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BRAIDING OUR (IN)VISIBILITY: NATIVE WOMEN NAVIGATING THE DOCTORAL PROCESS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Braiding Our (In)Visibility: Native Women Navigating the Doctoral Process through Social Media

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Native doctoral students are a severely underrepresented group in higher education with stagnating enrollment trends over the last 30 years when compared to other racial/ethnic groups. For Native women doctoral students specifically, they represent only 0.9% (n=119) in 2002-03 (DeVoy, Darling-Churchill, & Snyder, 2008). Connected to the lack of representation at a doctoral level, their unique intersectional experiences are largely ignored in research. Using (in)visibility, cultural integrity, and counter-storytelling, this Indigenous qualitative (e.g., sharing circles) study explores three Native women doctoral students' documented lived experiences via social media as they navigated through the doctoral and dissertation writing process. Through scholarly personal narrative analyses of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts and virtual sharing circles, early career Native scholars discuss managing visibility, maintaining cultural integrity, and using social media as a means for strengthening relationships and empowering resistance to oppressive university structures. While social media was important in helping Native women doctoral students, institutions must incorporate Native culture and perspectives when seeking ways to advance Native doctoral degree recipients.

Amidst a bustling academic conference with thousands of participants, seven phones buzzed with a group text, "Who wants to meet for dinner?" It was day two of the national conference and most of our close colleagues had arrived. After several back-and-forths over text, we gathered that night at a local pizzeria, eager to see each other and catch up. As we sat together, looking over menus, laughing loudly, and engaging in lively discussion about the conference, work, and family life, there was a break to the chatter, and we all looked around the table. We had much to celebrate. At our table sat

seven Native American academics: three established faculty, one recent doctoral graduate, and three PhD candidates, two of whom had successfully defended their dissertations weeks prior to the conference. We remarked at the importance of the gathered group, “Can you believe we have *seven* Native Ph.D.’s, or soon to be Ph.D.’s, in higher ed all at one table? That’s amazing!” We also realized that the seven of us represented a large majority of the scholars nationwide doing this work. At the moderately-sized pizzeria, our collective presence felt large and visible, but simultaneously, we all knew how invisible we were in the academy.

Over dinner, we discussed how the odds of obtaining a Ph.D. were against Native Americans. We were aware that while the national enrollment rate in graduate degrees has increased over the past two decades by 57 percent, enrollment for Natives¹ in those same degrees still account for less than 1% when compared to other racial/groups; resulting in a stagnation crises (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Of the 175,038 doctoral degrees conferred in 2013, a total of 900 Natives received a doctoral degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). When the total was disaggregated further, the National Science Foundation reported that 119 Natives acquired a research doctorate degree, and of those recipients, only 24 received an Education doctorate, with just 3 awarded in Higher Education nationally (NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2013). That means, 0.0001% of total doctoral degrees was awarded to a Native person in the field of Higher Education, and not surprisingly, one of the three awardees was at our table.

As the larger discussion veered in different directions, we, the authors, talked about our experiences as Native women navigating the doctoral process specifically.

¹ Throughout this paper we will use the terms “Native” and “Indigenous” interchangeably to refer to the peoples who are indigenous to what is now the United States of America.

We spoke candidly about the challenges we faced in writing our dissertations and the ways that maintaining strong relationships with fellow Native scholars, our families, and our communities helped thrust us to graduate (Secatero, 2014; Shotton, 2008). We discussed how institutional structures often do not fully foster an interdependent environment that honored our cultural values of relationships, community, and humility rooted in Native epistemologies. As we shared our dissertation journeys with one another, we piped in, “I saw that on your Instagram!” “I appreciated when you posted that about your struggles to finish writing.” “Your posts on Facebook about your progress inspired me so much!” The more we talked, the more we realized the role that social media had played in getting us through our writing, but also in helping us to negotiate through feelings of isolation and invisibility in spaces that did not often fully support or understand our experiences as Indigenous women. We then recognized the ways our social media use and the process of managing our visibility as a powerful act of resistance—an avenue to maintain and develop our identities as Native women in settler colonial² academic environments.

Research has identified factors that influence persistence for Native graduate students (Brayboy et al., 2012; Shotton, 2008; Secatero), but limited knowledge exists in understanding Native women doctoral students’ negotiation of (in)visibility³, especially when balancing children, family, and the additional weight and intersections of gender and societal norms. To address this gap in the literature, and the intersections of our various identities, we utilized Indigenous methodologies and scholarly personal

² We define settler colonialism as colonization that “destroys to replace” (Wolfe, 2006), in which settlers build a new nation-state on top of existing Indigenous lands, seeking to eradicate Indigenous peoples in the process.

³ We employ Brayboy’s (2004) use of (in)visibility to describe the experiences of Native students in Ivy League institutions, to represent the constant interplay between visibility and invisibility—both managed and unmanaged, both within our control and out of our control, and the ways institutions, historical contexts, and societal structures interplay with our daily lived realities.

narrative (SPN) to analyze our personal doctoral journey documented through social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Espino, Munoz, and Kiyama (2010) braided *trenzas de identidades multiples* (multiple strands of identity) in their stories of navigating from the doctoral phase to faculty. We connected with their metaphor of braiding, particularly when explaining (in)visibility because like a braid, there are areas where we were visible and then tucked behind another strand to be invisible. Therefore, we explore braiding our (in)visibility by addressing the following research questions: 1) How do Native women doctoral students' create visible spaces through a system where they are broadly viewed as invisible? 2) What are Native women experiences in managing their (in)visibility? 3) How was social media used to create and promote community and provide spaces of resistance through the doctoral journey for Native women?

Framing Our Space: Context and Theoretical Framework

The limited research on Native doctoral degree recipients points to present challenges and historically rooted ideological shifts that inhibit Native women doctoral students' experiences. Broadly speaking, Native graduate students indicated cultural alienation, racism and discrimination, and a lack of Indigenous role models in institutions as barriers to their success (Brayboy et al, 2012). For Native women doctoral recipients specifically, family financial difficulties, academic discouragements, and "initial failure" took a toll on their doctoral progression (Shotton, 2008). In a study with two Indigenous women and their participation in higher education, Waterman and Lindley (2013) articulated the complex nature that colonization has on gender roles among Indigenous peoples. Prior to European colonization, Indigenous peoples' viewed gender roles as being of equal importance and each fulfilling a specific role to societal

survival (Mihesuah, 2003). However, European ideologies that value individuality and independence disrupted century old traditions of interdependence and collectivism (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Therefore, Indigenous women today are seeking ways to redefine themselves (Waterman & Lindley, 2013) in a dominant patriarchal society. All these factors culminate to marginalizing Native women doctoral students and contribute to their invisibility in higher education (Fryberg & Stephens, 2010).

Our work is theoretically guided by the concept of *(in)visibility* (Brayboy, 2004; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012). For Native peoples, representations in broader society and within higher education are nearly completely absent, leaving scholars to move from the language of “underrepresented” to “invisible” (Fryberg and Stephens, 2010). Fryberg and Stephens describe invisibility for Native peoples as limiting “the public ‘ways of being’ or social representations (i.e., ideas, images) of ‘how to be a person’ that people use to orient themselves in their social world,” and this absence of any representations limits the “possible selves” imagined for Native peoples. The experiences of Native doctoral students are shaped by invisibility, but we find that invisibility is also combined with experiences of managing and searching for visibility. Brayboy (2004) argues that both invisibility and visibility can be sites of strength and power, or lead to further marginalization. Relevant to our study is the argument that, “invisibility is a strategic form of activism that illustrates that American Indians are not only present, but are capable, viable members of the university community” (Brayboy, 2004, p.147).

Brayboy (2004) also found that Native undergraduates managed their visibility in conscious and changing ways that allowed for them to maintain their *cultural integrity* (Deyhle, 1995), enabling them to stay true to their Indigenous values while navigating the white, Eurocentric university system. In understanding cultural integrity it is

important to note that this concept is not a binary, nor even a continuum—one is not “more” or “less” Indigenous based on their engagements with settler colonial spaces. Cultural integrity is an individual process of managing a student’s own connection to Indigenous values and finding ways to maintain agency and power in oppressive institutions.

In referring back to Fryberg and Stephens’ (2010) call for increased representations to counter invisibility and create possible selves for Natives, we apply *counter-storytelling* (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Emerging out of critical race theory, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as “telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 32). These stories can “shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). As Brayboy (2004) stated, visibility can be activism, and a way to make Native presence felt in the academy. We see the telling of our personal stories as an act of resistance to the dominant discourse that renders us invisible, and a means to take back power over our experiences and let others in the Native community see themselves reflected in spaces of higher education.

Our Approach: Methodology

In developing a transformative and culturally grounded methodology, we engaged in storytelling approaches that are deeply rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing. Since time immemorial, storytelling and stories within Native societies have been vital and a legitimate source of understanding and navigating through life (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2009). We employed *sharing circles* (Kovach, 2009; Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2016), an Indigenous methodology approach, to not only assert Indigenous ways of knowing,

but also because our purpose and research work are intricately connected and thereby guided by the relationships and obligations we have to our Indigenous communities (Wilson, 2008). Eurocentric qualitative methodologies, such as *Scholarly Personal Narrative* (SPN) were also utilized because SPN compliments Indigenous methods by viewing that, “every person’s life is a story, and every story has the potential to teach” (Nash & Bradley, 2012, p. 9). We were inspired by the autoethnographic and SPN journeys undertaken by other scholars of color and the ways they employed these methods to reflect upon and theorize their own experiences (Reddick & Sáenz, 2012; Espino, Munoz, & Kiyama, 2010; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005).

Sources of Knowledge: Data Collection

During our dissertation stage, we documented our experiences through various sources, including social media, personal journaling and photos. These personal sources then became data for our study (Nash, 2004). Through social media platform(s) including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, we used various hashtags throughout the dissertation process (e.g., #dissertationjourney, #dissertationceremony), which helped us to revisit, gather, and analyze our prior posts. For posts that did not include a hashtag descriptor, we utilized the platform’s search tools and chronological timelines to find posts written during our dissertation writing stage. For personal journaling, we kept a journal where we reflected on feelings, questions, and challenges arising from our daily research and writing. Lastly, we gathered personal photos that we chose not to share on social media that we felt was another important dimension of our dissertation journey.

Processing Our Personal and Collective Stories: Data Analysis.

Through five virtual sharing circles conducted through Google Hangout, we discussed and together analyzed the meaning of our individual and collective dissertation journeys. *Sharing circles* are an open-structured, conversational style methodology that respects story sharing within a Tribal cultural protocol context (Kovach, 2009). Through trust and openness to vulnerability, research has shown Native college students utilized sharing circles to share in-depth personal stories (Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016). By incorporating sharing circles to help process our stories, we discussed pivotal insights, debriefed, and challenged each other to provide examples and reflect deeper into our experiences.

Employing scholarly personal narrative, SPN (Nash, 2004), we then defined larger thematic concepts guided by in(visibility), counter-storytelling, and cultural integrity in higher education. SPN works to, “make narrative sense of personal experience,” by putting the, “*self* of the scholar front and center” that ultimately serves to benefit others (Nash, 2004, p. 18). SPN pushes the boundaries of scholarship by providing a space for underrepresented, invisible populations to include their personal and authentic voices into their writing (Nash & Bradley, 2012; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012).

Braiding Together Our Stories of In(visibility): Relationships, Authenticity, and Resistance

During one of our final sharing circles, we talked with each other about how our experiences with (in)visibility were like a three-stranded braid. The metaphor of braiding, particularly when explaining (in)visibility speaks to when we are visible and then carefully tucked behind another strand to be invisible. Moreover, for many Navajo people, braided hair is believed to instill cohesiveness, focus, and strength in thought.

As a Navajo woman, Amanda shared that she was told that when hair is braided, thoughts are clearer which can make a person resilient and strong. We therefore share our braided stories of (in)visibility, three inter-related findings that demonstrate the importance of cultural integrity teachings of relationships, authenticity, and resistance. Although, each of our stories highlight a specific cultural integrity teaching (e.g., relationships, authenticity, and resistance), we acknowledge that each cultural integrity value played a role in shaping our journey.

We also are conscious of the intersectional (braided) nature of our identities as women, citizens of sovereign Native nations, and racialized bodies, our socioeconomic statuses, and more (Crenshaw, 1991). These intersections work differently for each of us, given our varying skin tones, regional locations, locations on the doctoral journey timeline, tribal politics, and institutions. Part of the overwhelming invisibility Native peoples experience is the erasure of the diversity of Native identities and experiences—with over 567 federally recognized tribes and hundreds more state and non-federally recognized tribes, there is no singular Native experience, no singular Native culture, or singular Native identity. Each of our experiences are colored by our own unique intersectional identities, and that is important.

Honoring relationships as part of the #dissertationjourney: Amanda's story

I'm a mother of three. Coral, our oldest child is 13, a budding teenager full of tenderness. Brien is our middle child. He is 9 years of age, but he has an older soul that is closer in age to adulthood, well more like young adulthood. Noelle is our youngest. At the peak of the #dissertationjourney, at a time when I moved through the data analysis stage and began synthesizing the findings, Noelle was growing in my belly. Then throughout the intensity of the final writing stage, Noelle was near me constantly,

sleeping, playing, or nestled in the comforts and nourishment of my breast. Some of my fondest memories of writing included nursing her while reading and even (sometimes) attempting to type. She would stare at me with loving brown eyes and I would think she was telling me, “Keep working mama... keep working, for me.” In fact, I often tell people that the dissertation should be co-authored by Noelle because there were many times when I would read out loud a portion of the dissertation and ask her, “does that sound ok?” Sometimes she would nod no, and I would actually redo my (or our) work. Sometimes she would nod yes and I would release a little cheer of excitement because I agreed with her.

Intersecting my role as a doctoral mother with my identity as a Navajo woman stretched me. Raised in a Navajo family and a tribal community that instills kinship as fundamental to the way of life constantly played in my thoughts. You see, what this meant was that a huge part of me fought with feelings of selfishness in pursuing a doctoral degree. I battled through sacrifices that included time spent away from my immediate and extended family in order to dedicate time to writing. Consequently, I felt alone and encountered frequent thoughts of quitting.

Unfortunately, there were not many Native faculty that I could call upon for reassurance and guidance or to simply hear, “If I could do it, you can too,” or “This is what helped me...”. In this sense, invisibility hit a new level for me because I had no possible examples near me to provide some sense of hope (Fryberg & Stephens, 2010). Do not get me wrong, I’m grateful for the non-Native faculty who mentored, supported, and encouraged me. Yet, what I yearned for was a Native women faculty member who also had children. I imagined going to her and seeking advise on how she made it through as a Native mother.

After months of structurally induced marginalization and self-doubt, I understood that if I were to achieve a doctoral degree, I needed support. Therefore, I utilized Facebook (FB) as a tool for accountability. It was my way of seeking support from others because deep inside I feared that I would not get done. Most of my Facebook friends are family members, people from my hometown community of Ganado (located on the Navajo reservation), friends, former students, and colleagues (even faculty from my program). I thought that if I declared my personal intentions in a public space, possibly that visible strategy would motivate me. On October 10, I took that courageous and vulnerable step:

No more excuses. I need your help and support. My hope is to graduate this May 2015. Ultimately that means, I need to buckle down and prioritize time toward research and writing. September has come and gone and October will follow that same pattern. Therefore, in the next few months join me as I document via FB my journey toward completion. It is my hope that through sharing my experiences with many of you, a burning desire to cross that finish line will ignite allowing me to continuously move forward day by day. I have roughly 3 solid months to reach that goal. Trust my heart, because that is wherein God resides.
#dissertationjourney

While documenting the journey was at first an accountability strategy, I realized that sharing via FB was a way to stay true to my cultural integrity of kinship - honoring relationships in a visible manner, which ultimately helped me to negate feelings of selfishness. For example, on February 1st I posted, "Revised chapter five submitted. YAY! And Brian is still up with me. Little does he know how his support means so much to me. Good night or good morning. ☺ #dissertationjourney." Often I would stay up late to write because the kids were asleep and it was a quiet time for me to focus. However, it was also a lonely time because our home was dark and still. The only sounds came from my fingers tapping on the laptop keys and soft music to keep me company. Having Brian, my husband, near me during several of those nights was a warm, comforting

experience. I knew he was tired after working a full day of construction work, but he stayed by my side. His presence was his way of showing me support and I understood that. He gave me inspiration to press on and I wanted to acknowledge to others how grateful I was for his love and partnership.

I then began to be more open and vulnerable by recognizing loved ones who passed away, but whom I felt were constantly with me as I progressed. I wrote on March 17, “And then there is today, when I reflect on those love ones who passed away, shicheii [maternal grandfather], shimasani [maternal grandmother], aunt Wanda, grandma Carol, grandpa David, little Mary, shinali Manuelito [paternal grandfather], grandpa Ted, and so many more – I feel them cheering, encouraging, and loving me to keep pressing on. Ahe’hee!” I was in tears when I wrote this post. Listening to classic Gospel music made me think of my grandparents. I envisioned that my passed love ones heard my cry and were looking down from heaven and encouraging me to keep going, beckoning me to not give up. That evening, I surpassed my writing goal. As a Navajo woman, we are taught to recognize those who shaped us including people who are not physically with us today. Being able to recognize my family who passed away was another example of honoring the people that often go unrecognized in dominant conversations about the doctoral process.

I was also able to stay true to my teaching by recognizing the relationship that I had with Creator, which is again often pushed to the margins in higher education. I have many FB posts where I shared my faith. Most significantly, when I successfully defended the dissertation, with pure joy I posted on April 13:

Happy tears, joyous laughter, stories shared, and delicious memories... <3 this day, this moment, this journey. Looking forward to the work that lies ahead! Extremely grateful for family, friends, colleagues, and faculty who spent time with us today. Above all, grateful for Creator for already setting the path for today

and for tomorrow. I will cherish today for many years to come. Ahe'hee! With love, Dr. Amanda Tachine.

During the hardest times, meaning when I felt the magnitude of the invisibility weight heavy on my shoulders, prayers was what got me through. And then during the brightest of moments, such as getting a chapter approved and successfully defending the dissertation, I expressed how faith reassured and strengthened me. Being able to openly share my spiritual self was empowering and an act of resistance to the dominant fears of expressing spirituality as inseparable to education.

I became more aware that the doctoral process was not a solo voyage, but a collective journey. The journey intricately revolved around the relationships that I had with family, friends, passed love ones, and a higher power. Moreover, I was surprised to learn how much I became a motivational example or “possible self” for others (Fryberg & Stephens, 2010). Frequently, after I posted, I received responses from others such as, “You are giving me and many others hope to finish their doctoral journeys, and for that, I am so grateful. Most days, I feel like I will never finish so this is reassuring.” Those types of messages also inspired and reassured me to continue sharing my experiences because in some small way, I was helping others, which is again an important value amongst Indigenous peoples – reciprocal exchange of giving back.

I often hear that the dissertation writing process is lonely. As a Navajo women, I do not thrive in isolation, that is contrary to my way of life. FB provided a space for me to enact cultural integrity teachings of honoring relationships by recognizing people (past and present) and Creator whom were with me throughout my dissertation journey. This helped me to deconstruct the journey as an independent process, but see and feel that others were with me along the way. Sharing the dissertation journey in a very

visible space was an open door to my personal thoughts and beliefs that was laden with vulnerability. Invisibility is still felt in higher education, but being thoughtfully visible, grounded in cultural integrity teachings, I found the strength to move forward.

Asserting My Authenticity: Chris's Story

Like many graduate students, a bulk of the dissertation writing occurred late into the evening. Rather than plugging in my headphones and zoning off for hours, I was often visited by my pre-school aged son. He would wander into my office space, wearing in his favorite Cars PJs, asking me to sleep with him or sing him a song. More times than not, I would have to deny his beautiful face or ask my partner for help. Either way, I would feel an immense amount of guilt of having to choose between writing and him. One evening, rather than sending him off to bed, I set up a mountain of pillows and blankets next to my desk. When I told him that he could sleep here, he ran back to his bed to grab his favorite plush kitty and hopped into his temporary bed. He tossed and turned but consistently kept his eyes shut extra tight with a grin on his face. He was determined to prove to me that he could fall asleep next to me as I wrote. I didn't write much during that next half hour, instead I deeply thought about the dissertation process. As I heard his breathing slow and saw his body relax, I quietly pulled out my phone and took a photo of his small body, holding his kitty tight, in the bed of pillows and blankets. After I took that picture, I clicked on the Instagram icon to post the picture with a few witty lines. Before I clicked "share," I paused and stared at the photo, it felt special—too special to share with the world. I clicked cancel, closed the Instagram app, and went back to writing. In that moment, I was reminded of the sacrifice my family, regardless of age, was making for me. It also forced me to question my initial intentions of completing a doctoral degree. In that moment, I began to question how can I remain authentic.

Authenticity, through my Navajo and Laguna Pueblo lens, guides my actions and thoughts through the teachings of my ancestors, through my lived experiences with my family, and through my personal commitment to my community. By centering authenticity in the dissertation process, research process remains sacred.

When sharing stories with my fellow Native scholars, I realized my posts and pictures through social media demonstrated my ability to define and remain authentic during the dissertation process. Upon successfully defending the dissertation proposal, my family and I decided to relocate back to our home state, New Mexico. The decision was two-fold. One, to be physically closer to our traditional homelands and for our son to be near his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Two, for my partner to teach at his alma mater, a local tribal college. Both factors represent our commitment to community and family and our desire to reciprocate our higher education knowledge back to tribal communities. Prior to leaving Arizona, where my academic institution was located, I was cautioned by faculty mentors to not become the student who leaves after becoming All But Dissertation (ABD) and never completes the dissertation. Naively, I thought that wouldn't be me because I had my community support at home. It was true I did have my community in New Mexico, but what I didn't realize was that while I was in Arizona I had developed a different type of community that I had in New Mexico. I didn't have the same people I academically *grew up with* to process the dissertation writing phase.

I cannot profess that I purposefully used social media as a tool to find the community I was missing during the dissertation process. Rather, it formed more organically and it was not until I began analyzing my personal timeline on Facebook and Instagram did posts and pictures begin to show how I used social media to maintain

my commitment to remain authentic. By scrolling through years of posts on my timeline and reflecting on why I posted certain images or statements, I recognized significant differences between my usage of social media platforms. On my Facebook timeline, it would be common to see me share dissertation experiences, such as, “Another great accomplishment today! My dissertation proposal was approved...this is one step I never thought I would be taking.” Posts, like this one, were generally an indication of progress and celebration but when I began piecing out themes of my Facebook posts I realized there were few mentions about dissertation struggles. The posts about my struggles with the dissertation process, as I recall, would either exist in my mind or be a post that I would delete as fast as I ranted. I did not publicly post struggles because I did not want my emotionally charged post to negatively reflect upon the dissertation process and how I wanted to keep the research process sacred. I felt a negative post on Facebook could be perceived as me flaunting my struggle.

For me, the dissertation process needed to remain sacred, as many individuals from Native communities will never have this opportunity I have been blessed with. And to openly post struggles on Facebook about this sacred undertaking seemed self-centered and violated my personal commitment to remaining authentic to who I am and what I have been taught. Additionally, I did not want my posts to deter my Facebook friends, who consist of family members, colleagues, and other Indigenous rising-scholars, from navigating and obtaining any higher education degree. The dissertation struggles were intimate, as I quickly realized the dissertation was an extension of myself and my community. In my process, sharing the most difficult moments on a public platform would not necessarily help me overcome the challenges, so the intentional act

of remaining publicly silent on Facebook was my way of protecting the sacred research process.

In a more private space, I relied on a private Facebook group page to provide a virtual supportive space for female ABD students. This group was unlike any other Facebook group I had joined. First, other than two individuals, I did not personally know the ladies. Yet, I felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with other members, as they were going through a similar dissertation process. The group moderator suggested we post twice a week. Each post had overarching parameters, but in the end, we could post whatever was most salient in our dissertation process. I used this group to post my writing goals, to give updates on my progress, and most importantly, to openly rant about the struggles of the dissertation process. The struggling posts often looked like this post from February 2015:

It has been a rough week or so. Just writing and rewriting and writing and rewriting again. The worst is when you think you have a solid piece only to feel you get knocked down. I'm noticing I'm bouncing back faster than before so that's good (I think). I have a lot of work to do this weekend and all I want to do is spend time with my son and hubby. My son has been going to school 5 days a week (normally it's only 3) and poor kiddo is just exhausted. I miss spending time with him.

I'm trying to remember this is only temporary, but gosh, this is hard. I think this last stretch has been the most challenging for me. I think it's all the highs and lows. All in all, I have to remind myself that I chose this path and I'm not the only one on this path.

I just want to send a shout-out to [another member] for doing an awesome job on progressing and for helping me out with daily texts. Keep at it all...you all rock!

This post definitely hit upon the struggles I faced at the intersection of family, academic standards, and personal motivation. It reminds me of the questionable times, like how I felt I would not finish the dissertation process or that I was doing it “all wrong.”

Unlike my Facebook public posts and pictures, my Instagram picture posts expressed more raw emotions and the picture captions and hashtags left room for interpretation on what I was feeling. For example, on Instagram I posted a picture that shows me after a run I took (Figure 1). The image was captioned with: “I pushed approx. 40lbs for 2 miles even though that was the last think I wanted to do. #olinthemaster took this pic... such good angles he has for his photography. #artistictalent #notarunner #running.”



Figure 1. Me after a run I took

Olin, my 3-year old (at the time) son took this picture of me while he was taking a break from the slides and swings at the playground. This picture reminds me of how just an hour earlier I was attempting to edit a chapter while watching the clock to pick him up from school. The image also prompts me to recall how sacred running is to my ancestors and relatives. For many Indigenous people, running is partly about physical health, but also an activity that strengthens our connection to Mother Earth. For me, running during my dissertation writing sessions was an act of maintaining balance. So

while this image may not reference a dissertation event or struggle, it was a moment to share with others and to use hashtags like #notarunner and #running to reach out to individuals beyond those in academia. Maintaining relations with people outside of my academic life was critical. It grounded me on the larger picture. It reminded me why I was going through these dissertation “hoops.” Staying close to those purposes also helped me to not over exaggerate or internalize my struggles. My Instagram pictures reminded me that I chose to go through the dissertation process. It was my choice and essentially, I needed to just take the challenges in strides and accomplish my goal.

While the use of social media helped me to both publicly and privately process my dissertation experience, it was the thoughts and pictures I did not share that further demonstrated my commitment to remain grounded my authenticity. In addition to keeping a personal journal, I created folder on my computer of pictures that I took during the dissertation process. I did not begin this folder with the intent to keep the photos offline; I actually had planned to create a Facebook or Instagram picture collage at the end of my dissertation. But when I began reviewing certain photos, I vividly recalled raw emotions. Those emotions ran array and kept me grounded in the reasons why I was working toward a doctorate degree. Much like the photo of my son laying in the piles of blankets and pillows, I decided those emotions and memories would remain with me and those closest to me because the dissertation process was not about a piece of paper or a means to an end. The dissertation represents a sacred journey that allowed me to assert my authenticity in a space that is often benign in terms of values that center Indigenous communities and people.

Resisting Invisibility and Finding Support: Adrienne's story

I came to my Ivy League graduate institution knowing I'd be one of the only Native students. I told myself I knew what I was getting into, and that because I had grown up in a similar environment with few Native people that I would be fine. But when I arrived on campus, I could not have been prepared for the weight of the erasure I felt. I (and Native peoples) were largely invisible in the classroom. I became used to PowerPoint slides in class about race only including Black, White, Latino, and Asian; I only ever had one reading about or by a Native person on any of my syllabi; the week we discussed the "history of American Education" we skipped Indian boarding schools completely; and for the entire 5 years I was there, I was the only Native doctoral student in my program (As of today, there still isn't another one). Coupling with the fact that I pass as white and am not easily visually identified as an Indigenous person, and I am not a very big classroom talker—Native peoples were completely invisible in my classes and on my campus. Both physically and in research/scholarship—we were nonexistent.

Yet, there were several occasions where I was made hyper-visible. My school made a video about my journey to the doctoral program and my "research" in the second year, before I had even submitted a single document about my potential scholarship. They used this short clip to promote the diversity of the school, featuring it on the institution's webpage and even sending it to prospective students of color. I also sat on six different diversity committees, was on the diversity orientation panel several times, and led the statement of purpose workshop for the diversity recruitment event twice. I "connected with" countless prospective Native students over email, started a Native student group, served as an advisor to undergraduate students of color, and worked at the Native program—I basically said yes to every request and did

everything in my power to try and make sure that Native people had a presence and voice in issues of "diversity" on campus, because I knew if I wasn't there, no one would even notice our absence.

In turn, despite all this work, again, I was made to feel invisible and forgotten by the institution. There were several occasions where my name was accidentally left off important lists, a tangible reminder of my invisibility. The spring of my fourth year on campus I received a prestigious national fellowship. A campus-wide email celebrated the other recipients, but not me. Then, a year later, as I frantically wrote the last pages of my dissertation to make it to graduation, I wasn't included on the list of graduating students for commencement marshal voting. These two occasions should have been moments of celebration and excitement marking my progression through the doctoral program, but instead, they served as stark reminders that my research, my work, and my physical presence were marginalized. Both times, due to the outrage of my friends, the situation was remedied, but it contributed to my feelings of not belonging, and feeling like my presence only mattered to the university when it was promoting their diversity initiatives.

It was in this space and context that I turned to social media and online communities to both feel the presence of my voice, and to find the community and support I needed—it helped me feel seen. My first year of grad school I started my blog, *Native Appropriations*, which grew out of a growing discomfort with the lack of knowledge my faculty and peers displayed of Native peoples, and the relationship between that reality and the proliferation of stereotypical, demeaning, and decontextualized "Indian" imagery in popular culture. As the blog readership grew, so did my presence on other social media platforms, specifically Instagram and Twitter.

These platforms played important roles throughout my doctoral journey, but became very central during my 5th year of the program, as I was writing my dissertation.

I had to escape that year, and therefore moved all the way to Arizona to work with one of my committee members and write my dissertation. I knew if I stayed at my institution that I would get sucked into the diversity committee milieu, and was lucky enough to have outside funding that would support my time away from the east coast. As I began the writing process with uncertainty and insecurity, I began sharing and documenting my experiences on social media. A post on Instagram shows a screenshot of my purchase of the book “Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day,” with the caption: “Today’s purchase. #timetostartthisbeast.” My photos from that time also show the fruits of getting settled in a new home—a shot of my car packed for the move, a photo of my office door nameplate, sunsets from my new balcony, my new ID card. There are hints throughout Instagram of my trepidation with the process, such as a caption on a photo showing my new earring rack with rows and rows of Native jewelry where I wrote, “trying not to be nervous for my orals on Tuesday,” referring to the final approval process of my dissertation proposal.

As the months passed, my feed shows photos of academic commitments such as conferences, and writing process photos, such as stacks of books on Indian education (with a hashtag #mylibrarycardworks!), artistic arrangements of field notes, laptop, and reference texts, and diagrams of my “research agenda” for job applications. In between these were interspersed photos of a community-filled life in Arizona: hiking, gallery openings, Native community events, and inside jokes with my new colleagues. As I grew my network and community, I began posting pictures of my near-daily writing meet-ups at various locations throughout the city with fellow Native academics, which

I began to hashtag #indigenousscholar. These photos show a portion of my reality, and paint the picture of a happy, productive young scholar, which in many cases was true. But they also obscure the crushing insecurity and feelings of inadequacy that plagued me as I tried to write—which is when I would often turn to Twitter.

Reading back through my tweets from the later half of my dissertation writing is fascinating, and at times heartbreaking. I am very candid with my thoughts, despite tweets going out to over 10,000 followers and being public and searchable online to anyone who would like to see them. In January, with my full draft due less than a month away, I tweeted, “Never has something felt so close yet so incredibly impossible. This final dissertation push is gonna be the end of me. #somuchstilltodo.” But then, five minutes later, I added: “But as I read these interviews (for the millionth time!), I'm so grateful and proud of my students. #collegepridenativepride” and, “So things could be way worse. I still love my topic and my students! #atleastfornow #dissertatingprobs.” I was careful to couch my real anxieties with gratefulness and reminders of the relationships that made this all possible. Upon later reflection, this desire was related to my own cultural understandings—we are at our heart relational people. For better or worse, I felt that by complaining or expressing my fears I was centering myself in the process, rather than keeping the larger goal in mind, that this was all for my community, not me.

As I would sit at coffee shops day after day, I used Twitter as a place to hold myself accountable by tweeting out writing goals and accomplishments. I also was able to crowd source theory and methodological questions to my community of fellow Indigenous scholars online. When I would go on tangents responding to a popular culture topic, I often ended my threads with a tweet referencing my need to get back

to writing, “#backtothedissertation” or “backtothegrind” became commonplace. As the days grew shorter to my deadline, the tweets again obscured the frantic pace of my life behind the scenes. They joke about thanking Beyonce, extra large flannel pajama pants, and horchata ice cream in my acknowledgements, giving shout outs to the number of increasing pages in the document, and keep a running countdown of the days left. But behind the scenes I was barely eating, hardly showering, and sleeping less and less each night as the fear of failure loomed large. But each tweet would get favorites (a tiny gold star) or retweets, and those small acknowledgements reminded me of the community that supported me and wanted me to succeed—even from strangers that I had never met before, and only knew through a tiny Twitter avatar. I persisted, and resisted, through the reminders from my broader community that my work and degree mattered for something larger than myself.

As I scroll back through these feeds, I think about what I chose to share, and what I didn't, and I think about the backstories that didn't come through. There is one picture in particular that stands out in looking at my Instagram, a photo of the ceiling of the atrium at the National Academies in Washington D.C. (Figure 2). It's a poorly composed photo, with the geometric design of the glass panels off centered, and a black and white filter obscuring the brightness of the space. I captioned it simply with what it was, “ceiling of the atrium in the national academies of sciences. #lookup #DC.” The photo was taken during my spring retreat for my dissertation fellowship, a three-day experience where I felt unbelievably marginalized and out of place in the space.



Figure 2. The ceiling of the atrium at the National Academies in Washington DC

I had no job offers, a woefully incomplete dissertation, and was challenged harshly in my research presentation by fellow recipients. I took the photo during lunch, after I had come back from a walk with my one friend in the program where I held back tears and told her how awful I felt. Looking up at the atrium had given me momentary perspective on the bigger picture, but was also a symbolic reflection that I couldn't face what was in front of me at the retreat. But none of that was captured in the photo or caption on Instagram. In that moment it was too real and too raw to share as I typed the caption under the table at lunch, and to my followers and supporters it was just a black and white photo of the sky.

But when I finally was able to celebrate the end of what I called my #dissertationceremony, as a nod to the structure of my experience feeling similar to spiritual ceremonies, my online community celebrated with me. One of my first tasks after receiving word that all the boxes had been checked and my graduation would actually happen was to turn to my social media accounts and update the world. On

Twitter, I tweeted excitedly, “It’s official!!! Thanks to my proxy, [my colleague Jason], my dissertation has been officially handed in! #DrKinthehouse! #dissertationceremonyover” and then moments later, I changed my display name to “Dr. Adrienne K.” and tweeted, “made a slight change to my display name. #indulgeme #illchangeitlater 😊😊”. The flood of celebratory tweets in response showed me how much people were rooting for me, and how excited we all were that the journey was coming to a close. After graduation a month later, I sent out a last tweet on the #dissertationceremony, “PHX bound. So filled w/gratitude after an incredible graduation week. Couldn’t have done it alone. This doctorate is for Indian Country!”

While my graduate school experience made me feel invisible, social media gave me a voice, and a community, and validation that I could and would survive the doctoral process, and dissertation writing in particular. In Twitter and Instagram, I found space to be candid and share a window into my experiences, as a means for showing the world what it looked like to be a dissertating Native, but I also moderated and curated that window, being authentic, but tempered with humility and honest reflections about how this journey was bigger than me. Social media became my resistance. I refused to feel unseen, and wanted power back over the ways my story was used, and social media gave me that power. Though my web of community stretched through cyberspace and over the timelines of Twitter and Instagram, it showed me that the doctoral process didn’t have to be a selfish, isolating, insular process—that it could be bigger than that, and for a cause larger than my own. But on the most basic level, each tiny gold star or green retweet or red heart told me I wasn’t alone, that I was seen, and that I was part of something bigger than myself.

Tying our Braid of (In)visibility: Discussion and Implications

This study has the opportunity to generate visibility by “moving beyond the asterisk” in scholarship (Shotton et al., 2013) by highlighting the voice and agency of Native women during the doctoral process. Through sharing our lived experiences from an Indigenous lens, we expose counter-stories of cultural integrity rooted in Native epistemologies, which has the potential to inform practice, policy and research related to inclusion for marginalized populations in post-graduate degree programs. What we share are ways institutional leaders and policy makers can do to increase Native doctoral degree recipients by helping us to tie our braid.

When we discussed our stories, we returned to the braid metaphor. When defining what in/visibility meant to each of us, it became evident the term did not function as a dichotomy of simply invisible or visible. Rather in/visibility emerged as a fluid braided concept that required each of us to assert our sense of agency within our woven, intersectional identities. There were times where we were disempowered when made to feel invisible and hypervisible, but also empowered when we were able to assert our visibility through social media. We returned to the ways that Reddick and Sáenz (2012) discussed Brighenti’s (2007) use of invisibility as a “double edged sword” that can be both empowering and disempowering. They stated that as young scholars they are “learning to negotiate our visibility so that it works in our (and our communities’) favor” (p. 385). For us, this negotiation became tied not only toward supporting our communities and ourselves, but also, interrelatedly, when we were able to maintain our cultural integrity (Dehlye, 1995). We came to realize that our methods of untangling ourselves from dominant structures of invisibility while simultaneously braiding our (in)visibility were ways to honoring our cultural integrity—allowing us to strategically

assert our Native values such as relationality, our role as Native women, resistance, and humility.

Despite looming stereotypes about Native peoples as historicized devoid from a modern context that further accelerate invisibility, social media is a growing virtual environment that provides collective visibility (Brown, 2016; Guskin & Mitchell, 2012). It may not be surprising then that while we were battling systemic marginalization, we also resorted to social media spaces for support and sites to engage in our cultural integrity teachings/values. Although this was a place of affirming visibility, we recognize that it was outside of the academic doctoral space in which we were embarking upon.

What can universities learn from our experiences? For the three of us, we needed support, and we found that support through social media. Part of the need being fulfilled through social media was a returning of our own power over our representations and visibility. While the three of us found strength and support in these online spaces, we do not want to argue or assume that all Native students should feel the need to share their doctoral journey via social media. Rather, we encourage universities to consider how they are enacting and engaging cultural integrity teachings into their programs and services. It should not only be up to the student to navigate through the rough terrains of graduate school. In our graduate programs, though in many cases our departments, faculty, and mentors were extremely supportive, the invisibility or hypervisibility weight was often too heavy to bear. Moreover, our culture integrity teachings were often not incorporated in meaningful and intentional ways within higher education.

One such example that we wrestled with is negotiating through our relationships with others while operating in an environment that promotes a detachment from

family and home life (Tinto, 1995). In Indigenous communities, relationships are vitally important—where one fits into a community and the world is defined by relationships to family, land, culture, Creator, and any other number of combinations. These relationships were what made us aware of our environments and the ways that we posted on social media. We all recognized that maintaining relationships with our Native community (including family members and friends) throughout the doctoral process was crucial for our matriculation. Thus, in keeping our braid strong, relationships were an important strand.

However, we realized that we could not separate our doctoral experiences from our relational roles as Indigenous women (and mothers, in Chris and Amanda's case) to our respective communities. We recognized that we come from matriarchal societies, where since time immemorial women have carried respected responsibilities and roles in our homes, tribes, and communities. In many ways, we felt tension on our doctoral journeys when enacting Indigenous women and motherly roles, which run contrary to western patriarchal ways of knowing and understanding. The public sharing of our experiences through social media became an act of taking the responsibility of our roles as Indigenous women/mothers by acknowledging our children and clearing the path for those to follow while also managing through often divergent gendered roles/norms.

Another example of how we managed visibility into our doctoral experience is through acts of resistance. While Adrienne's story directly addressed the resistance to the power structures that rendered her invisible or hypervisible, the journeys of all three of us can be understood as acts of resistance. Brayboy (2005) discusses the experiences of Ivy League Native students through a lens of "transformational resistance" or the "acquisition of credentials and skills for the empowerment of

American Indian communities” (p. 196). As we navigated through the doctoral process, we were actively gathering skills to give back and empower our families, nations, and communities, and in many ways we shared what we learned and experienced through our social media spaces, furthering the act of resistance.

For us, our journeys are pathways of resistance. We resisted the master stories that often problematize Native peoples as deficits, doomed to failure, and we in turn shared our experiences visibly for our communities’ growth and liberation. We believe in bell hooks (1990) message that (chosen) marginality can be much more than deprivation, instead can be seen as sites of “creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance” (p. 343). For Native doctoral students just beginning this process, this framework can be powerful and liberating. Education for our people is resistance. Through this act of resistance, our braid shined with radiance.

Conclusion

We return to our opening scene of the table of Indigenous higher education scholars to think about the ways our metaphorical table, representing Indigenous ways of knowing can be joined with the existing, much larger, much more established, table of higher education and doctoral study. We want our table to grow, and to be able to create more seats and room for younger scholars working their way up through the system, but we also don’t want our voices and our unique Indigenous perspectives to be subsumed by the mainstream table. We hope that policies and universities will stop and take stock of their menus and tables—who is included? What is written that may inhibit Native voices and perspectives? In this time of sociopolitical unrest, centering voices

from scholars and communities at the margins become even more imperative, as well as finding, creating, and maintaining spaces of resistance.

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