The author would like to acknowledge the long-standing difficulty in selecting a group term to describe the Indigenous Peoples of North and South America. American Indian and Indian both have controversies related to the history of European colonization and imposition of names. Native American is problematic because all people who are born in the United States are native to the country. There are other terms, such as First Nations People that are used in countries like Canada, but they are less frequently used in the United States. I have chosen to use Native American because that is the term I use to identify myself unless specifically referring to my particular Nation and heritage (Arawak). It is also the term that, in my experience, is most commonly used and accepted in my region of the country.

The book, Guns, Germs, & Steel by Jared Diamond contains more information about the history of writing and implications for cultures who were proficient in particular forms of writing, whether syllabry, phonetic, or pictures, relative to cultures who were evolving written language, had their books burned and destroyed, or had no known written language.

Before I share my personal experiences to illustrate how covert racism impacts Native Americans, it is important to consider the role of “the story” as a teaching tool. Every culture began with an oral tradition. The oral story was the way a group of people passed on to its next generation such things as its history of creation, rules for behavior, consequences for misbehavior, rites of passage, and ways to treat other people and animals. Eventually, some cultures developed writing and chose to move from oral to written versions of the stories in order to pass them on to the next generation. We know some previously oral stories by these names: The Koran, The Bible, and The Torah. Writing has been one of the greatest inventions (Diamond 1999) in history, allowing knowledge to be transferred into the storage medium of millions of books in thousands of libraries. But now, how do we cull through all that written word? How do we know what is most important? For cultures that have thousands of years of oral tradition, important information is distilled and passed down in stories and songs, and the very most important knowledge is encoded into a ceremony.
Multicultural education has been defined in many ways. I use it here to include both content and pedagogy. It includes making underrepresented groups visible, teaching in ways to reach all learners, and acknowledging all oppressions and their intersections. The ultimate goal of multicultural education is social justice for historically oppressed groups (Alvord 1999). The significance of oral tradition and its value among Native Americans cannot be underestimated (Alvord 1999; King 2003). The metaphors, teachings, and examples laid out in a story are an integral part of the indirect communication style of Native Americans (Roseberry-McKibbin 1995). That communication style also includes the process by which stories are told. Stories are relayed to individuals within families and communities (clans, nations); with and among other people with whom a relationship exists. Having said that, the role of the story or the “narrative” takes on a new dimension in modern times (Lee 2003). It is a way for Native Americans to speak that allows the opportunity for non-Native people to listen and hear our authentic experiences, which too frequently are hidden and missing from the world. In this chapter, I will relay personal stories that highlight covert racism and connect these stories to the issues of racial identity development, marginalization, stereotypes and media, national holidays, multiracialness, and cultural survival. Listening to stories from people who are experiencing the pain of racism is a step toward understanding the many ways covert racism occurs.

David Wellman (1993) defines racism as a system of advantage based on race. This system includes personal, social/cultural, and institutional/systemic forms of racism. In my experience of teaching multicultural courses, most people conceptualize racism as overt, individual acts of meanness and therefore do not see themselves as engaging in racist behavior. Once they understand how the multiple levels of racism work together to maintain power and privilege of the dominant white European American group, they begin to understand that their privilege, as well as their silence (Ayvazian 1995), reinforces the cycle of oppression.

Researchers have identified this “silence” is different ways. Kivel (1996) and Batts (1998) use terms like “modern forms of racism” and Sue calls them “microaggressions” (2007). What we can say is that covert racism is characterized by silence around labeling and understanding actions as racist due to not knowing, not being aware, ignoring.