

Identity Politics: the Mixed-race American Indian Experience

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Abstract

This paper builds a Critical Race Theory approach to consider how mixed-race American Indian college students conform to, or resist, dominant black/non-black ideology. Current research on multiracials in the U.S. lacks the perspectives of mixed-race American Indians on the heightened disputes of “Indianness,” tribal enrollment, and tribal self-determination. Also under-explored is how mixed-race American Indian persons perceive themselves in racial terms, how they wish to be perceived, and how economic and historical perspectives inform their choices about racial self-identification. This paper provides an overview of the identity politics of mixed-race American Indians at a tribal college and highlights the need for tribal colleges to embrace a growing mixed-race population through self-determination education policies.

Through an inescapable web of images and language, society labels multiracial people, reaching a point where they come to internalize and use these labels themselves. Racial categorization operates at the level of perception. We learn to “see” race and assign people into racial groups. Multiracial people are sized up, or “racially measured,” as people try to decipher where they fit within the existing racial categories and hierarchy. “What are you?” is a question most multiracial people have been asked. For example, President Barack Obama, the son of a

black Kenyan father and white U.S. mother, is biracial, but the media labels him, monoracially, as black. However, not all multiracials experience racial measurement in the same way.

Similar to historical governmental policies and laws that determined the (monoracial) “one-drop” rule for blacks, current policies rely on blood quantum for federal tribal recognition or tribal enrollment and are subject to similar power dynamics. For example, Pevar (2004) states “To be considered an Indian for federal purposes, an individual must have some Indian blood; consequently, a non-Indian adopted into an Indian tribe cannot be considered an Indian under federal law” (p. 19). The most common blood quantum requirement is one-fourth. Some tribes require as little as one-thirty second degree of blood. Although Congress has limited few tribes in their enrollment decisions, tribes have authority to determine who is a member for tribal purposes, but not for state or federal purposes. Some tribes only require evidence of lineage created when the tribe became federally recognized. Under federal law, the federal government determines a tribe’s membership eligibility for economic resources. Because blood quantum is used as a device to categorize people based on the power structures of “whiteness,” racial and economic survival are based on blood quantum, and blood quantum further asserts and assigns racial labels (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009, Leonardo, 2005, Leonardo, 2002). As blood quantum continues to play a role in tribal enrollment and access to economic resources, such policies have widened the gap between acknowledged members and non-acknowledged members.

Tribal sovereignty does not shield a race group, above all mixed-race American Indians, from the social and political structures of the legacy of white supremacy. Due to the political nature of certain mixedness and phenotypic features being grounded with colorism, there is an intimate connection to the layers of a multiracial reality and how certain mixedness then can be

viewed as a symbolic form of material value (Hunter, 2006; Lee, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Montgomery, 2010; Pulera, 2002; Texeira, 2003). It is important to consider how identity politics of the one-drop rule and blood quantum policies defines “Indianness” of a mixed-race American Indian.

In the early 1980s, the Cherokee Nation began discussing whether the Cherokee Freedmen – descended from mixed-race and freed African slaves – should have rights as tribal citizens. The intersection between the fallacy of American Indian blood quantum and the anti-black racist paradigm has to date kept mixed-race descendants of freed African slaves of the Cherokee Freedmen rolls from being enrolled tribal members. The influences of tribal sovereignty and enrollment provide clear evidence of how blackness has been denigrated historically based on racial purity. In 2008, then-Senator Barak Obama disagreed with the Cherokee Freedman decision but expressed support for tribal sovereignty: “Our nation has learned with tragic results that federal intervention matters of Indian tribes is rarely productive – failed policies such as the Allotment and Termination grew out of efforts to second-guess Native communities. That is not a legacy we want to continue” (Smith, 2011). In other words, tribal sovereignty should be recognized as an inherent, sovereign power and not delegated powers granted by acts of Congress. Tribal sovereignty should be viewed as a relationship between the federal and tribal governments bound by treaties to uphold tribal autonomy and more importantly, tribal enrollment. In exercising sovereignty, tribes are falling into the same racial-identification rut that the white power structure uses, and adopting these inherently discriminatory structures in a way that discounter to the interests of at least some of the members of tribal communities, which ought to be resisted by tribes. Hence, the identity politics of assimilation blood quantum policies acts as a utility to widen the divisions within American Indian people. The heightened disputes

of “Indianness,” tribal enrollment, and economic resources normalize blood quantum by reinforcing whiteness as well as influenced the Freedman decision by the Cherokee Nation.

Current blood quantum debates are not only including mixedness or cultural ties to a community but also the divisive problems of how “DNA fingerprinting” is being marketed to U.S. tribes and Canadian Nations as an enrollment tool to define individuals’ “Indianness.” As Tallbear (2009) notes,

Some tribes (i.e., very wealthy gaming tribes that disburse per capita payments to their usually small membership) are abandoning older ways of determining enrollment in favor of across-the-membership DNA testing in order to keep numbers down. (p. 10).

Yet, if attention is now focused on the social and economic status of the racial representation of being mixed-race within the confines of a white racial stratum, issues of race cannot be easily separated from the issues of power that have been historically embedded in society. From this perspective, a multiracial category is not as simple as just “checking all that apply.” For example, if we consider how a white supremacist totality is played out through the use of DNA testing, what are the social and political consequences for being mixed-race American Indian? Will some tribes consider DNA markers as a replacement for the “one-drop” rule for mixed-race with black to maintain a non-black status similar to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma Freedman’s controversy? Further, can DNA markers be used to determine tribal enrollment, free of the influences of a racial hierarchy or setting a new precedent for the federal government to use as a tool to eliminate tribal sovereignty to terminate tribes?

The use of DNA is troubling on multiple levels because of its racialized implications to deliberately design racial boundaries (Tallbear, 2009). The outcome is assigning a material human value to members of different racial groups, an ideology of social institutions that has

served a purpose to reproduce status differences. What is at stake with mixed-racedness is when “Indianness” is defined by how mixed-race people internalize the value of whiteness by upholding a racialized dichotomy, in particular mixed-race American Indian students within tribal colleges and universities. As Delpit (1995) asserts, “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (p. 25). Thus, it is important to examine how schools as social institutions reinforce and reproduce white spaces (Allen, 2006). As Cummins (1996) argues, “Schools reflect the values and attitudes of the broader society that support them and students’ ethnic identity can be endangered during this process of devaluation at school” (p. 3). And, even more so, the theoretical, conceptual, and pedagogical experiences related to the mixed-race experience within tribal colleges and universities, such as the identity politics of blood quantum and “Indianness,” influence shifts or changes for mixed-race black and mixed-race with white students’ racial identity choice (Montgomery, 2010).

This paper builds a Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to advance our understanding of the multiracial ideology for how the reality of “whiteness” influences the meaning of one’s “Indianness” as a mixed-race American Indian student within tribal colleges and universities in three ways. First, I will provide a historical context for American Indian assimilation and self-determination. Second, I will discuss current research on multiracials in the U.S. Finally, I will use evidence from a qualitative study and critical race tenets to examine racial identity choice of mixed-race American Indian students at a tribal college (Montgomery, 2010).

Legacy of Federal American Indian Policy: Assimilation and Self-determination

The impact of how “Indianness” is defined, negotiated, and asserted was shaped by forces of assimilation through federal American Indian policies that created an overall sense of identity survival. The first was the desire by the federal government to take land for white settlement (Pevar, 2004). The second was the perspective that assimilating into white society would provide a solution to end poverty among American Indians (Pevar, 2004). Some American Indian communities that resisted assimilation and refused to give up their communal society lacked the financial resources to purchase the necessary resources for agricultural ventures – equipment, seeds, and cattle – to become ranchers and farmers. Many American Indians sold their allotments to white settlers or lost their land due to the inability to pay state real estate taxes. As a result, “of the nearly 150 million acres of land that tribes owned in 1887, less than 50 million acres remained in 1934 when the General Allotment Act was repealed” (Pevar, 2004, p. 9). The General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act, was passed with an objective that was “simple and clear cut: to extinguish tribal sovereignty, erase reservation boundaries, and force the assimilation of Indians into the society at large” (Pevar, 2004, p. 8).

For more than a century, the United States government continued to enforce assimilation policies beyond the Dawes Act by “educating the Indian” to end poverty on reservations. As Deloria, Jr., (1999) so precisely stated, “Educating the Indians to truth, be it religious, economic, or scientific, was regarded as the duty of the civilized man” (p. 159). A few efforts were well intentioned, but many only exacerbated the effects of postcolonialism. From the mid 1800s to the late 1900s, Native Americans remained among the poorest of the poor. Located in some of the most isolated corners of the country, reservations have often felt more like Third World nations.

Through the legacy of failed federal policies such as boarding schools trying to instill a work ethic based on whiteness, there are now many stories of the brutality of lost identity and language, and “lost generations” that resulted from “educating the Indian.” In hindsight, there were multiple reasons for governmental failure. For example, believing that the American Indian culture and tribal values needed to be assimilated into mainstream white, American culture often resulted in force. The government believed that elders and leaders should be treated like children until they were capable of functioning under societal norms based on white power and privilege. Although assimilation produced various forms of resistance, one form of resistance grew into a powerful political movement during the 1960s. A new generation of tribal leaders coalesced around a policy of tribal “self determination,” which gained support from President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 (Deloria, Jr., 1999; Deloria, Jr., 1997).

One of the most profound acts motivated by the notion of self-determination was the founding of tribally controlled colleges, chartered by tribes and governed by American Indians. The passing of the Indian Education Act¹ in 1972 promised to provide adequate and appropriate educational services for American Indians (Deloria, Jr., 1999; Deloria, Jr., 1997). The act represented a major initiative towards rectifying the cataclysmic effects from centuries of mistreatment and abuse.

Tribal colleges were the first institutions to fully integrate tribal culture and values into their mission statements and day-to-day work. In this new era, tribal colleges believe they must train leaders as well as workers, while providing opportunities for American Indian students to learn about their past, study their language, and practice their ceremonies with pride and a sense of

¹ “Indian Education Act (IEA) – was an amendment to the 815 and 874 impact aid statutes of the 1950 Congress. The IEA established the Office of Indian Education. Also, IEA defined “Indians” very broadly to include communities that did not have formal Interior recognition, and no blood quantum or residency requirements were included which would have limited application of the act” (Deloria, Jr., 1999, p.177).

purpose. Today, there are 36 tribal colleges, and they will continue to evolve as the self-determination movement matures.

Reflecting on the larger social and political inequalities, CRT can be used as a probe to understand the complexities of law, racial ideology, and political power contributing to the postcolonial effects of “educating the Indian” and how such effects are lived experiences at a tribal college for mixed-race students (Crenshaw, Gowanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefannic, 2001). By exploring in depth the nature of whiteness, in particular how the reality of whiteness influences the meaning of one’s “Indianness (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009, Leonardo, 2005, Leonardo, 2002). By looking at whiteness/Indianness, CRT can extract how white supremacy scripts the participation of mixed-race people in both ascribed and asserted racial identifications through six basic tenets:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic in American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993, p. 6).

Schools provide an important environment for reinforcing the importance of race. According to Allen (2006), “As social institutions, public schooling should be understood as a site where the

reproduction of (and resistance to) the white supremacist totality is played out.” Schools use racial information to track academic achievement standards (i.e., cognitive disabilities or proficiency on the grade level academic content) and socioeconomic demographics of students (i.e., food and nutrition services programs). However, in tribal colleges and universities, academic achievement is tied to accreditation and the economic value of blood quantum – private and public resources – specifically for students that are enrolled tribal members. The problem arises when schools racially measure mixed-race students and assign them into a monolithic multiracial typology. Students are thus taught the notion of race as a material symbol based on how they perceive themselves or how they wish others to perceive them (Montgomery, 2010). Although mixed-race students may not view their racial identity as being political, it is important to make known how mixed-race students play a role in the complexities of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Empirical Research

Although the increase in the U.S. mixed-race population has been noted, recent literature has not broadened to substantially include the factors that contribute to the number of ways in which multiracialism can be operationalized based on social criteria (Hunter, 2006; Lee, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Lopez, 2003; Montgomery, 2010; Pulea, 2002; Texeira, 2003). The argument is how the justification of a multiracial category would give individuals an option to choose their racial identity without having to select from a set of prefabricated categories to navigate whiteness. Then, what are the consequences of one’s “Indianness” for who counts as mixed-race American Indian black/non-black?

CRT pinpoints that earlier research viewed the consequences of mixed-race through race essentialist theories, such as the “marginal man” theory, caste mixed-race people as being

“hopelessly maladjusted,” which supports a race essentialist discourse that unions between “inferior” and “superior” race create offspring who are caught between two cultures but who, in reality, was not a member of either world (Stonequist, 1937). Race essentialism reinforced multiracials as problems potentially invading the boundaries of white purity and privilege, as Teicher (1968) wrote of mixed-race with black and white children, “Although the burden of the Negro child is recognized as a heavy one, that of the Negro-White child is seen to be even heavier” (p. 250). Race essentialist notions reinforced stigmas of mixed-race as “the pollution of the purity of both races” (Thompson, 2005). Hence, the growth of the mixed-race population should not be mistaken for our alleged “colorblind” era, because race remains a primary lens through which Americans perceive one another as socioeconomic and political representations (Omi & Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2005; Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006). The colorblind ideological approach proclaims that we should not notice differences among multiracial people. In fact, from this perspective, paying attention to the realities of the color line would be deemed racist. Yet, in everyday realities of race, whites tend to be more accepting of those who appear whiter.

Later research portrayed multiracials as feeling forced to choose one racial identity for themselves, but feeling they must also justify their identity choices to society (Nakashima, 1996; Williams, 2006), whereas monoracial individuals are rarely faced with the prospect of having others disagree with their racial identity choices. For instance, a monoracial white individual who self-identifies as white will rarely have others question his or her choice, but a biracial white/black individual who self-identifies as white will encounter not only questions about his or her identity choice, but also challenges as to whether he or she really belongs in the chosen group. The argument is that being required to justify their identity choice to others forces

multiracial individuals to question their own judgments about their membership in the group.

However, since then, the tone for multiracial politics has changed.

Recent research has focused on how multiracial individuals, in particular, are in positions to choose between many different identity options or having a fluid identity that challenges monoracialism and discourages racism (Root, 2003; Zack, 1993). Research of this framework coined mixed-raced as a “right” of a person to identify and be recognized as mixed-race (Dalmage, 2003; Root, 1996). This perspective problematizes the rationalization for a mixed-race identity without consideration of the larger social and political significance of biological context of race, such as “who is white(r) and who is not white” (Spencer, 1997; Spencer, 2006; Spickard, 2003; Texira, 2003, p. 33). However, through a lens of a black/non-black ideology, the rationalization for a mixed-race identity and its representation can be perceived as “whitening” oneself and distancing oneself from a lower racial caste. As Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2006) predict that the expanding boundaries of whiteness will in the next few decades include “traditional Whites, new White immigrants, assimilated Latinos, some light skinned multiracials and some Asian Americans” (p. 33). Generally speaking, the bottom line is that a mixed-race identity does not dislodge white supremacy, but it does re-create quasi-new racial strata (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006; Spencer, 1997; Spencer, 2006; Spickard, 2003).

Qualitative Study: Mixed-race American Indian Tribal College Students

In this case study, mixed-race students who identified as American Indian or acknowledged American Indian ancestry were interviewed at a tribal college in New Mexico in 2008-2009. At the time of the study, 513 students were enrolled, representing 83 federally recognized tribes and 22 state recognized tribes. Mixed-race students were asked to discuss, in 9 group sessions during the spring semester, their lived experiences that influenced their racial identity choices. The

sample of participants represented mixed-race students from *various* tribal communities. In an eight-month time period of the study, 9 participants were interviewed and participated in group sessions. Of the 9 total in the sample, 2 were male, 7 were female; 3 were American Indian/white, 2 were black/white/American Indian, 3 were Hispanic/white/American Indian, and 1 was Hispanic/American Indian. To protect the anonymity of each student, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Interviews with students indicated the use of a particular type of race discourse between those who identified as black/Native American and non-black/American Indian. As their experiences revealed, the one-drop rule and colorism was present in how blood quantum and cultural authenticity was socially practiced. Kathy, a black/American Indian participant describes her experience:

I think phenotypically is like obviously they say, ‘She’s a black girl.’ Here...at this school...It’s kinda like...’Oh...you can’t be Native...you are part black or you are black or whatever...you are pretending or you couldn’t possibly be’ (Montgomery, 2010, p. 102).

Kathy’s comment highlights the difficulties of how her “blackness” shaped her “Indianness,” but even more so, how her racial representation is perceived on campus. Not only is she viewed as being black regardless of her mixedness, she is also not accepted into a Native group membership. Logan, a white/American Indian student provides an additional example of the discourse surrounding colorism and hypodescent.

My aunt has three mixed children all from three separate black fathers...my aunt’s mom still has derogatory comments about black people in the presence of her grand-babies (Montgomery, 2010, p. 101).

As their experiences revealed, blackness affected racial identity in ways not conveyed through

blood quantum, meaning that the “one-drop” rule seemed present in how blood quantum and cultural authenticity was socially practiced. The reality of blackness cannot be easily separated from the issues of power that have been historically embedded in society, where “Indianness” is often exoticized, whereas “blackness” is denigrated. Tony, a black/American Indian participant, acknowledged that there was an obvious difference in how he is perceived on campus when compared to non-black mixed-race people, as he notes his experience of “blackness:”

On campus or in class or anywhere, white is still viewed as being some sort of access. And to be mixed with white and have obvious white features...then they will have a different experience versus me. And in class, I’m often just totally disregarded, but a person that I know is mixed...it’s obvious they are of mixed background and with white heritage...their input in class seems more important. It’s as if it’s ok for them to participate in the discussion but I don’t fit the part...too non-Native looking (Montgomery, 2010, p. 118).

Authentic Indianness is not simply about purity. It is also about what type of “impurity” is recognized and excluded. In mixed-race American Indian identity, blackness – unlike whiteness – is treated as something to be denigrated and pushed away (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009, Leonardo, 2005, Leonardo, 2002). Being black/American Indian mixed-race threatens the definition of “Indianness” in that it moves its association closer to that of blacks and away from non-blacks. This move occurs within a dominant dichotomizing racial structure, where the poles are black and white whereas everything else is defined on that continuum. In this way, race politics, both within and between races, can determine one’s experience of racial in/authenticity. Society teaches us to categorize people so we understand who they are, what stereotypes they fit into and more importantly, one’s racial status. For

example, Jennifer, a product of Puerto Rico's Spanish, Indigenous, and African *mestizaje* identifies as Taino (Native) and Hispanic, indicates how societal norms assign "whiteness" a higher value in a non-white group.

The way I kinda see it...uhm...we still have that way of looking at people...you look at their appearance. Like if we see...uhm...like a black Native as opposed to a white Native and I think people still see white people as...uhm...like this symbol of power and strength because of that fact that they are majority.

But we see the white person as more of a symbol of authority than we do the black person (Montgomery, 2010, p. 111-12).

Jennifer's comments indicate that the history of mixedness in the black race has not elevated their status out of the basement. In fact, a substantial number of blacks have both white and American Indian ancestry. In New Mexico, *Nativeness*, while denigrated and demonized, was not treated with the same level of repulsion as blackness (Nieto-Phillips, 2004).

An example of how the "one-drop" of blackness is not applied to non-black mixed-race students includes a fair-complexioned participant from northern New Mexico, Amy, who understood the advantages of "whiteness" and how her mixed-race identity choice could determine her social status.

I was always taught to be proud of who I was. So, maybe I even had a sense of like superiority...cause I'm Spanish, Native, and white. Cause I guess they [whites] seem to have a sense of superiority (Montgomery, p. 114).

Although Amy claims a non-white ancestry, her claim to whiteness has left her with the realization that she has a sense of superiority over those who have no claim to whiteness (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009, Leonardo, 2005, Leonardo, 2002). Claiming

whiteness so as to gain advantage over others happens at a structural level and is, of course, nothing new. However, self-labeling in New Mexico stems from relatively higher status people wanting to be considered more Spanish than Mexican, or, that is, closer to white. Furthermore, the one-drop rule never applied to “Hispanicness;” instead class, race, and social status were the mixed complexities that were at play. For example, Anthony, Hispanic/white/American Indian mixed-race explains,

People don’t understand that difference between Hispanics and Mexican...’cause there is a big difference. They always assume that I am white...always (Montgomery, 2010, p. 115).

And since New Mexican Spanish identity has been constructed in conjunction with the need for higher status to attain whiteness, this further highlights how one’s identity choice is connected to the denigration of certain raced people. Just as blood has become a signifier for American Indian racial and cultural identity, a non-white group identifying as white, or mostly white, Hispanics prompt a resurgence of a racial ideology discourse that further embraces certain races as having material wealth and higher social position. However, since there is a large group that identifies as white and Hispanic in New Mexico, this can be seen as a lens to expand the boundaries of “whiteness” for certain groups or members within a certain group, while continuing to disenfranchise other non-white raced groups. For example, Anthony describes his mixed-race experience as,

People often just assume that I am white, but I’m Hispanic. But because I look white, I’m often judged different from the rest of my friends who look Native or Hispanic (Montgomery, 2010, p. 122).

Anthony’s perspective ignores the racial reality of privilege associated with phenotypically “looking white.” His view that being “mixed” is a chance to float freely between and among

various groups stands in stark contrast to those in this study who have been denied such an option.

But the larger picture is how the value of whiteness as a symbolic factor of race is an inroad for mixed-race with white and phenotypically light-complexioned students. And the absence of discussing why lighter-skinned mixed-race students are not questioned about their “Indianness” to the degree dark-skinned mixed-race students opens up the reality of a black/non-black ideology over what counts as “Native” is as much as a problem of internal racial politics anywhere else. To hone in on the real problem, the issue is not just about the cultural and traditional perspective of self-determination at a tribal college; it is how to account for the historical and contemporary workings of race when it comes to notions of in/authenticity of “Indianness” through a black/non-black ideology. This means that mixed-race with black individuals are often forced to live within color boundaries created by the social construction of race. They are denied access to non-black identity, and thus higher social status.

In this study, mixed-race student experiences were based on either inclusion or exclusion of authentic versus inauthentic “Indianness.” Other contributing factors for a black/non-black ideology of mixedness positioning a person on one side of the line or the other included what race each student seem to identify with most closely (i.e., phenotypically, socially, and politically). For example, a student’s mixedness (i.e., white or black mixedness) such as mixed-race with white and phenotypically white features provided opportunities for students to negotiate within the white realms of privilege. In contrast, those with black mixedness continued to experience substantial disenfranchisement and alienation, marked primarily as outsiders. Because race is used as a device to categorize people based on power structures of “whiteness,” the need to racially and economically survive base on blood quantum will further assert and

assign racial labels (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2005; Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009, Leonardo, 2005, Leonardo, 2002). More importantly, it will widen the gap between acknowledged members and non-acknowledged members to group association as American Indian. As blood quantum continues to play a role in the woven fabric of tribal enrollment and access to economic resources, then the divisions between different mixed groups will heighten the strife of race dynamics. In this way, blood quantum, once internalized, operates as a wedge between American Indian people, drawing status distinctions and lines of membership.

There is much reason to believe that the notion of blood quantum has been normalized at the tribal college in this study, for example, as one of the participant notes

We also had two guest writers come to class...one of our students on campus asked them if they were full blood. And I looked at my teacher and I said, 'Oh my god.' Because you know, not only does this happen from outsiders but also it happens from insiders. But for students on this campus to question if someone is full blood is just recreating a stereotype of who is worthy of saying that they are Indian and who is not (Montgomery, 2010, p. 140).

What other racial group subjects itself so openly to questions about racial biological lineage? And, while it can be argued that American Indian people have little choice in that matter because the U.S. Government is the driving force behind blood quantum, there is also an element of complicity. What makes blood quantum so enticing is that it is a way to dole out relative power and privilege within the Native community. This is done not only by the U.S. Government, but also by American Indian peoples themselves, in part, through the practice of colorism and interethnic racism. If a person is not allowed into group membership based on lacking the appropriate blood quantum value or phenotypic features, raced people with accepted group

membership are indeed active participants of a racial hierarchy. For example, the concept of American Indian group membership being determined by blood quantum dictates a person's access to cultural and traditional practices that often defines one's tribal connection and group association as an insider versus an outsider. And in certain situations, one's mixedness determines if group membership will hold a certain value. Yet, reaffirms the realities of the power structures that uphold raced categories. Neither the politics of blood quantum nor the myth of tribal sovereignty can create immunity of a raced group from social and political power structures of a white supremacist legacy, particularly under government policies and laws.

Discussion

As blood quantum becomes the deciding factor for authenticity of one's "Indianness," the power structures at play will then determine the non-existence of "Indianness" as more tribal communities are becoming generationally mixed-raced. The overarching issue is to dismiss white social and political structures, while decolonizing the construction of the desire to attain whiteness. This will be difficult to do when the internal structure of American Indian communities and tribal colleges are stratified by colorism.

The differences participants in this study described in how they were viewed and treated by others were related to varying awareness about the experiences of mixed-race people and the operation of race more generally. This suggests that rather than challenging race as we know it, mixed-race people have a racial position based on their racial identity representation within the larger society. However, the role of racialization at tribal colleges played a significant factor in upholding a black/non-black ideology of mixed-race students. First, as a tribal college with a

strong history of focusing on self-determination, Cliff View College² did not institutionally act in ways that are compatible with the meaning of self-determination. Sadly, it did not appear to critique the racialized experiences of black/American Indian mixed-race students in its day-to-day operations. By continuously allowing white supremacist notions as the gatekeeper to devise opportunities to instill internalized racism, a tribal college that was built on self-determination is continuously institutionally assimilating the meaning of whiteness and bestowing more privilege on those who serve the larger political interest of whites (Allen, 2006; Bell, 1995; Tatum, 1997). Self-determination and the elimination of racism, including colorism and featurism, must be co-extensive. Submission to the value of lighter skin is in no way a form of self-determination. Tribal colleges and other institutions should be interested in learning more about the impact of schooling influences on mixed-race identity choice when classroom, campus, and peer pressures assert and assign certain mixedness to a particular group. If for no other reason, tribal colleges, as a new form of self-determination in comparison to historically black colleges and universities, will want to attract, retain, and graduate this growing population of students.

Also, the larger structures of racism manifested through the discourse around defining one's "Indianness." There is a contradiction in that on one hand whiteness exoticizes "Indianness," but on the other hand, as seen from a "macro" perspective, whites need allies, including even those who become defined as "Native," to maintain power. This assimilation of white privilege is often invisible and unacknowledged by tribes. Their participation as oppressors is clouded. And, they show little willingness to be empathetic towards the symbolic, material value of the layers of brownness and for the most part, blackness in their midst. Instead, these acts of internalized racist ideology fragment and divide raced groups while also create rank-ordered, caste- like structures. Those with a specific mixedness have a group inroad to

² Cliff View is a pseudonym for the name of the tribal college.

“Indianness,” unlike others, which only serves the larger political interests of whites in that it reifies the condition where whiter and more European looking and sounding bodies are assigned higher value (Allen, 2004; Bell, 1995; Tatum, 1997).

Even more troubling is how a mixed-race reality is neither fluid nor does it simply improve race relations. The perspective of mixed-race participants most often upheld the notion of “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo & Smith, 1998). When comparing mixed-race with black participants to the meaning of “Indianness” through a white lens of influence, Bobo and Smith (1998) pinpoint that “laissez-faire racism is based on cultural inferiority” (p. 186). And with cultural superiority having an economic and political value, the opposite, cultural inferiority, is then based on “a historical analysis of the changing economics and politics of race in the United States” (Bobo & Smith, 1998, p. 187). Race has been defined and positioned as an economic and political tool within a racial hierarchy. For that reason, a mixed-race with white person enrolled as a member in a state or federally recognized tribe has both an economic and political value. However, the opposite of cultural inferiority, is then based on “a historical analysis of the changing economics and politics of race in the United States” (Bobo & Smith, 1998, p. 187). As a result, a mixed-race with white person enrolled as a member in a state or federally recognized tribe has both an economic and political value that influences the definition of one’s “Indianness.” The concept of “laissez-faire racism” is applied not only to people who are raced as monoracially black, but also people who are mixed-race with black with specific phenotypic features. Nonetheless, this provides a more adequate lens of the influencing factors of how certain mixedness upholds a black/non-black ideology and why one’s “Indianness” being mixed-race with black is raced as culturally inferior to mixed-race with white.

Consequently, how a mixed-race person chooses to weigh his/her racial identity representation defines *who* will bear the burden of being powerless for *whom*. Therefore, there is a need to increase the perspectives of mixed-race American Indians on the heightened disputes of “Indianness,” tribal enrollment, self-determination and how economic resources normalizes blood quantum by reinforcing whiteness. It is important to provide a multi-layered, historical perspective for how mixed-race American Indians may view their racial identity choices as being political due to how the legacy of the “one-drop” rule define being mixed-race with black. Through the use of a CRT lens, one may see how the historical context of mixed-race around the “us” and “them” dichotomy can be asserted and assigned, but more importantly, how a rationalization for racial identity choice is political, in particular within the realm of identity politics. To trace the complexities of how the rationalization and representation of racial identity choice is based on how a mixed-race person perceive themselves or how they wish to be perceived. An overview of the identity politics of mixed-race American Indian college students within a tribal college learning environment surfaces why there is a need for tribal colleges to re-evaluate how to embrace a growing mixed-race population through self-determination education policies.

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