



# Center for Critical Race Studies in Education at UCLA

## Research Briefs

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### Tribal Critical Race Theory: Origins, Applications, and Implications

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Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) was developed by Bryan Brayboy as a framework to understand the complex experiences of Indigenous peoples in education. Influenced by Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the law and the subsequent application of CRT in educational work, TribalCrit addresses both the racialized and unique political status of Indigenous peoples as members of sovereign nations. TribalCrit is guided by 9, inter-related tenets:

“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 our identities; 4) Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty... 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 educational 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; and 9) Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change” (Brayboy, 2005, 429-430).

In educational research, one of TribalCrit’s most important contributions is centering that colonization is ongoing and that the racialized experiences of Indigenous peoples cannot be removed from their political status.

Indeed, Indigenous political status has been misunderstood by plaintiffs in key Supreme Court decisions that are at the foundation of diversity and inclusion in education. In the affirmative action case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the petitioner in *Bakke* attempted to use a prior case, *Morton v Mancari*, to argue that the State of California could favor minoritized groups by citing *Mancari*’s employment preference for American Indians. However, in *Mancari*, the Court held that an employment preference for American Indians did not violate the EEOA because the preference was applied for “...members of quasi-sovereign tribal entities” (417

U.S. 554). Returning to *Bakke*, the Supreme Court differentiated the facts of *Mancari* from the arguments in *Bakke*, finding that the *Mancari* employment preference was political, not racial.

This ignorance of Indigenous peoples political status as tribal citizens is produced by the dominant form of colonialism in the United States that necessitates ongoing Indigenous dispossession-settler colonialism (Grande, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). Thus, when applied in education, TribalCrit offers guidelines for incorporating relevant theories that help navigate the complex positioning of Indigenous peoples in the U.S and undo this ignorance.

In educational research, TribalCrit has been used as both theoretical and methodological framework in order to better understand the experiences of Indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> With regards to teacher education, TribalCrit has been used to expose how non-Native teachers and administrator's lack of "Native cultural competency" promotes practices that do not align with the political status of Indigenous peoples thereby promoting practices in schools that do not promote Native continuity (Williams, 2013). TribalCrit has been used to highlight how hostile campus climates k-16 are produced by the intersection of race and sovereignty for American

Indian/Alaska Native students (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Sobel, & Cabana, 2011; Quijada Cerecer, 2013), and methodologically, TribalCrit centers stories to center voices in educational research that are overlooked or subsumed by other categorizations as is the case with Pacific Islanders (Kaomea, 2009).

Just as important, and foundational to TribalCrit, education scholars use the framework to offer ways to reimagine and rework educational spaces to make them accessible to and have the ability to be in relationship with Indigenous communities. From rethinking teacher education (Kitchen & Hodsden, 2013) to developing Indigenous educational leaders that aim to decolonize schooling (Garcia & Shirley, 2013), TribalCrit as a framework centers both the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples within current educational contexts and highlights the importance of Indigenous cultures, indeed futurities, as central to this work. Through TribalCrit, scholars work to center the voices of Indigenous leaders/practitioners that might otherwise be overlooked that offer remedies beyond culturally responsive schooling (Castagno, 2012; Mackey, 2015; Paris, 2012) and towards culturally sustaining practices (Buckmiller, 2015; San Pedro, 2015). TribalCrit has not only been applied to k-12 but also higher education, with the similar

vision of using Indigenous knowledges to create practices that retain Indigenous students (Windchief & Joseph, 2015; Youngbull & Minthorn, 2018) and center voices of Indigenous faculty, students, staff and community in these spaces (Davidson, Shotton, Minthorn, & Waterman, 2018).

TribalCrit is a powerful tool that we should continue to use to expose the complex positioning of Indigenous peoples in the context of colonialism on the one hand and Indigenous traditions, knowledges, and inherent rights to self-government on the other. TribalCrit alone is not enough nor was it intended to be. It represents a framework that works with the diversity of Indigenous knowledges and associated research paradigms to uncover and make visible the ongoing impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples. As shown, the works above are guided by the tenets of TribalCrit alongside other relevant Indigenous informed frameworks to advance the goals of TribalCrit. TribalCrit reminds us we stand on Indigenous lands. Thus, Indigenous communities must be at the heart of any educational endeavor if we are serious about liberation for all peoples.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The works cited here are not representative of the depth and dearth of work. Due to space limitations, many works cited are not included here.

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