

Analysis

To know the story behind Jodi Rave’s landmark series *Broken Trust* is to understand that one of the most profound accomplishments was that the story was told at all. Mired in federal bureaucracy, obscured by history and beset by government and journalistic apathy, the story of Native land rights took a circuitous route to publication (**Text: p. 154**). Once told, though, the series provides a rare, comprehensive look at one of the country’s oldest and hardest-to-heal wounds.



A discussion in San Diego between tribal leaders and Interior Department officials about Native trust fund reform. (Photo: North County Times)

Context, in the series, is everything, and Rave makes excellent use of one core document—a massive federal court opinion—and a raft of established and new sources to tell the back story explaining the significance of Judge Royce C. Lamberth’s opinion and the enormity of the challenge before the courts. Many stories about racial and ethnic injustice are framed as tales of victimization. Note how Rave instead keeps the focus not on the victims but on the decision makers responsible for the Native land mess (**Text: p. 154**).

Recognizing that the background material is dense and tedious reading, Rave breaks the essential issues of the series into a list of questions (**Text: p. 134**) and uses simple chronology (**Text: p. 146**) to show the escalating tensions surrounding the seminal lawsuit. Each sidebar provides a slice of history, demonstrating overarching flaws in government oversight and the specific effect mismanagement has had on Native peoples. That structure effectively makes the story universal—all readers have a stake in how the government performs—while also being a story specific to Native Americans. The best stories about difference are often grounded in life’s universal truths.

The backdrop for the story is clearly the nation’s historically racist treatment of Native Americans. But one of complicating facts of this story is that roughly 90 percent of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees are Native American, and the BIA has been a significant part of the problem. Rave embraces that complexity, raising the issue of the BIA record keepers in her series (**DVD: Rave interview, 1:02**).

In the Classroom

Few of the journalists interviewed for *The Authentic Voice* connect their ethnicity to their journalism as directly as Jodi Rave does. Her discussion about “Indian Jodi” and “emotional reporting” (**Text: p. 155**) is good fodder for a classroom analysis of bias and benefits connected to ethnicity, geography, and class (**DVD: Rave interview, 3:50**).



Jodi Rave

It’s important here to help students push beyond Rave’s ethnicity to examine the ways their own connection to a story can inform and limit pursuit of accuracy and complete reporting. It’s easy, though not especially instructive, for discussions about such connections to get bogged down in race and ethnicity and focus on whether the journalist has an agenda that is race- or ethnicity-based.

Through exercises or discussion, help students to see that, as with all the major social issues with which journalists grapple, agendas come in all forms. In other words, everybody has an agenda of one kind or the other. The key here is to help students bring their own biases—be they race/ethnicity-based or otherwise—up for examination. Only then can a journalist get on with the business of fair, balanced, and complete reporting.

Covering People Like You

There’s an infinite landscape of minefields and gold mines attached to reporting on people with whom you share an affinity—be it gender, religion, class, geography, sexuality, age, ethnicity, or race. One of the first things journalists need to understand, though, is that simple similarities determine fairly little about how the reporting will go.

Many of the journalists in *The Authentic Voice* report that race or ethnicity alternately blinded them to some stories and led them to others. The ability to speak a language or understand a culture opened doors for some.

Many reporters say that there’s one less obstacle in the way of candor when they and their sources are of the same race/ethnicity (**Text: pp 121-122**). But there is another side to affinity. The downside, journalists say, comes when:

1. Sources assume that you’ll tell favorable stories about them because you have a common heritage (**Text: p. 328**).
2. Sources shorthand information, assuming that, because you’re like them, you don’t need the fuller explanation (**Text: pp. 75–76**).
3. Reporters assume sources with whom they share race/ethnicity are more credible (**Text: p. 44**).

Building strong reporting skills and a reputation for excellent journalism (**DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 3:47**) is still the best way to find and tell high-quality stories about race and ethnicity.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Covering People Like You, the interview with Jodi Rave has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Capturing the Authentic Voice
Complexity
Context
Describing People by Race and Ethnicity

Doing Your Homework
Ethics: Handling Quotes
Ethics: What Is Balance?
Framing the Story

Assignments

1. Many communities have long-standing legal cases tied to historic discrimination. Research racial and ethnic conflicts in your community and identify, as Rave does, a key public record that summarizes a case.

2. Do a story on a topic about which you have very strong feelings. When you're done, identify all the sources you interviewed or story angles you pursued that departed from your point of view.

3. Interview three reporters in your community about the challenges they face in covering people who share their race or ethnicity. Write about how your views on the issue were affected by the exercise, quoting your interviewees.



Sara Bernal and her uncle, Kenneth Hayes, both own land on Arizona's Gila River Reservation. (Photo: Roy Dabner, Lincoln Journal Star)