

1/128: Determining Native Identity

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This discussion stems from a single, deeply personal question – am I “Native”? Struck by a realization of the ambiguity of this identifier, I seek to map out the complexities of this aspect of identity, especially as it relates to small-town, Southeastern Oklahomans. What follows is an exploration into the issues and advantages of certain methods prescribed to define oneself as Native. Ultimately, determining Native identity at any scale is fraught by its own contemporaneity. To be Native, now, is to be a construction of characteristics both perceived and self-identified by a society at odds with who Native people are, and navigating these categorizations can leave one somewhat lost.

With this in mind, I would like to note that I do not assert absolute authority on the topic of Native identity, and furthermore, I do not ultimately question current institutions’ definition of it, for instance the Indian Nations of Oklahoma. Rather, in this paper, I seek to explore the ways in which we personally identify ourselves as Native people and try to elucidate the means people associate themselves with that identity.

To do this, I will compare commonly held beliefs (especially those of Southeastern Oklahomans) to a depiction of an unambiguously Native person, the protagonist of Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.¹ In this way, we can deconstruct the ways Alexie defines the protagonist (henceforth referred to as “Junior”) and how we utilize those characteristics to define ourselves as Native people. I believe we take several identifying factors of Native identity for granted. For example, many believe one is Native if they are registered. Is this a valid argument? Inversely, many believe one can be Native without proper registration. Is this a valid argument? By placing these commonly held sentiments next to a singular, clear portrayal of a Native person, I believe we can more effectively examine the ways in which we define ourselves.

Let us consider the discussion in seven parts: registration, lineage, affiliation with culture, appearance, degree of marginalization, self-identity, and perceived identity.

Registration

¹ Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Little, Brown and Company, 2007. All the quotations below are cited to this edition

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Perhaps the most authoritative declaration of one's Native identity is to say, "I am a registered Native." To have a CDIB (Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood) is to be officially claimed by a tribe. In turn, one can authoritatively claim the tribe for themselves with proof of one's valid blood quantum. Should one be as little as "1/128th Native," they are still, in fact, a Native person by the books.

The premise of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* supports this means of categorization as Junior goes beyond baseline registration; he lives on a reservation in Spokane. He is not simply "part Native" but "entirely Native." By conforming to all aspects of Native identity as confirmable by government standards, Junior maintains an unambiguous Native identity.

Lineage

And it's not like my mother and father were born into wealth. It's not like they gambled away their family fortunes. My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people. (11)

It's an ugly circle and there's nothing you can do about it. (13)

Many attribute their Native identity to their heritage, that they are Native because someone of whom they are a descendant was a Native person. In this way, Native identity can be conferred over time through familial relation. One can be Native because their mother is Native or because their grandmother was or because their great-grandmother was, etc.

Junior expresses this aspect of his Native identity through a lens of poverty. He is not only Native but an impoverished Native person, as were his parents, as were their parents, etc. This is a distinctly unglorified perspective on Native identity. For Junior to inherit his family's Native-ness, he must also inherit their financial struggles and the burdens therein. Native identity manifests itself in the same manner despite being conferred to different people over generations.

Affiliation with Culture

The Spokane Powwow is wicked hot during the day and freezing cold at night... I think the chicken dancers are cool because, well, they dance like chickens. (19)

Junior adheres to the cultural practices of his tribe, including participation in the reservation's powwow. He feels a sense of pride in this aspect of his Native identity, showing admiration for this type of active participation in cultural practices. As opposed to his sentiments on lineage, Junior somewhat glorifies his tribe in this way. To affiliate with a Native culture is to be Native, and this is especially true in Junior's situation.

For Oklahomans in the Southeastern region, cultural affiliation will manifest itself, perhaps, in indirect ways.² Many tribal practices are personal, whether certain clothing is worn, the tribe's language is spoken, or certain rituals are held in the home. The degree of affiliation will be different depending on the person, but the fact that one claims some sort of attachment to the tribe's culture seems sufficient for one to assert Native identity.

Appearance

Then the white kids began arriving for school. They surrounded me. Those kids weren't just white. They were translucent. I could see the blue veins running through their skin like rivers. (56)

Junior attends a better-funded, predominantly white public school of his own volition, to the disdain of his fellow reservation kids. He understands the risk involved that he, as a Native person, will receive backlash from both the people of the reservation as well as the students at his new school. The marked difference between his appearance and the appearance of his peers engenders much of the conflict he experiences at school, especially through teasing and joke-playing. It is undoubtable that Junior "looks Native."

However, this phrase is somewhat problematic as one calls authority to it. Who gets to decide what it means to look Native? It seems that stereotypes would immediately muddle any accuracy this phrase would potentially contain. That being said, many people who would otherwise be unambiguously Native may see their identity come into question should this facet of Native identity be required. In this way, Native appearance may prove to be a suspicious indicator of one's Native identity, but nevertheless, it is an identifier often used to make that claim.

Degree of Marginalization

Jeez, how stupid was I? What kind of job can a reservation Indian boy get? (10)

The financial situation of Junior's family consistently proves to be a problem for him. In this scene, Junior wishes to earn enough money to pay for his dog's veterinarian bill, which he is unable to do as he attributes to his status as a Native person. Coming from poverty, living on a reservation, and being a Native person in general, Junior is unable to find a job.

Over time, certain structures were built around Native people that discouraged their advancement moving forward. Junior experiences this marginalization both directly

² At the Native Symposium where this paper was presented, a woman mentioned her daughter's unfortunate situation at a high school graduation in a nearby Oklahoma town. As a Chickasaw person, her daughter requested to wear a traditional feather for the ceremony. The school's administration, for their professed fear of mockery, refused her request. The woman mentioned the tinge of irony in the affair as the school's mascot was a stereotypical depiction of a Native person, of the "savage" ilk.

and indirectly. At school, he faces discrimination directly from his classmates and, as mentioned before, he is unable to get a job due to his current state effect of his Native-ness. However, his home situation is a product of a history of impoverishment and denied opportunity. The fact that he lives on a reservation is effect of legislation against Native people.

How direct must this marginalization be for one to claim its effect on oneself? Many people face the indirect marginalization effect of legislation and general historical attitudes towards Native people, though they perhaps do not experience any negative effects directly. This can be seen in hiring practices, general economic states, and location of certain peoples. Much like lineage, it would seem that the effects of marginalization towards Native people are inherited. However, does this constitute authority to one's claim of Native identity? At what point does one claim they are marginalized, and to what degree is that marginalization valid?

Self-Identity and Perceived Identity

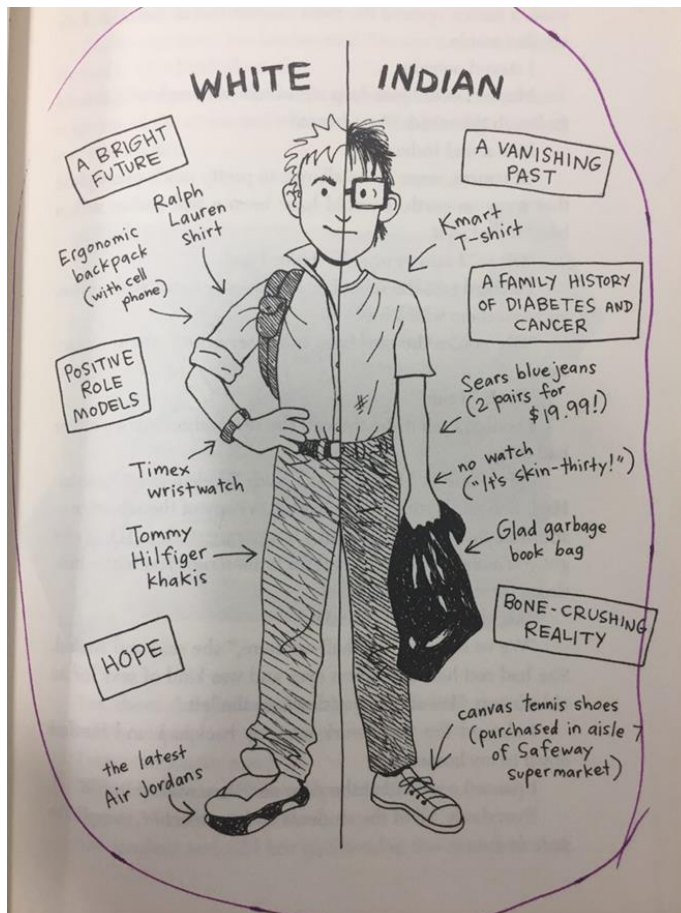


Illustration from page 57. The ink marks were added by me in my reading.

Junior both openly self-identifies as a Native person and is perceived as a Native person by other people. The above illustration reflects the ways in which he and others

make those distinctions, with predominance given to that which is visible. In both manners, Junior is unambiguously Native. In public discourse, there seems to be a gradient between the two poles of self-identity and perceived identity. Many would agree that one's self-identity in terms of Native-ness would not be sufficient to constitute validity.³ There must be a way to be perceived as Native, also.

The question becomes, "Which matters more?" Additionally, how does one allow oneself to be perceived as Native? Is it through immediately identifiable, physical characteristics? Is it through direct or indirect marginalization? Is it through one's own professed claims to that identity?

Concluding Thoughts

Junior is unambiguously Native. However, must this unambiguity be necessary for one to be Native? Where do we draw the lines, and what makes those lines valid? How many qualities must one have to be a Native person? Can one be "part" Native (or, for that matter, part any identity)? Must other people affirm one's identity for it to be valid?

I do not have a definitive answer for any of these questions. (As stated before, this paper wishes to do nothing more than identify the means to this end, not to assert whether those particular means are valid). I do, however, have a single proposition: whatever Native identity is now, it is decidedly different than what it used to be. It appears that to be Native in most perceived senses is to construct that identity. It requires the amalgamation of certain physical and quasi-physical traits such as blood quantum and bodily characteristics, in addition to more intangible certifiers such as lineage. This contemporary definition – whatever it is – is of supreme importance to those who choose to identify as Native people, and for this reason, we should take careful consideration into how we form our own notion of Native identity.

The destruction of Native people and their culture has engendered much of the conflict we see in this discussion, a logical effect of historical tragedy. Colonization ultimately eradicated much of the sureness of Native people and their survival. This conflict illustrates colonization's continuing destruction of Native people, dissolving the very core concepts of who these people are.

Many people misattribute the quote, "History is written by the victors" to Winston Churchill, while there is a more compelling version that predates this iteration. It goes, "History is written by the survivors." As this conversation becomes muddier, let us keep in mind the legacy of those who claim this identity and the history they choose to write

³ Consider the recent public outcry towards Rachel Dolezal, a self-identifying "transracial" black woman – assigned white at birth but identifying as black.

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for themselves, and even more, let us keep in mind that Native identity is not merely ephemeral but an act of perseverance, defiance, and survival.