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Tradition and the invention of racial selves: symbolic boundaries, collective authenticity, and contemporary struggles for racial equality¹

Jessica M. Vasquez and Christopher Wetzel

Abstract

This paper raises two important questions for understanding the influence of authenticity in the construction of racial identities: *what motivates racial authenticity work?* and *how do racial groups do authenticity work?* Relying on in-depth interviews we argue that Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians challenge contemporary institutional racism through elaborating symbolic boundaries and articulating moral discourses. By emphasizing authentic traditions – conceived of as values, roots, and cultural toolkits – these historically and currently subordinated racial groups distinguish themselves from the American mainstream. The moral and racial discourse of tradition and authenticity affords these racial minorities opportunities to re-evaluate their groups' statuses and re-invest their communities with esteem.

Keywords: Tradition; authenticity; symbolic boundaries; culture; Native Americans; Mexican Americans.

Introduction

We argue in this paper that Mexican Americans and Native Americans use claims of racial authenticity as a tactic of resistance against contemporary institutional racism. Mexican Americans and Native Americans establish their social worth – that is, the group's social position and collective dignity – by making discursive comparisons with, and drawing distinctions from, the American mainstream. They evaluate themselves using a metric that highlights their traditions, specifically their roots, values, and cultural toolkits. Emphasizing an alternative set of values that they believe are absent from and indeed

superior to white society enables group members to demonstrate their merit and validate their ways of being. Groups' demarcation of symbolic boundaries through a focus on authentic values is a strategic response to the emergence of less overt systems of racial discrimination and the rise of multiculturalism.

Strategies of racial resistance – attitudes, belief systems, and practices that are aimed at undercutting racist ideologies – are shaped by the historical structure and context of subordination. The Black, Brown, and Red Power movements of the 1960s responded to systems of blatant racial discrimination that justified inequality through assertions of biological differences between whites and minorities. Since then, however, racial discrimination has become increasingly covert, forcing tactics of resistance to change accordingly. In the post-Civil Rights era of heightened multiculturalism racial minorities confront the new challenge of discrimination often being less overt because it is embedded in social institutions. Contemporary *laissez-faire* racism legitimates injustices due to minority groups' purported cultural inferiority (Bobo and Smith 1998). Institutional racism further naturalizes and minimizes the perception of discrimination through the discourse of liberalism (Barlow 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2003). Despite the passage of laws making discrimination in education, employment, and housing illegal, institutional racism is a persistent problem. Lacking a clear target to organize against, minority groups now use the rhetoric of racial authenticity in order to positively represent themselves and contest the enduring racism of the United States' dominant populations and institutions. In this recent turn, racial minorities are creatively using race – the very feature long used to subjugate them – to their discursive advantage.

Mexican Americans and Native Americans both experience continued racism. We compare these groups because they resist their marginalization by rearticulating the same racialized terms that others use to categorize them, and re-inscribe this language with different values. Since the American understanding of minorities is racial, these two groups use the same language of race but invest it with very different meanings as they draw boundaries to positively distinguish themselves from both negative popular conceptions of them and dominant American culture. These minority groups use racial terms in order to make themselves visible and intelligible to a US populace that has been long obsessed with racial categories.

Existing theories: symbolic boundaries as a strategy of resistance

Groups construct symbolic boundaries to categorize, separate, and generate feelings of group solidarity (Weber 1978; Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002). While the configuration of elements that

constitute boundaries varies across time and place (Favell 2001; Bail 2008), our analysis focuses on understanding how two minority groups envision their locations *vis-à-vis* whites in the racial hierarchy – a hierarchical social order – rather than on the well documented boundaries of the black–white dichotomy. We do this by analysing how particular subordinated groups construct symbolic boundaries at the present and how these symbolic boundaries serve as a viable rhetorical strategy to contest subjugation. Much like Yen Le Espiritu's (2001, p. 416) research on the gendered boundary strategies of Filipinos, our goal here is to understand 'how the "margins" imagine and construct the "mainstream" in order to assert superiority over it'.

As groups located at the bottom of a persistent racial hierarchy, Mexican Americans and Native Americans face a difficult challenge since the system of racial subjugation has shifted from blatant Jim Crow-ism formalized in law to *de facto* marginalization. Yet recognizing that new cultural ideas are developed and compete for dominance during these periods of profound social change (Swidler 1986),² Mexican Americans and Native Americans confront the new adversity of diffuse institutional racism and assert their social worth by elaborating and deploying their own symbolic boundaries. They do this by describing the authenticity of their beliefs and noting that their values are absent from the market-oriented and impersonal mainstream white society (Massey and Sanchez 2007). The authenticity invoked through these boundaries is not inherent to a person, object, or performance but is a dynamic, socially constructed quality. These claims to authenticity are evaluated based on political and social categories (Fine 2003; Grazian 2003). While Richard A. Peterson (2005, p. 1086) insists that racial and ethnic identity work is the 'easiest sort of authenticity work' since it is generally based on ascribed group membership, we argue that the constant shifting, crossing, and contesting of collective boundaries, as well as broader systems of racial discrimination, render racial and ethnic authenticity work incredibly complicated. Because authenticity is contingent and contestable, we see it as something for which groups continually struggle, particularly in a context where institutionalized racism is rampant. In this case, we understand authenticity as performative in the Goffmanesque sense.³ This innovative boundary rearticulation allows members of marginalized racial groups to simultaneously challenge externally imposed racial hierarchies and strive for the dignity, value, and resources they do not otherwise obtain.

Asserting authenticity through symbolic boundaries requires concerted and consistent effort on the part of racial minority groups. Our Mexican American and Native American respondents emphasize their uniqueness and social worth by deploying the rhetoric and practices of tradition. Like authenticity, traditions are invented social practices.⁴

What matters most here is how traditions make groups cohere and impart knowledge about essential ‘beliefs, values, and behaviors’ (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 9). In our cases, people underscore what makes their racial group distinct from whites and socially valuable by describing three categories of practices under the broad framework of tradition: roots, values, and cultural toolkits. ‘Roots’ includes an emphasis on a homeland, history, and biological heritage. ‘Values’ focuses on elements such as the importance of family and social decorum. ‘Cultural toolkits’ encompasses cultural traits and abilities such as language competence, religion, food, and other ritualized practices. Collectively, roots, values, and cultural toolkits constitute racial traditions. Tradition, in turn, directly creates and legitimizes authenticity.⁵ Our respondents describe a direct relationship between tradition and authenticity. That is, the greater one’s knowledge and practice of traditions, the more legitimate is one’s claim to authenticity.⁶

Methodology

This paper developed from the intersection of two separate large-scale projects we conducted. One project uses in-depth interviews and ethnography to investigate the Potawatomi Indians’ diasporization from the Great Lakes area and subsequent national renaissance. The other research also uses in-depth interviews to explore racial identity formation among multi-generation Mexican American families. Despite these projects’ distinct origins, methodological dissimilarities, and different substantive foci, the emergent themes of the two studies were strikingly similar and piqued our curiosity about the common predicaments and strategies shared by our respondents. Again, these two minority groups are similar in terms of their contemporary social marginality as well as the discursive and practical responses to this subordination. We are confident that our inductive analysis of the two data sets reveals comparable categories and patterns, justifying this comparison.

Data on the Potawatomi Indians are drawn from fieldwork with seven Potawatomi bands in the United States. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 113 members of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (n=18), the Forest County Potawatomi Community (n=14), the Hannahville Indian Community (n=19), the Matche-be-nash-she-wish [Gun Lake] Band of Pottawatomi Indians (n=17), the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi Indians (n=11), the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation (n=15), and the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians (n=19). Fifty-nine interviewees were male and fifty-four were female. Initial interviewees were selected based on their structural positions (focusing on elected officials, directors of key programmes, and community members), followed by snowball

sampling. Participant observation of daily life on the Potawatomi reservations in Kansas, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin was also completed.⁷

Data on Mexican Americans were gathered in California through in-depth interviews with sixty-seven people in twenty-nine three-generation families. All respondents were either first-generation (Mexican nationals who immigrated to the United States; $n=8$), second-generation (the US-born children of the Mexican immigrants; $n=29$), or third-generation (the US-born grandchildren of the Mexican immigrants; $n=30$). Thirty-four interviewees were male and thirty-three were female and the vast majority of subjects were middle-class. Northern and southern California fieldsites were used (San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles and Santa Barbara Counties). Theoretical sampling was employed (Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, Catholic churches, and high schools), followed by snowball sampling.

While Mexican Americans and Native Americans have different histories in what is now US territory, we find this pairing to be theoretically fruitful because both populations were present *prior to* the formal establishment of the United States in 1776. Much of the US southwest was part of Mexico, even after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and remained so until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. Similarly, Native peoples were alone in populating North America prior to the arrival and settlement of Europeans between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Both groups existed before the formation of the United States and only had a racial 'minority' status imposed upon them with the arrival of European settlers and the creation of the US (Almaguer 1994). Thus, unlike other US minority groups, such as descendants of African, Asian, Caribbean, Central and South American, and European immigrant groups, people of Mexican and Native American descent have unique historical claims to reside on land now in the US. Through comparing the experiences of two populations that were present prior to the formation of the US nation-state, we explore how these groups 'do' authenticity work and how this serves as a means to re-evaluate and elevate their collective social worth in an externally imposed racial hierarchy.⁸

Racial traditions and the articulation of symbolic boundaries

Scholars have long focused on the black-white binary to understand racial regimes and resistances in the United States (Fanon 1967; Fredrickson 1981; Gilroy 1987; Wilson 1987; Blauner 1989; Collins 1991; Feagin 1991; Carmichael and Hamilton 1992; Conley 1999; Gilroy 1993; Massey and Denton 1993; Ignatiev 1995; Oliver and

Shapiro 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997; Blauner 2001). This preoccupation with the black–white binary ‘marginalizes the experiences of Latinas/os, Native Americans, and Asian Americans [and] perpetuates the normalization of whiteness, as whites become the group with which all others tend to be compared’ (Ochoa 2004, p. 73). Recent scholarship has focused on other populations, widening the black–white dichotomy into the multi-tiered image of a ‘racial hierarchy’⁹ (Montejano 1987; Foley 1990; Sanchez 1993; Skerry 1993; Almaguer 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Gutiérrez 1995; Nagel 1996; Foley 1997; Acevedo 2001; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Davis 2000; Garrouette 2003; Haney-Lopez 2003). Our paper contributes to this growing literature by analysing how Mexican Americans and Native Americans develop alternative rhetorics and systems of practice to contest racial inequality. Discussions of topics such as culture, the importance of family, religion, social organization, and linguistic fluency provide the rhetorical terrain upon which symbolic boundaries are articulated. Through these assessments Mexican American and Native American group members assert their unique social worth and reflect how they are different from whites.

Mexican Americans and Native Americans confront the contemporary reality of diffuse institutional racism by making binary references to construct symbolic boundaries around their communities. Framing these discourses in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is deliberately comparative and highly normative. For example, Milo Contreras describes the cultural richness associated with being a ‘racial mixture’ that is absent from the lives of white Americans:

And to me, I’ve always felt a sense of blandness and lack of culture and color and feeling and passion in ‘Americans.’ . . . So compared to Americans who – when the Aztecs were building pyramids and accurate calendars – were still in caves throwing rocks at each other . . . I have a sense of superiority almost. It’s more depth in the sense that the culture has passion, expression, heat, warmth. . . . You have all the religious holidays in Mexico and you have celebrations, weddings, baptisms, *quinceñeras* that go two or three days. . . . What do we see in America that’s like that?

Similarly, Jeff, a member of the Prairie Band, contrasts ‘life in here’, that is, residing in the geographic and cultural place of his reservation in northeast Kansas, and ‘life out there’, the white world in Topeka and beyond. He says: ‘Outside life is fast paced, impersonal. Life on the reservation is dictated more by tradition, culture, and history. People aren’t as rushed and know a lot about one another as people.’

In these examples, Milo and Jeff do more than simply note the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. They describe how their respective

communities value collective life and appreciate history in ways that hegemonic society simply does not. While these are perceptions rather than facts, these commonly held beliefs about racial communities' distinctiveness serve as the conceptual foundations for Mexican American and Potawatomi symbolic boundary making. The differences between the traditions of these racial communities and the larger white society are marked, illustrated, and amplified through discussions of roots, values, and cultural toolkits.

Respondents frequently use the refrain of 'remember your roots' to connect their current lives, homelands (however geographically or generationally distant), and family lineages. Third-generation Mexican American Marisol Fuentes, born and raised in San Diego and attending the University of California at Berkeley, explains the linkage between family history and identity development:

[It's important to] remember your family, your history and where you came from. When I think of the word 'remember,' I think you're piecing two things together like, remembering as in memory, like you're bringing back consciously certain things. . . . Your past has to do with who you are. It's . . . one of those double meanings like, remember, re-mem-bering, like the word 'member' as like being a part of your body, your arm is your member. It's like re-piecing yourself, like re-putting . . . putting yourself together by remembering things in your past and remembering your family and remembering your history.

Marisol's desire to remember is premised upon the belief that her history is alive in the present and that navigating contemporary life requires an understanding of the past. A critical dimension of this 'remembering roots' is acknowledging the groups' very real histories of subjugation and how this influences the present. 'Remembering roots' can refer to numerous definitions of 'roots', from historical homelands and ancient ancestors to living family elders. Renata Contreras, Milo's daughter, talks about the significance of historical memory and knowing her own genealogy:

Respect your elders. . . . A really important part of not forgetting your roots was keeping your Spanish. So we'd always try to communicate in Spanish, even if sometimes I'd respond in English, even if I understand and can say it back. Valuing where your ancestors came from and just being really proud to be where you're from.

Respect, Spanish language, and valuing ancestors all figure in Renata's explanation of why 'roots' are a source of pride for her.

Many Potawatomi Indians describe a similar need to understand who they are and where they came from – what Paige (Hannahville) evocatively describes in terms of Indians being ‘home people’. Often this takes the form of describing an abiding connection with one’s own reservation. For example, Julie (Prairie) worked at a college in California until 1997. Before starting her next job in the Midwest, she travelled to visit her relatives and spend some time on the Prairie Band reservation in Kansas. She describes the experience of returning:

As soon as I got here, I knew I was home. My aunt met me and hugged me and I felt her spirit and knew it was right. She drove me around and showed me where my family’s land was. When it was just about time for me to leave, she invited me to come to some ceremonies – she just wanted me to stay for longer. But I had already changed my driver’s license and got a P.O. box! [She laughs]

For a number of years after returning to the reservation Julie did not want to leave. She wanted to stay on the land where her ancestors had lived, to maintain that real connection to her history. While many Potawatomi describe their rootedness as connected with particular reservations, others indicate that there is a broader, national sense of place and connection to a historic homeland. Ernest, a member of the Pokagon Band in southwest Michigan, explains:

I’ve talked to numerous people from Kansas and Oklahoma who have said how important it is to come back here [to Michigan]. And it’s not so much that they want to come back here to live, but it’s important that they come back here to see the homeland. They view it as the homeland.

Despite the fact that the Potawatomi Nation had been removed from the southern Great Lakes area in the nineteenth century and diasporized, many still envision their roots in their ancestors’ original lands prior to forced removal.

In describing their histories and connection with homelands, Mexican Americans and Native Americans outline how common roots bind communities together. At times, roots discourses refer to specific family histories and particular places, while at other times they connect with the larger community. Roots narratives signal collective values and also stake out a critical dimension of larger symbolic boundaries.

Much like talking about one’s roots, emphasizing distinct values is another way Mexican Americans and Potawatomi differentiate themselves from the American mainstream. Here values typically focus on elements like the importance of family. Rex Schultz describes

Mexicans' celebration of family togetherness by contrasting it with Americans' harried lifestyles which systematically devalue the family:

[It is important] just to know what your heritage is, your background ... to get a better understanding that not everything is so Americanized and fast-paced. For example ... Hispanics get together and have dinner together. I think that's important, a family dinnertime. Not somebody picking up hamburgers and saying, 'see ya later.' There needs to be family time, definitely.

In directly comparing Hispanic culture with American culture, Rex clearly prefers the values of the former. For second-generation Mexican American Elena Vargas, family and togetherness are similarly prized values in her life:

We keep those values: we're all going to sit at the table and we're all going to go on Sunday to church, to keep those reunions together. I see so many other families, they don't even talk to their mom, they don't even talk to their kids, or the kids won't talk to their parents, or they don't get together for birthdays. What could be more important than to get together with your family?

Family bonds and obligations do not stop with biological relations but also include 'fictive kin' (Stack 1974). Second-generation Mexican American Benjamin Benavidas describes how familial care extends to other members of the community. In particular, he notes how the Catholic Church 'consecrates' the family and how family activity often involves the church:

What is most important and most significant is the whole concept of family. ... So the one thing is the importance of family and how you support each other and how you take care of each [other]. Right now in our house we have a couple of extra kids ... if there is a family problem the kids come over here and they hang out. ... So the community was the family. ... Another thing is Catholicism. Although we've questioned it and strayed, the Catholic Church still remains a powerful force whether we realize it or not.

For many Mexican American families, church attendance was a family event and Catholicism was seen as integral to Mexican identity. The Catholic Church, upholding the values of family and fellowship, also helped people see themselves as connected to, and responsible for, other members of the racial community.

Potawatomi people also describe memories of their times with families. Karl (Gun Lake), for example, recalled how his father's

stories about family and history entertained him and his siblings as children.

We heard a lot of stories . . . Boy, Pa could entertain us 'cause we had like a large family and of course we didn't, back then, have any electricity or running water or, just an old pot bellied stove. And that was our entertainment. Every night, every kid would gather around his rocker and say, 'Pa tell us a story, Pa tell us a story.' He didn't always tell us a story but when he lit his pipe up we knew we were going to get a story. He'd light his pipe up and then we'd get a story mostly about Indian legend and lore.

For Karl and others, family was the critical venue to transmit values and cultural knowledge. People learned about being Indian and how to live life properly through regular interactions with their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives in the community. Indeed, the power of these intergenerational family networks was the reason why the federal government sought to break up Indian families. Through federal Department of Housing and Urban Development grants in the 1970s and beyond, extended families were precluded from living together in single family homes. Describing the recent impact of 'HUD homes' on his reservation, Samuel (Forest County) notes that the federal government has

a specific vision of the family that doesn't fit with our patterns – single family homes. If I have someone stay more than two days in my home, I have to call HUD or they can evict me. You don't see people living with their extended families in a few rooms. There is less sharing of traditions.

As a corollary to prioritizing family, a number of Potawatomi described respect for elders as another critical value. This respect included taking care of and providing for their physical and material needs, as well as listening to their accumulated wisdom and experiences. Karl (Gun Lake) explains:

One of the things that we're doing is we're taking care of our elders, as much as we can. . . . And that's just our, one little way that we want to try to help our elders . . . I'm sure that philosophy's the same everywhere [among Native American tribes] that our elders are the most important resource that we have and we certainly respect and care for them as best we can.

Similarly, in explaining the importance of restoring the 'old ways', Paige (Hannahville) states that this means re-centring traditions in

daily life, including offering tobacco each morning, re-learning the language, and extending more respect to community elders. 'They should be represented on every committee. Plus, the council and people in the community should seek the advice of elders on what to do and how it should be done.'

Much like with homelands, there is also a broader sense of family that transcends specific Potawatomi bands and reservations, particularly at the annual Gathering of the Nation.¹⁰ Ryan (Pokagon) explained:

You just get this huge feeling of being proud when you go over to those Gatherings. And you start noticing the similarities between all of us. . . . And when those gatherings come together and everybody comes together, you realize that strength that's there, man. It's real.

He and his friend Tom (Pokagon) elaborated:

Ryan: They just welcome you in man. People would let you into their own homes. They give anything to you during those times of the gathering. And if you ever see them again, it's like . . .

Tom: [Interjecting] Family.

Ryan: [Nodding in agreement] It's like family. It's like making your family bigger and happier and stronger just by going and traveling and spending four or five days with people.

The pervasive feeling of family within and between the Potawatomi bands is a critical aspect of how they see themselves as people.

Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians are also constantly engaged in cultural action and envision their groups' cultural styles as distinct from those of mainstream US. Culture matters in the process of racial identity formation because it affords people a toolkit for organizing their lives. 'Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct "strategies of action"' (Swidler 1986, p. 273). Culture does not automatically provide values and behaviours, but supplies a 'toolkit' from which actors can devise 'strategies of action'. Thus, the differences in cultural styles to which our Mexican American and Potawatomi respondents continually refer are critically important because the 'tools' of beliefs, rituals, languages, stories, and daily practices populate one's 'toolkit'.

Linguistic fluency is one such significant dimension in organizing the worldview for Mexican American and Potawatomi people. Language provides tools for communication and knowledge as well as teaching specific ways of being. Competence in a hegemonic

language is a mark of social distinction (Bourdieu 1991). Therefore, linguistic fluency is a key element in one's racial 'cultural toolkit'. On this dimension, Potawatomi and Mexican Americans confront vastly different circumstances. A regular influx of Mexican immigrants and proximity to a stronghold of Spanish speakers allow for Spanish language skills to be regularly renewed. By contrast, according to a 1996 national language survey, there were fewer than fifty-five remaining fluent, first language speakers of Potawatomi. As such, Potawatomi communities are constantly working to both learn and document the language. Despite these very real and significant differences, the two groups place a similar rhetorical emphasis on language in describing the cultural dimension of the symbolic group boundaries.

Sergio Diaz, who is conversant in Spanish, notes how the language is a way to connect to one's roots:

I know my Spanish is lousy, but you feel comfortable knowing that if you're speaking to someone else that speaks Spanish there is a different type of communication. It's not just like on an English level. There's a different way of communication, where you feel – I guess you could say – your roots.

Gustavo Vasconcelos sounds like many other parents for whom Spanish language skills are critical to cultural knowledge and ethnic pride: 'We want our kids to take pride in who they are, to speak Spanish. We want to make sure we expose our kids to mariachis, different kinds of foods, their grandparents. ...'

Culture is central to defining who the Potawatomi are as people and how they are different from other Americans. Perhaps the most important element in Potawatomi culture is the language. 'The language is the core of who we are. Without that we'd just be like the rest of society', explains Paige (Hannahville). Kevin (Hannahville) similarly illustrates this point as he describes his copy of a Potawatomi census roll from the early twentieth century. He states:

When you look at these rolls, you can't just read from here to here [he gestures from the English name, age, and relationship columns]. It all begins over here with the Indian name. This is where the real information is. You have to understand the language at least a bit to know what these names mean. For example, look at this first one – Charles Keshick. What does that mean, 'Keshick'? It means 'blue sky'. What else? When the word ends with either a k or a q, it means 'everyone' or 'all the people'. To understand the stories, you have to understand the names.

However, because many people grow up outside of the reservation communities and also because of the massive cultural disruption caused by boarding schools,¹¹ a large number of people know little about Potawatomi history. Cultural celebrations such as powwows, ceremonies, and the annual Gathering are ideal opportunities to teach people about Potawatomi history. Andrew (Forest County) notes the importance of history at the Gathering. 'It lets us teach our children and pass on teachings that are two or three thousand years old. Plus, some of the bands are still learning about what it means to be Potawatomi. The Gathering is a good time to share these things.'

Mexican Americans and Potawatomi use the rhetoric of roots, values, and cultural toolkit to describe their way of group life and to draw positive distinctions from the dominant culture. Speaking the language of 'us' versus 'them' allows group members to delineate dichotomous boundaries around issues such as roots (homeland, lineage, community), values (importance of extended family, fictive kin, and more leisurely lifestyle), and cultural toolkit (language, food, traditions, beliefs). Using specific themes to mark symbolic boundaries, both Mexican Americans and Potawatomi re-invest their racial groups with a pride and dignity that they are not normally accorded. By resisting the 'taken-for-grantedness' of the racial hierarchy and the attendant dominant white culture, these racial minority groups use a different, values- and tradition-based yardstick with which to measure their social worth.

Discussion

Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians invoke roots, values, and cultural toolkit to describe their traditions and to account for their racial groups' social worth.¹² With the rise of institutional racism making prejudice and discrimination more complicated to identify and resist than in the era of legally sanctioned oppression, both Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians must alter their tactics of resistance. Thus, they strategically emphasize *subjective values* in defining what is traditional, sufficient to validate authenticity claims, and superior to mainstream culture. This can be understood as prioritizing *how* you are rather than *who* you are as a member of the racial collective in contemporary articulations of authenticity.

Emphasizing roots, values, and cultural toolkit through the rhetoric of tradition serves as both a valorization and a critique. Privileging particular traditions celebrates the practices of racial group members while simultaneously critiquing what is perceived as lacking in mainstream culture. With the mainstream's preoccupation with money, work, and the market, racial groups are flipping the cultural script to define themselves as fundamentally different from non-group

members and, indeed, more connected with the things that really matter: histories, homelands, families, respect, and languages. As Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, 'Collective identities . . . provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories' (Appiah 1998, p. 99).

The discourse of 'tradition' is significant in contesting diffuse institutional racism because it contains an important historical dimension. As Hobsbawm (1983) notes, tradition succeeds as a tool of social construction because it implies continuity by making reference to the past. Because tradition provides an element of timelessness and connection it makes the claims of marginalized racial groups seem less 'made up' and more valid. At the same time, our argument recognizes that the Mexican American and Native American symbolic boundaries and conceptions of what qualifies as traditional described here are dynamic and change over time. This dynamism in understandings of authenticity is a necessary element in responding to the ongoing challenges of being marginalized in a highly durable racial hierarchy.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, we also recognize that the ways Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians envision symbolic boundaries impact the negotiation of in-group identity and membership. Alejandro Portes (Portes and Landolt 1996; Portes 1998; Portes and Mooney 2002) describes how the construction of collective ties can yield deleterious outcomes. The expectations that accompany symbolic boundaries and group membership can result in unanticipated and negative consequences, particularly the pressure to conform to an essentialized vision of the community. Within communities, racial gatekeepers occupy structural positions which enable them to permit or proscribe particular ways of being, thinking, or doing group membership (Barrera 1991; Ochoa 2004). Racial gatekeepers apply pressure to 'be' a particular kind of racialized person, obscuring the vast diversity within any racial group, as well as policing the behaviour of others and encouraging them to 'stick to one's own'. Since race and racial traditions are socially constructed there are a variety of ways to live out or 'do' racial identity work. Our research acknowledges the importance of avoiding the intellectual trap of essentialism and homogenizing tendencies. Ironically, though, it was useful for our minority respondents to do exactly that – envision 'mainstream US culture' as monolithic and totalizing – so that they had a uniform image against which to contrast themselves for the benefit of re-valuation and group esteem.

Minority group values are created in rhetorical opposition to mainstream values in order to positively distinguish minority group culture and rearticulate a historically marginalized identity. Moral discourse is a particular strategy deployed at a specific historical

moment for disadvantaged populations to maintain a sense of self-worth and dignity. By grounding their collective identity and dignity in a particular moral order, groups subordinated because of race, class, or gender can reposition themselves above others (Lamont 2000). Nazli Kibria (2002, pp. 150, 158) found that her second-generation Chinese and Korean American informants regularly made comparisons between Asian values and those of American society and culture:

In this case the comparisons were points of contrast rather than similarity.... Informants used model minority notions of Asian culture to distance themselves from *American*. ... Asian Americans were *not* the unhyphenated Americans, lacking a strong or clear sense of ethnic roots.

As we similarly demonstrate, Mexican Americans and Potawatomi Indians contest their status in the US racial hierarchy. By reframing their self-perceptions – which may in turn help revise public conceptions of their racial groups – Mexican Americans and Potawatomi are reconstituting ‘cognitive and moral maps that orient ... actor[s]’ (Bleich 2003, p. 26). What likely began as a defensive or aggressive move against racial subjugation and low status in the US racial hierarchy, these minority groups are using the discourse of racial authenticity as a specific strategy to articulate symbolic boundaries, boost their group esteem, and contest the contemporary reality of institutionalized racism.

Notes

1. The authors contributed equally to this article and are listed in alphabetical order.
2. For examples of how this process of cultural innovation works, consider Benedict Anderson’s (1991) description of how the nation emerged as an innovative system of cultural order during a period of upheaval in the eighteenth century when major religions and the dynastic realm were in decline. Arlie Hochschild (1983) similarly demonstrates how the rise of the service economy and the growing corporate use of guile since the mid-twentieth century have led people to value spontaneity and sincere feelings in interactions.
3. ‘A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated’ (Goffman 1973, p. 75).
4. The term ‘invented’ should not be read as meaning that racial traditions are false or made up. Rather, we use the concept to demonstrate how groups dynamically, if selectively, articulate the past and present (Clifford 2001).
5. While this article holds to these analytic distinctions, it is noteworthy that respondents’ definitions of ‘roots,’ ‘values,’ and ‘cultural toolkits’ often overlap.
6. In the discussion section we point out the danger of suggesting that cultures are monolithic and homogeneous. The ‘essentialist trap’ is a hazard people confront as they construct and reify images of the ‘authentic’ and implicitly, if not explicitly, suggest this as the standard to which group members must conform. Intra-group tensions can result as

racial group members vie to demonstrate their 'authentic' status on the basis of language fluency, cultural competency, skin colour, class status, clothing, and behaviour.

7. It is reasonable to question to what extent the Potawatomi Indians are representative of what happens more generally for Native Americans. Over the last two centuries, the Potawatomi have negotiated treaties, forcibly ceded their land, attended boarding schools, adopted Indian Reorganization Act constitutions, and served in the armed forces. The bands have expanded the programmes offered to members, worked to revitalize the language, pursued economic development opportunities, and planned for the future. The picture here is that the Potawatomi are embedded in the same socio-political milieu as other Native Americans living in the United States. However, the specific responses across Native nations, as well as between the constituent bands, often differ based on their own histories and experiences.

8. The chief difference between our comparison groups in contemporary times is the fact that Mexicans continue to immigrate to and settle in the US. Additionally, the population of Mexican-origin people exceeds that of Native Americans.

9. This term comes from a speech Patricia Hill Collins gave at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA in August 2005.

10. The first Gathering of the Potawatomi Nation was held at Wasauksing First Nation at Parry Island, Ontario, Canada in 1994. Currently the Gatherings last approximately four days and feature an all-bands Council meeting, cultural workshops, powwows, feasts, giveaways, and athletic competitions. Each year a different Potawatomi band hosts the Gathering and welcomes members of the other bands to its reservation.

11. Beginning in the late nineteenth century the American government came to rely on boarding schools, most often run by religious missionaries, as a tool to assimilate and 'civilize' Native Americans. Native students were separated from their communities and prevented from speaking their own languages or following their own religious beliefs. They were compelled to immerse themselves in American culture, Christianity, and commerce at the schools, while also changing their names, hairstyles, and clothing. For more on the troubling legacy of boarding schools see Adams (1997) and Lomawaima (1995).

12. Again, we acknowledge that there are divergences in how our respondents elaborate certain dimensions of roots, values, and cultural toolkit. For example, unlike the Potawatomi, Mexican Americans frequently emphasized their work ethic. We assume they highlighted this feature as a reaction to contemporary debates over immigration, demonstrating that they are responsible, dependable, wage-earning workers and a necessary part of the US economy.¹ While not entirely outdated, in earlier eras, concrete elements of tradition such as blood, phenotype, and generation reigned as factors in defining authentic racial identities (Garroette 2001).

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