

Dr. Jacobsen-Bia's full article, along with this interview, multimedia links, and photographs, is available at *Cultural Anthropology Online*.

### About the Author

Kristina Jacobsen-Bia is an assistant professor in the Departments of Music and Anthropology at the University of New Mexico. Her research focuses on anthropology of the voice, the politics of authenticity, indigeneity and belonging, music of Native North America and the Appalachian mountains, race and musical genre, music as cultural performance, indigenous language revitalization, and working-class expressive cultures. As an anthropologist, ethnomusicologist, and performing musician, Jacobsen-Bia is invested in linking cultural politics to scholarship about music, art, and aesthetics. She is currently working on a book manuscript based on her ethnographic research on the Navajo Nation, where she sang and played steel guitar with Diné country western bands for two and a half years. For more on Jacobsen-Bia's work, please visit her [faculty page](#).

### Interview with Kristina Jacobsen-Bia

**Ann Iwashita:** It strikes me that the Navajo Nation covers a vast area across Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, and that different Navajo Chapters may have contradictory politics surrounding Radmilla's wide acclaim. Are there patterns you have noted that speak to how politics of race and authenticity might be differentially distributed in geographic space? In turn, how do people in this broad contingency mapped as the Navajo Nation make sense of Radmilla and her success? How do they support or deny her becoming?

**Kristina Jacobsen-Bia:** In my time spent living on both the Arizona and New Mexico sides of the Navajo reservation, I saw varying responses to the politics of language, place, and authenticity. Similarly, I hear and see mixed responses to Radmilla's voice and her message about inclusion and belonging.

Land history is different on reservation portions in each state. For example, on the Arizona-side reservation land is contiguous and is held in trust by the Federal government for the Navajo people. Tribal sovereignty, of course, predates the birth of both territories, which later became states, but nonetheless these jurisdictional differences can be salient on Navajo land today. On the easternmost portion of the New Mexico side, the area known as "Eastern Agency" is checkerboarded, meaning that reservation land is interspersed with private ranch land, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Forest Service (NFS), National Park Service (NPS), and other federal land-owning entities. These land-allocation patterns have led, in my experience, to differential perceptions of authenticity, where Arizona reservation residents are often perceived as being more "authentic" in some sense, more connected to ceremonial life, heritage-language abilities, and adhering to traditional matrilineal residence patterns. At the same time, this authenticity badge is often a double-edged sword, where being more authentically Navajo, hauling water, owning livestock, and living a more traditional lifestyle also opens one up to the criticism of being "hick" or, as the pejorative local term has it, "jáán."

On the New Mexico side, in contrast, residents sometimes perceive themselves as being less traditional, more racially and culturally "mixed," particularly in regards to mixture with Hispano, Apache, and Pueblo communities. This leads to the self-perception and impressions by Arizona residents of Checkerboard dwellers as being less authentically or traditionally Navajo.

Perhaps because of this open acknowledgement of mixture and lack of “purity” in a “blood quantum” sense, Crownpoint residents seem less concerned with Radmilla’s biracial background and often more appreciative of her voice and her music. At the same time, because she is an “Arizona Navajo,” Radmilla is also less well-known on New Mexico sides of the reservation, and the debate swirling around her at the time of the crowning was centered largely on Arizona reservation land.

**AI:** You talk about the ironies of the one-drop rule for a person of mixed African-American and Indian descent, whereby “it [takes] 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). How do you see the politics of authenticity and representation within the Navajo Nation mirroring and challenging American legal logic of blood quantum and phenotype?

**KJB:** I see it as both mirroring and challenging it simultaneously. This ambiguous indexicality (Samuels 2004) seems to me to be a very accurate expression of the complexities of contemporary sovereignty as it’s enacted by what the Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall termed “domestic dependent nations.” On the one hand, having a higher blood quantum or being a “4/4” Navajo, for example, is absolutely linked to ideas of Navajo authenticity and social belonging. Similarly, phenotype and skin color are also used as indexes of Navajo authenticity, both within Diné communities and in negotiating insider/outsider ideas of Navajo authenticity. In these ways the politics of authenticity and belonging are reflective of larger U.S. policies of blood quantum and phenotype, and reflect the “domestic” and “dependent” parts of sovereign indigenous nations.

On the other hand, there are many Navajo citizens, including Radmilla and her maternal grandmother, who insist that being Navajo isn’t about external factors such as appearance and blood quantum. These citizens use historical and epistemological determinants of belonging, such as matrilineal clan, place of birth, and linguistic and cultural knowledge, as methods to assess who belongs and who doesn’t. These perspectives reflect the self-standing “nation” definition of sovereignty as it applies to federally recognized tribes in the United States. Interestingly, it’s often older Navajos who use the latter criteria, and younger Diné who are more adamant about blood quantum and phenotype.

**AI:** During your dissertation fieldwork, you were the member of a country western band in the Navajo Nation. Can you speak to how this shaped your understanding of the lines along which racial politics in music lies, especially in terms of how one looks, what one knows, how one speaks and acts?

**KJB:** Being an Anglo, female musician playing with all-Navajo bands absolutely shaped my own understandings of racial politics as these played out in bands and in the settings where we performed. This difference served as both an asset and a detriment. First and most problematically, since the main band I played with was called Native Country, there was always the question of what to do with the bilagáana [Anglo] singer and steel player. This came up particularly in live performance situations and in the making of our first album when it came to the album cover and how to accurately represent ourselves as “Native Country.” Many of these suggestions involved asking me to “play Indian” to buttress the Native credentials of the band, such as the band leader suggesting that I tell everyone I was either “Lumbee” or “Cherokee” (something I declined to do) or that I put a feather in my Tony Lama hat for a more “Native” effect.

On the other hand, my Anglo identity lent us credibility in obtaining off-reservation gigs,

particularly in more racially fraught “border town” bars in towns such as Page, Gallup, and Winslow. Bar owners and managers also problematically assumed, because I was Anglo, that I was the band manager, organizer, etc., which was absolutely not the case. Finally, having a bilagáana singer in a Native band also marked our band as a sort of gimmick in ways which were sometimes good for marketing purposes and for procuring gigs in a super-saturated market where there are over fifty country bands performing on the reservation.

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**AI:** It strikes me that you have a deep understanding of music: the weavings of breath, tone, and notes that can run beneath, or give life to, lyrics. Could you take us through part of a song, maybe “A Beautiful Dawn,” describing the movement of the voice? What would it mean to be able to detach the songs from their singer’s race and image, and even perhaps from a musical genre? What would you hear?

**KJB:** Let’s look at 0:26–0:45 of “A Beautiful Dawn.” Written by Radmilla’s uncle and noted composer and singer, Herman Cody, “A Beautiful Dawn” is a song composed in a traditional-sounding vein for solo voice. The song begins with vocables, or non-lexical, formulaic syllabic patterns specific to certain songs and Navajo musical genres. Vocables in this song include “He ya ne ye yanga,” “iye ye,” and “ne yo wo.” Following the vocables, “he ya ne ye yanga,” in the first referential line of the song, “Nizhonigo hayilkaah” (in a serene state, the dawn comes), the voice swoops up on the word “nizhonigo” (beautifully or serenely) on an interval of a perfect fifth and then descends, incrementally, back down to the opening pitch or note of the song. As you listen to the descent, Radmilla links each descending pitch to the next pitch by employing melismas or vocal glides from one pitch to another, sliding from one note into the next and disguising the register shift from her head voice to her chest voice in the process. We can hear this on the syllable “-go” at the end of “nizhonigo.”

In contrast to vocal performances in country music, for example, where accentuating the register shifts or “breaks” between head and chest voice (as we might hear in a yodel) is a prized part of country performance practice, here Radmilla seamlessly integrates her “head” and “chest” voices so that we don’t hear the voice breaks at all. You can also hear Radmilla using vibrato, or rapid variations in pitch producing a pulsing or trembling effect, on sustained notes ending in vowels on the syllables, for example on the syllables “-kaah” and vocables “iye ye.” Breath also factors prominently in this recording. Radmilla does short, sharp breath intakes between phrases as a sort of punctuation—particularly effective because this song is written for solo voice. In contrast to many Navajo traditional singers, you also hear very little nasality in Radmilla’s singing style and a less “pressed” sounding voice. Instead, breath here becomes an expressive resource utilized to communicate emotional involvement and investment on the singer’s part in the vocal performance.

**AI:** At the close of your article, you write, quite beautifully, “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” (19). This is a new politics of recognition, which is not officiated by legal system or policy, but rather by vulnerabilities and attachments to sound, as well as an openness to the possibility that there are limits to our own knowledge of what might bring us more fully into our own lives. In your view, what does Radmilla represent in this vast political landscape of indigeneity, race, and music? What potential does she manifest, in her very existence?

**KJB:** Radmilla’s voice challenges the neat categories we often create and then naturalize

between racial identity and musical genre. In the case of the Navajo Nation, it also challenges assumptions about indigenous citizenship and belonging and the prescriptive ways that Navajo citizens should both look and sound.

For me, what's powerful about Radmilla's voice is the seamless coming together of musico-linguistic practices and myriad musical genres into a voice that is incredibly resonant, powerful, and complete in its own right. At the same time, it's very hard to dissect and tease apart all of these influences because they are so artfully fused into what I hear as an auratic voice. Her voice is a beautiful example of contemporary indigeneity where, like all identity formations, multiple cultural influences are fused into a complete and discrete entity, which stands, successfully and completely, on its own two feet.