

**American Indian Cultural Identity:  
A Narrative Analysis of Identity in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex**

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**Bio:**

Yolonda Cevaal-Moore is a senior majoring in Honors anthropology at The University of Tennessee. She is interested in American Indian cultures and the encouragement of women in science. As a Girl Scout troop leader in the Southern Appalachian Council and an anthropologist, she hopes to empower women and American Indians in science. As a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians in Belcourt, North Dakota, she recently received an eagle feather for making a difference in the Native American community. After graduation, she hopes to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs while pursuing a graduate degree.

**Abstract:**

According to Cevaal-Moore, often the American Indian is seen and not heard while the “urban Indian” is invisible and voiceless. The stereotype of the American Indian is deeply embedded in phenotypic appearance; federal, tribal and state guidelines; and cultural conceptions of the reservation Indian, although, more than two-thirds of the Indian population live in urban settings and have since the early twentieth century. This work seeks to broadcast the voice of the urban Indian and give understanding to the wider community that indigenous people are not extinct. This research shows how they connect with their indigenous heritage and navigate the urban environment.

## Urban Indian

Little Indian in the City  
Looks White what a pity

Little Indian walking on concrete  
Never heard the drum beat  
Walking around with souls on her feet

Little Indian dyes her hair blond or red  
Anything to make sure the savage is dead

White woman in moccasin feet  
Bouncing in the arena to the drum beat

White woman gets a tan, dyes her hair brown  
Anything to lose the white woman's crown

Mixed identity, mixed blood  
Mixed feelings, emotions flood

Métis woman in the City  
Head held high; no pity

Métis woman finds her beat  
Walking through the city in moccasin feet

*Red Bird*  
*Yselda L. Govaal-Moore*

## Introduction

### *Identity in the Stereotype*

Is it my hair, my skin tone, my cheekbones, my mom, my dad, my grandfather? What is it that makes you think I'm not who I say I am? What defines me as American Indian, Native American, or urban Indian? Many people think of the American Indian as the exotic other, or the extinct Native. The American Indians are people of the past or at least that's how we viewed them in history class; they wear their hair long, they have dark or "red" skin, they dance around a drum or a fire and beat their mouths with their hands while some foreign sound comes out. Maybe they have beautiful jewelry and beadwork and they live on the land and in teepees or adobes. Perhaps they hunt, gather, and go unaffected by the world around them. Maybe they wear loincloths, war paint, and feathers. Right? No. Let them speak.

### *A Story to Tell*

Let them tell us who they are. Let them show you they are right here under our noses. They are busily going about their day just as we do. They cannot be identified by the stereotypes. They are not the exotic other and they are not the Indian of the past. They are real, multi-dimensional Americans living in the here and now, but, because of these stereotypes, they are still facing discrimination and racial conflict.

This paper uses narrative analysis to seek a better understanding of American Indians living in the urban environment apart from tribal settings and/or ties. The use of narrative—the personal “stories” and experiences of those who participated in this research with me—allows me to place you in their moccasins as I tell you their stories; that is, the stories they told me. Narrative analysis requires the researcher to sensitively interpret these personal experiences and thus as a tool of qualitative research is as much “art” as it is “science” (Riessman, 1993). The

stories told by the participants seek to demonstrate what it is like to be American Indian off the “Rez” (Reservation) and in the urban community. They show us how their identity is created and experienced in an environment that does not seem stereotypically conducive with carrying on the expected cultural traditions of the American Indian community. It is in this environment that they manage this juxtaposition while maintaining their identity as American Indian.

Kohn (1996) explains that any narrative collected in a narrative analysis study sits within a larger cultural system. Thus, what the narrator articulates is far more nuanced and rich than an answer framed on a strictly evidential basis. For instance, in this research I could have done a survey asking for a participant’s lineage as American Indian, limiting her to a list of options. The findings could have indicated a female participant’s mother specific lineage. However, in the scope of the narrative analysis, the findings indicated that her identity was grounded more in her relationship to her maternal grandfather and very little connection was formed to the mother. Through this simple example, not only the lineage was uncovered, but also important subtleties about her heritage were further elaborated by the participant’s personal story.

Ochs (2007) highlights the main points of “narrative lessons” in which she demonstrates that narrative work is not just a recollection of prior events. It is a source that informs future action through past experience and present reflections strung together in coherent words, actions, and thoughts (2007). Ochs (2007) informs us that although the narrative is coherent it may not be strung together in order of events; it may start out with present and reflect on the past or on a known future, or it may reflect on present for a hypothetical future and conjure a lesson from the past. In other words, narratives may be chaotically organized yet an understanding can still be experienced. Ochs’s point was earlier described by Clifford Geertz (1973) when he wrote:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (p. 10)

Though Geertz was speaking of the data collected in fieldnotes, his words could well apply to the raw interviews that are my data. My analytical task was to find the common “story lines” present across the words of my research participants.

According to Kohn (1996), narratives aid the narrator in finding socially understood common meanings that demonstrate their own situation or identity. This knowledge gathered in stories and expressed as a means of coping for the narrator provide rich detail and context for others trying to understand the narrator’s reality.

### *Urban is Lonely*

I wanted to understand the reality of urban Indians, but why did I want to understand it? As my research began, I knew I had to come to terms with why I wanted to research the “urban Indian.” I am not sure where or when I first heard the words “urban Indian,” but I know that when I heard it, I made it my own and identified with it myself. I am an American Indian, Chippewa and Métis from Turtle Mountain in Belcourt North Dakota, but I was raised off the “Rez” in an urban environment. In saying this, you know that my point of view in this research is from an insider’s perspective because I am whom I am researching. As much as any other reason, I want assurance that I am not alone!

Smith (1999) writes through the lens of the indigenous, as not only an advocate and voice of the people but as the people herself. She calls upon the reader’s knowledge of the colonizers and begs the reader to look through the lens of the colonized to see and feel the ways in which

the colonized were taken advantage of and to address the problems so that the cycle does perpetuate itself. Smith (1999) argues that the very beginnings of anthropological research were embedded in colonial imperialism; in order to break free of this bond with the colonizer, she argues that it is essential to write from the perspective of the colonized. This is the approach I will take.

Although I will write from the insider's perspective, I look to the work of Abu-Lughod (2006) in "Writing Against Culture," because I am what she terms a "halfie-anthropologist." According to Abu-Lughod, halfies are "people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education or parentage" (p. 472). Urban Indians are then halfies by Abu-Lughod's definition, whether full-blood or not, because of their migration into the urban setting. Reservations are sovereign nations and although you may not need a passport for travel purposes elsewhere in the United States, the cultures are distinctly different.

I have the experience of both reservation life and the urban experience. I am conducting research within an American Indian community with which I identify. Abu-Lughod warns that it has been a long held tradition within the discipline that anthropologists study "the other" (2006). For the halfie, "the other" is also the self. Therefore, the halfie may simply slip into views lacking in analytical distance. On the other hand, she states that being studied by "the other" (i.e. the anthropologist) often hands the power over to them as they presume to speak for the native. Abu-Lughod points out that the best way to avoid the conundrums of the halfie-anthropologist is to focus on the historical and current connections between the community and the anthropologist working in that community and to expand on what enables the anthropologist to be in that particular place studying that group. Therefore, I choose to focus first on the historical



connections between American Indian identity, and then the American Indian's relocation in the urban setting.

### Literature Review

#### *The Quantum Identity*

Many who identify as American Indian bring up issues of tribal enrollment and blood quantum as one of the first topics of markers for American Indian identity. Blood quantum is the criteria for American Indian enrollment within their tribe via legislation enacted in order to identify those who may receive aid from the federal government. Blood quantum is defined as the degree of ancestry a person has such as full blood, half, quarter etc. The question that immediately arises is who created the taxonomy of "quantum" in the first place. L. James Dempsey (2005), in his "Status Indian: Who Defines You?" highlights society and the circumstances in which people fit into a neat little box of cultural identity. He elaborates on this idea by explaining how this process is different for indigenous people. Dempsey reveals how federal laws were designed to create a legal definition that allowed the state to manipulate the resources to its own advantage. In this hegemonically constructed version of indigenous identity based on blood quantum, Dempsey asserts that the federal laws formally constructed American Indian identity, not the Indians themselves. According to Gover (2009), blood quantum is the main reason for the questions of a person's nativeness or otherness, because federal government was trying to disown the "Indian problem" and force assimilation in order to get out of having to pay for their actions. This sentiment is stated clearly by Gonzales (2004):

When the Dawes Act, calling for the dissolution of tribal land, was enacted in 1887, it did not stipulate how and to whom tribally owned land was to be allotted. Undaunted by this Congressional oversight, federal agents relied on prevailing scientific tenets of the time

that held “blood” to be the carrier of genetic and cultural material for the determination of allotment eligibility, or what came to be commonly referred to as “blood quantum.” (p. 129)

In other words, once “blood” is sufficiently diluted, the rights pertaining to the blood relationship to a tribe disappears, and the federal agencies would no longer be bound by their treaties.

Miller (2003) elaborates this issue of not wanting to pay for their actions as he takes us through the legal system of the federal government in “Unrecognized Tribes, Unrecognized Peoples.” Miller’s (2003) perspective on the issue of the federally unrecognized indigenous peoples of the America’s is that the Federal Acts leading up to unrecognizing tribes was financial and political in nature and did not account for any cultural ties to the identification of indigeneity. In other words, it was strictly a plan to maximize resources and minimize responsibility. Miller also discusses the reliance of the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the Eurocentric definition of Indian via blood quantum. Through blood quantum, according to Miller, the federal government was trying to eliminate Indians altogether in order to deny access to monies that were guaranteed in previous Acts. This issue of blood quantum is also addressed as part of identity from all of the participants in Tomhave’s (2005) film “Native Voices.” For example, Christina Entrekin elaborates on the concept of blood quantum stating that it was an “extermination policy.” The Federal Government had enough forethought to invent the idea of blood quantum knowing that there would be intermarriage and a diluting of the race to the point that it would erase the “Indian Problem.”

### *Ethnic Cleansing and Genocide*

Quantum was only one of many tools in the federal toolbox that were intended to minimize the burden of having to return that which was wrongly taken, i.e., land, and lives of the

American Indians. Therefore, the federal government had an extermination policy of diluting blood quantum through intermarriage as one-step toward eliminating the Indian Problem. And then there was outright murder. Murder and evidence of it is in every account of the “Trail of Tears” in the archeological record from North Carolina to Oklahoma. Murder is evident in the cemeteries of every boarding school. More specifically, proof of murder is in the Sioux San boarding school in which every Indian sent to Sioux San knew it was a death sentence (Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000). Sioux San was the equivalent to the tuberculosis sanatoriums and being sent there they knew they were destined for death.

Maybury-Lewis (2002) addresses the Americas and the genocide that took place within the Americas. He explains that genocide is a last resort after exhausting all of the physical resources that an indigenous population has to offer. If the slavery that was implemented is no longer needed or is not working to the advantage of the slave owner, then killing is an option in the eyes of the colonizer. He draws our attention to the Americas in particular to show us that nowhere in the world was there a higher number of indigenous peoples murdered in mass than in the Americas while also noting that genocide is prevalent wherever there is colonization (2002). He then draws our attention to the marginalization of the survivors (2002). According to Maybury-Lewis, the foundation of marginalization in the indigenous groups is the subordination of the group to the greater powers such as the State and treated as if they do not belong in their own home. American Indians, if not killed physically, were to be killed culturally and forced to assimilate. Many agendas were widely accepted to hold the same belief as Army officer Richard Pratt who said “Kill the Indian and save the man,” believing whole heartedly that the Indian was a savage to be tamed (Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000). In this attempt to tame the

savage, American Indians were removed from their homes to boarding schools or to predominately White communities—anywhere away from their cultural setting.

### *Location and Relocation*

Moving the American Indians began as soon as the colonizers arrived but the efforts to relocate for the purposes of eliminating the Indian went on for an extensive period of time. Gonzales (2004) reveals that urban relocation was the trend between 1945 and 1961 through the House Concurrent Resolution 108 of 1954 and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Direct Employment Program also known as the Voluntary Relocation Program. Gover (2009) discusses the Termination Policy era of 1950-1970, Voluntary Relocation Program of 1952, and the influence of urban relocation. The Relocation Program was a program that encouraged American Indians to leave the reservation for urban residences in order to find work. Although the policy makers believed that work would be found, the lack of decent work left most who moved to the city in poverty worse than that which was experienced on the reservation and without the resources to return to their homes. In addition, most of the land was already allocated to the political entities that drew up the relocation program in the first place.

This brief mention of historical law gives an understanding as to why more than half the population of American Indians lives off the reservation and why they continue to stay off the reservation. Johnson and Eck (1996) address the legal pressures behind assimilation and their historical significance of who the American Indian is today. The points that Johnson and Eck cover about the legal reasons for the American Indian being stereotyped as they are has to do with their location today and is crucial to understanding the assimilation process and its difference in contrast to acculturation. Along with European arrival came the English language. Weaver (2001) explains that the language that most Native Americans today learn in is English.

Subsequently, many Native American accept the Eurocentric stereotypes on their own cultural identity. For example, by playing Indian or not knowing what it means to be a “real Indian.” Weaver explains that these stereotypes or labels often romanticize the indigenous people in a way that depicts them as the extinct human. However, what is to follow is evidence that American Indians are not extinct and that those who live in the urban environment have not assimilated. American Indians have adapted and formed their own community and their own identities within the urban environment. The reason the urban Indians may not be as visible as many would expect is that they are not the exotic other; they happen to blend well in the urban environment, which demonstrates their adaptable strength.

### Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was conducted through participant observation at two powwows in Oklahoma, one stomp-dance ceremony in Oklahoma, and at an intertribal center in Texas while getting treatment for my ailing tooth. Interviews were conducted at the University of North Texas with three participants who self-identified as “urban Indians.” I established contact with my participants at the University campus and scheduled semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, questions were asked about their lineage, their experience as American Indians, and ultimately their story of how they construct their identity as “urban Indian.” All interviews were voice recorded after informed consent was given.

The recorded data was then transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. Using content analysis, I was able to focus on the actual content and internal features of the interviews in order to determine the occurrence of certain words, concepts, themes, and phrases within the texts. Using this system, I was able to quantify the data in an objective manner. I coded, and broke down, into manageable categories a variety of levels of words, phrases, and themes, and

examined them using basic methods of conceptual analysis. With the results, I was able to make inferences about the themes within the data.

As stated earlier, narrative analysis was the main method employed throughout this work. The participants tell their experience and the researcher finds and interprets common story lines and common meanings. Narrative analysis is based on Fisher's (1984) narrative theory in which people are storytellers and view the world as a set of stories in which we choose and recreate our lives. For these narrative stories, two participants are male and one is female. Two participants are graduate students, one is in a master's degree program, and one is in a doctoral degree program. The third participant holds a Ph.D. in history. The first participant I interviewed was a young master's student that I met by chance encounter through a mutual friend on campus that understood my research.

### The Narrative

#### *Albino Indian*

I had no idea! Yes, even I am guilty of assumptions. She was right there all along as I was busily plugging away at my research trying to find urban Indians she was right there working in my building day in and day out. She was a blond haired, blue-eyed woman of 27 years and a self-identified Choctaw "urban Indian." She lived on the Rez for six years of her life and the rest has been in the urban environment, but her story began on the Rez as her experiences molded her identity. She said it never occurred to her that she did not fit in.

**TRC:** I remember everyone giving us sort of weird looks when I hung out with my grandfather 'cuz blond hair, blue eyes, I just thought I was albino.

**Interviewer:** That is very interesting because I, I would not have thought that you were Native and did not know until CRU told me and uh. I was so excited! [laugh]

**TRC:** [Laugh] Yeah, most people don't see it and they really don't understand. I've had teachers question me on it when they've been, like, "write about your Heritage" and they'll call my mom and my mom will be, like, "Yeah, she is [frustration in the voice]. Do you want pictures of her family? That's what she is!" And the teachers would immediately have to be like, "Oh, I'm sorry." So, I've learned to sort of, until someone else brings it up, I don't just for ease of argument.

**Interviewer:** Does um, does skin color come into play at all?

**TRC:** It did when I was older but not when I was younger. Like I said I just thought it went with the albino thing; like I just lost my color somewhere along the way.

TRC is not albino, although that is how she viewed herself as a child. She is just a phenotypic variation of yet another mixed American Indian. Does this phenotype matter in the context of personal identity? I wish I could say that it does not, but it has its effects on the developing cultural identity for those who participated in this research.

### *I Don't Look Like I Belong*

After analyzing the data collected from interviews and participant observation, a theme of appearance reared its ugly head one hundred thirty-eight times in fifty-four nuanced ways. More than any other piece of data in the research, appearance held its own at the top of the pile. Why is it that in order to identify as American Indian we must look the part, and what is looking the part? Additionally, why is appearance more salient for urban Indians?

According to my participants, looking the part is having the paper bag skin tone, the jet black hair, high cheekbones, deep brown eyes, and, for men, long hair. Funny how that doesn't leave much variation in phenotypes and yet that same description could apply to a number of

people. Phenotypic variations among non-Indians are acceptable without negating their identity.

Why is it any different for American Indians?

Some of these questions may be answered by history including the U.S. Census history. Up until 1960, a census worker would write down what they thought a person's race or ethnicity was based on appearance using the U.S. Census Bureau guidelines (Shepherd, 2000). It was the accepted norm of the time to see race and or ethnicity as phenotypically marked. This is similar to blood quantum rules mentioned earlier that were established from the prevailing scientific ideas of blood being the carrier of race (Gonzales, 2004). Historical actions bled into the identity of self for American Indians through the agents established by Tajfel's (1986) Social Identity Theory in which the personal identity is based on group membership, because group membership included the legal constraints of blood quantum or the phenotypic look as seen by the census workers.

JHC is a scholar with a traditional Cherokee male hair style that is long and braided in the back and short up front. He has blue eyes and light skin and a voice that tells you he has years of wisdom to back up his words. When discussing stereotypes in a conversation, he shared the following story establishing that the idea of being visibly Indian is reinforced by the media and Hollywood:

**Interviewer:** You were talking about stereotyping. Um, with the stereotyping do you feel that we have taken in some of these stereotypes ourselves?

**JHC:** Oh absolutely! When I was doing my research on the reservation, the former wife of the former tribal administrator there was sharing a story. In fact, no, it was the tribal administrator who was sharing the story, that, um, when television came to the reservation, he had one of the first television sets and a lot of kids would come over and



they had the typical Hollywood westerns on, and all these Native kids are watching TV and looking at each other and one of them says, “Man someday I hope I can meet a real Indian.” And so the stereotyping that Hollywood has perpetuated, certainly has had an impact. Um, many native students know more about Disney’s Pocahontas than they do the real Pocahontas, or about other Hollywood presentations about Indians than about their own communities and their own history.

Sadly, these stereotypes are internalized and it becomes a standard to live by, even more for the urban Indians who have no standard for comparison except the theatrical version of the powwows attended occasionally (as revealed in an interview with TRC).

However, TRC’s version of the theatrical powwow is not the experience of all American Indians. RBA is an American Indian man, a doctoral student 49 years with grey hair that is short in the front with a long ponytail in the back; he has blue eyes and light skin. During our interview, he shared his story of the drum we hear at the powwow, a feeling that I personally relate to:

**RBA:** I heard the drum and I had this sense of, you know, I’ve heard this over and over—a sense of coming home. I’ve had that sense of coming home feeling in a lot of areas. I had it when I followed the Grateful Dead [smile].

**Interviewer:** [Laughing]

**RBA:** You know, I followed the Grateful Dead for years, too, during and after that so that sense of connectedness wasn’t my first ah hah! You know like this feels important, so therefore, it must be, or it feels strong so it must be important. But you know, I had that same experience in religious experiences before, you know, in churches. Uh, so you know, I could probably go into a few other instances but, you know, for me there was

something deeper to it, something more quiet, still; there was something in the music, something in the.... It was a heartbeat I was tapping into. Now, everywhere I go, even if it takes me a while to get in with the Indian community, if I hear the drum, hear the drum, you know, my heart's beating with theirs. I know it's just social structures that are there, that it'll take time for me to break down to get in. I know I can get into any Indian community I want to if I put the time in. You know, so, but, I'm okay with being on the outside as long as I can hear the drum, you know, because it connects me to the thing that connects the Pan-Indian movement, if you will. You know it's that heartbeat of the Nation.

While the powwow may help in connecting with other Natives, it does nothing to change the urban Indian perspective of what it means to be a "real Indian" on a daily basis. Even when American Indians acknowledge that "real Indians" are everyday people outside of that particular media or historical set of views, they may struggle with appearance anyway as in the following story:

**RBA:** In Indian groups, I look White with blue eyes so I have to go prove myself every time but, you know, even then I'm still seen as this certain level of status. No one's gonna say "Get outta here, White man." There just gonna be suspicious. It's more subtle, it's more under the current than you would expect. I'm just a little bit outside of the set, not part of the norm. It takes a lot of effort to be accepted.

TRC shared a similar story in which she felt that the majority of the discrimination she felt was from non-Indians claiming that she did not look Indian. Even though they were non-Indian, she internalized their opinion and felt that it would not be as easy to be accepted within

the Indian community without her grandfather there with her as a silent voice that said she belonged.

### *Hair*

The idea of appearance seems to be more salient for female urban Indians in that the issue of hair. As a specific sub-set, appearance showed up 44 times making up 32% of the appearance category while only two times were there references to male hair, an equivalent of 1% within the sub-set. The following is an example of one such conversation about the female experience.

**Interviewer:** It can be painful

**TRC:** Yeah, ‘cuz, I love that part of my heritage and when I explain it to other people, like, when I explain “Oh that’s a Kachina doll. That’s not something you take out and let a kid play with.” They’ll look at me and be, like, “Just ‘cuz you read about it, doesn’t mean....” And it’s so hard not to just scream and I really wish I looked more Native American [tears], like, hardcore. A part of me still really wants, like, the black hair. I’m so jealous, I cannot tan or I cannot get any darker than I am. I just turn red. I’ve tried. I’ve gotten more sunburns than I care to remember. ‘Cuz, I’m, like, “Oh maybe this time it’ll work” [tears]. And part of that’s because I’m trying to look more.... [Deep breath, more tears] I would give up my blond hair and blue eyes in a heartbeat to look more like my grandfather. Like, without a doubt. It bugs me when people are, like, “You have blond hair, you’re so lucky.” I’m, like, “No, you have no idea.” Um, and my parents say it to me, like my grandfather said it to me, he was very proud of my blond hair [tears] and I, I hate it [tears]. I dye it a lot! The reason it’s not dyed right now is that I’ve gotten sort of sick of trying to keep up with it. I’m just, like, “Ugh, I’ll let it grow.” But, like, my hairdresser used to yell at me, and I wouldn’t tell her why I would dye it, and she’s just

like, “You have pretty blond hair. Why are you hiding it? I would kill for blond hair!” [Tori], who works desk here says, “Do you know how much money I spend to get blond hair?” And it’s, like, you have no idea what you’re stepping on. But I’m not gonna say anything, I’m not gonna be. ‘Cuz in fact when I finally told [Tori] I was part Choctaw, she was, like “I could see it in your cheekbones,” or she said something along those lines and I started crying and she was, like, “Eaahh!” [TRC explains] Like, it was one of those, “I stepped on a landmine somehow and I don’t know what it is.” And I was just, like, “I’m just really happy, ignore me” and she was, like, “Do you need five minutes away from desk?” [TRC explains] Like, “I don’t know what I did to you.” And yeah it’s like really bothersome. And my mom she’s like, “Oh, blond hair, I dyed my hair blond.” And I was just like, “Well that was your mistake.” And she gets really mad at me.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I have brown hair and it used to be dark when I lived in Wisconsin but then I moved to Florida and it got lighter and lighter and then I started bleaching my hair and I went blond and I went red and this and that. Then I went, oh, I wanna be Native American again so I’m gonna go dark again, and then, oh, I’m gonna highlight my hair, and then, oh, I’m gonna go dark again. I went back and forth with this, like, identity crisis. Even during this research, I went dark again and got into it with my husband. He said “You don’t have to make yourself look more Native.”

**TRC:** Sometimes you feel you do.

### *Indigenous Knowledge*

The feeling of not belonging goes deeper than appearance though, knowledge plays a critical role in the idea of acceptance in the group. Both RBA and JHC elaborated on the idea of indigenous knowledge or lack of indigenous knowledge as reasons why many urban Indians do

not feel they are “real Indians.” When speaking with JHC about the American Indian events planned at the University of North Texas, I was surprised to hear that there was very little involvement on the part of American Indians on campus.

**Interviewer:** But there’s such a high population of American Indians that attend UNT.

**JHC:** Well, that’s another thing. Supposedly on paper, there are more than any other university in the state. But in trying to get them to come out and get involved, we could consistently only get about six or seven. And I think there are a lot of different dynamics. One is a lot of people that are saying we wanna see if the university is really serious about this. So they were kinda hanging back to see if the university was really gonna do what it said it was gonna do. Secondly, you have a lot of people and in the urban setting particularly; this is a whole identity issue. Who know that they have Native ancestry, know that they may be, you know, Cherokee or Kiowa or whatever, but have never been raised around that culture and are very hesitant to say openly that they’re Native or get involved because they feel like, you know, people expect me to know things and do things that I don’t and so there’s a real.... There’s a woman at [the federal agency I used to work for], senior level, who was [Cree], yet finally, until I pigeonholed her and talked to her she said “Yes, I’m [Cree] from here and here,” and I said why haven’t you participated in our Native stuff. We really need someone at your level that can make a difference. She said, “Well, I wasn’t really raised with that and I’m uncomfortable claiming that publicly because I haven’t been involved in this community.” So there is a real, on the one hand, there’s a fear of people who are non-native getting involved and being exploitative, and there’s also the fear of people who are, and yet because their parents didn’t raise them in that, they are very hesitant to step up and become involved.

The idea of not having indigenous knowledge is true for both groups on and off the reservation. Indigenous knowledge is not taught in the public school system and after years of forced assimilation, the boarding school experience of our elders, and reservation or urban living there is a disconnect in access to indigenous knowledge. Disconnect is experienced in indigenous knowledge, whether its customs, craftwork, companionship with the land, or spirituality. In a conversation with TRC about the death of her Native grandfather, she shared the following:

**TRC:** There was a lot lost when he passed away ‘cuz my mom and my aunt weren’t as close to him as I was. Like, I was, like, my mother used to joke that I thought he hung the moon and the stars, and he thought that I hung the moon and the stars. But, um, he was the one I always ran around with as a kid. Um, and so, I know a lot of the stuff he wanted to teach me and show me. He was waiting until I was a certain age so I could fully understand it, and when he passed, that didn’t get to happen.

TRC felt her disconnect with the passing of her grandfather and is beginning her coping strategies through the help of the rest of her family and the discovery of how she can reconnect with the Indian community without her grandfather. The following is a synopsis of what RBA said in order to bring his experience a little more quickly to the point that he was elaborating. RBA shared his experience with the disconnectedness and his coping strategies in the urban environment by aligning himself with the human rights of the indigenous community.

**RBA:** Yeah, yeah, kinda like, a little bit of colonization, like they have been internally colonized and dis-rooted because, you know, with almost every Indian I’ve ever met, there’s a sense of when they understand, when they understand everything the American Indians have gone through. Like, over the long haul there’s a sense of mourning I guess. The historical trauma that is kinda just deeper than your ancestors were traumatized

because they were kind of uprooted from the land and the land is everything, you know. And so, the idea of being disconnected from something that, you know, gives you all your sustenance and seeing that as kind of a loss of an ancestor. You know, you lose your land, you lose your earth, you know, your mother earth, you've lost a great-grandmother right, when you are not connected to it anymore. And I mean connected like you put stuff in the ground and you know where it comes from and you see the cycle of life from seedling to food that you eat and you know all the cycles of the animals. You know, we're all so disconnected, you know, everybody shops at stores anymore and so we're kinda disconnected anyway from modernity but when you don't have no place to go back to. You know that connects you to that land you go back and you have a like a sense of, "Ahh, this is where I came from and I can see continuity in my personal narrative throughout my life." You know, that personal narrative is not, it's discontinuous, it's been broken up for so many Indians.

RBA discussed the feeling that American Indians have when they finally understand the true pain and suffering of more than their ancestors but their own pain for the loss of connection with the land that provides for our lives. He elaborated on the idea of the continuation of the disconnect with living life in the modern age of shopping. He went on to explain that he feels the disconnect is worse for those who suffer discrimination because they "look Indian." However, he does feel a form of discrimination for aligning with indigenous groups.

**RBA:** Like I said before, I never really suffered in discrimination for being Indian other than, uh, aligning myself with certain groups of people and maybe having some blow back from that. Like in doing archaeology, I've lost lots of jobs because I'm aligned with Indians on certain sites and wouldn't dig burials, etcetera.

**Interviewer:** So that's still going on?

**RBA:** Yeah, sites are looted every day. We have over a thousand burial artifacts sitting down here in Denton at the Museum on the Square. There's a museum in the basement there and there's a thousand artifacts tucked away in the shelves waiting to be repatriated. Under NAGPRA law they're suppose to be.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**RBA:** Uh but you know, those are the kinds of things that compared to the leak in the Gulf and the crashing economy and capitalism kind of not really being capitalism, really over the last two years. [Laugh] The subsidized capitalism we have now [laugh], compared to all that, people are not concerned about a couple of arrow heads and Indian bones sitting in a basement somewhere. That's small potatoes compared to starving to death or losing your own home, for a lot of people. To me it's not, I mean, to me it goes hand in hand, the disconnect from those artifacts, you know. They're supposed to be on this spiritual journey and in the ground. The disconnect from that is also the same disconnect that allows us to have unlimited exploration in the gulf with no technology to fix a leak a mile under the ground. It's the same kind of disconnect.

**Interviewer:** That's a good example.

**RBA:** Well, you know, when nothing matters but a growing economy with no end game in mind, like, what is the end game in mind with perpetual growth when you don't even question basic concepts in life, which is kind of the western paradigm, uh, why would artifacts sitting in the museum up here bother anybody? They don't make you money, they don't make you get ahead, they don't increase your individuality, they don't make you a star on American Idol, they don't do all the things that we thrive on that we just



kind of dismiss as unimportant. So that disconnect for me is filled by my American Indian connection, you know, and it doesn't take but a conversation about it and I remember why I'm here. All I got to do is talk about my ancestry and I know why I'm here, you know it puts me back in a spiritual frame of mind.

RBA explained that there is a disconnect but that his way of reconnecting is through aligning himself with those who need his assistance such as, the indigenous communities who are fighting for repatriation or protection from exploitative archeological endeavors and seeking a connection through his spirituality.

### *Spirituality*

RBA finds his connection through advocating for American Indians and practicing his own spirituality. When discussing spirituality among native peoples, it is a very diverse topic ranging from the traditional Indian way to Christianity, to Catholicism, to a combination of traditional and Christian, etcetera. In any case, there is a spiritual connection associated with the idea of being indigenous that assists the reconnection of urban Indians to their heritage. JHC and RBA both practice the traditional Indian way while TRC's grandfather was a devout Christian that respected the traditional way but did not practice himself. TRC claims to be a little lost when it comes to spirituality but in search of discovering the spiritual faith that her grandfather had. When discussing spirituality with RBA he uncovered yet another disconnect in the following conversation:

**RBA:** Yeah, I have an altar that I have certain things set up on it, uh, I burn, smudge, uh, burn sweet-grass, and, uh, cedar at certain times when certain things happen, uh.

**Interviewer:** Where do you get that around here?

**RBA:** Well, I get my sweet-grass from, uh, Oklahoma. Uh, you can get it on line and have it sent to you [laughing], uh, modernity [laughing]. Uh, sage, you can get at any little hippy shop around town. Uh, I burn white sage so that's a little bit more specialized, you know, trying not to burn something too perfumy, you know, there's all kinds of that. I mean, you know, you can get that stuff anywhere. See, I mean people are disconnected! See, where do you get cedar? Right off a cedar tree.

RBA was able to point out my personal disconnect in not knowing where to obtain these spiritual items within the urban setting and to my disconnect that these items are also found in nature. In addition, I found it interesting that there are enough Indians living off the reservation and in the urban community that the items needed to practice the traditional Indian way are sold in hippy shops and online. This was yet another indication to me that urban Indians have forged new connections within the urban setting in order to establish and/or maintain their cultural identity.

## Discussion

### *Finding Your Beat*

According to Fixico (2001), the American Indians in the urban community have made great efforts to learn the urban culture but rather than assimilating, they have formed their own urban identity as the urban Indian set apart from the mainstream yet accepted enough to survive. Fixico (2001) states that the major strength of American Indians is their ability to adapt and this is no different in the urban environment. Urban Indians have overcome many of the odds against them whether it is appearance, discrimination, or the historical laws they overcome, adapt, and survive. Like any other culture, the American Indian culture (which is visibly not a monolithic culture as seen in this work) is always changing, and, if it were not, then it would be extinct, but

the American Indian culture is not extinct and the people are alive and well busily adapting with great strength, regardless of the setting! When I speak of culture Geertz (1973) says it best that:

The concept I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

The participants have constructed their own forms of cultural identity, and, through the narratives, have revealed to me their meaning. All of the participants stated that they felt a disconnect at some point or another in their experience, but all were seeking a connection to their American Indian identity and felt that that was the connection they needed. In differing ways, they construct their identity as urban Indian by staying connected via relationships, spirituality, education, and serving the Indian community after overcoming the perceptions of appearance, historical law, and discrimination. They find their beat and effectively walk in both worlds to the beat of the same drum.

### Reflection

#### *Moccasins on Concrete*

This research has been an incredibly emotional and enlightening experience for me as an anthropologist, as a researcher, as an ethnographer, and as myself as an urban Indian. I am not the same person I was before beginning this endeavor and my path is forever changed though the people I met, the connections I established within my own discoveries, and the growth I have experienced though these findings. I had ideas going into this research about what I might find but when I sat down to analyze the data, I never expected to be as surprised as I was. I was

stunned by how much appearance played a role in urban Indian identity. I was even more amazed at how much there was to overcome for urban Indians in order for them to get to the heart of the identity that they truly wanted to obtain—the ultimate goal of gaining the connections they felt were important. I’ve always claimed to be an urban Indian and one reason I did was in order to make others understand why I didn’t know as much about my heritage as “others thought I should” as an American Indian. However, now I am confident when I say I am an urban Indian because I know now what it means to be an urban Indian, at least for me as I construct it!

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