing. I thought this was unfortunate as there are movements to decolonize the work of European influence of American Indian communities (Smith, 1999). On the other hand, I understand the professional necessity of having articles accepted in peer-reviewed journals. As a result, it is understandable that they conform to academic writing traditions.

Despite these obstacles, I did have some success differentiating Native and non-Native researchers. One way I could tell a researcher was Native was when they used narratives and wrote, "I am from _____ tribe." Another way I distinguished Native from non-Native authors was Googling their name for biographical information and pictures. However, there was an even a better way to identify differences. I started reading a book called *Custer Died for your Sins* for the first time a few years ago, and I knew from the beginning that the author was Native. I knew Vine Deloria Jr. was Native because he used something in his writing a lot of Natives identify with: humor (Pratt, 1998; Johansen, 2003). This led me to an important insight: if all Natives fit Horse Perry's definition of American Indian identity, and understand Native American humor, why do researchers not write in this manner.

For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the importance of Native American researchers incorporating Native American humor in their research to communicate to other Native American researchers/educators and non-Native American researchers/educators in American Indian education to prevent ethnic fraud against Native Americans.

WHY IS INCORPORATING NATIVE HUMOR IMPORTANT TO ACADEMIC WRITING IN EDUCATION?

Writing with Native American humor is worth considering because it is useful as a means of communicating difficult conversations, worshipping during religious functions, healing, wrestling with Native identity, dealing with tragedies, attending political functions, and regulating behavior (Dean, 2003; Gruber, 2008; Garrett & Garrett, 2005; Garrett & Garrett, 1994; Johansen, 2003; Deloria, 1969; Lancaster, 1966; Landes, 1937; Bletzer et al., 2011). Furthermore, Native humor can take many forms but commonly is commonly present as parody, teasing, exaggeration, and puns (Alexie, 2005; Basso 1996; Lincoln, 1993; Trechter, 2001; Wallace, 1953; Bates, 1995; Garrett & Garrett, 1994).

Humor is woven into the lives of Native Americans (Johansen, 2003). As I read through numerous academic articles in American Indian education, and similar disciplines about American Indians, I kept asking myself why Native authors do not use humor in their

writing. I thought maybe it is because they are afraid that other people will not understand our jokes. Or maybe it is because they do not want to offend anyone (Dean, 2003; Wallace, 1953). Or maybe it is because the academic tradition does not allow us to use humor because people will not take us seriously (Garrett & Garrett, 2005). Nonetheless, I find it essential for Native researchers to not only identify themselves in their writing for its own value, but also as an act of explaining western concepts through an Indigenous lens. This theory is further explained by Tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) which emerged as a theory to allow Indigenous peoples to address the complicated relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. federal government as well as describe American Indians' liminality as racial and legal/political groups as well as individuals (Brayboy, 2006). TribalCrit allows American Indian students to find ways to combine Indigenous notions of culture, knowledge, and power with western/European concepts in order to actively engage in survival, self-determination, and tribal autonomy. American Indian humor, being apart of our culture, can be seen as an avenue to analyze western concepts through an Indigenous lens to engage, again, in survival, self-determination, and tribal autonomy.

SURVIVAL

The indicator I always look for in distinguishing between Native and non-Native authorship is humor, and I hardly find it in any academic writing on American Indian education. Humor is important to the survival of our culture, survival within our culture, and survival in academia, and therefore needs to be acknowledged in the ways that Native researchers approach our respective research practices. For survival in education academia, I think that Native researchers have better hopes in an environment that they understand better, such as one that incorporates Native humor. It is easier for an Native American researcher to write from an Indigenous lens that they can understand rather than a westernized perspective that may not be compatible with Native life experiences. More importantly is that writing using humor in Native American education allows research to become more accessible to Native Americans reading the research and protect and celebrate our culture (Erdrich, 1985). Writing using Native American humor gives an insight to non-Native educators working in Native American communities, which is one of the best ways to understand our people and supports the survival of our culture (Ward, 1997; Deloria, 1969). Finally, and maybe most importantly, humor allows our survival within our own Native culture.

In most meetings that include Natives, we have probably laughed more than finished any work. It is not that Natives necessarily tell jokes in the meetings, but we often tease each other. Native people often intentionally leave themselves open to being teased as a means of cultural identity (Deloria, 1969). During fall 2014, I was in an American Indian advisory board meeting for a large federally funded research education group. It was my first meeting, and I was hesitant to see what kind of "advisory board" this would be according to their experience working with Native communities. However, from the moment I arrived at my table, two Native women instantly started teasing me. I sat down with a plate of fruit, and one of the women looked at the other and said, "What, do they not serve any of the good looking Indian men around here?" They both laughed. The other said, "I think he's trying to work on his commod bod." They both laughed again, and of course I knew that it was a sign of understanding due to our shared Native identity (Vantrease, 2013). I knew what a commod bod was, and I knew that in my recent years after being honorably discharged from the Army, I started to gain a commod bod and subsequently appeared to look like Sponge Bob (square body, skinny legs, and a flat butt). If you don't know what a commod bod is, Vantrease, (2013) explained "commod bod" as the, "esoteric terminology for "commodity [food] body." I also knew that their teasing was a way of expressing their acceptance of my identity as a Native American (Garrett & Garrett, 2005). I had a better chance of surviving in that environment because I knew our humor.

For non-Native researchers working in American Indian communities, understanding Native humor is beneficial because it can prevent offensive behaviors by non-Natives, or Natives without real Native experiences (Pratt, 1998). Our humor needs to survive because it is a part of our culture, and should be carried on through our writing. Keeping our humor alive, within the boundaries of our culture is important. However, extending our humor to the boundaries of research is equally important to our right to self-determination.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Tribal self-determination is important to many Native American researchers. By writing using an indigenous lens, researchers are promoting self-determination to Native and non-Native researchers as well as research consumers. Gruber (2008) argues that humor in literature can mediate meaningful conversations across races that might otherwise be unwilling to listen to one another. This means that humor plays an important role in communicating the self-determination of American Indian tribes and representation of American Indian communities. In 2012 I received a call to consult for a group shooting an independent film regarding Native youth life. I flew to Oklahoma with a list of suggestions after watching the film. When I arrived at the meeting there were Natives from different parts of the U.S. We all had different suggestions to improve the film to be more representative of that particular Native community, but almost unanimously we agreed that the film did not have any Native humor. What I found interesting about that experience was that throughout the meeting the Natives in the room were teasing, joking and laughing with each other, while the people who were creating the film were more straight-faced. This is contrary to the myth that all Natives are stoic. This is also a concept that Vine Deloria Jr. addressed by saying "The image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology" (Deloria, 1969, p. 148). In addition, allowing humor can address negative imagery that represents all Natives as Hollywood Natives (Deloria, 1969). Nonetheless, the filmmakers disregarded most of our suggestions. The final film was dry and you could tell that it was not representative of Native life. The film's creators portrayed the struggle of a Native community, but they didn't realize that many Natives are able to overcome and survive our struggles because of our humor, which is a remarkable trait (Johansen, 2003; Edmunds, 1976, p. 149; Maples et al., 2001). In the end the film's name does not need to be mentioned because I am sure not many Natives regard it as a legitimate representation of American Indian life like

Smoke Signals. The representation of tribal culture in this independent film was misrepresented and missing pieces that were essential to Native experiences and our autonomy. Similar to these filmmakers, some researchers have misrepresented Native American communities due to the traditions of their community which is more academic than artistic as in film. By including humor in their writing, it gives Native American researchers an opportunity to present evidence on issues that affect our people through an appropriate identifiable Indigenous perspective.

TRIBAL AUTONOMY

Humor is an avenue that allows tribal autonomy to take shape by displaying how American Indian writing has developed within the boundaries of tribal culture. Within this culture, Native Americans love to laugh (Dean, 2003; Deloria, 1969, Lancaster, 1966, p. 150) and it is key to Native American identity (Dean, 2003.; Gruber, 2008; Garrett & Garrett, 2005; Garrett & Garrett, 1994; Johansen, 2003; Deloria, 1969; Lancaster, 1966; Landes, 1937; Bletzer et al., 2011). If you are working in the realm of Native American education as a researcher, then understanding humor is a key to understanding our culture, especially since it may be one of the universal characteristics shared across tribes despite numerous other differences (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000). Given that some scholars have said humor is one of the universal characteristics shared across tribes, it is also least discussed, although it is acknowledged among many tribes (Lincoln, 1993). Native American humor becomes important to academic writing to establish tribal autonomy in our research practices. In other words, we are presenting empirical evidence in a manner that is from an Indigenous perspective.

I Googled “famous Native Americans” for this article. I thought the search results were kind of hilarious, and here are a few of my favorites: Jimi Hendrix, Kevin Costner, James Earl Jones, Tommy Lee Jones, Cameron Diaz, Matthew McConaughey, Bob Ross, Elvis, Miley Cyrus, and Chuck Norris. I’m not sure about any other Native American people in the world, but I am not sure if any of these individuals could speak to any legitimate tribal issues, partly because a few passed away. Nonetheless, it goes to show that there are many people who claim to be Native American and when they speak on American Indian issues are often mistakenly viewed as a legitimate representative of Native issues. I am exaggerating somewhat because I do not think anybody in their right mind would consider these famous people as great representatives of Native Americans. However, there is an issue with non-Native researchers who claim to be Native researchers, but lack the experience to speak to American Indian issues. This further supports the need for American Indians to use subtle cultural aspects of our heritage to identify our research as Indigenous work for other Natives to identify Native American researchers.

CONCLUSION

Not all Natives will be comfortable using humor, because we all have different experiences and skills. If you are non-Native you will definitely struggle to understand Native humor unless you are more knowledgeable about Native culture (Dean, 2003); however, Native American researchers may use their humor as a means of communicating western concepts through an Indigenous lens that promotes survival, self-determination, and tribal autonomy of American Indian culture in academic writing. This practice is essential to the prevention of ethnic fraud against Native American communities by promoting tribal sovereignty to the academic community and giving insight to Native American life experiences.

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