2014

Indian Play

Lisa K. Neuman

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INDIAN PLAY
Indian Play

INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES
AT BACONE COLLEGE

Lisa K. Neuman

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON
Dedicated to All Baconians,
Past, Present, and Future
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Preface

I engaged a variety of research techniques during my fieldwork in Oklahoma, which was conducted from January 1994 until December 1995. I personally interviewed forty-six former Baconians (most of them alumni). I also used telephone interviews and a written questionnaire to reach a larger number of alumni living out of state. In all, more than one hundred former Baconians participated in this project. While personal interviews provided strong data on feelings, identities, and the meanings of specific events, questionnaire responses tended to provide data on students’ motivations for attending Bacone, their favorite courses and teachers, and extracurricular activities in which they participated. Moreover, two years of participant observation while living in eastern Oklahoma and attending reunions and alumni events revealed the things that alumni and former teachers found to be most important about Bacone, and I discovered the enduring bonds that had formed among many former Baconians. Through time spent traveling around the state of Oklahoma, sometimes staying as the guest of Bacone alumni,
I was able to get a glimpse of their interactions within their own families and tribal communities and also observe their families’ impressions of Bacone.

I conducted primary archival research at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma; at the Philbrook Museum of Art and the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma; at the American Baptist Historical Society at the Samuel Colgate Historical Library in Rochester, New York; and at the American Baptist Historical Society Archives Center at the American Baptist Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania (materials from the last two sites are now located at the American Baptist Historical Society in Atlanta). This work gave me crucial access to official reports and correspondence, providing insight into the values, goals, and actions of Bacone’s administrators, local museum directors, and American Baptist leaders—things former students could not have been expected to know in any depth. In terms of the amount and variety of historical material available, I was lucky: there were plenty of newspaper accounts, letters, yearbooks, photographs, and reports that I could consult. Many of these were located in boxes and folders in a locked room in the basement of the Bacone College Library, referred to as the “Indian room.” The materials from the Indian room are now located in the American Indian Research Library at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Most important among these sources was the *Bacone Indian*, a biweekly student newspaper that began publication in 1928. The *Bacone Indian* showcased a large number of articles written by students, and the paper was a primary site where students articulated their ideas about what it meant to be Indian at school. The *Bacone Indian* was almost entirely student-run, and its content was largely student-produced, making it strikingly different from newspapers at some other Indian schools during this time where
school administrators censored student writings. Documents like the *Bacone Indian* helped to confirm the details of specific dates, places, and events far removed from the memories of alumni. Taken together, these various research strategies afforded me a much broader picture of life at Bacone than any single research method alone could have provided.

While I was interviewing them in the mid-1990s, Bacone alumni did clearly manifest some of the processes of cultural creativity that they had demonstrated while students. Indeed, I sensed that for some alumni, participating in my project was a way of emphasizing and rearticulating their present-day identities; and, from a methodological perspective, the meanings of students’ past experiences were often made clearer to me in the context of the present-day uses of identity that I often observed. Alumni often chose to emphasize fundamental connections between their present-day and past identities and experiences. For example, when some non-Native alumni playfully stated that they were not Indians but really “Sycamores” (the term used at Bacone for white students), or that they were members of the “Sycamore Tribe,” they were not simply emphasizing their present-day identities as “whites.” Instead, they were actually demonstrating for me exactly how, at Bacone, they and other students had negotiated the relationship between whiteness and Indianness by using forms of creative wordplay.

While in the field, I was frequently reminded of the often difficult and complex relationship between anthropologists and Native Americans, whose cultures have often formed the basis for ethnographic research but who have often been treated as objects of study rather than partners in scholarship. For example, when I arrived for one interview with a Choctaw alumnus, he smiled and quickly pulled out a small 35-millimeter camera and snapped a picture of me. “There,”
he said, “now I will remember what you looked like!” A few weeks later, a Creek alumna I was interviewing remarked, “You are very interesting to observe, did you know that?” These pointed remarks were intentional reminders to me that our relationships would not be the traditional one between anthropologist and “informants.” These two Baconians were astutely turning the tables on traditional power relationships that have often characterized anthropological field experiences with indigenous communities and that too often show up in anthropological writings.

If Baconians sometimes used biting humor to subvert the traditional roles of anthropological researcher and informant, they also could be very serious and direct about the negative reputations of anthropologists and the past mistakes they had sometimes made in working with Indian communities. For example, one alumnus I got to know over the course of my fieldwork continually reminded me that his Kiowa grandparents had been robbed of many important possessions, spiritual objects, and artistic works by earlier anthropologists who had taken these objects and put them in a museum in Washington DC (likely the Smithsonian). Other alumni hoped that I could help them recover items that had been taken to local museums. In one case, I was asked to retrieve a photocopy of a diary that was kept in a display case at Ataloa Lodge Museum and that had once belonged to a Cherokee man’s grandfather. With the help of the museum director (then Bacone alumnus Tom McKinney), I was able to return a photocopy of the grandfather’s diary to his grandson.

My identity was a salient factor in shaping interactions with alumni. Because I was an outsider to Bacone and had no connections to the American Baptists, my project was often greeted with curiosity, and people often asked me why I was interested in their
stories. The age difference between me (at the time in my mid-twenties) and the alumni I interviewed (the eldest of whom was then in his late eighties) meant that Baconians often found themselves translating the meanings of important regional, national, and global events of forty, fifty, or sixty years before to a relative youngster. Having come to Oklahoma as a graduate student from a school on the east coast, my Oklahoma family background, and the fact that I had grown up not too far away (in Kansas City) proved to be important factors in interactions with alumni. If I did not always tell them right away what my background was, alumni often asked. Some drew their own conclusions upon first seeing me or hearing me talk. Once, when Cheyenne artist Dick West tried to explain to me how Indian students differentiated themselves on campus, he told me that some students at Bacone were not so obviously Indian, because “they look like you.”

As a scholar whose family has historical roots among the diverse peoples of Oklahoma, I have long been attracted to dynamic concepts of culture and identity. Like Bacone’s alumni, in researching and writing this cultural history I used my present-day perspectives and identities to assess and re-create the past. My training in anthropology during the 1990s emphasized the social construction of identities, and I conducted my fieldwork at a time when our discipline was asking profound questions about the value of the anthropological concept of culture. I have no doubt that these perspectives and identities drew me to that small school for Indians in Oklahoma one summer day in 1991, when this project was conceived. However, many years later there is no doubt in my mind that dynamic concepts of culture and identity are the only ones that can adequately explain the complex experiences of Indian students at Bacone during the years from 1927 to 1957.
Preface

Through getting to know many Baconians over a two-year period—and through extended friendships that developed since I left Oklahoma in 1995—I am certain that Bacone alumni provided me with extremely cogent, thoughtful, and honest insights into the meanings of their past experiences at school. That alumni today continue to assess the meanings of their Bacone educations from a perspective many years removed from the events of their youth is not a methodological impediment. It is a further testament to the power of the identities and meanings that were created many years ago on that small campus in Muskogee, Oklahoma.
Several organizations and individuals provided generous financial support for this project, from its inception as a doctoral dissertation in cultural anthropology at Duke University to the book that it is today. A Phillips Fund Grant for Native American Research, awarded by the American Philosophical Society, and a Jacobs Research Fund grant, awarded by the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington, provided support for fieldwork in Oklahoma and for the preservation of original research materials. A Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellowship provided substantial financial support for long-term data analysis and writing, and Duke University supported the final stages of dissertation writing through a Graduate Dissertation Fellowship. More recently, a Summer Faculty Research Award from the University of Maine and a faculty sabbatical provided financial support and a release from teaching responsibilities that helped me prepare the final manuscript. The Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine helped fund the preparation of the index for this book.
Acknowledgments

My job as a scholar was greatly enhanced by the assistance and encouragement of many people. My thanks to colleagues at the University of Maine, St. Norbert College, Duke University, Northwestern University, the Harvard University School of Education, and the American Educational Research Association for their comments on earlier versions of this work. At Duke University, Richard G. Fox, Orin Starn, Ernestine Friedl, M. Jean Black, and William Reddy served as advisers and mentors when this volume was in its earliest incarnation. Angela R. Stork and Sister Ann Dominic Tassone lent enthusiastic support and friendship from afar. Colleagues at the University of Maine—including Margo Lukens, Maureen E. Smith, Darren Ranco, Paul “Jim” Roscoe, and Kristin Sobolik—all motivated me to complete the final manuscript. I am grateful for their support and collegiality.

Garrick Bailey, Genevieve Bell, Ben Kracht, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Neil Morton, Justin Noble, Alfonso Ortiz, Rennard Strickland, and John Williams consulted with me informally, at my request, during the 1990s while I was conducting research for this project. Special thanks to Tulsa educator Kathy Burden, whose mother, Coeryne Bode, wrote a master’s thesis about Bacone College in the 1950s, and who met with me in the 1990s to talk about her mother’s work.

A number of people assisted during the archival research stages of the project. At the American Baptist Historical Society Archives Center at the American Baptist Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania (now American Baptist Historical Society, Atlanta), archivists Beverly Carlson and Betty Layton provided valuable assistance locating missionary correspondence and materials on Bacone. At the American Baptist Historical Society at the Samuel Colgate Historical Library in Rochester, New York (now American Baptist...
Acknowledgments

Historical Society, Atlanta), James R. Lynch also provided assistance locating American Baptist publications and materials on Bacone. In Oklahoma, librarian Tom Young of the H. A. and Mary K. Chapman Library of the Philbrook Museum of Art helped locate materials on Bacone artists who had exhibited work at the museum as well as their patrons, and I am grateful for the help he has continued to provide over the many years that I have been developing this book. Special thanks to Marla Redcorn and Andrea Rogers-Henry, curatorial assistants at the Philbrook, for generously sharing aspects of their own research with me. Sarah Erwin, curator of Archival Collections at the Gilcrease Museum of Art, helped me locate correspondence from Bacone artists to Thomas Gilcrease. William Welge, director of the American Indian Culture and Preservation Office, and Chester Cowan, photoarchivist—both of the Oklahoma Historical Society—also helped me locate historical materials on Bacone. At Northeastern State University, Special Collections librarian and Bacone alumna Delores Sumner and archivist Victoria Sheffler helped me gather materials on Bacone in the John Vaughan Library. In addition, I am grateful to librarian Frances Donelson and assistant librarian Lois Webb for providing me access to the Indian room in the Bacone College Library (now the American Indian Research Library). A special thank-you to Bacone alumna Roseanna Spinks, who helped me locate Bacone alumni back in the 1990s. In addition, staff members from Special Collections in the McFarlin Library of the University of Tulsa and the Western History Collections of the University of Oklahoma offered assistance over the course of this project.

I am most grateful to the administrators, staff, and students of Bacone College who put up with my questions and presence on campus for the two years it took to complete the research for this
Acknowledgments

Many Bacone alumni helped see this project to fruition. Without them, it would not have been possible. Throughout the two years, they took me into their homes, fed me dinner, made me laugh, made me frustrated, moved me to tears, inspired me, got on my case, and challenged my interpretations of Bacone’s past. Their enthusiasm for the project underscored the collaborative nature of anthropological research and made my time in Oklahoma truly enjoyable. By far, the greatest gift they gave me collectively was the opportunity to tell their unique stories to a new generation. To the many people associated with Bacone who chose to be unnamed participants—and to those I may have unwittingly omitted—I extend my gratitude. Thanks to Perry Ellis Aunko, Stokes E. Baggett, Jesus Balderrama, Margie Lahoma Joice Berry, Samuel Billison, Ellen Keys Blaze, Ruth Green Cantrell, Don Chandler, James L. Cole, Rose S. Curley, J. B. Dreadfulwater, Napanee Grayhorse Goforth, Robert L. Goombi, Luther B. Grass, Kenneth L. Hughes, Juanita Tiger Kavena, Emma J. Keys-Perrine, Louis V. Black Hair Horse Knight, Don Mosier, Juanita McClure, Philip J. O’Jibway, Joseph I. Ojibway, Emmett Oliver, Georgia Abeita Oliver, Dorothy Thayer Parris, Mose Parris, Mary Taylor, Etheleen Ross Thompson, Willard S. Wilson, and the daughter of Ocie Couch Miller. To former Bacone presidents Al Ginkel and Earl Riley (also a Bacone alumnus), I extend my gratitude. Thanks also to alumnus Roger Weeks for his willingness to share his assessment of his father’s presidency of Bacone.

For spending many hours with me discussing Bacone I am grateful.
Acknowledgments

to Charles Ballard, Simon Belvin, Herbert Brown, Dolores Pettit Broyles, Carol Yvonne Edwards Cannon, Alvie Carney, Verlon Oleta Long Cimino, Herschell E. Daney, Daniel D. Drew, Jane Martin Dunning, Dan Frost, Anna Coffey Gover, Matilda M. (Peggy) Harjo, Scotty Harjo, Hazel Montgomery Johnson, J. Oscar Jones, Ruthe Blalock Jones, Wilson N. Jones, Julius A. LaCroix Jr., David M. Landrum, Tom Levi, Wendell Logan, Harry Malcolm, Clayton Mameah, Marlene Riding In Mameah, Tom McKinney, Jack Montgomery, Tom Moore, Phil Newkumet, Dennis Groundhog Ogan, David Paddlety, Louise Daney Paddlety, Phil Pipkin, Goodlow Proctor, Mary Katherine Harris Smith, Ted Smith, Brenda Sullivan, Renè West, W. Richard West, Eugene B. Wilson, and Darlene Hovokah Wolfe. Special thanks to Jim Baker, Karen Baker, Carolyn Hunt Lujan, Elizabeth Joshua Miller, Raymond Miller, Pat Toyebo Noel, June Whitehorse, Roland Whitehorse, and Yvette Zotigh, whose kindness I value more than they can ever imagine. For her special friendship and willingness to re-create old Bacone songs for me, a sincere thank-you to Doris Anderson Smith. For his special interest in this project and his friendship, my gratitude to Bacone junior college alumnus of ’29 Shelby “Nehi” Ray, whose enthusiasm and encouragement were driving forces behind the completion of this project.

Since returning from the field, I have received the sad notice of the passing of many of the Bacone alumni and others whose lives will be discussed in the pages that follow. Among them is Walter Richard “Dick” West, Wah-Pah-Nah-Yah (Lightfoot Runner), who was so gracious in his help with this project. To his wife, Renè West, special thanks for her help with the project and a hope that the pages that follow do justice to the legacy of a great artist and educator.

Several people assisted me while I was preparing the final manuscript for publication, including editors Matt Bokovoy, Elisabeth

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Acknowledgments

Chretien, Heather Stauffer, Sabrina Stellrecht, and Kyle Simonsen at the University of Nebraska Press; Clara Sue Kidwell, Pete G. Coser, and Connie Falleaf of Bacone College; Darcy Marlow of the Philbrook Museum of Art; Nathan Gonzales from the University of Redlands Archives; Renee Harvey and Michelle Maxwell of the Gilcrease Museum; Terry Zinn from the Oklahoma Historical Society; Katherine Lancaster from the staff of *Ethnology* at the University of Pittsburgh; Jan Ballard and her staff at the American Baptist Historical Society; Nancy Calhoun and Jere Harris of the genealogy and local history department of the Muskogee Public Library; Shelley Palmer and Gail Agrell of the University of Maine; and the staff of the University of Maine’s Fogler Library. Copyeditor Jonathan Lawrence helped refine the text and kept me on my toes. Special acknowledgment and thanks must be given to Frances Donelson—now American Indian Research and Special Collections librarian at Bacone—and to John Timothy II, director of Bacone’s Ataloa Lodge Museum, both of whom located many of the photographs included in this book. In addition, I am grateful to Frances Donelson for her help verifying facts about Bacone’s history. Thanks to Orin Starn for his comments on several early drafts of the manuscript. David Wallace Adams and one anonymous reviewer offered critical insights, and I appreciate their comments. Of course, all responsibility for the analysis of material or for any omissions in the text that follows lies solely with me.

Finally, four people deserve special thanks here: my parents, Dale and Dona Neuman, for their ongoing support of this project; Jeff Roggenbuck, my husband, for his encouragement and interest in my work; and Zane, our young son, for trying to understand my need for long hours in front of the computer. I am so very proud of you.
INDIAN PLAY
Introduction

American Indian Identities at School

This is a historical account of American Indian education, but it is also much more. It is the story of how an educational institution designed to assimilate young Native Americans to European American society became a site where Indian identities could flourish. It is also the story of how a unique school fostered an environment where Native American identities could be expressed within innovative curricular programs and creative student peer cultures. How and why did Bacone College—a small American Baptist school for Native Americans in Muskogee, Oklahoma—transform itself during the mid-twentieth century from being a school designed to assimilate American Indians into white society into being an Indian school that many students and alumni were proud to call their own? It is this primary question that forms the basis of the book that follows.

What does it mean to say that a school became an Indian school, and how is that identity defined or measured? I begin with terminology. The terms “Native American,” “American Indian,” “Indian,” “Native,” and “indigenous” are all used in the United States today
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by descendants of the original inhabitants of North America to refer
to themselves, although there is debate within Native communi-
ties over which term is preferred. In self-identifying, some people
reject all of these terms, electing instead to identify themselves
by the name of their particular tribe, Native nation, community,
family name, or clan. The European (and, later, European Ameri-
can) practice of grouping all descendants of America’s indigenous
populations together is historically problematic, because it obscures
the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political diversity of
Native American groups prior to European contact. Indeed, the term
“Indian” is itself a historical misnomer, created by early European
explorers who thought they had reached, not a new continent,
but the East Indies. Today, however, new meanings and identities
have been attributed to the term “Indian,” in addition to “Native
American,” “American Indian,” “Native,” and “indigenous.” I use
these terms interchangeably throughout this book, although I tend
to prefer “American Indian,” “Indian,” and “Native.” The first two
terms were most often used in Oklahoma during the time period of
this study and are therefore the most historically appropriate. The
third is gaining popularity today and is beginning to replace “Native
American” in scholarly writing.

One of the goals of this book is to examine the degree to which
students at Bacone conceptualized themselves as sharing a larger
pan-Indian identity (as “Indians” regardless of tribal affiliation)
versus a distinctive tribal identity as Choctaws, Pawnees, or Chero-
kees, for example. That a substantial number of students at Bacone
had parents from two or more tribes, and many others had at least
some European American ancestry, further complicates this ques-
tion. In this context, pinpointing how students viewed their Indian
identities is complex; in fact, some former students told me that
they first learned what it meant to be Indian while interacting with other students at Bacone. Answering the question of how Bacone became an Indian school requires a careful deconstruction of the multiple layers of identity and meaning behind the terminology delineating the boundaries between “Indians” and “non-Indians.”

The pages that follow attempt to undo some of our common understandings of American Indian cultures and identities. This is not always easy. During the twentieth century in the United States, powerful new ideologies about the authenticity of Native identities emerged. The idea was simple yet insidious: real Indians should possess an unbroken connection to past cultural traditions or to an essential biological or psychological Indianness. These ideas about static Native identities see indigenous groups as being rooted in a continuous, unbroken connection to an unchanging cultural past. These standards of authenticity to which American Indian identities have been held are highly problematic. The idea that real Indians today must demonstrate an unbroken cultural, biological, or even psychological connection to the past stands in stark contrast to the historical realities of Indian existence on this continent during more than five hundred years of colonialism. The usurpation of American Indian lands by Europeans (and later European Americans) and the resulting history of genocide, resource extraction, cultural imperialism, forced relocation, Native American diaspora, intermarriage, creative pan-Indian movements, and the redefinition of Indianness in terms of European American legal standards have all fundamentally altered pre-contact definitions of indigenous identities.

To complicate matters, in addition to the powerful ideologies of authenticity surrounding American Indian identities, an ongoing legacy of European American colonialism has been the widespread appropriation of Native identities by non-Indians. Philip Deloria calls
this “playing Indian” and associates it with an imagined romantic Indianness used by non-Indians to construct their own modern identities.¹ The Boston Tea Party, the use of Native American motifs by organizations like the Boy Scouts beginning in the early twentieth century, and the evocation of Indian imagery by the modern men’s movement are all examples of playing Indian. For Deloria, playing Indian represents a fantasy of Indianness, created by non-Indians to build gendered national identities and to authenticate an imagined sense of self.²

One particularly troubling dimension of European Americans’ Indian play has been the ascription of particular psychological, spiritual, and physical traits to Native Americans. The opposite of the bloodthirsty “savage,” the “noble savage” with his close connection to nature, and their female counterparts—the beautiful and helpful Indian “princess” and her cousin the undesirable “squaw”—are examples of historically variable and often contradictory binary images that European Americans have constructed to define American Indian identities.³ The attribution of such characteristics to American Indians functioned to justify European American colonial expansion in the past, and today it finds an audience in new forms of economic and spiritual consumption. For example, today the image of the “ecological Indian” (a modern version of the noble savage) often shapes public perceptions about Native Americans, who may be judged harshly when they try to develop tribal lands or build tribal enterprises that are not in sync with an image of environmentalism.⁴ Michael Dorris illustrated this point well: “Unless they talk ‘Indian’ (a kind of metaphoric mumbo jumbo pidgin of English), ooze nostalgia for bygone days, and come bedecked with metallic or beaded jewelry, many native people who hold positions of respect and authority within their own communities are disappointments
to non-Indians whose standards of ethnic validity are based on Pocahontas, Squanto, or Tonto.”

Given the complex historical and cultural circumstances that have shaped Indians’ perceptions of their own identities as well as non-Natives’ images of Indianness, measuring how Bacone became an Indian school is no simple task. Moreover, when I write about Indian identities today and in the past, I do so with the knowledge that I am also writing about people’s perceptions of the authenticity of those identities. For example, many people would consider the images of Indianness mentioned above to be highly inauthentic images constructed by non-Natives for their own purposes, not examples of real Indian identities. Yet, what happens when Indians themselves play Indian, to borrow Deloria’s expression? In other words, can Indians reappropriate non-Indian images of Indianness to serve their own ends? If so, what does this trope do to the standards of authenticity to which Indian cultures and identities are held?

These larger questions inform the story of Bacone that follows. When I deal with forms of Indian play, I do so to show how people can simultaneously create cultural meanings and be constrained by the cultural meanings produced by others before them. Yet my intention is to disrupt the opposition between authentic and inauthentic that has often limited our abilities to write about Native cultures and identities. This disruption is crucial to an understanding of how Bacone became an Indian school. Students at Bacone often used Indian play in their daily interactions, often referencing images of Indianness created by non-Indians. Instead of conceptualizing students’ Indian play as inauthentic reflections of their Native identities because their Indian play often referenced outsiders’ images of Indians, I view their creative forms of student peer culture to be at the center of new Native identities that emerged at the school.
"The Red Men Are Coming!" declared the headline on a concert brochure for the Bacone College Men’s Glee Club during a 1930s tour. Directly below this announcement was a drawing of the face of an archetypical Native American man wearing a Plains war bonnet (see fig. 1). The headline referenced a film released by Universal Pictures in 1930 called *The Indians Are Coming*, which played across the United States to packed theaters. Designed to garner publicity for Bacone College, the headline likely resonated with audiences, who would have recognized the reference to the popular Hollywood film. In the film *The Indians Are Coming*, which was based on a book by famed Wild West entrepreneur and performer William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Indians circle a wagon train, attack it, and kidnap the white female protagonist—a plot depicting Indian “savagery” seen again and again in American adventure books and twentieth-century Westerns. However, there was more to the image. The Plains Indian man in the headdress could have easily served as a generic symbol of a romanticized and almost-vanished Native American past. By the 1930s, whites often viewed Native Americans as nonthreatening, as members of a “noble race,” even as symbols that served to define modern American nationhood by rooting it in a type of indigenous authenticity. The juxtaposition of headline and image in the brochure played with a common binary image—the Indian as “savage” and “noble savage”—and played to multiple layers of viewer expectation.

Consider another page of the brochure: nine members of the college chorus (known as the Red Men’s Glee Club and later as the Singing Redmen) pose for the camera outside one of Bacone’s academic buildings, all wearing forms of traditional tribal attire—most
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from Plains and southwestern tribes. In direct contrast to what the headline appears to suggest, the students in the photograph don’t look particularly menacing: some are smirking, with a revealing and knowing look in their eyes. In fact, these images were intended by those who produced them to be seen as benign and playful, invoking curiosity and humor. After all, these college-educated Indians were coming, not to fight, but to sing!

What do we make of the complex images in this publicity brochure, and why are they important? Beginning in the 1920s, students and staff at Bacone created images like these as part of a fund-raising strategy to advertise the school to non-Native audiences and attract donations. Moreover, evidence suggests that these images were not simply designed to provide publicity for the school and aid in fund-raising efforts, although that was one of their important functions. They also publicly, directly, and knowingly referenced stereotypical European American images of Indian cultures and identities. Furthermore, these images were part of a larger peer culture on campus shared by many of the school’s Native students that playfully commented on European American images of Indian-ness while also engaging ideas about what it meant to be educated and Indian in mid-twentieth century America.

Let’s return for a moment to the glee club brochure. In the historical context of European American attempts to educate Native Americans, the binary of “savage” and “noble savage” was symbolically transformed into an opposition between traditional tribal cultures (often viewed as backward and “primitive”) and European and European American societies, considered to represent “Civilization” (with a capital “C”). In the late nineteenth century, theories of social evolution dominated understandings of the place of indigenous peoples in an industrializing world. In his book Ancient
Society, American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan theorized that all human groups would ultimately pass through various stages of cultural development, which he identified as “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilization.” Influenced by Morgan and other writers, many white Americans of the time shared an ethnocentric belief that their society stood at the pinnacle of civilization and that efforts to educate Indian youth would elevate American Indians more quickly from a savage state to that of civilization, skipping the intermediate stage altogether. The federal government’s system of setting up large off-reservation boarding schools for Indians during the late nineteenth century was premised on this belief. However, by the 1930s white Americans were less likely to subscribe to social-evolutionary thinking than their nineteenth-century counterparts, and federally run schools for Indians were beginning to change to reflect new interest in preserving some aspects of Native cultures.

Bacone’s Indian students in the 1930s were playing around with the older idea of social evolution and the implication that they had been transformed through formal education from imagined savages into civilized performers! Of course, the idea that singing was a genteel and civilized activity and one that contrasted greatly with the archetypal image of the hypermasculine Indian warrior was also part of Bacone’s attention-grabbing strategy in its fund-raising campaigns.

The Singing Redmen, as the Men’s Glee Club would eventually be called, embodied all of the cultural complexities that these images suggested. Young men mostly of college age, the group traveled the country during the mid-twentieth century performing Indian-themed songs and dances (along with a repertoire of non-Native music), all to help publicize the mission of Bacon College and raise funds for the school. Representing various tribes and drawing largely from the Five Tribes (Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw,
Seminole) and Plains groups of Oklahoma, the Singing Redmen adopted easily recognizable red velveteen Navajo costumes and carefully crafted and projected an image of natural Native musical ability and earthy primitivism to white audiences, selecting songs like “The Red Man’s Death Chant” and “The Dagger Dance” as part of their regular repertoire. When they were back on campus and not fund-raising for Bacone, many members of the Singing Redmen—along with their female counterparts from the Bacone College Girls’ Glee Club—were immersed in their studies of subjects such as history, philosophy, art, mathematics, and biology. When they were not attending classes, studying, or practicing for their public performances, they would sometimes play sports or walk to nearby Muskogee to socialize, eat, or catch a movie. More often, they would work in the school’s dining hall or at another type of job on campus, in order to help pay for school. When chapel bells rang, they went to church. When other bells rang, they rose from sleep or journeyed to the dining hall to eat. Most importantly, in between their public performances as the Singing Redmen, their formal studies, work, and their campus routines, Bacone’s Indian students created a unique peer culture that articulated and engaged the meanings of being Indian in mid-twentieth-century America.

At Bacone, students had an unusual amount of freedom to publicly articulate the meanings of being Indian. As we will see, during the mid-twentieth century the school not only produced groups like the Singing Redmen but also actively channeled money from successful fund-raising strategies into curricular and extracurricular programs that promoted American Indian cultures and identities. Visit Bacone’s Ataloa Lodge today, and you will be reminded of this legacy. Covering the walls and floors of this rustic building are Navajo rugs, cases of kachina dolls, examples of nineteenth-century
tribal clothing, pottery, southeastern basketry, prehistoric artifacts, and artwork produced by teachers and alumni. Completed in 1932, Ataloa Lodge served as a museum, classroom, social center, and reception hall for this small campus southeast of Tulsa. It became a centerpiece for the school’s programs in American Indian cultures and proved to be a popular campus gathering spot where patrons and friends of the school could come and hear the Singing Redmen or the Girls’ Glee Club perform. The physical space that the lodge provided for public presentations of American Indian identities and cultures was matched by a metaphorical space where students could publicly articulate and engage ideas about Indianness. In this context, peer culture became an important source of new Indian identities for many students, as Baconians produced a large number of paintings, drawings, poems, stories, plays, and songs during the period from 1927 to 1957 that directly referenced Indian cultures and identities.

While Baconians were articulating their identities as Indians, they also were negotiating their identities as educated Indians. As Lomawaima and McCarty have reminded us, long before many European Americans decided that it was in their best interest to formally educate (read “assimilate”) American Indian children in schools, American Indian communities had their own forms of education, and some of those systems of education were themselves formalized. The binary between informal and formal education, they claim, is a false one. However, at Bacone, Indian students openly articulated the tensions between being Indian and being educated in mid-twentieth-century America. To Baconians, being educated came to be associated not with learning traditional skills and forms of tribal knowledge but with attending a sectarian school for Indians. In this respect, students themselves often distinguished
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between the “formal” education they received through their studies at Bacone and other forms of knowledge they might acquire from peers, family members, and their tribal communities. Although schools like Bacone were designed to assimilate Native students to European American society (largely through converting students to Christianity and training a Native pastorate), students’ views of the relationship between education and Indianness did not always match those of school staff and administrators. While some students embraced the opportunity to use formal education (in this case, a high school or junior college education) to their advantage in the workplace, others saw attending a religious institution as an extension of their own families’ Christian beliefs. While at school, students sometimes expressed the hierarchical view that the formal education they were receiving at Bacone was superior to traditional systems of Native education. Others utilized their time at Bacone to create enduring intertribal friendships and exchange cultural information with their peers. These students used Bacone as a space for the exploration of their own and others’ Indian identities, as they learned from one another.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that schools like Bacone, which were designed to educate Indians, fostered the development of ideas about being Indian and being educated. After all, as Alexandra Harmon points out, in addition to their own motivations for being in school, Indian students from diverse tribes were in schools precisely because European Americans tended to view them monolithically as Indians. European Americans’ ideas about what it meant to be both educated and Indian often bumped up against meanings constructed by students themselves, making Indian schools important sources for the development of new Native American identities. Moreover, students and their parents from different tribes varied in how they
viewed the relationship between education and Indianness. For example, during the mid-nineteenth century, Cherokees had higher literacy rates in English than did their white neighbors. This was due in large part to the invention of the written Cherokee language by Sequoyah (George Guess or Gist) and the circulation of bilingual tribal newspapers—the Cherokee Phoenix (1828–34) and the Cherokee Advocate (1844–1906). Cherokees ran many of their own schools and accepted education as an important source of Cherokee identity. Yet, unlike Cherokees, other Indian groups were wary of schools run by European Americans because they viewed learning English and acquiring European American values to be an assault on their identities as Indians. In some cases, “returned students”—those who had attended schools run by whites—were treated with suspicion and were not welcomed back to their reservations.

This book examines how a school designed to assimilate Native Americans to European American society ultimately became a place of a decidedly (although not exclusively) Indian character, where school administrators actively promoted the Indian identities of their students in fund-raising campaigns, where money was reinvested into curricular and extracurricular programs in American Indian cultures, where Indian students came from distant cities and reservations and had to be turned away for lack of space, and where Indian alumni returned to teach and to foster the indigenous identities of their own students. Yet, as a sectarian institution, Bacone was not a tribal college, nor was it controlled by Native communities. Its mission was firmly rooted in late-nineteenth-century ideas of providing formal (in Bacone’s case, the then radical notion of higher) education for Indians in order to blur the distinctions between American Indians and their white neighbors and ultimately “win” Indian souls for Christ. In this historical context, understanding how and
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why Bacone transformed itself in the mid-twentieth century into an Indian school—and understanding the particular forces that ultimately reined in its momentum and kept Bacone from becoming the more far-reaching Indian-centered university that it might have become—is the task I attempt in the pages that follow.

SCHOOLS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITIES

In what is now the United States, attempts by whites to formally educate American Indians date back more than four hundred years and were inextricably linked to colonialism. These efforts continued as the United States emerged as a nation in its own right, and by the late nineteenth century they were formalized in federal policies designed to replace indigenous languages with English and to replace indigenous cultures with European American values. Although official policies toward American Indian cultures varied from one missionary group to another and from one government administration to another, European Americans designed schools to assimilate Indians to Euro-American society. Converting Indians to Christianity, making them into American citizens who would think in terms of individualism rather than communalism, and instilling Euro-American values of hard work, industry, and private property into the Native population were some of the diverse goals of Euro-Americans who sought to offer education to Indians. By the late nineteenth century these goals were being pursued in large off-reservation boarding schools for Indian youth established by the federal government and in scattered smaller institutions run by the federal government and missionary groups nearer to reservations. Believing that America’s Indians needed to be assimilated to European American society, the federal government forcibly
removed many Indian children from their homes and adopted the policy—first articulated by military man Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the government’s Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania—that “you have to kill the Indian to save the man.” In schools such as Carlisle, Indian children were forced to cut their hair, trade tribal dress for military-style clothing, select Anglo names, speak English, and cut off almost all contact with their families and communities—thereby, their new guardians hoped, effectively killing their Indian identities. Although commonly referred to as “the Indian schools,” these institutions were designed to transform young Indians into an image created by white Americans and were by no means places where Indian cultures or identities were intended to take center stage. That the “formal” education of Native Americans served the interests of those who wished to transform tribal polities and economies through Indian dispossession and the acquisition of tribally held lands is clear. By the turn of the century the federal Indian schools as well as many sectarian schools for Indians were actively promoting the training of boys as farmers and laborers and of girls as homemakers and domestic servants. Even the reforms of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier (1933–45), whose administration adopted what was then a radical stance toward the inclusion of American Indian cultures in federal Indian schools, must be understood in their mid-twentieth-century political and economic contexts. These reforms were designed to restructure tribal governments and foster the growth of economically self-sufficient Native communities that would be part of a modern American society.

A number of scholarly works have been devoted to exploring the effects of the Indian schools on the indigenous identities of their students. Questions about the degree to which individual schools were successful in assimilating Native students and the extent of
the cultural assault waged by the schools on Indian identities form
the basis for many of these accounts. Some scholars write about *de-
Indianization* or *deculturation* in the schools, while others emphasize
forms of student resistance that allowed some aspects of Native
identities to survive. One of the underlying premises of this book
is that, in examining the effects of the schools on American Indian
identities, we must be mindful of the concepts of culture we use. For
example, framing the historical question in terms of de-Indianization
can reduce complex neocolonial relationships between Indians and
non-Indians to a simplistic notion of cultural loss, rather than the
often complex encounters and cultural negotiations that they were.
We need to recognize that indigenous identities have been consti-
tuted *within*, as much as outside of, colonial processes. That people
in the United States group diverse indigenous communities together
under the term “Indian” today is illustrative of this point. We also
need to be mindful not to impart uniformity to the experiences of
Indian students in schools that is not supported by specific historical
evidence. For example, students had different degrees of exposure
to and knowledge of traditional forms of tribal cultures when they
entered school, and pre-contact forms of traditional tribal cultures
had already been substantially altered by colonial encounters.
Finally, we need to consider the possibility that schools—like other
neocolonial institutions—could become important sites for the
creation of new types of indigenous identities. In this sense, then,
evidence of student creativity and resistance in the schools should
not simply be equated with cultural “persistence.” For, such static
notions of culture and identity do little to advance our understanding
of how Indian students actively engaged, articulated, negotiated, at
times reinscribed, and occasionally challenged cultural meanings
that others had created before them.
Early studies of pan-Indian movements were some of the first to recognize that schools could become sources of new Native identities. Studies of the emergence of new Indian religious and political movements (such as the Native American Church or peyote religion and the American Indian Movement) revealed that structural features of the large federal off-reservation Indian boarding schools promoted the spread of new cultural forms and cultural identities that were more generally Indian than tribally based. These schools brought together large numbers of Indian students, many of whom were from western reservations where the peyote religion had already achieved a stronghold. At school students shared information about the emerging religion and grew to have a greater sense of themselves as Indians rather than as members of distinct tribes. Moreover, specific structural features of the Indian boarding schools served to decrease tribal factionalism and promote the development of pan-Indian identities among students. Perhaps the most important factor in the promotion of pan-Indian identities was the use of English as the lingua franca among boarding school students. The use of English promoted intertribal friendships and the recognition among students from diverse backgrounds that all tribal groups faced common economic, social, and political problems based on their relationship to European Americans. Furthermore, the schools produced an educated group of elite young Native Americans, who, facing limited job opportunities upon leaving school, began to understand the implications of their identities as Indians within the larger American society of the early twentieth century.

These theories are supported by evidence that school administrators were well aware that their schools could become sources of Indian identities. In fact, official government educational policies were often designed to thwart student bonding. Concerned
that students from one tribe would stick together and not learn English—what federal administrators called “tribalism”—officials designed the schools to mix together as many different tribal groups as possible. In federal Indian schools, officials often assigned students from different tribes to share rooms, and they sometimes attempted to limit enrollment to younger students for whom peer pressure might be at a minimum.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, some scholars began to introduce more complex cultural analyses into their studies of the Indian schools. Most important during this time was the work of Sally McBeth, who interviewed Indian students, alumni, and staff from six schools in central and southern Oklahoma. McBeth argued that boarding schools became symbols of Indianness to their alumni and that these schools fostered the development of a pan-Indian ethnic identity among people who had attended them. In fact, among the Indian communities McBeth studied, boarding school attendance was often used as a positive measure of a person’s identity as an Indian.

Since the mid-1980s, a number of studies of Indian boarding schools have presented evidence that these institutions were important sources of new Native American identities. These accounts focus on cultural, rather than purely structural, analyses of the boarding schools and examine how schools helped to foster the emergence not only of pan-Indian identities but also of regional, tribal, community, and institutional identities among their students. Most importantly, these scholars look closely at what boarding schools meant to the Indian students who attended them, and they incorporate the voices of alumni into their accounts. For example, through the use of in-depth interviews with alumni and former staff members of the Chilocco Indian School, K. Tsianina Lomawaima has shown...
that students at Chilocco created oppositional school cultures that challenged the rules and regulations surrounding clothing, gender, friendships, discipline, and the consumption of food. Lomawaima claims that Chilocco became an Indian school, not simply because it was designed to educate Indian students, but because its Indian students helped develop within it a specific institutional culture and worked to shape Chilocco to their own goals and needs. Like McBeth, Lomawaima argues that, in spite of their apparent role in the assimilation of Indian students, the boarding schools produced symbols of Indian identity.

Some histories of American Indian education provide evidence of the cultural inventiveness of students at various boarding schools. For example, in her discussion of the “bloomer stories,” Lomawaima notes that female students at Chilocco found ways to subvert a symbol of European American control over their bodies by secretly removing their bloomers—required undergarments that functioned like chastity belts—when their matrons weren’t watching. Lomawaima argues that the “bloomer stories” themselves have become symbols of Indian identity and resistance for alumni, who delight in their retelling. In another example, Clyde Ellis found that one of his informants was able to subvert the rules separating the sexes in his school during the early twentieth century by devising a phonetic transcription of the Kiowa language and using it to write to his campus girlfriend. His creativity went unnoticed by school staff, who could not read the written Kiowa phonetics. Eventually, this student’s phonetic transcription led to the development of a written Kiowa language used by the rest of the tribe.

Evidence from a variety of sources suggests that students in the Indian schools actively engaged cultural meanings produced by teachers, administrators, and other students. Furthermore, these
examples illustrate that this process of creating meaning has continued into the present; it is manifest in the symbols of culture and identity that boarding school alumni evoke today in the process of retelling their educational histories. We therefore must conceptualize schools as potential sources of new identities for Indian students rather than as simply sites of cultural persistence or loss.

**INDIAN PLAY**

As Bacone’s American Baptist administrators and its Indian teachers created a space for students to openly explore their Indian identities, students increasingly used humor and inventive wordplay to reference Indianness, and they articulated the (often contradictory) meanings of being educated Indians in mid-twentieth-century America. In an inversion of what Philip Deloria calls “playing Indian” (i.e., the widespread appropriation of romanticized notions of Indianness by non-Indians to define their own identities), I use the term “Indian play” to describe Native students’ creativity in publicly engaging, articulating, and negotiating ideas about their own and others’ Indian identities. As Deloria helps us see, historically the Indian play of non-Indians and Indians has been firmly intertwined. I argue that Indian play was a powerful aspect of peer culture at Bacone that merits careful analysis. While playful and spirited, the Indian play of students at Bacone was dedicated to a serious purpose: challenging white stereotypes of Indians, exposing the differences among diverse American Indian communities, recognizing the effects of colonialism on American Indians, and questioning how schools run by European Americans could benefit Native students. In this context, Indian play among peers at Bacone fostered the development of important new Indian identities. Moreover, this public peer culture was possible because of the specific historical,
financial, legal, and social forces at Bacone College, which created an environment in which ideas about Indianness could be openly expressed. Unlike students at other Indian schools, whose peer cultures often were well hidden from teachers and administrators, those at Bacone could openly engage in Indian play.

In analyzing the richness and complexity of Indian play among students at Bacone, I take a theoretical approach to the study of the anthropology of education known as *cultural production*. Studies of cultural production employ dynamic notions of the relationship between education and culture; they view schools as sites where new cultural meanings may be created. Scholars of cultural production view students as active producers of cultural forms rather than passive recipients of school knowledge and ideology. Yet, scholars of cultural production do not impart unfounded notions of agency or resistance to students. They examine how students create cultural meanings in relation to the cultural meanings produced by their teachers, other adults, and other students before them. By investigating culture in process, the cultural production approach treats cultures and identities as fluid, contextual, and complex.\(^\text{32}\)

In addition to a cultural production approach that focuses on Indian play, concepts of “ideology,” “hegemony,” and “counterhegemony” can also help us understand how Bacone could both be a site designed to assimilate and transform Native identities and simultaneously provide a space where students could creatively articulate, express, define, and redefine their own identities as Indians. Here, I use “ideology” to refer to commonly held and deeply felt shared understandings (and misunderstandings) that shape how Native American cultures and identities are viewed and that are often openly articulated by people. Theories of social evolution, the concept of the noble savage, and even the idea that all Native
Americans live in harmony with nature are all examples of past or present ideologies of Indianness. The concept of “hegemony,” often attributed to Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and more recently articulated by Raymond Williams (1921–88) and others, refers to the idea that many kinds of ideological beliefs—while still felt or assumed—are not always overtly articulated by the people who hold them. These unspoken hegemonic beliefs are all the more powerful because they are taken for granted and not openly expressed by people. For example, if non-Natives in the twenty-first century do not understand why Native American tribes might want to build a resort and casino on tribal lands because they do not associate this kind of economic enterprise with Indianness, then we may be able to say that the ideological belief associating Indians with a sort of natural purity is also being manifest in the underlying hegemonic belief that Indians are not capable of being part of a modern economy. However, experiences and contradictions in everyday life can help reveal hegemonic beliefs and bring them to the forefront, where they can be challenged by counterhegemonic discourses. For example, if a tribe operates a casino and is also able to promote its own view of traditional tribal culture within the casino itself (e.g., by having a tribal museum in the casino complex), then the tribe may be producing a very public discourse that counters hegemonic views of Indianness and links Native identities to contemporary economic enterprises.

At Bacone, the Indian play of students often challenged dominant ideologies of Indianness and represented a form of counterhegemonic discourse. In modified form, theories of the relationship between ideology, hegemony, and counterhegemony are helpful tools in analyzing the potential meanings of Indian play at Bacone. Here I employ Pierre Bourdieu’s idea that hegemonic ideas derive
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their power largely from being unsaid. However, I modify Bourdieu’s strong definition of doxa—that which may be unsayable or unknowable—by substituting the idea that hegemonic cultural meanings are often known but are often left unsaid.34 That they are not always openly articulated, however, does not mean that they are necessarily unconscious or unable to be articulated.35 Once fully articulated, these hegemonic meanings have the potential to become something altogether different. At Bacone, students took hegemonic cultural ideas about Indianness that were known but were often left unsaid and articulated them through Indian play, thereby making them open to negotiation and contestation.

However, the very fact that the Indian play of students at Bacone was found in brochures designed to bring donations to the school makes assessing its counterhegemonic potential all the more difficult, since these public forms of Indian play represented discourses that simultaneously challenged and reinforced dominant ideologies of Indianness. That we can locate this type of dual discourse should not surprise us or detract from our discussion of the significance of Indian play at Bacone. In her work on Cherokee identity politics, Circe Sturm reminds us that in neocolonial contexts there is a “constant slippage between ideology, hegemony, and counterhegemony.”36 The neocolonial context of the Indian schools produced tensions, uncertainties, and contradictions that students had to negotiate. In articulating hegemonic meanings about being Indian and being educated and bringing them to public discourse through Indian play, Baconians reinforced some aspects of dominant cultural ideologies about Indians while at the same time creating a space for counterhegemonic discourse. In examining instances of Indian play (like that found in the glee club brochure) it is important to understand that cultural forms that appear at first to be hegemonic
may be transformed into something altogether different when we consider their meanings to the people who created them.

**BECOMING AN INDIAN SCHOOL**

In the pages that follow, I trace how Bacone became an *Indian* school and identify several historically important dimensions to the school’s transformation. In one important structural way, Bacone became an Indian school when it began to focus (almost) exclusively on educating Indian students. Although Bacone’s mission had always been the education of Native students, in its early years the school had also been educating white students who had no other access to higher education. Beginning in 1918, Bacone’s administration made the critical decision to limit enrollment at the institution to American Indian students. Coupled with extensive efforts to recruit students from diverse tribes, this policy had the effect of bringing together a considerable number of Native students from varied cultural backgrounds who learned from one another and created a peer culture that often centered on their Indian identities. Another dimension of Bacone’s transformation was the image that the school began to project to the larger public. Beginning in the mid-1920s, the school crafted a very public image of itself as an Indian institution, attracting the support of non-Indian donors by advertising the Indian identities of its students. These romantic images of Indian-ness that Bacone fed to the public garnered the school national attention and, most importantly, brought in money that was used to expand the school’s physical plant and increase the number of students on campus. A third aspect of Bacone’s transformation was curricular innovation. Money from fund-raising campaigns was used to create new curricular and extracurricular programs on campus that, along with an influx of new Indian teachers and staff (many of
them Bacone alumni), created a space where many students could further explore their Indian identities within the formal programs established at the school. Finally, Bacone became an Indian school because its students made it their own through creative forms of peer culture—including forms of Indian play that referenced, articulated, and (at times) reinscribed or redefined what it meant to be Indian in twentieth-century America. Bacone became an important source of new Indian identities for many students who attended the institution during the years from 1927 to 1957, and this was the most salient aspect of the school’s transformation from being strictly an institution of assimilation to being an Indian school.

This book is organized to reflect Bacone’s transformation from a school for Indians into an Indian school. Chapter 1, “Creating an Indian University: Bacone College, 1880–1927,” provides a history of the complex and contradictory motivations and goals of the school’s founders and administrators. It presents some of the religious ideologies of the American Baptists, the beliefs about Indian cultures and identities that shaped the policies of the institution in its early years, and the landmark court decision that limited how Bacone’s administrators could financially support the school. It discusses the circumstances that led to the founding of Indian University (later Bacone College) in 1880, the transformation of Indian University into Bacone College, the traditional financial support American Indians provided to Bacone, and Bacone’s eventual need to appeal to white donors in order to remain financially viable.

Chapters 2–5 detail the emergence of a new public image for the school, the projection of Indian imagery in fund-raising campaigns, the innovative curricular programs that Native faculty created with the proceeds from fund-raising campaigns, and the postwar changes that influenced a shift in Bacone’s curricular programs to focus on
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fine arts. In addition, these chapters establish the importance of both Native artists and non-Native art patrons in defining the direction that the arts curriculum at Bacone would eventually take. Chapter 2, “Images of Indianness: Selling Bacone to the Public,” examines the cultural production of Indianness by Baconians in the context of the school’s fund-raising efforts and explores the images of Indianness that were presented to the school’s new white patrons. Chapter 3, “‘The Dream of an Indian Princess’: Indian Culture at Bacone, 1927–1941,” demonstrates how funds raised by Bacone were used to establish new campus programs to foster the teaching of Indian arts and culture. Chapter 4, “Indian Education in a Changing America: Bacone College, 1941–1957,” discusses the effects of World War II and changes in Bacone’s administration on the school’s programs in Indian culture, including attempts by Baconians to negotiate Bacone’s identity as an Indian school in the face of new debates about the value of Indian education in postwar America. Chapter 5, “Marketing Culture: Bacone’s Indian Artists and Their Patrons,” traces the development of Bacone as a nationally known center for the study of Indian painting and discusses the relationship between Indian artists at Bacone and their non-Indian patrons. It also examines how definitions of Indian identity and culture promoted by art galleries and museums shaped Baconians’ portrayals of Indianness in their work.

Chapters 6–8 center on the Indian identities that were articulated and created at the school, focusing on campus life, peer cultures, and Indian play. Chapter 6, “Painting Culture: Studying Indian Art at Bacone,” discusses the role of Bacone alumnus Dick West in revitalizing the school’s art program during the late 1940s and 1950s. It shows how painting became a means of cultural recordkeeping for artists and examines the relationship between Bacone’s art program
and the emergence of new Indian identities among student artists. Chapter 7, “Being Indian at School: Students at Bacone College, 1927–1957,” discusses peer relationships and student experiences at school, utilizing student writings from the *Bacone Indian* to examine what being *educated* meant to Bacone’s students. Chapter 8, “The Meanings of Indianness: Tribal, Racial, and Religious Identities at Bacone,” examines what being Indian meant and came to mean to Bacone’s Indian students and alumni. Through the use of student writings and alumni narratives, it explores how peer relationships and Bacone’s programs in Indian culture shaped students’ definitions of their Indian identities.

In “Conclusion: New Indigenous Identities,” the book closes with a discussion of what made Bacone a unique place historically and what the institution is like today. It argues that a focus on Indian play as a cultural form is central to our understandings of how Bacone became an Indian school and concludes with a discussion of how the concept of cultural authenticity limits understandings of Indian play in the past and can narrowly restrict and circumscribe American Indian identities in the present and future.

How did a school for Indians become an Indian school? It is to this question that I turn.