

Where We Go and What We Carry with Us:
An Autoethnographic Study of the Marginalization and Resiliency of Appalachian
Indigenous Communities of West Virginia

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Abstract

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Most research claims that settler colonialism has been successful in erasing indigenous communities in West Virginia. While it is true that there are no federally recognized tribes in the state, this does not mean that there are no original indigenous people in this area. Oftentimes, the indigenous people of West Virginia are mixed with other races, including white admixtures. This study is an autoethnographical investigation into the story of my own mixed indigenous family in West Virginia. Interviews were conducted with seven of my family members from both sides of my family to provide a

narrative counterpoint about these claims. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three major themes: Claiming Identities: State Construction and Categorization of Race, Family as Foundation for Racial Identity; and The Role of Family: Agency in Racial/Ethnic Identity Disclosure. The results are discussed using a queer phenomenological framework to illustrate indigenous identity as more nuanced and complex than assumptions based on ideologies of the state and federal government.

Where We Go and What We Carry with Us: An Autoethnographic Study of the Marginalization and Resiliency of Appalachian Indigenous Communities of West Virginia

Most people, including many from West Virginia, will tell you that settler colonialism has been particularly successful in erasing the original indigenous communities from the state by the European colonization process. While it is true that there are no federally recognized Indigenous tribes in West Virginia, with Virginia is the nearest state with tribes that are recognized by the United States (Salazar, 2018). This does not mean that there are no Indigenous people with deep roots in West Virginia. One of the troubling consequences of settler colonialism, to my way of thinking is its preoccupation with legislating blood quantum. To this end, the U.S. government created the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) which centered the concept of “degree of Indianness”, or blood quantum as measurable and quantifiable. This is primarily a political move where the BIA issues a “Certificate of Indian Blood” that in turn is used by the U.S. to verify a person’s membership within a federally recognized tribe based on an established percentage of North American blood a person holds (Horse, 2005). This orients the conception of original/mixed Indigenous identity away from a personal identity, and positions indigeneity into a larger, more complex, racially driven political narrative (Horse, 2005; Ahmed, 2009).

This study is an autoethnography of my family and my people. Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that allows for a more nuanced and narrative exploration of people’s experiences. It helps place this exploration in relationship of understanding of both self and culture, and most importantly includes the standpoint and experience of the researcher in the narrative and analysis (Jones, 2007). It is my hope that this study will show the ways that settler colonialism has affected people’s bodies and identities through the case study and history

of my own family. One of the major mechanisms of settler colonialism that sets up an ideological framework that impacts Indigenous communities like my family are the blood quantum laws. This legislation by the U.S. government informs relations with Indigenous communities of the Appalachian Ohio Valley. Blood quantum feeds into specific policies that identify nativity by the state, and public relations campaigns by the United States government in order to gain access to resources of tribal lands in the name of “progress” (Brands, 2006). This study is used to push back against this ideological narrative.

First, I used the narratives of my family to tell the story of how blood quantum and other colonizing methods have made the original Appalachian Indigenous communities of West Virginia complicit in their own erasure. Second, I applied these same methods to foreground the community assets and resiliency of my Appalachian Indigenous community. Finally, I compared my family’s story to those of my Indigenous/Mixed Indigenous friends. This project explored the ways this community navigates historical trauma both negatively, and as a site for transformation and empowerment.

To these ends, my study research questions were:

- How does my family, as representatives of original Indigenous/mixed community of the Appalachia region, navigate the landscape of colonialism?
- In what ways does my family as representations of the original Indigenous/mixed communities display resilience in the face of historical trauma and erasure including phenotypically white “passing” mixed Indigenous communities based on their white “passing” positionality?

My Standpoint and Background

Epistemology

It is my belief that in order to honor and hold these narratives, this thesis needs to center not only on equity, but also on de-colonized queer epistemologies and methodologies. It is important to speak to the beliefs that will ultimately form the world-building of data collection and analysis, as well as the creation of the theoretical landscape that the semi-structured asynchronous interviews will be positioned and oriented within. The overarching epistemology of this study is based in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2009), more specifically within the understanding that places are charted and navigated by the people who live in them. Ahmed's work is useful in my study, as discussion of the phenomenology of Queer/racially coded bodies navigating a larger heterosexist social environment can be applied to my own original Indigenous/mixed family, as representative of a mixed indigenous community in a white, imperialist, colonial understanding of the world (Ahmed, 2009). Both my family's narrative and this understanding are important to this study because delegitimizing and destabilizing Indigenous identity allows the colonialist government to not only control the land my family lives on, but to re-write history in order to rationalize this social control (Herbert, 2018; Mancke, 2018). These strategies create a particular social environment in which my family continues to navigate to this day.

My research is based partly in Ahmed's phenomenology, not only as part of the epistemology of this study, but also as a form of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2017). The original Indigenous/mixed Indigenous people in my family were given an opportunity to speak their experiences without any research bias, misrepresentation and/or judgment enfolded within Ahmed's queer phenomenological understanding (Alase, 2017;

Ahmed, 2009). Ahmed's queer phenomenology was integral to theme discovery, particularly regarding that of my family navigation of colonialism by re-ordering and disrupting their identities and the construction of those identities.

Not only is my study placed within a Queer phenomenological understanding, but it is also contextualized by a de-colonized understanding. I am very intentional in this placement because I operate within an epistemology that highlights de-colonization as a method to center Indigenous lived experiences, and not as an abstraction to advance westernized research, schools, or societies (Tuck, 2012). In recent times 'de-colonization' has become a buzz word, far removed from its original meaning, and often is used as a prop for settler colonialism to put forth their own innocence with very little awareness to Indigenous communities' social ostracism and historical trauma (Tuck, 2012; Whitbeck et al., 2012). Historical trauma is generally understood as the aggregate, intergenerational, shared 'lived' experience of emotional and psychological harm in the bodies of communities and in their descendants (Whitbeck et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2011). My study seeks to help re-position the theory of de-colonization back onto research areas that foreground Indigeneity and resilience in the face of historical trauma. (Tuck, 2012; Whitbeck, et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2011).

Positionality and Orientation

In order to fully understand the history of the original Indigenous/mixed Indigenous Appalachian people, and especially my family and my people, it is important to understand the history of the land on which we grew up. My people live in the Ohio River Valley that is defined by the Ohio River, which stretches from the convergence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to the North. From there the Ohio River flows southwest, forming the boundary between Ohio and West Virginia. The river then winds west-

by-northwest, between Ohio and Kentucky, before twisting southwest toward Indiana, ultimately emptying into the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois (Kolb, 2020). The Appalachian Region follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, from the northern tip of the Mississippi, to the southern edge of New York (About the Appalachian Region, n.d.). My family lives in West Virginia which is nestled completely within this region (About the Appalachian Region, n.d.). My family's understanding of itself is deeply rooted into the history of the land we grew up on. By understanding this history, as well as, the geography of my family's homeland, it is possible to understand how we connect to our original/mixed Indigenous identity. Because we have always understood ourselves in orientation to, and navigation of this land both as a geographic space, and as a social environment (Ahmed, 2009).

Literature Review

This literature review provides a framework for the ways settler colonialism has destabilized Indigenous communities in West Virginia. It focuses on the history and backstory of the Ohio Valley through the 18th and 19th century into modernity, as a foundation for settler colonialism as it has directly affected my family and community.

Indigenous Peoples in the Original Lands of West Virginia in the 18th Century

The landscape that the original Indigenous communities roamed is an 18th century concept that is defined and mapped by various original Indigenous people that moved through it (Ahmed, 2006; Mancke, 2018). The notion of land and space is uniquely an Indigenous one, distinct from the current understandings of borders such as states or counties currently used to define what is known as West Virginia (Herbert, 2018; Mancke, 2018). The narrative and concept of the North American South are especially important in understanding the cultural landscape that is prevalent within (along with various settler colonial cultures) the Appalachian

region (Herbert, 2018; Appalachia Regional Commission; n.d.). During the 18th century the Ohio Valley, especially West Virginia, was not home to any particular tribe, but rather a neutral zone where many different tribes roamed. These tribes included communities that made up the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations including: the Shawanwa (Shawnee), Lenni Lanape (Delaware), Bode'wadmi (Potawatomi), Iyiniwok (Cree), Kiwigapawa (Kickapoo), Aniyunwiya (Cherokee/Tsalagi), and many other tribes (Native Languages Organization, n.d.; McConnell, 1992). However, the land areas of Appalachia that my family comes from have been Indigenous grounds from the arrival of the first French traders and into the 19th century as well (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018). The historical relations between the original Indigenous sovereign nations of North America and the European colonial powers are extremely complicated (Frank, 2018). For the purposes of my research, I will focus on the particular aspects of the relationship between settler colonists and Indigenous peoples in the area now known as West Virginia.

There were three critical public policies of the federal government during the 18th century that have had the most impact on not only how original Indigenous/mixed Indigenous communities of Appalachia are understood, but also how the bodies of my and other native peoples carry historical trauma, the stigma of illegitimacy through the 19th century and into today's social landscape (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018; Tuck, 2012; Whitbeck et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2011). These legislative acts are The Indian Removal Act of 1830, The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, and The General Allotment Act of 1887 (Morin & Morin, 2019; Trail of Tears Trail of Tears, 2009; Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents, n.d.; Bennett, 2008; United States Statues at Large NADP Document A1887, n.d.). These legislative acts worked to challenge not only the sovereignty of the original Indigenous/mixed Indigenous Appalachian communities of the Ohio Valley, but all Indigenous people on the North American

continent in two distinct ways: by robbing these communities of ancestral lands by moving them onto reservations, through the process of acculturation into the more ‘civilized’ colonial norms and behavioral practices of a colonized America. I describe each of these major federal policies below.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830

This Act was signed by Andrew Jackson in 1830 as part of a larger effort to relocate tribes in the southeast, including those around the Ohio valley further west into what is now Oklahoma as the colonial settlers desired more land (Young, 2011; Trail of Tears, 2009; Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents, n.d.). European colonies viewed the Indigenous people of North America as a barrier, barring them access to their destiny to grow and expand across the continent; therefore, these inconveniences needed to be relocated (Young, 2011; Trail of Tears, 2009). This forced migration is also known by the name the Trail of Tears (Young, 2011; Trail of Tears, 2009). This event lasted almost a century, and while it did affect the Aniyunwiya (Cherokee/Tsalagi) tribe, it also had a lasting effect on many other tribes (Young, 2011; Trail of Tears, 2009; Native Languages Organization, n.d.; McConnell, 1992). The Trail of Tears is considered by many to be an act of genocide, and this trauma is still held by Indigenous peoples today (Young, 2011; Trail of Tears, 2009).

The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871

The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871 ended U.S. policy of treating Indigenous communities as sovereign nations and was part of the re-location efforts of Indigenous people onto farming reservations (Morin & Morin, 2019; Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents, n.d; United States Statues at Large NADP Document A1887, n.d). This Act’s main purpose when stacked with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, was to break the power and culture of

Indigenous tribes by positioning Indigenous people as constituents of the state (Morin & Morin, 2019; Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents, n.d; United States Statues at Large NADP Document A1887, n.d). As such, Indigenous people were forced from their ancestral lands and ways of living, and placed in new landscapes both, geographically and culturally as their bodies were repositioned into a colonized worldview and power structure (Morin & Morin, 2019).

The General Allotment Act of 1887 (The Dawes Act)

The Dawes Act was a continuation of The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871, with its main function to ‘mainstream’ Indigenous people into a settler contextuality (Miller, 2017; Bennett, 2008; Perdue, 2003). This act included other imperatives such as: breaking up tribes as a social unit, reducing the cost of the native administration, encouraging individualist initiatives inside tribal culture, and opening up more lands to white settlers for profit and exploitation (Miller, 2017; Bennett, 2008; Perdue, 2003). The Dawes Act oriented North American tribal communities into a Euro-Western Americanization positionality (Miller, 2017; Ahmed, 2009; Bennett, 2008; Perdue, 2003). These federal policies have informed the cultural landscape that my family continues to navigate in terms of how we not only view, ourselves but, also how we feel about the disclosure of our own Indigenous identity to outsiders.

The 19th Century to the Present

The European settler colonial complex pushed their manifest destiny onto the intertribal landscapes and bodies of North American Indigenous communities (Ray, 2018; Miller, 2017; Ahmed, 2009). This effort had a specific impact on the original Indigenous/mixed Indigenous Appalachia communities of the Ohio Valley, as evidenced in my own family, in terms of how they view their own legitimacy and the disclosure of their own Indigeneity to the world at large (Ray, 2018; Mancke, 2018; Miller, 2017). Settler colonial efforts to disrupt tribal sovereignty

and ‘mainstream’ Indigenous identities into a Euro-Western Americanization process began with George Washington and continue to this day (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018; Young, 2011; Brand, 2006).

This effort included layers of acculturation and delimitations of what constituted, “Indigenous” as codified by white understandings that became encoded/internalized as oppressive self-regulatory practices (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018; Young, 2011; Walters et al., 2011; Brand, 2006). Indigenous people, including original and mixed communities of the Ohio Valley of the Appalachia region, had to find ways to fit within white laws and regulations of blood quantum levels (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018; Young, 2011; Walters et al., 2011; Brand, 2006). These constraints created spaces that are especially troublesome to mixed Indigenous bodies who internalize messages of legitimacy /citizenship through a colonized lens (Frank, 2018; Ray, 2018; Young, 2011; Walters et al., 2011; Brand, 2006). This internalization may disrupt Indigenous peoples sense of their own communities and identities.

The culture created by the removal, legislation, and colonial acculturation process of Euro-Western Americanization can cause mixed Indigenous bodies to carry structural systems of oppression (Person, 2013; Walters et al., 2011). This is especially problematic for phenotypically white “passing,” mixed, Indigenous bodies in the Ohio Valley, as these bodies have internalized a self-accounting of propping up white settler colonialism (Person, 2013). Academics have helped to ground these accounts by writing not only about the success of the colonial complex, but also by stating that most, if not all, Appalachia communities claiming Indigenous identities are white settlers overstepping true Indigenous communities with their own colonial identities (Person, 2013).

Research Methods

This is autoethnographic qualitative study relied on both in-depth interviewing of my family members and my own critical self-reflection as study data. This study was approved by the UW Human Subjects Division on February 10,2020.

Study Participants

The primary inclusion criteria required that participants be adults (over age 18), either full or mixed Appalachian Indigenous or First nations, and most importantly, descendants and members of the Shuman/Bunner/Britton/Brightwell family of West Virginia. Table 1 below lists all the family members that participated in this study. This table includes pseudonyms chosen by each participant (noted in the “Name” column), as well as participant age and how each participant is related to me (noted in the “Familial Relationship” column).

Table 1

Family Participants (N=7)

Name	Age	Familial Relationship
Ninoshenh Ganawishodawe	65	Aunt (Mother’s side)
Ninoshenh Mishibizhii	62	Aunt (Mother’s side)
Gichi aya’a Giisawaanzo	57	Cousin (Father’s side)
Ma’iingan		
Mojo	42	Cousin (Mother’s side)
Niiji Makwa	41	Brother
Oshiimeyan B	38	Cousin (Mother’s side)
Noel	21	Cousin (Mother’s side)

Data Collection and Analysis

A series of interviews with my family members from the Ohio Valley region of West Virginia were completed over the phone due to the COVID-19 crisis, which prevented travel and

in-person contact with my family. The exception was my brother referred, to by the pseudonym “Nijji Makwa”, who lives with me.

Interviews were conducted over a two-week period from July 12 - 25, 2020. Each of these phone interviews was conducted with the full permission of each participant and, were conducted in a secure environment over speaker phone in order to make use of a transcription program. Before each interview, an informed consent form was read to each participant and a copy of this form was sent to each person’s email. During the interview process spot checks were performed on these transcriptions by the researcher during the phone call in order to maintain accuracy. Each participant also agreed to make themselves available for questions of clarity due to the extenuating circumstances of COVID-19. These transcripts were then coded using thematic analysis with continued review and dialogue with my thesis committee.

As previously stated, autoethnography is a research method that explores experiences in a reflexive way that engages the researcher in the co-creation of meaning with participants; that is, how self-reflection represents a connection between the idea of “self” and culture (Jones, 2007). It was chosen for this study because this method creates nuances within societal and cultural understandings due to the purposeful engagement of the researcher in the process (Jones, 2016). By focusing on sense-making and storytelling, autoethnography allows for a deeper understanding into the often uncertain, unpredictable, and multiple ways that personhood is legitimized and understood in society, incorporating the standpoint, experience, and voice of the researcher-participant (Adams & Jones, 2011). The fluidity and reflexivity place the researcher and the participants into a liminal queered space where the narratives of a person’s “lived experience” can be told and understood (Jones, 2016).

A thematic phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data. As stated previously, this approach is grounded in the work of Sarah Ahmed's queered approach to phenomenology, orientation, and positionality (Ahmed, 2009) and driven by Eve Tuck's desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009). By doing content analysis, I pulled themes from the interviews of my family, my own personal reflections, and the literature review to interweave them into a final ethnographic narrative (Ellis, 2004). This analysis process began after each interview transcript was cleaned up and checked for accuracy. I then read through each transcript using a deductive analysis approach utilizing a queer phenomenological lens (Ahmed, 2009). I was looking for themes that explored how their personal experience of their own Indigenous identity interacted with most people's understanding of Indigenous identity construction. I then coded these themes using the process described by Braun, Clarke, Terry and Hayfield (2009). This process begins with data familiarization, then coding, generation of initial themes, reviewing these themes, along with finalizing the definitions and naming of themes before ultimately writing up these themes (Braun, et al., 2019). I worked with my thesis committee on the process of generating themes with many discussions and refinements to reach the themes reported in my findings.

Findings

I uncovered three major themes in my analysis of the data collected through interviews and self-reflection. The themes are: Claiming Identities: State Construction and Categorization of Race; Family as Foundation for Racial Identity; and The Role of Family: Agency in Racial/Ethnic Identity Disclosure.

Theme # 1: Claiming Identities: State Construction and Categorization of Race

This theme encapsulates how the state, in the form of socio-political ideology and structure, but not as a formal entity, in and of itself can impact how people create and interact with racial identity. This idea was found in the combination of narratives of my entire family's responses within their individual interviews of what makes a person Indigenous. Each of my family members talked about the boundaries that were placed upon their Indigenous identity by people's perceptions as, informed by the ideology of the U.S. government. Each of my family expressed a complicated relationship with this ideology, and how they are expected to embody their own Indigenous identity.

My brother (Niiji Makwa) and my cousin (Oshiimeyan B) talked specifically about their own thoughts about blood quantum laws. My brother said that, "in some ways [he] could see how blood quantum," itself might be "useful for tribes to know each other" but he "could not wrap his head around" blood quantum laws and the way they are used to gatekeep Indigenous identity especially since "before the settlers decided against it tribes adopted people from outside the tribe; including escaped slaves" (Niiji Makwa, 41). Oshiimeyan B discussed his thoughts by saying that he "feel[s] like the government has attempted to kill...off" Indigenous identity and he believes that blood quantum "is just another part of this [process]" (Oshiimeyan B, 38, Cousin).

Other family members explored more abstract relationships with the ways the state constructs and categorizes race by talking about people's perceptions of this construction and categorization. My aunt stated that it was "odd" to her that Indigenous identity does not seem to be recognized as valid "unless it is written down." She mentioned that she grew up around people that kept lineages through oral stories, and that the preoccupation of people to claim that her identity must be created from only written accounts is "simply untrue" (Ninoshenh-

Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt). My cousin Mojo summed up his experience in the following statement, “I simply thought you fit in where you get in because really what else could a people do that are given no options really...if people think you white...[I know] we are definitely mixed...” (Mojo, 42, Cousin).

My cousin Gichi ayaa’aa Giisawaanzo Ma’iingan spoke about a particular challenge he had affirming his identity in official paperwork where; he was forced to conform to a particular view of his Indigenoussness as he was growing up. He illustrated his experiences through the following example: “When I was younger I would write ‘Native American mixed [white] on forms and was told to scratch it out and just put white [by officials]” (Gichi ayaa’aa Giisawaanzo Ma’iingan, 57, Cousin).

This theme became the lynchpin that the other themes were built upon since it surfaced as a beginning to a narrative arch that was embedded in my family’s interviews. This theme helped to “orient” my family within the following questions. Is federal recognition or recognition by tribal bodies slotted into colonial structures the final authority? Is race something that can be/or should be measured? What makes state recognition the final says of racial or ethnic identity especially without capitalist motivations in the individual? Can state recognition erase family recognition through lineage and oral history? This theme also speaks to the ideas of “proof” and blood quantum as means of the broad expanse of colonial governmental ideology and structure to control racial identity construction, especially in regard to mixed Indigenous communities.

Theme #2: Family as Foundation for Racial Identity

This theme explores how my white-mixed Indigenous family uses ancestry, lineage, and oral history to ground their racial and ethnic identity. This is in contrast to the socio-political structure of the state in determining racial or ethnic identity in any meaningful way for those

with mixed race identities. When I questioned my family about how they knew they were Indigenous, each person talked about their lineage and used this discussion to lead into their construction of their own identity.

The theme of how my family expressed themselves as links of a chain starts with Gichi-ayaa'aa Giisawaanzo Ma'iingan. This is an elder of our family that my 95-year-old aunt grew up with. "Mom would talk about...Betsy Kickapoo who was one of the last pure Indians left in the family; we discovered that Betsy's last name wasn't Kickapoo that was the name of her tribe... before we all got mixed up. Now through marriage we have Shawnee, Ojibwe, Mohawk, and Seneca-Cayuga in us just as much as we have white blood" (Gichi-ayaa'aa-giisawaanzoma'iingan, 57, Cousin).

This sentiment was also mentioned by my aunt Ninoshenh-Mishibizhii and my cousin Oshiimeyan B. My aunt said she "always knew [she] was Indian" because her "father, ...mother, and ...grandmother" were Indigenous; they looked and lived as "Indian" and that this was "how she knew" she was Indigenous (Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt). My cousin also used this way of defining his Indigenous identity based on how he was oriented in the family narrative (Ahmed, 2009). He stated, "I always knew that my father was Cherokee and that my mom was mixed Indian" and that while he might have "struggled" with how other people perceived him, he never "doubted where [he] came from and who [he] was to [himself]" (Oshiimeyan B, 38, Cousin).

Throughout my family's responses was the idea of family, not only a continuous narrative that provides a stable foundation for their construction of their Indigenous identity, but also as a starting point for how they navigated disclosing their Indigenous identity in terms of a being white-mixed Indigenous.

Theme #3 The Role of Family: Agency in Racial/Ethnic Identity Disclosure

This theme speaks to another common theme in all of my family's interview responses: that of not allowing socio-political ideology to determine the meaningfulness of who and in what way, they disclose their mixed racial identity. This theme speaks to the reflexive component of my family's mixed racial identity especially, in terms of the "insider vs outsider" aspect to how and to what extent they disclose their white-mixed Indigenous identity.

My youngest cousin, Noel describes her experience of this component, as she reflected on the interview process for this paper. She said, "It is interesting in a way doing this interview because in my experience our mixed identity was not something anyone felt much of a need to talk about....It was just known" (Noel, 21, Cousin). My aunt who is her grandmother, had this to say:

I am comfortable in who I am, I look in the mirror and I know who I am, I am not sure if it matters, at least to me [about claiming tribal affiliation]. I don't need to shout who I am from the rooftops...Ever since I was eight years old people would ask me if I was Indian and they still do to this day. They see my darker skin, my long hair, and my facial features and they are not sure if I am pure Indian or not...and that is ok by me (Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt).

Her sister, who phenotypically takes after the white side of our family, said that "People see my red hair and lighter eyes and immediately they see the Irish in me." She freely admits, "I don't look as Indian as my sister, your aunt [Ninoshenh Mishibizhii] or my mom." But then goes on to say that she is "not bothered by this because I know I am not trying to be anything other than who I am. I am not interested in changing anyone's minds." She also affirmed that she is "ok

with who I am and where I come from” (Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, 65, Aunt). My brother summed up my family’s attitude on this by stating: “I know we are mixed Indian; mixed from our father and mixed from our mother; and we were raised with the old stories. I am not sure if it matters to me what the federal government thinks or what anyone thinks” (Nijji Makwa, 41, Brother).

I honestly feel that the theme of who, and for what reason, my family discloses their identity has been an important narrative theme in all of my interviews. Of everyone in my family, I and my cousin Oshiimeyan B had the most tension with the idea of people’s perceptions of whether or not we should disclose our identity. Most of my family just did not care; they knew who they were because they knew where they came from. I also got the feeling that my family was only willing to talk about this topic to such depth because I am family, and they had an “insiders” trust of my intentions with this study.

Discussion

In this study I performed thematic analysis on members of my family as representatives of white-mixed Indigenous people. In the background, my positionality as part of the family was very much present in the form of my family’s openness and trust in me to represent my family in an honest and authentic way. This positionality also created challenges that I had to confront in the form of my own bias. This positionality of being an “insider vs an outsider” of my culture also created instances of reflexivity (Kersen, 2017; Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2007). This reflexivity affected me as a researcher, as my awareness and understanding of my family’s navigation of their racial identity were at times challenged, and at other times deepened, as my family reacted to, and was transformed by, being interviewed by one of their own (Butz & Besio, 2009).

I began this project with a primary motivation of telling the story of my family, in order to challenge the conceptions of outsiders about the contemporary ways identity is structured and claimed among mixed Indigenous/ Indigenous people of the Ohio Valley in the Appalachian mountains, and specifically the mixed Indigenous/Indigenous people of West Virginia. I discovered the process in which my white-mixed Indigenous family arrived at their thoughts of their own Indigenous identity. My family, while aware of the ideological basis for how Indigenousness is constructed by the U.S. government, does not construct their identity in the same way and by the same criteria. My family prioritizes family narrative and lineage over blood quantum laws. This dual awareness between how the U.S government constructs and categorizes most people's awareness of Indigenous identity and, how they and their grandparents experience this construction and categorization, has led to a predominant thematic arc of family over government. In other words, they value family over outsiders. My experience of unearthing and foregrounding my own family's story themes led to me discover how Indigenousness as a racial identity is created and held during the continued influence of the United States colonial enterprise (Fanon, 2007).

As discussed previously, Indigenous identity (mixed or otherwise) outside of the federal recognition of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs can be contentious. This seems to be especially true for white-mixed Indigenous communities not currently recognized by the Federal government. As my cousin Oshimeyan B discussed during his interview, it often feels like the legacy of President Jackson's desire to resolve what was viewed by the settlers of North America as the encroachment of savages on civilized lands continues well into the present day in the form of "blood quantum" as a criterion for not only federal recognition in the form of a "certificate of Indian Blood" but, also for general acceptance of a people's Indigenous identity (Trail of Tears,

2009; Horse, 2005). The continual diluting of blood quantum from different racial/tribal admixtures of Indigenous people of the United States, has become a permanent solution to what Andrew Jackson called the “Indian problem” as our Indigenous elders pass on leaving smaller and smaller percentages of Indigenous blood among the existing native populations came up in my interview with my cousin Oshiimeyan B. (Horse, 2005).

It is in this social environment that my family, as white-mixed Indigenous people, continue to navigate the process of constructing their own Indigenous identities and deconstructing colonial naming and claiming of us by the State. This is where my family not only “positions” and “orients” themselves but, also how they seem to challenge what may be thought of as the standard of most understandings of Indigenousness that are based on ideological settler constructions by the U.S. government (Quigley, 2019; Ahmed, 2009). For some of the people in my family, this process is destabilized by the admixture of whiteness. Such as in the case of my Aunt Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe and my cousin Oshiimeyan B. For my aunt Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, this destabilization comes in the form of how other people perceive my Aunt’s outward features with her “red hair and lighter eye [color]” about which she seems to accept that people will read as “Irish”/white in comparison to her sister or her mother (Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, 65, Aunt). Although by her own admission, this destabilization is not something she dwells on much because she does not care how other people see her (Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, 65, Aunt). If my aunt’s destabilization could be categorized as externally located in other people, my cousin Oshiimeyan B admitted to internalizing this destabilization and, has said that he often “struggled” with disclosing his Indigenous identity to other people (Oshiimeyan B, 38, Cousin).

It is also noteworthy that as, this navigation of “minority identity” moves through generations of my family, it seems we simultaneously move further away from Indigenous identity into an assimilated white identity; through which the idea of blood quantum becomes less of a reminder of lost racial identity and, more an interesting way to know who you are (Noel, 21, Cousin). My cousin Mojo offers up a possible explanation for this phenomenon in his belief that people “fit in where you can get in” and specifically in reference to my family in general, he feels that we have not been given any real “options” to exist as anything other than white (Mojo, 42, Cousin).

But even in these instances where my family seems to embrace an outward white-only identity, there is still the insider understanding of ourselves as well as others in our family as mixed-Indigenous. Because even though Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, Mojo, and Noel may personally identify as white, they still hold space for Indigenousness in other members of our family and, this extends into an awareness of mixed Indigenousness in themselves. However, they still choose, for various reasons, to personally identify as white Indigenous. And while Mojo claims a white identity, it is because he does not feel that any other existence is open to him, therefore he does not see the purpose of amplifying his own mixed identity. However, he still feels that if people want to “bang the drum” and embrace the “old ways” then they are welcome to it (Mojo, 42, Cousin). This shows an awareness of a mixed Indigenous racial identity within himself and other members of our family. Even my younger cousin Noel sees evidence of this mixed Indigenous in our family through my Aunt Ninoshenh Mishibizhii; her grandmother (who she calls “nan”) even if she has not claimed it in herself (Noel, 21, Cousin).

The concept of identity disclosure is strong in my family as we are very specific with whom and why we disclose our Indigenous identity. This is shown above with Mojo, but more

strongly with my Aunt Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, Uncle Gichi-ayaa'aa Giisawaanzo Ma'iingan, Oshiimeyan B, and myself to various degrees. I fully embrace my identity as mixed Indigenousness based off our ancestry and being raised in an Indigenous understanding of the world and, spiritual practices from various elders, most who have since passed away. My Aunt Ninoshenh Mishibizhii and Gichi-ayaa'aa Giisawaanzo Ma'iingan both reported being mistaken for various Indigenous tribes due to their physical and phenotypical appearance, which has been supported by other members of our family (Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt; Gichi-ayaa'aa Giisawaanzo Ma'iingan, 57, Uncle/Cousin; Ninoshenh Ganawishkodawe, 65, Aunt; Noel, 21, Cousin).

A common theme of personal connection and awareness of Indigenousness, but with an accompanying lack to disclose, was interwoven throughout all the interviews with my family members who do not expressly live their lives as “white only;” they are not bothered by other people’s perceptions and they feel no need to share anything about their racial identity with others (Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt; Niiji Makwa, 41, Brother). This has been related succinctly by both my Aunt Ninoshenh Mishibizhii and my brother, but has also been echoed throughout my entire family, besides my cousin Oshiimeyan B, and myself. In fact, it is my understanding that the only reason they talked about it at all is out of care and respect for me as a member of our family and a desire to help. However, there is another layer in this narrative as I understand my family to be extremely proud of who we are and where we come from, in addition to a desire to “set the record straight.” They are aware of how outsiders tend to erase them from popular understandings of the racial identity of West Virginia (Gichi-ayaa'aa Giisawaanzo Ma'iingan, 57, Uncle/Cousin; Ninoshenh Mishibizhii, 62, Aunt).

I did not see any real connection to the idea of “historical trauma” in any of my family’s responses although, there were discussions of family poverty, injustice due to incarceration, and substance abuse. My family viewed these events as facts of life, and not instances of historical trauma (Whitbeck, et.al., 2012). I had the impression that my family did not want to be understood as victims, but instead as survivors. This is something that also resonates strongly with me, as I have no desire to have our history define me or my family; instead, I want to tell our own story of my family’s resilience. I feel as Eve Tuck, does that there has been an oversaturation of the suffering of Indigenous/mixed Indigenous communities by researchers, with little discussion of the strength and passion of our communities (Tuck, 2012).

Conclusion

This study has really made me think about my own navigation of my mixed-Indigenusness. At one time I was more aligned with my family. Members of my family have asked me at different times during this study why talking about our mixed-Indigenusness is so important to me, and until this moment I was not sure. It is true that for most of my life I lived knowing who I was and where I came from, and that was enough for me. I am not sure when this changed. Maybe like my family, I became fed up with the erasure of our history and the humanity of the people close to me by outsiders. This coupled with my positioning along the Medicine Way from an early age created a kind of calling in me to push back and resist what I feel is the slow death of assimilation through colonization. I am not so bothered if people see me as white, as long as they do not tell me. If they take away my identity based on my skin color given to me through breeding with white settlers or lack of blood percentage, then they are also taking away the identity of my family and my ancestors. I am not ashamed to be white-mixed

Indigenous; I honor all aspects of my ancestors. I firmly believe that a person's Indigeness is not determined by the standards of a colonizer government (Fanon, 2007).

This means that I will not allow other people to dishonor my people and my ancestors by trying to make me choose how I identify, especially when that choice means to choose whiteness to the exclusion of my Indigenous ancestors and family that are Indigenous even by the standards of state-defined blood quantum laws. Most of my family members are in their late 90's and, I was not able to reach them to interview them because of COVID-19. This is why I still push back against people saying I am not of Indigenous descent because in my mind, that means that I no longer live as Indigenous and, that my elders who are still alive, and even those who have passed on, have been erased. But I will admit that I am at times situational with disclosing my identity in BIPOC spaces, unless specifically asked. I was raised with the understanding that unless the disclosure of my identity would add comfort or healing in those spaces, I am comfortable with BIPOC people perceiving me as they want.

I wanted to write this study not only as a passion project or a "love song" to my family, but also to add to a larger critical narrative about the ways the United States attempts to legislate blood quantum and racial categorization for their own gain. And this should not be perpetuated by the field of social work. In a profession whose Code of Ethics claims to "challenge injustice" and "respect the inherent dignity and worth of a person" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017, Ethical Principles), we as a field, need to look past a person's skin or the measure of a person's blood, and respect the narrative of the person as they want to define and tell it. Oftentimes a person's story is deeper and more complex than it would first appear. And a person you may at first read as "white" may have a history, a people, and an identity that is more than your awareness or knowledge allows you to "see." And they may be struggling to express

this story through years of systematic attempts of erasure through colonization, racism, homophobia, and systematic oppression.

Gaawiin Awiya*

I don't remember
 when the white man came
 too far away and
 many years before I was
 born

I don't remember when the
 white man came
 (oh! lay down your blankets people of the muddy river)

I don't remember when
 the white men
 came
 so long ago before
 I was born

(oh! be careful people of the muddy river they will swallow your
 blood and beat you down; they will make you lay down your
 blankets and scour your roots they will fill your shoes with coal
 they will take your skin)

I don't remember
 when the white men came
 to make us believe that will soon
 become ghosts I only remember
 the stories we told and how the elders said to
 keep the fires close; constantly burning within our
 bones.

Baa maampii g'ga waabamigo**

*nobody in Ojibwe

** so long and we will see you in Ojibwe

(from Slowly; Or by Degrees- By Abandon GawinWaya Shuman, 2019; edited 2020)

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