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# E Pluribus Unum: power, problem definition and ownership between the United States and Indigenous populations

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## ABSTRACT

In this manuscript, we seek to understand how linguistic devices can be used to critique the moral and political frameworks surrounding the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Specifically, we focus on two documents that reflect policy responses to the UNDRIP: (1) a press release from 13 September 2007 outlining the United States Government's position in voting against the adoption of the UNDRIP, and (2) President Obama's speech from 16 December 2010 about the reversal of said position. Through the use of TribalCrit to interpret our results, implications of our analyses point to the extent to which power is exercised within an announced position endorsing UNDRIP as an implicit pronouncement of state-centered goals.

## KEYWORDS

Discourse; Indigenous; policy; power

Public policy discourse reflects, shapes, and influences the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples (Abele, Dittburner, and Graham 2000). The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) serves as the centerpiece for a discussion of the power of discourse in Aboriginal education policy. How governments such as the United States (US) make sense of and interpret documents such as the UNDRIP can influence policy contexts and constitute exercise of power that is detrimental to Indigenous peoples. In this manuscript, we employ a discourse analytical framework centrally based on Stone (2002) to understand how linguistic devices can be used in policy discourse and the moral and political frameworks surrounding the UNDRIP. Conceptually, we frame this analysis on perspectives of tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) (Brayboy 2005). Specifically, though the lens of TribalCrit, we will show how the US perpetuates power and ownership onto Indigenous populations by using what Stone (2002) referred to as 'discourse tricks.' These tricks are aimed at appearing empathetic to the plight of Indigenous populations in the US while in actuality dismissing the needs of these communities and re-centering western-hegemonic perspectives.

## Some words on power

Because this paper attempts to deconstruct and expose the ways that ambiguous or opaque language is employed in policy discourses to encode the subtle but pervasive exertion of problem ownership, we have elected to address outright our own

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positionalities as, at the time of this writing, three White male doctoral students and one White male professor who, though we strive at every turn to understand the process of minoritization more fully and compassionately, are fundamentally, ‘detached from the struggle of the colonized’ people (Memmi 1965, 19) we write with and about.

There is measured support for the inclusion of non-native<sup>1</sup> voices in such conversations (Champagne 1996), even on the global scale in the case of UNDRIP, which can ‘strengthen the work of all partners’ if carried out appropriately (Benjamin, Preston, and Léger 2010, 63). But, if we are to continue, we must first justify our desire to write about issues confronted by Native American and Indigenous populations despite the fact that several authors (e.g. Swisher 1996; Innes 2009) have questioned and directly criticized outsider voices in this field. Going beyond questions of the ‘Insider Doctrine’ and research validity (cf. Merton 1972), the issue of outsider voices in Native American Studies assumes particular gravity when considered against the history of colonization, exemplified by extractive research (Wilmsen 2008; Blodgett et al. 2011) and domination through scientism (Reardon and TallBear 2012).

We are likewise mindful of Tuck and Yang’s (2012) crucial assertion that ‘decolonization is not a metaphor,’ and employing such language allegorically can trivialize the voices and histories of colonized peoples. Examining our language and role seriously, then, we understand the desire of outsiders to want to be allies, which, Bishop (2002) notes, ‘requires an awareness of the interrelated and mutually reinforces relationships of oppression and a recognition and accounting of one’s own power and privilege in relation to others’ (p. 42). Simultaneously, however, we wonder, following Memmi (1965) if we can ever really be allies of oppressed peoples – even if we refuse the benefits of the colonial system – in a world that is still deeply characterized by the coloniality of land, resources, knowledge, employment, and space in scholarly journals. As Williams (1983) explained in relation to writing about Navajo culture, ‘We are not Navajo . . . their traditional stories don’t work for us. Their stories hold meaning for us only as examples. They can teach us what is possible. We must create our own stories’ (p. 3). This article is our attempt at creating such stories. While we address these dynamics, we understand this work may (and likely should) be critiqued for its lack of Indigenous voice in the analysis itself.

As we are aware of these issues, we were willing to embark on this project because we do not purport to speak for any Indigenous peoples or even about Indigenous issues *per se*; we have no authority to do so. Ultimately, our intention is to provide an analysis of policy discourse and the content is primarily a product of the contemporaneity of the UNDRIP (and recurring State expressions of interest in Indigenous issues, typified by President Obama’s 2015 ‘Generation Indigenous’ Initiative), but we hope analyses such as this one would be beneficial in a variety of fields. As such, the long legal history of federal oversight and control of Native populations within the US must be explicated to better meet this aim, of which we describe below. This history is needed to situate our subsequent literature review regarding the concept of problem ownership.

## The principle of power: courts and Indigenous rights

Before presenting literature related to the concept of problem ownership in academia, it is necessary to contextualize our current analysis in the larger legal history of the relationship between Native and immigrant (i.e. European) populations within the US. Beginning with the arrival of Europeans in the western hemisphere, Native populations were construed by white settlers as inferior, using white culture as the standard for superiority. Such inferiority encompassed all aspects of the word, from customs and beliefs to stature and beauty (O’Hanlon and Teng 2005). After the forming of the US and as early as 1802, representatives in the state of Georgia were in contact with the federal government regarding the removal of Native tribes (Davis 2010). What the legal history below will show, and the use of TribalCrit will elucidate, is the US Government, from its inception, has made liminal native experiences and autonomous rights by a process of problem ownership.

### Power and the courts

In the 1823 Supreme Court Case of *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, the court decided Native tribes would be legally allowed to control lands within the newly formed nation, however, could not hold title of those lands. Specifically, the Court argued that the Native tribes’ ‘right to occupancy’ was secondary to the US governments ‘right to discovery’ (Public Broadcasting System 2009). Such a decision provides some of the first legal-evidence regarding problem ownership between Native tribes and the US government. Specifically, *Johnson v. M’Intosh* shows the ways the US would position itself to both define and enact decisions regarding land ownership and tribal rights onto Indigenous populations.

In the 1820s, the Cherokee nation drafted and adopted a constitution, of which they modeled after the US constitution and defined themselves as a sovereign nation to “secure their lands from hostile takeover (Kushner 2021, 4). Such a process reveals an attempt by the Cherokee to redefine ownership, fundamentally shifting arguments for autonomy to the realm of western thinking. In other words, the drafted constitution showed how the US government controlled the ways land ownership would not only be sanctioned, but conceptualized. After the largest federal removal of Native tribes was enacted through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, a pattern of re-conceptualizing the rules regarding how Native tribes would be allowed to consider themselves ‘owners’ of their ancestral lands was again redefined. In the next section, we provide literature related to the concept of problem ownership as it relates to power and the continual redefining of the term by governments across North America for Indigenous tribes.

### Who defines a ‘problem’?

The unequal power characterizing the relationship between the US government and Native Americans is, like virtually all others, is exercised through the process of defining problems. Among the variety of objective conditions that do exist, what gets defined as a problem (in need of a solution) is largely a matter of social construction (Best 1989), and ontology (i.e. ways of being) and thus power. For instance, in the context of schooling, Bang et al. (2012) described a science classroom where definitions of ‘living’ and

'nonliving' were products of students' ontological backgrounds. When a student asked how the sun, if nonliving, can create and sustain life, the authors explained, 'He was moving toward a view of the system as living,' which the authors went on to describe as a way to question Eurocentric and western notions of connections between nature and culture. The teacher, however, could not understand the nuance of such a question, and therefore did not understand the problem the student presented.

The product of this dynamic tension manifests as the struggle for what Gusfield (1989) defined as 'problem ownership'. In the schooling example above, the student was seeking to expand the problem in defining 'alive' beyond westernized views of 'living,' while the teacher remained in the traditional scientific parameters of the west. The pivotal role such perceptions of ownership play in the creation of policy and the discourse where it is often based can be seen in the decisions of Canada and the US to disavow then later pledge support to UNDRIP despite virtually no change in the Declaration itself. Rather, this shift seemed to be based on varying 'interpretations of its potential impact' that were more a product of a change in national leadership than anything else (Benjamin, Preston, and Léger 2010, 64). Benjamin et al. went on to note, 'The success of the government's media spin [to amass support for Canada's 2006 decision to reject the Declaration] illustrates the need for continued solidarity and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists' (p. 65). Jacob and Desautels (2013) discussed problem ownership within the Evaluations of Aboriginal Programs in Canada. They explained, not only does an earnestly participative approach, 'produce more ethical and valid results,' it foregrounds epistemological (i.e. ways of knowing) and ontological paradigms specific to the communities who must be recognized as the authority in defining what research priorities should be (pp. 22, 24).

Interestingly, some policy researchers, upsetting the notion of linear policy development, point out that sometimes preferred preexisting solutions determine problem definition (Kingdon 2011). Similarly, Wildavsky (1979) argued that public officials will not take a problem seriously unless there is a proposed course of action attached to it: 'A problem is a problem only if something can be done about it' (p. 42). In a sense, the solution begets the problem. Understanding the nature of the difficulties presented by members of a population defined as a 'problem' are also formative in policy making. Problem definition and problem solutions are inextricably intertwined with notions of cultural ontology, epistemology and power. Simply put, how you experience and understand the world is how you will experience and understand problems therein. If you have power in experience, you will have power in defining problems.

Moreover, some have described important processual approaches to problem definition as dynamic framing (e.g. Bardwell 1991; Benford and Snow 2000; Swaffield 1998;), paying special attention to how conceptions of problems and attitudes are works in progress and shift over time (Miller and Holstein 1993). Nevertheless, claims makers do more than identify or frame social problems by 'typifying' them (Best 1989), and therefore dictate the range of solutions that are acceptable (Bardwell 1991) by advancing a particular value-orientation (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Our interest here is in examining the tension between the ambiguity that characterizes policy discourse and fixity with which statements, like those of the White House examined below, of progress or failure, are often conveyed. We do so by anchoring and interpreting outcomes of our analytical frame with Stone's (2002) work through our conceptual frame of TribalCrit.

## Synchronistic strength: Stone (2002) and Brayboy (2005)

What distinguishes TribalCrit from the larger critical race theory (CRT) is that the former explicitly addresses, ‘American Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization’ (Brayboy 2005, pp. 428–429). Brayboy (2005) went on to list nine specific tenets of TribalCrit. As Martinez-Cola (2020) explained, Brayboy (2005) is not the only scholar to discuss the ways race and colonization intersect to affect Indigenous experiences, however, they were the first to formally outline these tenets: 1) Colonization is endemic to society; 2) US 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, 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 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; 9) Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work toward social change (Brayboy 2005, pp. 429–430). By infusing TribalCrit with our analytic frame described below, we were able to interpret Stone’s (2002) presentation of ‘discursive tricks’ as they specifically related to the inequitable history of Indigenous/US government relations.

## Analytical framework

Stone (2002) described four facets of symbolic representation that are especially important in the processes associated with developing problem ownership for policies: (1) narrative stories, (2) synecdoche, (3) metaphors, and (4) ambiguity (See Table 1). She explained narrative stories provide explanations of how the world works. Many times, narratives used in politics are so commonplace and taken for granted that people are usually unaware of them. These stories hold a powerful grip on the imaginations of the populous because they offer promise away from crises. As this relates to our definition of problem ownership, epistemological and ontological orientations, coupled with power, create the fertile soil for stories to become ‘truths’ within policy discourse.

Following Table 1, Stone (2002) described synecdoche as superimposing a portion of a story to represent the whole. In this facet of symbolic representation, extreme examples are offered as typical cases of a larger problem. To do so, Stone provided the concept of a ‘horror story,’ in which politicians intentionally select a horrific incident to become the defining narrative for some selected problem. Next, metaphors are implied comparisons that can be used to distinguish associations between two things, but are also meant to provide implications for a prescriptive action. For instance, politicians in the global west, and US in particular, often use a metaphor of ‘war’ to elicit the dual outcomes of association and implication. Finally, Stone (2002) described ambiguity as the most

**Table 1.** Stone's (2002) discourse tricks.

Discourse Trick	Definition (Stone 2002)	Examples (Stone 2002)
Stories	'What all stories of control have in common is their assertion that there is a choice . . . stories of control offer hope, just as stories of decline foster anxiety and despair' (p. 144).	<i>Decline</i> 'In the beginning, things were pretty good, but they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done' (p. 138). <i>Helplessness and Control</i> The situation was outside of our control, something we had to accept but not influence. Now, however, let me show you that in fact we can control things' (p. 142).
Synecdoche	'A figure of speech in which a whole is presented by one of its parts . . . where examples are offered up as "typical instances" or "prototypical cases" of a larger problem' (p. 145).	<i>Horror Stories</i> 'Politicians or interest groups deliberately choose one egregious or outlandish incident to represent the universal case, and then use that use that example to build support for changing and entire rule or policy' (p. 146).
Ambiguity	'The most important feature of all symbols, both in art and politics, is their ambiguity. A symbol can mean two (or more) things simultaneously' (p. 157).	"Religious Freedom" means organized vocal prayer in public schools to some people and absolutely no prayer in public schools to others' (p. 157).

important piece to symbolic representation in politics. Within politics, symbols can mean two things at once and, 'Legislators can satisfy demands to "do something" about a problem by passing a vague statute with ambiguous meaning, then letting administrative agencies hash out the more conflictual [sic] details' (p. 159). We principally address in the two documents analyzed in this manuscript three of the mechanisms described by Stone: narrative stories, synecdoche, and ambiguity. Based on our discussions of the definition of problems and 'problem ownership' above, we believe these facets align well with our goal of understanding the ways the US government creates, defines, and then employs actions related to its relationship with Native American tribes. For instance, as we will show below by infusing Stone (2002) with TribalCrit, President Obama could describe vague supports (i.e. use ambiguity) his administration was committed to providing for Ingenious populations by defining what the problems were that needed to be solved (i.e. the second tenet of TribalCrit).

### Beliefs control actions

Before presenting our analysis, we believe it important to situate readers with the ontologies of the authors. Each author situates themselves ontologically as critical constructivists. We push back against a single objective reality, and argue instead that a person's experience is directly tied to the ways they interpret and interact with the world. While we have all spent significant time outside of the US, both living, working, and traveling, we understand our perspectives are still rooted in western political and educational thoughts/epistemologies. Even so, we believe our analysis provides useful knowledge to better understand the ways problem ownership can and has been utilized by governments to construct policies detrimental to Indigenous populations in an effort to acknowledge and ameliorate existing systems of inequity.

## Actions control analyses

Because our interests were founded in better understanding contemporary power ownership strategies between the US government and Indigenous populations, we focused on two documents that reflect contemporary US policy responses to the UNDRIP: (1) USUN Press Release #204(07) from 13 September 2007 that outlined the US Government's position in voting against the adoption of the UNDRIP; (2) President Obama's speech from 16 December 2010 about the reversal of said position. Over 150 countries voted on the Declaration and our analysis should by no means be taken to address the variety of ways this process was affected and received by diverse countries around the world. Moreover, with President Obama's 2015 launching of the Generation Indigenous Initiative and Canada's recent ratification of the UNDRIP, an analysis of a contemporary issue lends support to our assertion that these topics are still relevant.

Our decisions regarding document selections were also informed by Newcomb's (2011) arguments that policies such as UNDRIP were direct consequences of Indigenous populations being treated as 'less than human' by States across the world. Specifically, the following call made by Newcomb directed us toward our analysis:

There is every reason to believe that for reasons of reality construction and maintenance, a great deal of semantic acumen is being used by States such as the United States to make it seem that they are expressing endorsement or support for the UN declaration, when in fact they are merely endorsing or supporting their own very constrained state-centered *interpretation* of the document. Anyone who doubts this need only take a copy of the statement issued by the US Department of State on 16 December 2010 and compare it with the 13 September 2007 statement made by the United States when it voted 'no' in the UN General Assembly on the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There is no appreciable difference between the two statements. (pp. 586-587, emphasis in original)

Newcomb contended the UNDRIP was a product of States constructing laws of domination against Indigenous populations. Aligning with TribalCrit, he argued that none of the 46 articles within the declaration addressed issues of domination, and therefore the State actors who drafted the resolution were intent on keeping the status quo of power and oppression over Indigenous populations. Moreover, in the US in particular, he explained resolutions such as the UNDRIP would do little to influence reform based on the history of US policy makers and justices who deny the use of systems (legal and extra-legal) used to dominate Native peoples.

## How we analyzed our documents

Both documents were analyzed using Stone's (2002) interpretive framework for evaluating policy texts. Although Stone's work is useful in uncovering semantic shifts used by policymakers, it is our contention that not enough emphasis is placed on the creation of political discourse and claims of ownership over the definitions of the problem itself. Here, TribalCrit provided a useful conceptual framework to extend and interpret Stone's (2005) work.



As we read the selected documents, we searched for instantiations of Stone's (2002) description of symbolic policy representation. Specifically, we looked for ways language aimed at constituting, positioning, making productive, regulating, moralizing, and governing citizens were employed. The second author initially read the documents using Stone's (2002) concepts as deductive codes, with the first and third authors editing and adding their interpretations to the analysis results at a later time. After this process, we met three separate times to discuss different interpretations of Stone's work as it related to the documents selected for analysis. As a result of these discussions, the team came to 100% agreement on codes by the end of our meetings. Using a-priori codes provided a structure for us to follow in our analyses, however, by coding separately, we were able to critique team members interpretations of results, providing opportunity for new conclusions to arise. The results below are the products of this collaborative process.

## Our generated data

Several of the policy tropes identified by Stone (2002) were at play in the discourses framing Indigenous policies (Table 2) in the USUN press release. The story told by the authors of the release describing reasons the delegation to the UN did not endorse the UNDRIP characterized the resolution as flawed putatively because of the lack of transparency within the document and its improbability of implementation. Representatives

**Table 2.** Application of Stone (2002) to analyzed documents.

Discourse Trick	USUN Press Release #204(07)	President Obama's Speech 12/16/2010
Narrative Stories	'We worked hard for 11 years in Geneva for a consensus declaration, but the document before us is a text that was prepared and submitted after the negotiations had concluded' (p. 1) 'Although we are voting against this flawed document, my government will continue its vigorous efforts to promote indigenous rights domestically ...' (p. 1).	'We've resolved a number of longstanding disputes about the ways that our government has treated – or in some cases mistreated – folks in Indian Country, even in recent years ... And after a 14-year battle over the accounting of tribal resources in the Cobell case, we reached a bipartisan agreement, which was part of a law I signed just a week ago.'
Synecdoche	'It is disappointing that the Human Rights Council did not respond to calls we made, in partnership with Council members, for States to undertake further work to generate a consensus text' (p. 1).	'It's a matter of upholding an ideal that has always defined who we are as Americans. <i>E pluribus unum</i> . Out of many, one.' <i>Horror Story</i> 'We all know Native Americans die of illnesses like diabetes, pneumonia, flu – even tuberculosis – at higher rates than the rest of the population' ... unless communities are safe places to grow up ... where people are not living under constant threat of violence and crime ... crime rates in Indian country and anywhere from twice to 20 times the national average'
Ambiguity	'In this domestic context, this means promoting tribal self-government over a broad range of internal and local affairs ...' (p. 1) 'In our diplomatic efforts, we will continue our opposition to racial discrimination against indigenous individuals and communities and continue to press for full indigenous participation in democratic electoral processes throughout the world' (p. 1).	So, to help spur the economy, we've boosted investment in roads throughout the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Reservation Road Program, and we've offered new loans to reach reservations with broadband." '... no statement can undo the damage that was done; what it can do is reaffirm the principles that should guide our future'

from the US asserted that the Council of Human Rights within the UN did not respond to ‘calls made’ in partnership with other council members to generate a consensus text. Using the narrative story component of Stone’s (2002) work, this argument can be interpreted in terms of control. Delegates from the US did not feel their own interests were being met in the resolution, and therefore deemed its ratification unacceptable. TribalCrit enhanced this interpretation by helping to reveal how this strategy aligns with the long history of problem ownership enacted through ‘legal’ expulsions of Native populations in the US. Specifically, tenet 5 shows how by framing of the resolution as inadequate and flawed, the authors sought to forefront the interests of the US government ahead of the Indigenous populations UNDRIP was meant to center.

Conversely, ignoring the legal history described above allowed the authors of the press release to construct a singular story of positive relationships between the US Federal Government and Indigenous populations. They wrote, ‘Although we are voting against this flawed document, my government will continue its vigorous efforts to promote Indigenous rights domestically . . . In our legal system, the federal government has a government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes’ (p. 1). This story aligns with Stone’s (2002) idea of synecdoche. Moreover, while tenet 4 of TribalCrit centers on the agency of Indigenous populations to determine their value, the ambiguity of the quoted statement from the press release above conversely shows the fact that the phrase ‘government-to-government’ is solely defined by the US. That is, only federally recognized tribes are defined as such and therefore can have any sort of ‘relationship’ with the US.

Similar to this power dynamic, the authors of the press release went on to list numerous ways the US government *allowed* Tribes across the country to promote self-governance and determine, among other things, membership, culture, language, religion, education, information, and social welfare. The authors described the US government providing, ‘ways and means for financing these autonomous functions’ (p. 1). The writers explained the US would continue to promote Indigenous rights internationally through opposition of racial discrimination. The irony of this statement is also revealed through TribalCrit tenet 3: ‘Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities’ (Brayboy 2005, 429). Ensuring readers of the US government’s continual protection against racial discrimination to justify not supporting the UNDRIP ambiguously ignores the very same discrimination enacted on Indigenous peoples by the US government since the country’s inception, which through synecdoche turns a whole story into a fraction (i.e. that of the US government as protector against and never perpetuator of racial discrimination). In other words, the contents of the statement exemplify the liminal space Brayboy (2005) discussed of Indigenous populations being both politically and racially defined by the US government. By purporting to have a ‘government-to-government’ relationship (political identity) with Indigenous tribes as well as protecting those very tribes against racial discrimination, the authors of the statement showed how the US government did not differentiate between the two.

By drafting the US government’s position as established in moral and legal righteousness, the authors obviated any demands for the reader to critically question the benevolence or legality of future reforms. Creation of this discourse justified the rejection decision of the UNDRIP and linguistically occludes further questioning of the document

itself. Indeed, the author of the press release, Robert Hagen, described the results of the vote to adopt the Declaration as ‘splintered,’ conveniently omitting that the actual tally was 144 to 4 in favor, with 11 States abstaining (Benjamin, Preston, and Léger 2010). Mostly unaware of this significant exclusion, readers of Hagen’s explanation may believe that if the US decided to reject the resolution, the document may indeed be morally deficient, at least, lacking in feasibility. Hagen’s silence on this lopsided vote and unwillingness to state how it is that 97% of the States voting on this issue acknowledged none of the Declaration’s purported shortcomings purposefully frames the narrative. Applying Stone’s (2002) framework, we can see clearly that what is said – and *not said* – is a purposeful framing of problem ownership. Interestingly, not much changes in the perpetuation of this discourse of moral superiority and problem ownership when, three years later, US officials decided to reverse their previous stance on the shortcomings of the document and supported the UNDRIP, to which we turn in the next section.

### President Obama’s speech 12/16/2010

The speech to address the changing position of the US toward the UNDRIP was given at the beginning of the White House Tribal Nations Conference. In it, former President Obama began with stories of positive interactions he and his staff had with Indigenous communities since their time on the campaign trail. The discourse was established by the President with examples of times members of his staff had been working on, ‘behalf of the first Americans’ (p. 2), continuing the tone of moral righteousness and ownership seen in the press release from 2007 and aligning with Stone’s (2002) conceptualization of narrative story. He continued to describe his early promises of providing a voice for Native Americans in the White House so such groups would not be forgotten or ignored.

Continuing use of Stone’s (2002) narrative story by controlling how his administration would be perceived in relation to Native tribes, President Obama asserted more ways his administration helped these populations. Specifically, he explained this was done with investment and loans to improve economic stability through job creation and empowering parents to give their children better options for schools. Such options, the President explained, were being made through support programs that, ‘actually work with Indian parents to give them a real voice in improving education in [their] community’ (p. 5). The discourse here was steeped in positivity, however, a deeper analysis through the tenets of TribalCrit allowed us to question the seriousness of the President’s tone. Through this lens, President Obama’s statement is an example of the ways US government policies are, ‘intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation’ (Brayboy 2005, 429).

For instance, the US governmental tendency to downplay its dominant relationship toward Indigenous populations by emphasizing the grandeur of American democracy – *e pluribus unum* – without considering its violently assimilative potential has been at central concern of Native Americans for over a century. ‘The white man says there is freedom and justice for all. We have had “freedom and justice,” and that is why we have been almost exterminated,’ reported the Grand Council of American Indians in 1927 (cited in Begaye 2008, 462). We are not, to be sure, claiming that former President Obama or anyone else appeared to actively support policies of extermination. Rather, we

are drawing attention to a sustained refusal to take Indigenous voices and worldviews seriously and thereby exerting problem ownership over Native American and US interactions. The following portion of the President's speech highlights this process.

The President's narrative included a story of how the Crow Nation made him an 'honorary Crow' and gave him the name: 'One Who Helps People Throughout the Land' (p. 2). The President explained that when he told this to his wife, she replied his name should be, 'One Who Isn't Picking Up His Shoes and Socks' (p. 2). Using Stone's (2002) framework of narrative story infused with TribalCrit, we can understand this statement, while seemingly innocuous, as a denigration toward Indigenous knowledge and custom. Through this jest, what is portrayed as inclusive humor in actuality serves to establish President Obama's worldview as standard and the Crow views as merely a quaint anachronism. What on the surface appeared to be a joke takes on new meaning when examined through TribalCrit. Through this lens, the statement becomes a denial of the equality of white and Indigenous peoples. This statement places Indigenous customs in the sort of liminal space Brayboy (2005) presents and betrays the predilection of the labeler to separate himself from the labeled, to call his object primitive and underdeveloped, and to plan for the improvement of the other's situation (Kipnis 1995). Moreover, understanding the history of the relationship between the Crow Nation and US government also reveals this liminality.

The name itself, 'Crow' is in actuality a misinterpretation of the name 'Apsaalook,' which means, 'children of the large-beaked bird' (Governor's Office of Indian Affairs 2021). White settlers in the west relegated the way this tribe (the Apsaalook) understood themselves, controlling their name and therefore perceived identity by western white settlers. Understanding this history of ownership along with Stone's (2002) concept of ambiguity reveals President Obama's joke carries much more weight and he was able to assert and legitimize the power of the Federal Government. Specifically, the ambiguity in the comment established how his administration framed the relationship between Indigenous tribes and the Federal Government. The President would still be in power with or without the honorary titles bestowed on him. The tribes, however, will have more difficulty finding autonomy and economic stability without the 'aid' of the Obama Administration, and therefore the transcribed 'laughter' written after the remark might be more a product of necessity than amusement (Office of the Press Secretary 2010). Ambiguity in relation to the ways the Obama Administration helped Native American tribes was also apparent in creating a discourse of power.

President Obama explained the Bureau of Indian Affairs offered 'new loans' to reservations so they could have broadband internet service and boosted investment in roads. There were no specifics given to how these investments and loans would be given or the outcomes they might have. Additionally, being that loans must be paid back, these strategies keep power in the hands of the Federal Government by placing Native tribes in their debt. Such a policy showed the tribes that it was not their autonomy that ensured their livelihood but the philanthropic goals of the Obama Administration. Moreover, the ambiguity of which particular tribes would receive the loans leaves one to question, or more likely assume, that only federally recognized tribes would be eligible. While President Obama may have been sincere in his desire to support growth in Native tribes, the truth is that the entity that forcibly removed these tribes from their original homes now determined which were qualified to receive these economic boosts. Using TribalCrit

as a lens of interpretation, the Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk's explanation of relational dynamics with the US government is still relevant: Even though the US government can, 'talk and talk for days,' in the end their words have been nothing more than promises, 'blowing in the wind' (Neihardt 2014, 65). Stone's (2002) concept of synecdoche can also be applied to this promise to show how problem ownership is perpetuated by the US government.

Using horror story (Table 1), politicians choose an egregious or outlandish incident to represent the whole of cases and create a narrative in regards to some problem. President Obama's description of high crime rates and health problems seen on reservations can be interpreted as such. He explained, 'We all know Native Americans die of illnesses like diabetes, pneumonia, flu – even tuberculosis – at higher rates than the rest of the population' (p. 4). He then described efforts his administration was taking to help the Native populations in health care and education, and argued they would not succeed, 'unless communities are safe places to grow up . . . where people are not living under constant threat of violence and crime . . . crime rates in Indian country and anywhere from twice to 20 times the national average' (p. 4). While such numbers and statistics are indeed important to both acknowledge and understand to find strategies toward their amelioration, they also generalize across Indigenous populations and produce non-context specific oppressions. As the use of TribalCrit pushes scholars to understand, Indigenous populations, while faced with such harsh realities, are also places of deep and lasting wealth. It is clear in this statement President Obama is not being considerate of the 'Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future [that] are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples' (Brayboy 2005, 439). President Obama fell short of acknowledging this in his use of horror story to control the narrative and own the problem.

Using numbers to define a problem is another discourse trick described by Stone (2002) who explained, 'Although numbers have a preeminent status in our scientific culture, measuring is only one of the ways to describe' (p. 163). She continued, 'To count is to form a category by emphasizing some features instead of others . . . ' (p. 165). By selecting disparities Indigenous people may experience and presenting them as numbers, President Obama was able to remove his government's culpability in these outcomes and re-define them as being perpetuated within the tribes themselves. This in turn wholly negates the sort of data the use of TribalCrit reveals to be the legitimate source within Indigenous communities: narrative stories. Using numbers to create this horror story both allowed President Obama to continue the savior narrative that placed the Federal Government as a key factor in riding these communities of their ills and once again define how a problem to be solved should be understood (i.e. quantitatively).

At the end of his speech, President Obama admitted to past 'mistreatment' of Native populations at the hand of the US government. He furthered this sentiment by stating, 'no statement can undo the damage that was done; what it can do is reaffirm the principles that should guide our future' (p. 6). By admitting this, he took on the role of enlightened politician trying to express his empathy toward Indigenous struggles. The irony of such a statement was that even though he explained the past should not be 'gloss[ed] over,' he did just that while ambiguously failing to describe the atrocities and strategies of domination used to rip the livelihood from Native populations in North America. Strengthening his positive discourse, and following the path Stone (2002)

described of narrative stories moving from doom to salvation (Table 1), after this digression President Obama moved quickly back to the progress his administration was making *for* Native tribes. Again, the ambiguity of his statement allowed the audience to possibly feel real change was occurring when no specific changes had been explained, and semantically relegated the desire of Indigenous people to obtain sovereignty and self-determination back to the margins.

Based on the results and analyses above, even though the US government chose to support the UNDRIP, they did so in a way that reified their positive morality while implicating Indigenous population's lack of tribal sovereignty, power, and self-identification (TribalCrit tenet 4). Both documents analyzed show the strategy of the US government to constitute a narrative that positioned their own policies toward Indigenous populations as acceptable and progressive, and define the problems to be solved. We continue to address these issues in the discussion below, as well as explain possible implications to our analytical approach.

## Let us discuss

Our manuscript outlined an approach and method that helped to examine the long-standing policy problem associated with the relationship of the US government and Indigenous peoples. Specifically, our analysis revealed how power was enacted through the social construction of policy problem definition (i.e. problem ownership). As the use of TribalCrit allowed us to understand, members of the US government have been careful to define and represent Native American policy problems according to its own perspectives and agendas. Stone's (2002) framework showed how this was and is done through narrative, ambiguity, and synecdoche.

Our analytical strategy of infusing Stone's (2002) work with a more critical lens brought to light how US government statements that initially may seem gracious and genuine toward Indigenous peoples are in actuality perpetuations of government values and policy priorities. Such statements continue to place Indigenous peoples in the liminal space discussed by Brayboy (2005). Even though the Federal Government ostensibly offered Native American tribes autonomy and self-determination, such offers were only symbolic and reify the lack of power held by those tribes to be autonomous and self-identify. For instance, according to writers of the US press release from 2007, the relationship between Native Americans and the US government was reportedly treated as a 'government-to-government' one. Also stated in a remarkably candid way in another section of the 2007 release was that under existing law, Indigenous peoples were, 'not entitled to independence nor any right of self-governance within the nation-state,' and that 'it was never the intent' of the US to reconsider this status quo (p. 2). Essentially, the position the US government held was that Indigenous peoples within their territory were only recognized as Indigenous if they were, by definition, dominated (TribalCrit tenet 2). This purposeful establishment of dominating essentially predetermined the power dynamic of any dialogue between these entities and supports the TribalCrit tenet of colonization being endemic to society (tenet 1).

Our analysis also showed how the adoption of the UNDRIP must be understood not at face value, but rather within the undergirding context of power and political dynamics of nation-states. As Reyhner (2009) pointed out

In colonized countries where the indigenous populations remained a numerical majority, as in many places in Africa and Asia, the indigenous populations have been able to regain their sovereignty through self-determination. However, where they became a relatively small minority, as in the four countries voting against the 2007 Declaration, they remain in many ways second-class citizens. As Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, 492) concluded, 'many governments applaud . . . human rights, as long as they can define them in their own way, according to their own cultural norms'. (p. 8)

Without being framed as a legally binding declaration, which the US government consistently resisted, adoption of UNDRIP in countries where Indigenous populations are a small minority of the overall population makes such adoption largely inconsequential.

### Silence speaks

Methodologically, it is also noteworthy that in this case it was just as important to recognize what was *not* said as it was to analyze that which was said in the discourse. This is what discourse does: it governs what can and cannot be said. While one can locate hints of suspicious intentions within discourse in the statements we analyzed, the lack of discourse on deep-seated issues of recognition reveals the US government's intentions in these statements. One example of the centrality of dominance undergirding the discourse was that of the way President Obama addressed the US government's mistreatment of Indigenous tribes. Cautiously gliding across the surface of the issue, the President boasted of government action to resolve disputes. However, our analysis led us to question to what extent any of the issues he discussed were at all 'resolved'.

This was essentially the reason why we thought it was so useful to infuse interpretive approaches to discourse analysis (e.g. that of Stone 2002) with consideration of power relations through TribalCrit. In this way, we could recognize the possibility of multiple and divergent policy problem definitions (Stein 2004; Rein 1976), and how discursive power controls categories that then become structural power forces (Stein 2004; Shore and Wright 1997). At the same time, we delved further into issues of power relations, and interrogated who said and enacted what constituted 'normal' in policy discourse. The discourse investigated through TribalCrit was thus akin to the tip of an iceberg, which below the surface reveals the taken-for-granted sociocultural context of Indigenous policy making.

### Conclusions

In the examples presented above, the US government's position framed the policy problem, purposefully, in line with a totalizing position of domination within their purported 'government-to-government' relationship. The US government attempted to construct the problems faced by Indigenous peoples through policy to constrain the possibilities of raising new strategies for solutions. TribalCrit was used to reveal this as a continuation of the endemic colonialization of Indigenous tribes by the US government and goals of assimilating Indigenous populations toward western ideals and knowledge. This power dynamic was/is achieved through a homogenization of the subject in US policy.

As the title of our manuscript suggests, we interrogated exactly what value President Obama was articulating in his statement when he referred to the American ideal of ‘E Pluribus Unum’ – was this instance of discourse articulating policy for purposes of assimilative state conformity, as TribalCrit was used to reveal, or to encourage unitary diversity through democratic processes? Once again, what was not said revealed the answer. Given contextual clues from our results above, President Obama’s statement can be understood as simply a symbolic articulation of solidarity, when in fact the goal is problem ownership. Rather than understand the differences in Indigenous populations through illustrations of the adaptability among individuals and groups (TribalCrit tenet 7), the President’s discourse reduced this diverse group of interlocutors to economic subjects who were conflated to a singular construct of a ‘Native.’

### **What might be done?**

Our argument regarding the US government’s discourse on adopting the UNDRIP may be complete at this point, however, following in the footsteps of Flyvbjerg (2001), we wish not only to describe and enumerate that which has been said and done, but also to explore how, going forward, policy that aims to improve the conditions of American Indigenous tribes should be interrogated. If, as TribalCrit can help reveal, problem ownership shapes the creation of normative policy discourse, then democratic negotiation of values in policy is essential. A democratic negotiation of policy values would necessitate in-depth discussion concerning problem definition. Far from a symbolic discussion premised upon predetermined outcomes and policy priorities of government figureheads, for the US public this would mean hearing and recognizing the common and perhaps divergent concerns and ideas of various Indigenous groups on their own terms (i.e. TribalCrit tenets 5 and 7). Simply attempting to understand a diversity of Indigenous perspectives on the issues in questions would constitute a step away from normative policy discourse that merely cheers its past accomplishments.

As a general public in the US, we are taught to think about the problem and solutions to Indigenous policy from a normative-western perspective. However, it is impossible to even begin the difficult process of addressing past injustices and domination, while simultaneously understanding perspectives in light of their corresponding Indigenous epistemologies, unless we pause efforts to solve the problems that have been defined by western governments and attempt to listen to those who have been oppressed. As citizens and immigrants of nations such as the US and Canada – which announced its adoption of UNDRIP as the first draft of this article was being written – it will be necessary to take what we claim in this manuscript into consideration.

In conclusion, if we had to sum our implications down to one sentence, the reader of these announced adoptions of international declarations should not take endorsement at face value. Merely surveying the linguistic devices utilized by the crafters of such statements is not enough. One must also interrogate the extent to which power is being exercised, as in this case, where the announced US position endorsing UNDRIP was in fact little more than an implicit celebration of its own state-centered, narrow interpretation of the problem at hand.



## Note

1. Wherever possible, we use the cited authors' terms for Indigenous peoples around the world. When left to our own, we do not use the full title of 'Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaskan Natives Peoples' throughout the text for stylistic reasons. We want to acknowledge, however, the great diversity that exists among and within all Indigenous peoples and the diversity of issues they confront.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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