



## RADMILLA'S VOICE: Music Genre, Blood Quantum, and Belonging on the Navajo Nation

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Window Rock, Navajo Nation, Arizona, September 1997. A young woman butchers a sheep as the crowd at the Navajo Nation Fairgrounds watches. Her hair tied back in a *tsiyéél*, a woman's hair bun, she wears a velvet top, silver concho belt, long satin skirt, and leather moccasins—the markers of traditional Navajo femininity. As she expertly slits the sheep's throat to begin the arduous process of dissecting the animal, her skirt remains spotless: Not a drop of blood touches it.

Sheep butchering, a traditional Navajo art of subsistence, constitutes the first part of the Navajo Nation's annual Miss Navajo pageant. The second is singing, and the same young woman—Radmilla Cody—performs a traditional “skip dance” song in the Navajo language. But something makes her performance different. As Radmilla's voice carries across the fairground, she adds melismas, or vocal flourishes, note glides, and a bluesy inflection to the more nasal sound of traditional skip dance songs, which are typically sung by men (McAllester 1954). Onlookers cock their heads to listen more closely, and they hear for the first time the singer who will become known as the “Navajo Whitney Houston.”<sup>1</sup> The crowd responds ecstatically; Radmilla, a twenty-one-year-old from Grand Falls, Navajo Nation, is publicly crowned the forty-sixth Miss Navajo Nation, 1997–1998.

When I introduced myself in Navajo to Radmilla in 2011 at a CD signing (for I had long been a fan of her music), she seemed amused to hear an Anglo,



Figure 1. Sheep butchering, Miss Navajo contestants, September 2012. (Image from “Celebrating Leandra Thomas, the 2012–2013 Miss Navajo Nation,” by Sunnie Clahchischiligi, *Indian Country Today Media Network.com*, September 29, 2012)

a *bilagáana*,<sup>2</sup> speaking her language. She joked that we try performing some skip dance songs together in a perhaps improbable duo—a white woman and she, a half-black, half-Navajo one, performing old Navajo standards. As she autographed a glossy poster for my friend’s nine-year-old niece, who is of mixed Navajo, Korean, and French descent, she wrote in flowing cursive: “Beautiful you are! Many blessings to you. Always remember that, and walk in beauty.”

Radmilla dramatically broke the mold in more ways than one. There was, most obviously, her distinctive, hybrid singing at the intersection of Navajo tradition and African American rhythm and blues; that style reflected Radmilla’s own mixed heritage: she was the child of a Navajo (*Tl’áashchí’i* clan)<sup>3</sup> mother and a *Naakai Lizhinii*, or African American, father. In the documentary *Hearing Radmilla* (2010), she recalled being singled out as a child living on the Navajo reservation for her African American appearance, being perceived as different from other Navajos. There was also the later denouement to Radmilla’s story, her arrest in 2003 for aiding an abusive, drug-selling boyfriend and her subsequent attempt to rehabilitate her public image as a good citizen of the Navajo tribe. Fully fluent in Navajo and a citizen of the Navajo Nation, she embodied a unique



Figure 2. Radmilla Cody, Miss Navajo Nation, 1997–1998. (Image from Miss Navajo Council, Inc. <http://www.missnavajocouncil.org/history/missnn/1997-1998.htm>)

story, and Radmilla's voice became a lightning rod for reflection and debate about the twenty-first-century politics of race,<sup>4</sup> blood, music genre, and belonging in Navajo country.

What, then, does Radmilla's story reveal about the relationship between sound, racial identity, and blood quantum on the Navajo Nation? And what, in particular, can be said about the role of the singing voice in the politics of indigeneity? In this article, I use two case studies to show the tensions still surrounding black-Native parentage in Native American communities such as the Navajo (or Diné)<sup>5</sup> and analyze reactions to Radmilla's voice as a partial reflection of larger racial stereotypes about blackness and criminality that permeate U.S. society. These ideas tie crucially into issues of tribal citizenship in Native North America in the era of casinos, where the affective and political stakes of belonging have been dramatically raised, and citizenship and enrollment have come to signify

more rigid demarcations between who belongs and who does not. Second, I demonstrate how sound itself becomes an “ethnic trope,” defined as symbols constructed as “allusions toward an ideal that has no living model” (Fast 2002, 23), where voice, musical genre, phenotype, and heritage-language skills index a speaker as more or less “authentically” Diné. Here, I distinguish sound from music, defining sound as a broader framework encompassing both music and language, which allows me to talk about the singing and speaking voice within a single frame. In Radmilla’s case, the supposedly black dimensions of both her phenotype and her traditional singing were used to single her out as less than fully Navajo. And, both in her crowning and in her run-in with the law, Radmilla’s identity as a celebrity gained what Daphne Patai (qtd. in Starn 2011, 123) has called “surplus visibility” about racial matters, “always put on the spot when controversy arises.”

Using my own fieldwork singing and playing with the Navajo country-western group, Native Country Band, as a counterpoint to Radmilla’s experience, I examine how individual and collective voices become marked by racial identities. On the one hand, her voice, perceived racial identity, and idiosyncratic singing style designated Radmilla as a cultural outsider. At the same time, in other contexts and because of her ability to broker generational differences in her choice of recorded material, her voice was celebrated as being quintessentially Navajo, securing her insider status as a Diné citizen. Bringing sound into conversations about blood, belonging, and indigeneity, I show how racial identities become marked and investigate the role played by voice in this marking. Music and language both reflect and reinforce ideas of inclusion, exclusion, and communal reckoning in contemporary Navajo communities and in U.S. society at large (Harkness 2010; Feld et al. 2004). My larger contention becomes, in the case of Radmilla, the Navajo Nation, and the U.S. nation, that aesthetics—and voice and sound in particular—matter in relation to politics, albeit often in divergent ways and on differing scales.

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There are four Navajo reservations, and the largest one spans parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The three satellite reservations of Tohajiilee,<sup>6</sup> Ramah, and Alamo, all located in central New Mexico, have their unique histories, dialects, and identities as Diné people living apart from the “big rez.” Yet the four reservations together comprise the political entity known as the Navajo Nation, and citizens of each reservation vote in Navajo national elections.

With more than 170,700 self-reported fluent Navajo speakers, the Navajo Nation has the largest number of Native-language speakers ([United States Census Bureau 2007](#)) of a single tribe within the continental United States. In the 2010 census, for example, there were 332,000 enrolled Navajos, 83.3 percent of whom self-reported as speaking their heritage language, Navajo or Diné Bizaad ([Henson 2008](#), 283–84). Thus, not all Navajos speak Navajo, and those who identify as Navajo include heritage-language speakers and non-heritage-language speakers. Further, mirroring Radmilla's own life, not all Diné people live on reservations, and the Navajo Nation is as internally diverse as the U.S. nation that surrounds it: Approximately two-thirds of Navajo residents live on one of four Navajo reservations, while the remaining third live in southwestern urban centers, elsewhere in the United States, or abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Like all federally recognized tribes, the Navajo Nation is also a sovereign Indian nation, with its own government, judicial system, tribal police force, council delegates, and tribal president.<sup>8</sup> The Navajo Nation exercises its sovereignty in myriad ways, for example, by negotiating water rights at the federal, state, and tribal levels; by taxing Navajo citizens (at 4 percent) for retail sales made on the reservations ([Associated Press 2012](#)); and by determining its own tribal membership. In fact, although a beauty contest might not seem like a conventional marker of nationhood, the Miss Navajo pageant is also a contemporary expression of Navajo sovereignty, and specifically reflects diplomatic relations between the Navajo Nation, the states with which the Navajo Nation shares overlapping jurisdiction (Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico), and the United States.

Yet the politics of tribal belonging are far from simple. The legal criteria used for contemporary tribal membership conflict, in fact, with other definitions Dine'é used and use to assay Navajo identity and tribal citizenship, and some scholars today (see [Dennison 2012](#)) see legal criteria such as blood quantum as a direct affront to tribal sovereignty and the future of indigenous polities.<sup>9</sup> Using a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB or CIB) card as proof of legal recognition as an Indian is a fairly recent phenomenon in Navajo and Indian Country. Significantly, this shift in the legal definition of Indian disregards historical and community-internal criteria—such as kinship (*k'é*), maternal clan, and number of years lived in a Navajo community—in determining indigenous belonging and social authenticity.

Radmilla herself comes from Leupp Chapter, in the reservation's southwest corner on the Arizona side. After finishing her studies at Coconino High School in Flagstaff, an off-reservation border town, Radmilla was encouraged to enter

the Miss Navajo contest by her maternal grandmother and her mother (Naylor 2006). Other federally and state recognized U.S. tribes also host similar hybrid beauty-culture pageants, open exclusively to their female citizens, including the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina and the White Mountain Apache Tribe of Arizona. In most cases, these Native pageants began in the 1950s and 1960s (Jenkins 2010; Schroder 2004).<sup>10</sup>

Unique to these pageants is their dual emphasis on both contemporary and traditional skills (including singing, food preparation, heritage-language abilities, and sheep butchering). Thus, successful contestants must demonstrate their knowledge of the global world around them but must also be deeply grounded in their respective cultural traditions; however, the latter might be defined by the pageant and the host tribe. More specifically, Miss Navajo “must exemplify the essence and characters of the Navajo deities First Woman, White Shell Woman and Changing Woman” (Cartwright n.d.).<sup>11</sup> The winner of the Miss Navajo pageant then becomes the official ambassador to the Navajo Tribe for one calendar year. Notably absent from these pageants is the archetypal category of traditional Western beauty competitions, the swimsuit contest.

But the Navajo pageant is by no means entirely different from its counterparts around the globe. Echoing the familiar gender politics of conventional contests, Miss Navajo contestants are expected to be single and “available.” As one Diné critic has noted, “Although Miss Navajo Nation embodies Navajo cultural values associated with ideal womanhood, we must also acknowledge that beauty pageants are rooted in white middle-class values that present femininity as values of chastity, morality, and virtue” (Denetdale 2006, 20). We can observe these values at play in the Miss Navajo pageant itself, which awards its runner-up trophies for Miss Congeniality and Miss Photogenic (Bitsoi 2011).

Radmilla’s mother, Margaret Cody, met her dad, Troy Davis, and had Radmilla when she was eighteen (Cartwright n.d.). Shortly after giving birth, Margaret moved to Georgia, leaving Radmilla to be raised by her maternal grandmother (her *másání*), Dorothy, in Grand Falls. Troy was a driver for a Ford dealership in Flagstaff, and had very little contact with his daughter as she grew up (Banks 2011). Radmilla attended Leupp Boarding School, a Bureau of Indian Affairs school on the reservation, and during her elementary school years lived without running water or electricity, two salient indices of rural reservation life. She was taught to herd sheep and weave, the latter an art form predominantly associated with Navajo women. At age seven, she also began attending a Christian church with her grandmother and began singing in the choir there. By junior



Figure 3. *Navajo Nation Fair Golden Anniversary Magazine, 1996 Commemorative Edition*. Note banner behind: “Traditional Queen” and “Modern Queen.” (Image from the website for the film *Teenage*, dir. Matt Wolf. “Miss Navajo,” posted by Kelly Rakowski, <http://www.teenagefilm.com/archives/tube-time/miss-navajo>, used with permission)

high, Radmilla had decided she wanted to be a professional singer; she met her uncle, the noted singer and composer Herman Cody, at a Miss Navajo engagement in 1997–1998, and they have been collaborating since then.

Because she was raised in the Navajo way (*Dinék'ehjí*), it was not until high school that Radmilla became more conscious of her African American identity, learning about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and gaining a black political consciousness as it related to her own identity (Gordy 2011). As she frequently notes in interviews, she has since often been asked to choose between these two identities. These larger cultural expectations specifically came to the fore in mandates about what a Miss Navajo should look and sound like, as well as in op-ed pieces in the main Navajo newspaper, the *Navajo Times*, and in press reviews of the pageant.<sup>12</sup> Radmilla has largely responded by refusing these mandates, insisting, like her late maternal grandmother, that *k'é*, or kinship, determines Navajo belonging and identity.

For example, building on her ability to successfully claim an audience, Radmilla is now on a linguistic mission to eradicate usage of the term *zhinii*, a form of Navajo slang referring to African Americans and an elided version of the term *Naakai Lizhinee* (Black Mexicans) from everyday parlance.<sup>13</sup> As she explained in Navajo to the elderly women sitting in the audience after a screening of *Hearing*





Figure 4. Radmilla Cody and her másání, the late Dorothy Cody, in 2006. (Image from Contreras 2010. Photo by John Running)

*Radmilla*, *zhinii* is a term that has brought a lot of hurt over the years, always singling her out and making her feel less Navajo and, ultimately, less human. Instead, she is calling for the introduction of the word *Nahilii*, a more descriptive and, to her ears, respectful term denoting African American peoples, which translates to “the black ones that came across, persevered and have become one.”<sup>14</sup> At the Chinle high school graduation on May 18, 2013, where she was a featured performer, Radmilla refused to self-identify in Navajo using the standard term *Naakai Łizhíinii*, introducing her four clans instead as: “*Tł’ááshchí’í nishkí* [I am of the red ochre on cheek people], *Nahilii báshíshchíín* [I am born for the African American people], *Naakai Dine’é dashicheii* [my maternal grandfather’s clan is Mexican] *dóó* [and] *Nahilii dashinálí* [my paternal grandfather’s clan is African American].”

#### **BLACK/NATIVE PARENTAGE: *K’é* and Blood Quantum**

Throughout Native North America, Indian-white and Indian-black parentage has been understood in dissimilar and contradictory terms (Brooks 2002; Miles and Holland 2006). While Navajo–African American relations date back to the



Spanish colonial period, these relations are today sometimes selectively depicted as a phenomenon of the past fifty years. As scholars of U.S. racial politics and the one-drop rule have shown (Sanjek and Gregory 1994; Starn 2011), whiteness is often depicted as a *tabula rasa*, while blackness becomes the marked racial category (Gillborn 2009; McIntosh 1990; Omi and Winant 1994; Sullivan 2006, 22). In other words, whiteness in relation to blackness is understood as a mere “absence of pigmentation,” with blackness—and black “blood” in particular—read as that which overdetermines one’s racial identity regardless of one’s total racial mixture (Roediger 2002, 326). Thus, within the logic of the one-drop rule, “it may take one drop of blood to make a black person, but it takes a lot of blood to make an Indian” (Arica Coleman in Schilling 2013, 1).

While Navajo citizenship is determined by a minimum blood quantum of one-quarter Navajo blood and having at least one enrolled parent on the 1940 Bureau of Indian Affairs base roll (Spruhan 2008, 5, 11), sometimes Diné citizens with mixed Navajo-black ancestry are expected to prove their Native identity in ways that so-called full-bloods, and those of Indian-Anglo mixture, are not. Indeed, this held true for Radmilla, as the legitimacy of previous Miss Navajo winners of Indian-Anglo parentage was not questioned to nearly the same extent as was Radmilla’s. Thus, while anthropologists understand race as a social construction and not a given, natural fact, perceptions of race and racial identities profoundly influence the day-to-day lives and sense of belonging for Navajo citizens. As Thomas Biolsi (2005, 400) has noted, “race is a *concrete* abstraction, and to be black in the United States, for example, is to live on the receiving end of the fiction of ‘race’ in deeply brutalizing ways. And, as scholars have only recently come to recognize, to be white is to inherit racial privilege in profoundly material ways.”

Determining the blood percentage of a given individual, Native or not, is only pseudo-scientific, measured based on ancestry, rather than by a DNA test or actual percentages of Indian blood. In the Navajo context, assessing blood quantum presents an additional challenge because it is determined in part by who is present at a child’s birth to sign the birth certificate. For example, a child’s degree of Indian blood is calculated based on lineal descent but relies on the birth certificate as the starting point to calculate a child’s blood quantum (Begay 2011, 21). This means that if a (Navajo) father is absent at the birth or chooses not to sign the birth certificate for any other reason, the child’s blood quantum will be calculated using only the mother’s Indian blood. Thus, “the child may legitimately be a full-blooded Navajo, but due to the father being absent, the child is consid-

ered one-half or less depending on the mother's blood quantum" (Begay 2011, 22). Additionally, Navajos have long intermarried with non-Navajos, and numerous Navajo clans—a matrilineal kinship system used to determine systems of obligation and reciprocity—are so-called adopted clans. These adopted Navajo clans include the Mexican People Clan (Naakai Dine'é), the Tewa Clan (Naashashí), that is, the Tewa-speaking peoples of New Mexico, the Mescalero Apache Clan (Naashgalí Dine'é), and the Chiricahua Apache Clan (Chíshí Dine'é). About fifty clans continue to be important in contemporary Navajo society (San Juan Heritage 2003), influencing everything from who a person can marry, to who one socializes with or calls "brother" or "sister,"<sup>15</sup> to the profession one chooses. Clans and the incorporation of non-Navajos into Navajo society also predate colonial forms of reckoning and belonging, which, importantly, based their criteria on *k'e* or kinship systems rather than blood quantum. Adopted clans thus are no longer considered separate and are subsumed under the Navajo clan system, losing their separate status as an indicator of an ethnic or racial group.

Further confounding these demarcations, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Navajo Tribe count these adopted clans as Navajo when it comes to issuing CIB or tribal ID cards to Navajo citizens.<sup>16</sup> For example, someone with three non-adopted Navajo clans and one adopted clan such as Naakai Dine'é is considered a full-blooded Navajo according to his or her CIB.

But debates about who belongs and who is authentically Navajo are not limited to Diné individuals with a lower blood quantum. Indeed, assessing citizenship, belonging, and policing identity are questions that citizens of many indigenous nations within and beyond the United States grapple with today (Beckett 1988; Dennison 2012; Perdue 2003; Povinelli 2002; Smith 1999; Sturm 2002, 2011).<sup>17</sup> In the U.S. context, the stakes of indigenous belonging have been raised particularly in the casino era (1979–present), where tribal citizenship can signal additional benefits such as per capita payments for casino-owning tribes and has caused some tribes to further restrict their enrollment criteria (Painter-Thorne 2010; Debenport 2011).

As a matrilineal society, clans and land in Navajo society are passed down through the mother's line. Using even the strictest criteria, a child whose first (the mother's) clan is Diné, as in Radmilla's case, is Navajo. As Theda Perdue and others have noted for the Cherokee and other matrilineal Native nations, these earlier forms of determining belonging and indigenous citizenship preceded the federal government's implementation of blood quantum (Perdue 2003; Kauanui 2008). Indeed, in the Cherokee and Navajo contexts, categories of cit-

izenship and belonging were more inclusive and allowed for affiliation based on cultural identity, community connection, and in-depth knowledge of cultural practices. Thus, although blood quantum can be traced to English common law as a method for determining inheritance and “long predates the question of mixed-race ancestry” (Spruhan 2006, 4), its specific legal application in determining legal recognition as an Indian and citizenship in a tribal nation dates only to the early 1900s (Spruhan 2006, 4, 39). Thus, blood quantum and kinship are irreconcilable when used together to assess Navajo identity and belonging for two reasons. First, because blood quantum is based less on one’s actual percentage of ancestral blood and more on what was or was not administratively (and often arbitrarily) recorded (LaRoque 2004; Spruhan 2006; TallBear 2003). Second, blood quantum does not determine how one is or is not socialized—linguistically, culturally and politically—into indigenous identity.

In Radmilla’s case, phenotype, blood quantum, kinship, and culture held a precarious balance, with some commentators arguing that phenotype was more important, while others, like Radmilla herself, arguing that culture trumped phenotype. By claiming her identity as a Diné woman, singer, and a former Miss Navajo, Radmilla shows how voice is a uniquely malleable form of expressive culture. At the same time, voice can become fixed and rigid when categories of race, blood quantum, and expectations about musical genre are superimposed onto it. Radmilla’s singing foregrounds tensions about how voice—the way we hear it, interpellate it, categorize it, project it—can stretch ideas of phenotype and, at the same time, show how vocal tone color, diction, and register can mark and calcify expectations about phenotype.

### SOUND AS A MARKER OF AUTHENTICITY

While blackness marks Navajo individuals such as Radmilla, sound, and music genre in particular, can also mark Diné identities. This is something I frequently witnessed during my fieldwork, where I studied the Navajo language and sang and played lap steel guitar with Navajo country-western bands. Even within the narrow confines of country music, the type of country (old or new) that a band such as Native Country Band played often determined our ability to get a gig on the reservation; it also influenced who would come and dance to our music. Most musicians in Navajo country-western bands are male,<sup>18</sup> as are most vocalists of traditional Navajo skip dance and round dance songs.<sup>19</sup> Since country is the hegemonic genre of popular music on the reservation, especially for those forty and older, branching outside of this musical genre, singing in public, and



Figure 5. Radmilla Cody singing “Spirit of a Woman” at Central Navajo Fair, Piñon, Arizona (Image from Patterson 2009. Photo by Donovan Quintero)

being a female performer can elicit surprised or shocked responses from older Dine’é in particular. Thus, music genre selection is understood as a performance of a Navajo cultural identity in its own right.

Musical genre also dictates the types of physical spaces, radio stations, and built environments (on the reservation versus off it; chapter house or outdoor parade versus a bar) where one performs, and thus music genre itself is understood as a performance of a Navajo cultural identity. For example, when seeking airtime on a reservation radio station, one highly skilled Navajo blues band, Chucki Begay and the Mother Earth Blues Band, learned from the radio announcer that it “didn’t sound Navajo enough,” and was refused airplay.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of my main band, Native Country Band, composed of four full-blooded Diné men born and raised on the Navajo reservation, questions of Navajo identity and belonging frequently undergirded casual conversation during band practice, particularly because of my non-Native identity. For example, because the name *Native Country Band* implies indigenous origins, early on in my fieldwork the bandleader suggested we tell audience members that I was a Lumbee Indian, as I had been living in North Carolina (where the Lumbee Tribe is located) and because, according to the bandleader, some Lumbee Indians “look white.”

At the same time, the drummer for Native Country Band, Miguel, was quick to note that he considered those with a lower blood quantum—he often referenced citizens of tribes “back east”—to be “less Indian,” exemplifying how some Navajo Nation and U.S. citizens put an asymmetrical emphasis on blood versus culture or other markers of identity. Descriptions of Radmilla’s voice also

mirror this polarization, couched as a distinction between a black blood essence (“soul”) and a Navajo cultural essence (“spirituality”). Radmilla herself, employing language that reflects the earlier anthropological debate regarding nature versus culture (Ortner 1974), links vocal tone color (timbre) to racial ideologies about voice. Speaking about her own voice, she notes that “the soul comes from the black side” and says that the “spiritual” side of songs springs from her Navajo side (qtd. in Contreras 2010). For the latter she cites her own ability to showcase the beauty and sound of the Navajo language, *Diné bizaad*. Similarly, her recording label, Canyon Records, in its most recent press release describes her voice as “soaring vocals that deliver both traditional and contemporary sounds with a hint of gospel and soul” (Rodgers 2011).

Such descriptions stem perhaps from how Radmilla collapses a tone color and a singing style indexing soul and rhythm and blues female vocalists—popular genres historically associated with African American singers—with a genre of male-dominated traditional Navajo songs.<sup>21</sup> In songs such as “Frybread Song” (*Precious Friends*, 2007), we can also hear the musical influence of her grandmother’s church choir and traces of a classically trained singing voice.

In her performances of “Ke’yah baa Hózhó” (“My Country ‘Tis of Thee”), “Chidi’ Nayiiniih” (“Buy a Vehicle”),<sup>22</sup> or the national anthem sung in Navajo,<sup>23</sup> we hear how these different styles undergird the expressivity and unique sound quality of Radmilla’s voice. In contrast to more typical performances of social dance songs, Radmilla employs a generous amount of vibrato (the signature sound of many opera singers and also used in slower soul, R & B, and pop ballads) and also glides between notes, as did her childhood musical idols, Whitney Houston and Diana Ross. Further, many social dance songs are typically performed in a nasal, compressed voice, described by some listeners as “a monotone, with almost no flourishes” (Contreras 2010). Radmilla employs less nasality than these male voices, and, as the cultural critic Felix Contreras (2010) notes, “Radmilla projects more and uses techniques like bending notes: common among blues, jazz and pop singers.” In contrast to other Navajo performers singing social dance songs in a traditional vein,<sup>24</sup> Radmilla also sings with a breathier style, punctuating the beginnings and endings of phrases with anticipatory in-breaths and slower, more audible exhales and releases. These breathing techniques have become part of the stylistic aesthetic of many R & B singers as well.

At the same time, Radmilla’s style also encompasses some of the most salient markers of the Navajo language. Navajo as a spoken language privileges the manipulation of wind or air (Witherspoon 1977, 30–31) through the correct use of

glottal stops (marked as ' in written Navajo) or, according to *Merriam-Webster* online, the “audible release of the airstream after complete closure of the glottis,” as heard in the English sounds “uh oh.” We can hear this in particular in her rendition of “Kéyah baa Hózhó,” where she sings expressively using uniquely Navajo phonetics such as the glottal stop and the alveolar or lateral *l*.<sup>25</sup>

A conscious attention to breath and air is also a prominent feature of artful country singing (Fox 2004a). We hear this most prominently in what Urban (1988, 389) calls “icons of crying,” or the simulation of crying within the frame of a song or a lament, where a vocalist “breaks” between her or his head and chest voice. A stylized manipulation of air is also heard in what Aaron Fox terms the “ravaged voice,” a pharyngealized singing style that the lead singer for our band, Tommy Bia, sometimes employed. This held especially true in songs that were affectively charged or, at the end of a long night, when his voice would start to give out from singing in a barroom clouded with cigarette smoke.

Yet many listeners identify Radmilla as a quintessentially Navajo singer precisely because of her singing style and how it reflects the complexity of contemporary Navajo experience. In her ability to reach multiple generations through a wide variety of musical genres and through her performances in English, Navadlish,<sup>26</sup> and Navajo, Radmilla’s choice of songs—social dance songs, patriotic songs, rap, and traditional songs composed by her uncle Herman—indexes the breadth of her Navajo and Native identity. Perhaps most important, Radmilla herself consistently identifies first as a Diné woman.

Descriptions of Radmilla’s voice by Canyon Records perpetuate the idea of Navajo cultural continuity while also marking and marketing her voice as “different” or “exceptional.” For example, even though her albums feature songs influenced by Western art music, gospel, country, hip hop, and rap, including the spoken-word performance of “Old School Shepherder’s Rap” (*Precious Friends*, 2007), Canyon Records describes the songs on her most recent album (*Shí Kéyah* or “My Land/Country,” 2011) as “sung in the traditional style of the Diné.” In her bio, the label also speaks of her as a “traditional Navajo recording artist.”<sup>27</sup>

### **RACE AND MUSICAL GENRE: Country Music and Whiteness**

While black musical styles are sometimes marked in and through Radmilla’s voice, other musical genres remain initially unmarked when performed by Navajo musicians, only to become re-marked when they become identifiably Navajo again. Take country music, what are locally referred to as “rez bands,” and how whiteness and Navajo identity intertwine. In an unsettling moment revealing the

impact of internalized racism and settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006) on Navajo senses of self and musical ability, Francine, a driver for the Crownpoint, New Mexico, dialysis clinic, mentioned to me she had heard me singing with Native Country Band on the local radio station. After announcing to those in the waiting room how much she liked my singing in the song “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” she lowered her voice and said confidentially, “I could *tell* it wasn’t a Navajo singing.”<sup>28</sup> When I asked her to explain, she said she just “knew” the vocalist had to be an Anglo because the voice sounded more professional and I did not sing with a “rez” or Navadlish accent.

What does this ascription mean, and what can we actually learn about racial identity through listening to voices on the radio? Francine was linking her perception of musical skill with sociophonetic ideologies of whiteness and upward mobility. Here, to tell someone they sound “white” is meant as a compliment. For Francine, who knew I was singing with a Navajo band and had been actively listening for us on the radio, my whiteness became correlated with a cultural capital, diction, and singing style that she associated with places beyond Crownpoint and the reservation.

My own role in the bands in which I played also factored into these and similar assessments. As an Anglo female lap steel player and vocalist, I auditioned for each of the bands I played with. Although the members of Native Country Band expressed some hesitation about the research portion of my band membership at the outset, my Anglo identity, my education level, and ability to play an instrument that few musicians on the reservation knew how to ultimately led them to include me as a full band member. In a strange twist, my membership in the band also gave it the cultural capital needed to help us get off-reservation gigs. From a marketing perspective, the contrast between four Navajo men and one Anglo woman in the band, a rarity in Native bands, became an informal branding strategy that marked our band and made our gigs memorable for many fans, even if merely to suggest new band names such as Native Country and *Bilaqáana* Band (Native Country and the White Girl Band). Yet the same things that made me a potential asset also at times made me a liability, particularly in off-reservation musical spaces where fans, bar owners, or managers might have been expecting an all-Native or all-Anglo band and felt invested in policing racial and cultural boundaries in fraught border-town environments. The unexpected (Deloria 2004) element of my membership in the band thus foregrounded not only others’ expectations for our band but also various audience and music-management investments in maintaining these expectations.



But Francine's comment may also reflect a dominant cultural and musical narrative, something we "tell ourselves about ourselves" (Geertz 1973, 448), that correlates whiteness with country music and blackness with genres like jazz, blues, and gospel (Roy 2004; Pecknold 2007; 2013). These correlations, which date back to the division between so-called race records and hillbilly records in the early 1920s, continue to affect our perceptions of music, race, and genre today.<sup>29</sup> In a provocatively titled article, "Why Does Country Music Sound White?" Geoff Mann (2008) shows how country singing styles have historically indexed primarily white, working-class identities. Many successful Native, African American, and Mexican American country singers notwithstanding,<sup>30</sup> Mann (2008, 75) attempts to denaturalize the supposed link between whiteness and country music, arguing that whiteness is not *reflected* in country music so much as it is consciously produced and reinstated by it through the entertainment industry and by early hillbilly records moguls targeting white audiences in particular (Jensen 1998; Pecknold 2007, 2013; Peterson 1997). This production of whiteness depended on thematic material, instrumentation, the consistent use of a southeastern U.S. dialect in singing, and the utilization of an instrumental and vocal "twang" (Fox 2004a; Samuels in Feld et al. 2004). Defined as "gliding a single vowel sound to give it two audibly distinct segments," twang is so consistently used in country performance as to have become a "virtually substitutable marker of 'country' and 'racial' identification" (Mann 2008, 79).

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In my own experience playing, teaching about, and singing country music in both Native and non-Native spaces, twang is also the element of country that elicits the strongest reaction from listeners, becoming an easy target for what people either love or hate about country music (Fox 2004b, 29–46; Samuels in Feld et al. 2004, 339). As Mann notes, tongue-in-cheek, about the cultural politics of race and musical genre in the United States: "There is little in contemporary American popular culture more 'obvious' than the 'colour' of music. We simply 'cannot fail to recognize'. . . the blackness of hip-hop or soul, the whiteness of heavy metal or country" (Mann 2008, 77–78).<sup>31</sup> The point is thus to inquire into "the American-born social grounds of racially attributable stylistic procedures," since the "perception of musical difference [has] grown so thoroughly racialized that music [has come] to epitomize racial differences generally" (Radano 2003, 8, 9). The racialization of musical genres stands in for perceived racial difference, marking its performers in limiting and sometimes stigmatizing ways (Radano and

Bohlman 2000, 8; Bigenho 2012, 21). This racialization is what Perea (2012, 9) refers to as “sound quantum,” or the racialized understandings of what counts as Native music, which relies in part on a performer’s blood quantum. Just as clean corollaries between identity and race need to be complicated and unpacked, so too do ideas of musical genre, race, and perceptions of social difference.

Less evident in discussions of race and musical genre is the long and deep history of Dine’é performing country music in reservation spaces, as evidenced in names like Garth Brooks Yazzie, George Strait Begay, Shelby Lynne Henry, and Shelby Lynne Arviso, all common Navajo surnames appended to the stage names of famous country vocalists. Because of its long history in Diné communities dating back to the 1930s, musicians and music fans in the Navajo Nation also frequently reference country music as a “traditional” genre of music (Jacobsen 2009), one that resonates deeply with rural Navajo lifestyles and ranching in particular. Such appellations of course complicate our ideas of tradition and its link to time depth and supposed Native authenticity. At the same time, they also point to another long-standing Navajo practice, that of ranching and rodeo competition (Downs 1972; Iverson 1994). In Navajo spaces, then, country singing indexes not only whiteness but also a generation-specific Navajo and even Indian identity.

In contrast to the sometimes stigmatizing responses to Radmilla and Chucki Begay singing supposedly black styles of music, Navajos singing allegedly white musical genres such as country do not elicit strong responses among the Diné citizenry. In fact, bands performing country music are considered fairly commonplace—there are currently more than fifty country bands active on the Navajo Nation—and unremarkable. Yet when musicians begin to sing in a thick rez accent, employ a monotone nasal singing style, or use older public address systems with low-fidelity speakers or no monitors, these bands re-mark their music as sounding explicitly Navajo. When choosing to perform in this older style, in a sound that explicitly indexes the first Navajo country bands of the 1950s, fans often approvingly comment that it sounds “Navajo,” “mono,” or “rez” again. Sounding Navajo and playing country correspond, but often only when country is played in a certain way and when a narrow canon of older country songs is performed. Country can be both white and Navajo, but these racial identities are specific to a generation.

Similar to the U.S. racial identities discussed earlier, white musical styles such as country are more easily subsumed into Indianness than are black musical styles such as hip hop, soul, and blues. Although Radmilla herself classifies her

music as Native American, those who listen to her, market her, and describe her music for the press consistently mark it as black first and Native American second. This parallels the description and understanding of black-Native parentage in American public culture. Just as “sounding Navajo” can be overdetermined in and through the performance of older country music, blackness becomes equally essentialized through its assumed links to musical genres and singing styles historically associated with African American performers but long since integrated into the domains of vocalists from various racial identities and expressive cultural worlds (Radano 2003, 8).

### CONCLUSION

On returning to the reservation from prison,<sup>32</sup> Radmilla once again met with trepidation and some anger, much of it stemming from the sense that she had not lived up to the role model responsibilities of a Miss Navajo and, by extension, of White Shell Woman, First Woman, and Changing Woman. Since then, she has largely been rehabilitated within the Navajo Nation: She is a recent Grammy nominee,<sup>33</sup> in addition to being a public figure, having an active recording career, and pursuing a master’s degree in sociology. She has also started a domestic-violence nonprofit for teenagers, the Life Is Beautiful Campaign, and stars in the recent documentary *Hearing Radmilla*.<sup>34</sup> Like many other national celebrities and politicians from Bill Clinton to Tiger Woods (see Starn 2011), Radmilla sought public forgiveness and in her case found redemption through her public activism, her singing, and her recording career.

As I have shown with both Radmilla and my own fieldwork, how we hear the singing and speaking voice is informed by deeper cultural expectations surrounding racial identity, gender, and differing assumptions about blood and sound as this relates to Navajo, African American, and Anglo identities. When voices do not match our expectations or when identity and musical genre appear not to align, we are challenged to broaden our understandings of self in relation to society and aesthetics in relation to politics. Radmilla’s voice does this work because of the aesthetic and cultural mixture it represents, but also because it is both socially inscribed and simultaneously inimitable, unique to one singer and one body.

As auditory creatures socialized into sound, we are uniquely vulnerable to sound and voice: including voice as part of our ethnographic inventory is essential not only because of how deeply and unconsciously we internalize sound but also because voices represent the meeting point between the individual and the social. If words are the “sign of the voice” (Frith 1988, 121), then voice and vocality are

“among the body’s first mechanisms of difference” (Feld et al. 2004, 341). Sonic differences carry social differences because sound is laden with value, socially embedded, and often inextricable from ideas of genre, nation, and identity.

Sound and voice matter to a politics of indigeneity because voice indexes identity almost instantaneously; through this process, voices cement and challenge our expectations for how Native peoples “sound” and signify their own varied attachments to being indigenous. Voices stretch and change our expectations of phenotype because, ultimately, we are more forgiving and open to experimentation in the world of aesthetics than we are in our cultural politics about race. Thus voices carry weight because “recognition” itself—at both the individual and tribal levels—is often on the line. Aesthetics and politics matter because they mutually inform how we hear sound and how we assess belonging to a given social body.

Fusing musical elements from Navajo traditional culture, Christian hymnody, and popular genres of music preferred by a younger generation of Navajos, Radmilla’s voice in many ways epitomizes and unifies contemporary Navajo experience, cultural influences, and listening practices. As Radmilla (qtd. in Cordova 2012) recently noted: “People forget that there are more similarities than differences. . . . They get caught up in trying to dissect and break things apart when it comes to race and culture, and they wind up separating people rather than bringing them together.” Building on this, she articulated a tenet of her own life philosophy to graduating seniors at the 2013 Chinle High School graduation ceremony: “When someone gets in your way or tries to put you down, bless them and move on.”

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, I examine race, sound, and belonging through an analysis of the first Navajo/African American Miss Navajo Nation, Radmilla Cody. Cody, a professional singer and a Navajo citizen, has been a polarizing public figure in Navajo communities since her crowning in 1997. Utilizing a mixed methodology of participant observation, sound recordings, and press releases, I probe how sound and voice inform a politics of indigeneity in today’s Navajo Nation (Diné Bikéyah). Focusing on black/ Native parentage and how sound serves as an additional form of marking, I foreground how voice, musical genre, and blood quantum inform public opinion about social authenticity and about who belongs as a Diné citizen. My larger contention becomes that both poetics and politics matter, albeit in differing ways and on divergent scales. [race; politics of indigeneity; sound; blood quantum; belonging; kinship; voice]*

## NOTES

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1. Chip Thomas, "On the Road with Miss Navajo Nation," *Ruminations* blog, May 27, 1998. [http://www.chipthomasphotography.com/ruminations/miss\\_navajo\\_97.htm](http://www.chipthomasphotography.com/ruminations/miss_navajo_97.htm).
2. This is the Navajo word for an Anglo or white person.
3. Red Ochre on Cheek clan.
4. The American Anthropological Association's Project Race states: "Physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them" (Smedley 1998). While I want to acknowledge that race is indeed a social construct, for the purposes of this article, I foreground what Biolsi has termed the "social fact" of race, or the way that race is assigned social meaning in its lived, everyday contexts (Biolsi 2005, 400).
5. Pronounced "Dineh." Diné is often the preferred ethnonym for the Navajo people, meaning "the people." Plural Dine'é, pronounced "Dineh-eh."
6. Formerly Cañoncito.
7. For example, the 2000 U.S. census reported Navajos living in every state of the union with the exception of Vermont, Rhode Island, and Delaware (Begay 2011, 29).
8. Currently Ben Shelly (president) and Rex Lee Jim (vice president), sworn in January 11, 2011.
9. Blood quantum means the percentage of Indian blood.
10. Miss Navajo, 1952; Miss Florida Seminole, 1957; Miss Lumbee, 1968; Miss White Mountain Apache, 1954.
11. In Navajo, these deities are *Altsé Asdzáá*, *Yoolgai Asdzáá* and *Asdzáá Nádleehi*, respectively.
12. See these letters to the editor in the *Navajo Times*: "Interracial Marriages Have Deep Ties" and "Sense of Identity," December 30, 1997; "What's Your Beef?!" January 22, 1998; "Superior Disgust," April 2, 1998; "Mothers Love Their Children, Who They Are," April 16, 1998.
13. For a view outlining the pros and cons of banning racial epitaphs, see Kennedy 2002.
14. In an e-mail from Radmilla (e-mail to author, March 1, 2011), she writes that "the new term that I now use for African Americans is Nahíłii which is broken down in the following way: Na (across), híł (dark, calmness, have overcome and persevered and we've come to like), ii (oneness)."
15. In the Navajo kinship system, if two people share the same maternal, or first, clan, they consider themselves brother or sister.
16. Officially called CDIB (Certificate Degree of Indian Blood) cards, in Navajo reservation discourse these cards are typically referred to as simply "CIBs."
17. For some of the more acrimonious debates regarding the policing of Native identity, consult Churchill 2001; Red Shirt 2002; Byrd 2007; Harjo 2007; and Bernstein 2013.
18. For example, out of about fifty actively performing bands on the Navajo reservation in 2011, I knew of five female musicians: three lead singers, one drummer, and one bass player.
19. These are songs comprising the public portion of Navajo ceremonies or so-called sings. As a whole, they are often referred to by McAllester 1954 and others as "social dance songs."

20. Charlene “Chucki” Begay, interview with the author, March 1, 2010, Gallup, New Mexico.
21. The term *rhythm and blues* (R & B) was attributed to the *Billboard* writer Jerry Wexler in 1947. By 1949, R & B replaced the *Billboard* chart category of “Race” records, or music that was marketed to a primarily African American audience (Scaruffi 2003).
22. To listen, visit Rhapsody, <http://www.rhapsody.com/artist/radmilla-cody/album/precious-friends/track/buy-a-vehicle> (accessed February 19, 2014).
23. To listen, visit YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NUj\\_w38FNM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NUj_w38FNM) (accessed February 19, 2014).
24. Well-known singers of this genre include Jay Begaye, the Tódí Néésh Zhéé Singers, the Navajo Nation Swingers, and the Chinle Valley Boys.
25. For a recording online, see Radmilla’s My Space page, <http://www.myspace.com/radmillacody/music/songs/keyah-baa-h-zh-my-country-tis-of-thee-46518311>.
26. This is the local term for a code-mixed version of Navajo and English.
27. See the Canyon Records website, <http://store.canyonrecords.com> (accessed June 13, 2013).
28. Francine Chishchillie, conversation with the author, October 10, 2010, Crownpoint, New Mexico.
29. The record industry used the names “race” and “hillbilly” to market their music to black and white audiences, respectively.
30. Examples include the performers Stoney Edwards (Cherokee Nation), Charley Pride, and Baldemar Huerta (aka Freddy Fender).
31. The internal quote is to Althusser (1971, 172).
32. At the risk of cementing a discourse I am critiquing, Radmilla was caught smuggling cocaine through Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, Arizona; she was convicted as an accomplice to a large international drug smuggling ring and, in January 2003, sentenced to twenty-one months in a federal prison (*Gallup Independent*, December 11, 2002). Radmilla would later assert that her longtime boyfriend, the drug kingpin David Dwight Bellamy, had habitually abused her and that, to avoid physical punishment, she had been commandeered into trafficking drugs as his accomplice.
33. She was a nominee in the 2013 “Regional Roots” category.
34. To watch the trailer for the film, please visit [vimeo.com/13113380](http://vimeo.com/13113380) (accessed February 19, 2014).

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