

The Lasting Impact of Genocide in America: Historical Trauma, Continued Genocide, and
Methods of Prevention

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According to the Oxford Dictionary, genocide is “The deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group” (Oxford University Press 2019). The term was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin to have a better understanding of the atrocities carried out by the Nazis (Bechky 2012). Genocide became a crime under international law in 1946, and in 1948 the United Nations recorded an official definition in Article II of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* as follows (United Nations 2018):

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

To further contextualize such a heinous crime, and in the continued effort of prevention, Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch, defined 10 stages of genocide ([1996] 2013); classification to create a bipolar “us and them” society; symbolization given to the classifications to further distinguish “us and them”; discrimination through law, custom, and political power; dehumanization by equating members of the other group with animals, vermin, insects or diseases; organization of special military groups in order to plan the genocidal killings; polarization to drive the groups apart through propaganda and laws; preparation by group leaders to enable their forces for the genocidal killings; persecution of specific groups including the creation of death lists and forced confinement; extermination through the rapid and mass killing

of members of the persecuted group(s); and denial of the events through destruction of evidence, intimidating witnesses, and blaming the events on the victims.

When framing the events of the past 500 years in the United States using these definitions and stages, it is difficult to deny that Native Americans experienced genocide. The sheer population loss alone is more than enough evidence; most scholars agree that there was a 95 percent decrease in the population of Native Americans in North America between the arrival of Columbus in 1492 and the end of the 19th century (Plous 2002). This decline is attributed to both the intentional slaughter of Native peoples, and the exposure to diseases and other inhospitable conditions. More instances of genocide were experienced during the boarding school era; from the opening of Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879, Native children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to government-run residential schools (Adams 1995). These children were stripped of their Tribal identity, beaten for speaking their language, and often succumbed to preventable illnesses (Child 1998). It wasn't until the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978 that parents were given the right to deny the removal of their children (Szasz 1999).

There is a lasting and devastating effect of the past among many Native Americans. Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) suggest that the "legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations" is the cause of the problems faced by many Native Americans. Historical trauma suggests that trauma suffered by one generation is then passed on to other generations through biological, psychological, environmental, and social means (Sotero 2006). Mortality disparity rates from 2009-2011 as reported by Indian Health Services (IHS) show that Natives died from all causes at 1.3 times the rate in comparison to all other races in the United States, including heart disease (1.1 times), influenza and pneumonia (1.8 times), kidney disease (1.5

times) and diabetes (3.2 times). Chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, Alzheimer's, and hypertension all had higher rates as well. When compared with any other group in the United States, Native American individuals have the lowest income, least education, and highest poverty rate (Denny, Holtzman, Goins et al. 2005). They have the lowest life expectancy (CDC 2010), and higher suicide rates than the national average (CDC 2007). Among Native youth, suicide is the second leading cause of death, and suicide rates are over three times higher than the national rate (CDC 2018). Non-Hispanic Native American adults are also at a much higher risk of experiencing feelings of psychological distress, poorer overall physical and mental health, and unmet psychological and medical needs (Barnes and Adams 2010). Though there has been increasing research in the field of historical trauma among Native Americans and means for healing (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, et al. 2011), current literature lacks consideration for ongoing events of genocide, or possible methods of prevention.

A 2017 report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated that Native American women suffer from the second highest homicide rate in the United States (Petrosky, Blair, and Betz et al.). According to data from 1999-2002, Natives were the victims of violent crimes at more than twice the rate of all United States residents, and 88 percent of violent crime committed against Native women was committed by non-Native perpetrators (United States Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs). Data gathered by Indian Health Services (IHS) from 2009-2011 showed that Natives died from assault at 2.1 times the rate of all United States races. And, a study conducted in 2017 found that 38 percent of Natives had reported that they or family members had experienced violence, 34 percent had been threatened or harassed, and 15 percent said they had avoided seeking health care because of anticipated discrimination (Findling, Casey, Fryberg et al.).

In 2016 alone there were nearly 6,000 reported cases of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls, yet only 116 cases were logged by the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). Despite these staggering statistics, the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) has not been seriously addressed by many law enforcement agencies until recently. In 2017 the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that Department of Justice "did not know the total number of Native American victims who received services under human trafficking grant programs" (United States Government Accountability Office). A course providing specialized and detailed investigative tools for agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs working exclusively in Indian Country wasn't created until 2016 (Johnson 2018). There has been progress with "Savanna's Act", a bill that requires the U.S. Department of Justice to strengthen training, coordination, data collection and other guidelines related to MMIWG cases. Savanna's Law was introduced in 2017 after the brutal murder of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, however, it was not signed into law until the fall of 2020 due to funding issues (Flores 2020). The MMIW crisis is an ongoing event of genocide enabled by the continued dehumanization of Native Americans, which is a direct result brought about by the attitudes of color-blind racism and the perpetuation of outdated or overly sexualized conceptions of Native Americans.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked a new era in the United States; not a post-racial society with equality for all, but rather a society of implicit bias and color-blind racism. Color-blind racism is "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017), a new and more subtle, yet equally damaging set of attitudes and behaviors. Bonilla-Silva framed color-blind racism within four major concepts; abstract liberalism (opposing affirmative action), naturalization ("segregation is normal because they do it to themselves"), cultural racism ("Black

people have too many babies”), and minimization (“it’s better now than in the past”). Though he was centering his work on the Black/White binary in the United States, Bonilla-Silva’s concepts of color-blind racism apply to Natives. Data from the RNT study supports the concepts of color-blind racism applying to Natives with 53 percent of Americans believing that Natives receive benefits simply for being Native, and 32 percent of the country strongly agreeing that the “past is the past” when it comes to the tragedies suffered by Natives (First Nations Development Institute and Echo Hawk Consulting 2018).

Further compounding the issue of color-blind racism is the fact that Natives are incredibly underrepresented in many domains of contemporary life. Fryberg and Stephens (2010) contend that Natives have become “invisible.” This is seen in the constant “othering” of Native peoples, an active, insidious means of erasing them from the narrative. The most blatant and recent example was CNN labeling Natives as “Something Else” in an Arizona exit poll during the 2020 Presidential Election coverage (Zornosa 2020). When there is visibility, it is almost predominately images of the past. A team of researchers conducted an image search on Google and Bing using the terms “American Indian” and “Native American” and examined the first 100 results for each. 95.5% of the images on Google and 99% of the images on Bing were historical representations of Natives (Leavitt, Covarrubias, and Perez et al. 2015).

And if the images are not ones of the past, they are often problematic in other ways. Two stereotypes applied to Native people are pervasive and have been perpetuated through time by Hollywood and the media: the Red Savage and the Noble Savage. The Red Savage has no redeeming qualities; they are bloodthirsty seekers of war and violence. Because they can never be redeemed, they must be exterminated. Native mascots celebrate the Red Savage stereotype, with their war cries and warrior imagery. The Native mascot issue is one that is widely debated

and most often misunderstood by non-Natives who argue that Native mascots are “honoring” Natives. This argument disregards the impact of these generic, comical, or offensive images. Fryberg et al. (2008) studied the effects of these mascots on Native students and found that they reported lower self-esteem and community worth. In another study, Burkley et al. (2017) found there was an increased activation of negative stereotypes among non-Natives when exposed to Native mascots. Despite knowing the damaging effects, only 39% of the country supports a ban on Native mascots (First Nations Development Institute and Echo Hawk Consulting).

Equally as damaging as the Red Savage stereotype is the Noble Savage. The Noble Savage is one with the nature; they commune with the animals and spirits. Yet it is important to remember that they are still not one of us, and thus they don’t belong. One of the most dominant representations of the Noble Savage is Pocahontas, who Disney likes to tell us fell in love with John Smith, saved his life, and helped bring peace between her people and the White settlers. Historic accounts from tribal oral histories portray a much darker reality. Pocahontas, or her birth name of *Matoaka*, was no more than nine or ten years old when the colonists arrived. She likely only knew John Smith in passing and they certainly were never involved romantically. When she was 15 or 16, she was kidnapped by the English colonists and forced to give up her first child, then was later raped and became pregnant with her second child while being held captive. After marrying John Rolfe, she was forcibly converted to Christianity and taken to England to be shown off, then died on the voyage back; she was no older than twenty-one at the time of her death (Schilling 2017). Despite the truth of *Matoaka*’s life, the romanticized and often sexualized image of the “Noble Savage” remains. A search for “Sexy Pocahontas Costume” on Amazon returns four pages of results (Amazon 2019).

When a society, but especially the dominant culture of that society, believes that racism is no longer an issue there remains little impetus to change or desire to acknowledge the issues at hand. The belief that nothing is wrong with the way things are and that nothing needs to change in the first place perpetuates the damaging stereotypes affecting Native people. If there is no awareness of the truth behind Pocahontas and what the idea of the “Noble Savage” really represents, then there is no harm in major retailers selling offensive costumes. If there is no perceived racism faced by Natives, then the issue of Native mascots becomes not one of how damaging these mascots truly are, but instead of how the teams are “honoring” Native peoples. To deny Native peoples their history, to deny the implicit racism and sexism in popular portrayals, is to deny them of their humanity. When someone is seen as less than human, it is all the easier to end their lives through violence.

The idea of education as an interventional tool in prejudicial attitudes is not new. A 2007 study found that there was a greater awareness of racism and a greater support for affirmative action after students completed a required diversity course (Case 2007). Another found that students reported an increase in awareness of racism after completing courses that examined racism and prejudice (Kernahan and Davis 2007). A study conducted in 2000 found that hearing about someone’s experience with racism increase the awareness of racism in the society (Harrell), and even a 20-minute video was effective in producing increased racial awareness (Soble, Spanierman, and Laio 2010). Further analysis of the RNT data by Brumfield and MacArthur (N.d) revealed that prejudice towards Natives decreased as education increased, and a study published in 2013 (Carvacho, Zick, and Haye et al.) found education to be one of the strongest predictors of prejudice.

Education in and of itself, however, is not a simple solution to prevent genocide when it was once a tool of genocide. Because the dominant voice in education has been that of the White male, the subject matter offered comes primarily from the viewpoint of the White male. Western structures of knowledge validation hold little to no consideration for the validation of any other voice aside from that of the dominant culture (Hill Collins 2000). The experiences of Native Americans are then considered “invalid” and are excluded from what counts as knowledge. Though the dominance of White male academics and their shaping of what is considered “valid” has greatly— and detrimentally—affected curriculum, there are challenges to these traditional views of education. Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the late 1980s from critical legal studies on race issues. It not only recognizes that race is a social construct, but that this construct then creates an inequality which benefits the dominant group. The concept of CRT was first introduced to the field of education in 1995 by Ladson-Billings and Tate. They stated that race remained a significant factor in society in general, particularly in education, yet race was under-theorized as a topic of scholarly inquiry in education. Because of this, they proposed that critical race theory should be used to examine the role of race and racism in education. CRT, however, “does not address the specific needs of Tribal peoples because it does not address American Indians” liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization” (Brayboy 2005).

The better means of challenging the system, then, relies on Tribal Critical Theory (TribalCrit), a theory emerging from CRT because of the unique experiences of Native Americans in this country. What is important to note about TribalCrit is that while it does emphasize the endemic nature of colonization, it also acknowledges the role played by racism. By addressing both issues of colonization and racism, TribalCrit builds upon the foundation of

CRT in education to offer the most useful tools to shape curriculum related to Native Americans.

In 2005, Brayboy laid out the nine central tenets to TribalCrit as follows:

- Colonization is endemic to society.
- U.S. Policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
- Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
- Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge Tribal sovereignty, Tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
- The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
- Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
- Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
- Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
- Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

Using the frame of TribalCrit, education has the potential to serve as an intervention in the cycle of genocide. A curriculum shaped by TribalCrit that recognizes colonization and racism, that accepts stories and oral histories as valid sources, and that emphasizes the importance of Native voices is critical in reducing the amount of racism and discrimination faced by Native Americans. Student learning objectives for one section of NAMS 1100 include some, but not all of the tenets of TribalCrit such as recognizing Tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and self-identification; recognizing the problematic goal of assimilation; and recognizing that Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understand the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

Through Native-centered education, more non-Natives become aware of the issues at hand. This leads to the shedding of the Eurocentric viewpoint endemic to the American education system. By reshaping the Master Narrative, there is a better understanding of why things are the way they are, and why they should not be that way. Rather than breeding bias and prejudice, a Native-centered education creates better allies and advocates. More voices can speak out in unison against inequality, and education can finally be used as a tool of prevention rather than a tool of destruction. The whitewashing of American history can be eliminated at the origin, and if incorporated into schools as early as the primary level, Native-centered education has the potential to create a bottom-up approach to eliminating discrimination and prejudice.

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