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Off White

Readings on Race, Power, and Society

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Linda C. Powell, and L. Mun Wong,
Editors

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Resisting Diversity: An Alaskan Case of Institutional Struggle

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INTRODUCTION

In the following discussion an incident provoked by alleged comments regarding the preferential grading of Alaskan Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is described and analyzed as a case study in the cultural-racial politics of education. As such it provides a vivid, even chilling, example of the techniques a white institution will marshal to resist cultural diversity and maintain its whiteness by completely missing, misunderstanding, and ultimately ignoring the responses, concerns, and actions of an aggrieved minority population in imposing its own institutional perceptions and interpretations of events. A deeply problematic and painful aspect of this resistance is that it is primarily accomplished through actions that the institution actually believes support minority success but in fact negate it. It is therefore necessary to illustrate and describe examples of the complexities and subtle machinations of white institutional privilege in order to begin to combat its devastating effects.

We present this case in order to raise the level of the discourse from one about individuals, specific programs, and groups to one which focuses on a critical self-examination of institutional practices that consciously and unconsciously undermine diversity and nurture white privilege. (For a fuller discussion of this case and its historical context see Gilmore, Smith, and Kairaiuak, forthcoming; Gilmore, 1987; Gilmore, Kairaiuak, Kashatok, and Chase, forthcoming; and Smith,

in press). This, then, is not a discussion about individuals, villains, or heroes, but about institutional postures, policies, and practices that on the surface may seem to be about race-neutral issues but, in fact, carry significant and damaging racial-political consequences.

In the summer of 1993 Michelle Fine visited the University of Alaska Fairbanks. In a colloquia address, drawing on examples from her data, she explored questions of both silencing and of speaking, commenting that neither was a “pretty picture.” She reminded the audience that there was “plenty of evidence” to suggest that when people do speak “institutions from whom we expect better, surround elite interests.” Fine’s concluding analysis addressed the “responsibility” we as university scholars, practitioners, and activists have to both “speak the unspeakable” and to “support those who are gutsy enough to say some things out loud.” Fine urged us (1) to rethink and document hidden transcripts of resistance; (2) to track consequences of institutional policies that may look neutral but are organized around hierarchical race/gender politics; (3) to document the costs of silencing and exclusion; (4) to rethink public discourse examining moments where comments which are said all the time suddenly fracture the discourse; and finally, (5) to nurture, create, and document free spaces through critique and creativity where silences can be interrupted and passion and outrage can be transformed into professionalism, scholarship, activism, and leadership (Fine, 1993).

The three authors of this chapter were all in the audience that afternoon. All resonated with the points that were being made. Each of us, two white professors and an Alaska Native graduate student, had shared experiences of silencing and speaking and witnessed the costs. We each knew well that the “grading controversy” on campus the year before had been our own poignant and powerful example of institutional silencing and resistance. We had each, along with many others in the university community, felt passion, rage, and confusion during the months of turmoil surrounding the fractured public discourse. Each of us had entered that discourse both on campus and in the media. Each of us could vividly recall our sense of exclusion as the institution “from whom we expected better” seemed to surround elite interests. We offer the following description and discussion of this controversial incident to interrupt an oppressive silence and to create a public place for critique and repair.

It is imperative that we take individual and institutional responsibility for critically examining the practices of our own institutions, and for initiating and maintaining an open dialogue that will ultimately nurture the possibilities for growth and change within our institutions. This dialogue is a difficult one to initiate. For example, after a limited circulation of an earlier draft of this essay, we had two very different sets of reactions. Members of the Alaska Native community (and the editors of this volume) felt we were extremely generous and diplomatic with regard to the institution and its actions while white administration and faculty tended to see our position regarding the institution as particularly harsh. We have tried to find a platform from which to speak that neither diminishes our critique nor inhibits our potential for repair.

In the first section of the chapter, we will present a description of the incident. In order to highlight the nature of the community’s shared experience of the public discourse, the incident will be presented primarily through its depiction in the dominant culture narrative created and portrayed by the local media. Gates (1995), in a recent *New Yorker* essay which examines the national racial discourse surrounding the O.J. Simpson case and Million Man March, points out that “People arrive at an understanding of themselves and the world through narratives—narratives purveyed by schoolteachers, newscasters, ‘authorities,’ and the other authors of our common sense” (p. 57). In this essay, the local Alaska media headlines, through which we document the incident, capture a sense of the dominant culture reality in this particular community.

In the final sections of the paper we will argue that the incident itself functioned to maintain

hegemonic practices at the university and to obscure the demonstrated and increasing successes of the Alaska Native student population there. We argue that the University, by almost exclusively focusing their responses to the incident on issues of academic freedom, standards, and grading practices, abdicated their responsibility to resist racial slurs and stereotypes and to provide a safe learning environment for the growing minority population. While issues of academic freedom, standards and grading practices are worthy concerns, they are not the focus of this essay. What is of concern to the authors is the fact that despite an official university investigation finding (reported early in the chronology of the incident) that there was *no* evidence to suggest any differences in grading practices for Native and non-Native students, the public discourse continued to almost exclusively concentrate on standards and grades. This dominant narrative managed to effectively squelch any analysis of the damaging racial politics at the core of the incident.

THE INCIDENT

The event that set off the incident occurred on September 5, 1991. It was described by the Chancellor in a report to the Board of Regents (January 8, 1992) four months later, in the following way:

At a meeting off-campus, [a professor] was invited to present views on alternative methods of teacher certification. During a lively discussion that followed the presentation [the professor] apparently stated that UAF was under equity pressure to pass (graduate) Native students. No tapes of the meeting exist and accounts differ, but her remarks were interpreted as an attack on the integrity of grades and degrees awarded to Native students at UAF. [The professor] was not speaking as a representative of UAF at the meeting.

The comments made at that “lively discussion” and the reactions to them became the focus of a heated and intense discourse that was spotlighted and stirred by the local media and lasted for an entire academic year. Though rumors of the event were circulating, it was a month before the first article which made reference to the event was actually published. This was a letter to the editor in the student newspaper which was run with the headline, “Concerned with speaker” (*Sun Star*, October 4, 1991). The professor and a colleague replied in the following issue. Their letters to the editor were headlined, “Inaccurate rumor rectified” and “Let’s all work together,” respectively (October 11).

While the tone of these early student newspaper captions appears mild and almost understated, the drama was building across the campus and the community in private discussions, meetings, phone calls, letters, memos, and undocumented dialogues. In a letter to the chancellor, the executive director of the local Native Association wrote, “It is incredulous that statements like this can be made by one of the University’s professors, and no reaction by anyone so far” (letter to the Chancellor, October 4, 1991). No official or public response from the administration was forthcoming.

Weeks later, on the first of November, the story broke in an Anchorage paper (a city located approximately 400 miles away from Fairbanks). The headline was big, bold, and almost unforgettable. It read, “Professor alleges UAF graduating unqualified Native students” (*Anchorage Times*, November 1, 1991). The article characterized the turmoil, reporting that “A professor’s comments about grading standards for Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks has sharply split the community, pitting academic freedom against what some say is the devaluation

of a degree in education.” The director of the Native association mentioned above was quoted as being “concerned about the effect the statement has on Native students at the university. It has caused them great anxiety and concern—they don’t want to have any doubt passed on their education, which the statement did.”

The torrent of statewide headlines and media attention that followed for the next five months must have surprised even the media. The headlines below capture some of the focus of the controversy: “Professor’s remarks raise ruckus: educators, students hit comments about Native performance at UA” (*Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, November 3, 1991); “UAF Students want investigation” (*FDNM*, November 5); “Charge of favoritism riles Natives at UAF” (*FDNM*, November 5); “Students demand probe of lenient grading claim” (*Anchorage Daily News*, November 6); “UAF grading policies face close examination” and “Debate centers on preparation” (*FDNM*, November 7); “Native teacher shortage worries educators” (*FDNM*, November 7); “Natives express anger, hurt at forum” (*Sun Star*, November 8); “Controversy Reaches Fever Pitch” (*Sun Star*, November 8); “Regents seek report on UAF grading” (*FDNM*, November 10); “Racial animosity” (*FDNM*, November 29/30); and “Savage attack” (*FDNM*, December 2).

The headlines continued through December and final exams with articles, letters to the editor, and guest editorials each taking some position for or against the professor, the faculty, the education department, the Native students, the administration, etc. Accusations of racism, stereotyping, and cultural insensitivity, and defenses of academic freedom, university standards, and program quality were dominant themes. Residents in the immediate community as well as those across the state followed the daily headlines. In remote Native rural communities, residents are reported to have waited over fax machines for friends and relatives to send the most recent news reports. Even at a distance the incident carried an “electric” quality.

In January, after the holidays and at the start of a new semester, a report from the chancellor stirred the intensity of the headlines again. “Grading dispute continues: UAF chancellor’s report finds no overall pattern” (*FDNM*, January 9, 1992). The *Anchorage Times* headline on the same day read, “Professor slams study: says UAF failed in analysis of grading Natives.” Debate continued and accusations were made anew. “Professor bolsters favoritism charge: Inquiry does little to quell controversy” (*Anchorage Daily News*, January 10); “UAF grading charges fly” (*FDNM*, January 10).

The incident persisted and continued to create controversy and stir emotion and argument, and appeared to be not only irrepressible but also unresolvable. Most everyone felt wounded in some way. Law suits, threats of litigation, and legal action surrounded every interaction, further silencing a substantive or meaningful discourse.

In April a headline read, “Natives voice complaints on [the professor]” (*FDNM*, April 1). The newly appointed Native advisory committee in meetings with the chancellor were reported to have said that “the controversy over Native student academic abilities has not been resolved and they want to see action.” Comments about the professor’s “racial remark” were quoted. In response to much of the focus on academic freedom one committee member raised issues of academic responsibility, saying, “Academic freedom does not permit infringing on the rights of others. We have academic freedom of speech but we can also be judged by what we say.” After almost a full academic year, despite committee reports, University plans and investigations, nothing seemed resolved; no one was satisfied.

In May of 1992, in response to the Native advisory committee’s concerns, the chancellor issued a statement in which she acknowledged “that many Native students do not believe that the matter has been brought to satisfactory closure.” With regard to grading practices she stated, “We believe without any doubt that, as a standard practice, UAF students, specifically including Native

students, earn the grades and credentials they receive. We believe that there is no reason to question the efforts of faculty in general to grade all students fairly. The controversy was unfortunate, and on behalf of the University of Alaska, I apologize to Native students for any discomfort they may have felt.”

These words and the public apology however, came too late. The semester was over. Many students were gone. In the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* on June 28, 1992 (nine months after the alleged remarks about preferential grades were made, and when most students were not on campus), a large ad was placed by the Alaska Native Education Student Association in order to have the chancellor’s announcement made public. No articles, letters, or editorials accompanied or were forthcoming in response to the ad. Though the announcement carried large letters declaring “FAIR GRADING OF NATIVE STUDENTS AFFIRMED,” the damage had already been done. One might only speculate about what might have been if such a statement had been forthcoming early in the controversy.

To the Alaska Native students the year’s headlines had read like a catechism of hegemony; a litany of shame; a pedagogy for the oppressed (Freire, 1973). Questioning minority credentials and standards is unfortunately not a new or unfamiliar response to minority achievement. Nor are these discussions new to academia. (Unfortunately these are the common responses to interrupting any “gatekeeping” practices where race, class, and gender lines are crossed.) Remarks such as these must have been uttered many other times. But the intensity and persistence of this controversy and its continuous media frenzy with its unending stream of headlines seemed to surprise (and eventually exhaust) everyone.

OVERCOMING CLASHES OF EPISTEMOLOGY, EXPECTATION, AND STYLE

The seriousness of the controversy as measured by the pain and disruption it caused to Native students and their community of supporters demonstrated the separateness of the conflicting worlds they inhabit as subordinate participants in a white institution. This conflict resulted in clashes on several fronts.

In any conflict situation, the parties act according to their perceptions of the meaning of issues raised. Their reactions to the other’s actions are colored by a complex set of expectations each has developed of the other. The mutual set of expectations that has evolved between Alaska Native students and the institution is far from simple, involving issues of academic expectations, silencing, and standards for assessment.

To the professor who had made the remark, and to most of the university community, the intense reaction seemed to come as a complete surprise. Comments about the abilities or inabilities of students and opinions about grading policy are the stock-in-trade of academic discourse. Many faculty members had often expressed similar concerns without serious consequence.

For most Alaska Native students the academic experience is loaded with import of a different sort. A pervasive expectation of failure confronts Native students and to a large extent governs how they are viewed and treated by the institution. But in many cases the institutional view is internalized by the students themselves. Many of the students on campus during the standards’ controversy represented the first generation of those who attended high schools in their own villages, itself too often, as the narratives collected in another study by the authors (Gilmore, Smith, and Kairaiuak, forthcoming) illustrate, an experience with an alien white institution.¹

Often in the small rural schools, where resources are limited, advanced math and science courses and various literature or language classes were not available to students. Therefore, many

of the Native students, in order to fully matriculate into University degree programs, have to endure several semesters of “developmental” classes that do not count toward their degrees. These students have much to prove, to themselves and to their families, by their academic success. In their eyes and those of their families that they are earning good grades and graduating means that they have reached a major water mark in striving for success.

This is more the case because for many of them the approbation of professors, in the awarding of successful grades, bespeaks a deep cultural affinity they have experienced with elders or respected relatives in the village. In these contexts when a younger person is told to accept a responsibility by an older relative or elder, he or she accepts the assignment with pride, knowing that he or she would not be asked until they had proven themselves capable. Being told that they didn't deserve their successes, not only by the professor in question, but, through its reactions, by the institution itself, created not only palpable pain but a serious betrayal.

The institution treated the matter as purely academic, part of an ongoing debate about grading. It appeared taken back by the strong reaction of the Native community. One professor commented on the “hysteria” in the Native community. The institution didn't seem to know how to read the cues of, respond to, or acknowledge the Native community response. At least part of this reaction can be attributed to a serious and deep-seated clash of expectations. The institution expected that the university community would see the issue as academic and not personal, that it would welcome the proposed, impassionate, and rational attempts to sort out the “facts” as a positive contribution to resolving an ongoing debate.

Native students who had labored under a pervasive expectation of failure and who had, against all odds, registered impressive academic successes, expected the institution to celebrate these successes with them and to censure the faculty who had betrayed them. At the very least they expected the institution to hear their pain, understand the shame they risked bringing upon their families and their communities, and take steps to address these concerns. The institution views students as individuals; the students, in contrast, view themselves as part of a connected web of family and community. For the students their educations were not separable from their place in their families. This concept was expressed clearly in the following student narrative:

The Native family infrastructure is fairly extensive when compared to a non-Native family; aunts, uncles and grandparents play a vital role almost equal to that of parents.

I think, you know, within Native families, when you finish school they value it very highly. Because it's seen as part of the family, an accomplishment of the family. It's not just the individual. And so, in a sense, it's very highly valued.

However, the institution's response to the conflict surfaced another underlying conflict, a clash of conceptions of the nature of the University. One of the tenets of the positivism that characterizes western institutions is the need to separate facts from values or feelings and to make decision on the basis of facts alone. Universities celebrate their abilities to make academic distinctions, to look at issues “objectively” and dispassionately. The very bedrock of scientific inquiry is the ability to separate the investigator from the object of study—the need for objectification taken as unproblematic—and to eschew any emotional involvement.

This epistemology seriously clashes with that of Alaskan aboriginal society.² It is at the root of a number of other issues facing Alaska today, including the continuing debate of Native subsistence rights, which are seen as simple economic matters by the dominant majority, not matters of ideology and personal identity as they are perceived by Alaska Natives.

To the administration, and to much of the rest of the University community, the standards

controversy was simply a matter of getting the facts and then finding a technistic resolution of the matter. For example, the chancellor repeatedly stated that this was an academic issue and would be addressed through academic channels. This impassionate, rationalistic, and technistic approach, in a Habermasian (1962) sense, clashed with Native students' views of reality as shaped both by their early experiences in traditional villages and by learning to succeed in an oppressive, often condescending and hostile educational environment. In the following discussion several dimensions of these views of reality are illustrated.

First, to these students grades, diplomas, and academic successes are not simply objective and depersonalized facts but valued personal accomplishments owned and celebrated not only by them but by their extended families and communities as well, and important to demonstrating self-worth. Many of the students came from traditional communities which allow for a pedagogy that provides room for error but goes to great pains to arrange for success. Noncompetitive and cooperative learning opportunities characterize the traditional pedagogy which holds the students in high esteem and maintains high expectations for them.

Second, contrary to the institutional assumption, the grading incident could not be seen as isolated and aberrant but was connected to other events serving as a whole to define the nature of their university experience. Their experiences of racism in the village schools, the stigma of being treated as potential failures, and their marginalization at the University form a connected web. Often Native people would recount several other seemingly (to many non-Natives) unrelated events of violence along with the grading controversy as a related cluster. There had been a drive-by shooting of a Native man in the town and the accused had been acquitted. A yet unsolved murder of a young Alaska Native woman student in the University dormitory had shocked, saddened, and traumatized the population on campus. These events along with the departure of several Native professors, the restructuring of the Rural College, and the grading controversy were all talked about in the Native community as part of the same problem.

The grading controversy could not be "taken care of" simply by ferreting out the facts, remediating the immediate breach, and proceeding with business as usual. To address it meant addressing the entire pattern of behaviors that constituted their experiencing of university existence. Virtually no one in the administration and few of the faculty or white students ever grasped, or acknowledged, the legitimacy of this reality.

Third, the roles some of the students were thrust into, as spokespersons and leaders, was inappropriate given their ages and kinship statuses. During the grading controversy the students went to the administration and to the faculty asking for explanations as to what was happening and for assurance that the issue was being addressed. Given their perception of the problem and appropriate action to be taken, they got little satisfaction. One student was told by his professor that he had deserved the grades he received but that he was different from other Native students. Even many of the professors to whom they looked for direction appeared weak and helpless in the turmoil. The faculty were unable to vindicate themselves or the students. As a result the students found themselves having to serve as their own spokespersons. They organized meetings, wrote letters to the media and the University committees, drafted position papers, and most difficult of all, were called upon to explain what was happening to their families.

While these were stressful and time-consuming roles, causing several students to drop classes and even drop out of programs, the net results were not all negative. Several students found a voice to surface what for them had been subjugated knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Some were able to challenge what had been a long-standing matter of conflict for them, that is, the way "white people" fragment reality and look at pieces of the whole. These examples illustrate Lather's (1991) contention that situations of this sort can result in the "historical 'others' mov[ing] to the

foreground, challenging and reshaping what we know of knowledge." Many of the students assumed leading roles in newly organized student organizations and on advisory committees.

Finally, the confrontational style of the institution and the involved faculty was at first shockingly inappropriate and intimidating. In large part, the student response to the accusation was first to consult with faculty to see if it were true. On hearing it was not they asked the administration to deal with the professor who had made the accusation. As the institution failed to respond and the concern escalated both within the University and the larger community, the students began to participate in meetings and discussions with the media, in student organizations, and with student support service programs, faculty, and administration. The main topic of these meetings was the expression of their hurt, bewilderment, and feelings of betrayal.

The response to their initially expressed grievances, even though the administration repeatedly claimed that there was no evidence to support the accusation, was neither apology or retraction. Rather statements of policy were forthcoming from the institution and real or implied threats of legal action from the professor having made the accusation.

CONCLUSION: COUNTERING INSTITUTIONAL HEGEMONY WITH CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The data and discussion we have presented in this essay suggest that the unusual length and intensity of the incident described in this chapter can best be understood as an institution's resistance to the increasing successes of a visibly growing minority population on campus. The incident itself functioned to maintain hegemonic practices at the University and to obscure the demonstrated and increasing accomplishments of the Alaska Native population. The University, by almost exclusively focusing its responses to the incident on issues of academic freedom, standards, and grading practices, abdicated its responsibility to resist racial slurs and stereotypes (especially as depicted in news headlines), and to provide a safe learning environment for the growing minority population.

Consistent with theories of resistance and reproduction in education (e.g., see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1985), when it could no longer be predicted that Native students would "flunk out" or "get homesick" in their first year at the University, and when graduation statistics included growing percentages of Native students, the discourse shifted to questions of grading and unearned degrees.

Claude Steele (see Watters, 1995) has proposed the notion of "stereotype vulnerability" to explain poor black and minority academic performance. Steele states that,

whenever [minority] students concentrate on an explicitly scholastic task, they risk confirming their group's negative stereotype. This extra burden . . . can be enough to drag down their performance (p. 45).

Steele argues that students have to "contend with this whisper of inferiority at the moment when their mental abilities are most taxed . . ." (Watters, 1995, pp. 45-46). In the case of the Native students on the Fairbanks campus this was not a whisper to contend with but a loud chorus that lasted through the midterms and finals of two semesters. Steele's research demonstrates that the cues that spark the vulnerability can be subtle. For example, stereotype vulnerability can negatively affect women's performance on a given math test if they believe the test shows gender differences or can similarly negatively affect white men's performance when told Asians tend to do

better on the particular exam. What then might the effects of stereotype vulnerability be when the cues are bold, public, and clearly humiliating as they were throughout the incident described?

By not interrupting the damaging public discourse, the University failed to protect the educational lives and reputations of its Native student population. Many speculated about the damaging impact of the dominant public narrative on the students' potential for professional employment. Given these circumstances, the students demonstrated an unusual and inspiring amount of resilience throughout and after the incident. They displayed a remarkable ability to resist the public discourse.³ The students seemed to draw their strength and direction primarily from their traditional values, families, and communities.

Many Alaska Native families want their children to be educated but are cautious about the potential vulnerability of their children in the white man's world, often far from home at the University. A poignant and illustrative example of this was shared in one of the open forums organized at the University during the grading controversy. A young Yup'ik woman came to the podium wearing a full length traditional fur parka. She stood proudly and explained that when she was leaving her village to come to the University to continue her education, her grandfather spoke to her. He said that she was Yup'ik and that she was beautiful. Because of that, he told her, the white people might try to harm her. (One might argue that this grandfather predicted the incident.) He continued, saying that the parka her grandmother made for her would protect her from harm. At the podium, she turned to model the full beauty of the parka she was wearing and told the audience that she always wears her parka and thinks of her grandparents' and their protection.

Though the University had not created a free or safe space, the students were able to maintain their traditional ties and seize a context for themselves. They learned the value of situated freedom which was not granted, but seized and created it in the context of many obstacles. For the most part students appeared to be able to transform anger, hurt, and confusion into professionalism and academic effort. That they could so strongly resist the stigma and vulnerability in such a hostile and assaulting environment is a remarkable story of resistance and resilience.

Almost one year after the incident occurred, a colleague, when asked how things stood with the controversy, responded that things were fine and that it was best to "go on and leave that all behind us now." The authors disagree. We have much to learn from these events and from the surrounding stories that were never told. If the incident and our reflections on it don't transform us, teach us, warn us, then we have not learned anything. Peggy McIntosh (1988) in a discussion of white privilege asserts that "[t]o redesign social systems we need to first acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials are the key political tool here."

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NOTES

1. Village high schools are administered by regional school districts with virtually all superintendents being non-Native and the majority having been imported from other states. Furthermore less than 5 percent of the principals are Native and the great majority of teachers are non-Native from outside the village. There are local school boards comprised of village residents but with very few exceptions these are virtually powerless to seriously affect policy.
2. A provocative treatment of this issue is found in Kawageley, 1995.
3. Although it is difficult to capture accurately, it appears that neither the grades nor dropout rates of the Alaska Native students were significantly affected by the incident. One can only speculate how much better grades might have been in the absence of such negative stereotyping and attention.