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Indigenous Identity

What Is It, and Who *Really* Has It?

HILARY N. WEAVER

Indigenous identity is a truly complex and somewhat controversial topic. There is little agreement on precisely what constitutes an indigenous identity, how to measure it, and who truly has it. Indeed, there is not even a consensus on appropriate terms. Are we talking about Indians, American Indians, Natives, Native Americans, indigenous people, or First Nations people? Are we talking about Sioux or Lakota? Navajo or Dine? Chippewa, Ojibway, or Anishnabe? Once we get that sorted out, are we talking about race, ethnicity, cultural identity, tribal identity, acculturation, enculturation, bicultural identity, multicultural identity, or some other form of identity?

The topic of indigenous identity opens a Pandora's box of possibilities, and to try to address them all would mean doing justice to none. This article provides background information on three facets of identity—self-identification, community identification, and external identification—followed by a brief overview of measurement issues and my reflections on how internalized oppression/colonization is related to identity. The terms *Native* and *indigenous* are used interchangeably to refer to the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. These are not, per se, the “right” terms or the only terms that could have been used. They reflect my preferences.

Cultural identity, as reflected in the values, beliefs, and worldviews of indigenous people, is the focus of the article. Those who belong to the same culture share a broadly similar conceptual map and way of interpreting language.¹ People can identify themselves in many ways other than by their cultures.² In fact, identity may actually be a composite of many things such as race, class, education, region, religion, and gender.³ The influence of these aspects of identity on who someone is as an indigenous person is likely to change over time. Identities are always fragmented, multiply constructed, and intersected in a constantly changing, sometimes conflicting array.⁴ Although in reality the various facets of identity are inextricably linked, for the purposes of this essay I will focus on culture as a facet of identity.

While indigenous identity is a topic that I have done some research on, it is also a topic that I, as a Lakota woman, approach with subjectivity. Rather than solely a limitation, this subjectivity adds an important dimension to the work. Native people must begin to examine their own histories and issues rather than leaving these analyses to nonnatives.⁵ My work is influenced by the facts that my mother's parents left Rosebud decades ago after attending boarding school and I live in an urban setting largely made up of Haudenosaunee people. Additionally, my professional affiliation as a social worker leads me to focus on aspects of cultural identity that tend to have practical implications for helping service providers understand their indigenous clients. As well as drawing on the literature, I draw on my own experiences and bring my personal perspectives to the topic.

My father came from an Appalachian background. He was the one who remembered and told the stories. Thus, I begin with a story about cultural identity. I do not know the original source, but the story rings with an important truth and is a poignant commentary on contemporary indigenous identity. My appreciation goes out to the original storytellers, whoever they may be. A brief summary of the story is warranted here.

"THE BIG GAME"

The day had come for the championship game in the all-Native basketball tournament. Many teams had played valiantly, but on the last day the competition came down to the highly competitive Lakota and Navajo teams. The tension was high as all waited to see which would be the best team.

Prior to the game, some of the Lakota players went to watch the Navajos practice. They were awed and somewhat intimidated by the Navajos' impressive display of skills. One Lakota who was particularly anxious and insecure pointed out to his teammates that some of the Navajo players had facial hair. "Everyone knows that Indians don't have facial hair," he stated. Another Lakota added that some of the Navajos also had suspiciously dark skin. They concluded, disdainfully, that clearly these were not Native people and, in fact, were probably a "bunch of Mexicans." The so-called Navajos should be disqualified from the tournament, leaving the Lakota team the winner by default.

That same afternoon, some Navajo players went to watch the Lakota team practice. The Lakotas had a lot of skillful moves that made the Navajos worry. One Navajo observed, "That guy's skin sure looks awful light." Another added, "Yeah, and most of them have short hair." They concluded, disdainfully, that clearly these were not Native people and, in fact, were probably a "bunch of white guys." The so-called Lakotas should be disqualified from the tournament, leaving the Navajos the winners by default.

The captains from both teams brought their accusations to the referee just before game time. Both teams agreed that Native identity must be established before the game could be played and that whichever team could not establish Native identity to everyone's satisfaction must forfeit. The Lakota captain suggested that everyone show his tribal enrollment card as proof of identity. The Lakotas promptly displayed their "red cards," but some of the Navajos did not have enrollment cards. The Lakotas were ready to celebrate their victory when the Navajo captain protested that carrying an enrollment card was a product of colonization and not an indicator of true identity. He suggested that the real proof would be a display of indigenous language skills, and each Navajo proceeded to recite his clan affiliations in the traditional way of introducing himself in the Navajo language. Some of the Lakotas were able to speak their language, but others were not. The teams went back and forth proposing standards of proof of identity, but each proposed standard was self-serving and could not be met by the other team. As the sun began to set, the frustrated referees canceled the championship game. Because of the accusations and disagreements that could not be resolved there would be no champion in the indigenous tournament.

FACETS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Overview

In recent years there has been a growing literature on identity, accompanied by many deconstructive critiques of this concept.⁶ Generally, identification is based on recognition of a common origin or shared characteristics with another person, group, or ideal leading to solidarity and allegiance. Beyond this, the discursive approach sees identification as an ongoing process that is never complete.⁷ Additionally, identities do not exist before they are constructed.⁸

Most theorists agree that identity exists, not solely within an individual or category of individuals but through difference in relationship with others.⁹ Thus, there was no Native American identity prior to contact with Europeans.¹⁰ Likewise, immigrants from various European nations had to learn to define themselves as white rather than according to their national origins or cultural groups.¹¹ Before contact, indigenous people identified themselves as distinct from other indigenous people and constructed their identities in this way. Indeed, this is still the case for many who see themselves as members of their own nations rather than members of a larger group represented by the umbrella term *Native American*.

The constructionist approach to representation states that meaning is constructed through language.¹² Thus, the words we choose to use such as *Ameri-*

can Indian, Native American, or First Nations not only reflect but shape identity. Likewise, using English translations for indigenous words shapes meanings. Today, Native people often learn about themselves and their culture in English and therefore adopt some stereotypes and distorted meanings.¹³

The label “Indian” has served to reinforce the image of indigenous people as linked to a romantic past. “Indians” are the images in old photographs, movies, and museum cases.¹⁴ It is a label for people who are fundamentally unknown and misrecognized by nonindigenous people. Indeed, an “Indian” is constituted in the act of naming.¹⁵ Those who are relatively powerless to represent themselves as complex human beings against the backdrop of degrading stereotypes become invisible and nameless.¹⁶

Identity is shaped, in part, by recognition, absence of recognition, or misrecognition by others: “A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.”¹⁷ This misrecognition has oppressed indigenous people and has imprisoned them within a false “Indian” identity.¹⁸

How an indigenous cultural identity is defined by Natives and nonnatives has been complex in both contemporary and historical times.¹⁹ It is misleading to assume that all indigenous people experience a Native cultural identity in the same way just because they were born into a Native community. This glosses over the multifaceted and evolving nature of identity as well as cultural differences among and within Native nations.²⁰

Additionally, identity can be multilayered. For some, a subtribal identity such as clan affiliation is primary. For others, identification with a tribe or a region like the Northern Plains is most meaningful. Still others espouse a broader identity as Native or indigenous people. Different levels of identity are likely to be presented in different contexts: “Thus, an American Indian might be a ‘mixed-blood’ on the reservation, from ‘Pine Ridge’ when speaking to someone from another reservation, an ‘Oglala Sioux’ or ‘Lakota’ when asked about tribal affiliation, or an ‘American Indian’ when interacting with non-Indians.”²¹

Identity is a combination of self-identification and the perceptions of others.²² There are widespread disputes about who can assert a Native identity and who has the right to represent indigenous interests. Such conflicts occur when self-identification and the perceptions of others are at odds. Some people who assert indigenous identity do not appear phenotypically Native, are not enrolled, and were not born on reservations or in some other Native communities. Some of these individuals indeed have indigenous heritage, and others do

not. Other people are enrolled or have Native heritage but know little about their cultures. This may be because they have no interest or no one to teach them or because of factors such as racism and stereotypes that inhibit their willingness to pursue an indigenous identity.²³ Some indigenous communities, such as the Mashpee, have experienced significant racial mixing. Marriage between Europeans and indigenous people was sanctioned and rewarded by U.S. government officials as a way to assimilate and acculturate Native people.²⁴ This raises the question, Did the Mashpee and similar indigenous communities absorb outsiders, or were they absorbed into the American melting pot?²⁵ These issues of authenticity permeate the story “The Big Game” as players try to exclude others from the competition. Indeed, identity is always based on power and exclusion. Someone must be excluded from a particular identity in order for it to be meaningful.²⁶

Self-Identification

Self-perception is a key component of identity. For some, expression of a Native identity may be little more than a personal belief about heritage expressed on a census form.²⁷ Cultural identity is not static; rather, it progresses through developmental stages during which an individual has a changing sense of who he or she is, perhaps leading to a rediscovered sense of being Native.²⁸ There is some level of choice involved in accepting a Native identity, although the range of choices is limited by factors such as phenotypical appearances.²⁹ Choice may also be influenced by social, economic, and political factors.³⁰ For example, a climate filled with discrimination may lead an individual to reject a Native identity, whereas a climate in which a Native identity is seen as fashionable and perhaps financially profitable may lead an individual to assert an indigenous identity.

In some instances, asserting an indigenous cultural identity is related to resisting assimilation. Navajo and Ute youth who grow up off the reservation with limited connections to their cultural past or traditional ceremonies often define their indigenous identity and cultural pride through resistance to the domination of the white community. For example, attending and doing well in school are defined as important and good by the surrounding white community, yet these youth often drop out, not because they are “bad” or incapable of school success but as a way of defying the dominant society. Resistance of “goodness” as framed by whites and insistence on living their lives as indigenous people, in the many different ways in which they define it, are at the core of their actions.³¹

Developing a cultural identity consists of a lifelong learning process of cultural awareness and understanding.³² Because the formation of identity takes

place over time, a strong cultural identity may increase with age.³³ In addition to a growing cultural attachment as individuals get older, there seems to be a revitalization in indigenous cultures and communities across the country. Indeed, individual cultural renewal and collective cultural renewal are intertwined.³⁴

In the story "The Big Game," all the players see themselves as indigenous people, yet the ways in which they define themselves are contested by others. A stalemate occurs when it becomes impossible to reach an agreement between self-definitions and external definitions of identity.

Community Identification

Indigenous identity is connected to a sense of peoplehood inseparably linked to sacred traditions, traditional homelands, and a shared history as indigenous people.³⁵ A person must be integrated into a society, not simply stand alone as an individual, in order to be fully human.³⁶ Additionally, identity can only be confirmed by others who share that identity.³⁷ The sense of membership in a community is so integrally linked to a sense of identity that Native people often identify themselves by their reservations or tribal communities. This stands in striking contrast to the practice of many members of the dominant society who commonly identify themselves by their professional affiliations. Tribal members have an enduring sense of their own unique indigenous identity.³⁸ The sense of a traditional homeland is so strong for many Navajos that when outside their traditional territory and away from sacred geography they sometimes experience an extreme imbalance that can only be corrected by returning to their home communities for ceremonies.³⁹

Tribal communities, and thus their members, maintain their identities relative to the identities of neighboring communities. In the past, neighboring communities consisted of other indigenous groups; now they are groups from other cultures.⁴⁰ Sometimes identity boundaries are defined by policy and law as well as convention. Tribes have the right to determine criteria for membership. This regulation of membership, in some ways a form of regulating identity, has implications for political access and resource allocation.⁴¹ Likewise, enrollment (or lack thereof) has implications for how a person perceives him- or herself and is perceived by others, both within and outside of the Native community.

Cultural identity not only exists in contrast to surrounding communities; differences are also found among indigenous people within a community. Csordas describes how the types of healing used by various Navajo people indicate and reinforce their cultural identity.⁴² Whether an individual participates in traditional, Native American Church, or Christian forms of healing reflects a sense of identity and self-worth as a Navajo.

For some indigenous people, a sense of community identity comes increasingly from intertribal or pan-Indian groups. Nagel points to activist developments such as the occupation of Alcatraz, the development of the Red Power movement, the occupation of Wounded Knee, fish-ins, and the Trail of Broken Treaties as turning points in the evolution of indigenous identity. Through these activist efforts, some indigenous people began to see Native heritage as a valuable part of personal identity and as a foundation for pan-Indian solidarity. Although a growing climate of activism led to increased cultural renewal, this should not obscure the social and cultural continuity that has been maintained in some communities.⁴³

In the story “The Big Game,” the players are members of teams. The teams validate and reinforce each member’s identity as a basketball player, just as Native communities validate and reinforce the identities of their members. Being part of a larger group is critical to identity in both cases.

External Identification

Native identity has often been defined from a nonnative perspective. This raises critical questions about authenticity: Who decides who is an indigenous person, Natives or nonnatives?⁴⁴ The federal government has asserted a shaping force in indigenous identity by defining both Native nations and individuals.⁴⁵ Federal policy makers have increasingly imposed their own standards of who is considered a Native person in spite of the fact that this is in direct conflict with the rights of tribes/nations.⁴⁶

The role of the federal government in shaping an indigenous identity can be pervasive but hard to define. The United States declared indigenous people to be members of domestic dependent nations, wards of the federal government, and even U.S. citizens. This raises interesting questions, such as, What is the influence of social and economic policies on identity? Can someone else’s laws define who we are? Do we adopt an identity as farmers because that is what the Allotment Act intended? Deloria sets the stage for many such questions, yet the answers are complex and elusive.⁴⁷

Some Native nations are not acknowledged to exist by the federal government. This lack of recognition has implications for how these tribes/nations are viewed by other people as well as how they view themselves. Issues of authenticity are increasingly debated in the courts as some Native groups seek federal recognition and a return of traditional lands. In the case of the Mashpee, who sued for a return of land, the primary issue was whether the group calling itself the Mashpee Tribe was in fact an Indian tribe and, if so, whether it was the same tribe that lost land through a series of contested legislative acts in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁸ A similar issue of authenticity exists for indi-

viduals who are not enrolled in their nations for whatever reason: "Although tribal status and Indian identity have long been vague and politically constituted, not just anyone with some native blood or claim to adoption or shared tradition can be an Indian, and not just any Native American group can decide to be a tribe and sue for lost lands."⁴⁹

Stereotypes have a powerful influence on identity. Popular notions of Native identity are stereotypical and locked in the past.⁵⁰ In movies and writing, indigenous people seem permanently associated with notions of the old American frontier. Nonnative people may view indigenous people as having a harmonious relationship with nature and possessing an unspoiled spirituality. Sometimes indigenous people are viewed as tourist attractions, victims, and historical artifacts.⁵¹ Vizenor asserts that indigenous identities have been censored.⁵² Nonindigenous people do not want to see aspects of Native people that do not support their own ideas and beliefs, thus leading to a perpetuation of stereotypes. These external perceptions may influence how indigenous people view themselves.

Historically, indigenous people knew who they were, and today most continue to trace identity through descent, lineage, and clan, but the federal government's preoccupation with a formal definition has caused many problems. Indeed, there is considerable variation within branches of the federal government as to how Native people are defined, and these definitions are often at odds with state and tribal definitions.⁵³

The way we choose to define ourselves is often not the way that others define us.⁵⁴ "The Big Game" is an example of how conflicting definitions of identity can lead to hostilities. When the members of one team identify themselves with enrollment cards, this is perceived as a threat to the self-defined identities of those without cards. Likewise, when the other team asserts that identity is grounded in the ability to speak an indigenous language, this threatens the self-perceptions of those who speak only English. Searching for the "right" criteria is both counterproductive and damaging.

Reflections on the Facets of Identity

The facets of identity interact with and sometimes reinforce or challenge each other. 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. Historical circumstances, however, led to thousands of Native people being taken from their communities and raised without community connections through mechanisms such as interracial adoption, foster care, and boarding schools. Indeed, there are many indigenous people with tenuous community connections at

best, and some of them try to reassert an indigenous identity and find their way home to their cultures.

Establishing community connections is often an arduous task. Some indigenous people may offer support and guidance to those who try to find their way home to their tribal communities. This can be a positive experience of reintegration and cultural learning. In other instances, support is not forthcoming, and many roadblocks are raised by other indigenous people playing a gatekeeping function.

External, nonindigenous validation of Native identity, unlike community validation, is not grounded in a reasonable foundation. While it makes sense that a community should define its members, it does not make sense for an external entity to define indigenous people. It is not up to the federal government or any dominant society institution to pass judgment on the validity of any individual's claim to an indigenous identity. Likewise, it is not up to the Navajos in the story to define who the Lakotas are, nor should the Lakota attempt to define who is truly Navajo.

MEASURING IDENTITY

Although there is no consensus about what indigenous cultural identity and its various facets are, there is no shortage of attempts to measure this phenomenon. Identity is expressed as a measurable or quantifiable entity far more for indigenous people than for any other group. The federal government and most tribes use some form of blood quantum measurement.⁵⁵ Such measures are commonly used, although biological heritage is clearly not synonymous with any level of cultural connection. When the practice of defining Native identity by blood quantum is combined with the highest rate of intermarriage of any group (75 percent), Native people seem to be on a course of irreversible absorption into the larger U.S. society.⁵⁶ Scholars such as Jaimes and Rose suggest that the federal government has an interest in the statistical extermination of indigenous people, thereby leading to an end to treaty and trust responsibilities.⁵⁷

Because race is not an adequate indicator of culture, identity is something that should be assessed rather than assumed.⁵⁸ Various scales have been developed to assess indigenous people's cultural identity along a continuum from traditional, to integrated/bicultural, to assimilated. See, for example, the scales developed recently by Young, Lujan, and Dixon and Garrett and Pichette.⁵⁹ Such scales are often modeled on scales developed for other cultural groups such as Latinos and tend to have questions that focus on language, ethnic origin of friends and associates, music and food preferences, and place of birth.

Many measures of cultural identity are actually measures of acculturation (into the dominant society). Additionally, some measures, such as the one de-

veloped by Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washienko, Walter, and Dyer, have been developed to assess enculturation, the lifelong learning process of cultural awareness and understanding.⁶⁰ Both acculturation and enculturation scales tend to use linear continua. The utility of a linear model in representing such a complex concept has been challenged by scholars such as Oetting and Beauvais, who propose an orthogonal model of cultural identification in which attachment to one culture does not necessarily detract from attachment to another and multiple cultural identifications are not only possible but potentially healthy.⁶¹ Likewise, Deyhle has found that linear and hierarchical models of biculturalism are limited and neglect the context of racism.⁶² Theorists and researchers who use linear models often speak of cultural conflict and individuals being caught between two worlds, a circumstance that leads to a variety of social difficulties, but Deyhle believes that this perspective does not accurately depict the realities of Native youth. Rather than determining where someone fits on a continuum between two cultural identities or worlds, it may be more accurate to say that indigenous people live in one complex, conflictual world.

In the end, although it is clearly inappropriate to make assumptions about an individual's cultural identity based on appearance or blood quantum, most attempts to measure identity are of questionable adequacy and accuracy: "Indianness means different things to different people. And, of course, at the most elementary level, Indianness is something only experienced by people who are Indians. It is how Indians think about themselves and is internal, intangible, and metaphysical. From this perspective, studying Indianness is like trying to study the innermost mysteries of the human mind itself."⁶³ The conflict in the story "The Big Game" illustrates the difficulty inherent in measuring identity by any one standard.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION/COLONIZATION

Perhaps the harshest arbiters of Native identity are Native people themselves. Federal policies that treated Native people of mixed heritage differently than those without mixed heritage effectively attacked unity within Native communities, thereby turning indigenous people against each other.⁶⁴ Some Native people fight others fiercely to prevent them from claiming a Native identity. Sometimes Native people, as well as the federal government, find a financial incentive to prevent others from declaring themselves to be indigenous. In 1979, the Samish and Snohomish of Puget Sound were declared "legally extinct" by the federal government in part because other Native groups such as the Tulalips did not view them as genuine. Likewise, the Lumbees of North Carolina, one of the largest tribes in the 1990 census, had difficulty gaining social and federal acceptance as constituting legitimate indigenous communities

because of intertribal disputes over timber resources. After a long fight they received only limited federal acknowledgment with the proviso that they receive no federal services.⁶⁵

Internalized oppression, a by-product of colonization, has become common among indigenous people. We fight among ourselves and often accuse each other of not being “Indian enough” based on differences in politics, religion, or phenotype: “Mixed-heritage members may see traditionals as uncivilized and backwards. Traditionalists may believe that progressives are ‘less Indian’ because of cultural naivete and that multi-heritage people only claim tribal membership for land and annuity purposes.”⁶⁶ Such fighting among ourselves only serves to divide communities. In some regions of the country it is common to see the bumper sticker “FBI: Full Blooded Indian.” What message does this communicate to people of mixed heritage? Does this mean that they are somehow lesser human beings and cannot have strong cultural connections?

Skin color and phenotype lead to assumptions about identity, suspicion, and lack of acceptance.⁶⁷ A survey of indigenous helping professionals has found that one of the most prominent challenges of indigenous people in higher education is struggling with the stereotypes that others hold about them.⁶⁸ Sometimes these stereotypes are held by people of other cultural groups, but often they are held by other Native people who make assumptions about cultural identity based solely on physical appearance. These assumptions have led to painful experiences such as ostracism from other indigenous people and people having their identities contradicted and denied.

Some of the propensity toward exclusivity and denying the cultural identities of mixed-blood people comes from the exploitation experienced by Native people and communities for centuries. There is well-founded suspicion of people who claim a Native heritage but have no apparent connections to an indigenous community. In today’s climate, in which New Age spirituality has become popular and so much cultural appropriation has happened, there is a fear of the ultimate cultural appropriation: the usurpation of Native cultural identity. When people with minimal Native heritage, no cultural knowledge, and no kinship ties attempt to assert an indigenous identity, it is often hotly contested among indigenous people, yet this does not appear to be much of an issue for others who are not indigenous.⁶⁹ It is fairly common for the nonnatives I encounter to have difficulty seeing any reason for concern when a person claims to be Native but has no cultural knowledge, community connections, or verifiable ancestry.

Suspicion about the identity of some Native people has been fueled by the recent growth of the indigenous population according to U.S. census counts. Some people believe that others are inappropriately self-identifying as indigenous because it may be “fashionable” at this time. Another possible explana-

tion is that now it is safer for people of mixed heritage to publicly proclaim cultural pride in an indigenous identity. A renaissance in Native cultures has been paralleling dramatic population growth since the 1960s. Political revitalization, linguistic revival, membership growth, and cultural revitalization have all taken place in recent decades. The proliferation of indigenous organizations and activism has served as a catalyst for the resurgence of individual Native identity as reflected in the census and the renewal of tribal and urban community life.⁷⁰

Although I stated earlier that there is no “correct” terminology for indigenous people, semantics is certainly an issue that evokes strong feelings. Many people express clear preferences for certain terms (e.g., *Native American* rather than *American Indian* or *First Nations people* rather than more commonly used terms). Indigenous people who attempt to dictate to other indigenous people what they should call themselves replicate the oppression that has been imposed on them. In recent years many Native nations have begun to return to their traditional names rather than use those imposed by external forces. While many people, myself included, view this as a positive step toward cultural revitalization and pride, it would be inappropriate to impose this requirement on others. As a child I was raised referring to myself as Sioux. As I grew older and the political climate changed, I took pride in calling myself Lakota. It is not unusual, however, for some to continue using the term *Sioux*. This is their right and reflects aspects of their identity. Although the names that indigenous groups were given by others often have a derogatory origin, we only make this worse when indigenous people who consider themselves decolonized mock others who continue to use such terms.

While we as indigenous people were busy guarding against cultural appropriation, we may have missed a much bigger threat to indigenous continuity. Indeed, there are some nonnatives who pose as Natives and some Natives who sell traditions and spirituality for a profit, but the self-appointed “identity police,” those who divide communities and accuse others of not being “Indian” enough because they practice the wrong religion, have the wrong politics, use the wrong label for themselves, or do not have the right skin color, should also be an issue of concern. Some indigenous people ask, “Are you Indian, or are you Christian?” as if these are mutually exclusive categories. I have seen caring indigenous people driven to tears at their jobs at a Native community center when they were berated for having some white ancestry. People have been publicly humiliated because someone decided that their tribal affiliations were inappropriate. This harassment and badgering is conducted by indigenous people, against indigenous people. The roots for this type of behavior probably lie deep in the accusers’ own insecurities about identity and racism learned as part of the colonization process.

Many indigenous traditions speak of people returning who have been alienated from their communities. I know of no indigenous people who are not well aware of the generations of Native people that grew up outside their traditions. Although there is no doubt of the existence of these people, there is often suspicion when an unknown individual seeks information on possible community connections. This is one of the factors that mobilizes the “identity police.” While, indeed, there probably are some people pretending to have indigenous heritage along with those who really do, pretenders will ultimately get what they deserve without any intervention from the “identity police.”

Through internalized oppression/colonization, we have become our own worst enemy. The hateful accusations that are hurled at some serve to hurt our communities. “The Big Game” illustrates this point. It is a story of the pain we inflict on each other as a result of internalized colonization.

Indigenous identity is a complex and multifaceted topic. I have discussed some of these facets here along with my own reflections on internalized oppression/colonization. Although a variety of literature is cited from people currently writing in this area, the perspective that comes across is a reflection of my own beliefs, sense of self, and identity as a Lakota woman living in a particular time and place. While my views may differ from those of some indigenous people, others may find something in my words that resonates with their own perspectives.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Our divisions should be reconcilable, but internalized colonization and oppression just lead to deeper divisions. Features of internalized oppression and colonization can be found in many oppressed communities in addition to the indigenous communities discussed here. Actions and reactions born of internalized oppression and colonization are themselves acts of colonization that mirror the oppressors’ acts. Until we are able to put aside our own insecurities that lead us to accuse others, there will be no winners among indigenous people.

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