

## Democracy's College Podcast

### Episode 42: The Multiple and Nuanced Ways Universities Perpetuate Settler Colonial Aims of Erasure for Indigenous Students

**Sal Nudo:**

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P through 20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In this episode, OCCRL Director Eboni Zamani-Gallaher talks with Dr. Heather Shotton about the multiple and nuanced ways that universities perpetuate settler colonial aims of eraser for Indigenous students. Dr. Shotton is an associate professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and the director of the Indigenous Education Initiatives at the University of Oklahoma.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

Thank you for joining us today on Democracy's College. Today, we have with us Dr. Heather Shotton. She is an associate professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Oklahoma. There she also serves as the director for Native Education Initiatives. Heather has been a co-editor for a couple of books, one of which you *must* read: *Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education* by Stylist Publications, as well as a book entitled *Reclaiming Indigenous Research and Higher Education*, available with Rutgers University Press. She also has a forthcoming book with Robin Minthorn and Christine Nelson entitled *Indigenous Motherhood in the Academy*. Please welcome, today, Dr. Heather Shotton.

**Heather Shotton:**

Thanks for having me.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

Thanks so much for being with us. In looking at some of your works, one thing you have noted is that the attrition rate for American Indian students is higher than that of any other racial and ethnic group. Could you share with us some factors that you think would encourage persistence among American Indian collegians?

**Heather Shotton:**

Well, I think when we look at Indigenous students, both in higher education and in K-12 education, what we see is a disconnect between curriculum and between approaches to teaching and cultural values, cultural knowledge. We also see a number of socioeconomic factors, looking at issues of where our students are enrolling in schools, what the resources are for those schools. We understand a lot about, and a lot has been written about, the "failure of Indigenous students." But we haven't really talked



about the real issue, which is the failure of institutions in schools, in schooling systems, to Indigenous students.

A number of us have addressed and come to recognize that we have to recognize the strengths that Indigenous students bring, the incredible cultural knowledge that Indigenous students bring. And when we see institutions, again, whether it be K-12 or institutions of higher education that are grounded in ancestral knowledge, cultural pedagogies, one only has to look to our tribal colleges and universities to see what this looks like. When we have institutions that honor Indigenous people, Indigenous knowledge, then we see where Indigenous students thrive.

That centering of Indigenous knowledge and the cultural strengths of Indigenous students is critical. I think aspects of community and relationships with support systems, whether it be within institutions, within community and with family, all of those, I think, are important factors that contribute to persistence in graduation. And I think we have to re-examine the motivation of Indigenous students. So we have to stop looking at motivation in education as one that is purely grounded in capitalism and kind of neoliberal aims and that is centered on the individual. And think about what is motivating Indigenous students to go to college.

And oftentimes, over and over, we've found that it has to do with reciprocity and really framing it within native nation building. And so, if we understand *why* Indigenous students are going to college, and what it is that they're trying to get out of it, so that they can go back to their tribal communities and help to build up tribal nations, then I think that it helps us to better understand how we shape curriculum, how we support and serve native students, and how we interact with them in these spaces.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

You know, as you were talking about centering Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge, and then thinking about tribal colleges and universities as places where there is greater cultural congruence and fit, personal environment fit—what are some other holistic strategies, whether it be in a TCU environment or at a historically white institutional context, that can effectively address opportunity gaps for Indigenous learners?

**Heather Shotton:**

Well, I think that's just it: It's this looking at students as *whole* human beings and treating them as *whole* human beings. We see that, again, TCUs as a great example of being guided by cultural practices and cultural knowledge, Indigenous knowledge systems that really tends to the whole person. And I think in non-TCUs, or what Stephanie Waterman and Shelly Lowe and I like to call non-native colleges and universities, that we have to take our cues and look at what TCUs are doing well and how they're doing it well, how they're serving Indigenous students well. And think about how we actually think about the whole student rather than thinking about them as products and outcomes and measures—that we're thinking about their well-being.

I don't know how much we often consider how harmful our institutions are, and that a real fear that we have is that when Indigenous students come into our institutions, are we doing more harm than good? Yes, we want them to graduate, but we want them to leave *whole*, happy human beings who are *better* than when they came to us.

When I have the opportunity to meet my students when they graduate, when I meet their families, I often say, "Thank you for sharing your child with us." And my hope is that we return them to you in a better way and that we haven't recreated harm for them and that we have cared for them. And so I think framing that as our responsibilities to students and thinking about students and our responsibilities is relative. So how do we be a good relative to students? How are institutions good relatives? And in that framing, it necessitates our accountability to one another, our responsibility to those relationships and to the well-being of the people that we're in relationships with. So I think just thinking more holistically about the whole human, the whole person and framing it as how we're being good relatives to one another.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

Wow, that really resonates with me and, you know, I think that some of the literature as well around kinship networks and communities of color, where we have a collectivist culture in terms of our own cultural norms. I, too, have told parents of my students, "Thank you for sharing your son or daughter with me and allowing me to be an academic mom to their child" because they're all our children, right?

**Heather Shotton:**

Right.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

So, in your publication, "‘I Thought You’d Call Her White Feather’: Native Women and Racial Microaggressions in Doctoral Education," you share how there's this really unique and complex nature of racism that's experienced by native women, and particularly within academic contexts and when pursuing advanced graduate education. Can you share a little bit more about your findings? Because given that there's been so little examination around the subtle, as well as the more overt, forms of racial antipathy that's experienced by native women, the racialized microaggressions, microinsults and invalidations, let alone a full acknowledgement of systemic and structural inequities. Just curious if you would share with us some of your thoughts and your work with our audience as to the findings with that particular piece.

**Heather Shotton:**

So that piece was challenging because one of the things that I argue, and those who came long before me have argued, and it's the very basis of our understanding of sovereignty and the distinction, the unique place of Indigenous people and what Bryan Brayboy refers to as this liminal space that we occupy as both racialized and political people. And so it was difficult discussing these racial microaggressions because simultaneously they're also these settler aggressions—and I don't go into it in that particular piece—that there are settler aggressions, I think, that are also happening simultaneously.

And so that particular piece really deals with the racism that Indigenous women encounter in academia and those examples are based truly in racist ideologies around who Indigenous people are, based in beliefs of White supremacy. The other side of that is that there also what might, I think, more aptly be termed “settler aggressions,” because those can come from multiple populations that really, at the root, have issues of eraser as part of those aggressions.

But in this piece, I think what came out over and over is this really complicated space that Indigenous women encounter, not unlike other women of color, where how we communicate, how that's perceived, how that's immediately perceived as a threat or as aggressive, no matter how we're communicating that. Really, it's about *what* we're communicating and our very presence that is the threat in these spaces. It's this discrediting of knowledge, so these micro invalidations of, we can't possibly be experts of our own experiences or our own knowledge systems, right? Even when we're talking about issues of Indigenous communities or education or whatever it might be, that someone else often white men, know better than we do. So it's this very kind of paternalistic engagement where, again, there's no way we could possibly know better than someone else about our own experiences. And so, these microinvalidations that we experience.

The other piece I thought was really interesting, and what inspired the title for the article, was the way that Indigenous people and Indigenous women are made into these exotic objects that exist outside of consciousness, too. So the “I Thought You'd Call Her White Feather” actually came from an example from one of the women that came out of my dissertation study that what she described is she went to her chair, she was writing up her findings, and she had come up with pseudonyms for the people in her study. And they weren't your Eurocentric European names, I guess, and her chair says to her, “Oh, I thought you would have called them something like White Feather or Babbling Brook or something like that.” And the woman who was telling this story, she was like, “I don't know what kind of BS name she thought I was going to come up with.” But, I mean, her perception of *who* an Indigenous person is and what that is was so far off and this imposition of her idea of what that meant as more important than what this Indigenous woman wanted to do-

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

What she wanted to call her.

**Heather Shotton:**

Yeah and trying to disrupt that agency. But it was really like this kind of exotic stereotypical notion of who Indigenous women are, like this Disney *Pocahontas*, like all the “Colors of the Wind” kind of image that people think of when they think about Indigenous women, but it's really, really harmful. And we see that in so many ways that I think is beyond this particular conversation, but it's really, really harmful and damaging.

And I think, ultimately, taking away from that was kind of disrupted for these women, their experience, in this instance, graduate education. And that this was

in multiple spaces, spaces where there was a large Indigenous presence, spaces where they might've been the only Indigenous person. They might've been in their homelands, they might've been far away from home and this was just pervasive across different institutional types. And so, it's not contained to what we would normally think about, "Oh, racism only exist here."

And the other piece is that we often don't think about racism when it comes to native people. We often don't think about what that experience is and how Indigenous people uniquely experience racism.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** So, there are very few examples of American education that truly addresses and integrates American Indian sovereignty curriculum. We were just talking about that just a little bit in the response prior. But as tribal sovereignty calls for active cultivation of government to government relations, between schools and tribes, as well as there's the requirement of making sure that Native voices are in the curriculum content, can you share places or examples that you feel serve as models for promising practices? Not necessarily best practices, but some promising practices that others, particularly different states, could look to as case in points for how they should aspire to move in that direction?

**Heather Shotton:** There's two, I think, promising examples. One is in the state of Montana and the other is in the state of Washington. And this is particularly when we think about state-level curriculum and Montana's Indian Education for All I think was an initial example for many of us that other states have and are attempting to follow. Maybe not as effectively as what happened in Montana that actually has this requirement of in the curriculum, the statewide curriculum, that deals with the sovereignty and the history of Indigenous peoples of that place and of that state.

And Washington has a similar approach and actually provides really great resources. So, one of the things that we talk about is that it's one thing for states to mandate in curriculum standards that there has to be some inclusion of sovereignty education or Indigenous peoples. If you don't couple that with actual resources for educators, then what's the point? So you're setting up these standards-

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Unfunded mandates.

**Heather Shotton:** Yes! Unfunded and beyond funding, like, un-resourced.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Heather Shotton:** So, we expect educators to come to know and be familiar with, especially when we're talking about sovereignty, sovereignty is complex, it is particularly nuanced, and it's a whole area of law that people study. So when we're asking educators to not only to become familiar but to become somewhat expert enough to translate it into curriculum and into their teaching, we're asking a lot

if we're not providing them with adequate resources.

Then the other side of that is how many of our colleges of education are actually preparing teachers to tackle this? Washington is, I think, another great example where there's an entire website for the state, where they provide resources and curriculum examples. And especially when we're thinking about from K to 12, all these different standards, what you would teach a kindergartner about sovereignty and how you introduce that is very different, clearly, than what you would do with a 12th grader.

So I think that those are great examples, and then I think we see particular universities and colleges that are working to create cohorts of Indigenous teachers and educational leaders that are based in Indigenous knowledges—University of Oregon's a great example and other spaces. University of New Mexico has their NALE program and they're developing something similarly with Dr. Robin Minthorn at University of Washington at Tacoma. And so thinking about how we're preparing educational leaders and teachers to go into these spaces and address this.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** So that may actually couple up really nicely and provide some response to this next question that I'd wanted to ask about how educational leaders, as well as the faculty themselves, can really work and endeavor to advance decolonization of P-20 education?

**Heather Shotton:** Oh, it's so challenging. I mean, really, and it's challenging because to do that requires a disruption of privilege.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Yes.

**Heather Shotton:** So, when we're asking our colleagues and faculty and administrators in colleges of education to decolonize, or to even enter into this work with de-colonial aims, ultimately, we're asking them to willingly disrupt their power and privilege, and that's not an easy sell. Though, I think when we truly understand how that benefits all of us, and it's not just Indigenous people. When we approach things with decolonial aims, how that benefits communities and how we think about education, how we approach education, how we approach our work. And so I think it's important to acknowledge that first. Because again, we're asking people to willingly give up and disrupt power and privilege.

The other thing is asking our colleagues to really reflect and interrogate our systems. And how our systems are set up in teacher prep programs and educational leadership. When we think about how we even conceive of leadership, so how we think about educational leadership departments and programs, how we're preparing educational leaders. Even the concepts of leadership as this very hierarchical, really kind of colonial concept of what leadership means, as opposed to what we can learn from Indigenous concepts

of leadership and Indigenous framings of leadership. And how that is centered in the collective and community and how that benefits and work so much better. Indigenous societies and governments and knowledges have survived for millennia, so there's something to be learned from that.

So, I think really interrogating that and reflecting on how we even *define* our approaches and how we define leadership, how we define education and how we think of education as existing in this box. And not as wholly connected to all these other spaces into the whole human person and being.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** You are an activist scholar. And so as a scholar activist and leader, how do you mitigate burnout?

**Heather Shotton:** Oh.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** For those of us who, again, want to stay the course.

**Heather Shotton:** You know, I hear that question and I always feel like I am probably the *last* person to ask, like, "How do you mitigate burnout?"

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Because these are really weighty—right?—issues, grand challenges that are perennial and—

**Heather Shotton:** It's heavy.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Over time fatigue can set in.

**Heather Shotton:** Mm-hmm (affirmative). And it does and I think that that's a natural part. And if I said that I don't experience fatigue and I don't experience burnout, then that wouldn't be honest because I do. I try my best; I don't know that I'm always successful. But one of the ways that I do that is that I often refer to my sister scholars, my Indigenous sister scholars. That community and those relationships, that family, I think is really critical for *me* in these spaces because it's not just the, you know, yes, we write together, we think together, we push each other in our scholarship, but more importantly, we're accountable to one another. So that means that we celebrate together, we mourn together, we focus on nurturing those relationships because those relationships are really what sustain.

So when it's hard for one of us and you are surrounded by a community of sisters that can help to lift you up and pull you up when it's hard and when you're fatigued and when you're burned out and help you to see yourself, because sometimes I think those women see me better than I see myself, and they are able to see me in critical ways that I really need sometimes, especially in these spaces that constantly communicate to us that we don't belong here, we're not supposed to be here, we're not smart enough, our scholarship isn't *real* scholarship. All of those things that we take those assaults on a daily basis.

And so having those women around you and community members around you who really are able to see you and remind you and tell you that you're great and you're awesome and you're amazing when you don't feel so amazing. When I'm looking beat down and feeling beat down and dejected, for them to be able to say, "We see you."

And then I think that I'm really privileged to have a number of women outside of my Indigenous sister scholars that have become a part of that. What Leslie Gonzalez talks about—"our support squad." And then my family. I mean, I think that it's really easy in these spaces to get so focused on the work that I have to remind myself, "If everything that I'm doing is based in love and relationship, then I have to first and foremost honor that love and those relationships with my family." There's nothing like having two teenage daughters to keep you humble, right? And to make you laugh and to not take yourself too seriously. And so on the one hand, while everything that I'm doing is inspired by them and is for them and for everyone that will come after them, the other part of that is that they remind me about the importance of laughter and of love. In those spaces, I'm just Mom, and that's a great, great feeling.

So, yeah, I think family is really critical, and then also for me the other aspect is ceremony, maintaining and tending to my own spirituality and my own responsibilities and my family's responsibilities in ceremony. That's, I think, particularly as my spouse and I are getting older, though it still feels like in our communities we're still fairly young—I'm in my mid-forties, so we're not supposed to be at that stage yet, but it just is how it is. And we start, particularly my spouse, starts to take on more ceremonial responsibilities; that means that inevitably I take on more responsibilities with him.

And so being forced to shift how I think about where my responsibilities lie and that that also sustains me, and so it's all connected. Like *that* sustains how I am able to function in these spaces because those are things that are much older than any of these institutions, than any of these settler notions and logics that exist in these spaces that have existed and survived and that have a purpose in our lives. I think that those are the things that really kind of help me to mitigate those issues of burnout and fatigue and how I interact in these spaces.

**Zamani-Gallaher:**

So as we wrap up, is there a call to action you might have for educators and how they can advance equitable student outcomes for American Indian learners?

**Heather Shotton:**

Yeah, I think ultimately, honor Indigenous knowledge. Honor Indigenous knowledge, which also requires honoring our relationship to land and place, honoring sovereignty and self-determination of our tribal nations. And the critical knowledges and understandings of the world that we bring as valuable, which ultimately means honoring Indigenous people.

**Zamani-Gallaher:** Well, with that, I think that's a great note to end. Again, thank you so much, Dr. Heather Shotton, of the University of Oklahoma, associate professor. We appreciate you.

**Heather Shotton:** Thank you.

**Sal Nudo:** Tune in next month when OCCRL Director Eboni Zamani-Gallaher talks with Dr. Anne Edwards about college readiness in math and about curricular alignment. They'll also discuss issues related to placement and developmental mathematics courses, guided pathways, math pathways, and student participation in STEM. Dr. Edwards is a senior research associate and the director of learning and teaching at West Ed.

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