



WHAT IS TRIBALCRIT?



For many Native Americans, the arrival of Europeans in North America is not an event to celebrate with turkey and pie and cute school plays with children dressed as pilgrims. Rather, it is a tragedy to observe as a **National Day of Mourning** commemorating genocide, land theft, and cultural decimation.

These contrasting views of one of our major U.S. holidays are just one way in which the experiences and perceptions of American Indians and Alaska Natives often differ sharply from those of non-Native ancestry.

National Education Policy Center Fellow **Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy**, President's Professor in the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University, has **crafted a theory** to help examine the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

He calls it Tribal Critical Race Theory, or TribalCrit for short. Although Brayboy developed the theory a couple decades ago, it is particularly resonant today, as Native Americans **disproportionately suffer** from the health and economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic while the nation as a whole contemplates what, if any, racial reckoning might emerge from last summer's nationwide demonstrations against police brutality toward people of color.

TribalCrit is rooted in Critical Race Theory, which was first posited by legal scholars who argued, among other things, that racism is endemic to society. Drawing on fields and disciplines like anthropology, law, political science, American Indian studies, and education, TribalCrit starts with the basic premise that colonization, too, is endemic to society.

Brayboy created TribalCrit to address Indigenous peoples' experiences with colonization as well as racism. His intent was to build a theory that allowed Indigenous scholars to focus on

their analyses of individual experiences and institutional problems and opportunities, rather than being required to explain their epistemological and ontological concerns. It has been cited in the literature over 1,200 times and on six continents.

In an [article](#) in the peer-refereed journal, *The Urban Review*, Brayboy lays out TribalCrit's nine core components:

- 1. Colonization is endemic to society.** For example, the boarding schools that Native Americans were forced to attend were intended to colonize their students so that they were more like European Americans.
- 2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, white supremacy, and a desire for material gain.** Yet often they were justified by moral tenets such as the concept of Manifest Destiny, which posited that God wanted European settlers to steal Native lands, or the Norman Yoke, a term coined by economist Adam Smith to explain that individuals had not only a right but a moral obligation to use "vacant" lands occupied by Indigenous people. White supremacy plays out in school curricula when Native American authors such as Zitkala-Sa are left out in favor of writers honored within the White cannon.
- 3. Indigenous peoples have not only racial but political identities.** Federal laws and rules demand that the U.S. government interacts with Native American communities not just as individuals or racial minorities but as separate and sovereign governments, which politicizes their identities in ways that other racial groups are unlikely to experience.
- 4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.** For instance, Native Americans should have the right to identify themselves as Indians rather than following rules created by schools or governments, Brayboy says.
- 5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.** Indigenous ways of knowing and thinking can be effectively combined with traditional Western education.
- 6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.** This is a concept particularly relevant to education, which has historically been a major means of replacing tribal values with European tenets. In more recent years, American Indians have had more opportunities to teach indigenous ideas, but assimilation remains a pervasive outcome of public education. For example, the American Indian Teacher Training Program, which Brayboy helped found, has aimed to train prospective teachers to help students integrate Native and European knowledge and structures.
- 7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.** Compared to European American culture, tribal cultures place a greater em-

phasis on cooperation. Brayboy emphasizes the need to treat this as a strength and not, as has too often been the case, a signal of individuals' inability to be self-sufficient.

8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are therefore real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being. They serve as a means of orienting others to ways of being and thinking. "You tell them, hear them, and feel them—establishing a strong place for empathy and for 'getting it,'" Brayboy writes.

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change. Brayboy argues against research

with Indigenous Peoples that is not in some way directed by a community and aimed toward improving the life chances and situations of specific communities and American Indians writ large. The research must be relevant and address the problems of the community; there is little room for abstract ideas in real communities.

NEPC Resources on Critical Theory and Pedagogy

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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