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Perceived indicators of American Indian identity in everyday interaction: navigating settler-colonial erasure

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ABSTRACT

A primary process in settler colonial societies is erasure of Indigenous presence. We employ a symbolic interactionist approach, embedded in macro-level critical analysis, to explore the conveyance and interpretation of American Indian identity in everyday interaction in the settler colonial society of the United States. We surveyed 213 White American participants, asking them to write about indicators they utilize to determine American Indian identity, and 104 American Indian participants, asking them to write about experiences associated with conveying and others interpreting their American Indian identities. Our findings reveal similarities and differences between White and American Indian perspectives associated with three types of indicators: perceived phenotypical, perceived cultural, and verbal. We find that racialized phenotypical perceptions of American Indian identity contribute to misidentification and invisibility of American Indian people. Cultural stereotypes also contribute to invisibility. We situate these findings in dominant U.S. culture and structures rooted in settler colonial processes.

In *Teen Vogue*, Rebecca Nagle (2018) quotes teenager Peyton Boyd, citizen of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians: "It really hurts when I realize everyone assumes that I'm not Native." Such invisibility is rooted in settler colonial processes of elimination and erasure.

When colonists settle on land that is already inhabited and strive to eliminate and replace the original inhabitants, this is called settler colonialism (e.g.

McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020; Wolfe 2006). Further, to legitimate settler colonial land possession and power, settler colonial societies erase contemporary Indigenous Peoples. Processes of elimination and erasure include genocide, displacement, containment, not recognizing Indigenous Nation sovereignty, individual land allotment, assimilation, racialization, and omission of representations (e.g. McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020; O'Brien 2010; Rohrer 2016; Wolfe 2006). The settler colonial project in the United States has generated, propagated, and enforced conceptions of American Indian[1] (AI) identity that obscure and usurp AI Nation sovereignty and facilitate colonial power and land possession (e.g. McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020). As a result, as we will explain in our discussion section, various settler colonial processes fuel invisibility and misidentification of AI persons.

Presently, there are many different criteria used to determine AI identity, including genetic markers, lineage, kinship ties, phenotype, cultural practices, AI community involvement, self-identification, and whatever criteria is specified by AI Nations. Various scholars have explicated problems associated with many of these criteria, including threats to the sovereignty of AI Nations (e.g. Garroutte 2003; Krouse 1999; McKay 2021; Robertson 2013; Sturm 2010; Tallbear 2013).

Identity conveyance and interpretation

Goffman (1959) posited that people simultaneously seek information about those they interact with and engage in presentations of self to influence others' impressions of themselves. He added that people interpret both intentional and unintentional behaviours in their assessments of others. A central concern for people is whether others will accept or discredit their presentations of self.

More specifically focused on social identities, West and Fenstermaker (1995) argued that class, gender, and racial identities are ongoing situational interactional accomplishments requiring a correspondence between actions and recognition by others. Snow and Anderson (1987) defined "identity work" as activities people engage in to generate, maintain, and present their identities in a manner consistent with their self-concepts. These activities include the use of props, settings, selective association, verbal assertions, and arrangement of physical appearance. Burke (1991) suggested that people continuously adjust their actions to maintain congruency between self-perceptions of their identity and others' feedback on their identity. But, sometimes, repeated or severe interruptions to the process of maintaining this congruency occur.

It is important to situate micro-level (i.e. face-to-face) interactions in a macro-level social context (i.e. in the context of societal and global patterns). Moving beyond the micro-level, Goffman (1959) noted that the presentation

of self is affected by societal understandings learned during the socialization process. Stryker, Serpe, and Hunt (2005), explaining a structural symbolic interactionist approach, argued that macro and meso-level (i.e. formal organizations and communities) social structures influence identity-related social psychological processes.

Some researchers have combined symbolic interactionism and critical macro-level approaches to analyse conveyance of racial or ethnic identity (Khanna and Johnson 2010; Killian and Johnson 2006; Lewis 2004). Based on findings from a study of three elementary schools, Lewis (2004) argued that U.S. culture and structure affect racial identification and categorization in everyday social interaction. Besides physical features, which Lewis found to be primary, criteria employed to assess race included name, language, cultural signifiers (e.g. dress), and geographic location. Khanna and Johnson (2010) interviewed 40 Black–White biracial Americans, and determined that they made efforts to assert their preferred identities, but were constrained by phenotype and the race and ethnicity of their social networks. Participants in this study used the following strategies to convey their preferred race: verbal identification and dis-identification, selective concealment or revelation, selective association, manipulation of phenotype, and the highlighting or downplaying of cultural symbols (e.g. dress and language).

American Indian identity conveyance and interpretation

We define racial groups as socially constructed categories based on perceived phenotypical differences and ethnic groups as socially constructed categories based on perceived cultural differences. Yet, as evidenced by some of the research findings discussed above, sometimes people perceive cultural indicators as evidence of racial group membership and phenotypical indicators as evidence of ethnic group membership. Importantly, the concept of race is rooted in, and undergirds, processes and structures of racial stratification (Omi and Winant 1986).

McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard (2020) assert that it is critical to utilize the framework of settler colonialism when considering racism faced by AI persons. Prior to colonization, there was no such thing as "American Indian" (racial) identity, as AI Peoples were considered members of political bodies that settler colonists referred to as "tribes." Part of the settler colonial process in the U.S. involved racialization of AI Peoples. The settler colonial government wrested control of AI identity from AI tribal Nations, with the goal of minimizing the number of AI people and acquiring land. In the present period, settler colonial policies and practices continue to affect the expression and interpretation of AI identity (e.g. McKay 2021; Tallbear 2013).

Two researchers combined a micro-level symbolic interactionist approach with macro-level critical analysis to examine AI identity. Fitzgerald (2007)

studied a small sample of participants from Missouri who previously did not identify as AI and now do. Fitzgerald found that many of these participants intentionally signified their AI identity by having long hair, displaying political messages in support of AI Peoples, and wearing items perceived to indicate AI identity (often silver and turquoise southwestern AI jewelry even when their AI ancestry was not from the southwest).

Jacobs (2015) observed that AI people in northeastern Ohio struggled to be recognized as AI, as darker AI people were often misclassified as other persons of colour and lighter AI people faced dismissal of their assertions of AI identity. Jacobs (2019) noted that some AI people internalized problematic essentialist beliefs about AI identity that are derived from dominant U.S. culture, while others strategically drew on these beliefs to be recognized as AI.

Campbell and Troyer (2007, 2011) demonstrated that AI Peoples are more apt than other "racial groups" to experience misclassification, and suggested that this misclassification is chronic. Further, they revealed that AI people who are misclassified face greater rates of mental health problems. They argued that this is the case because identity is important to groups that face oppression and interaction is improved when interactants validate others' key identities.

Two scholars found that several indicators are used to convey and interpret AI identity in everyday interactions in U.S. society. First, their AI participants reported that the phenotypical features of tan or brown skin, straight black hair, dark brown eyes, and high cheekbones are perceived as indicators of AI identity (Garroutte 2003; Jacobs 2015, 2019). Second, Garroutte's (2003) AI participants noted that AI cultural practices can affect recognition of AI identity. Yet, these participants observed that they often have to convey homogenous stereotypes of past AI cultural practices to be recognized as AI by non-AI Americans; and contemporary AI cultural practices are often deemed inauthentic or not perceived as AI.

Lastly, verbal statements could be used and interpreted to indicate AI identity. Yet, some people who identify as AI have neither valid evidence of AI lineage nor association with AI Nations (e.g. Garroutte 2003; Jacobs 2020).

The present study

Like the scholarship cited above, we examine perceptions of AI identity in everyday interaction, but we begin by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of White American participants. Our first research question is: What indicators do White Americans utilize to determine whether persons they are interacting with are AI? Next, we turn to AI participants to answer our second research question: How do AI experiences and perspectives relate to the indicators White Americans use? More generally,

we employ a micro-level symbolic interactionist approach, embedded in macro-level critical analysis, to explore the phenomenon of conveying and interpreting AI identity in everyday interaction between AI and White Americans. By posing survey questions about this matter to White and AI people from across the U.S., we hoped to learn what indicators White Americans commonly draw on to determine AI identity. We also hoped to understand how use of these indicators affect whether AI people are perceived as AI, as well as the degree to which AI people utilize these indicators to convey their AI identities. After presenting our findings, we situate them in a macro-level settler colonial context.

Method

Participants

Data for this study came from two online questionnaires, one completed by 213 White American participants and another by 104 AI participants. Qualtrics offered our questionnaire to participants who met our demographic criteria, and further screening within the questionnaire automatically removed those who did not meet participant criteria. As a result, all participants were 18–50 years old, identified as AI or as only White, lived their entire life (excluding military service) in the U.S., lived the longest in and resided in states other than Alaska and Hawaii, correctly replied to the attention check, and met character count requirements. Further, we removed participants who replied to open-ended questions in a problematic manner (e.g. typed in random characters).

AI participants were automatically removed from this study if they indicated that they were not enrolled in a federally recognized tribe and manually removed if the tribe they named as their own was not federally recognized. The participants are collectively enrolled in 38 AI Nations and reside in 33 states; 49 per cent lived on reservations for part (but only 17% most) of their lives (see SOM Appendix Tables 1 and 2). See Table 1 for per cent AI residents in their communities. Seventy-two identify as only AI, while 32 identify as AI in combination with another race. See Table 2 for these details, as well as their age, gender, education level, and political beliefs.

White participants were automatically removed if they could not "recall, in detail, at least one time that [they] suspected, believed, or learned that a person [they] interacted with was an American Indian." They were drawn from two different samples: 102 resided and lived the longest in six states with higher percentages of AI people, and 111 resided and lived the longest in 33 other states (see SOM Appendix Table 1). Percentages of AI residents living in the White participants' communities and settings where they

Table 1. Per cent American Indian in participants' communities and setting where White participants learned of American Indian identity.

Type of Contact	Per cent for American Indians	Per cent for Whites from Higher Percentage American Indian States	Per cent for Whites from Lower Percentage American Indian States
Per cent Hour Drive from Reservation (or tribal lands)	66	83	46
TOWN/CITY – PER CENT AMERICAN INDIAN			
Mean American Indian-Only	8.9	4.6	0.5
Median American Indian-Only	1	2.7	0.3
Range American Indian-Only	0–97	0–33.9	0–2.5
Mean American Indian-Only Plus American Indian-Combined	12.1	7.9	1.4
Median American Indian-Only Plus American Indian-Combined	2.9	5.1	1.1
Range American Indian-Only Plus American Indian-Combined	0–97.4	0–44.7	0–12.1
SETTING WHERE LEARNED A PERSON WAS AMERICAN INDIAN			
Friendship	–	31	19
Work (Coworker)	–	27	23 (11)
School (Classmate)	–	27 (14)	26 (11)
Family	–	12	15
Setting Focused on American Indians	–	12	24

Note: We derived percentages in participants' towns/cities from the participants' zip codes (which they wrote on their survey), using the 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Nationally, the percentage of American Indian-alone is 0.9, while the percentage of those who identify as both American Indian-alone and at least one other race is 1.7.

learned a person was AI, appear in Table 1, while we report their age, gender, education level, and political beliefs in Table 2.

We limited our study to participants 18–50 years old since individuals in this age range will likely be around for decades to come and therefore the results are more apt to have lasting relevance. We excluded those who lived in nations other than the United States to ensure that our participants had a lifetime of experiences in this society, and we excluded people from Alaska and Hawaii due to differences in their conceptions of Indigenous identity. We limited our AI participants to those enrolled in federally recognized AI Nations because their AI identities are not legally in question.

We limited our non-AI sample to Whites because this race is dominant and thus has more impact shaping societal meanings associated with AI identity. Since Whites from states with higher percentages of AI residents are more likely to have interpersonal contact with AI people than Whites from lower

Table 2. Demographic data.

Demographic Characteristics	American Indian	Whites from Higher Percentage American Indian States	Whites from Lower Percentage American Indian States
AGE			
Range	18–50	18–50	18–50
Mean	33	36	35
Median	31	37	35
GENDER			
Man	32%	39%	30%
Woman	65%	61%	68%
Other	3%	0%	2%
EDUCATION LEVEL			
Range	less than high school to master's degree	less than high school to doctorate or professional degree	less than high school to doctorate or professional degree
Mean	slightly below some college or associate's degree	between some college or associate's degree and bachelor's degree	between some college or associate's degree and bachelor's degree
Median	some college or associate's degree	some college or associate's degree	bachelor's degree
POLITICAL BELIEFS			
Mean	moderate-leaning-slightly liberal	moderate-leaning-slightly liberal	moderate-leaning-slightly liberal
Median	moderate	moderate	moderate
"RACIAL" IDENTIFICATION			
White-Only		102	111
American Indian-Only	72		
American Indian & White	25		
American Indian & Latinx	5		
American Indian & Black	3		
American Indian & Asian	1		
American Indian & Arab	1		

percentage states, and this contact may impact perceptions of AI identity indicators, we secured two geographically distinct samples of Whites.

Procedures and materials

After completing the consent form, all participants answered demographic questions, followed by open-ended questions. Next, participants answered close-ended questions that inquired about the degree of contact they had with AI people, and AI participants answered closed-ended questions about their AI identity.

White participants began the open-ended section of the survey by reading directions that encouraged them to be thoughtful and detailed, explained that

people assess others' identities via verbal and non-verbal cues (accompanied by an example focused on occupation), and defined the term "American Indian." White participants then responded to two open-ended questions. The first read,

> Please recall a memorable or recent time you suspected, believed, or learned that a person you interacted with was American Indian. (a) First, describe this interaction. (b) Second, fully explain all of the indicators that led you to believe that this person was American Indian.

The second read, "Please thoroughly describe all of the verbal and non-verbal indicators that would lead you *in the future* to suspect, believe, or recognize that someone is American Indian." This survey took participants a median of 15 minutes.

The survey for AI participants included 12 open-ended questions, and took a median of 19 minutes. These questions focused on: ways non-AI persons can tell participants are AI; verbal and non-verbal, intentional and unintentional ways participants convey their AI identity to non-AI people; reactions of non-AI people to revelation of this identity; degree to which participants wish non-AI persons know they are AI; reasons participants wish non-AI people to know they are AI; concealment of AI identity; and experiences with misidentification.

Data analysis

The first author used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to inductively code answers to the open-ended questions. She began by familiarizing herself with participant answers, then systemically recorded all codes related to conveying and interpreting AI identity. Next, she reviewed all codes, which resulted in combining codes into themes with sub-themes. The first author then calculated the percentage of participants who articulated each theme and sub-theme. Then, she reviewed common themes, refined them, named them, and generated a framework (i.e. a thematic map) that brought together related themes. The first author then created a process and codebook (composed of the common themes), for the second author to use when coding, in a deductive manner, 20 per cent of randomly selected participant answers from all three samples. For the White samples Cohen's Kappa was 0.91 (96.4%) and for the AI sample 0.91 (96.3%). Lastly, the first author worked with the third author to determine how to interpret, contextualize, and frame these themes. This study meets all fifteen criteria (where applicable) for "good thematic analysis" as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

We begin this section by presenting findings about our AI participants' perceptions of their AI identity, and then we describe the most common

indicators of AI identity discussed by both White and AI participants. The findings reported below are themes mentioned by at least 10 per cent of White participants in either or both samples and by at least 5 per cent of the AI sample. We lowered the bar for AI participants because this was a single sample and they were required to reply to more open-ended questions, potentially constraining their answers due to fatigue. We use the abbreviations of H (for "highest") to refer to White participants from the six states with higher percentages of AI residents and L (for "lower") to refer to White participants from the other states.

Others' knowledge of participants' AI identities

AI identity is very important to the vast majority of our AI participants. Thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority want most or all people to be aware of their AI identity. Further, only 8 per cent ever wished non-AI people did not perceive them as AI. About a third of AI participants are often identified as AI without intentional identity work, while the others must engage in identity work to be perceived as AI. Yet, inclusive of their intentional identity work, AI participants reported that most people are aware of their AI identities. Further, most of the people who are aware of the participants' AI identities are non-AI. Inclusive of intentional identity work, the majority of participants seem satisfied with who is aware of their AI identities. Nevertheless, a substantial minority (35%) indicated that there were times when they wished non-AI people knew they were AI when they did not know. Further, when we asked participants if they ever concealed their AI identity from non-AI persons, 14 per cent indicated that they had done so. Statistical data on the findings presented in this section appear in Table 3.

Perceived indicators of AI identity

In this section, we discuss the three types of indicators of AI identity mentioned by our participants: perceived racial, perceived cultural, and verbal. As we present these findings, we compare White and AI participant perspectives. A table displaying these findings appears in SOM Appendix Table 3.

Perceived racial indicators

The vast majority of White participants perceive AI identity through the lens of race, meaning that they use visible phenotypical characteristics to determine AI identity (78% H; 79% L). The majority use skin colour (66% H; 60% L), which they most often described as "darker," "dark," "tan" or "brown." Hair colour was also a common criterion (42% H; 44% L), most often described as "dark" or "black," as was facial features (45% H; 42% L), which participants

Table 3. American Indian participants' identity perspectives and experiences.

Perspectives and Experiences	American Indian Sample
IMPORTANCE OF AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY TO SELF	
Very	80%
Somewhat	15%
Little	4%
Not	1%
WHO WISH AWARE OF AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY	
Everyone whom have any contact with	42%
Those have occasional contact with	26%
Those have regular contact with	16%
Only those close to	8%
No one	8%
EVER WISH NOT PERCEIVED AS AMERICAN INDIAN	
Yes	8%
No	92%
NON-KNOWN OTHERS WHO CAN TELL AMERICAN INDIAN	
Almost everybody	9%
Majority	24%
Some	24%
Very few	23%
Almost nobody	21%
NON-KNOWN OTHERS CAN TELL AMERICAN INDIAN WITHOUT IDENTITY WORK	
Yes	29%
No	49%
No, but described at least one way others can tell	22%
PEOPLE WHO KNOW AMERICAN INDIAN	
Almost everybody have any contact with	34%
People have occasional contact with	30%
People regular contact with	19%
Only those close to	17%
PER CENT NON-INDIAN WHO KNOW AMERICAN INDIAN	
All	11%
Most	46%
Some	30%
Very few	11%
None	2%
SASTISFIED WITH WHO KNOWS AMERICAN INDIAN	
Yes	65%
No	35%
EVER CONCEALED AMERICAN INDIAN	
Yes	14%
No	86%

sometimes referred to with the general label of "facial features" and other times specified as cheek shape (14% L) and/or dark eye colour (16% H; 17% L). One White participant (H) mentioned these features:

> I could see Sam was Native right away by his dark black hair and darker tan skin. In my experience Native American males also seem to have more squared features … I would say dark black hair and tan skin are easy things to notice … Native Americans also tend to have darker shaded eye(s), from dark almond brown to black.

Some Whites from states with higher percentages of AI residents also perceived body shape as an indicator (14% H): "I don't have to guess if they are Native American … Sometimes you just know based on facial structure … There's also body structure … that can help clue people in."

In comparison, a smaller per cent of AI participants mentioned that non-AI people use phenotypical indicators to (attempt to) identify them (58%) as AI, including skin colour (34%), facial features (38%) (16% specified cheek bones and 5% eye colour), hair colour or texture (15%), and body shape (8%). Among those who directly or indirectly indicated that others could tell they are AI without intentional conveyance, 53 per cent indicated that this was due to their phenotypical features: 38 per cent due to facial features (17% specified cheekbones), 25 per cent due to skin colour, and 15 per cent due to hair colour and/or texture. One AI participant stated that some non-AI people can tell she is AI because of "body type" and "body shape." Another participant wrote, "I have some strong Native features … Usually most people just ask me because they think that I am. The shape of my nose and high cheek bones. Brown eyes. Dark hair. Tan skin."

In summary, although the vast majority of White participants indicated that they use phenotypical indicators to identify people as AI, only about one third of our AI participants are perceived as AI because of these indicators. In other words, while White Americans may perceive AI Peoples as a racial category, such perceptions are not accurate for many AI people.

In fact, our findings suggest that such perceptions are problematic. The vast majority (81%) of AI participants reported that others misidentify them. In particular, 51 per cent indicated that they are misidentified as Latinx (31% specified Mexican), 34 per cent as White, 16 per cent as Asian (5% specified Filipino), and a few as Black. As one AI participant expressed, "I have no choice but to display [my] tribal ID for non-Native Americans to view because I appear to be White." Another AI participant wrote:

> I usually get mistaken as a Mexican or Asian … I think it happens because people think Mexicans are Natives or Natives are Mexicans. We're both very similar but not exact. [S]ome of our features such as brown skin, high cheek bones, long hair, even get mistaken as Filipino or something.

Seven per cent indicated that living near high percentages of Latinx people contributes to others misidentifying them as Latinx. As one participant observed, "Most people believe I am Hispanic … I believe this happens because there is a large Hispanic community where I live."

Some AI participants were concerned about this misidentification, while others were not. Twenty per cent indicated that they wished other people knew they were AI so that they would not be misidentified, with 11 per cent specifically mentioning concern about misidentification as Latinx (5% as Mexican). Twelve per cent indicated concern about misidentification

because Latinx people experience prejudice and discrimination. Here a participant expressed concern about being identified as White:

> Everyone thinks I'm just white because I'm white-passing. It's very frustrating … People disregard my experiences as an Indigenous person, and I feel like I'm not allowed to speak on Native issues because of the fact that I pass for a White person.

Another participant articulated concern about being misidentified as Latinx:

> I always want Non-Indian people to know I am an American Indian [because] I'm affected by prejudice … and being treated meanly or rudely by Non-Indians who incorrectly label me as a Mexican American … [N]on-Native people … start to disparage Mexican Americans to us and we have to say "I'm an American Indian."

Perceived cultural indicators

Given the vast majority of our AI participants wish others to know their AI identities, but phenotypical characteristics do not accomplish this for many, it is not surprising that 49 per cent of AI participants indicated that they intentionally convey their AI identity in a non-verbal cultural manner. In fact, the vast majority of AI participants are at least somewhat involved in their AI Nation cultures (e.g. ceremonies, foods, beliefs, language, political involvement, cultural events): 29 per cent are very involved, 47 per cent somewhat involved, 18 per cent very little involved, and 6 per cent not at all involved. Yet, of the AI participants who intentionally convey their AI identity in a non-verbal cultural manner, only 59 per cent reported that these efforts are effective most or all of the time.

Despite this, most White participants indicated that they use non-verbal cultural indicators to identify people as AI. We do not know whether these participants perceive these cultural indicators as evidence of AI racial identity, pan-ethnic AI identity, or specific AI Nation ethnic or political identities.

A little more than a quarter of White participants used hairstyle to identify people as AI (26% H; 28% L), most often mentioning long hair and sometimes specifying men. For example, one participant (L) noted: "They … tend to have long hair (in my mind), and I would take notice to long 'pony tails,' and natural long hair … This would cause me to suspect (along with the skin colour) that somebody is an Indian." AI participants were less apt to perceive hairstyle was an indicator of AI identity (16%). Further, only 7 per cent of AI participants reported that people can tell they are AI for this reason, and only 6 per cent mentioned that they have long hair in order to convey their AI identity. One AI man explained, "I pull my hair out, because I have very long hair, and show … my pony tail. And, that's pretty much the signal that I [use] to tell people that I'm … Native American."

About half of the White participants (48% H; 53% L) perceive aspects of bodily adornment as indicators of AI identity. Most commonly this was clothing (40% H; 44% L), but sometimes jewelry (16% H; 18% L) or feathers (11% L). As one White participant put it (L), "They came up to me … with a feather in their hair … It led me to thinking they were an American Indian." Another White participant (H) wrote:

> My neighbor, who just move[d] in next door is Native American. I knew right away because … [s]he was wearing a dress with Native figures and it looked like it was handmade … The lady was [also] wearing a blue necklace which is very common on Native ladies … [O]ne of the main things that can let you know if someone is Native American … [is] you can see them from time to time wearing their clothes with Native designs or jewelry.

In contrast, only 26 per cent of AI participants mentioned adornment as an indicator of AI identity. Most often this was clothing (14%), jewelry (13%), and tattoos (11%). Of those who directly or indirectly indicated that some non-AI people (that they do not know) perceive them as AI when they do not intentionally convey their AI identity, 19 per cent indicated that their adornment triggered this perception and 13 per cent specifically mentioned their tattoos. As one AI participant related:

> I often wear "traditional" clothing, … [and] silver and turquoise jewelry that was made on reservations in Arizona. … I've been asked about my tribal heritage because of the tattoos I have that are always visible … My tattoos and attire are often the factors that lead people to ask or assume … .I got told I look the part often.

Thus, compared to White participants, AI participants are much less apt to perceive body adornment as signifiers of AI identity. More specifically, AI participants are much less likely to perceive their clothing as an indicator, do not mention feathers as an indicator, and are more apt to perceive their tattoos as an indicator.

White participants discussed some cultural indicators other than body adornment. The most common was manner of speaking (52% H; 37% L), and some specifically mentioned accent (28% H; 18% L) and being less talkative (10% H). As one White participant (L) articulated: "[S]ome of the things that makes me realize they are American Indian [are] some have an accent, … [s]ome have deeper and more blunt voices, [and] … [t]hey are usually quieter or more reserved. Usually people of few words[.]" AI participants were much less apt to mention manner of speaking as an indicator of AI identity (11%). Of those who indicated that non-AI people identify them as AI when they are not intentionally conveying this identity, 19 per cent indicated that this occurs because of their manner of speaking, and 11 per cent specified accent. For example, one participant mentioned that non-AI people recognize him as AI by the "rez accent" that he "tend[s] to use from

time to time." Thus, compared to the White samples, AI participants were less apt to perceive their manner of speech as an indicator of their AI identity, and they did not focus on AI Peoples being less talkative.

Other cultural indicators of AI identity mentioned by 10–20 per cent of at least one of the White samples were: speaking an AI language (17% H), names they associate with AI Peoples (12% H; 16% L), creating/selling/displaying arts and crafts (12% H; 10% L), particular body movement and/or mannerisms (10% L), connections to nature (10% L), and being recipients of tribal or U.S. government aid (12% H). Here White participants discussed the indicators of government aid, body mannerisms, connections to nature, and name: (a) "A big indication of them being Indian [is] many receive monthly aid and money for college." (H); (b) "I believe that the way to really tell if someone is Native American is to just really see their body language." (L); (c) "American Indians … are typically very connected with nature, so I would be led to believe someone is American Indian if they have a delicate relationship and care for nature." (L); and (d) "When I was in college, I met and became casual friends with another college student … I knew she was American Indian from her name and appearance … I would recognize someone is American Indian from their appearance or name." (H). Another participant (H) specified AI language as an indicator:

> In college I met a woman who was in one of my classes … [One thing that] led me to believe she was Native American … [is] she was on the phone speaking the Navajo language … It would … make me think they are Native American if I see them … speak in their tribal language.

Here a participant (H) described involvement in arts and crafts as an indicator:

> My Parents bought a cabin up in Flagstaff, Arizona … Every weekend they would have a farmer's market and the Native Americans would come and sell there jewelry, baskets and rugs … We knew that they were American Indian because they … liked to talk about how they would make the items they sell and how it was taught and passed on to each generation. They really had a craft for making these original and beautiful items. Making the baskets, rugs and jewelry was a big part of their American Indian culture.

Corresponding with these findings, 12 per cent of AI participants noted that non-AI people perceive them as AI when they (sometimes intentionally) speak their AI language:

> I communicate in a few different ways that I'm an American Indian, if they don't interpret it from my physical traits & mannerisms. I can sometimes say a few simple words or commands in my Native language, as I am very proficient in it and have taught it at the elementary school for a few years. After people hear my authentic dialect roll right off my tongue, they immediately know I'm an American Indian.

Similar to the findings for the White sample, 10 per cent of the AI sample indicated that non-AI people identify them by their (sometimes intentional) body movement mannerisms. As one participant expressed, "I intentionally communicate to non-Indian people that I am American Indian … by body language."

In contrast to the White sample, AI participants did not perceive their names, arts and crafts, connections to nature, or receiving aid as indicators of AI identity. Also, some AI participants uniquely highlighted different cultural indicators such as displaying AI-associated objects in personal locations (e.g. their homes) (8%) and AI IDs or license plates (9%). As one participant remarked, "My car has a Creek Tag, so that is a non-verbal confirmation of my nationality," and another commented, "[I]n my home I have a tapestry on my wall, … so that [is a way] people know I'm Native American."

A final cultural indicator mentioned by about a quarter of the White participants (23% H; 27% L) is settings associated with AI Peoples. In other words, these participants believe when the setting in which they encounter people is associated with AI Peoples (e.g. powwows, AI Nation casinos, AI arts booths/fairs, events featuring an AI speaker, and especially AI Nation reservations), this is an indicator of AI identity. Here a White participant (H) highlighted this indicator:

> My husband and I were driving through Browning, Montana … and stopped at a gas station … A man standing outside the gas station saw my dog and said he was pretty … I knew he was Native American because we were in Browning, which is on the Blackfeet Reservation … If I met [a] person on a reservation, I might assume they were Native American. I also might meet a Native American at a tribal event, such as a powwow or tribal meeting.

Relatedly, when asked to describe a time that they learned someone was AI, some White participants (12% H; 24% L) described encounters in situations they associated with AI Peoples: "[A] classmate … did a presentation on their American Indian heritage, so it was not an assumption [that they were American Indian]" (L). AI participants were much less apt to indicate that non-AI people identified them as AI based on such settings (5%).

Verbal indicators

Although it is not always possible or considered appropriate to share ones' identities in a verbal manner, verbal conveyance of AI identity is no doubt more clear than perceived phenotypical or cultural indicators. Thus, it is not surprising that there is substantial agreement between White and AI participants on the use of verbal indicators. The majority of White participants, especially those in low percentage AI states, indicated that AI Peoples engage in verbal conveyance of their AI identity (68% H; 80% L), and 86%

of AI participants reported that they intentionally conveyed their AI identity in a verbal manner.

More specifically, White participants mentioned the following verbal indicators: stating they were Native American or American Indian (34% H; 47% L), naming their tribe (11% H; 22% L), discussing their AI family, heritage or ancestry (15% H; 29% L), mentioning their reservation (18% H), revealing their personal involvement in AI life (e.g. attending a ceremony) (10% H; 10% L), and talking about AI culture more generally (28% H; 30% L). As one White participant explained:

> We were meeting a couple at the restaurant[.] [T]he woman in that couple, during the course of dinner, very straightforwardly, described herself as being a Mic Mac Indian … The woman was able to describe in some detail her family background as well as many cultural activities surrounding her heritage … I would recognize a person as American Indian if they told me they were verbally … If they verbally told me much of their culture I would likely recognize them as Indian as well. They could tell me of their Native food[.] They could discuss their family and cultural traditions. All would lead me to believe they are American Indian. (L)

Another participant reported:

> I have a friend that I went to Middle school and High School with … This night we met up at a bar with friends … I was pretty sure that my friend was an American Indian. But he did confirm it for me stating that he does go to the reservation and visit family. My friend also states that he goes to Pow-Wows to keep updated as to what is happening with the Tribe … [An indicator] would be that they state they are American Indians, much like a friend who stated that he is American Indian. (H)

AI participants mentioned these same verbal indicators, with the exception of revealing personal involvement in AI life. In comparison to White participants, AI participants were more apt to report identification via stating that they were Native American/American Indian (78%) and mentioning their tribal Nation (39%), and less apt to report identification via describing their AI culture (14%) and mentioning their reservation (6%). For example, one AI participant stated, "I … usually just say I am Native American. And then also what tribe I am a part of, which is Oneida."

Only AI participants emphasized verbal identification that involved: mentioning pride in being AI (8%), referencing enrolment in a tribal Nation (6%), educating others about AI Peoples (13%), and discussing bias against AI Peoples (9%). Illustrating revealing AI identity in association with pride, a participant stated, "I tell them I am Native American and take pride in my tribe." Demonstrating the mention of enrolment when revealing AI identity, another participant reported, "I tell them I'm American Indian registered in the Oglala Sioux tribe from South Dakota." Another participant asserted their AI identity in an educational manner: "We were discussing Native history in class and I

felt as if it wasn't being told correctly. I spoke up and mentioned being Native, and asked if I could relay our oral history." Lastly, a participant discussed how they revealed their AI identity via discussion of bias:

> I was explaining to a group of people how the $20 bill has the president, Andrew Jackson, who was responsible for the genocide of my ancestors. My grandmother was 4 years old when she arrived in Oklahoma from the Trail of Tears. I have some American Indian features, so [revelation of my identity] was not a surprise, but they were bothered about the racist tone that is memorialize[d] all across America.

Although there were no questions on our surveys that asked participants whether non-AI people inquired about AI identity, some participants mentioned this phenomenon. While 15 per cent of White participants in lower per cent AI states indicated that they had asked people if they were AI, 42 per cent of AI participants indicated that non-AI people had asked them. Here, a White participant (L) recalled an instance of inquiring about AI identity:

> I learned a person that I interacted [with] was American Indian when a new coworker started a new job at a company that I work at. When I met this person the first thing he said was his name. And I asked if it was American Indian and he said yes.

One AI participant explained:

> If I am not in a formal introduction, I don't usually bring it up, they do. Depending on how long our conversation goes on they will eventually ask if I am Native, or they bring up something Native to try to get me to talk about it so they can then ask about it (probably not supposed to lol in these answers but that one is definitely a lol for me).

In summary, White participants use a variety of verbal indicators to determine whether others are AI, and the vast majority of AI participants convey their identity in a verbal manner. Having said that, AI participants are more apt than White participants to report that: non-AI people inquire about their identity, they directly state the name of their AI Nation and that they are AI, and they accomplish other tasks (e.g. education) via verbal revelations.

Discussion

The goal of our research was to explore indicators White Americans utilize to determine whether others are AI, as well as issues that arise in micro-level interaction between AI and non-AI people regarding AI identity. AI identity is important to the vast majority of our AI participants; thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority want non-AI people to be aware of this identity. Yet, without engaging in identity work, most AI participants are not perceived

as AI. Having said that, AI participants report that most are aware of their AI identity, and thus it is clear that many engage in identity work. In the rest of this section, we summarize our main findings and make sense of them using a macro-level settler colonial framework.

The vast majority of our White participants use racial (i.e. perceived phenotypical) indicators to identify people as AI, and (similar to Jacobs 2019) our AI participants are generally aware others are using these indicators. Yet, only about a third of our AI participants are perceived as AI based on these indicators. Further, like Jacobs (2015), we found the vast majority of our AI participants are misidentified, most often as Latinx or White, because others are using racial indicators. Below, we discuss U.S. settler colonial policies and processes, many with the primary goal of elimination of AI Nations to facilitate land acquisition, that have contributed to the invisibility and misidentification discussed above.

First, policies and processes, including genocide and limited access to resources necessary to survival, have decreased the percentage of AI persons. In addition, many AI Peoples were forcibly removed from their lands and concentrated on small reservations. Along with this, favourable immigration policies for Europeans increased the percentage of White persons. These policies and processes resulted in a low percentage of AI people living amongst a high percentage of White people. More recently, a substantial and rising percentage of Latinx people, many of whom have Indigenous ancestry, reside in the United States. The much higher percentages of White and Latinx people, relative to the percentage of AI people, likely reduces consideration of the possibility that others may be AI and increases perceptions that others are White or Latinx.

A second set of U.S. settler colonial policies that have contributed to invisibility and misidentification of AI people involve racialization of AI identity (McKay 2021; Rodriguez-Lonebear 2021). This includes blood quantum requirements for recognition and defining AI identity as racial on the census. Given widespread racialization of AI identity in U.S. society, non-AI persons are likely socialized to believe that AI Peoples are a racial group, thus prompting them to use phenotypical indicators to determine AI identity.

Once U.S. society racialized AI Peoples, other settler colonial policies and processes contributed to reproductive mixing, which made phenotypical identification even less valid. Some of these policies put AI people into closer contact with non-AI people, which enabled the development of intimate relationships as well as sexual assault. These policies include non-recognition and termination of AI Nations that resulted in no reservation land, creation of small reservations (often on land that does not enable sustenance) encircled by non-AI lands, and relocation of AI Peoples from reservations to U.S. cities. Further, explicit assimilation policies have facilitated reproductive

mixing because cultural similarity (e.g. in regard to language, religion, etc.) increases the chance of intimate relationships.

Lastly, many U.S. settler colonial policies have eliminated and diminished AI Nation sovereignty, reducing AI Nation control over AI identities. These policies include genocide, termination, and the Dawes Act allotment policy that resulted in major loss of reservation land. Worsening this situation, the education and media institutions do little to inform the non-AI public about AI Nation sovereignty, including AI Nations' conceptions of AI identities. It is in this macro-level context, that many AI individuals must engage in identity work in order to be recognized.

Thus (aligned with the findings of Fitzgerald 2007), it is not surprising that about half of our AI participants attempt to convey their AI identities via non-verbal cultural (i.e. ethnic) signifiers, although these signifiers are not always interpreted by non-AI people as indicators of AI identity. Our White participants use a variety of cultural indicators to determine AI identity. Some AI participants utilize the cultural signifiers identified by our White participants, but most AI participants do not use these signifiers. Our AI participants are less apt than our White participants to mention that people can tell they are AI based on their hairstyle, clothing, manner of speaking, and settings associated with AI Peoples. And, contrary to White participants' expectations, people cannot identify our AI participants based on feathers, names, arts and crafts, connections to nature, or government aid.

Conveyance and interpretation of AI identity via non-verbal cultural indicators is not inherently a problem. But, some of our White participants expect to see stereotypical signifiers that are rarely or never employed by our AI participants, and some AI participants do not use any non-verbal cultural signifiers or use them only in particular settings. Further, non-AI people use some of the same cultural signifiers (e.g. wear jewelry associated with AI Peoples). When Whites expect AI people to "wear their cultures on their sleeves," or expect AI people to convey a stereotypical version of AI cultures, many AI people remain invisible to them.

The source of White non-recognition of non-stereotypical AI cultural indicators, and White expectations that they will see stereotypical cultural indicators, is rooted in several macro-level phenomena. First, settler colonial assimilationist policies prohibited AI people from practicing their cultures, thus rendering many AI people more similar to the dominant U.S. culture. These policies included forcing AI children to attend boarding schools, banning AI spiritual practices, and enabling non-AI adoption of AI children. Second, due to settler colonial policies that forced most AI Peoples into particular geographic regions, many non-AI people have little interpersonal contact with AI people due to segregation (e.g. Lichter et al. 2007; Wilkes 2003). This lack of interpersonal contact reduces the possibility that non-AI people will recognize signifiers of contemporary AI cultures. Third, due to

settler colonial practices of rendering AI people invisible in representations in media and education, except via stereotypical representations of the past, many non-AI people have little exposure to representations of contemporary AI people (Davis-Delano et al. 2021; Fryberg and Eason 2017). Thus, most non-AI people know little about contemporary AI cultures. Given this context, at the micro-level, AI people who do not exhibit stereotypical cultural indicators will often not be recognized as AI unless they fit the racialized indicators or assert their identities in verbal form.

Verbal indicators of AI identity seem to be a clear-cut solution to the problems associated with the use of racial and cultural indicators. And thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority of AI participants convey their AI identities in this manner, and most White participants perceive verbal conveyance as an indicator. Nevertheless, verbal self-identification is not without problems. First, belief in stereotypical racial and cultural indicators are so ingrained that some of our AI participants are met with disbelief or challenges after they verbally identified (Davis-Delano et al., Forthcoming). Second, it is problematic when those with little-to-no AI ancestry *and* no AI Nation citizenship or connections verbally assert AI identity (e.g. Jacobs 2020; McKay 2021).[2] This phenomenon, which seems to be relatively common, is rooted in belief that infinitesimal amounts of Indigenous genetic ancestry evidence AI identity (e.g. Leroux 2019; Tallbear 2013) and perhaps a desire to be associated with (ostensibly) positive stereotypes of AI Peoples.

There are multiple macro-level social forces that give rise to the latter problem. First, the dominant U.S. ideology of individualism undergirds the premise that it is individuals, rather than social collectivities, that (should or do) determine identities. This ideology is likely one of the main reasons that AI Nation control of AI identities is often not understood and respected. Second, the White-controlled media and education institutions often legitimate problematic individual claims to AI identities, and rarely help the non-AI public understand the nature of AI Nation sovereignty and the role AI Nations play in determining AI Nation citizenship. In this context, it is not surprising that some AI people are concerned that non-AI people often recognize as AI those with little-to-no AI ancestry in combination with little-to-no connections to AI Nations (e.g. Jacobs 2020; McKay 2021).

One of our goals was to situate micro-level conveyance and interpretation of AI identity in macro-level social context, and we did so through the framework of settler colonialism. Overall, we argue that past and present-day U.S. settler colonial policies, practices, and representations contribute to erasure of AI Peoples (O'Brien 2010; Rohrer 2016; Wolfe 2006), obscure the political nature of AI identities, and generate and propagate perceptions of AI identity that are racialized, associated with cultural stereotypes, and based on self-identification (e.g. Garroutte 2003; Krouse 1999; McKay 2021; Robertson 2013; Sturm 2010; Tallbear 2013). More narrowly, omission of representations

of contemporary AI Nations and people in the White-controlled media and education institutions likely contributes to widespread non-AI ignorance of AI people in their midst. And, stereotypical representations of AI people from the past in these institutions likely fuel non-AI assumptions that contemporary AI Peoples do not exist or resemble these stereotypes (Davis-Delano et al. 2021). Collectively considered, many different aspects of settler colonialism in U.S. society negatively impact the nature and success of identity work by AI people.

AI Nations should be able to control official definitions and shape public perceptions of AI identity. Although limited by the settler colonial context, including U.S. federal laws and policies, AI Nations have struggled to regain control over AI identity. In some cases, this involves rejection of racialized settler colonial discourses that focus primarily on per cent ancestry (Rodriguez-Lonebear 2021). Yet, many non-AI people are ill-informed about AI Nation sovereignty (Conner, Fryar, and Johnson 2017) and AI Nation citizenship policies and practices.

To reduce the problems discussed above, U.S. society must remove barriers to AI Nation sovereignty (e.g. Davis-Delano et al. 2020). Further, it is necessary for the U.S. media and education institutions to eliminate stereotypes of AI Peoples and greatly increase the quantity of accurate information about and portrayals of contemporary AI Nations and Peoples. Doing so will enable more accurate non-AI interpretations of AI identity, and thus reduce challenges AI people face when they engage in identity work.

Like all research projects, our study has limitations. For example, our samples are not representative of AI or White Americans. Written replies do not allow for follow-up questions to enhance clarity and detail, which is a strength of interview studies. Our inability to actually observe the interactions described by our participants required that we rely on our participants' reports about their experiences and interpretations.

In the future, researchers could use closed-ended survey questions with representative samples to determine the frequency of our findings in society. When doing so, scholars could explore factors that might be associated with non-AI use of particular indicators (e.g. close relationships with AI people and consumption of AI-generated media texts). Experimental researchers could explore whether interventions that involve the provision of information about AI Nation sovereignty, identity, phenotypical variance, and the like can be used to reduce the use of problematic indicators.

Conclusion

U.S. settler colonialism obscures the political nature of AI identities and fuels conceptions of AI identity that are individualistic, racialized, and stereotypical.

Racialized perceptions of AI identity contribute to invisibility and misidentification of AI people. Stereotypes associated with AI identity also contribute to invisibility for the many AI people who do not evidence stereotypical cultural signifiers. And, reliance on verbal self-identification runs the risk of enabling individualistic, rather than AI Nation, conceptions of AI identity. It is unfortunate that the U.S. media and education institutions continue to render contemporary AI Nations and people invisible and misunderstood (Davis-Delano et al. 2021; Fryberg and Eason 2017). It is hopeful that organizations like IllumiNative and the American Indian Journalists Association are working to address these problems.

Notes

1. In this paper, we use the term American Indian because in the U.S. it is associated with recognition of AI Nation sovereignty.
2. Mentioning AI ancestry is different from assertions of AI identity (Jacobs 2020).

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