Real Indians: Policing or Protecting Authentic Indigenous Identity?

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Abstract

Research shows that the institutionalization of legitimacy criteria has created contested meanings of being indigenous to the United States, which leads to an unrelenting debate about authentic indigeneity among indigenous people and between indigenous communities. While instituted through colonizing federal Indian policy, the “real Indian” trope is now a social fact for American Indians. Thus, indigeneity claims commonly encounter resistance in the United States, even within indigenous communities. This work explores how indigeneity claims encounter opposition at interpersonal and group levels and the consequences of authenticity policing. I ask two guiding questions: What authenticity markers hold the most value for American Indians? How do American Indians justify authenticity policing? Using a qualitative approach and an indigenous epistemology, I examine the phenomenon of internalizing the real Indian trope and the impact of policing authenticity through conversations with 45 indigenous people. I find that achieving authenticity is elusive because of its dynamic nature within the local specificity of social contexts. I present and discuss two major signifiers of American Indian identity and major sites of authenticity contestation: (1) blood as protection, culture, and belonging, and (2) Indian cards as protection, responsibility, and belonging.

Keywords

indigeneity, authenticity, legitimized racism, blood quantum, internalized oppression

Contested meanings of being American Indian in the United States reinforce an unrelenting debate about indicators of authentic indigeneity (Robertson 2013). Authenticity policing indicates the power to challenge another’s belonging or tentative inclusion within a group. Birthed in colonizing oppression, European acts of othering, settler colonialism, and federal Indian policy, the “real Indian” trope is a social fact for American Indians. That is, there is a collective belief that authentic indigeneity exists—one that transcends and exerts external constraint over individual understandings. Thus, indigeneity claims commonly encounter resistance in the United States. Even within American Indian communities, individuals often employ the real Indian trope by inquiring or commenting about the legitimacy of another person’s claim of Indianness among and against one another (Garroutte 2003; Hamill 2003; Pack 2012).

Policing authentic indigeneity boundaries produces collective representational challenges for American Indians. Because of the intense socialization of what constitutes authenticity, American Indians internalize and continue to reify the collective belief that they must be distinguished, at the very least, on a tribal level, and at best, at both tribal and federal levels. Contemporary authenticity markers like blood quanta, phenotype, cultural performance, and tribal citizenship are particularly meaningful—symbolically, politically, and legally. Our lives gain meaning with validating symbols like language, ceremony, and shared histories. But

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tribal-specific traditions, knowledges, and values often get lost among institutional signifiers of American Indian identity (Archuleta 2005). Lived experiences of being American Indian get displaced among enrollment numbers, federal and tribal recognition, and fractional blood heritage (Simpson 2014).

Racial boundary policing did not originate as an indigenous phenomenon. Therefore, my intent is not to depict the prejudices and bigotry of American Indians. Dominant groups enjoy a long history of policing racial boundaries to exclude those deemed inferior. Because race is socially created, modified, and transformed within sociohistorical contexts among powerful political interests (Omi and Winant 2008), racial boundaries are messy and inherently biased. Operating within hegemonic whiteness, nondominant groups often police actions and cultural proclivities within racial boundaries to determine authenticity for community inclusion (Roediger 2005). Failure to express group identity through locally prescribed authenticity distinctions undermines the credibility of people claiming it. This study provides one example of the complexity of policing racial borders, somewhat differentiated because of the mercenary, incessant legal regimes of federal Indian policy that used tactical exclusionary measures regarding Indian identity.

Colonial powers used genocidal policies, economic deprivation, corporate violence, and eras of forced disenfranchisement, internment, displacement, and assimilation to oppress indigenous peoples (Deloria 1969; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Invaded on every side, first by Europeans and then by Americans, indigenous peoples resisted and survived to sustain and adapt traditional knowledges and ways of belonging. Thus, no single project can do justice to the complexity of contemporary American Indian identity. My goal is to expose the impact of centuries of oppression against American Indians as manifested in the authenticity policing of imposed racial boundaries. In that spirit, I examine the real Indian trope by asking the following questions: What authenticity markers hold the most value for American Indians? How do American Indians justify authenticity policing? Using an indigenous epistemology and a critical qualitative approach, I examine the impact of policing indigenous authenticity through conversations with 45 people who identify as American Indians. I begin with an overview of indigenous identity, provide an overview of racialization processes and policies, follow with a description of the methods of the research, give an overview of the findings, and discuss the study’s implications.

THE PARADOX OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people who self-identify as American Indian has sharply increased in the past 50 years—from 524,000 in 1960 to 5.2 million in 2010. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA; 2018) estimates only 1.9 million people are enrolled members of 567 federally recognized tribes. According to these numbers, more than 67 percent of people self-identify with a racial identity of American Indian (and an ethnic identity if they purport a tribal affiliation) without official tribal membership status. Russell (1999:131) states that self-identification leads “Indians to joke that the largest tribe in the United States soon will be the ‘Wanabi.’”

Scholars argue that the claim of authenticity is yet another issue by which American Indians can be divided and conquered (Garroutte 2003; Pack 2012; Robertson 2013; Schmidt 2011; TallBear 2003). Self-identified people do not automatically gain acceptance as American Indians. Contemporary authenticity criteria vary greatly by tribe, social organization, and regional location. People may hold adequate markers within one or more categories but not within all. Possessing phenotypical authenticity does not indicate cultural capacity or tribal membership. Cultural standing does not depend on phenotype or belonging to a federally recognized tribe. Tribal citizenship is not equivalent to holding traditional knowledge, community belonging, or racial identifiability. Unless accompanied by expected authenticity markers within tribal-specific communities, claims of indigeneity are heavily contested (Dennison 2012; Pack 2012; Robertson 2013; Simpson 2014). When facing such ambiguity within multiple categories of performativity, many individuals find navigating discourses of authentic indigeneity to be particularly challenging.

Two problematic assumptions structure indigenous authenticity policing (Taylor 1994). First, there is the assumption of an “ideal” authentic indigeneity, which artificially imposes a binary of authentic/not authentic. Second, there is the assumption that since an authentic indigeneity exists, it must be distinguishable to others. Conversely, inauthentic indigeneity also must exist and be recognizable. As a result, performativity is likely to be censured, rejected, and excluded if judged to be inconsistent with accepted indigeneity authenticity measures. Harris (2013) provides a
concise explanation of the intensity of performing and policing of authentic indigeneity:

There is a great deal of symbolic capital that ensues from authentic performance, especially in the absence of group access to important economic and political resources. Who establishes the boundaries within which one must perform? Forces both from within and outside of indigenous communities seek to construct, define, name, and police indigenous identities, and in doing so, a constant battle ensues in the shifting sands on which the play for authenticity is performed. (P.12)

But increasing numbers of self-identifying American Indians do raise concerns about ethnic fraud and cultural appropriation (Chavers 2009; Grande 2015; Tsosie 2005). Ethnic fraud occurs when people use fictitious ancestry to benefit from identifying as Indian for personal, economic, cultural, or professional reward. The practice of ethnic fraud by non-Indians is well documented (Brayboy 2005; Garrouette 2003; Pewewardy and Frey 2004). Cultural appropriation occurs when non-Indians take, use, re-create, or reproduce, without permission, the artifacts, ceremonial rituals, social expressions, and knowledges of indigenous peoples. Tsosie (2005) argues that “one of the most powerful forms of assimilation is to appropriate the key cultural symbols of another group and transform them into part of the dominant society” (p. 95). Barth (1995), Dennison (2012), Garrouette (2003), Simpson (2014), and others contend that the heterogeneity of indigenous societies has been reduced to a colonial formation of “culture” that all too often takes on a static shape used for the perpetuation of stereotypes. Grande (2015) argues that ethnic interlopers tour reservations, acting as “cultural predators loose in Indian theme parks” (p. 109). Consequently, existing indigenous languages, practices, and knowledges become commodified as mythical culture products for consumption and reproduction.

American Indians may justify authenticity policing as a protective measure against ethnic fraud and cultural appropriation. But a myriad of options exists for individuals who self-categorize as American Indians: They may hold a lot, a little, or no cultural knowledge. They may express affiliation to one tribe, multiple tribes, or no tribe. They may or may not be known within their tribe or another Indian community. They may live on a reservation with or without belonging to the jurisdictional tribe. They may hold membership within a federally recognized tribal nation or within a non-federally recognized tribe or may hold no membership at all. They may belong to an urban Indian center, participating in activities linked to a multi-tribal identity rather than a specific tribal entity. They may participate politically but not contribute culturally, or vice versa. They may hold emotional ties to ancestral homelands or ceremonial grounds or to the idea of an Indian community-at-large. They may or may not be racialized by others as American Indian. Finally, they may have any combination of the presence or absence of the previously named characteristics and an inestimable number of others not discussed within this research. This is the paradox of indigenous identity in the United States.

Forced to participate in the cultural codes and forms of the West, many American Indians have learned to speak the language of their oppressors and have adopted their meanings of difference (Poupart 2003). My intent is not to simplify the complexity of contemporary indigeneity, reaffirm a monolithic trope of the real Indian, nor create any other. Contemporary indigenous people may not even racialize themselves as American Indians but instead signify belonging to particular people in the language of their ancestors. This study focuses on the creation, occurrence, and impact of racialized American Indian authenticity claims and authenticity policing through a racialized lens.

Racialization, Federal Indian Policy, and Strategies of Exclusion

American Indians did not exist before European invasion. People were here, but the first inhabitants were heterogeneous groups that were fluid and dynamic, living in hundreds of alliances with complex political structures, diverse languages, extensive trade networks and economic centers, and superior agricultural cultivation (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Garrouette 2003; Nagel 2000; Wilkins 2009). Without the concept of race, indigenous peoples held a subjective view of who belonged—with no exclusionary hard boundaries (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Wilkins 2009). People frequently migrated outside of their groups of origin, gaining memberships with other groups of different languages, cultures, and traditions through “systems of naturalization that could confer group membership on non-kin” (Castile 1996:743). Communities maintained their cohesion via ancestral ties but also adopted people outside of the group (Garrouette 2003; Wilkins
Common values and needs outweighed objective considerations of familial ties or blood lineage (Castile 1996; Wilkins 2009).

For more than five centuries, the dominant discourse justified the genocide of Indians as well as systematic land and resource theft (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Fenelon 2006). Processes of identity construction, maintenance, ascription, and enforcement are indicative of racialization in our society. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, colonizers used concepts like “heathen” and “savage” to impose a collective identity that became known as Indian and the racialized term “tribe” to indicate shared cultural similarities or geographic location (Wilkins 2009). Through racialized discourse, Europeans reframed unbridled colonial greed as righteous and godly, serving to justify eradication measures against Indians (Poupart 2003), and further disrupted the autonomy of indigenous peoples by designating them as “tribes” (Wilkins 2009). Lawrence (2003) contends colonial racial discourse has appropriated “the right to define indigenous citizenship, reducing the members of hundreds of extremely different nations, ethnicities, and language groups to a common raced identity as Indian” (pp. 4–5). Thus, the question of authentic indigeneity “has deep roots within colonial racism” (Sissons 2005:43).

The systematic colonial racialization of indigenous peoples into one monolithic group and the erasure of their independent governments, cultures, and histories is reified by federal Indian policy. Motivated by the desire to reduce and eventually terminate financial responsibility to Indians, the United States was the first authenticity police of Indianess (Brownell 2001). To ensure unremitting westward invasion, Congress forcibly removed and relocated (e.g., Indian Removal Act of 1830, Indian treaties) Indian tribes and confined Indian tribes to reservations (e.g., Indian Appropriations Act of 1851) (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Concerns soon escalated about expenses for providing subsistence rations and paying military personnel to ensure American Indians stayed within geographically ascribed borders (Russell 1999). Seeking to limit contractual obligations by reducing the number of people to be covered within the agreements, the federal government applied increasingly restrictive boundaries around the race of Indian.

The United States first claimed that the supposed inferior behavior of American Indians made them racially distinct. In the 1877 case US v. Joseph, the Supreme Court decided that even though they looked like Indians, the Pueblos in New Mexico were not really Indians because they behaved in intelligent, virtuous, and industrious ways. The Court then reversed its decision in the 1913 case US v. Sandoval, finding that the Pueblos were Indians, after all, because BIA reported that the Pueblos drank, danced, and lived communally (Brownell 2001:279). Consequently, the use of behavior as a racial marker was deemed too inclusive for designating people as American Indian; thus, the federal government intensified its exclusionary efforts with the idea that physical differences indicated different races. In 1914, the Justice Department contracted anthropologists to determine blood quantum of the Chippewas on the White Earth Reservation based on hair texture—straight hair indicated full blood and curly hair, half blood or less (Schmidt 2011). The United States also used racist laws, like the one-drop rule, to divide communities and exclude claims of indigeneity (Coleman 2013). In 1936, BIA sent an anthropologist to North Carolina to determine whether the Lumbees were actually Indian by slipping a pencil through their hair (Brownell 2001; Coleman 2013). If the pencil slipped easily, they were classified as Indian; if not, they were classified as “Negroid.” Only 22 of 209 people were racially designated as Indian, with children and their parents and siblings designated as different races (Brownell 2001).

Only since the late nineteenth century, blood quantum has been privileged in defining individual Indian identity and tribal membership (Meyer 2004; Spruhan 2006). The concept of Indian legitimacy by blood was birthed in federal legislation by the Dawes Act of 1887 (Simpson 2014). The Dawes Act abolished tribal governments and removed communal lands from tribal ownership to portion out predetermined allotments. Individuals were required to enumerate their blood quantum on allotment applications. With less than 40 percent of applications approved, tribal census rolls documented people with a percentage of “Indian by blood” or “Indian not by blood” (Debo 1989). What exactly is blood quantum? It is a metaphorical construction that refers to an ancestral heritage that is measured by degrees or fractions of blood inheritance.

But the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act firmly established the concept of federal recognition as the defining criterion for tribal legitimacy and blood quantum as the standard for tribal membership. Since ratification of the Indian Reorganization Act, only Indian tribes that are recognized are eligible to receive protections and services: “The term
‘Indian’ as used in this Act shall include all persons of Indian descent who are members of any recognized Indian tribe now under Federal jurisdiction, and ... all other persons of one-half or more Indian blood’ (Quinn 1990:356, emphasis added). The “Report on Indians Taxed and Not Taxed” set the stage for the concept of federal recognition with the suggestion to abandon reservations and consolidate tribes because “this will save millions of dollars” (U.S. Census Bureau 1894:73). The Supreme Court has ruled that Congress possessed plenary power—full and complete authority—to limit, modify, or eliminate tribal rights (Wilkins 2009); in other words, it may “assist or destroy an Indian tribe as it sees fit” (Pevar 2012:59). Simpson (2014) describes recognition as a biopolitical project that moved tribes away from the status of autonomous sovereignties “into the conceptual and legal ambit of racialized minorities” (p. 138).

Racialization remains an exclusionary strategy to simultaneously decrease U.S. financial responsibilities to tribes and their citizens and systematically reduce the political and economic power of Indians (Robertson 2013; Tsosie 2005). The Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 gave federally recognized tribes the authority to construct their own membership criteria (Wilkins 2009). One third of tribes now require lineal descent rather than a set blood quantum. Even though tribes set the criteria for tribal membership, Congress can deny or revoke acknowledgment of any tribe and its members. Federal agencies have exclusive power to determine tribal membership for disbursement of federal program funds and may ignore tribal membership lists altogether. The United States insists tribal members “must have some Indian blood; consequently, a non-Indian adopted into an Indian tribe cannot be considered an Indian under federal law” (Pevar 2012:19). Race as a biological concept has been discredited but continues to be a concrete expression of Indianness through blood quantum restrictions and blood heritage for federal recognition and tribal membership.

To receive federal services or protections as an American Indian, a person must present proof of a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) card or tribal membership card issued from a federally recognized tribe (i.e., Indian cards). This card lists the person’s name, date of birth, tribal affiliation, and blood quantum. Under federal law, American Indians are issued CDIB cards in one of two ways: (1) BIA authenticates people with one half blood quantum or more who are not members of any federally recognized tribe, or (2) people are citizens or members of federally recognized tribes. Tribal cards are issued only to people who meet their tribal standards for citizenship. American Indians may possess one or both cards. Specific blood quanta are often required to receive services such as Indian housing, employment preference, educational opportunities, and health care (Meyer 2004; Robertson 2013). Blood quantum, lineal descent, and proof of Indianness are embedded in the racial paradigm birthed in colonialism, institutionalized through federal Indian policy, reified though tribal restrictions, and internalized within indigenous communities.

METHODOLOGY

My personal lens shapes this research. As an enrolled citizen and former employee of a federally recognized tribe, I witness authenticity policing on personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. As a person raised within my tribal boundaries and traditions, I attest to the frequency with which people claim indigeneity without any connection to a specific tribe. As a researcher and scholar, I know the exclusionary impact of federal Indian policy eras. Consequently, my American Indian status, familiarity with various Native communities and cultures, and scholarly expertise allowed me to connect with participants in an empathetic and understanding manner. Whereas I am an insider as an American Indian, I also could be considered an outsider when talking with people who have been questioned about the authenticity of their indigeneity. In addition, the participants represented various and distinct tribes. Although I relate through my identity of being American Indian, my own unique tribal perspective often differed by geographic location, language, and history. To balance this subjectivity, I exercised assurance and reciprocity in conversations and activities.

Between June 2009 and May 2015, I conducted extensive one-hour to two-hour conversations with 45 people from 29 distinct tribes, who live in Oklahoma; New York; California; Arizona; Maine; North Carolina; Montana; Colorado; Texas; Ohio; Washington, D.C.; and Massachusetts. I used purpose sampling (a method of selecting participants with specific characteristics) because the participants needed to identify as American Indian. I recruited participants at ceremonial events, Indian churches, and Indian health clinics and on indigenous studies listservs. I followed this up with snowball sampling (a method of expanding the sample by asking one participant to recommend
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Of the participants, 24 were women, and 21 were men. Ages ranged from 21 to 85, but the average age was 42; average annual income was $30,567. I did not request proof of Native identity through identification or community reference.

As participants preferred, I spoke with 33 people in person, 7 by telephone, and 10 online through video calling. When gathering general demographic and tribal information, I was sensitive to distinctions used for affiliation preference (e.g., by tribe and/or pan-Indian labels such as American Indian, indigenous, and Native). I asked open-ended questions about being indigenous in the United States. We reflected about our experiences, feelings, ideas, knowledge, and opinions about American Indian identity symbols. We discussed our individual tribal histories, language, customs, and membership requirements. I shared my own perspective and reflections with participants to balance respect and reciprocity (Kovach 2009). If necessary, I contacted the participants again to clarify wording or meaning and ask follow-up questions. I recorded and transcribed the conversations, supplemented the work with written reflections, and noted any additional information that might help with the interpretation (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

I use a blended critical and indigenous interpretive lens—a standpoint that emphasizes participative, emancipatory research and requires holistic, relational, decolonizing ethics like empathy, respect, and reciprocity (Grande 2008; Kovach 2009; Miranda 2013; Smith 1999). A critical qualitative approach centers the voices of marginalized group members, giving value and expression to their lived experiences in a historically contextualized way (Kovach 2009; Marshall and Rossman 2006). Jacob (2013) describes indigenous epistemology as a “critical healing approach”—one that positions indigenous people as experts in our own lives, capable of assigning meaning and significance to our lived realities, experiences, and challenges in the ongoing struggle of the decolonization of our existence. Western epistemology positions the researcher as the authority and contends that research must be conducted under a neutral and objective gaze (Smith 1999). Indigenous epistemology acts to decolonize the Western scientific practices and to develop research approaches based on indigenous knowledge and voice (Grande 2008; Smith 1999).

The analysis should serve to clarify and honor the narrative. Deeply personal stories and subsequent vulnerability and pain within the conversations made it difficult to parse out bits and pieces as “coding” themes. As a concession, I used a blended approach for analysis (Creswell 2009). I read each transcript several times before I identified themes. As themes emerged, I went back to all the data—transcribed conversations, analytic memos, and self-reflexive journals—for a fresh look at emerging bundles of themes. I present the data as wholly as possible with integrated theme coding in a modified grounded theory method (Creswell 2009). I examined contextual assumptions about the politics of identity and policing authenticity. I looked for discourses linked to political and social institutions that reproduce authenticity discourses through dominance and power as well as subsequent “real Indian” rhetoric. I present my research in a thematic version with illustrative narrative quotes from conversations with participants. Accuracy of the research was ensured through the participants’ checking of the conversations (Maxwell 2005). I use pseudonyms to identify the participants. The next section presents my findings about accepted indicators of indigeneity and the impact of policing authentic indigenous identity.

**FINDINGS**

My conversations with participants indicate that indigeneity is dynamically formed, challenged, resisted, and reformed within local, historical, and culturally specific social contexts. Therefore, this is an attempt not to simplify that complexity but to understand how policing authenticity functions for and affects not only those whose identity is being monitored but also for those who police indigeneity standards. Two questions guided this work: What authenticity markers hold the most value for American Indians? How do American Indians justify authenticity policing? Conversations with participants indicate that achieving authenticity is elusive because of its dynamic nature within the local specificity of social contexts. I present two themes mentioned most often by participants as major signifiers of Indian identity and major sites of authenticity contestation: (1) blood as protection, culture, and belonging, and (2) Indian cards as pride, responsibility, and belonging.

**Blood as Protection, Culture, and Belonging**

Blood quantum certainly qualifies as a privileged, broad boundary meant to include “real” Indians to the exclusion of all other racial groups. Perdue (2003:x) argues that indigenous communities
experience substantial conflict “by using ‘blood’ to privilege some individuals, to discredit others, and ultimately to racialize Native societies in ways that are foreign to Native cultural traditions.” Every participant knew and stated his or her blood quantum, even though I never asked or initiated the conversation about a person’s blood quantum. This illustrates the depth to which a racialized identity has been internalized. Of 45 participants, 36 believe that blood ancestry is necessary. When asked whether blood quantum was a good measure of Indianess, the participants responded with mixed messages. For the majority of participants, blood quantum protects the tribe’s autonomy but also limits personal belonging for individuals. Tom, a tribally enrolled man, explains that his tribe requires one-half blood quantum or more for holding political office and complains that this restricts his ability to belong and contribute:

Blood quantum is good in a way because it keeps the Nation run by Nation people. But in a sense, I think it’s discriminatory by saying okay, your grandparents or great grandparents are on the [tribal roll], but you don’t have enough blood to be part of who we are. So if there’s a full blood who is okay with sitting back, “Well, what can the tribe do for me? How can the tribe pay my bills this month?” And they’re not doing anything. What makes him better than me for the tribe? If he’s gonna sit back and just take, like, drive elders to appointments or take food to people who are ill. Then there was another woman who was full blood and she looked it. But if you have a higher quantum, not participating culturally doesn’t invalidate you. They’re both Indian.

Blood quantum is privileged over cultural participation. Tom expresses the tension many participants feel about privileging blood quantum over kinship ties and community participation. Not having a high enough blood quantum restricts Tom from participating within the political leadership of the tribe, and he feels demoralized. Tom argues against this limitation by highlighting his cultural participation: “I’m always out at the grounds and taking medicine. I look out for the old ones and young people. Why limit me with blood?” Tom feels like blood quantum is privileged over his cultural participation. But Tom and most others believe that blood quantum protects tribal sovereignty against further encroachment by non-Native.

Participants often expressed resistance by stating that cultural participation is much more important than blood quantum. To test this, I gave an example of two American Indians and made their tribal origin and gender the same as the participant I was speaking with: One woman had a lower blood quantum (one-eighth) but was very active in the community, driving elders to appointments or taking food to people who were ill. Another woman had a higher blood quantum (three-fourths) but did not participate in the community. I then asked, “Who do you think is the real Indian?” A common story emerged from the conversations. I provide Natalie’s commentary as an example of the overall message:

I knew [an Indian] woman who worked in the [tribal] program. She abstained from alcohol, always voting, always in the community helping the elders, picking up kids and giving rides to school. She worked to preserve the traditions and was raising her daughter that way. She was very involved, but she was blond haired. Then there was another woman who was full blood and she looked it. She only voted if somebody came and got her. I think they are both Native. A lower quantum doesn’t make you not an Indian if you work hard for the community. But if you have a higher quantum, not participating culturally doesn’t invalidate you. They’re both Indian.

Blood quantum often symbolizes belonging without any participation requirement. Other research notes that blood hegemony has been internalized to the extent that marrying a non-Native and having children is directly associated with cultural loss (Dennison 2012; Pack 2012). Congress estimates that by 2080 less than 8 percent of American Indians will have one half or more of Indian blood (Thornton 1997). Pack (2012:179) reports that all his informants emphasize “the importance of preserving their culture by keeping their bloodlines pure.” Instead, this study shows that participants struggle with the application of blood quantum for future generations. Janet expresses that blood quantum is very important for her but attributes cultural understanding as most important to her son:

It’s easy for me because I’m full blood. I know how much I am, but for my son, it’s like a part of me is trying to figure out. I tease my husband because he’s only an eighth: “Oh you were just enough to push him over the halfway mark.” My son’s nine-sixteenths. “Yeah exactly, thanks
babe, that sliver did it, babe.” But you know, it’s important because we are all intermingled. We aren’t all full blooded anymore. And for my son, it’s gonna be important to me for him to know how much he is and what he is.

Clearly, Janet regards the threshold of more than one half as meaningful, but when I question Janet about whether a higher blood quantum indicates someone is more Indian, she states, “No. It’s like with me being a full blood and I still don’t know all that I should know with our culture.” In other words, Janet dismisses the equivalence of higher blood quantum into cultural belonging. She reasons that she still feels culturally lacking, even though she is full blood. Consequently, when discussing future generations, Janet, and other participants, privilege cultural understanding as more precious and harder to attain than blood quantum. Shelly feels ambivalent about blood quantum, but like other participants with children, she recognizes its limiting nature when she thinks of her kids.

I am happy to say, “Yes, I am half [tribal name].” But my kids are a quarter and their kids are gonna be one eighth. And when you start to get to those low doses, that’s when it starts being a big deal. My husband is totally offended that they lowered the blood quantum in his tribe to an eighth. He doesn’t want people that don’t have anything to do with, not just the traditions, but that community. Because that’s where he grew up. That’s his home, his people. He doesn’t want somebody who got adopted out, coming back and running his community. So he’s really offended by it.

Shelly appreciates her own blood quantum because in her community, “being half is considered as good as full blood.” Shelly also struggles with the exclusivity of blood quantum as the sole indicator of Indianness when she recognizes its adverse effects on her children. Shelly’s mention of her husband shows that, like Tom, many people equate diminishing blood quantum with a loss of sovereignty. Dennison (2012) supports this finding among the Osage.

A common reductionist dichotomy between phenotype and blood quantum translates into the assumption that full-blood Indians will look the most Indian. Sturm (2002) asserts that American Indians respond more positively to people who look Indian—even to the extent of assigning varying degrees of social importance to phenotypical distinction. A total of 10 participants expressed a desire for more blood quantum. Jennifer discusses blood quantum in a double-minded way:

I think it’s a bad thing, although I wish that I was a full blood. Because I feel like if I were I would be more Indian. That sounds crazy, but that’s how I feel. I would have more right to claim being a really real Indian, not to being just Indian. After all, I am Indian.

When I ask what having a higher blood quantum means, most participants reply with answers that indicate they would experience less policing and gain more authenticity. Lynn states, “More blood means looking more Indian. I wouldn’t have to explain my blue eyes because I’m half white and half Indian. I would just be accepted.” Blood quantum and phenotype act as intertwined tools of exclusion that encourage American Indians to “rework racial notions, entangling blood in their own understandings of relation and survival” (Dennison 2012:62).

Most participants express consent to the oppressive nature of blood quantum because it establishes their authenticity and right to belong. Scholars argue that the assignment of blood quanta and subtexts of lineal descent maintains a racialized American Indian identity. TallBear (2003) explains, “Blood talk and, increasingly, talk of DNA have unfortunately infiltrated tribal political life and are used to help justify cultural and political authority. Such biological measures reaffirm racial definitions of the tribal nation and who rightly claims tribal citizenship” (p. 83). Within this study, blood quantum is deployed as privilege, protective mechanism, and cultural belonging. None of the participants thought that blood heritage should be eliminated from tribal membership criteria.

Indian Cards as Pride, Belonging, and Responsibility

CDIB and tribal citizenship cards represent the protection of tribal autonomy and pride of belonging as well as function as cultural surrogates for many participants. Tribal citizens are socialized to routinely provide this type of proof for social or legal services. Some people stress that Indian cards also protect indigenous culture and tribal resources from further appropriation (Deloria 1998; Robertson 2013). Others argue that that identity validation is foreign to the very nature of being Native (Hamill 2003; Schmidt 2011). Altogether,
Indian cards play significant roles in some communities—protect resources, indicate belonging, and highlight responsibility. Two thirds of the people I spoke with imbued the cards with cultural value. Others stress that they prove racial belonging. Joseph recounts how he felt the day he received his CDIB card, assigning immense symbolic value and pride to it:

I was 14 years old. And uh, when you got CDIB card, then you were full-blown Indian. That was like getting your social security card, your driver’s license, it was your identity. When you got that CDIB card, you told people you were Indian and you could show them that you were Indian. There was a certain amount of pride associated with it. It was documented. A lot of people knew you were Indian, and a lot of people didn’t. Like when I went to prison out in California, they interviewed you whenever they were booking you into prison. And this guy said, “So you’re white.” And I said, “No, I’m American Indian.” He said, “You’re gonna have to produce the paperwork.” I told him, “Look in my wallet for my CDIB card. It’s a federal card.” And he got that out and said, “Well, by god, you are an Indian. You do have your paperwork with you.” I told him, “I can use this card anywhere in the United States of America. I can go to another state and if I need help, I can take this to the BIA or the local tribe and ask for help. And I can get it whether they’re my tribe or not.” So getting that CDIB card when I was young made me really, really proud. I was proud to be an Indian anyway, but I was really, really proud because I had documentation of it.

Joseph attaches meaningful achievement to his CDIB card—with its arrival, he was “full blown.” Joseph also describes the normality of CDIB cards, equating getting one to getting a social security card. I ask Joseph why the prison guard thought he was white. Joseph laughs and explains he is often thought to “be Hispanic and all those forms say white for that.” Joseph expresses pride in being able to prove his indigeneity and enjoyed educating the prison worker about how his Indian card signifies the responsibility of the federal government and all Indian tribes to him.

For some, having Indian cards serves as a proxy for cultural belonging. Teresa, a professional woman in her 30s, continues to live within the political boundaries of her federally recognized tribe. Teresa reveals that she is “full blood” during the first five minutes of our conversation. Teresa grew up traveling the powwow circuit with her family, dedicating every weekend to cultural activities with her large extended family, and she laughingly says, “My family didn’t go to church. We powwowed.” Teresa has obvious indicators of indigeneity but still needed to marry a “real Indian” to conform to her family’s expectations of authenticity: “Our culture was really big, at least for my grandmother, that I marry Indian, so my husband had to work hard and get his Cherokee documented. Everybody’s happy that he got a card.” I ask, “[Your grandmother] didn’t think [your husband] was an Indian until he got a card?” Teresa answers, “Exactly. I was the oldest grandchild for a long time, and there was a lot of pressure. I couldn’t handle it, hardly. Of course, our grandmother was the center of everything. And so it was very important to her but not to me.” Teresa’s grandmother reserved her blessing until Teresa’s husband could authenticate his indigeneity. Teresa explains that, for her grandmother, a card represented proof that his community accepted him, not that he was certified by the federal government as Indian. Teresa questions the purpose of cards but actively works to reduce any feelings of dissonance. Teresa’s decision, though intertwined with racialized objects imposed by the federal government, is based in tradition. Teresa felt strongly her grandmother’s cultural honor was the “center of everything.” She explains that her grandmother’s motives were culturally driven. Approval from older members of the family is crucial to the development of a strong indigenous identity (Pewewardy 2002). Teresa’s grandmother was the symbolic leader within her family, holding the wisdom and traditions, and her approval preserved harmony and balance within the family.

Almost one third of participants understood that Indian cards have overwhelming implications as racialized objects. Every participant mentioned that no other race or ethnicity was required to provide legal proof of blood ancestry. Joy, who lives within her nation, acknowledges that it “seems racist having to show a card showing I am this much Indian.” But she also feels secure and valid with her tribal card—being able to show that she is a “real Indian”: “I’ve had to pull out the card a few times to prove to people. An international student from Kenya was like, ‘No way, you can’t be Indian.’ So I pull my card out, and he said, ‘You have to carry this? Isn’t this racism?’” Joy laughs as she repeats what the Kenyan student asked her. The symbolic value of cards is high for participants.
who lack other indicators of indigeneity, particularly phenotype. When an exchange student easily recognizes the inherent racism of Indian cards, Joy justifies it as necessary for keeping out the wannabes or “all those people who were Indian in a former life.” According to Joy, she does not look Indian but regularly participates in tribal cultural events. Joy laughs and says that people tease her about her looks and call her a “whindian” (white Indian). Joy wants to make it clear that she does not just self-identify by showing her card to me as we eat lunch in a busy café. This indicates that Joy believes that people who self-identify without proof are not “real Indians” and conversely that people who have Indian cards are “real Indians.” Joy finds comfort in being called a whindian rather than a wannabe. In other words, people who do not look Indian may or may not be wannabes, but people who do not have cards are wannabes. Consequently, claims of cultural belonging do not substitute for legal validation of Indian identity. For example, Steve Russell (2003) explains that he uses his CDIB and tribal cards to “notify white people of my tribal identity and, when combined with my birthplace, tell Indian people (should there be any) that I was not an ‘instant Indian’ seeking special favors” (p. 401). Russell’s statement also shows that the strength of the card depends on the audience and phenotype. If individuals do not look Indian, then cards validate their belonging.

The symbolic value of Indian cards varies by the presence of other indicators of Indianness. According to this study, being Indian only when it is convenient exposes inauthentic indigeneity. Even people with Indian cards experience authenticity policing. Most participants contest people who take no part in community responsibilities or deny their heritage but take advantage of Indian services, labeling them as “convenient Indians.” Shane’s comments reflect the overall feeling toward them:

I know people who have CDIB cards, but they don’t tell anybody. It’s not something they talk about. I go to the [denomination] church. Indians call it the white church. I would see people at the Indian clinic that I see at church. And no one would know that they are Indian. They come for their services, but they go out and live the rest of their lives, like they don’t want to identify with being Indian. It’s like they’re ashamed of it or something. I know older people, people in their 40s, and even people younger than me act that way.

Convenient Indians break the social norm of an expected performance of reciprocity within Indigenous communities. Whereas some people may use Indian cards when convenient or beneficial, for participants in this study, they represent responsibility. On the other hand, a few participants do accuse those who use Indian cards as being inauthentic and assimilated. Bob questions the intent of Indian cards: “It’s not that card. It’s the dollars associated with that card. And that’s tragic because that means those Indians have adopted another culture’s ways.” Some participants expressed emotional hurt that other community members would privilege Indian cards over claims of indigeneity, arguing that asking about a card actually shows a lack of authenticity by the challenger. In other words, participants often respond by monitoring the authenticity of those who police them. For example, Lisa expresses her frustration when people question whether she has a card: “One girl even said, ‘You have no proof.’ That bothered me. It was insulting for me. It would be insulting for anyone to tell someone else, ‘You aren’t who you are.’ That’s not Indian. I wouldn’t do that.”

Lisa’s reaction typifies the conflict over Indian cards. Individuals who police authenticity, rather than the federal Indian policy that manifests in tribal membership criteria, are identified as the problem. This allows self-identified Indians to maintain racial identities without being enrolled in federally recognized tribes. They also can forgo any anger with the tribes that do not accept them as citizens. In the absence of standard racialized authenticity indicators like phenotype or high blood quantum, the power of legal belonging represented by an Indian card is greater than cultural participation. Indian cards may be racist in origin, but most participants see them as necessary for proof of belonging. Most participants repurposed and rearticulated Indian cards as symbols of pride, belonging, and responsibility.

Federal Indian policy has ensured the complicity of American Indians and Indian tribes by legislating boundaries of Indianness and imposing the internalization of those margins. Internalized oppression results when people internalize the stereotypes and negative myths communicated about their groups by the oppressive regime (Poupart 2003), causing even the oppressed to have a stake in their subordinated identity (Pyke 2010:557). Legitimized racism is the (1) systemic racial discourse of inequality that exists in federal Indian policy and (2) deeply embedded and normalized anti-Indian racism accepted as nonracist (Robertson
2015). Internalization occurs when the racialized group accepts that the racial identities, constraints, traditions, behaviors, terminology, and institutions are real and not harmful. Since the real Indian trope developed within U.S. federal institutions, the policing of authentic indigeneity manifests as an expression of internalized oppression and an extension of legitimized racism. These findings corroborate previous findings that indigenous communities experience substantial conflict about the criteria for claiming authenticity. Furthermore, this study shows that American Indians have internalized the belief that federally derived and racist artifacts represent authentic indigeneity, which results in an internalized legitimized racism that displaces cultural knowledge and community ties.

CONCLUSION

After centuries of constructions of otherness, enforced cultural codes, and institutionalized identity measures, American Indians negotiate staggering expectations of cultural purity and performance, social recognition within the community and legal recognition from both tribal and federal governments, high degrees of blood quantum, and geographical location (Robertson 2013). Produced through centuries of Western legitimized racism, the real Indian trope is a social fact that manifests in racial, cultural, and legal authenticity expectations. Even participants with strong cultural and political belonging desire to be identified as racially Indian because they recognize authenticity policing occurs on multiple levels—racial, cultural, and legal. Any shared discriminatory beliefs and common stereotypes that American Indians hold against and/or about one another originate in the racist discourse of the colonial conquest and domination.

Policing these authenticity boundaries presents great challenges for indigenous communities. What authenticity markers hold the most value for American Indians? My findings show that tribal communities and indigenous people have internalized and continue to reify federally defined criteria for authentic indigeneity. That is, documented belonging in the form of Indian cards and high blood quanta bear substantive and significant importance. How do American Indians justify authenticity policing? American Indians have accepted and incorporated the definitions and objects used against them within the embodiment of indigeneity.

Suspicions about ethnic fraud and cultural appropriation have grown alongside the increasing population of people claiming to be American Indian. Without community approval, blood quantum becomes the gold standard for authenticity. Blood quantum—even though inherently racist—establishes the right to belong within the community and greater Indian country, which exposes the contradiction of this study. On one hand, participants present cultural understanding as more important than blood quantum. But when questioned about community involvement and living culturally, the majority of participants privilege higher blood quantum. The symbolic value of Indian cards varies by the presence of other indicators of Indianness. Indeed, we discredit our authenticity if we utilize our card without participating in the tribal community. Yet in the absence of phenotype or high blood quantum, the power of symbolic markers like cultural knowledge or participation weakens rather than strengthens. Thus, having an Indian card is deemed better than just self-identifying.

Within American Indian communities, blood quanta and Indian identification cards are central in the performance of indigenous identity. Indian identity has been framed as blood and ancestry with meanings of underlying power and prejudice that we now use against one another, expressed through Indian cards and blood quantum. In other words, public discourse has produced a bastardized version of Indianness that has manifested in a monolithic caricature of the real Indian trope. As a result, American Indians justify policing other American Indians about their identity. They see Indian cards as proxies for cultural belonging and protection of resources even as they recognize the restricting and exclusiveness of blood quantum. The acceptance of these symbols reduces indigeneity to racialized objects.

Many advocate that indigenous communities should know each other by shared values, norms, and thought patterns when determining authentic Indianness (Pewewardy 2001). Others argue that cultural definitions impose “misleading and timeless homogeneity onto tribes” (Garroule 2003:67). Whether using racial or cultural boundaries, expectations for group membership may result in an essentialized vision of community that requires a specified set of attributes to belong. Ultimately, essentialized communities give birth to racial and cultural gatekeepers to operate within a legitimized racism paradigm. Because tribal nations and American Indians desire to protect their cultural and political authority from further colonized encroachment, they hold tightly to an established means to differentiate—even if that involves the commodification of Indian identity through legitimized racism.
But to view blood as merely racial ignores the role of power and community in indigenous identity formation and shifts. The symbolism of blood and ancestry goes beyond racialization. Indigenous conceptions of blood are not comparable to the colonized idea that blood means ancestry and rights of heir (Meyer 2004). Historically, blood does not connote physiological meaning but rather belonging. That is, blood is a relational concept through which we assert cultural autonomy (Simpson 2014). Mihesuah (1998) contends that blood as kinship is crucial to the development of contemporary American Indian identity. Krous (1999) maintains that blood and descent are especially important among urban Indians who lack ties to their tribes of origin, establishing rights of access to cultural knowledge that allow displaced Indians to participate in the urban pan-Indian community. Blood and ancestry remain fundamental to American Indian identity and tribal sovereignty.

Western domination unabashedly demanded both cultural and structural changes for American Indians—leaving us little to recognize ourselves by—but we still do recognize ourselves. Indigenous communities have always monitored belonging by kinship, relationship to the land, and other indicators. Weaver (2001) says, “Given the strong emphasis on the collectivity in indigenous cultures, it is problematic to have an individual who self-identifies as indigenous yet has no community sanction or validation of that identity” (p. 247). Self-representation and boundaries of belonging have been important tools for resisting the racialized constraint and exclusion of colonialism and federal Indian policy. How will we decide to honor the survival, resistance, and resilience of their ancestors? A promising start would be the incorporation of the peoplehood matrix (Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003). Peoplehood is a complete system that centers and integrates the temporality, diversity, and interrelatedness of indigeneity through four aspects—language, sacred history, place territory, and ceremonial cycle. Through the lens of peoplehood, we may discover old ways and determine new ways of belonging—ways that forgo racialized objects meant to divide and exclude.

NOTES

1. Passionate debate persists in academia over the most useful term(s) to describe indigenous peoples of what is currently known as the United States. I make no claim over which terms should be used, but I offer the following thoughts: The participants in this study used a multitude of terminology that I wish to honor in this work. The terms “Indian,” “American Indian,” “tribe,” and “tribal” are racial terms imposed by colonizing forces. Having lived in Indian country most of my life, I hear elders and others use these terms on a daily basis. I work in the academy but must live within my communities. For the purpose of this research, I use the term “American Indian” because of its usage by federal agencies. I use the term “Indian” because it is the legal term used within federal Indian policy, judicial review, and other regulatory language. I use the terms “Native” and “indigenous” interchangeably, as my preferences. I apologize in advance for the distraction and messiness, but labels are the consequence of colonial racism.

2. Some argue that discussing and analyzing concepts for categories of difference (e.g., race and blood quantum) contribute to the refication of essentialist thinking about socially constructed concepts; that is, we perpetuate the notion that these categories are real and not the product of human creation. There is a social reality to these social categories in that they produce real effects on racialized and othered actors; therefore, it is important to highlight and contrast the social dynamics that produce the categories as well as the social categories themselves.

3. Scholars point out that more than demographics, such as increased birth rate, decreased death rate, or improved health, accounts for such a growth in population (Liebler 2010; Snipp 2004; Thornton 1997). The most common reasons acknowledged for this increase are changing patterns of racial self-identification and improved procedural collection of census data. Since 1960 people have been allowed to choose their racial identification, rather than having it assigned by a census taker.

4. Framing symbolic documentation, identifiability, and blood heritage as proxy for indigeneity was developed solely within this project and is not meant to indicate that all indigenous people experience the same.

5. I do not use these terms as essential categories but as social constructions that have been essentialized.

REFERENCES


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