

A Narrative Portrait of Critical Indigenous Consciousness within Culturally Based Education

Shawn Clark¹
Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT

This manuscript presents a profoundly personal account from a non-Indigenous scholar engaged in community-based participatory action research with Indigenous cultural immersion teachers and their students. Grounded in critical Indigenous research methodologies and conveyed through narrative portraiture, the study explores how educators cultivate critical Indigenous consciousness within Culturally Based Education. Anchored in land-based learning and critical pedagogy, the cultural immersion program reviewed for this study reflects the ideals of honoring educational sovereignty for Indigenous communities. Educator and student testimonies reveal how such practices challenge colonial structures and affirm educational sovereignty. The research confirms that culturally relevant classrooms not only empower Indigenous youth but also lead to measurable academic growth while honoring Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This narrative portrait advances qualitative inquiry by illustrating how funds of knowledge contribute to positioning critical Indigenous consciousness to address an identity paradox.

KEYWORDS: Critical Indigenous consciousness; critical Indigenous research methodologies, critical place inquiry, qualitative, portraiture

This manuscript demonstrates a critical place inquiry (Chiblow, 2021; Tuck and McKenzie, 2015) that braids critical Indigenous research methodologies (CIRM) (Brayboy et al., 2023; Tsosie et al., 2022) with narrative portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The author wrote the portrait for Indigenous and non-Indigenous academic communities. This project aims to demonstrate how CIRM can intersect with narrative portraiture to produce Thick description (Geertz, 1973) to showcase a cultural immersion instructional model (Clark, 2022a; Clark 2023) designed to nurture critical Indigenous consciousness (Lee, 2006) among Indigenous youths. This purpose aligns with Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) belief that research should have a positive impact on the participant's community. The report is divided into eight parts: 1) Methodology, 2) Critical Indigenous Consciousness, 3) A Blackfoot Way of Learning, 4) A Portrait of the Blackfoot Way of Knowing Program, 5) Discussing the Impact of the Blackfoot Way of Knowing Program, 6) Concluding Thoughts, 7) Glossary, 8) References

¹ Corresponding Author: Shawn Clark, the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University. E-Mail: sdclark8@asu.edu

Methodology

Indigenous methodologies serve not only to honor and sustain Indigenous knowledge and practices but also to position them meaningfully within cross-cultural conversations (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021; Tuck & Guishard, 2013). Conveying Indigenous knowledge in non-Indigenous spaces requires a commitment to honoring Indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Pidgeon & Riley, 2021), which center on “relationality, storytelling, and holistic” (Sivertsen et al, 2025, p. 3) representations. I selected portraiture because it aligned with the Indigenous-informed participant observation method (Bastien, 2004; Wilson, 2008), which I used to gather knowledge from the daily experiences of classroom teachers and their students. This participant observation method aligns with the CIRM framework grounding this study (Tsosie et al., 2022), which acknowledges and validates the longstanding traditions within Indigenous communities of generating scientific knowledge through observation and experimentation. By immersing myself in the daily experiences of classroom teachers and students, I built personal relationships that reflect what Wilson (2008) describes as ethical Indigenous research practices.

Portraiture shares commonalities with autoethnography, as both involve the author as a central figure in the story (Denzin & Giardina, 2024; Lawrence Lightfoot, 2016). In autoethnography, the researcher is both the subject and the investigator, which positions them reflexively within the study (Denzin & Giardina, 2024). Likewise, portraiture is a process of self-discovery (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2005) through writing that is both reflective and revelatory (Clark & Miisamiinamska, 2025; Lawrence Lightfoot, 2016) inviting the writer to engage deeply with themselves and their topic (Denzin, 2019). This process of introspection enables scholars to use cultural encounters to explore their epistemological positioning against a larger context (Reed-Danahay, 2017). Lawrence Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that portraiture offers insight not only into how researchers interpret behavior from the outside but also into how individuals perceive and live their social realities from within (Kwame, 2017).

In this way, writing becomes a way of learning and uncovering layers of meaning not only by telling, but also by showing, sensing, and experiencing through words (Denzin, 2016; Wilson & Hughes, 2019). It is through this dynamic practice that new insights emerge not only about the subject at hand but also about the writer's relationship to it (Adams et al., 2015; Whitinui, 2013). Writing in different forms and voices opens pathways to understanding that might otherwise remain hidden, making discovery and analysis inseparable from one another (Clark & Miisamiinamska, 2025). Each act of writing informs the other, demonstrating that learning about a topic and learning about oneself are not distinct endeavors, but rather parts of a shared and unfolding journey (Richardson, 1994).

The uniqueness of narrative portraiture lies in its embrace of intricacy (Travis, 2020), as it rises beyond the constraints of a single disciplinary lens and moves toward a deeply holistic engagement with context, voice, and meaning (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Central to CIRM and portraiture is the emphasis of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) between the researcher and the participant, where a shared understanding grows through dialogue. This connection transforms the research process into a Research Ceremony (Wilson, 2008) in which both voices contribute to shaping the story and knowledge through a shared act of meaning-making (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2005).

While portraiture offers a powerful research approach, it is not without limitations. One such limitation is that it positions the researcher as the primary instrument of inquiry (Chapman, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). This self-centered stance can raise ethical concerns for non-Indigenous scholars working with Indigenous communities, as it opens Indigenous knowledge to misinterpretation, unnecessary critique (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021), and perpetuates damage-

focused research (Tuck, 2009). Therefore, engaging in portraiture within Indigenous contexts demands a heightened sense of responsibility and relational accountability (Wilson & Hughes, 2019) to avoid reproducing harm while honoring Indigenous knowledge systems (Cribb et al., 2024).

To address these concerns and honor Indigenous methodologies, I established a Community Advisory Board (CAB) composed of enrolled tribal members and descendants. This collaborative approach was instrumental in shaping the research. I also relied on a cultural guide throughout the study who taught me the Blackfoot way of knowing (Bastien, 2004). The project was approved by the School District and both Tribal and University Institutional Review Boards. Interpretations of my study were shared with my cultural guide, the CAB, and other community members to gather their insights before finalizing reports, further reinforcing the collaborative and ethically grounded nature of the research.

A second limiting factor of portraiture arises from the method's emphasis on documenting "Goodness" in the relationships formed during the study (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2016). While intended to highlight the strength and humanity within communities, this emphasis can unintentionally undermine the validity of the research if it glosses over complexity or conflict. Validity in portraiture, particularly within Indigenous contexts, depends on the scholar's ability to recognize their positioning and to remain critically reflective of their perspectives. Indigenous scholars assert that openly situating oneself within the research is essential to maintaining accountability and integrity (Absolon & Willett, 2004).

In response to this call, I acknowledge my positionality as a non-Indigenous scholar from the United States of America. I served as a public-school educator for over 25 years, including 19 years as a school administrator, with seven of those years on the Blackfeet Nation. I earned my doctorate from the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University, where my research explores cultural pluralism, belonging, and education. I am culturally guided by Miisamiinamska of the Amaskapi Pikuni or Blackfeet. The Amaskapi Pikuni or Blackfeet are members of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Stevens et al., 2024) and a federally recognized Tribal Nation (Clark & Wylie, 2021). Miisamiinamska is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation and was raised on the Blackfeet Nation. His family cared for the Ninamska (Medicine Pipe Bundle) and the Niitopii (Horn Society Bundle).

I acknowledge that I conceived many of the ideas in this portrait while on the ancestral homelands of Indigenous Peoples, who have cared for these lands for generations. I also recognize that readers may be engaging with these ideas on traditional and unceded Tribal territories. I offer deep respect to the past, present, and future Elders whose leadership continues to guide efforts to protect Indigenous ways of knowing and being. By naming my position and relationships, I seek to honor Indigenous protocols and affirm my responsibility in co-constructing knowledge with care and humility.

Critical Indigenous Consciousness

Critical Indigenous consciousness, as explored by Lee (2006), evolved from the concept of critical consciousness introduced by Freire (1970). Freire suggested that as individuals better understand their social conditions, they develop self-efficacy and agency needed to influence their reality. Freire determined that a principle purpose of education should be to engage students in learning to decode and challenge their social conditions. He coined the term critical consciousness to denote a process for oppressed groups to examine and influence their social structure.

Watts et al., (2011) extended Freire's (1970) seminal ideas to offer three interrelated elements of critical consciousness: (1) critical reflection, (2) political efficacy, and (3) critical

action. Critical reflection refers to the process of learning to question how one's history influenced one's social status (Diemer et al., 2016; Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Political efficacy denotes one's perceived self-efficacy to influence their social status (Diemer et al., 2016). Critical action relates to how one individually or collectively influences their social standing (Hope & Spencer, 2017).

Lee (2006) proposed an Indigenous slant to critical consciousness by focusing on helping tribal communities secure self-determination and tribal sovereignty. Self-determination refers to the ability of Indigenous communities to control their futures by making decisions about their destinies (Brayboy et al., 2015). Tribal sovereignty encompasses the fundamental right to self-governance, self-determination, and self-education (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002), empowering tribes to make decisions that reflect their unique cultural identities and values. This autonomy includes the ability to express themselves through writing, speaking, and acting with a sense of agency (Brayboy et al., 2015).

Scholars generally agree that critical consciousness grows across a continuum as one's individual and social identities form during human development (Seider et al., 2020; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). This view aligns with the position of Erikson (1968) who suggests that young peoples' identities form as they actively search for connections between their lived experiences and the broader society. The reflection process young people use to explore their place in the world relates to what Watts and Flanagan (2007) called Worldview and Social Analysis. This process is particularly crucial for Indigenous people because they experienced a cultural genocide that attempted to subjugate their worldview (Wolfe, 2006). A worldview is a mental lens of how we see the world (Hart, 2010).

Reflecting on and resolving the conflict between competing worldviews is crucial for Lee (2006) who suggests that critical Indigenous consciousness is realized when the mind is liberated from dominant hegemony. This process is more challenging for Indigenous youths (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Clark, 2022b) who must resolve their ethnic identity while code switching between their traditional and Western cultures (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Ethnic identity refers to how an individual views their association with an ethnic group (Newman, 2005).

A Blackfoot Way of Learning

Traditional Blackfoot learning is a participatory and experiential process deeply rooted in a Blackfoot way of knowing (Bastien, 2004). Blackfoot Elder Ninna Piiksii proclaims that traditional Blackfoot learning is understood through the metaphor of iinnii (buffalo) (Piiksii et al., 2024). This way of knowing depends on uncovering the interconnectedness of all things, animate and inanimate (Bastien, 2004; Gladstone & Pepion, 2016; Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt, 2002). Chambers and Blood, as cited in Prete (2019), affirmed that Blackfoot pedagogy is not just about acquiring knowledge but about a way of living and being. Scholars note that origin stories play a crucial role in transferring Blackfoot knowledge (Hernandez, 1999; Pepion, 1999) because they carry lessons, offer guidance, and express core philosophies that are essential to life and being within the Blackfoot worldview (Bastien, 2004; Raczka, 2017).

The Blackfoot worldview embodies interconnectedness by integrating the spiritual and material aspects of life across all its dimensions (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016; Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt, 2002). This worldview is grounded in the belief that all things possess a spirit granted by the Creator and exist in relationship with one another (Long Standing Bear Chief, 1992). Bastien (2004) explains that people continuously renew these relationships by breathing the same air as their ancestors. Within this worldview, knowledge emerges through the tipi camp circle, beginning at the periphery and moving inward, reflecting a dynamic process of learning and

understanding (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016). Crowshoe & Mannes Schmidt (2002) liken this structure to a sacred bundle system.

The Blackfoot believe bundles originate from the cosmos rather than being made by human hands (Wissler, 1912b). These bundles embody reciprocal relationships with other-than-human entities (Lokensgard, 2010) and illustrate the interconnectedness of the material world with the guiding principles that shape cosmic, natural, and social orders (Zedeño, 2008). This perspective makes them essential for the transmission and preservation of knowledge (Zedeño et al., 2021). Bundles are commonly swaddled in animal hides or cloth (Lokensgard, 2001), and contain sacred objects that symbolize elements of the physical environment (Zedeño, 2008). The Blackfoot considers these bundles to be living beings, deserving constant care and respect. This belief underscores their sacred status and the responsibilities that accompany interaction with them (Lokensgard, 2001).

This deep reverence for bundles as living embodiments of knowledge, relationship, and responsibility reflects a broader Blackfoot commitment to cultural continuity and the transmission of sacred teachings across generations (Clark & Miisamiinamska, 2025). It is within this context of preservation and renewal that the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council took formal steps to safeguard cultural knowledge through education by approving the Blackfeet Education Standards (BES) in 2005 through tribal resolution #59-2005. The resolution mandated that all educational experiences within the Blackfeet Nation include Piikani language and cultural teachings (BES, 2005). The BES are rooted in the Piikani Code of Education, which views education as a process for transmitting cultural knowledge and values (BES, 2005; Hall, 2018).

Building on the foundation laid by the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, the local school district developed models that move beyond policy into lived practice. One such model is the Blackfoot way of knowing (BWK) immersion program, which demonstrates how the BES can actively foster critical Indigenous consciousness through culturally grounded, experiential learning. This cultural immersion approach is rooted in traditional Blackfoot learning and aligns with the concept of adaptive culture (García Coll et al., 1996). The BWK model builds directly from the teachings embedded in the BES and honors the participatory and experiential learning described by Bastien (2004). Grounded in the Piikani belief system and reaffirmed by the Council's 2005 resolution, the BWK model addresses concerns about cultural loss by embedding Blackfeet language and values into everyday classroom life and ensuring that education remains a reflection of Blackfoot ways of being.

The BWK program reviewed for this portrait offers a powerful example of how culturally grounded models can foster critical Indigenous consciousness through immersive educational practices. Nevertheless, while educational programs like BWK highlight the importance of cultural continuity, a significant gap remains in research that documents how these practices cultivate critical Indigenous consciousness in real-time. Despite reports indicating the benefits of ethnic racial socialization (Byrd et al., 2020; Perez Brena et al., 2018) and the power of critical consciousness to confront oppression, few have explored how these intersect within Indigenous educational contexts (Clark, 2022a; Clark, 2023).

This missing data makes the current narrative portrait a timely and necessary contribution. This manuscript shows Indigenous educators using critical Indigenous consciousness pedagogies to grow their students' critical reflection skills as they build the foundation for developing critical Indigenous consciousness. I focused on critical reflection skills because the students were preadolescent and scholars reported that of the three critical consciousness domains "critical reflection is the most neglected in youth civic engagement research" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 47).

A Portrait of the Blackfoot Way of Knowing Program

6:30am

My journey began on U.S. Highway 2, heading west, just as the first rays from the morning sun bounced off my rearview mirror and into my eyes, causing me to squint tightly. U.S. Highway 2, a vast expanse of nearly 2,400 miles, stretches from Houlton, Maine, to Everett, Washington, and cuts through the entire northern corridor of Montana. The section of U.S. Highway 2 between my residence in Shelby, Montana, and the largest community on the Blackfeet Nation in Browning, Montana, is a straight path, punctuated only by a turn exiting Cut Bank, Montana, and a larger s-curve entering Browning. These unique features added a touch of intrigue to the otherwise straightforward journey.

On the outskirts of Shelby, the beams from my headlights illuminated a long string of Burlington Northern boxcars just as they screeched to a halt. The sound of the brakes reminded me of fingernails scraping a chalkboard. My lights, like a guiding hand, shifted up and down with the rise and fall of the road, each dip a new adventure. To my left and right, I noticed the burro pits filled with a thick layer of Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), Leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), and Spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*). Just beyond the blanket of noxious weeds, I could see golden strands of Winter Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) waving me on my way as I sped by.

7:30am

I drove across Cut Bank Creek and noticed a beautiful sculpture welcoming me to the Blackfeet Nation. The Blackfeet Nation is in Montana and was established by the U.S. government through the Lame's Bull Treaty in 1855 (Farr, 2001). By recognizing that the sovereign territory of the Blackfeet Nation is where the ideas for this autoethnography originated I am situating the people and place of our cultural and colonial histories (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

In the distance, I could see the purple glow of the snowcapped peaks of Glacier National Park. I felt a sense of remorse, knowing that Glacier National Park is a reminder of the genocide enacted by the U.S. government against the Blackfeet (Stevens et al., 2024). The Blackfeet were forced to sell the land that would become the eastern half of Glacier National Park to avoid starvation because the United States government failed to honor the provisions of the Lame's Bull Treaty (Craig et al., 2012).

The story of the Blackfeet people's relationship with the land, which is integral to their cultural identity, is held in the sacred places tucked away in the Rocky Mountains and surrounding plains. The land secures old stories that provide the knowledge for transforming the storyteller into the story maker. Zedeño and associates (2021) pointed out that "historic memory lives because it is firmly and purposefully anchored in places where events and cultural practices occurred" (p. 6). The loss of land to manifest destiny (Brayboy, 2005) and the U.S. government's neglect limited traditional *journeying*, explained as "seeking out and coming to an understanding of the stories and knowledge embedded in those lands" (Styres, 2019, p. 29). An Elder described the significance of place and story:

Culture starts with the landscape—It starts with the territory. The stories that are part of the land. It is not just visiting the sacred places, but it's knowing the stories—it creates a sense of belonging. It is not just a geographic boundary, but it's where life lessons are demonstrated (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 223).

8:30am

I eased into the final bend leading into Browning and noticed several of the housing communities that make-up the Blackfeet Nation, each with a unique name that holds a significant place in their community: FEMA Ville, named for the trailers sent by the United States government following their use in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; Rodeo Drive, a nod to the famous boulevard in California; Death Row, named for the large number of elderlies housed there; and the brightly colored Easter Egg Homes. My mind wandered as I remembered during my time as a school principal in the Blackfeet Nation, searching those communities for students who were nearing graduation. I took a left onto 1st Ave and slammed on my brakes as three students darted in front of my car—my heart raced. I drove cautiously and parked at the end of a long line of vehicles lining the front of the school.

I sat silently, as I watched groups of dogs, some with visible signs of struggle, happily approaching children walking to the school. One of the dogs, bravely hopping between children, was missing their right hind leg, another, showing signs of severe hunger, and a third, bearing fresh battle scars. The Blackfeet revere dogs because, during the pre-horse days, they carried their family's belongings in search of buffalo (Bastien, 2004). I chuckled, my emotions mixed, as I watched the dogs move from child to child in search of a snack or maybe just a pat on their head and reflected on my time as an educator. It had been nearly three years since I had retired from the school district, and I was admittedly nervous, my heart pounding, to walk through the front doors to begin my research. I took a deep breath and stepped from my vehicle. I noticed the sky was big and blue and absent of clouds—the wind was eerily dormant—the Blackfeet Nation and United States flags lay motionless against a weathered, silver pole.

8:45am

I approached the school's front door and was met with a lively group of children. "Morning," one of the children greeted me, his smile lighting up the morning. I reciprocated their cheer, "Good morning." The same child, full of confidence, stepped forward and pressed a button beside the door. A woman's voice, warm and welcoming, resonated, "Please come in." I stepped into the main foyer, and in an instant, I was transported back to my days as a young student at Central Elementary School. The halls were a symphony of excited chatter and the occasional nervous giggle. The familiar scent of the cafeteria, a comforting mix of food and memories, wafted through the air.

I walked down the hallway between children like I was moving through a human maze. The wooden floor beneath my feet was old and creaky, and I could feel it give way slightly with each step. The walls surrounding me were freshly painted white and adorned with black-and-white pictures of Native American heroes. Looking at those pictures stirred up feelings of intense inspiration within me, much like the way Gone (2019) describes pictures evoking strong emotional reactions "that a reader would never know from simply perusing this published dialogue" (p. 55). I looked past those images and imagined the stories embedded in the walls like those housed in the memories of Elders.

I noticed that next to each classroom door hung a handmade sign indicating the teacher's Christian name and listed below it their Indian name if they had received one during a naming ceremony. I remember wondering if the Indian name placed below the Christian name was a symbol of cultural genocide or genocide. Differentiating between cultural genocide and genocide depends on whether one is the colonizer or the colonized. Colonizers do not like to use the term genocide because it is permanent. Wolfe (2006) crafted an intriguing dilemma when he implied

that cultural genocide is a nexus to genocide. After all, Governments did not just subjugate Indigenous peoples' cultural identities at boarding schools (Pewewardy et al., 2018); they kidnapped (Eagle Shield et al., 2021), murdered, and buried their children under the playgrounds (Newland, 2022; Piiksii et al., 2024).

9:00am

I walked through the door of Naatosii sahkompaii's classroom and moved to a seat near the back of the room—it was small and uncomfortable. Several students turned and stared at me intently. I noticed others pointing at me and whispering to their classmates. I stared back and wondered if they equated my presence to Richard Pratt, who established the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 with support from the United States government (Clark & Wylie, 2021). The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was used as a scalpel to separate Native American children from their identity by barring their Native languages (Adams, 2020; Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Fear-Segal & Rose, 2016).

An Elder explained the trepidation Native American parents encountered when deciding whether to teach their children their traditional language, stating, "We are from an era where our parents and grandparents didn't teach us Blackfoot because they feared we would be punished at the boarding schools" (Clark & Wylie, 2021, p. 336). United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, J.T. Morgan affirmed their fears when he directed his Indian agents to discipline Native children for using their traditional language, asserting, "Pupils must be compelled to converse with each other in English and should be properly rebuked or punished for persistent violation of this rule" (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, p. CLI). An Elder detailed the harsh penalties faced by Native children at boarding schools for using their traditional language, stating, "The punishments were severe for speaking the language, like forced starvation" (Fieldnotes). Blackfoot Elder Michael Bruised Head explained the punishment he endured for speaking his traditional language while at boarding school,

I do not know how many times I got hit here, trying to literally knock my birthmark off my face... I got knocked on the floor with what seemed like 2×4 s; they were not rulers, they were not yard sticks, they were heavier than that. Imagine a 6- or 7-year-old getting knocked on the floor, and being hit while you are on the floor (Piiksii et al., 2024, pp. 6-7).

I noticed on the front whiteboard several words written in both Blackfoot language and English. During one visit with an Elder, I learned about the importance of emphasizing their traditional language over English,

When you teach a Native language, the language should be taught in the medium of the Native language instead of in a medium of the English language—if you don't, you're placing English as a superior language and you're causing psychological harm to the child (Fieldnotes).

Blending Native languages with English is not just essential, but a matter of cultural survival. Native American languages are not just languages, but windows into Indigenous worldviews (Absolon & Willet, 2005; Raczka, 2017), and are central to ethnicity (Perea, 1992). Searle and associates (2018) argue that traditional languages sustain Indigenous peoples' identity by transmitting culture (Grande, 2000) and encapsulating unique beliefs (Kimmerer, 2013) that nurture vital parts of ceremonial practices (Benally & Viri, 2005).

Language immersion programs have been successful in preserving Native American languages and cultural identities (Brayboy et al., 2017; Morcom & Roy, 2017), countering the erase-replace policies and practices (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006) used by the United States

government to eradicate them (McCarty et al., 2021; Reyhner, 2010). An Elder also highlighted the benefits of exposing young people to Native languages as a way to revitalize their traditional languages and reinforce their cultural identities.

These young kids that are learning the language have an advantage to people like me whose brains have already been washed of how to think Blackfoot. Speakers say think like a Blackfoot not like a Westerner (Clark & Wylie, p. 332).

Students in the classrooms linked learning their language to acts of community building, one stating, “Learning our language is important, so we will be able to speak and teach other kids to speak.” (Fieldnotes) A second student described their views of Blackfoot language, stating, “I use our language to pray and teach it to my little brother,” (Clark, 2022a, p. 180). This sense of community is a motivator for Indigenous children’s scholarly achievement (Shotton et al., 2018) and for nurturing a sense of belonging (Sun et al., 2022). Moreover, Yosso (2005) and Pidgeon (2008) championed linguistic capital as an element of cultural capital. Scholarly literature connected the cultural capital with academic achievement over aptitude or meeting mandated benchmarks (Swartz, 1997). Perhaps, most significant for Indigenous students is the expressed value of their languages as counter-narratives to the belief that Indigenous knowledge (IK) is subservient to Western knowledge (Battiste, 2009; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Castagno et al., 2022).

9:15am

Naatosii’sahkomapii began taking attendance by calling out each student’s Indian name. An Indian name is trusted to safeguard your spirit (Clark, 2022a) and opens doors to one’s ancestors (Bastien, 2004). Another scholar indicated an Indian name helps one navigate across their lifetime (Wissler, 1912a) and grounds their identity (Armstrong Jr., 2021). Blackfoot scholar LaPier (2015b) claims a child’s Indian name influences their “destinies and even their fates” (p. 7) and helps guide their walk of life. When students were asked about their Indian name, one said, “My Indian name makes me feel good about myself.” (Fieldnotes) A second youth said, “My Indian name is important because it came from an elder’s dream who gave it to my mom” (Clark, 2022a, p. 180).

9:30am

Natoyii’saamiiakii took a small wooden box from the windowsill and placed it on the desk. I learned from a Blackfoot Elder that the box is called an iitāwāamāatō’osimō’•p’ (altar) and, in traditional times, would rest on the yō’•p’ (western side) of a niito’yiss (tipi). The teacher placed several pieces of sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*) in the iitāwāamāatō’osimō’•p’ and lit it with a match—the sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*) ignited. Literature notes that braids of sweetgrass (*Sevastana odorata*) woven of three strands (Kimmerer, 2013) represent the sun, water, and earth (Wagner, 2018) and when burned to āwāamāatō’osimāa (smudge) “washes the recipient in kindness and compassion to heal the body and spirit” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 293). A sweet smell filled the air as smoke rose from the iitāwāamāatō’osimō’•p’—a sense of calmness hung in the classroom as students fanned the smoke into their faces and through their hair.

I was overcome with loneliness as I wondered about my place in this sacred moment. I struggled to get past the thoughts of Pratt’s mission to “Kill the Indian and save the man” (Pratt, 1892, p.46). Pratt infamously articulated the United States government’s position toward Native Americans when he scribed in the 1890 Commissioner of Indian Affairs report to Congress,

There is but one plain duty resting upon us with regard to the Indians, and that is to relieve them of their savagery and other alien qualities by the same methods used to relieve others. Help them, too, to die as helpless tribes, and to rise up among us as strong and capable individual men and American citizens (United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1890, p. 308).

One of the students sitting directly in front of me turned in her chair and glanced toward me. She noticed I had caught her eye and quickly turned around. She leaned to her right and began talking to the student beside her. They both turned and looked at me. The second girl whispered, “Are you going to *āwāamāto’osimāa*, mister?” I sat silently, my mind racing with thoughts of cultural respect and curiosity. “I don’t think I’m permitted,” I uttered, unsure of the correct response. The first girl momentarily looked at me and said, “Smudging is for anyone, mister. If you don’t know how we can teach you.” I peered through the smoke and into the *iitāwāamāto’osimō’p’* like I was staring into an abyss of spirits drifting toward *Natoosii* (Sun), a mix of awe and trepidation filling my heart.

10:00am

Three loud taps reverberated from the classroom speaker, followed by a woman stating, “Good morning, students.” I could hear youthful giggles in the background. The women continued, “Please listen to your classmates say the *niitsiitūpii āatsimoi’kāan* (real people blessing).”

īyō isstsiipāattūpiiyō’p’ (oh, source of life), *isspoōmoōkinnāan* (help us), *nāa’kaiyiistsiisinnāan* (so that we may listen), *nāa’kaikimmoōtsiisinnāan* (So that we may treat each other with kindness), *nāa’kayikāakimāasinnāan* (So that we may try hard), *nāa’koōkōkāakimāatoōsinnāan* (So that we may be honest), *nāa’kāto’yiiitūksisinnāan* (So that we may be spiritual), *āayoō’toōkinnāan ā’pisstoōtoōkii* (Hear us Creator), *kimmis koōkoōsiiks* (Pity your children), *iiksiikimmātā’psiiyāa* (They are in need), *kāamōtāani* (Grant us safety), *Niisstāawātsiimāan miisūmiiipāattūpiisin* (So we may grow into having long lives), *kyinn* (amen) (Clark, 2022a, p. 175).

Bastien (2004) highlighted the role of prayers in Blackfoot culture, serving as a spiritual bridge to their ancestors. The integration of spirituality into classroom activities is not just a means of education, but a powerful catalyst for students to revive their cultural identity. Indigenous scholars assert that Indigenous belief system underscores the universal connections between elements in the physical world (Wagner, 2018) and the other-than-human of the environment (Lokensgard, 2010). The Blackfoot believe they acquire unique powers by forging bonds with supernatural entities that are either representative of the lands near them or manifest themselves through dreams (Hall, 2020).

1:30pm

I unclasped the strap securing my leather attaché case and retrieved a copy of *Napi and The Rock*, a timeless narrative that traces the very roots of Blackfoot culture, written by Blackfoot scholar Eaglespeaker (2017). The legends of *Napi*, a living testament to the enduring spirit of Blackfoot existence (Bastien, 2004), have been passed down by Blackfoot parents (Ewers, 1939; Pepion, 1999) to their children for generations upon generations (Bastien, 2004; Eaglespeaker, 2017). Blackfoot scholar LaPier (2015a) paints a vivid picture of *Napi* as an adventurous, “supernatural being” (p. 127) who communicates with the other-than-humans of the environment (Lokensgard, 2010) to accomplish supernatural feats (Pepion, 1999). *Napi* stories, deeply rooted in

memory, bear the unique imprint of each storyteller while preserving the core elements of the story's genesis (Baumann, 2023; Zedeño et al., 2021).

I moved to the center of the students and began reading the opening passage of Eaglespeaker's (2017) rendition of Napi and The Rock. The story of Napi and The Rock, a timeless parable, showcases the mystical powers of Napi communicating with the other-than-humans of the environment (Lokensgard, 2010) to teach young people about respect and generosity. I spoke softly, but confidently, "Man this heat is too wicked" (p. 4), Napi thought as he walked through the prairie. "I just saw a coyote chasing a jackrabbit—and they were both walking" (p. 4), Napi said aloud as he struggled under the intense heat. He asks himself how he might cool off, "My buffalo robe of course—I gotta ditch this robe" (p. 5). Napi hears a rock whispering, "I need a robe to stay warm" (p. 5). Napi generously gives his robe to The Rock. Suddenly, snow begins to fly, and Napi starts to freeze. He goes back to The Rock and takes the buffalo robe. "That ain't right" (p. 8), says The Rock. "Whatchu you gonna do about it? You're just a rock," (p. 8) Napi says walking away. Napi hears a loud rumble, and suddenly, The Rock rolled over him. Napi screams at the birds watching him struggle under The Rock, and pleads for their help, "You two stop laughing and help me" (p. 11). The bird leader calls out to the other birds to help Napi, "Okay, you know the drill, peck away at the rock" (p. 12). The Rock succumbs to the endless pecking and splits in half. Napi reflects and realizes he betrayed a family member by taking the buffalo robe from The Rock. "I was wrong. Thank you for teaching me a powerful lesson" (p. 14), Napi says to The Rock and continues, "Please accept my buffalo robe as a gift...please forgive me...I am still learning" (p. 14).

Natoyii'saamiiakii walked to the front whiteboard and drew two graphic organizers. Scholars point out that graphic organizers are visual representations that help students connect with ideas and organize thoughts (Jones-Goods, 2019; Mede, 2010). Natoyii'saamiiakii wrote *āa'sittūpiiyissin* (generosity) in the center circle of one graphic organizer, and the other, she wrote *iiyināakoōtsiyyissin* (respect). "How do Napi and The Rock show *āa'sittūpiiyissin* and *iiyināakoōtsiyyissin* to each other?" She asks the students. Several students quickly raised their hands, "By giving The Rock his robe," said one student. "By saying thank you," another student shouted. Natoyii'saamiiakii nodded, acknowledging their responses, "Excellent observations, class" she said and continued, "These are indeed instances of *āa'sittūpiiyissin* and *iiyināakoōtsiyyissin*."

I was deeply moved as I stood there, listening to the interaction between Natoyii'saamiiakii and her students. It made me contemplate the symbolism inherent in this co-teaching experience. The partnership we displayed was symbolic of our commitment to situating ourselves in our cultural and colonial histories. I stared at the graphic organizers and reflected on the lessons I had learned from Indigenous Elders about embracing the values of reciprocity and gratitude to nurture connections.

3:00pm

I sat in the front seat of my car, staring at the elementary school, and reminisced about my fears of walking through the school's front doors and wondering if the children equated me to Richard Pratt. I remembered my feelings of inspiration while looking at the pictures of Native American heroes and my cultural curiosity while watching the students *āwāamāitō'osimāa*. These memories caused me to reflect on the words of Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005), who spoke of portraiture's powerful ability to hold space for contradiction.

This sensibility resonates deeply with an insight I encountered in Featherstone's (1989) essay, where the author observes that children in many narratives confront life on terms quite

different from their parents. These portrayals convey a quiet form of American existentialism, rooted in the belief that people can still grow in the present, even when their pasts include painful memories (Bruce et al., 2025). Together, these perspectives affirm that meaningful transformation often emerges through the tension between what has been and what might still be. That is the beautiful and ugly experiences of human development and social relationships that Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) references.

Discussing the Impact of the Blackfoot Way of Knowing Program

One key reason for sharing this manuscript is to highlight an Indigenous-grounded culturally based education model (Demmert et., al, 2003). The BWK model exemplifies what Brayboy and Castagno (2009) propose as a means for Indigenous people to succeed (Lomawaima, 2000) in reclaiming control over their education (Gay, 2018). The BWK educational program shows how socially, culturally, and linguistically responsive (SCLR) education (Lee, 2015; McCarthy & Lee, 2014) positions critical Indigenous consciousness (Lee, 2006). I concluded that the program successfully positioned critical Indigenous consciousness for students and their caregivers. One indication of this came from one of the instructor's testimonies during the Montana Office of Public Instruction's Indian Education for All Conference when he said,

I wanted the students to know it was ok to be Indigenous and not to be scared no more...so this kind of filtered to the homelife...to a point where parents wanted to know more...they wanted to get their students involved more and they themselves want to learn even more...it was a sense of striking pride with these parents of seeing their children succeed...language was a big part...the revitalization process of language...because that is where our key knowledge is located...being able to help these students along with their language...helped to open up these barriers that parents and grandparents and family members had when it comes to our Blackfoot ways of knowing who they are...our Indigenous knowledge...it was a healing process stemming away from generational, historical trauma (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

Culturally responsive education approaches framed through critical pedagogy (Bishop & Vass, 2020) and grounded through place (Lee, 2015; McCarthy & Lee, 2014) reflect the ideals of honoring educational sovereignty for Indigenous communities (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Research shows that "Indigenous Peoples have had successful systems of teaching and learning in-place, from-place" (Bishop & Vass, 2020, p. 340). The BWK program uniquely positions place-based learning and traditional Indigenous learning practices within a Western model of schooling. One of the program's teachers explained it this way, "The main goal behind this component was to let them know that...there is knowledge outside the classroom... there's knowledge all around us" (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

Armstrong Jr.'s reference to outside knowledge is rooted in land-based learning, which is a central component of Indigenous pedagogy and knowledge transfer (Cajete, 1994). It recognizes that Indigenous worldviews, knowledge creation (McDonald, 2023), and identities are deeply embedded in the land (Redvers, 2020). An example of a land-based learning activity used by the BWK teachers is when they taught their students how to pick sweetgrass. The students transferring that knowledge to their family members grew their critical consciousness. "We taught our students how to pick sweetgrass...It's something the students carried on, and they go out on their own when it's time to pick sweetgrass, and they've even taught their parents and grandparents to look for it and pick it" (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

Armstrong Jr. realized early in the design process of his immersion program that he needed to create a culturally relevant classroom (CRC) environment that supported the goal of immersion education. “Talking about the components of a place-based learning environment. One of the things I had to develop was an atmosphere that was relevant to the goal and purpose behind immersion so that my students would buy-in—believe in it” (Armstrong Jr., 2021). CRC environments for Indigenous students are grounded in their Native language, have strong spiritual and cultural connectedness, and are land-based (Benally & Viri, 2005). They go beyond culturally responsive education (Ladson-Billings, 2021) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010) “to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

One way he accomplished this goal was inviting the students to smudge. So, every morning when the students would come in, we’d light a smudge. I always made a point to explain why smudge is important every day. If you hold up a braid of sweetgrass, it’s just sweetgrass. There is no purpose behind it until you light that sweetgrass. In our language it transforms into a purpose...a smudge. It’s that smoke that journeys up...that carries our prayers...a sense of clarity and a sense of healing (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

Scholars assert that youths regularly express a desire to see their cultural identities authentically represented within school environments (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2010). The absence of their collective voices in school discourse and the lack of affirmation of their lived experiences and belief systems contribute to feelings of alienation and invisibility (Clausen et al., 2021; Solórzano et al., 2000). A failure to acknowledge the integral role of culture in shaping identity can significantly undermine students’ sense of belonging and contribute to an “Identity Paradox” (Lee, 2006, p. 11).

The Identity Paradox, as explored by Grande (2004), represents the struggle between how Indigenous people see themselves in relation to how they must conform to the perceptions of the outside world. The author explains that “American Indian students have indeed internalized the invisible but powerful borders demarcating “authentic” Indian-ness” (p. 104). Armstrong Jr. described the Identity Paradox experienced by his students,

These students really lacked their identity. You have got to recognize the level of assimilation. There was a lot of confusion in their hearts and minds of knowing who they truly are. They could honestly say they were Native American, but they didn’t know anything about that. We had to plant that seed in helping our students self-actualize who they are as Blackfeet... The fear tactics of the boarding school process was used on us...A lot of the ways they believed was influenced by generational historical trauma...I had to help them heal from that...We had to break away from that and I had to ensure them that it was okay to think and live Blackfoot (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

Strong CRC environments create a sense of belonging and help Indigenous students make connections between their cultural and academic identities (Nganga et al., 2025). An example of an activity the BWK teachers used to nurture a CRC environment is when they combined Western ideas of grouping students with a traditional Indigenous society process.

I started teaching and talking about a society called the Brave Dogs. Within these societies and our Blackfeet way of knowing there are a lot of morals, a lot values, a lot of in-depth teaching that helps mature a young mind... It really helped our students learn the respect factors that are needed to go

along with our ways of life and that's not about them individually...but taking care of the community (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

The classroom society process broadened the students' critical consciousness by emphasizing their commitment to the community. Lee (2006) argues that critical Indigenous consciousness is dependent on individuals recognizing their obligations to the community because of "the need to protect tribal sovereignty and self-determination" (p. 8). Armstrong Jr. explained how the classroom society process planted a seed for students to become engaged in their community. "It planted a seed in all of these students to pursue outside of the classroom...they wanted to get involved with our societies...that was something that was missing since the boarding school era" (Armstrong Jr., 2021).

CRC environments encourage students to explore their ethnic-racial identity (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee et al., 2014; Wantchekon et al., 2021) by examining their traditional culture (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). I aver that creating CRC learning environments is obligatory for helping Indigenous youths develop the critical motivation (Diemer et al., 2016) needed to confront colonial practices designed to impede identity development (McCarthy and Lee, 2014). Scholars emphasize that culturally embedded educational approaches that are pedagogically sound (Suartha et al., 2022) and community-based are particularly empowering for Indigenous students (Carjuzaa, 2012; Gay, 2013; McCarty, 2012) because they grow cultural connectedness (Clark, 2022a, Clark, 2022b, Clark, 2023; Snowshoe et al., 2015). Cultural connectedness is associated with enhanced academic motivation and achievement (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Whitbeck et al., 2001) and school connectedness (Clark, 2023).

The BWK model builds on the 'funds of knowledge' approach introduced by Moll et al., 1992). It emphasizes the importance of teachers' and students' cultural perspectives in fostering critical consciousness. This approach helps individuals understand how their worldviews influence the transfer of knowledge. Armstrong Jr. (2021) discussed his journey of discovering this concept as he developed his critical consciousness.

I felt like I was confusing the students...And I thought about my own background, you know, from when I grew up in education...I didn't get it...I was this little Native American kid...looking up at my teacher and wondering what they are talking about...not truly understanding...what they were teaching...I felt lost and discouraged...Now I understand I didn't get it...I didn't connect properly...I started thinking about that process and about what my own students are going through...so I started teaching from a Blackfoot's perspective...its taking westernized ways of pedagogy and sprinkling it on top of the Blackfoot ways.

The self-actualization demonstrated by the educator significantly contributed to the academic growth experienced by students in the BWK classrooms, especially when compared to their peers in classrooms utilizing traditional Western learning models. Notably, the BWK classrooms were the only ones in the elementary school where students successfully tested out of the WIDA program (Armstrong Jr., 2021). WIDA assesses four essential skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—critical for students to effectively decode and comprehend content and succeed in school (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016).

Concluding Thoughts

Ethnographers describing another cultural group's journey is incomplete but superior to silence. Silence, in this context, refers to the absence of detailed, context-rich interpretations of social actions, which are the essence of Thick description. Geertz (1973) indicates that Thick description lets someone know the difference between an involuntary wink and one sent to deliver a message. The absence of Thick description thwarts efforts to use critical reflection for differentiating between desire-based and damaged-centered portrayals.

Tuck (2009) underscores the possibility of using a desire-based framework as “an antidote to damage-centered research” (p. 416). To be clear, Tuck does not advocate for this antidote to correct the supposed social ills highlighted in Native American communities. The author instead uses it to counteract the deficit mindsets scholars use to construct those narratives. This approach by Tuck underscores the need to recognize rather than deny these deficit mindsets. As Tuck (2009) writes, “Desire is the song about walking through the storm, a song that recognizes rather than denies that pain doubtlessly lies ahead” (p. 419). To heed Tuck's calling for solidarity against damaged-centered research, I borrowed Tuck's ideas to connect survivance (Vizenor, 2008) and thrivance (Baumann, 2023) to accentuate Native Americans as “productive, successful, and vibrant contributors in today’s world” (p. 3).

Earlier reviewers of this manuscript questioned why I included elements of what they consider to be damaged-centered reporting. I thought deeply about their words and considered removing references to acts of cultural genocide and genocide or even historical names like Richard Pratt. Ultimately, I leaned on the words of Blackfoot Elder LaPlant, who spoke about memory as a counter-narrative to settler-colonial accounts that attempt to present a fictional history of Native Americans, “The reflections of events are represented very differently, and the interpretations of those events are represented extremely differently” (Clark, 2022a, p. 182). In my view, to present a story without acknowledging the impact of past exploitations would be an attempt to rewrite history (Denzin, 2004) and impede the growth of critical Indigenous consciousness (Garcia & Shirley, 2012) used to advance the “political and social justice goals of Indigenous communities” (Brayboy et al., 2012, p. 443).

As I neared the end of this writing journey, I returned to Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2016) call to map goodness, which she viewed as a way to empower school communities, especially those who are rarely given a voice in public conversations about education (Bruce et al., 2025). She described portraiture as a methodology that intentionally centers strengths while also recognizing how people respond to challenges (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986). This approach invites a deeper look into the lives of individuals and the environments they inhabit, and it captures the layered contexts that shape their experiences (Bolaji & Imonitie, 2025; Chapman, 2007; Prince 2023). Through this lens, portraiture becomes a way to honor complexity and affirms the richness of human experience within educational spaces (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Walter and Andersen (2016) encouraged scholars to pinpoint their social position, a charge, I believe, is intertwined into the fibers of portraiture. By social position, I refer to the unique perspective and experiences that individuals bring to their research, shaped by their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Portraiture mandates that you peel back layers of thought to cause a paradigm shift that illuminates your social position as both elevated and subservient to cultural exploration—elevated because the scholar's worldview is ever present in the story and subservient because the scholar places another culture's worldview at the vanguard. The discovery of THAT epiphany creates the praxis for sharing a decolonizing story THAT supports narratives honoring educational sovereignty for Indigenous youths.

Note

For the current article, I used Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous interchangeably. I capitalize the term Indigenous to recognize Indigenous people's distinct cultural and political relationship with their homelands (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

Glossary

Blackfoot Language	Meaning
iiṭāwāamāto'osimō'•p'	altar
yō'•p'	western side
a niito'yiss	tipi
āwāamāto'osimāa	smudge
iinnii	buffalo
āa'sittūpiiyissin	generosity
iiyināakoōtsiiyissin	respect
niitsiittūpii āatsimoi'•kāan	real people blessing
īyō isstsiipāattūpiiyō'•p'	oh, source of life
isspoōmoōkinnāan	help us
nāa"kaīyiistsiisinnāan	so that we may listen
nāa"kaikimmoōtsiisinnāan	so that we may treat each other with kindness
nāa"kaīyikāakimāasinnāan	so that we may try hard
nāa"koōkōkāakimāatoōsinnāan	so that we may be honest
nāa"kāto'yiiṭuksisinnāan	so that we may be spiritual
āayoō"toōkinnāan ā•pisstoōtoōkii	hear us Creator
kimmis koōkoōsiiks	pity your children
iiksiikimmātā•psiiyāa	they are in need
kāamōīāani	grant us safety
Niisstāawātsiimāan miisūmiiipāattūpiisin	so we may grow into having long lives
kyīnn	amen

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Notes on Contributor

Shawn Clark, a public-school educator for 25 years, served as a building-level administrator for 19 years, including 7 years at the largest Indigenous student-attended high school in Montana. He earned his doctoral degree in Education (Leadership and Innovation) in the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University. His research centers on elements of belongingness, cultural pluralism, and rural education.

ORCID

Shawn Clark, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7474-9696>