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Grace Thayer
Bridgewater State University

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Recommended Citation

Thayer, Grace. (2022). Blood Quantum? Native DNA? Indigenous Lineage? The Complexities of Native Authenticity and Identity. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 567. Available at:

https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/567

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Blood Quantum? Native DNA? Indigenous Lineage?
The Complexities of Native Authenticity and Identity

Grace Katherine Thayer

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

April 15, 2022

Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Thesis Advisor

Date: 5/8/2022

Dr. Allyson Ferrante, Committee Member

Date: 5/8/2022

Dr. Benjamin D. Carson, Committee Member

Date: 4/15/2022

Blood Quantum? Native DNA? Indigenous Lineage? The Complexities of Native Authenticity and Identity

“The deceptively simple, seemingly neutral approach to determining who is or is not a bona fide Indian will continue to be a tool of colonization, eagerly seized and wielded by those who wish to consolidate their power and spurred on by those who stand to profit from the resulting conflict”

– David E. and Shelly Hulse Wilkins (Lumbee Nation)

Unlike any other ethnic minority in the US, Native Americans are required to authenticate their Indianness, or their relation to Native peoples, in order to qualify for tribal citizenship and justify their identity as Indigenous peoples. In order to become citizens of a Native nation, or to even be considered Indigenous in the eyes of the United States government, Native peoples are often required to prove their Indigeneity, or Nativeness, through blood, DNA, and other seemingly quantifiable measurements. No other minority group is forced to prove their legitimacy to be a citizen of their community in the United States, yet Indigenous peoples are regularly required to authenticate themselves on both a social and governmental level. While it may seem reasonable and genuine for wanting to vet a person in order to make sure their claims are genuine, this act of evaluating one’s Nativeness can be extremely damaging for many Native communities and for a nation’s sovereignty, as the act convolutes the enrollment system, making granting citizenship difficult. Having strict citizenship requirements relating to blood and DNA also limits the number of prospective citizens, thus limiting overall population size. Furthermore, many of the practices used to verify Indigeneity are comprised of subjective criteria heavily influenced by racist historical discourse, including past policies appertaining to the erasure of Native peoples.

Some examples of how Indigeneity is verified include the following: lineage tracking (the act of tracing ancestors in order to mark descendants from a certain person or group), fractions of

land allotments (the subdividing of sections of land based on the Dawes Act of 1887), and perhaps the most divisive, blood quantum (the measuring of the amount of Indigenous blood one possesses). All of these practices are influenced by or in accordance with colonial ideologies, which contributed to Indigenous genocides in the first place. In addition, validation of Indigenous peoples often comes down to how well an individual matches the description of the colonially manufactured and monolithic “Native American” image that so many are familiar with (stereotypical deep reddish-brown skin, braids, stoic nature, etc.) which of course is based on the many stereotypes that have been perpetuated since Columbus’ first accounts of the “Indians” in his “Letter of the First Voyage.” However, attempting to terminate the practice of policing who is and who isn’t Indigenous is not an easy fix due to the many complexities and layers that muddle tribal enrollment systems. One major complexity is that the Blood Quantum System (BQS) is currently utilized and supported by 70 % of U.S. state and federally recognized Native nations. These nations, it could be argued, by adhering to the BQS, are “self-colonizing,” despite the fact that the BQS itself is a policy of erasure set up by colonial governments in hopes of limiting the number of Indigenous peoples in America. Nevertheless, determining one’s Nativeness based solely on numerical and scientific measures such as blood quantum and DNA is impossible, because identity and culture are not quantifiable.

Growing up, I learned very little about Native American histories and cultures. Given the fact that I lived just twenty miles from Plymouth, Massachusetts, most of what I did learn surrounded the myth of the first Thanksgiving, a myth still perpetuated by the Plimoth Patuxet Museum. It wasn’t until my second year of college, when I first read Zitkála-Šá’s *School Days of an Indian Girl*, that I was introduced to Indigenous histories and learned about the many injustices that Indigenous peoples face. I look back at my childhood in public education and am

shocked over how little Indigenous peoples were acknowledged. Perhaps most surprising to me now is that I also had never learned about current-day Native cultures and practices, which led me to falsely believe that Native Americans were a group of the past or that there weren't many "real" Native Americans on the east coast. Now I know how wrong I was. Since reading Šá's memoir, I have actively sought out courses at my university in order to learn more about Indigenous studies, which has led me to my current research. In conducting this research, I, as a non-Indigenous person, hope to shed light on the many complexities of what it means to be Indigenous today and to educate members of the general public, many of whom may currently believe the fallacies I once believed. Furthermore, armed with a more complex understanding of Indigenous histories and matters, I hope that I can be an ally (or accomplice rather) to Indigenous communities. I conducted this research knowing that, as a non-Indigenous white woman, I have not shared, nor had to endure, the many negative experiences of Indigenous people in native North America. But I am here to listen and to constantly learn.

In the next two sections, I will be discussing human biases in science and politics as it relates to Native policy and treaty making. When I bring up the inadequacies and human biases in science that often goes ignored, I am not calling for the cancellation of science, instead, I am shedding light on situations where science undermines human experiences, in hope that there will be change, and that the general public might understand why Indigenous identity cannot solely rely on genetics.

And remember, wherever you are in the Americas, you are on Native land (<https://native-land.ca/>).

Scientific Racism: When Science is Biased

In our modern, high-tech world where DNA tests are widely available to the general public, and age-old mysteries regarding ancestry and origins can seemingly be solved instantly with a little bit of saliva, it is easy to believe that everyone's questions of belonging and community can be easily answered by science, bypassing all questions of culture and experience. However, it is simply not that easy. Such romanticized depictions of ancestral lineage testing are seen in everyday life, including television commercials for DNA testing companies such as *23andMe* or *Ancestry.com*. One popular commercial from *Ancestry.com* features a man who proudly grew up taking part in German cultural practices and had strong ties with the German community in America. However, after taking the *Ancestry* DNA test, he found out he wasn't actually German at all, but mostly Scottish; he states that he was shocked but decided to give up his German traditions and "trade in his lederhosen for a kilt" (2015). This commercial, which is trying to persuade others to take the *Ancestry.com* DNA Test for ninety-nine dollars, suggests that identity has nothing to do with culture, and everything to do with measuring blood and DNA. It suggests that even if someone considers themselves to be one ethnicity their entire life, and is wholly part of their community, taking part in cultural practices, that they need to change their identity if they learn their DNA doesn't match. This way of thinking perpetuates colonialism, as it implies that people can be fragmented and divided evenly into categories (a key point of colonialism's "divide and conquer" ideology), which then helps solve all questions of identity and belonging. As it relates to Indigenous authenticity and identity, this sort of romanticized DNA testing and sequencing is often viewed as the answer to all problems regarding Indigenous citizenship and identity problems. Phrases like, "DNA doesn't lie" or "the proof is in the pudding" are used when discussing the validity of Indigenous claims to Native ancestry, suggesting that when someone's claims to Indigenous lineage are in question, their

DNA holds all of the answers, not their community ties or culture. This way of neocolonial reduction is highly problematic and leads to the exclusion of Indigenous peoples, as many Native Americans lack the amount of DNA and blood quantum needed to be considered Indigenous, and are, therefore, excluded from their community, even if they have been strong members of that community for their entire lives. Furthermore, genetic testing and DNA sequencing is an uneven playing field, where identities of BIPOC are evaluated using smaller testing pools, making the results less reliable. Therefore, identity, especially Indigenous identity which has suffered hundreds of years of settler colonialism, cannot be contained or defined by genetics; DNA testing should not be used as the sole marker of Indigeneity, or membership in a Native community.

Science is often viewed as a non-biased, completely reliable source of objective information; however, just like any other discipline, science will always be subject to human-biases, including racism. Historically, western science has been used to justify racism and discrimination against Indigenous peoples, as well as other people of color. In fact, eugenics, craniometry, phrenology, and other pseudosciences have been used by those in favor of the plantocracy as key evidence to support the argument that white people are superior to non-whites. Samuel George Morton, an American scientist and physician most famous for his collection of Indigenous skulls, published his book *Crania Americana: Or a Comparatif View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of... America* in 1839, in which he discusses the differences between Indigenous and white intelligence based on his measuring of skull capacity. He writes, “the structure of his [the Indigenous] mind appears to be different from that of the white man; nor can the two harmonies in their social relations, except on the most limited scale” (Morton 29). Morton suggests that because Indigenous skulls look different than white skulls,

that Native minds and intelligence must be inferior, since white men are considered the standard of intelligence. In an editorial footnote, the editors write, “Dr. Morton adds that the Indians are extremely defective in comprehending everything relating to numbers...showed the great deficiency of the organ of number in their skulls” (29). Morton is suggesting that Indigenous peoples are not capable of thinking like white men, especially regarding math and numbers, and therefore Native people should only socialize with white people on rare occasions. He believes their brains and skulls are supposedly “scientifically” smaller and shaped differently. This toxic finding was widely supported by scientists all over the world, including Charles Darwin. Morton’s research also later supported and helped reaffirm the Indian Removal Act, which gave the U.S. government the power to remove and sell Native land. Despite its overt racism (or perhaps because of its support of overt racism, which helps those in power continue to flourish), *Crania Americana* had a lasting impacts on American knowledge regarding Indigenous peoples, and is one example of how biased widely supported scientific studies can be. While not as overt, there are still manifestations of this type of scientific racism today, such as the common myth that “Native Americans are medically predisposed to alcoholism.” This is not necessarily true; alcoholism on reservations is an extremely complex issue that stems from the overall emotional erasure of Indigenous peoples due to colonialism and being forced to move into reservations. However, this myth continues to be perpetuated by those claiming that there is a scientific reason solely responsible for alcoholism on reservations. “Science” is not always correct nor is it completely neutral and objective, and therefore, scientific measurements cannot be used as the sole marker of Indigenous identity.

With the advancements of commercial DNA testing, it is assumed that the capabilities of ancestry and genetic tests are much more accurate than they actually are; commercial DNA tests

should not, cannot, and are not used as markers of Indigenous citizenship and identity. Kim Tallbear, Indigenous professor, author, and pioneer of Indigenous studies of DNA, sheds light on the inadequacies of DNA testing in her book, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belongings and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. Tallbear writes, “Most living Native Americans have not had their DNA studied, and the definition of who is Native American for the purpose of sampling is not always in line with broader social and political definitions of who is Native American...[The] shortcomings of the tests are that they examine a very few lineages that comprise a very small percentage of one’s total ancestry, less than 1 percent of total DNA” (Tallbear 43). Genetic ancestry tests (specifically Y-chromosome and mtDNA tests) work by surveying a person’s genome and recording variations of single nucleotide polymorphisms, or SNPs. After sorting through the SNPs, companies take this information and compare it to a pool of other people’s DNA, whose ancestry and origins are known. With this information, a computer program takes an educated guess at a person’s ancestral makeup. Tallbear points out that one of the key elements of genetic ancestry testing, comparing identified DNA, is unable to work effectively for Native peoples because very few Indigenous Americans have actually had their DNA tested. So the pool of known DNA for Indigenous ancestry is much smaller than that of someone with European ancestry, meaning there is a much greater chance for miscalculating or misplacing someone on an ancestral map. Additionally, popular companies such as *AncestryDNA* and *23andMe* find great difficulty actually differentiating between East Asian and Indigenous DNA; both websites have grouped these ethnicities together (clumping Asian and Indigenous peoples together is already a sensitive topic; this will be addressed next). Commercial DNA tests are also unable to pin-point someone’s nation or tribe, and will most likely never be able to, based on the very similar genetic makeup between nations. Instead, companies give into

the trap of Pan-Indianism, or the clumping of Indigenous peoples together as one homogenous group, which is problematic at best. It is not just Native peoples who are shortchanged. These companies also group numerous African nations together under the umbrella term “Broadly Sub-Saharan African.” At the time of writing, *23andMe* currently only has 74 Indigenous individuals used as references in their testing pools, compared to the 6328 European references used for determining ancestral makeup, making ancestry tests an uneven playing ground for BIPOC.

Scientific theories have also been used to undermine and displace Indigenous peoples and have been treated as absolute truth despite being exactly what they are: just theories. The Bering Strait Theory is a common belief that the ancestors of today’s Indigenous Americans aren’t actually from North America but originated from what is now known as modern day Siberia. It is speculated that these ancestors migrated via a land bridge around 13,000-15,000 years ago, which has since been covered by rising sea levels. Just like many scientific theories, the Bering Strait Theory is highly controversial (especially within Indigenous communities), and there is evidence that goes against it, such as the fact that there have been remains and burial grounds found in North America which are dated before the 15,000 year cutoff of the original theory. According to Alexander Ewen, scholar and member of the Purépecha Nation, some archaeologists and scientists are afraid to challenge the Bering Strait Theory for fear of their reputation, though, because the theory is adamantly supported by powerful people in the anthropological industry, who control funding. Ewen writes, “It was simply impossible to challenge the scientific view that ancient Indians crossed over from Asia ... regardless of what the scientific evidence actually said... [No] scientist would risk their reputation and their academic standing to counter the prevailing view, nor would any reputable journal publish their findings even if they were brave enough to speak out” (4). Ewen is describing a situation where a

group of scientists found evidence against this theory, yet feared bringing the evidence to light against other powerful scientists, because of the possible effects it would have on their reputation and funding. This is an example of how powerful people (often men) control the narrative and threaten those who disagree with their views; this narrative thus effects disciplines which are seemingly objective. Perhaps one reason why the Bering Strait Theory has not been challenged as greatly as other theories is because it justifies colonialism's Manifest Destiny—if Native Americans aren't actually from North America as the theory suggests, then they have no more rights or claims to land than the European settlers have, because they too were once immigrants—so it's perfectly acceptable to displace and erase them. The theory also directly contradicts and subverts Indigenous creation stories, as it suggests that Native people are in fact not native to these lands, unlike what many creation stories say; it suggests that the origins of creation on Turtle Island (a Haudenosaunee belief), for example, are unquestionably false, as Indigenous Americans are not technically native to Turtle Island. This dismal of ideologies is not entirely unheard of, as Western science has always dismissed Indigenous oral traditions. The Bering Strait Theory is just one example of how science is used to undermine the Indigenous worldview and justify Manifest Destiny.

Similarly, the Clovis-First theory, which states that no humans existed in the Americas before 13,000 years ago, when the Clovis people lived (sometimes referred to as Paleo-Indians), was debunked in the early 21st century, approximately sixty years after it was hypothesized; but the belief in this theory from orthodox scientists and archaeologists was so strong that many researchers were unable to bring new evidence to light against the theory without being academically destroyed and shunned, showing just how politically, socially and emotionally-biased science can be. Paulette Steeves, Indigenous archeologist, Canadian Research Chair in

Healing and Reconciliation, and author of *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere*, discusses the hostile academic environment surrounding the Clovis-First theory, saying, “The bias against pre-Clovis is so strong that many archaeologists who found older sites and reported on them were academically destroyed... [A]rcheologists spent their time looking for Clovis’ tools in Siberia and Asia to show that culture came from the East to the West. Nothing was ever found... [they] invented a pan-hemispherical cultural group called Clovis people. The Clovis people didn’t exist” (Ryan). Steeves explains that despite having found evidence to disprove the Clovis-First theory, archaeologists and scientists were not actually able to report on the sites they found without having their reputation and work academically belittled. One would think that professionals in the field would welcome new evidence and information, since science, and knowledge in general, is always changing for the better based on new evidence. But instead of prioritizing new information in order to advance the discipline, many archeologist chose to ignore the new evidence on the grounds that the Clovis-First theory was a scientific break-through supported by powerful professionals who controlled the narrative. So anyone who found and reported evidence against the theory would be seen as a radical and would be discredited. Eventually, enough information and evidence was acquired to disprove the theory that the Clovis were the first peoples in North America, but knowing that the theory has in fact been largely disproven now makes the initial ignorance and social-biases within science even more evident. If some professional environments within the scientific discipline are this unwilling to change with evolving information, then the beliefs and theories which we are reliant on in the modern day may also be not as accurate and objective as we think due to the unwillingness to change. This is why it is important to never be solely reliant on one source of

information when making a decision or measurement; it's important to never decide who is or who is not Native based on science and blood measurements alone.

Social sciences and the humanities are guilty of taking advantage of Indigenous peoples and deliberately ignoring Native needs in the name of research; therefore, it is extremely important to acknowledge Indigenous Americans as present-day people who have rights to their own management of research and expertise of Indigenous history. T.J. Ferguson, archaeologist and professor at the University of Arizona who specializes in anthropological research in collaboration with Indigenous Americans, discusses the problematic history between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples regarding grave-robbing in his paper, "Native Americans and the Practice of Archaeology." He writes, "archaeology in the Americas was essentially a colonist endeavor... Native Americans were dehumanized and objectified when the remains of their ancestors were collected" (Ferguson 64-65). Up until the year 1990 when the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed, archaeologist and anthropologist were legally allowed to dig up Native American burial grounds in search of artifacts, including human remains. These remains would be used for research and historical evidence, and often would then end up in museums and private collections. Most "artifacts" would never be returned to the Native nation they belonged to, and some were "lost," only to be found for sale on private trading websites. Ferguson explains that the archaeologists' privilege to be able to essentially steal someone else's ancestors and loved ones' bodies for their own use stems from archaeology being a colonial invention used to provide further evidence of Anglo-Saxon superiority. For many years, backlash from the Indigenous communities were drowned out by the industry claiming that the information acquired from these digs are "extremely important for figuring out the past," or that this information is "important for future generation to know," as if to say "we

know you are incredibly uncomfortable given the fact that we are crossing every boundary in order to conduct this research and present this data, but you are being selfish asking for regulations and social-rules, because you ultimately will be hurting the past and future by complicating this.” This evidences researchers’ attempt to “preserve” Indigenous history and culture, as if Indigenous peoples aren’t here to do it for themselves. This belief of course is intertwined with the “Vanishing Indian Myth:” the belief that most, if not all, “real” Indigenous peoples were eradicated by colonists, and that what little Indigenous peoples we have left are doomed to die off within the next century. In order to prevent researchers taking advantage of Indigenous peoples, we must acknowledge that Indigenous peoples *are still here*, and are capable of their own preservation. Beverly Becenti-Pigman, of the Navajo nation, says, “We must develop expert Indians instead of Indian experts.” Grave robbing, for example, directly relates to Indigenous identity, as it once again shows that today’s scientists and experts do not always have the best intentions, nor do they know what is best for the Indigenous community; therefore, all determinacy of Indigenous affairs, including identity and authenticity, should rest on the Indigenous, not the “Indian experts.”

Manufactured Through the Colonist’s Eye: The Characterization of Indigenous Peoples in American Culture

Museum goes at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) walk down a large, black corridor, where every wall is filled with images and depictions of Native Americans in pop culture and mainstream media. Among the images are some familiar sights, including the Land O’ Lakes butter maiden, Chief Wahoo (the mascot of the Cleveland Indians baseball team), and an animated Pocahontas. What has just been described is part of the “Americans” exhibition at NMAI, which debuted in 2018 and can currently be explored on the third floor of the museum.

The exhibition's purpose is to start the conversation on how Indians seem to be a central part of American identity and a fixture of mainstream media, yet receive little real recognition as living peoples. Curator Paul Chatt Smith explains, "No other minority has captivated and come to identify with the country itself quite like Indians in the U.S." (Bentley). These images on display are reminders of how American society projects their impressions onto Indigenous peoples, and how Native representation is seemingly everywhere, yet is not actually acting on behalf of today's Indigenous peoples. In fact, many depictions are extremely demeaning and problematic, as they rely on racist stereotypes. The depictions of Native Americans in mainstream media directly relate to Indigenous authenticity and identity, as it leaves both Natives and non-natives believing that Indigenous peoples only look certain ways, and if a Native person does not match that description, then they aren't a "real" Indigenous person. These images are often manufactured to be outlandish and caricature-like, so very few people actually match their description, leaving many Indigenous peoples invisible to the general public. Native depictions in pop-culture are one contributing factor for the need to authenticate Indianness, and therefore should be refuted and reformulated to meet Indigenous peoples' needs.

Many of the stereotypical traits that are used to phenotype and identify Indigenous peoples (and are used as a template for manufacturing Native depictions in pop-culture), stem from Christopher Columbus' "Letter on the First Voyage," in which he describes the Indigenous peoples he came across when he arrived in what is now known as the Caribbean. Columbus describes the Indigenous peoples he saw as wearing little clothing, with long, dark hair, and wielding bows and arrows: "The inhabitants...always go as naked as they came into the world, except that some of the women cover their private parts with leaves ... They wear their hair long like women, and use bows and arrows" (Columbus 4). This description is what many westerners

still envision today when the word “Indigenous,” or “Indian,” is used. This description is also synonymous with many Indigenous characters in Western movies, ad campaigns, T.V. shows, etc, evidencing that Columbus, and those who follow, are still being given authority over Indigenous voices. While this phenotyping may seem innocuous considering that this technically is how some Indigenous peoples have dressed in the past, it actually perpetuates colonialism and Pan-Indianism. Firstly, Indigenous people’s appearances are one of the many cultural practices that were forcefully cleaved from them, as they were forced to become more “civilized” by changing the way they dress to conform to the European standard. Additionally, this description is believed to be representative of all Indigenous peoples, despite the fact that each nation has distinct ways of dressing, relating to their own cultural practices. Diné yucca and deerskin dress is different from Wampanoag breech clout and leggings; both types of dress reflect the geographically different Indigenous nations who deserve their own acknowledgements, and should not be grouped into one nation of peoples. Furthermore, because of inter-marriages and overall modernization, Indigenous peoples have become an incredibly diverse group, many of which do not fit the Native “mold” that has been created and forced upon them. Many reference points used to determine and legitimize Indigenous peoples are futile yet are continually used when authenticating individuals.

The use of Native American mascots is dehumanizing and leads to “a racially hostile environment that prevents [Indigenous children] from applying,” which directly effects Indigenous identity (Baca 73). Charlene Teters, an Indigenous artist, activist, and member of the Spokane nation, was faced with the demeaning world of “Indian” mascots when she brought her children to a basketball game at the University of Illinois. She was left horrified and her children left embarrassed when Chief Illiniwek, the university’s mascot, revealed himself and did an

offensive version of a “tribal dance.” The documentary, *In Whose Honor: American Indian Mascots in Sports*, by filmmaker Jay Rosenstein, covers the story of Teter’s fight to remove the racist mascot. Her picketing received immense backlash from sport fans, alumni, and the general public alike, all claiming that mascots are “tradition,” and that they are well loved and meant to honor Native Americans. Teters says, “Of course you love [your chief], you manufactured him. See, that’s not our image. That’s not our perception of ourselves, it’s their perception of who we are” (Rosenstein). Indigenous mascots are manufactured by white people in their image, and have no connection to the actual Indigenous community, so they are not “honoring” anyone. They rely on the same bigoted stereotypes that have been used for centuries to identify and exclude Indigenous peoples. No other minority group is subject to racist mascots in today’s climate. Today, we would never allow a Sambo character or Jim Crow to be used as the face of a baseball team, and rightfully so, because that would be terribly disrespectful. Yet somehow it was appropriate to plaster “R*dskins” for all to see, and attach it to a football team. (It is worth noting that the Washington football team recently has removed this slur from their name, but the damage that Indigenous communities experienced still stands). Additionally, placing Indigenous peoples into mascot category perpetuates the belief that Indigenous peoples are animal-like and savage. Tigers, eagles, panthers, bulldogs: these are just a few examples of common mascots in America; each animal is a powerful predator. What does this say about Indigenous peoples then? Or rather, what does it say about non-native peoples perspectives of Indigenous peoples? Native mascots leave many Indigenous peoples feeling ashamed of their Native identity, and therefore must be acknowledged and denounced when exploring the layers of Indigenous identity and authenticity.

Indigenous themed Halloween costumes are also dehumanizing, as they make a mockery of sacred cultural practices, and perpetuate the notion that “real” Native Americans are make-believe. Olivia Hoelt, author and member of the Oneida nation, writes about her experiences with Indigenous themed Halloween costumes in her article “Walking In Two Worlds: The Native American College Experience,” published in *The Great Vanishing Act: Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations*, edited by Kathleen Ratteree and Norbert Hill. Hoelt describes the moment she witnessed some friends attempting to buy Native American costumes. She writes, “[I] had the surprise encounter of finding two of my acquaintances deliberating over not if, but which Native princess-themed outfit to buy... Later that night, I saw someone wearing a giant, dollar store Headdress and beige outfit... cultural appropriation is a challenge” (Hoelt 36). This situation made Hoelt feel extremely uncomfortable, just as many Indigenous peoples feel when they see their likeness belittled. Indigenous costumes are a prime example of cultural appropriation, or the inappropriate adoption of customs by a dominant culture, as they are often worn by white individuals and prey on sacred traditions such as the wearing of headdresses. Headdresses, otherwise known as Warbonnets, are commonly worn by male leaders and elders in select Indigenous nations, most notably in the Great Plains region. They signify a warrior’s bravery and success, and in most cases, each and every feather is earned. Headdresses can be viewed as sacred and are an important part of ceremonial regalia. Wearing one as part of a Halloween costume is extremely disrespectful and disparages the honor and bravery it takes to earn each feather, especially when purchased at a place like a costume shop or the dollar store; wearing headdresses as part of a costume is akin to mocking a religious symbol. Additionally, Halloween costumes tend to feature mythical creatures that do not exist in the real world, and wearing Native American themed costumes put Indigenous peoples in the same category of

vampires, mummies and werewolves; they insinuate that Indigenous peoples are make-believe. How can anyone claim an identity with a group that does not exist? This is how something as seemingly innocent as Halloween costumes affect identity and authenticity.

“Playing Indian” is an example of how children are taught rules of colonialism, such as divide and conquer, from a young age, and leaves many Indigenous peoples feeling as if they still have targets on their backs. Playing “cowboys and Indians” is a common game that many children in America grew up role-playing. Each child involved picks a side, cowboys or Indians, and battles it out with fake guns and bows and arrows. Usually, the children playing the cowboys win, and the death of the Indian team is seen as an inevitable part of the game. Many children were inspired, or even encouraged, to play this game by the many Western movies that were produced in the early to mid-twentieth century. Se-ah-dom Edmo, Indigenous author and founder of the Northwest Justice Funders Collective, writes about the act of playing Indian in her book, *American Indian Identity: Citizenship, Membership, and Blood*, which she co-authored with Jessie Young and Alan Parker. She writes, “Playing Indian not only served to help develop American identity, but also worked to politically establish it by creating its own self-fulfilling prophecy—the Indian is dead so we should commemorate the noble savage by preserving an interpretation of him” (Edmo 66-67). Aside from being incredibly violent, playing Indian fulfills the prophecy that all Native Americans are dead, and commemorates this act in order to “honor” and remember, as Edmo explains. Historically, playing Indian wasn’t just a game, but a way to make a political statement and to hide one’s identity for the purpose of shifting blame, as evidenced by the Boston Tea Party, where colonial rebels disguised themselves as Native Americans. I myself have played Indian, when I was made to dress up as a Wampanoag person to reenact the First Thanksgiving with my preschool class. I look back at pictures of my four-

year-old self, decked out in an erroneous headdress hand-made out of colorful, plastic feathers, and I am embarrassed and angry that I was not taught any better, and that my preschool teacher hadn't thought of the people she would be hurting. As Dr. Cornel Pewewardy, Professor Emeritus of Indigenous Nations Studies at Portland State University says, "dressing up your children to demonstrate, reenact, and/or play cowboys and Indians is playing genocide." Playing Indian results in many Indigenous children losing self-esteem, which may discourage Indigenous children from wanting to identify as Native.

Blood Dynamics in Indian Country

"The blood quantum system is not broken, however. It is doing exactly what it was intended to do: reinforce binaries" – Doug Kiel (Oneida)

"Blood talk" has ruled discussions of citizenship and authenticity in Indian country, or Indigenous reservation land, territories, and communities, since the idea of "Indian blood" was created by settler-colonialism. Blood talk refers to conversations regarding blood quantum and blood fractions as it relates to belonging and becoming a citizen in a nation or tribe. Before measuring blood for the purpose of erasure was forced upon Indigenous peoples by colonizers, many nations adopted members into their community with little recognition of blood origins. Measuring blood is not a traditional practice of most Indigenous nations in America. In fact, inter-marrying with other clans and nations for the purpose of strengthening tribal relations was a well-celebrated tradition for many nations; risking the mixing of bloodlines and jeopardizing "purity" was rarely an acknowledged issue to be purposely avoided, except for rules regarding incestuous relationships. Instead, blood, as a western symbolic fluid of origins, can be traced to the Spanish Inquisition in 1484 with their "Pure Blood Laws," and has deep ties with Christianity

and colonialism (Friedman 4). Purity-obsessed colonizers brought the idea of pure, white blood to the Americas, which we still see in white supremacist movements today. Any other type of non-white blood was separated and labeled into a different category, and thus, “Indian blood” and the blood quantum system (BQS) was created, and eventually forced upon Indigenous peoples. The BQS specifically was made to erase Indigenous peoples by colonists, as it was created for forced assimilation. With the eventual adoption of the BQS by many Indigenous nations, worrisome complications have arisen, such as dwindling numbers of eligible citizens, serious identity crises, and difficulties navigating love and reproduction—all of which jeopardize the future of many communities. For these reasons, some Indigenous nations are choosing to forgo the blood quantum system, and instead are utilizing other forms of validation for the purpose of enrollment, such as: fractions of land, lineage tracking using the Dawes rolls, and measuring Native American DNA. In many ways, “Native American DNA” has replaced “Indian blood” within conversations of authentication. However, the meaning and emotions behind both phrases are essentially the same; they both perpetuate colonialism with problems of exclusion and gate-keeping within communities based on the idea of blood fractions. The language behind “DNA” is just seemingly more progressive and scientific, and therefore is more likely to be supported as a “fairer” way of validating Indianness. Generally, many of the forms of authentication still rely on the belief that identity and culture can be quantified, which is troublesome at best. However, our current political climate is not necessarily supportive of free enrollment systems. Ultimately, protecting and supporting self-sovereignty of Indigenous nations is most important; it is up to the individual nation to decide enrollment criteria and this must be supported, despite any “colonial catch 22” (Chow).

The idea of having Indian blood is a construct of settler-colonialism, so utilizing a system that is based upon the values of measuring Indigenous blood is showing accordance with colonialism. Colonizers brought white supremacy and the idea of “pure,” white blood to the Americas, which in turn created Indian blood. The practice of measuring Indian blood was later used for the purpose of forced assimilation. In 1887, the General Allotment Act (otherwise known as the Dawes Act, named after Massachusetts Congressman Henry Dawes) passed in hopes that Indigenous peoples would become homesteaders and assimilate into mainstream society. Forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples would have benefitted the country as it would create more farmers and workers, as well as get rid of the “savages,” who were seen as nuisances to progress and greatly challenged Christian values. In order to encourage farming, the government stripped millions of acres of tribal land from Indigenous peoples and promised to redistribute the “free” land back to Native Americans, but only if they were to register themselves with the Office of Indian Affairs (now known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or BIA). The Dawes act did not technically utilize any type of criteria that dictated who could register for these “base” rolls, other than specifying that land would be allotted through tribal relations. It did, however, give U.S. citizenship to those who were “half-blood” (half Indigenous, half white), along with their full title of land. Those who possessed more than half Indigenous blood had their title held in a trust for them for twenty-five years and were denied citizenship. This act supported the notion that those with more “pure,” white blood were more capable of business and more deserving of a spot in American society through citizenship, than those with a greater amount of “savage” blood. Later in 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act reversed these roles slightly when nations were suddenly allowed to create their own enrollment criteria, and many decided to adopt minimum blood quantum requirements as criteria to secure their rights to

sovereignty as a nation in the government's eye. This meant that those with less Indigenous blood than the required amount would not be able to enroll and receive land and other benefits. This is all to say that measuring Indigenous blood was created and implemented by colonizers for the purpose of erasure and forced assimilation, and utilizing a system based upon these values shows an adherence with settler-colonialism.

Indigenous nations who have blood quantum requirements for the purpose of enrollment may seem like they are "self-colonizing;" however, not only was this system forced upon them, but the government is still incentivizing nations to avoid "diluting" their Indigenous blood. Jessie Young, coauthor of *American Indian Identity: Citizenship, Membership, and Blood*, discusses this dilemma in her chapter, "Tribal Citizenship and Indian Identity." Young highlights the how the Bureau of Indian Affairs held losing rights to self-sovereignty over the heads of nations who were asking for the elimination of blood quantum requirements. The BIA, while conversing with the Lake Superior Chippewa nation, says, "We share your concern about eliminating the blood quantum in favor of mere descendancy... If there ceases to exist a demonstratable bilateral, political relationship between tribe and its members, the courts or Congress may well decide that a tribe has so diluted the relationship between a tribal government and its members that it has 'self-determined' its sovereignty away" (Young 114). The BIA is saying that while they understand the concern over diminishing enrollment numbers, it would be a *shame* if Congress were to take a nation's right to self-sovereignty away due to members no longer *actually* being Indigenous, since their blood no longer reflects their Indigeneity. This is just one example of how nations are being highly influenced (or even threatened) into keeping blood quantum requirements as part of enrollment criteria. Despite the fact that nations themselves technically have the last say on the matter, changing criteria can greatly jeopardize self-sovereignty, public

image, and even business ventures. This is why it is crucial to not victim-blame Indigenous peoples for “self-colonizing,” because it is sometimes out of the nation’s control.

As a result of the adoption and implementation of blood quantum requirements as part enrollment criteria, many Indigenous peoples who have grown up wholly in their community and have scaffolded their identity and beliefs around being Indigenous are not allowed to become citizens in their nation; this negatively affects Indigenous identity and moral, and jeopardizes the future of many nations. Leslie Logan, author and journalist for *Indian Country Today*, and member of the Seneca nation, discusses the heartache involved when a mixed Indigenous person is denied citizenship. In “Good Guidance,” in *The Great Vanishing Act; Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations*, Logan discusses the implications of her father remarrying a white person and having a “half-breed” child. Logan gives this example of her own half-sister, who is denied being included in her nation on the grounds that she is half white, despite growing up with traditions and taking part in her community. Logan writes:

Through no fault of her own, my half-sister was ruined under the rafters of the Longhouse that extended to my father’s side. By virtue of being my father’s daughter, she had been witness to sacred medicine ceremonies, dances, songs, masks, and recitations. Yet suddenly when she was 16, she was asked to leave my father’s house, because she was *honyo’oh* [a white person]; because she didn’t belong. My father’s choice had consequences, searing, painful, unmistakable, lifelong consequences for my half-sister who ultimately has to come to feel she was born of a place and a people to which she did not belong. She had come to understand, respect, and appreciate customs and traditions that she was later prohibited from participating in and even being in proximity to (Logan 27).

Although the Seneca nation is matrilineal, this situation is all too common for mixed individuals who lack the amount of Indigenous blood needed to enroll in their nation. It is overwhelmingly heartbreaking for anyone to be excluded from their community and traditions on the grounds that their blood, something so abstract, something they have no control over, doesn't measure up. In addition, many Indigenous peoples question their identity as a Native individual after being denied citizenship. This exclusion leads to fewer Indigenous peoples overall, both because there are fewer state and federally enrolled Natives, but also, some Indigenous peoples who would normally mark "American Indian or Native Alaskan" on documents such as the Census may choose to omit this category if their identity is in question after being denied enrollment, which means that there are fewer Indigenous Americans to be counted for. Fewer government accounted Indigenous peoples means the government feels less of a need to fund reservations, and may lead to more land cuts, etc. Blood quantum requirements ultimately lead to the exclusion of many Indigenous peoples, which then affects every Indigenous community whether or not they utilize the system.

Blood quantum requirements lead to many young, enrolled Indigenous peoples having anxiety surrounding marriage and having children, as they worry about "ruining" their future children's chances of enrollment if they cannot find a partner whose blood fractions are enough to meet the requirement; consequently, many Indigenous peoples marry for blood fractions as opposed to real love, which may be one contributing factor towards the high domestic violence rates in Indian country. Adrienne Keene, Indigenous writer, activist, and member of the Cherokee nation, writes about the trials and tribulations of young love amongst Indigenous peoples in "Love in the Time of Blood Quantum." Keene shares a statement by an Indigenous college student, who said, "I'm only 20 years old, in my 3rd year of undergrad, and I'm already

having anxiety about whether or not my future children will be ‘Native.’ My tribe has a 1/4th blood requirement and the only way my children would be enrolled is if my sperm donor... was at least a quarter Ojibwe” (Keene 6). This young person should be focused on studying and doing well in school, but she already is having overwhelming thoughts about whether or not her future children will be Native based on her choice of a partner or sperm donor. In her future, she should worry about how kind and caring her partner is, not forced to worry about how much Indigenous blood they possess. She is also equating being Native with having a certain degree of blood instead of, say, measuring Nativeness based on being active in their community and culture, which further exemplifies how much blood quantum actually affects Indigenous identity. Keene offers another example of an Indigenous woman who has concerns about love and blood quantum. The woman says, “I also wonder how many native women feel like they can’t leave a bad situation because it feels like a betrayal of their tribe... I am thinking love by fractions can be pretty thin love” (8). When this person says “love by fractions,” she means choosing someone based on their blood quantum measurements, and by “thin love,” she means these relationships contain no actual love.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in four women will experience domestic violence in America. Compared to this national average, Indigenous women are more likely to be affected by domestic violence, as a whopping four out of five Indigenous women will experience violence in their lifetime. Indigenous women are also ten-times more likely to be murdered than the national average, with homicide being the third most leading cause of death in young Indigenous women. The topics of domestic violence in Indian country and missing and murdered Indigenous women are incredibly complex, and come down to many factors, including high substance abuse, poverty, and unemployment rates in Indian

country (all of which, of course, are directly related to erasure forced upon Indigenous peoples by colonization), but it is safe to assume that marrying for blood quantum and not for love is a factor as well. Rushing into a relationship based on biological fulfilment instead emotional needs and happiness can lead to a disconsolate relationship where domestic violence may be more likely to take place. As this example given by Keene suggests, many Indigenous people who enter relationships because their partner fulfills the blood quantum requirement, as opposed to actually marrying for love and compatibility, find themselves in toxic situations where they may feel it is betrayal for their nation and children if they leave; which in turn, leads to more toxic behaviors such as domestic violence. Blood quantum requirements create anxiety about the future of the next generation's enrollment eligibility, which in turn leads to many Indigenous people not marrying for love, leading to consequential violence.

Tribal gaming casinos have also greatly affected blood talk in Indian country, as many gaming nations have adopted stricter blood requirements, or refused to lessen their requirements when asked, for the purpose of managing and protecting funds; this has resulted in negative emotions in many Indigenous communities, with many believing that gaming gives in to capitalism and other colonial mentalities. Kim Tallbear highlights how tribal gaming has influenced blood quantum requirements in her chapter, "Twentieth Century Tribal Blood Politics: Policy, Place, and Descent," published in *The Great Vanishing Act: Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations*. While discussing a rule regarding citizenship in an Indigenous community she grew up in (Flandreau, South Dakota, who refuses to enroll her), Tallbear writes, "It's worth mentioning that this additional enrollment rule came into being only after gaming started...Gaming and per capita payments, increasingly, are driving forces changing enrollment rules: in my view, for the worse...Shifts in tribal enrollment regulations have plenty to do with

managing numbers, both people and dollars” (Tallbear 136). Tallbear explains that gaming casinos have become a major reason why many Native nations choose to tighten up on enrollment instead of loosening their requirements, despite increasing numbers of Indigenous children who are unable to meet blood requirements. According to the National Indian Gaming Commission, there are an estimated 525 tribally owned casinos in the United States, run by 242 federally recognized nations. One major reason why nations that own casinos choose to adopt stricter enrollment criteria is funding. For many gaming nations, citizenship can be financially beneficial, as their nation may include payouts as part of tribal amenities. The larger a nation, the less money citizens receive, as the share must be split. So naturally, when the possibility of greater money is involved, some nations choose to restrict membership. It also stands to reason that more people with bad intentions (sometimes referred to as “pretend Indians” or “Pretendians”) may attempt to enroll in a nation in hopes they may receive a cut, despite having no connection to the community. For these reasons, many gaming nations have adopted stricter rules regarding blood requirements, which in turn has influenced other Indigenous communities to do the same. However, it is important to not immediately “blame” Indigenous businesses for flourishing or for taking part in American business. In reality, around 88 of the 242 gaming nations make less than 3 million dollars in revenue, well below the line of profit. So it is not like all gaming nations are wealthy. If anything, the negativity surrounding tribal gaming (especially by the non-indigenous, general public) further proves that Indigenous peoples aren’t always supported, even if they assimilate into our mainstream, “capitalistic” society. In the end though, tribal gaming has affected blood quantum requirements and enrollment for the worse, as Indigenous people are being disenrolled or not even accepted in the first place, because of money, which does not align with most Indigenous nations’ traditions.

Conclusion

Determining one's Indianness based solely on numerical and scientific measurements such as blood quantum and Indigenous DNA is impossible, because identity and culture are not quantifiable. Realizing this will aid in the decolonization process, which takes place in the form of refuting colonial ideologies such as purity, or fragmenting by blood. Part of this decolonization movement requires critically analyzing the ways Indigenous nations have been victimized and continue to be affected by forced assimilation, but also realizing that many Indigenous nations still utilize colonial inventions such as blood requirements, which shows an accordance with colonization. These systems will most likely need to be replaced in order to maintain citizenship in a nation or tribe. However, one of the most important steps in the decolonization process is fully supporting and respecting the sovereignty of Indigenous nations, which includes supporting their choice to use colonial systems. Whether or not Indigenous nations are choosing to utilize colonial inventions, non-indigenous people should not be blaming nations for "self-colonizing," nor should they be voicing opposition to Indigenous nations if they are trying to help their citizens in the first place, because ultimately, it is the nations' choice. Supporting a nation's right to choose enrollment criteria themselves is supporting their sovereignty.

Moving forward, the best thing non-indigenous people can do to help alleviate the issues that plague many Indigenous communities without complicating things or assuming a "white-saviour complex" is to *listen*. Non-indigenous people, most notably white men, generally speaking have been given the opportunity to voice their opinions on matters including Indigeneity for thousands of years. It is time to pause, stop talking, and listen to what Indigenous peoples have to say. When non-indigenous people stop and listen, they learn about Indigenous

matters that continue to be an issue for many communities such as: dispossession of land, continued erasure and forced assimilation, violence, missing and murdered Indigenous women, environmental damage such as the Keystone pipeline, etc. What is even more essential to helping Indigenous communities is to take the information learned from listening and to actually do something with it, whether that be donating time or money to a cause, sharing information with family and friends, signing petitions for the purpose of lawmaking, attending protests and demonstrations, continuing to research on the subject matter, etc. It is one thing to be an ally, someone who supports Indigenous peoples and causes, but it is better to be an accomplice, someone who is willing to get out there and put themselves potentially in harm's way ("harm's way" could mean attending a protest where police brutality is expected, for example) to support the cause. As uncomfortable as it may seem, given all of the heartache and death that Indigenous communities have experienced as a result of colonization, being uncomfortable is worth it.

There is hope for change in the way Indigenous people are represented and validated in America. There have already been monumental positive developments, such as opening the "Americans" exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, or even having this museum in the first place. Overall, this hope lies in the public education system. The moment Indigenous histories are accurately represented and included in national public education curriculum, there will be major improvement with how Indigenous matters are viewed and supported. Implementation of Tribal Critical Race Theory, along with Critical Race Theory, is imperative for the positive changes regarding equality of BIPOC. I am also confident that those whose education lacked Indigenous histories can learn about the truths of American history and become accomplices. As I have mentioned, I learned very little about Indigenous histories prior to attending university and have made mistakes unknowingly. But I now know better and am

committed to understanding the loose threads of Indigenous identity, and sharing this information with other non-Indigenous people who may have experienced the same. Ultimately, solving humanitarian issues with humanity as opposed to attempting to solve them with measurements and fragmentation will make all the difference.

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