

To Challenge the Settler Colonial Narrative of Native Americans in Social Studies Curriculum: A New Way Forward for Teachers

They don't look like Indians to me, and they don't look like Indians to Indians.

– Donald Trump, 1993 Congressional testimony¹

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FOR MANY NON-NATIVE PEOPLE, Native Americans are one large homogenous group. A fairly simple “group” to understand. Indigenous people are commonly presented and understood through long-enduring imagery via movies, advertising, product naming, and mascots. Through these processes, indigenous peoples are labeled, named, and historically placed as entities stripped of their humanity. They are made caricatures. These actions of presentation de facto allow large numbers of people to ignore or opt out of examining the historical experiences, present realities, geographies, and cultural manifestations of indigenous peoples. Accompanied by a dearth of depth and complexity, Native Americans are relegated to tropes of tipis and warriors in the past, and casinos in the present. Never far away are also depictions of Native Americans as savages and nature-lovers.

In general, the presentations of Native Americans have saturated the social consciousness in very particular ways. For non-Native peoples, Native Americans are often positioned as a “group” of

long-held intrigue and historical interest. It is not uncommon that they are seen as artifacts of the past, as a collection of “fossils” for cultural understanding in the present, or even as curiosities. Too often, the idea of the contemporary Indian rings hollow, or even as a myth—as if Native Americans are not “real” unless they reflect dominant society’s sometimes convoluted understanding of who and what they are.

This type of thinking is possible, and even strengthened via the social ubiquity of a normative Native American ideal. The ideal itself provides an interesting corollary of presentation and understanding. Without looking very hard at all, people are inundated with “Native American-ness” through movies, sports, business promotion, and products. In one way, the normative view of Native Americans has allowed for associations of naming and imagery that has legitimized Native cultures as a powerful commercial currency in society. And, over time, has aided in the construction of an idealized Native American identity: a historically placed, Plains, feather-wearing warrior, of few and simple words.

For instance: Want some professional sports gear? You can take your pick...there are the Braves, Indians, Redskins, or Blackhawks. Need school supplies? Get Big Chief notebook paper. Time for a new vehicle? What about a Jeep Cherokee, or maybe a Pontiac? Need butter? How about trying Land O’Lakes? Time for an old Western? How about The Lone Ranger and his trusty sidekick Tonto? Or any number of John Wayne films [insert *The Searchers*, *Stagecoach*, *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and so on...]? Need a souvenir? Doesn’t it have to be a dreamcatcher or an arrowhead? Or maybe even a decorative headdress? The U.S. military even references Native American warrior qualities through weaponry such as Tomahawk missiles and Apache helicopters.

These commercialized examples are of course easy—low-hanging fruit, if you will. And that is *exactly* the point. By minimizing the scope of Native Americans to specific visual representations and constructing limited portrayals as ubiquitous, such presentations become accepted, believed, and strengthened by larger society. The result often time being a misrepresentative view of Native Americans becoming further ingratiated in national discourse by non-indigenous peoples. The commercial use of indigenous people is of course not a new phenomenon. As early as in the 1900s,

Native Americans were routinely cast in oversimplified roles in Wild West shows, or as the perpetual opponent to freedom-fighting white settlers/cowboys in dime novels or through music. Creation of the Native American image has been continually influenced by dominant society's changing understanding of itself. Over and over again, the Native American ideal has been positioned in opposition to "real Americans" by being singled out and separated as "other," in society in general as well as in education specifically.² There is no clearer expression of this ideal than the ubiquity and frivolity of the children's game "Cowboys and Indians," though for adults, too, "Playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American culture."³

Reel Injun, a 2009 documentary about Native American portrayals in 4,000 Hollywood movies over the past 100 years noted that the vast majority were stereotypical in nature.⁴ Movies overwhelmingly depict horse-riding Plains Indians. With little or no other information to go on, one might believe such portrayals constitute a complete overview of Native Americans. In a critique of *The Searchers* (1956), one of the most well-known Westerns ever made, film critic Jon Tuska noted in 1964 that the movie was "one of the most viciously anti-Indian films ever made...The entire film is in effect an argument in favor of killing Indians as the only solution to the 'Indian problem.'"⁵

While indigenous depictions in movies have changed over time, their portrayals still lean toward them as either noble, savage, or groovy.⁶ Consequently, Native Americans are posited as a collection of like-minded groups and enter the realm of myth making under this guise. They have also been mythologized by drawing marked similarities to both ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. Even the early silent movies of Thomas Edison "Orientalized" the dances of the Laguna Pueblo by putting them on display as "the other." Overall, Native American presentation in movies were vehicles for how Hollywood and larger white society needed to see them in order to make sense of their own place in the world, to validate their own actions, and to enact a clarity of difference between the races.⁷ Hence, the durability of long-standing cultural memories sustaining cultural tropes were built on misrepresentation. In lieu of indigenous perspectives, history is rather situated in memory practices that offer the blankets of white perspectives through the curricular structure of settler colonialism.

A Note on Naming

Native American. Indian. Indigenous. Native. As noted by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, all these names can be problematic.⁸ The names attempt to collectively identify hundreds of different groups into one. Issues from racism, to domination, to being named by “others,” project the limitations of the names mentioned above. However, the names are often used interchangeably in academic settings.⁹ There is also no singular agreed-upon correct terminology, largely because “Native people are gravitating increasingly to using their traditional names.”¹⁰ It is with an understanding of these limitations and academic precedent in mind that terminology will engage general naming interchangeably throughout the article with the use of specific tribal names when necessary.

The Climate for Teaching About Native Americans

High-stakes testing environments tend to create an over-reliance on standards-based curricula that follow the historical markers and perspectives of dominant discourse. Students are engaged through public discourse and school curriculum in a construction and, therefore, an understanding of the past that is shortsighted to the perspectives and concerns of minority populations. Indigenous peoples exist in this space of standards learning. As noted by historian Michael Frisch:

We must understand the depth of the cultural symbolism our students and fellow citizens carry inside them long before entering our classrooms, if ever they do. Appreciating the powerful grip of collective cultural memory becomes a necessary first step if we are to help our students to understand the real people and processes of history, to locate its reality in their lives, and to discover the power and uses of historical imagination in the present.¹¹

The limitations of curriculum standards are not up for debate in this article; a growing amount of studies have shown that curriculum rooted in settler colonialism overwhelming privileges white perspectives and, therefore, minimizes the spaces and perspectives of Native Americans.¹² Native American portrayals and placement in K-12 curriculum are stereotypical and trope-prone.¹³ There is a

consistency to their delivery and presentation that creates clear lines of delineation concerning indigenous people and “actual” Americans. In order to confront such curricular limitations within the classroom, the social studies need to be a place that consciously explores the politics of knowledge construction and fully explicates the opportunities to examine the past as “never objective or neutral.”¹⁴

Previous literature in the social studies has highlighted the limitations of Native American portrayals in curriculum standards,¹⁵ explored the grand narratives about and around Native Americans,¹⁶ shown their placement as relegated to within specific historical time periods,¹⁷ and issued calls for critical analyses¹⁸ and anti-colonial examinations.¹⁹

A New Way Forward for Teachers: Why It’s Important

Teachers often do the best with what they have as far as resources and materials.²⁰ Caught somewhere in the limbo of standardized testing, finite resources, shortsighted curriculum portrayals, and limited perspectives of teaching materials is their work reality. What I suggest is that teachers use Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) to frame their engagement of Native American topics in the social studies curriculum.²¹ Theoretically, this move is important because TribalCrit is grounded in the idea of privileging specific indigenous experiences and perspectives as a means to challenge dominant discourses that do not. The inclusion of TribalCrit as a pedagogical tool to engage new possibilities for the teaching of Native Americans in the social studies is also a means of refutation to the constructed Native American narratives that are not oriented toward indigenous thinking.²² Conceptually, this paper uses the framework to explore the avenues in which teachers can leverage TribalCrit in the classroom, engaging students in learning about Native Americans in ways that are atypical of educational resources such as canned curriculums or textbooks.²³ The philosophical concept of curriculum mining will serve as an example for how teachers might utilize the nine tenets of TribalCrit in their teaching. TribalCrit can also be used to shift indigenous narratives toward a more critical space, and to orient teacher thinking and teaching toward anti-colonial Native American paradigms.²⁴

The contextualization of the historical and contemporary Native American experience in the United States through an indigenous lens is not easy. It is a move that relies heavily on teacher agency and ambitious teaching, as well as access to content materials that challenge the typical restrictions of textbooks, canned curriculums, and limited resources that social studies teachers often face.²⁵ Teachers are asked to address the long-standing limitations of social studies curriculum by utilizing indigenous experiences and perspectives to examine a historical past, present, and future that has been typically invisible or stereotypically illustrated.

Ambitious teaching is also essential to teacher success in this endeavor. Faithful adherence to ambitious teaching requires that teachers continue their own learning and understanding of content. From their own growth in content knowledge, teachers are better able to know when and where to challenge curriculum shortcomings through critical examinations with more than cursory attention paid to Native Americans. As a process, ambitious teaching presents well in theory as “it is the interplay of teachers’ deep subject matter knowledge, knowledge of their students, and the challenging contexts they teach.”²⁶ However, invitations are few for educators to openly challenge standard texts or curriculum standards, and yet the need for ambitious teachers to engage this type of work is necessary.²⁷ Accessing indigenous-oriented professional development opportunities, utilizing Native American-generated curriculum materials, and teaching about indigenous peoples throughout the entire school year are but a few ways for teachers to improve their own content knowledge and also offer students’ different perspectives and context in their learning.

For instance, while a focus on progress (especially during times like Native American History Month) is important as a means to highlight individual achievements that have long been in the shadows, it cannot be the whole message. There must also be a place for a curriculum that critically analyzes and challenges the tropes of race and violence that typical curriculum willfully present.²⁸ Building upon previous work on Native Americans in curriculum and standards, my research acknowledges that curriculum standards are inadequate and misrepresentative, and that they are also unlikely to change in overall scope or theme unless teachers find ways to move past such portrayals. Through the use of TribalCrit, efforts

are explored to show how teachers can trouble dominant portrayals of Native Americans for more complex engagement of indigenous histories and stories, challenging the traditional Eurocentric views of curriculum. TribalCrit centers analysis and inquiry within an indigenous paradigm.

The use of TribalCrit is meant as a way for teachers to inject new thinking and perspectives into their teaching about Native Americans. It might be tempting to utilize the tenets of TribalCrit as a way to promote particular curriculum inclusions. Such a move can be powerful, as it can provide voice to topics invisible via common curriculum. But it can also lead to the containment of indigeneity within certain events, people, contexts, and topics, thereby reframing their importance and altering their meaning.²⁹ Importantly, TribalCrit serves as a way for teachers to have students critically assess the long-standing effect and impact of the continual privileging of certain knowledge in the development of dominant narratives. Which begs the important question—whose knowledge is most valued and why?³⁰

The persistent tangential treatment of Native Americans in standards provides consent for curriculum to sidestep the examination of the structural realities of racism, both historically and in the modern context. Within these movements are the continued portrayal of Native Americans in tension with the nationalistic intentions of curriculum standards.³¹ Furthermore, Native Americans in social studies curriculum largely have been decorative inclusions, not included towards any means of purposeful integration.³² Maintaining the status quo of traditional history in the curriculum standards allows the narrative to remain largely unchanged, reifying the dynamics of knowledge as a means of maintaining dominant culture.³³

Working from the realist assumption that curriculum standards will continue to be written in a manner that normalizes dominant society's own views of itself and others,³⁴ this article will explore ways in which teachers can discuss and challenge Native American portrayals in curriculum by utilizing a critical framework written from an indigenous perspective. Acknowledging and understanding the liminal space of Native American representation is tantamount to equipping teachers with the tools to critique, challenge, and complicate the official curriculum standards, and TribalCrit allows this.³⁵

Through the use of Tribal Critical Theory, this article will locate possibilities for ambitious teaching and curriculum mining through

which teachers can address entrenched attitudes and narratives about Native Americans. A similar type of work has been advocated for and cited in *Precious Knowledge* (2011), a film about the Mexican American Studies Program at Tucson High School, where the traditional curriculum was replaced with a social justice ethnic studies curriculum.³⁶

How are Native Americans Represented in Social Studies Curriculum?

Social studies curriculum has become a central area for appropriations of the past. The correlation of Native American depictions in society to curriculum becomes constant through the influence and presence of historical memory. By definition, memory is “a recollection” and/or “something remembered from the past.” Curriculum scholars have shown time and again that Native Americans historically have been given short shrift through limited inclusions and interpretations in curriculum.

The prominence of settler colonialism in curriculum permeates the portrayals of Native Americans and further serves as a guiding light for how American identity is constructed and promulgated.³⁷ Through such acts of replacement and appropriation, social studies curriculum sustains white supremacy as a structural reality of schooling. Even so, there is a need for anti-colonial curriculum to reflect indigenous ideas and thinking that refutes such normalizing work.³⁸ For example, consider a common reality of Native American portrayals in social studies curriculum:

Ironically, First Americans became frozen in time, as no other ethnic group has. Imagine ending the study of African Americans with the Civil War. Imagine never bringing the study of African American peoples into the twentieth century, never studying the Harlem Renaissance or the civil rights movement. Yet this is exactly what has occurred with the study of First Americans in much of this country’s curricula.³⁹

Research has further shown the limitations and outright manipulation of information and context when it comes to depictions of Native Americans in social studies curriculum standards.⁴⁰ Three common issues in curricular portrayals are: (1) the invisibility of Native Americans in post-1830s United States, (2) a whitewashing of Native

American biographies to champion those who reflect traditional ideals of masculinity and American values, and (3) an almost exclusive situating of Native Americans within their own often contentious interactions with white Americans. What these issues highlight is a shortsighted view of Native Americans that reflects a reliance on entrenched stereotypes.

Native American narratives are commonly presented in quite problematic ways as part of a larger colonial settler project that misconstrues the relationship between Native Americans and the United States. Major issues prevalent in curriculum are one-dimensional, caricature-like presentations and an over-reliance on the “savage” vs. “civil” binary that places Native Americans in a historical purgatory of being in continual opposition to the white experience.⁴¹ Presented through non-indigenous perspectives and understandings of the world, the examination of Native American stories typically read only as additions—and, often times, only as roadblocks—to the main “historical” story of white settlers/society. Synergistically, this type of curriculum creates a story around American identity tropes of progress and bootstrap idealism. It is in this type of social studies curriculum that indigenous people are positioned as hermetically sealed artifacts of the past.⁴² A lag between academic historical scholarship and curriculum standards development is evident.⁴³

There is a durability around issues of race that also needs to be dissected. When discussing race, curriculum often mistakes overt racism with nuanced and/or structural racism; believing that if acts of historical and outward racism are over, then racism exists only in the past and all is well. Research has noted that such assumptions are shortsighted, as curriculum is a tangible endeavor that allows for the inequitable attention to race and its constructs by defaulting to white interests and dominant discourses and understandings of the past.⁴⁴ Challenging these notions requires that teachers “be active and deliberate without waiting for the ideal space (e.g., Black history courses) to make such inclusions.”⁴⁵

Historical Background and the Modern Reality of Curriculum

Curriculum is developed through a collection of choices. The choices promote ideologies and privilege which knowledge is taught

in schools, creating significant reach in influencing student learning and identity.⁴⁶ For the social studies, this includes a systemic show of power concerning what gets erased, preserved, remembered, and promoted through representations of history.⁴⁷ These understandings of memory coincide directly with how the historical Native American has been appropriated in curriculum through constructed memories of the past. By directing what knowledge is presented as privileged or unnecessary, curriculum plays a vital role in portrayals of the world, and students' place within that world.⁴⁸ While objectivity may be a stringent belief of some, curricular decisions have been shown to be inherently political and biased. It is in these subjective decisions about the past and present that lead to the creation of state-sanctioned official knowledge.⁴⁹ Deciding what is and is not important, or what should be learned by young students is never a benign act of objectivity. Influenced by a cacophony of ideologies about the world, and beliefs about the past, the development of social studies curriculum for schools becomes a clear manner by which opinions and assumptions concerning every aspect of the world and its inhabitants can be proclaimed as fact.

Curriculum debates commonly develop under the umbrella of culture wars.⁵⁰ Such debates tend to focus on who and what is important.⁵¹ The curriculum debates in California in the 1990s regarding U.S. history revolved around the standard markers of traditional history. Political leaders, individual achievement, and patriotism were considered the cornerstones of the good and patriotic story of America; in other words—the true story of the United States. It was a narrative that validated dominant discourses about the United States, explained what it meant to be an American, and also stipulated which acts and attitudes constituted a patriotic American.

As normative history, this particular curriculum prescription led to historical examinations that were overly celebratory and highlighted portrayals of history that were whitewashed of critical examinations of structure and agency related to race, class, and/or gender. History was, in essence, a collection of achievement narratives meant to clearly illuminate the greatness of the United States. Challenges for a more multicultural social studies curriculum instead of the traditional treatments of history were met with fierce opposition.

Attacks on multicultural education became part of the discourse as the concept of multiculturalism was framed as a distortion of the

historical record, a dumbing down of history education, and—even more incendiary—as America hating and anti-intellectual. It was seen as unpatriotic as it cast a critical lens on people and events that were part and parcel to the canon of U.S. history. Part of the attacks likely had to do with dominant narratives of self and society that informed traditional mainstream American identity being challenged with such words as “racism” and “injustice”—words believed to be wholly and historically placed in the past with no space in the believed freedom-loving and fair air of the present. Concerns that business as usual in the world of curriculum would continue to perpetuate stereotypes in social studies standards was of little concern to those who supported the push for more traditional history instead of multicultural and layered looks into the past.⁵²

Related Literature: Native Americans in Social Studies Curriculum

There is significant scholarship on the limitations of social studies curriculum regarding Native Americans.⁵³ Previous research on curriculum standards that challenged common stereotypes of Native Americans noted that avenues of inclusion were either history-centered or issues-centered.⁵⁴ In both cases, progress—not critique or critical analysis—is the focus of the standards. A study incorporating tribal members from Pennsylvania concluded that state standards and teaching within schools largely perpetuated myths and excluded Native American perspectives.⁵⁵ And when Native Americans were mentioned, it was only in the most general of conceptions. Research has also noted that prevalence of cultural stereotypes in standards wherein Native Americans are largely presented as historical beings, rather than as living people part of modern society.⁵⁶ A study of members of the Cherokee tribe in Northern Alabama examined how tribal members saw themselves portrayed in curriculum standards and in social studies classes.⁵⁷ Results showed that most members felt Native Americans were largely essentialized to nature and presented in comparison to whites. Tribal members also raised concerns about how their exclusion from contemporary life, except as living in poverty, tacitly underscored a belief that real Native Americans lived in the past and/or should be pitied. Examination of curricular discourses show that they often operate at opposite ends

of a spectrum by over-emphasizing Native American involvement with violence or suggesting a passivity that negates their own agency and nullifies indigenous perspectives.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most comprehensive curricular analysis from all fifty states and Washington, D.C. applied a postcolonial framework to highlight the overarching Eurocentrism that minimizes Native Americans, casts them as barriers to progress, and places them largely as artifacts in a pre-1900 incantation of the nationalist narratives often perpetuated throughout U.S. history survey courses in K-12 schooling.⁵⁹ This work was an extension of previous research that found that Native Americans, largely cast as different from “real Americans,” disappeared from U.S. history curriculum standards by the 1830s.⁶⁰ Other work also acknowledged the prevalence of race in the U.S., and posited the use of Critical Race Theory to consider government action against Native Americans by engaging students in multiple perspectives to further challenge nationalistic standards.⁶¹

Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an offshoot of Critical Legal Studies (CLS). With roots in the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, CLS struck against the fundamental belief that the law was essentially fair and served the interest of all people equally. Arguing that the law is not value-free and that context mattered, CLS asserted instead that the law was a tool of oppression wielded by those in power to help maintain their place in the social hierarchy. To CLS, the law worked as a means to separate the haves and have-nots, and this was all done in a structural and legal way. Extending concepts of Critical Legal Studies to race were the foundational blocks from which Critical Race Theory were developed.

In the 1970s, Derrick Bell and Allen Freeman introduced Critical Race Theory as a means to explore the role of race and racism in society. As in CLS, CRT iterates that power dynamics interplay with race to create a society built on racial hierarchy. CRT also further stipulates that society at its core depends on the durability and strength of racism to protect, institutionalize, and normalize it in modern society. Race and racism are viewed as critical structural elements in the fabric of society. CRT methodology calls for the critical examination of race and racism. Such an orientation toward race

allows one to move beyond situating overt and/or physical violence as the only means to understand racism in a highly contextualized and nuanced manner.⁶² By problematizing dominant discourse on race and racism, CRT also promotes anti-racist praxis as direct challenges to structures of inequality and inequity that promote social stratification.⁶³ If one accepts the racial contract as *the* social contract, it becomes clear that the systemic privileging of whites has allowed history to be told largely from their perspective.⁶⁴ The application of CRT in the social studies can work toward efforts in democracy and engaging difficult truths in society.⁶⁵ This continues to be true even in the modern context of content standards, textbooks, and curricula.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is an offshoot Critical Race Theory. TribalCrit centers on examining the particular experience of Native Americans through a critical lens that acknowledges and illuminates the space through which they have existed historically, currently, and into the future.⁶⁶ TribalCrit provides a unique lens through which to view indigenous experiences, such as engagement and oppression, and specific expressions of culture to critique traditional histories.⁶⁷

Drawing on the foundations of CRT are the nine tenets of TribalCrit:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of their identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and education policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
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.

8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.⁶⁸

Textbooks as Curriculum

Textbooks bear mentioning in discussions of curriculum standards largely because of their significant role in curriculum development and classroom use. Textbooks hold an unusual position of power in K-12 education. In a number of classrooms, curriculum is largely tied to or influenced by the textbook. For many, the textbook *is* the curriculum.⁶⁹ Textbooks are often accepted by teachers and students as *the* truth and gospel. Little credence is paid to the context of their development or quality of their content. Anything and everything worth learning is held within their pages. Information existing outside of textbook pages is projected as ancillary. The dance of politics around inclusion and exclusion in standards and textbooks largely go unnoticed. Never mind that the word “textbook”—not to mention the phrase, “get out your textbook”—have elicited groans from generations of students and critical educators for as long as textbooks have inundated classrooms.

There are numerous reasons for this general dislike of textbooks. And the feeling is not unfounded. Logistically, textbooks are heavy and have small print. But a clearly evident reason for student dislike is that history textbooks often are seen as painfully boring. Boring in that what they include as history is often no more than a laundry list of facts and perspectives centered around whiteness, with the main story focusing on dead white guys.⁷⁰ The inadequacy of this type of history is that, first and foremost, it is inaccurate and irrelevant. By positing history as a set of answers to be learned rather than questions to be asked and examined, there is little space for the inclusion of multiple perspectives and analyses that critique the structures presented within such a historical narrative. There is little room for inquiry. Presenting certainty instead of avenues for the engagement of critical thinking often means a lack of depth on critical issues of race, class, and gender. While the desire for shared historical commonalities and bootstrap individualism may be appealing to the masses, it grossly misinterprets the historical realities of the past and

the present for Native Americans. And yet, textbooks that present such a story remain pervasive in many classrooms.⁷¹

There is usually little to no discussion or debate in many textbooks at any critical level about anything outside the purview of celebratory dominant history or historical asides (e.g., historical bias, presentation of model minorities, and events that mesh well with larger historical discourses).⁷² Substantively, textbooks fail to provide *metadiscourse* (e.g., suggestions of emphasis and/or judgment) and, as such, miss an opportunity to provide more critical analysis.⁷³

Why the Need for Curriculum “Mining”?

Native Americans in current social studies standards are nearly invisible.⁷⁴ The official narrative is one that portrays Native Americans largely as resistors and aggressors to oncoming Anglo settlement. Native Americans are placed in opposition to, and in constant comparison with, the dominant curricular story. When Native Americans are mentioned, it is usually in the vein of demonization or mythology; either way, such portrayals are built on partial-truths strengthened by Hollywood portrayals of indigenous people, as well as distortions and omissions, where historical context and layered interactions are often missing.⁷⁵

If a teacher strictly adheres to the typical curriculum presentation of Native Americans, students will receive an education that is heavily influenced by stereotypes, with a near exclusive European/Anglo perspective, bias, and simplicity.⁷⁶ Critical examinations that could inform a deeper understanding of societal norms constructed around race and historical realities would be null.⁷⁷ Curriculum mining is, therefore, a necessary process by which to extract greater meaning and context about Native Americans.

“Mining” means to dig and delve into something, and to expose/present something of value. It is a process that requires great care, understanding, and hard work. Above all, it highlights the requirement for diligence and skill. Options for curricular mining include finding the spaces of exclusion and troubling existing narratives. The presentation of new perspectives and the utilization of new indigenous-based resources will aid in this work. Because it is likely that there will never be a time when teachers are freely given the resources and materials needed to engage more nuanced

and critical understandings of Native Americans, ambitious teaching via curriculum mining is vital.

Curriculum, whether it be in textbooks or some other resource, should never become a tit-for-tat proposition of inclusion. It should not be a battleground of replacing one set of nauseating facts and figures of bias about one group for another.⁷⁸ And yet, it often times becomes just that. The ability to challenge common curricular assertions and problematize the concept of neutral knowledge first requires an acknowledgement of inadequate curricular coverage that places Native Americans as historic relics of a bygone era instead of as a vibrant people who have a current stake in the life and development of the United States.⁷⁹ The use of TribalCrit offers avenues by which teachers can move past such inadequate curriculum standards and textbook notions of Native Americans in U.S. history.

Mining the curriculum asks that teachers infuse activism into their teaching by seeking to change the way in which students engage the past. By pedagogically moving students away from the conveyor belt of standards discourse, teachers can promote a teaching of liberating curriculum that utilizes multiple perspectives. Mining also challenges the feel-good narrative prevalent in curriculum that validates the values of dominant groups and often ignores groups on the margins or positions their curricular inclusion as appeasement.

TribalCrit: Applications for Use in the Classroom

What follows below are conceptual suggestions for how the nine tenets of TribalCrit could be explored by teachers in the classroom. Curricular treatments of minority populations, including Native Americans, in social studies texts are known to be quite simplistic.⁸⁰ Providing the space to challenge the impact of stereotypes and confront both *sins of commission* and *sins of omission* is an opportunity.⁸¹ It is valuable for teachers to have students analyze and critique Native Americans portrayals in social studies curriculum, to explore the presentation and purpose of Native Americans in movies, and to discuss how indigenous peoples are projected by outsiders. Examination of Native Americans portrayals in curriculum and in numerous aspects of life can be a process for students to engage in discussions on the power and durability of labeling, on constructing knowledge, and on the influence of memory making. This process

can also help address the presentation of sameness with Native American people. For example, students might critique the common practice in curriculum for assimilative tribes to play the role of “good Indians” and non-assimilative tribes to be framed otherwise.⁸²

New academic scholarship has been pretty clear; U.S. policy has never been value-neutral in its dealings with Native American tribes. TribalCrit allows the space for students to consider these ramifications. Plays of power inundate the federal relationship to Native peoples. Yet in the typical social studies curriculum, aspects of government policy are rarely mentioned at all. There is, however, one exception: the nineteenth-century frontier policy of buffalo extermination and assimilation of Plains Indians, represented collectively by the movie *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Of course, such a policy was based in imperialism and enacted to “protect” the mass of white settlers heading to and through the wide open plains. In fact, many texts refer to the imperialism of the United States through the more acceptable and less hostile word, “expansion.” Without doubt, the examination of individual, state, and national material gains through the lens of imperialism vis-à-vis land ownership and social structures are a rich landscape in which to further examine Native Americans relationships with government entities. TribalCrit can also be used to engage such topics as the American Indian Movement, the Carlisle School and other Indian education endeavors, the Dawes Act, treaties, and the more current concerns with drilling on Native lands like at Standing Rock.

Historical policies of imperialism, extermination, and cultural misunderstanding that marked the removal of Native Americans from their land and that attack tribal sovereignty require a critical humanizing approach to the past.⁸³ By juxtaposing Native voices with nuanced historical context, teachers can add complexity to their engagement of the Native American experience by considering aspects of citizenship and how it has affected and cast different tribes over time. This also makes possible discussions of what it means to be an American. The liminal space in which indigenous peoples find themselves in relation to governmental policy in laws and treaties offers the opportunity to provide more nuanced attention to the idea of what it means to be a citizen and to deconstruct the ideas that surround it. Beyond treaties and laws, further opportunities to examine U.S. frontier actions could focus on a critical discussion of

the racist policies of the federal government regarding assimilation. The context of modernity further provides students the chance to address and rectify preconceived notions and understandings of Native Americans only as relics of the past.⁸⁴

Engaging topics such as “tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification”⁸⁵ is a way to challenge the prevalent dichotomy of Native Americans as either victim or aggressor. Such a positionality allows for Native Americans to move out from under the shadow of whiteness and lets teachers and students contextually examine the contemporary world, including its opportunities and its challenges, from indigenous perspectives. This might include engaging issues of hunting and fishing rights and other cultural expressions of indigeneity.

State-adopted curricular treatments of culture, knowledge, and power do not include the Native American perspective, nor do they show inroads to engage in critical historical thinking.⁸⁶ However, adopting Native American resources in one’s teaching can provide an opportunity to combat ethnocentric normalized curricular portrayals of Native American culture and knowledge.⁸⁷ Students are allowed to compare and contrast their notions of culture, knowledge, and power by the introduction of Native American epic traditions, oral histories, and other primary sources to fill the gap of resources and knowledge in the curriculum. Further discussions can allow students to critique how and why societal privilege informs larger understandings of culture through lenses such as knowledge, value, and power.

Underscoring all of these avenues in which Native Americans have been impacted by government and educational policies is that histories are almost never presented from an indigenous perspective. Noting that stories of Native American experience are legitimate sources of knowledge and inform their being, it is essential that the curriculum be mined to tell the stories of Native Americans *by* Native Americans. Storytelling and poetry, including oral histories and music of the past and present, allow for a counter-narrative that can have the added impact of contextualizing understandings of value—both provided in and given to different types of knowledge.⁸⁸

Overall, TribalCrit provides a framework for educators to move beyond stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans through a process of mining new possibilities for examination. The framework of TribalCrit gives teachers the chance to move beyond pow wows

and tipis to create opportunities for a more diverse and culturally responsive education concerning Native Americans.⁸⁹

Opportunities for the Future

A curriculum analysis on social studies textbooks from across the nation saw that a 20,000-year indigenous history was being narrowed down to less than a dozen topics and events for exploration. Noting that curricula typically focused on soft topics like food, clothing, and shelter as the only aspects of Native “culture,” the study also showed that events of critical importance were often ignored or left out important historical context. The National Museum of the American Indian decided to take corrective action: the interactive teaching tool, Native Knowledge 360. Accessible through the museum’s website, Native Knowledge 360 is a hub for the flow of indigenous knowledge. It includes an index of resources such as classroom lessons, curriculum materials, and professional development opportunities. Native Knowledge 360 represents an exemplar on the current efforts to offer indigenous resources to a wider audience by democratizing access to free information via technology.

As an example, Native Knowledge 360 represents new possibilities for teachers and opens access to resources. It is through the growing number of online resources from museums, parks, and educational organizations that teachers will be able to mine curriculum for more and varied resources on the Native American story. Specifically, the U.S. National Parks Service has made conscious efforts to expand Native American voices and perspectives within their sites, through their online educational resources and on-site interpretations. A long overdue move, the National Parks Service is finally coming to grips with its contentious relationship with different Native American tribes. The movements for inclusion are a positive step forward and, at a minimum, represent an acknowledgement of the wrongful acquisition of many parks from indigenous lands.⁹⁰

Figure 1 features a list of online resources for teachers to access in teaching about Native Americans. It includes historical collections; information on the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA); suggested curriculum, including lesson plans and other teaching resources; professional development workshop opportunities; tribal advocacy; and information on treaties.

Native American Online Resources

General/Introductory

Native Knowledge 360, by the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, <<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/>>.

Indians/Native Americans, by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/native-americans.html>>.

American Indian Heritage, by the U.S. National Park Service, Department of the Interior, <<https://www.nps.gov/americanindians/>>.

Educational/Institutional

Indian Education for All, by the Montana Office of Public Instruction, <<https://opi.mt.gov/Educators/Teaching-Learning/Indian-Education>>.

Utah American Indian Digital Archive, by the University of Utah's American West Center, the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library, and the Utah Division of Indian Affairs and Department of Heritage and Arts, <<https://utahindians.org/archives/>>.

We Shall Remain: Utah Indian Curriculum Project, by the University of Utah's American West Center, the Utah Division of Indian Affairs, and the Utah State Office of Education, <<https://utahindians.org/Curriculum/>>.

Teaching Native American Histories, by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, <<http://teachnativehistories.umass.edu/>>.

Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State, by the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: The Indian Education Office, <<http://www.indian-ed.org/>>.

Organizations

Lessons of Our Land, by the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (ILTF), a non-profit organization, <<https://www.lessonsofourland.org/>>.

Oyate, a non-profit organization advocating for indigenous histories and portrayals, <<http://www.oyate.org/>>.

Cultural Survival, a non-profit organization advocating for indigenous rights and culture, <<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/>>.

Figure 1: Free-Use Native American Online Resources for Teachers.

The list of resources is not definitive, but does represent a strong collection of free-use Native American resources that teachers can use in the classroom to engage more critical aspects of indigeneity.

A strong possibility for supporting the growing number of efforts dedicated to improving the portrayal of Native Americans in curriculum is a paradigm shift concerning who should have the right to write curriculum and for what purpose.⁹¹ For instance, federally recognized tribes as well as unrecognized groups and organizations that have members of Native American descent could have greater input about the presentation of Native Americans in curriculum.⁹² Allowing tribal organizations places at the table of curricular discussions in which they are afforded real power will offer compelling possibilities for change toward the larger goal of equitable Native American empowerment in curriculum decisions.⁹³

Similarly, the continued development of stand-alone Native American curriculum resources available to teachers would provide a different perspective and opportunity to explore concepts, issues, and ideas from an indigenous perspective. Challenging the constructed historical memory surrounding Native Americans is essential to adding depth and context to their story. The TribalCrit framework offers a tangible way in which teachers can guide students in learning that moves past the essentialized portrayals too often found in textbooks and K-12 curriculum.

Conclusion

The genesis and act of curriculum creation is and will remain a political act. It is ingrained in the very nature of the process of choice. It begs the questions: What information stays? What information goes? What's important? Who's important? What do we want students to learn? What *don't* we want students to learn? All these questions highlight the inherent subjective arc and political nature of curriculum. Because the curriculum is political, it is also the responsibility and charge of educators to undertake themes of the past and connect them to political realities of the present, and engage in the opportunity to morph curriculum from what is it to what it should be.⁹⁴

Through the dedication of teachers who believe in the benefit of a critical pedagogy, there are real opportunities to present Native

American peoples from their own perspectives. With privilege given to their own specific epistemologies and lived experiences, indigenous people will not remain as static and hermetically sealed stories as cultural relics of a bygone era. Rather, the willingness and ability of educators to be ambitious teachers and to challenge normative narratives make the usage of the TribalCrit framework invaluable. Through the leadership of teachers, Native Americans can be explored through more nuanced sociocultural perspectives and as a contemporary people with a rich and complex past that informs the challenges, possibilities, and realities of their modern existence.⁹⁵

In the end, because curriculum has always been an ideological battlefield, it may seem unlikely to change anytime soon. The very desire to make knowledge official is not a passive act. It is an act of curation. Specific choices have been made as to what is shared and how it is to be framed—just as much as what will not be engaged. As such, actions of challenge and improvisation on the behalf of teachers and those directly involved with curriculum have a responsibility to act—to ask more of students than the mere learning of facts, dates, and locations, and to have them think critically, exploring issues such as colonization, imperialism, assimilation, tribal sovereignty, and self-identification. Engagement with such topics are necessary to move toward understanding the contentious relationship between the U.S. government and indigenous populations.

Engaging a critical framework about and for Native Americans in social studies curriculum is a necessary challenge to a course of study that is much more than a set of standards to learn; it is a reproduction of consciousness and a substantiation of misrepresentations. What has been offered within this essay is a call for teachers to utilize the TribalCrit framework in their teaching. By highlighting the ubiquitous nature of Native American imagery in society and the limitations of curriculum via standards and textbooks, this article has argued that utilization of the TribalCrit framework is possible, and necessary. By teaching ambitiously and mining the standard social studies curriculum, traditional portrayals of Native Americans can be replaced by deeper, more critical, and hopefully more contextualized representations—offering opportunities for educators and their students to move beyond the tropes of settler colonialism that invade the typical engagement of indigeneity in social studies curriculum, and offering anti-colonial ways in which to do so.

Notes

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