

# Trickster Discourse and American Indian Identity in Counselor Education: A Critical Phenomenological Inquiry

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*Abstract: In this qualitative phenomenological study, authors explored an American Indian student's experiences of colonization within a master's counselor education program. Interviews were conducted with one participant that met criterion sampling. Findings outlined counselor education's assimilative capacity and Indigenous resistance to assimilation. Themes included Confronting the Threat and Being Too Indian. Authors discussed implications for counselor educators and multicultural education specifically.*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature regarding racial identity is abundant in the fields of psychology and educational research (Shin, 2015; Sue & Sue, 1990, 1991; Cross, 1995; Kim, 1981; Ruiz, 1990; Helms, 1995; Garrett & Pichette, 2000). The APA defines racial identity as one's sense of being a part of a racialized group (2023). This identity can be contextual and fluid (APA, 2023). For example, a mixed-race person may identify as Black in one setting (or point in their life) and mixed in another. Within the helping profession, previous research has focused on the *development* of racial identity and the clinical implications of it (Sue & Sue, 1990, 1991). There are disparities when it comes to who generally participates in studies regarding minoritized racialized identity development. Much of the literature includes participants identified as African American/Black, Latino/a/x or Hispanic, and Asian (Watson, 2009; Shin, 2015), but research on American Indian (AI) identity development is sparse.

AI identity is a complicated and contested topic both within and without Indian Country (Weaver, 2001), a notion that most non-Indians misunderstand or remain ignorant of (Champagne, 2010). AI racial identity is unique for AIs in that it is tied to legal membership, or *enrollment* in a tribal nation (Brayboy, 2005; Champagne, 2010). Membership is controversial

among AIs as some tribes have stricter membership laws, requiring one fourth or more *blood quantum* from one tribe, while others use lineage in considering enrollment status (TallBear, 2003). Differences in phenotype or whether one lives on or off of a reservation can also be a pressure point for lateral violence in which AIs attempt to de-tribalize or ‘out-Indian’ one another (TallBear, 2003; Weaver, 2001). The issue of blood quantum has garnered more attention in recent years for Indians and non-Indians alike and may inform competent understanding of AI identity at large (Ellinghaus, 2017; Champagne, 2010). Given that racial identity is dependent on contextual factors (APA, 2023) and linked to mental health (Sue & Sue, 1990, 1991), understanding how AI identity unfolds in settler contexts like counselor education is vital.

### **American Indian Identity**

Garrette and Pichette (2000) describe five *levels* of AI *orientation* in their model of AI identity in which use of AI language and knowledges determine orientation. *Traditional* AIs speak little English and primarily practice tribal ways of knowing and being. *Marginal* AIs are bilingual and know little to nothing about their tribal ways, but they are not fully acculturated into Settler society. *Bicultural* AIs live settler and tribal ways. *Assimilated* AIs embrace settler ways, and *pantraditional* AIs were born into settler ways but make efforts to return to tribal ways. Horse (2001) situates AI identity within a type of collective consciousness. “American Indian consciousness” is influenced by five specificities, including language, genealogy, worldview, self-concept, and enrollment status (Horse, 2001).

### **Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and Biculturalism**

AI people can differ in nationalism and cosmopolitanism orientations. A *nationalist* orientation stipulates tribal identity be made concrete and manifest in all aspects of daily life, valuing tribal sovereignty and autonomy. *Cosmopolitanism* holds a critical view towards sovereignty and autonomy, pointing to the inevitability of a global hybrid culture. Weaver (2013) wrote that cosmopolitanism seems to tell nationalists to “salute” *East*, insinuating that AIs should acculturate to certain settler ideas as globalization is inevitable. People can be at either extreme of the spectrum or somewhere in the middle.

Extant research regarding how Indian identity impacts academic success and persistence is mixed. Some research has linked cultural traditionalism (i.e., being strongly connected to Native culture and practicing it in all aspects of life; Garrett & Pichette, 2000) to struggles in

settler schooling (Garrett, 1999; Garcia & Ahler, 1992). Conversely, other research has linked cultural traditionalism to greater academic achievement and persistence (Huffman et al., 1986; Huffman, 2008; Whitbeck et al., 2001). Lastly, other research has found Native identity to have no impact on academic outcomes (Bryant & LaFromboise, 2005; Middlebrook et al., 2010). Fish and Syed (2018) note that linking biculturalism to persistence and success is problematic in that it puts the onus of persistence and success within the Native student versus the colonial environment. It also fails to acknowledge the difficulty Native students face when attempting to construct a sense of self and incorporating Native ontologies within an oppressive, colonial environment (Fish & Syed, 2018). Native representation in educational settings has been connected to student success (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015).

### **Assimilation and “Health”**

Many authors frame a bicultural identity as more adaptive/ flexible and, therefore, *healthier* (Sue & Sue, 1990, 1991; Berry, 2005). As with other Students of Color, higher education presents challenges to AI students with non-colonial identities (Pigeon, 2009; Waterman, 2019). Often these challenges are framed as an inability to adjust to higher education (Watson, 2009). Out of dissatisfaction, AI scholars within the helping profession—including first author, SW—have looked to other fields in search of alternative perspectives regarding AI identity development (e.g., AI literature, AI Studies, anthropology, etc.). Gone (2006) wrote that most models concerning AI identity within the helping profession were created by white, settler researchers. These models reflect the researchers’ intended purposes of classification for sake of essentialism and analysis. Whether such models benefit AI people is a matter of contention. When assimilative racial identity models (Shin, 2015) are utilized in clinical practice, pathologizing survivors of ongoing colonization and genocide can result. Those in resistance to colonial structures may be dubbed “unhealthy” or “underdeveloped.” Imperative here is recognizing that this logic calls for AI students to be more accommodating of colonial agendas, even in the face of ongoing settler-colonial violence taking place on college campuses, or be pathologized.

### **Identity and Higher Education**

Critical scholars identify higher education as a perpetuator of colonial agendas and violence that otherizes AI identities (Patel, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Brayboy, 2005; Stein &

de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016; Authors, in review). Within counselor education specifically, this can manifest as *surveillance* (Azarani, 2021; Brayboy, 2004), or “being closely watched in a way that controls one’s identity and actions” (Brayboy, 2004, p. 126). Native students may be forced to hide their identities for extended training periods, including during post-graduate supervision. Jackson et al. (2003) found that AI students experienced both “passive” (i.e., ignoring or singling out based upon race) and “active” (i.e., making derogatory comments about a group) racism in higher education. Most of the active racism “was typically experienced in classes or other discussions about historic or cultural issues” (p. 557), a time when faculty were present and listening. Students with minoritized (i.e., non-white) identities have reported *racial stress*. Racial stress has been correlated with an array of physical and emotional health concerns, including shorter life-expectancy (Berger & Sarnyai, 2015). Experiencing colonial violence like racism impacts AI students *physiologically*, not just academically.

However horrible, such dynamics do not make pitiable victims of AI students. Vizenor (1989) wrote at length regarding AI *survivance*. Survivance (Vizenor, 1989) combines the words “resistance” and “survival.” “Trickster discourse” (p. 187) and survivance can be seen as refusal of settler-colonial narratives that situate AIs in a position of helplessness and destitution (Vizenor, 1989). The trickster in AI storytelling is “a liberator and a healer,” helping the listener to critically think about and laugh about difficult situations (Vizenor, 1989, p. 187). Humorous and paradoxical storying are deeply embedded in Indigenous cultures of Turtle Island (i.e., North America) broadly. Such storying is also used as social commentary (Deloria, 1988; Vizenor, 1989).

### ***Native Students in Counseling and Counseling Psychology Education***

Educational researchers have found racial identity development linked to academic achievement (Watson, 2009) and most studies focus on undergraduate students. Conceptualized as a dependent variable, achievement within higher education has been measured using a variety of demarcations, including grades, motivation, retention, and persistence (Watson, 2009). Research regarding AIs students’ racial identity within graduate-level counselor education specifically is non-existent.

Racial justice and multiculturalism continue to be centered in counseling training programs in the United States, yet Natives remain invisible in educational spaces broadly (Fryberg & Eason, 2017). AI students may find themselves in counselor programs purporting an emphasis on multiculturalism yet face blatant racism and other settler-colonial violence in their

educational setting (Brayboy, 2004; Stare & Wescoup, in review). Such dynamics involve signifiers of social justice and/or claims of decolonization that mask continued colonial aspirations. In such maskings, Native students are tokenized in service of a white neoliberal agenda.

Native psychologists are severely underrepresented in the United States. AIs and Alaska Natives earned less than 1% of conferred doctorate degrees in 2019 (APA, 2019). Begay (2020) notes that a severe lack of AI psychologists practicing and engaging in research leaves the Counseling Psychology field grossly underprepared for meeting its goals of incorporating Indigenous knowledge into training programs. Furthermore, at the time of this study, we found no published research examining AI student experiences in either counselor education or counseling psychology.

## **Rationale**

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of an AI student's experiences of colonization in master's level counselor education program. Our research question was "How are colonizing practices experienced by a master's level AI counseling student?" The goal of this study is to consider the ways one Southeastern Tribal AI graduate student seeks to retain his identity in a master's level counselor education program.

The U.S. settler-colonial project is a land occupation facilitated by the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. One of the objectives of the settler-colonial project is the erasure of AI epistemologies and prohibition of them in educational settings. This article is part of a broader qualitative research study on colonizing practices in counselor education where Stare and Wescoup (in review) explored the nature in which an AI counseling student was coerced into learning white ways of healing to participate in capitalism and the ongoing U.S. settler-colonial project. Findings included the ways in which ontological violence and erasure of Native epistemologies transcend the depth commonly conceptualized as *microaggressions* (Stare & Wescoups, in review). These findings also indicated a need to consider AI identity within the context of counselor education dynamics. Themes pertaining to AI identity were not included in the previously mentioned Stare and Wescoup (in review). This particular article contains those findings and pertains to how counselor education was survived by an AI student.

## METHODOLOGY

Researchers utilized a critical phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis (Guenther, 2013) and incorporated ethical considerations for research with Indigenous Peoples (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 2012). Critical phenomenology is an approach to understanding living embodiment and meaning-making within quasi-transcendental structures (Guenther, 2013). Where classical phenomenological approaches have been criticized for failing to accommodate the historical and social structuring of subjective experience (Guenther, 2020), the placing of individual being before intersubjectivity and social relation (Guenther, 2013), and racialization as it pertains to structural positioning and alterity (Lee, 2014), a critical phenomenology facilitates the documentation of subjective experiences within political and historical quasi-transcendental structures. Race is a socially constructed phenomenon which carries tremendous ontological weight, and its imposed structure shapes the epistemic and subjective experiences of the individual (Guenther, 2020; Lee, 2014). By including structural understandings from critical race theory, post-colonial theory, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing, our practice of critical phenomenology involved a relational understanding of lived embodiment within colonial structures of race and their imposition through educational systems. Specifically, we focus on the racialized ontological and epistemological experiences of being AI in higher education. Our study was both collaborative and critical in that we joined with co-researchers in seeking to shift our focus away from studying AIs and towards more deeply understanding the racialized colonial violence of higher education.

Indigenous scholars have emphasized the importance of Indigenous people/Peoples as research collaborators rather than subjects and the ethical necessity of joint collaboration with Indigenous peoples in research design, implementation, and outcome (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 2012). Similar to Community-Based Action Research (C-BAR), the intentionality undergirding this methodology was to benefit the co-researchers by giving them an opportunity to guide the research process, including the creation of research questions (Hacker, 2013). Authors elected critical phenomenology and accompanying research methods in close collaboration with co-researchers. Authors collaborated with co-researchers in research design with regard to selecting methodology, generating research topic and questions, interview formats, interview questions and approach to data analysis. The lived experiences documented in this critical phenomenology serve as testimony to the anger towards and absurdity of the University as a colonial structure

rather than the more common and detrimental solicitation of liberal sympathy for the plight of AIs (Tuck, 2009).

### **Data Collection & Co-Researchers**

Authors used purposive opportunity sampling to select a small sample ( $N=1$ ; Co-Researcher 2 served as triangulation source) consistent with phenomenological inquiry (Patton, 2014; Vagle, 2017). Smith (2012) writes that research with Indigenous people requires significant relationship-building and a relationship that does not end with findings. Authors and Co-Researchers were previously professionally acquainted, a positioning creating trust and collaboration in the research process and *relationality* (Smith, 2012). The idea for research collaboration arose organically from dialogues between second author and both Co-Researchers about racism in counselor education (Smith, 2012). Sampling was purposive. Authors determined small sample size on  $N=1$  based on Co-Researcher 1's 1) knowledge of tribal ways and language, 2) AI epistemology, and critical race studies. Authors were not able to find another participant that met the aforementioned criteria that Authors also had appropriate relationality with (Smith, 2012). Co-Researcher 2, Co-Researcher 1's father, assisted with triangulation. A  $N=1$  sample size was preceded by previous critical phenomenological research (Guenther, 2013) given Co-Researcher 1's depth of both traditional Native and critical race knowledge and the degree to which Native students are excluded from or do not enter counselor education. Upon obtaining IRB approval from the second author's university, second author conducted 6 in-depth interviews, 1-1.5 hours each with Co-Researcher 1 at his home, spending additional time in his neighborhood and with his family. Second author audio-recorded interviews and utilized a professional service to obtain interview transcripts. Second author led coding, member-checking, and authorship for this manuscript.

#### ***Co-Researchers***

Co-Researcher 1, Jay, was a 34-year-old master's counseling student at a southern state university. Jay is a member of a tribe from the Southeastern United States. He was in his second year of a program focusing on clinical mental health counseling. Jay resided in a large urban area with his partner and uncle. He was raised by his father in a smaller city nearby. Jay was exposed to activism and learned about AI epistemology, ceremony, and language in his upbringing.

Co-Researcher 2, Gray, was an educator employed at a southern state university and also from a Southeastern tribe. He published on topics pertaining to AI psychology, and he self-



identified as carrying a fairly centrist view of AI identity on a scale of cosmopolitan to nationalist. He indicated his son, Jay, carried a more nationalist view. Further details were omitted to protect participants' identities.

### **Data Analysis**

Authors' critical phenomenological data analysis involved Husserlian steps of intentionality, epoche, phenomenological reduction, and transcendental subjectivity (Davis, 2020; Vagle, 2017). First author, a traditional Lakota woman (she/her/wínȟyaŋ), and second author, a white gender non-binary settler of Irish and Western European descent (pronouns: she/her/hers), reflected on their own positionalities within the U.S. settler-colonial project and perceptions of their own internalizations of colonization. First author reflected on how her Lakota identity impacted her interactions with Co-Researchers as well as how data was interpreted. She frequently paused to reflect upon how she unknowingly perpetuated settler ways of knowing such as hierarchical and linear thinking (Jun, 2019), assimilation (Brayboy, 2005), and transcendence over immanence (Deloria, 1972). Second author reflected on her white patriarchal socialization and settler positioning as well as sociohistorical underpinnings of her current collaboration with AI people in certain overlapping abolitionary interests. Authors logged and engaged with bridleing how these internalizations may affect their perceptions of data, a process that continued throughout data analysis.

Authors met weekly for 12 weeks during data analysis. First, they individually conducted multiple line-by-line readings of each interview transcript, highlighted meaning units, and wrote thick descriptions from which they developed preliminary codes (Vagle, 2017). Authors then developed preliminary themes and coding manual containing in vivo (emic) and process codes (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo codes provided labels verbatim from co-researchers' descriptions and process codes offered description of ongoing phenomena. Authors then re-coded all selected meaning units using the coding manual which they further developed and finalized in the process. Authors reached a final inter-coder agreement of 100%.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness is central to qualitative research validity (Vagle, 2017; Patton, 2014). Authors engaged in extensive data immersion including spending extended time with the participant and his father, repeated readings and re-readings of data sets, and verification of findings through member-checking and triangulation. First author conducted member check with



Co-Researcher 1 upon conclusion of completing the preliminary coding manual and verified accuracy of themes and selected passages. Second author triangulated with Co-Researcher 2 regarding findings and received additional contextualizing information which supplemented author's conceptualization of transcendental subjectivity and Indigenous ways of knowing. Authors consulted with other critical scholars and Indigenous researchers in electing research methodology, revisiting potentials for harm throughout the research process. Any harmful considerations that arose were discussed and resolved with Co-Researchers. In one such instance, Authors expressed concern regarding the historical mining of AI communities for resources and academic study (Patel, 2015; Trudell, 2008; Smith, 2012). Co-Researcher 1 dismissed this concern indicating his belief that this study would help first author as an AI person in counselor education, and Co-Researcher 2 expressed his belief in the potential for this study to help other AIs in counselor education as well.

## RESULTS

Authors organized findings into two themes and five subthemes. Theme One: Confronting the Threat described how Jay confronted epistemological violence in his program. It contained two subthemes (Coyote and Critical Thought) outlining the specific mechanisms through which Jay confronted this violence. Theme Two: Being Too Indian described how Jay experienced settler-colonial violence in his program when being his authentic cultural self and the consequences of those violences. It contained three subthemes, White Mask, Laying Low, and Empty Glass. All theme names and passages are directly paraphrased or verbatim participant quotes. Authors organized themes in a non-linear narrative manner reflective of the participant's lived experience. While academic writing often adheres to linear and categorical style, AI epistemologies encompass more holistic micro- and macro-perspectives. These findings may be considered through such a holistic lens, and many quotes of length are left in block format to honor Jay's storying process. Findings are specific to Jay's experiences in counselor education, but his experiences within counselor education reflect larger dynamics of settler-colonialism in civil society.

### Theme One: Confronting the Threat

In this theme, Jay described how he confronted epistemological violence in higher education. Subthemes include *Critical Thought* and *Coyote*. These describe his seeking, finding,

and grounding in cultural identity as well as his methods of cultural survival employed while in his program. As the helping field is grounded in Western, colonial epistemology—primarily positivist paradigms—Jay was expected to operate from such ways of knowing as well. In this theme, Jay described how he was able to refuse such assimilative efforts.

### *Critical Thought*

Jay reported being raised by woke people and militants. For example, he explained how he sat in on American Indian Movement (AIM) meetings as a child. Jay also reflected on his *privilege* in having these experiences as they provided him a foundation for his tribal identity as well as understanding of colonization not shared by all modern [Southeastern tribe] people. Further, Jay described experiencing pain and suffering from internalized colonialism until he found tools to differently engage in critical thought (i.e., debate and critical race studies):

For so many years, shoot, until I was in debate, until I was 25. I was just so angry and unhappy. And I knew things were fucked up...but I didn't know why I was so sad, and I guess I didn't know what to do. Um, I never critically thought about race, and how it's- has underpinnings of everything in America that's been created...and when I did through debate, through Black people calling me out on shit and seeing...oh, I was perpetuating anti-Blackness. I was perpetuating Whiteness. Doesn't matter I have a brown body. I was still perpetuating many of these things and it was hurting me. I was perpetuating against my own being and identity, and so, critical thought got me out of that. It saved my life, from being depressed.

In deciphering his own internalized colonization and colonial positionality, Jay was able to recognize how we enacted lateral violence towards himself and others.

He also described recognizing how the English language itself was assimilative and how critical thought saved him from assimilation into The Colony, which he called “The Beast”:

Um, this language [English]. All these are kind of false things that I understand are not me... I'm one that has been swallowed by the beast. I'm inside the stomach. But I'm also fighting my way to cut my way out of that stomach...And I think that's the only way that we can truly survive within this stomach of the beast, is...questioning, and critically thinking. Critical thought, you know, that saved me, probably from suicide and...or death. Cultural death.

Jay's orientation to colonialism within counselor education was one of resistance and pessimism. He did not see any form of beneficial change coming from white, neoliberal systems like counselor education, hence his frequent cynical laughter. However, Jay did experience growth and optimism from reorientation towards his own Native identity and Ways:

But that's not to say that I haven't gained who I am more as years have went. I've attained a lot of that traditional Ways and Knowledges. I've peeled away colonial leeches more and more...and I think critical race theory has...helped me understand my positioning, my positionality in regard to white systems.

Emotional responses were a driving force in this process of reorientation, and Jay described how critical race theory (CRT) helped him to externalize feelings like anger. This helped him to see his People in a new light and to regain his "power":

And that's been invaluable, man. That has given me so much power and I've been so much less depressed because at first it was just anger, and I knew things were fucked up, but I didn't know how to articulate it, I guess. Not to people, just in my mind. I didn't know how to explain it to myself. You know, my people are drunk. My people are fat. My people die early and are considered uneducated or not smart. And you know, I think a lot of that I kind of internalized until I became versed in critical race theory.

These tools helped him to recognize his own internalized "policing" and to reclaim his identity as a Native person:

I understood that that's not who I was...I believe we each have like this BIA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, like this cop or this BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] agent in our heads. And sometimes we operate from that, like respectability politics, "Oh I need to pull my pants up..." That's that agent in our head. It's also surviving (Chuckles) thing, but so it's helped incredibly in that way. Understanding. I'm more comfortable. Even though the situation hasn't changed, I understand what's going on, and it...that's powerful for me.

Jay was freed from the shame that respectability politics can saddle minoritized groups with and see such social expectations as simple techniques used for access to capital. Even though Jay was still within The Beast, he was “more comfortable” in it after externalizing.

Jay repeatedly clarified his pessimism by remarking that he does not believe that the colonial system will change for the better or cease to attempt to colonize him, but that he finds power in reclaiming himself internally through epistemology and practice of his Ways.

Jay described peoples’ resistance to critical thought by saying “Critical thought is after truth. Truth. Nothing else. Truth and understanding. And people don't want that (laughs) because they have to, it's going to hurt. (Laughs) It hurts.” This played a key role for his experiences in counselor education. Ontological positionality was inseparable from classroom dynamics, and Jay was constantly tasked with interpreting violence.

I believe, that threat is not just physical, it's also cultural. As an Indigenous person, my life has been about confronting the threat or at least understanding the threat so it doesn't harm me, you know? So, I was told from a young age by my dad, by my elders, to not believe everything school was teaching me, you know, 'cause I was singing “in 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” you know? And so I had Indigenous elders telling me that was bullshit. And you know, that white folks try to teach you bullshit a lot. And so you have to be able to decipher, the settler that’s on some bullshit and also useful things that you can learn from anybody regardless of their race.

He described putting critical thought to use through a constant and emotion-laden filtering process. Jay described how his ancestors’ presence helped him to filter out The Colony’s attempts to assimilate him:

There's always that resentment, and it's a good resentment...even when I'm in class...the pessimist in me is always there. My ancestor is always right beside me, and I'm always asking myself, what would my ancestors think of this? Could they even understand this? It's pretty whack that I even can understand this...I'm filtering everything that goes through my brain. Questioning it all.

Critical thought was central to filtering, and therefore, cultural preservation. Jay described the process by saying “as a person of color, I think you're constantly having to be aware of where

the threat is, if there's a threat, uh, and how you filter the threat. Especially if you're trying to decolonize.” Jay described regularly being confronted with messages of his inferiority and attempts at cultural decimation (i.e., discourse around “savages” and technological inferiority), but filtering (i.e., critical thought) preserved him and provided relief.

### *Coyote*

Jay reported his program to be an environment with little critical discourse to foster this aforementioned alleviation, and he described often trying to inspire such discourse through his own contributions in class via his Native *trickster discourse* of “playing Coyote.”

I'll say things that's very provocative on purpose. I'm kinda playing Coyote, kinda tricking 'em. Sometimes I might even say things I don't completely agree or believe in, and I'll just say it, extreme, just to get people out of the sanitized, civilized, white bullshit way of learning that's in college all the time where one guy talks to us for three hours on a PowerPoint, and we all shut up, and we have this banking method instead. I go up in there, and, somebody says something about Native Americans, and I raise my hand and say, "Please don't call me American. I'm not American."...So there's gonna be some pushback to that. But then we can have a dialogue. Then we can have a discussion about what America is, that it was named after Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian sailor. And that was happening when my people had already been here for thousands and thousands and thousands of years with, uh, (laughs) you know, 'colleges,' and systems of being, and were living great.

Jay reported that “playing Coyote” created discomfort in classrooms and that he was often met with anger, and/or dismissed or scapegoated as a result. He described how pervasive colonialism was in his program and on a global scale and his desire to be contrarian to it:

I feel like they feel like I'm kind of a contrary...and I mean that's what resistance is. Hell yeah, I'm a contrary. I hope I am to most things here, because I think most things are messed up on this earth. And so if I'm contrary to it, maybe that puts me in some kind (chuckles) healthy space, I don't know, because this ain't healthy, what's going on. Not for me and my People.

Despite the pushback, Jay also described seeing students exhibit willingness to reflect on unquestioned settler narratives on rare occasions.

“Playing Coyote” was rooted in wisdom, resistance, and humor. Jay described the roles of Coyote in tribal traditions:

I had an elder [Comanche] recently tell me...the Coyote is at the pinnacle of knowledge and intelligence. It's at the pinnacle because he just, he understands the world and everything that's going on well, you know, from that eagle point of view. He understands everything that's happening...none of it matters. It's all ridiculous...So I can become angry and bitter, but that's kinda like whiteness controlling me. And I'm too strong for that. My people have ways of healing that people don't know about, and ways of being that people don't know about. How we kind of escape this is, you know, our laugh. Whether I'm in the stomach [of the Beast] or on the Trail of Tears or whatever, I'm going to laugh. You can't take that from me. We're the funniest People in the world. And the Coyote is someone that just causes chaos.

...The Coyote person will walk backwards, will bathe in dirt, will be a contrary to everything in certain instances. You know, we have clowns. All our tribes they have clowns. Some are called Heyoka. Some are called Yopula...They do different things, and some will be there just to fuck with you. You're not that important. I'm gonna tell you “bye” when I see you, I'm gonna tell you “hello” when I walk away. I'm gonna make you question everything. It is the person...he or she is the person that makes you crazy and think at the same time...will make you critically think. Why are you telling me hello when you see me? This is a good-bye. Huh? What the hell? Well, think about. Cuz this person...we believe those people are, usually, uh, like there's...are actual people, these clowns exist, you know, and they were chosen, we believe, by the Creator, by the Spirits.

Coyote wisdom, humor, and critical thought were central to Jay's self-understanding and survival of epistemological violence in counselor education. He told in a story:

I heard this story once...Creator when he was creating the two-legged, the human beings, it...whatever, I'm using English words and obviously these are gender

constructions and sexist blah, blah, blah, blah, whatever...was creating these people, and he was creating them out of clay, and he was putting them into this like this earth oven. And he said, "Oh, they're all white. The clay is white. I need to give them some color, so Imma bake them for a little bit." And so he put them in the oven. And as he started baking them, a coyote came around, Coyote said, "Hey, Hashtahli, Creator, you better take those out, they're gonna get burnt. You don't want them to be burnt, do you?" So the creator took them out, and they were white. They weren't no good. They weren't done. They're ugly. And so he just threw them in this place that became known as Europe. He didn't want them. And you know he was mad at Coyote, so he kicked him, kicked him, and coyote arr arr arr start running off. And that's when the Creator put them in the oven the way he wanted, the way he intended. And they came out perfect color. The color of the earth here. And he said, "These people belong here. In the greatest place in the world to protect and look over this area of earth." And you know, I've heard that and that's how people were created.

Playing Coyote also helped Jay to respond to microaggressions:

And so that, that's the Coyote, the Coyote, we survive. We laugh at you. Your great-grandma was a Cherokee Princess? We laugh. Like we have ways of laughing, of being. And to me, that's channeled through the Coyote, the ultimate intellect, the troll, the Internet troll. That's the ultimate intellect in some ways. I'm not saying there ain't dumb ones, but to the one that understands it all and is doing that, come on. That's great. Mess it all up. All this is fucked up anyways. Burn it. Burn it by... what, what, what did Joker say? He was kinda the same way, just, just mess with things. I'm not, not saying hurt people physically, I'm saying when all things are ridiculous, engage with it that way. Laugh at it.

It also allowed him to stay grounded amidst false notions of power:

Yeah. I try to, I stepped into that position sometimes. I started thinking this paper called the degree I'm going to get, it's some important, or that I'm, you know, a professor thinks I'm smart so I'm important, whatever it is. And none of it is true. It's all this ego stuff and power things happening and me thinking I'm gaining



power. And so I would much rather slip into the, the clown, the Coyote and assure myself that I'm not important, and that the stuff I'm being taught is ridiculous. And really, this whole thing is stupid. When I die, the trees are still going to be grown. You know what I mean? Everything's still going to be happening. The world will be okay without me. I wasn't even...I heard from Russell Means once that most things in the world, like bees, the Coyote, the trees, anything we talk about, if they died out, we die. The world will die. Will become damaged.

Jay was able to remember that true power lies in the connections that all living things have with each other. The credentials gained in his program were of no value in the grand scheme of things, so he did not allow his ego to be inflated by such white notions of power as educational attainment. In the end, it was all “ridiculous.”

### **Theme Two: Being Too Indian**

In this theme, Jay described how being openly Indian in his program made him a target for colonial violence. The theme also described how he survived it, namely by acting white. He explained how acting white helped him navigate Whiteness as well as the burden and/or risk of such techniques. Appeasing The Colony by acting white allowed Jay access to capital, but Jay questioned what the consequences were to him and his People in doing so. Subthemes include *White Mask*, *Laying Low*, and *Empty Glass*.

#### ***White Mask***

Jay discussed how his lived experiences informed how he navigated whiteness in his program. He described using codeswitching, dulling, or hiding his emotions and ignoring micro- and macroaggressions. Pointedly, Jay also described what he saw as the ramifications of such methods. Jay specifically described wariness around hiding his tribal identity and its potential towards internalizing Whiteness:

Throughout my life I've kind of learned how to maneuver as they do, as whiteness does. In college, in academia, college even, it's the same thing. It never really changed for me...maybe went from conservative to liberal or something. Some slight (laughs) minuscule change. But not me having to constantly put on a white mask for people. And maybe it's a mask I don't even have a choice to take off

anymore. (laughs) Maybe it's one that's just stuck now because I don't remember, I don't even remember my own face anymore. I can't take this mask off. I don't know my language well, so I speak this mask's language.

Jay reflected on the past, how he came to speak English. He reflected on the cost of him putting on the white mask. He wondered if he would have volition in taking it off. He also reflected on the minute differences between liberal and conservative politics.

Jay also used “shutting things off” as a means to protect himself from colonial violences in his program. This was an intentional act of numbing and ignoring, and there were days when he went in as his authentic Indigenous self and got hurt in doing so:

Oh yeah. It changes day to day. Some days I can, I can somehow go in there and kind of shut things off and uh, come out with not too many wounds, but the more... uh, (smacks) (pauses) cognizant I am of things going on around me... the more woke I am to those things, the more I pay attention to them, (smacks) and, operate out of my own being, indigenous, it'll hurt worse.

He elaborated on such pain by saying, “...And so, some days...I go in there, and I'm accidentally Indian. Just a little too much, and I think like a Native a little too much, and I might talk like a Native a little too much, and that's when things start hurting.” He described how being in his program continually reminded him that his People were colonized and what was lost by saying, “That's when the pain comes because that's when you realize, you know, you're not speaking your language in any way, you're not operating in your language, you're not... moving in your language, uh, in your way.”

Jay closed this theme by emotionally discussing his empathy for AIs who adapt to whiteness in order to gain access to education and survive. He also described, however, the risks in adapting to whiteness:

And so I just know that the people that it usually ends up helping, these programs, not that their heart isn't in the right place, but they've usually become whitened. And so the things that they want are the same things that, uh, white instructors have kind of encouraged their whole life. And they- and these students- and these people of color usually have received for it, scholarships, and maybe money, positionings in jobs and success. And they might still have the heart to, "But I still want to help

my people," and that's good; I'm not saying that's bad. That's a good thing to have your heart there. But I still think there- there needs to be a stripping away of everything you are after you get through (laughs) one of those systems, but there's no way it hasn't rubbed off on you. There's no way that you didn't become it a little bit in some way. And that becomes dangerous.

Jay also described the danger in Natives using white ways of knowing to help their communities. He described what he saw as the need for Natives to decolonize and retribalize themselves before entering back into their communities for the fear of lateral violence or perpetuation of colonization. Jay also pointed out how sneaky colonization can be, how it can be unconsciously internalized saying "there's no way it hasn't rubbed off on you."

### *Laying Low*

On the flip side of engaging in a white way, Jay attempted to not engage fully while in his program, to tamp down his affect. Jay described using discretion when to express himself authentically as "laying low." Jay described "com[ing] over to" whiteness to keep others in his program comfortable. He expressed consciously attempting to present himself in a less "threatening" way. He also spoke of the emotional labor involved in doing so:

So that's some of the experiences, just having to constantly come over to someone else's side. And not just language, but ways of speaking and interacting, you don't...You have to constantly be aware that you're around whiteness and you're the only brown kid in the entire class 99% of classes you take. And you don't want to seem scary or criminal or...so you're constantly aware of how you speak, how loud you're speaking so you're not taken as this angry, mean, criminal savage.

He discussed using silence in his classes as a means of just surviving them:

And, some days, I deal with them better than other days. Some days I go in there, and I...kind of pretend I'm uh, just like everyone else, or I'm just quiet and don't, I just kind of try to keep to myself and sometimes those are the best days because I can get away from that space without too many wounds after.

On the flip side, Jay also spoke to the double-bind that being silent put him in. By not speaking up in class, he ran the risk of not participating in his seminars, courses where assessments of competency can rely heavily on classroom discussions. Jay described these places where he was forced to talk for a grade as unsafe:

I think I'm usually the safest when I am allowed not to speak and just sit there and just be. But then, a lot of times professors take that as (chuckles) you're not engaging. You can get a bad grade for that sometimes.

### *Empty Glass*

Jay described the many ways in which navigating whiteness in his program took a toll on him emotionally. He also spoke to a one-way transactional relationship with his program whereby Jay sharing his identity only benefited others. In fact, sharing his identity led to an expectation of doing so, some type of unpaid labor. In explaining these experiences, he used the metaphor of "empty glass":

What ends up happening is I come into the group with my glass half full, and so does everybody else, and of course as always, race will be brought up somehow...And I usually find that the white folks in group are usually, without talking to me or looking at me, they start talking about how... they've had it hard growing up and how people of color have been racist to them and... they start kind of being defensive about, I guess feeling some kind of pressure from my body just being there, so it turns into me kind of defending that... And, it becomes that I give everything and all my water, and the white folks walk out with their glass full, and I'm empty... that's not a relationship. If you can't pour some of your water into my cup, that's not a relationship.

Jay described his requirement to speak for a grade, even when he was emotionally drained and staying silent in order to preserve himself:

Maybe some weeks I don't want to talk. You know what I mean? I won't speak at all 'cause I'm just so sick of it. It becomes hard because of course your White teacher sees you and thinks, (laughs) "Why aren't you engaging?" You know, you come into the classroom with the glass half full, and they always want you to empty it so

they have full glasses, but you always leave with that empty glass. Nothing changes for you; you step out back into oppression.

Jay went on to further describe the futility in attempting to interact with others in an authentic way. Language and/or positionality differences made Jay feel like others could not truly know or understand him. Unless others understood the settler-colonial system (i.e., the Beast) and their role in it, others could not adequately receive him. He could also not constantly remind others of the Beast:

You don't- you can't speak my language. You don't know me. I don't know me. (laughs). So, how can I give me to you? I think there's less of that going on when it's just natives around because we can again alleviate some of those colonial leeches. Some of those are gone in that circle. It still exists, but we're all in the same position. We're all in the same boat. We're all in the same place within that beast's stomach, and we can talk about it from that place. I don't have to... tell you where I'm at... (chuckles) for every hour. I don't have to explain my positioning and for instance, I think one group session somebody said (sighs) they were saying something about education and... how that's how that'll save us all, and all this stuff. And I had to again, go through the story about how my grandpa and grandma were, you know, dragged to Chilocco boarding school, and their hair was cut, and they were taught how to wave and how to clean. Not science, not math, not how to even survive really, but how to become white. And you know, I don't have to explain that to natives 'cause all our grandparents were in that boarding (scoffs) school.

Lastly, Jay demanded due compensation. By constantly being on the giving side of the one-way transactional relationship in his program, Jay wanted payment for his labor:

So, we can start at a place where I can grow, you know. So I think it can be good for white folks to have a person of color in there. Maybe that person of color...you put me in a group again with six, seven other white folks you better pay me. I better be getting paid to be the person in there that's doing all the work for the damn group and emptying my water, my glass so you can fill yours.

Regardless of Jay's pessimism, he also described how hope visited him. He described how he was unsure of being hopeful that positive changes would come from the Beast and his role in making those changes:

I don't know if it's a resistance...But maybe it's a healer that has this thing in my intellectual self I don't believe I have, called hope. And maybe I naturally have something in me that hopes that people will get better. And hopes that my people will quit being oppressed and hurt as much. And some kind of understanding will happen. Maybe there is some hope. I don't, uh, I don't, uh, really I'm not cognizant of, and it just happens. Maybe it's, I dunno, maybe that's whiteness...the disease that's reached me feeling that I need to do that, you know. Caring more than just about surviving for my individual self, but actually trying to give something to the communities I encounter, rather, whether they're against me or not. I don't know. I haven't fleshed that out enough, man. I have to think about that.

## DISCUSSION

Participating and learning about AI cultural capital empowered Jay. He drew on traditional AI teachings, teachings from his upbringing, critical race studies, and critical thought as means by which to navigate higher education and keep his identity intact. Jay called this process "confronting the threat." Traditional AI teachings were employed as Jay engaged in *trickster discourse* (Vizenor, 1989) in the classroom. By playing a contrarian role (like the Lakota *Heyoka*), Jay offered others learning opportunities to think critically about classroom conversations and content. His trickster discourse offered up space to question oft invisibilized white ways of being and knowing within educational settings. Humor was also employed, as Indigenous scholars mention use of humor as a means by which to prompt critical conversation, especially when it comes to challenging white ways of being and knowing (Deloria, 1988; Vizenor, 1989).

"Playing coyote" was a way for Jay to challenge settler thinking by shaking listeners out of the dominant white narrative. In this way, Jay's experiences provide insight into what can happen when the white and Indigenous worldviews come into contact with one another. Vizenor (1989) and Deloria (1988) have written at length about how AIs use their humor, wit, and resistance as a means of, not only survival, but their flourishing. Vizenor (1989) notes that the trickster often prompts "agonistic imagination" (p. 188), prompting those listening to focus on the

story in a new, unconventional way. Deloria (1988) describes the way in which AI people use teasing as a way to correct out-of-step behavior without causing someone public embarrassment. Humor prompts listeners to think differently without directly embarrassing them in a public space. It is vital to note that AI tribes vary in their conceptualizations of the trickster. It is inappropriate to attempt to homogenize the trickster to one typology.

### **Critical Thought and Theory**

Engaging in the classroom with a critical consciousness, Jay described how critical thought enabled him to “filter” out colonial ways of being and knowing. He also explicitly pointed to Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a tool that helped him to see how colonization manifests within himself, his counseling program, and higher education broadly. CRT came out of a response to Critical Legal Studies in the mid-1970s (Brayboy, 2005). Since then, many minoritized groups have utilized the theory to produce scholarship and praxis aimed at institutional change. Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy, and creator of TribalCrit, writes that “educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (2005, p. 429) and that “culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens” (p. 429).

By not swallowing white ideas whole, whiteness was not successful in swallowing Jay. He described how CRT prompted him to recognize how whiteness was internalized. Jay contrasted white ways of being and knowing taught in the classroom to those of his ancestors. Filtering out settler ontologies and epistemologies refracted assimilative schooling within his program, allowing Jay to engage in resistance and *survivance* (Vizenor, 1989). Jay linked knowledge of CRT to lifting him out of depression and empowering him as a tribal person.

Brayboy (2005)’s TribalCrit points to education as an assimilator. Jay was conscious of this and reflected on how such scholarship mirrored his own tribal teachings. He described how his family members explicitly told him not to trust common pedagogical practices and curriculum within American schooling. These practices perpetuate an imperial narrative with aims of AI erasure. A good example of this that Jay mentioned was teachings framing Christopher Columbus as a friendly explorer and deliberately omitting the genocide he inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. He also spoke to how settler scholarship explicitly framed AI peoples as “savages.” Jay described a healthy resentment that he felt towards settler schooling and a commitment to “question it all.”



Lastly, Jay alluded to the danger of AIs returning to their communities with white ways of knowing and being in tow. It is not a new idea that internalized oppression (i.e., whiteness) can lead to lateral violence. Within counselor education specifically, this may manifest as pathologization.

### **The Double Bind of Adaptation**

Regarding the sustainability of such aforementioned engagements in the classroom, it appears that Jay was regularly overwhelmed. Having an “empty glass” while attempting to complete his program likely acted as a barrier to Jay’s success and emotional and physical wellness. Berger and Saranyai (2015) wrote that experiences of racism in schooling are linked to very real negative physical outcomes. Experiences of oppression are bad for the body. Chronic overactivation of the HPA-axis has been linked to many adverse physical and psychological outcomes (Berger & Saranyai, 2015).

Jay attempted to protect himself from such stressors by employing a variety of techniques, but these techniques came with consequences of their own. Putting on a “white mask” aided in Jay avoiding being targeted by colonial violence and allowed him to blend in, but he felt like he was losing his tribal identity in the process. Actively ignoring the violence (micro- and macroaggressions) allowed him to experience less emotional distress, but he was not able to sustain such efforts consistently. Lastly, silence allowed him to replenish his emotional reserves while still attending his classes, but he was penalized for doing so. Jay consistently found himself in a double-bind.

### **Multicultural Counseling**

Multicultural educational practices have been criticized by AIs (Castagno, 2013; Haynes Writer, 2008). Indigenous perspectives are often excluded from conversations regarding multiculturalism and social justice. Haynes Writer (2008) shared a conversation regarding this phenomenon that occurred at a Native American and Indigenous Studies Conference in 2008:

The negativity towards multicultural education and multiculturalism at the conference was accompanied by comments regarding the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in educational contexts or content—if inclusion is not being done by us or from our frame of reference, leave Indigenous Peoples out of the discourse and

curriculum content; otherwise, colonization and oppression are perpetuated. That is, the information regarding Indigenous people must come from what we have to say about ourselves, through our stories and perspectives. As a Native person, I concur with this sentiment (p. 2).

In multicultural counselor education courses, emphasis is often placed on understanding cultural differences and power dynamics pluralistically in order to assess cultural competency. While concepts such as white privilege and oppression are often addressed, colonial positionalities which honor Native Land and Waters, recognize settler colonial structures, and designate non-AI non-Black people as settlers are sparse. Explicit reference to post-colonial and AI epistemological concepts fall outside of the bounds of current competencies and call them into question (Ratts et al., 2015; American Counseling Association, 2014). Of particular import to Jay was the unethical practice of making humans central to the web of life. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the AI positionality and of liminality (Brayboy, 2005) was lost in pluralism. Jay questioned the intentionality behind such courses and the role that they play in alleviating white guilt.

Racial identity development models were problematic here as well (Shin, 2015). Some models within multicultural counseling education cite bicultural identities as the epitome of mental health without recognizing it as problematic (Fish & Syed, 2018). Fish and Syed (2018) ask “Does the college environment permit Native American students to maintain their cultural beliefs and traditions?” (p. 393). The authors also note the significance of Natives’ relationship with education as a means to oppress and erase. The writing of this paper comes on the heels of the discovery of a mass grave of 215 children being discovered at the Canadian residential school in Kamloops, BC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2021). How counselor education is specifically linked to modern efforts to assimilate Natives and commit cultural genocide is not a conversation happening outside of Indian Country.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Jay’s experiences in counselor education illustrates how counselor education can embody assimilative practices seen in education broadly. Curriculums that invisibilize Indigenous Ways of Knowing and being and center Western, colonial ways of knowing and being require Native students to “come over to whiteness” and wear a “white mask” in order to succeed in their programs. As Jay mentioned, there may also be a danger in Native students bringing these colonial

ways back into their communities. As Jay alluded to in his mentioning of boarding schools, Natives have a history of being oppressed by education. Choctaw scholar Jodi Byrd writes that centering access to education in reaches towards social justice can neglect structural oppression alive and well within education itself (2011). For Jay, settler-colonialism and whiteness were structural oppressors that met him upon entering his program, after gaining “access” to education.

It is imperative for counselor educators to recognize that Jay’s stories reflect a healthy resistance to the attempted erasure of his identity as an AI person and the erasure of the First Peoples of Turtle Island broadly. Counselor educators need to also unlearn seeing their minoritized students through a “damage-centered narrative” (Tuck, 2009, p. 415) in which settler-colonial ways of being and knowing (i.e., settler schooling) are students’ emancipators.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

Researchers were limited in this research by multiple factors. Communicating in the English language versus Jay’s tribal language may have skewed the meaning that Jay attempted to convey. Further, critical phenomenology is a western framework. Utilization of an Indigenous research methodology may be a better fit in the future. Audio transcription misses other pertinent forms of data like body language and hand gestures. This study also leaves out many details regarding interactions taking place before and after the interviews themselves were conducted. Those data add nuance and meaning to the interviews. Future researchers may consider the experiences of counseling students enrolled in tribal colleges and historically Black or Hispanic institutions in order to understand how AI identity is impacted in educational settings that are not historically white. This may also demonstrate the importance of activism and praxis to AI identity and critical thought as described by Jay. The N=1 method may also be a limitation. Having a larger sample size may have supplemented Jay’s experiences or provided alternative perspectives. While generalizability is not the goal of constructivist, qualitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018), including more participants that met the above-mentioned criteria for the study may have added depth and variation to our findings.

### **CONCLUSION**

We close by emphasizing how important it is to not to view AIs as victims (Vizenor, 1989). Survivance must be recognized including the way humor for AIs may be indispensable when being

confronted with the absurdity embodied by the university and counselor education. While the larger dynamics may not be changed, counseling professors, instructors, and supervisors can seek to listen, learn, and understand to reduce direct harm to AI students.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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