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Dancing Power: Examining Identity  
Through Native American Powwow

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Kresta-Leigh Opperman

August 2010

Advisor: Richard Clemmer-Smith

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Powwow  
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## ABSTRACT

This study considers how inter-tribal Indian identity formed through historic circumstances and how it is negotiated and maintained by contemporary Native Americans. Specifically, it considers identity formation and negotiation through the inter-tribal dance event, powwow. Further, it considers how and if men and women participate in this identity formation and negotiation differently. Finally, it considers how this identity is useful for urban Indian populations living outside of tribal lands and who, in some cases, have little involvement in more traditional, or tribal, settings.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Also, I would like to thank the powwow participants who collaborated and shared their experiences with me during the course of my fieldwork. Without their honesty and insight about what powwow means to them this thesis would not have been possible. I truly appreciate their candor and the welcoming way in which they invited me to participate within their community.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who believed in me and believed in this work. Their support and encouragement guided me and gave me the strength I needed to complete this work. I would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to all of you.

**Dancing Power: Examining Identity Evident in Native American  
Powwow**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

The main focus of this study is to understand what is, or what makes up, “Indian” identity which is different from, but often layered with, tribal identities. This study looks at how this identity was formed through historic circumstances and how it is negotiated and maintained by contemporary Native Americans. It will also consider how and if men and women participate in this identity formation and negotiation differently. Specifically, I will consider how this identity is useful for urban Indian populations living outside of tribal lands and who, in some cases, have little involvement in more traditional, or tribal, settings.

There is concern, by some scholars, mainstream Americans, and by Native Americans themselves, that young urban Indians are detrimentally estranged from their cultural ways and traditions. Despite the shift, in anthropology, from the idea of “vanishing cultures” to an understanding of cultures as dynamic and changing there continues to be a concern that these young Indians, who, in some cases, have never lived on tribal land and have grown up as part of mainstream America, may lose their heritage or cultural

understanding. For some, pan-Indian events, those which are inclusive to members of a variety of tribal backgrounds, held in urban areas are a way to combat this perceived loss as will be discussed here in the context of powwows.

Finally, this study is concerned with understanding the popular mythologies concerning Indian identity found in mainstream representations, cultural and historical narratives, and how they affect that creation and negotiation of contemporary Indian identity. This study will consider how these popular ideas are incorporated and or rejected by contemporary urban Indians and how they are evident in the powwow performance.

### **Thesis Overview**

This thesis begins by considering the context of contemporary urban Indian culture through the lens of the inter-tribal event, powwow. It considers how this identity developed, how it is useful in contemporary American Indian society, and how it both negotiated and perpetuated in a contemporary urban context. It contends that this identity is useful and beneficial to Native Americans at a variety of levels, including but not limited to, cultural revitalization and political contexts. Further, it contends that the powwow as a public event is a useful tool for the maintenance and negotiation of identity.

In considering this identity and the event of powwow this study will utilize theories of performance and ethnicity to dissect what may be occurring on the powwow stage. This study will consider the motives and ideals of



powwow participants in the Denver, Colorado area. This thesis will provide historical context to situate the contemporary Native American situation and analysis based on my ethnographic research.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical and methodological approaches utilized in my analysis. I begin with a review of the current literature regarding the powwow event and its relevance in contemporary Indian culture. The literature guides a discussion of how Native Americans involved in powwow are negotiating both contemporary identity and gender roles. In order to further understand the topics brought up by the literature I follow with a discussion of my theoretical approach based primarily in ethnic and performance theories. Here, in Chapter Two, I also discuss my fieldwork conducted in the Denver, Colorado area as well as discuss my research methodology and the methods used to conduct this research.

In Chapter Three I present a historical overview of the circumstances that affected the development of an Indian identity and discuss how this identity is different from tribal identities. I also provide a context for further discussion of identity as well as the motives and ideologies that guide the need to maintain a unique identity in the presence of the dominant culture. This discussion of the historical circumstances of Native American people is essential for contextualizing the contemporary situation which will be discussed in my ethnographic analysis of powwow.

Chapter Four considers the context of the two main types of powwow, contest and traditional, and how, each of these types provides differing

opportunities for the enactment and negotiation of culture through performance. Chapter Five provides a discussion of how specific roles in powwow influence the cultural narrative as it is performed at this event. In this chapter I utilize theories of performance and ethnicity to discuss the data collected through participant observation and interviews and to provide an analysis of how the powwow event is an identity building and reaffirming process. Finally, in Chapter Six I provide a summary of the findings from this research, the limitations of this study, and suggestions for additional research.

## **Chapter 2: Theory and Method**

I had never been to a powwow before, and I was not sure what to expect. It was a Friday afternoon and I packed up and drove to the Stadium. The parking lot was crowded and a steady stream of people walked toward the buildings entrance. Many carried suitcases containing regalia they would put on inside while others quickly changed in the back of cars or vans.

Entering into the Stadium I was caught in a crowd of people steadily moving from one vender to another looking at the arts and crafts items available for purchase. The smell of fry bread permeated the air and people milled about with Indian tacos. I worked my way into The Stadium stands to sit and watch the performance. The grand entry began led by the color guard and sponsor drum. Following were the golden age men and golden age women and so on through the individual dance categories until, a half an hour later the youngest, the tiny tots, entered the arena. Once all of the dancers where inside the arena a flag song (often referred to as similar to the National Anthem and was originally a chief's honoring song) was sung. For this the lights were dimmed and the dancers still. Following this was a victory song and all the dancers began to dance again. The emcee announced that over one thousand people had participated in the grand entry.

For the rest of the afternoon the dance arena was filled with dancers for contest songs and specials. In these instances dancers, in specific regalia, participate in a given dance category. These categories include women's traditional, women's fancy, women's jingle, men's traditional, men's fancy, and men's grass. These categories also are divided by age from the youngest to oldest and in some cases further divided by region.

During the tiny tots category the emcee declared, "We don't care how they dance. We are just glad they do!" Later, when the adolescent categories were called the emcee praised their participation in this event stating, "People say a lot of bad things about young people. But look around we have so many young people doing good things at powwow... powwow is good for young people." Besides encouraging the younger generations to participate the emcee emphasized culture, honoring the elder generation's knowledge and describing the struggles and resilience that has brought Native American people to where they are now. (Field Notes 5/18/2005).

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Powwow: Active Participation in Identity Formation**

Each summer Native American people across the country pack up their cars and travel to powwows. Some attend to participate in the dances, others as part of drum groups, and some simply as spectators. What brings these

participants, from diverse tribal backgrounds, to these common meeting places year after year?

William K. Powers suggests that intertribal music and dance “reinforce American Indian identity at a level where this identity is directly threatened by non-Indian influences” (Powers 1980:216). As a visible enactment of culture, this performance is a space in which the presentation of identity supports and reinforces it. Further, Powers reconsiders the idea of “revitalization,” and suggests instead that the popularity of music and dance in contemporary American Indian culture may be better understood as “vitalization” (1980:225), supporting the idea of dynamic and changing culture rather than “lost culture” waiting to be found and relearned. The contemporary powwow scene provides a popular space in which Native American people enact culture through music and dance. During powwow, the negotiation of Indian ethnicity occurs in a community-building event (Barker Lerch and Bullers 1996).

The presumption is often made that powwow culture is “pan-Indian,” a conglomeration of Plains Indian traits and modern influences that have resulted in a “hybrid culture.” However, as suggested by Powers (1968) this concept may be applied all too readily in discussions of powwow music and dance. In an early work on Native American dance, Powers (1968) suggests that ethnographers overuse the idea of “pan-Indianism” as introduced by James H. Howard (1955). Howard (1955) first introduced the concept of

“pan-Indianism” which he describes as an extension of Plains culture to other Native American groups as an ethnic identity that supersedes tribal identities.

While Powers suggests that there is a trend toward a more singular ethnicity, to the detriment of tribal identities, he claims that the pan-Indian elements found in Oklahoma powwow styles may have negligible influence in the northern, Teton, region in which he finds what he terms “pan-Tetonism” to be the primary inter-tribal identity influencing dance and powwow performance (1968:367). Here, Powers suggests that “pan-Indianism” does not exclusively influence the powwow tradition. Rather, the influence may be regional in nature.

In 1980, Powers again considers the spread of pan-Indian identity as it relates to music and dance. Powers moves away from the idea that pan-Indian identity is spreading to the detriment of tribal identities. Rather, he suggests that the two may coexist (Powers 1980:216). In order to illustrate this idea he distinguishes between tribalism and intertribalism in music and dance stating that, “tribal music and dance are always traditional in structure and function. Intertribal music and dance are always traditional in structure but not always so in function” (Powers 1980:216). It is through this distinction that identity negotiation takes place and identity is reinforced. This identity may be both tribal and inter-tribal in nature. In other words, this enactment of culture allows a person to self-identify at one level, or multiple levels, and perhaps project identity to an audience at a supra-tribal level.

Howard (1976), writing about the Gourd Dance, a feature of many powwows, but also a dance style and event all its own, continues to suggest that pan-Indian influence has standardized tribal uniqueness in music and dance resulting in a new Gourd Dance that is “spreading like wildfire” (243). He, like Powers, argues that music and dance may be two of the primary tools used to revitalize Native American tradition as evidenced by the popularity of this dance and its inclusion, often before or after, the powwow event (Howard 1976). Further, he states that the popularity of this style results from the “attractive image,” of the Plains Indian as a prototype for American Indian culture. He maintains his previous argument that Native American people are continuing to move away from tribal distinctiveness in favor of a unified pan-Indian identity (Howard 1976:257). Unlike Powers, Howard does not acknowledge that these identities may coexist but rather places them at odds with each other. This dichotomy overlooks the reality of how Native American people choose to identify themselves and each other and in many ways relies on the antiquated EuroAmerican idea that all Native Americans are somehow the same. It is a limiting analysis that perpetuates the idea of “lost” and “dying” culture.

Benjamin R. Kracht suggests that studies of powwow, such as those above, focus too heavily on the secular aspects of the event and its role in the development of pan-Indian culture. He argues that powwow’s meaning, for participants, runs much deeper than that. He makes a case that Victor Turner’s idea of “communitas” may be applied to the powwow circuit in the

sense that it brings together a group of equals in a ritual performance (Kracht 1994:322). This, as well as the ceremonial aspects of music and dance, he argues, supports the idea that powwow is a sacred event for those who participate. Further, he suggests that this participation strengthens communities through common understanding and needs (Kracht 1994:322). While Kracht states that researchers should move away from studying powwow solely in terms of its role in the development of pan-Indian identity his argument supports the idea that powwow is a space in which identity is reinforced and negotiated as a community event through his use of Turner's work.

Turner's description of "communitas" is a social structure in which a group of individuals are bonded together through commonality (Turner 1969:96). It is through this commonality that group identity exists. The flaw in using Turner's "communitas" is that powwow participants may not all be "equals." Many participants would argue that in fact they are not – that politics, favoritism, and perhaps gender, as will be discussed, play important roles in the event. That aside, the analysis provides a useful way to consider how powwow participants create and negotiate identity.

Mark Mattern (1996) also considers powwow in terms of its role in creating and maintaining Indian identity both within the culture and externally. The issues of ethnicity discussed in the previous chapter, including establishing authenticity and defining Indian identity, are visible in his description of powwow as a space in which the negotiation of identity



takes place. This negotiation may take the form of healthy disagreement and discussion between Native Americans that strengthens their own conceptions of Indian-ness, self-identification, and community (Mattern 1996:198). Through this negotiation both tribal and supra-tribal identities are supported and changed over time.

How does this negotiation of Indian-ness translate to the general Native American population? The literature suggests that often those most involved in powwow are urban, college educated, and are part of American Indian civil rights movements (Eschbach and Applebaum 2000:80, Fowler 1987:190, Howard 1976:256, Weible-Orlando 1991:136). Karl Eschbach and Kalman Applebaum ask “Who Goes to Powwows?” (2000). Based on statistical analysis of survey data collected in 1987, they find that Indians with the most exposure to Euro-American culture, through education or employment, are most likely to attend powwow (2000: 80). Thus, for example, powwow may be a place for urban Indians to reaffirm their cultural identity as described by Weibel-Orlando (1991:133,136). In her discussion Weibel-Orlando considers Native American’s living in participating in events in Los Angeles, CA. These participants are highly urbanized and participate in a variety of pan-Indian events. Through powwow these participants are connecting to a community that may not be tribally specific, but rather, one that supports a pan-Indian, or intertribal, identity.

Eschbach and Applebaum’s study supports arguments such as Howard’s that powwow is more intimately connected to intertribal rather than

tribal identity due to its popularity among people who tend to be most removed from tribal activities through physical distance or loss of tribal connections. However, others suggest that powwows are equally important tribally (DesJarlait 1997, Ellis 2003:5). Tribal powwows tend to be smaller and more intimate. They support family interaction and local tradition (DesJarlait 1997, Ellis 2003:5).

While reaffirming cultural connections within the community, Native Americans involved in powwow are also displaying cultural uniqueness to the public (Buddle 2004, McMullen 2004). McMullen claims that it is essential such acts be public and convey messages to the greater population (McMullen 2004). Similarly, Nesper (2003) shows in his study of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's Wa-Swa-Gon Indian Bowl, a cultural fair, in Wisconsin, aimed specifically at outsiders, that by enacting cultural difference, through dance, this Indian group was able to resist assimilation and maintain cultural distinctiveness. Nesper's study suggests the power of performance as a tool for social negotiation. Likewise, Katheleen Buddle (2004) approaches powwow as a communicative performance aimed at reaffirming identity. She suggests that this is most visible at large intertribal powwows where there is a significant non-Indian audience. Local or tribal powwows may not function in this way (Buddle 2004:30). I would disagree with this argument only in that tribal or local powwows appear to function as identity reaffirming aimed within the community rather than as a projection of ethnic uniqueness to the greater American population.

Maintaining this discussion of powwow as a tool for cultural affirmation Lassiter, like Powers and Howard before him, suggests that song and dance are dominant cultural symbols in contemporary Native American society (1998:7). Lassiter's discussion focuses primarily on Kiowa song in powwow. It chronicles his experiences and involvement as a hobbyist, anthropologist, and friend. He finds that song is a powerful affirmation of personhood within the community. Further, he describes it is a healing process that strengthens community ties (Lassiter 1998:205-213).

### **The Women of Powwow**

Throughout the history of powwow, men and women have maintained different space and activities within the event. In a historical account of powwow, Clyde Ellis (2003) suggests that women have always been a vital component of intertribal dance for their roles as organizers, committee members, and instructors for younger generations (24). Through this role women plan powwow events for the community that reinforce identity (Ellis 2003:24). Further, Native American women's role as cultural instructors for younger generations, as discussed by Tamara C. Cheshire (2001) is evident in women's powwow participation. Through their role as mother women influence and socialize their children within this community to empower them with the information necessary to maintain their ethnic identity (Cheshire 2001:1535).

At nearly every powwow I attended, the importance of this role was emphasized for *survival*. Survival no longer entails avoiding the battlefield bullets but is rather a struggle to maintain identity and cultural uniqueness in a world where this is perceived to have been lost. There appears to be a preoccupation with this potential loss that reinforces the importance of community events such as powwow. If the suggestion is true that women are the primary cultural instructors, this makes their roles vitally important in this struggle.

Powers states that the literature describing Lakota powwows often suggests that music and dance is skewed toward male participation (2000:13). This, he states, is understood from a EuroAmerican consideration of gender relations and that the Lakota do not see this as an unequal relationship (2000:13). This, however, does not mean that women's roles in powwow have not changed over time. Powers states that women physically participate in powwow differently – now participating in dance within the circle rather than at the edge of it, as they did previously. He also finds that recently there are more songs composed about strong women, women participate in drum groups, and in some instances in male dance competition (2000:19). These changes, he credits, to the changing role of women in Lakota society as a whole. He finds that women more actively participate in social, political, and economic life than they did previously (2000:19).

Likewise, Marla N. Powers (1988) suggest that women in Lakota society are able to move more freely between their roles as Lakota women and

mothers, and their professional lives in the workforce. She argues that this is much more difficult for Lakota men to do since those males that occupy high status professional positions are stereotyped as behaving like EuroAmerican men (Powers, M. 1988:18). Using this understanding of Lakota gender relationships and her fieldwork observations she argues that the powwow dance arena has changed little for men. They take up the same space they did previously. However, for women this space has changed significantly and they are able to move through the space more freely. Women no longer remain at the edge of the circle during powwow events but dance within it just as men do. Interestingly enough, Marla N. Powers finds that the converse is true of dance style and regalia. She sees little change in the way women dance and their clothing while men's styles appear to be undergoing continuous change (Powers, M. 1988:17). She suggests that this may show how Native American men are continually struggling to negotiate their identity as both modern Americans and Indian while Native American women appear to have the ability to balance these roles because they are not subject to the same social stereotyping if they are successful in the workplace.

Powers asserts that Native American women appear to have greater ease in balancing their various roles than their male counterparts. As I will discuss the degree to which women have increased their participation in powwow illuminates Power's assertion and expand on the discussion of how Native American women are redefining their space in powwow. My research

shows that negotiations of gender specific roles, evident at powwow, have been met with varying degrees of acceptance.

## **Research Goals and Methods**

In order to explore how Indian identity is performed and negotiated at powwow I employed two popular ethnographic methods; participant observation and informant interviews. Both methods provided important and different information useful for understanding the nuances of contemporary Indian identity.

Participant observation allows the anthropologist to situate him or herself more closely within the context of the situation. This method involves the anthropologist in the day to day activities of the community and includes, social interaction, direct observation, formal and informal interviewing, and creates a fluidity that allows the direction of the study to move with the dynamic of the interaction (McCall and Simmons 1969:1). Through this method the anthropologist participates and develops familiarity with the system which gives the anthropologist a greater understanding and depth of knowledge. This method provides greater contextualization and may allow the anthropologist greater insight which can lead to more depth and significance of discussions during interviews with key informants.

Key informant interviews were a key method for gathering data during the course of this research. Interviews provided a wide breath of knowledge held by powwow participants regarding how and why they participate in this

activity. These interviews also provided personal and cultural narratives that further expanded on intertribal identity from the perspective on Indian people themselves. The majority of the interviews conducted were informal or unstructured. Structured interviews, with specific question sets, were also conducted.

The unstructured interviews allowed subjects to speak on a variety of topics and provided the subject with the opportunity to elaborate on the topics he or she felt more inclined to discuss or those of which they had the most to say (Devereux and Hoddinot 1993:30). Such unstructured interviews can provide cultural and personal narratives which can be used to develop a qualitative analysis. The drawback to this type of interview is, of course, since subjects do not all speak on the same subject or respond to a specific series of questions, comparisons of the data received may be difficult, and quantitative data is less likely to be obtained (Devereux and Hoddinot 1993:30).

Primarily, this research was conducted between March of 2005 and March of 2006 and was spread out to encompass the local powwow schedule. Typically, well known, annual, powwows in this area are scheduled in the spring and fall in the months of March, April, and May, and then again from the end of August through September. Smaller powwows, often held for a specific event such as a high school graduation, are also found throughout the year. Several of the powwow participants I spoke with suggested that this

spring and fall schedule allows for travel to powwows outside the area during the summer powwow season.

To conduct this research I began with a small network of key informants who helped to guide me through the local powwow scene. I attended six regional powwows, the names and exact locations of which have been changed, and recorded field notes that included detailed observations of the events as well as transcripts of conversations with participants at the events.

During this time I also set up a series of formal interviews with three key informants who each participate in the local powwow scene at different levels and in different ways. All three consultants possess college degrees, live in an urban setting, and self identify both with their tribe(s) and as Indian. Interviews were structured for the ease and comfort of the consultants and were only recorded with their permission. For this reason only interviews with one informant were recorded and then transcribed. The other interviews were conducted without recording equipment and were either transcribed as notes while the interview took place or in some instances directly after the interview. The data and narratives resulting from these interviews are a key component of my research and analysis.

Finally, I also conducted informal unstructured interviews with consultants both at and outside of powwow. Often these were informal conversations with powwow participants, who, through the course of my field work and my subsequent work within the community also became friends and



colleagues. These conversations were informal and notes regarding the conversations are recorded with my field notes. In the discussion and analysis provided here I have changed the names and locations of participants and events to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of those involved. I have based my research on considering two questions:

Does powwow contain elements of an existing dialogue between and among both natives and non-natives regarding Indian identity that aid in the construction of a unique ethnicity different from both tribal and governmental definitions of “Indian-ness”? and

Is there evidence that women and men construct Indian identity, through the context of powwow, in different ways?

To answer these questions I utilized theories of identity and performance to consider the two distinct powwow venues, the large contest powwow, and the small local, sometimes called traditional, powwow. I will show that both powwow types incorporate the identity affirming and negotiation qualities described and understood in performance theory and how each is able to do so at both within the community and externally. I will also consider how the roles individuals embody during powwow influence and guide the negotiation of identity.

## **Identity in Theory**

### **An Indian Identity**

Intertribal Indian identity is a construction resulting from colonization, displacement, and assimilationist movements aimed at Native American people. Its development and perpetuation largely rests upon the need for diverse tribal groups, with common interests and common history, to resist assimilation and acculturation. The strength of this identity exists in its power to unite diverse culture groups throughout North America through their common interest and historical situation.

One manner of resistance to acculturation is revitalization. The application of Wallace's model of revitalization movements (1956) is useful in understanding the construction of Indian identity, despite the fact that it is more often used to address specifically tribal situations. A revitalization movement, according to Wallace, is "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956: 265). What is important to note is the agency (Marx and Engles 1975:47) necessary within a culture to enact such change. Wallace describes a conscious effort, a desire by group members to alter something about their culture. He is not describing traditionally accepted methods of change including drift, diffusion, and acculturation; these he argues do not depend on the deliberate action of group members (1956: 265). This applies to the creation of intertribal identity

specifically during the nineteen sixties when a shift in the narrative of “Indian-ness” occurred (E. Bruner 1986).

Narratives as described by Jerome Bruner are a way of organizing experience (1991:4) and are crucial in identity formation (Rosaldo 1993:129; Ochs and Capps 1996:21). The narrative created during this time, as described by Clifton, evoked sympathy at a time when political resistance by Native American people was spurred on by the various civil rights movements occurring simultaneously (1990:41). In many ways, the shift in the dominant narrative resembles a revitalization movement. Its aim was to resist acculturation, reject certain Euro-American influences and values, and emphasize self-determination and sovereignty. James A. Clifton (1990) describes this process as invention rather than revitalization conceptualizing contemporary Indian-ness as invented and even fictitious, created and used for political purposes. Clifton argues that this has led to a generation that does not question the validity of this identity because they rely on works such as Vine Deloria’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Clifton 1990:41).

Both Deloria’s and Brown’s work provide scathing commentary on U.S. treatment of Native American people. While Deloria deals with U.S. Indian policies such as treaties, termination, and religious suppression (1969) Brown focuses on the U.S. military atrocities against Indian people during the wars for the American west (1970). These works were written during a time when the common discourse moved from one of assimilation to one of

resistance (Clemmer 1972:214; E. Bruner 1986:139-142). In other words, narrative changes through time may have resulted from a struggle for power in which Indian people successfully banished ideas of assimilation by maintaining the boundaries of ethnicity (Barth 1969) and maintaining uniqueness (McMullen 2004). Prior to this, the dominant discourse described the inevitability of Native American cultural extinction because it was thought of as “a ‘previous stage’ of sociocultural evolution” (Clemmer 1995:128).

Recent work, such as that done by Ann McMullen (2004) cautions one’s reliance on revitalization or invention as classification for cultural change. She finds that revitalization, as described by Wallace, may be too restrictive to be applied under the current paradigm of culture as continually changing and dynamic (2004:273). Invention, too, must be cautioned against as it carries with it connotations of being inauthentic which, for good reason, often causes it to be rejected by the culture in question (Sahlins 1994:379). As all culture is continually invented and re-invented this approach may carry with it concerns of ethnocentrism evident in one’s research (Sahlins 1994:379). Further, as described by Richard O. Clemmer, “Tradition may be more than merely a holdover from the past; it may also be deliberately constructed and reconstructed as a critique of modernism” (1994:13). Thus, what a group considers part of its tradition and its culture may or may not be gained solely from its history but may be constructed and negotiated as the group moves through various political and social situations.

## **Ethnic Authenticity**

At present, there are 336 federally recognized tribes in the United States consideration of state tribes and tribal groups petitioning for recognition would increase the number to around 500. This makes it problematic to define a singular *Indian identity*, due to tribal and regional variation, yet maintaining ethnic authenticity is at the forefront of contemporary Native American issues. As discussed by Fogelson defining Indian identity is often a problematic task. Basing much of his analysis on the legal implication of Indian identity including land rights and tribal enrollment, he claims that finding a definition has increasingly become more important yet doing so has often been left to the federal government or federally recognized tribes (1998: 54). The implication is that members of tribes not recognized by the U.S. government are not considered Indian; they are stripped of their identity and their legal rights, through legislation. Further, governmental definitions of identity often rely on the use of blood quantum; a measure based on ancestry and often related to degree of acculturation (Krouse 1999:75). “Full-bloods,” those who have only Indian ancestors are usually considered “Indian” whereas “half-breeds” or “breeds” who have non-Indian as well as Indian ancestors may have to prove their authenticity (Krouse 1999; Hamill 2003).

The use of blood quantum in determining Indian identity has taken traditional methods for defining group membership away from Indian people. It is problematic to define identity based on degree of blood because there are

so many factors influencing identity. For this reason there are no sufficient measures of what makes one person more authentically Indian than another (Weaver 2001). A return to traditional methods of identification such as kinship may be useful in attributing tribal identity but is it applicable to Indian identity, which requires choice and participation that is separate from tribal affiliation (e.g., Fogelson 1998; Krouse 1999)? Susan Applegate Krouse argues that kinship ties are integral to establishing Indian identity specifically for urban mixed-blood Indians estranged from their tribal communities and seeking to reestablish connection to this ethnicity (1999). She claims that establishing kinship ties is the best way to establish ethnic authenticity when re-integrating oneself into the community (Krouse 1999).

Authenticity is recurrent in the literature (e.g., Barker Lerch and Bullers 1996; Fogelson 1998; Krouse 1999; Hamill 2003), leading one to question what is authentically “Indian” and based on whose standards. As Hilary Weaver asks in the title of her article “Who *Really* Has It?” the general American population usually defines “Indians” by their phenotypic attributes; do they look Indian? (Weaver 2001:247). Authenticity is also rooted in federal recognition and enrollment, or citizenship, in these sovereign tribes (Castile 1996:745). As card-carrying members of a recognized tribe, they are legitimized as Indians according to the U.S. legal system (Castile 1996:745; Hamill 2003:280). Such external identification infringes on traditional modes of defining identity as well as one’s self-identification.

James F. Hamill argues, “at a deeper and more significant level the debate is about who is an Indian from the point of view of Indian people” (Hamill 2003: 268). Focusing his study on Indians in Oklahoma, Hamill agrees that currently blood quantum is a key factor in establishing Indian identity but alone is not enough to constitute this identity. He argues that participation in Indian communities is equally important when claiming membership since those who are not active within the culture are seen as claiming the identity for prestige or personal gain (Hamill 2003: 280). One way to actively participate in cultural activities, especially for Indians living in urban areas, is through intertribal events such as powwow.

### **The Performance of Powwow**

Powers (1980) defines powwow as a performance that is a visible enactment of culture. Performance, as defined by Richard Bauman (1992) is a communicative behavior that is aesthetically marked, framed by specific constraints, and presented in front of an audience (41). The presence of an audience is essential for performance to take place and the relationship between performer and audience is one of reflexive communication. Deborah A. Kapchan (1995) expands the definition of performance describing it as, “aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportments – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (479). For Edward L. Schieffelin

(1997) the term performance may be used in two ways. In his first definition performance is a symbolic or aesthetic activity enacted intentionally to be expressive and is distinct from daily activity. In his second use of the term, performance is not related to a specific event but rather to the concept of performativity, that is, the personal expression of identity through performance acts in social interactions. Schieffelin considers this a fundamental part of daily communication (Schieffelin 1997:195). For the purposes of understanding powwow Schieffelin's first definition will be used here. His second definition, related to performative acts in daily social interaction is of limited use since the powwow is a distinct event separate from "mundane," to use Victor Turner's (1986:21) description of daily interaction.

Performance is inherently ephemeral. It exists in the moment and then it is gone. Therefore, no two performances are identical. The emergent quality of performance lends itself well to a study of contemporary cultural negotiation and change. Individual and cultural creativity evidenced in the event as well as consideration of the event as emergent, or created in the moment, allows one to consider the current context of social interaction. Bauman argues that folklorists and anthropologists have often focused too heavily on "residual culture," that which is somewhat distanced from contemporary meaning and is reminiscent of earlier periods. At the time of his writing scholars had only recently begun to consider emergent qualities of culture, which emphasized new meaning, experience, and significance.



Bauman finds that this focus on the past, or “traditional” culture, is limiting and restricts understanding of culture change (1977:47). It has a static quality that disengages the ethnographic subject from contemporary society. A study that accepts the emergent qualities of culture allows the subject to exist in the present. Bauman argues that performance may be a meeting place for these two concepts in which both ideas exist through a relationship with the past, or perhaps traditional knowledge, and an acceptance of contemporary creativity and change (Bauman 1977:47). Powwow is an example of this interaction between residual and emergent culture.

To understand the powwow performance it is important to consider the components that make up the event. Powwows make use of several performative genres as defined by Richard Bauman (1992) including song, dance, clothing, food, humor, and oratory. In this instance, particular attention will be paid to song, dance, humor and oratory. Together these components create, and help negotiate, the messages and meanings communicated by the event. It is important to note that meaning may differ based upon the audience member, or recipients, cultural understanding and ability to deconstruct the messages.

### **Performance Genres**

The performative genres that comprise powwow are both verbal and nonverbal. Both performance types maintain several commonalities. Bauman follows the work of Erving Goffman (1974) in his interpretation of

performance as framed with culturally understood markers that allow the audience to interpret what is being said. These markers provide the audience with instructions or aids in their understanding of the performance (Goffman 1974:21). Keys, or performative markers, may include the use of figurative language, special codes, parallelism, specific formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimers of performative ability (Bauman 1977:16). Once established these keys inform audience expectation of performance in that cultural context. These markers, embodied within the performance, create meaning within the community. For this reason, performance is inherently “risky.” It requires interaction with an audience and that audience comes to the event with prior knowledge and expectations (Goffman 1974:39). The event risks failure if these expectations are not met (Schieffelin 1997:198).

Song is a primary component of powwow. Songs may be heard before audience members see the dancers; when they are milling through the vendors or at the concessions. Song also indicates the style of dance, keys dancers’ movements and structures the performance. Drum groups, or simply the “drum” performs songs associated with powwow. The group generally consists of eight or so individuals, typically men who combine the vocal and drum sound to create appropriate dance songs. In some instances, women join these groups as drummers but more often, they lend their voices as “back up vocalists,” standing just behind the men. Many authors consider song to be the most prominent and directive aspect of performances in which it is included (Lassiter 1998:59).

Marcia Herndon (1992) describes song as an elusive concept that it performed not only by humans but also by animals such as birds. She explains that song can occur with or without musical accompaniment, it exists as both solo and group activity, and it has a variety of audiences (Herndon 1992:159). A general recognition of speaking and singing as distinct behaviors exists. George List (1963) suggests that these two categories may be better viewed as two poles of a continuum encompassing a variety of vocal styles. While speech differs from song, song vocals, to a certain extent, follow patterns of language. This aids in audience understanding. Alteration of language for the purpose of the song, such as word alteration, word coinage, and the use of archaic expressions or words, also exists (Herndon 1992:161).

Herndon suggests that List's continuum is insufficient in that he rejects songs made up partially or entirely by vocables, or sound creations, that are not words and do not have "meaning" in that sense. She finds this problematic due to the large number of songs throughout the world made up of such sounds (1992:162). Specifically, a large number of powwow songs are composed of vocables or a combination of vocables and words. She finds linguist Dwight Bolinger's approach to the distinction between speech and song more useful. Bolinger (1972) suggests that tone is secondary in speech which holds language and syntax as its primary concern. Song on the other hand creates tone and melody as the fundamental expression with lexical

meaning existing as a secondary category. Song, in the context of powwow, is accompanied by dance.

Dance, next to song, is perhaps the most prominent performance genre evident in powwow. Dancers are centralized within the arena and are highly visible performers whom the audience gathers to watch. A performative tool aiding in the communicative process of dance is the use of specialized clothing or regalia. I will touch on this concept briefly here and will expand upon its communicative importance, as associated with powwow, in another chapter. While dancers may participate in inter-tribal dances (those that are not dance category specific) in street clothes participation in dance categories requires the use of specialized regalia. Werner Enninger (1992) explains that clothing styles are imbued with visual signs that remain present throughout an encounter. Such signs are indicative of identity markers such as age, sex, ethnicity, or membership in an organization (Enninger 1992:222).

Song and dance constitute a substantial portion of the powwow performance. Another performer, the emcee, guides both the audience and performers through the schedule of events and provides commentary on significance. The emcee may also act as a translator for observers lacking communicative competence. A skilled emcee is a masterful orator as described by Alessandro Duranti (1992). Oratory is the skillful performance of speech for an audience (Duranti 1992:154). Such speech is often distinct from daily speech in its use of repetition - the reiteration of key elements, metaphor – using analogy to discuss a topic, and parallelism - repeated

syntactical similarities introduced for rhetorical effect. Duranti (1992) describes the most respected orators as those who establish a relationship with audiences by showing knowledge of the past as well as addressing contemporary concerns. Linguistic skill is not the sole evaluation for an orator's ability to communicate. Culturally appropriate repertoire is highly valued (Duranti 1992:156)

Humor is a communicative tool often used by powwow emcees. Specifically emcees tend to rely on verbal humor such as joking. It is a powerful communicative tool but a precise definition of humor is elusive due to its cerebral nature (Apte 1992:68). To a certain extent, it is a mental phenomenon. Despite this, Mahadev L. Apte (1992) describes three common phases that constitute a humorous situation, (1) Some event in the external world acts as a trigger for a specific mental response; (2) a cognitive and intellectual process receives and evaluates the event, resulting in a mirthful state of mind; and (3) there is an immediate overt behavior reflection of the mirthful state – smiling or laughter (1992:68). As described by Apte humor helps to create a convivial atmosphere, a feeling of social solidarity, and may provide social critique (1992:67).

Bauman includes food as a performative genre in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (1992). While not the primary performative tool evident at powwow it is an important feature of the event and worth mentioning briefly. Food can be an important symbolic, communicative tool within communities and particular dishes may signify

group membership (Goode 1992). Sharing and exchange of food, as well as the act of eating together, may strengthen feelings of community solidarity (Goode 1992:233). Judith Goode (1992) suggests that another expressive feature of food is evident in the gender roles often associated with preparing and receiving food. That is, women typically prepare and men typically receive in many cultures (Goode 1992:244). Such structuring of food preparation, serving, and consumption may be viewed as a performative act, specifically within the context of a social event such as ritual or festival. Powwow's structure specifically defines time for a dinner break and access to food during the event is plentiful.

Common refreshments available at powwow include fry bread, Indian tacos, also called Navajo tacos, and Frito pies. Other items such as hotdogs, nachos, and soda are also popular. Typically, these items are purchased throughout the event and taken back to one's seat. Women usually make and serve the fry bread and tacos although some men do participate in the deep-frying of the bread dough. These refreshment stands are open throughout the event and the long lines throughout the day testify to the popularity of these items among both Native and non-Native attendees.

### **Verbal Performance and Communicative Competence**

The audience is fundamental to the act of performance due to the reflexive nature of communication between the performer and the observer. Barre Toelken (1996) suggests that there are four types of audience. The

central audience includes any person(s) present who is informed in the tradition and may influence the nature of the performance in some way. The second audience type is the bystander. Toelken describes them as most likely interested in the aspects of performance that best match their stereotypical expectations. He includes tourists and aficionados in this category. Third is the outsider audience. To them what is being presented is foreign and perhaps impossible to interpret. Finally, the cultural audience, or implied audience, either approves or disapproves of the tradition itself. To better explain the cultural audience Toelken provides two examples of craft work in different cultures. In one, a man no longer makes a certain style of basket because it is no longer valued. In the other, a woman continues to make quilts and send them to all of her family members because they retain cultural value (Toelken 1996:139-140). Therefore, the cultural audience, through its approval or disapproval influences change in performance over time.

These different audiences have the ability to understand a performance at three levels. The first, and most basic is seeing. At this level, what is interpreted is what one observes empirically. Slightly more complex is hearing. At this level, one listens and understands what is said. Finally, the most complex level is believing. Toelken finds this level to be difficult to assess empirically as it arises from participation, the observance of custom and the ability to feel its validity. He suggests that it is difficult for folklorists (and perhaps anthropologists) to interpret at the level of belief unless they work within their own culture group (Toelken 1996:133).

Verbal performance and linguistic components of performance events make an understanding of linguistic theory relevant for the study of performance. Dell Hymes (1974) suggests that linguistic competence, or “fluency” is relative not only to individual ability, but more importantly (in this case) to the community. As such, fluency may be measured culturally. The “speech community” is a social construct made up of members of a community who use and understand language in a common manner. This understanding may be different from the prescribed grammatical interpretation of language. In this way, the speech community becomes the primary interpretive model superseding text-book grammatical interpretation (Hymes 1974:46-47). This is relevant in an ethnographic study of language use in performance for its focus on cultural context and its reminder that the words used may be interpreted differently from emic and etic standpoints.

Similarly, Michael Agar (1994) suggests that a metaphorical circle around language exists. Inside the circle are linguistic components such as syntax and semantics, while outside exists culture. He argues that Ferdinand de Saussure created the circle when he made the distinction between language and speech by defining language as a pure inventory of symbols, unlike speech, which is what people do with language (Agar 1994:37). For Agar, what is most important is what people do with language and how it is interpreted within a community.

Similarly, performance requires “communicative competence” that is socially learned (Hymes 1974:75, Kaeppeler 2004:305). Hymes defines



communicative competence as, “the ability to participate in society, as not only a speaking, but also a communicating member” (1974:75). It is this culturally learned information that provides the audience with the tools to distinguish between Clifford Geertz’s winking, blinking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, and rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking (1973:6). For Geertz the anthropologist may misunderstand these eye movements without further thought and “thick description.” Similarly, the audience member lacking communicative competence has limited interpretive ability. Kaepler describes such audience members as spectators, onlookers who observe the event but are not part of it. For them, the performance is a spectacle (Kaepler 2004:305).

### **Performance Categories**

Several categories of performance help to describe the powwow event. Three that I will focus on are ritual, festival, and spectacle. While powwow may not be any one of these categories individually, combined they are useful in explaining and understanding the various aspects of the event and the multiple happenings that make up a powwow. Further, with the community distinctions in understanding between ritual, festival, and spectacle, these categories define how powwow is interpreted by its variety of audiences.

Ritual is a formalized series of actions and speech. While it is often thought of as an aspect of religion, Roy A. Rappaport (1992) finds it more useful to consider it a structure or a set of characteristics that are combined in

formal repetitive action. Ritualized action in powwow includes the formalized grand entry parades, the sequencing of dance performances based on gender and age, and the incorporation of specials and giveaways meant to honor community members. Rappaport finds that performance is a critical element of ritual with its absence ritual cannot exist. Performance is the medium by which the message is transmitted (Rappaport 1992:250). He describes these messages as both variant and invariant. In other words through rituals there are messages transmitted that are changeless and tend to relate to enduring aspects of culture. Other messages that are transmitted contain variation and are often related directly to the performer or to concerns that are critical at that particular moment. These messages relate to the emergent quality of performance (Rappaport 1992:250).

Festival is a second category that helps to define a powwow event. Beverly J. Stoeltje describes festival as a method of cultural transmission and performance that has existed for centuries in a wide variety of cultures. Festivals serve social purposes including resistance to oppression as well as an active expression of group identity. The literature on powwow supports the suggestion that the event serves these social purposes (Barker Lerch and Bullers 1996, Mattern 1996, Weibel-Orlando 1991). Also important to festival is that it is open to the public. This allows an audience of non-community members to participate and view the expression of identity that is displayed. Finally, event is structured. It may include an opening ceremony, ritual,

drama, contests, food, music, and dance. Many of these are performative genres evident in powwow as discussed previously.

Finally, in some instances, powwow is spectacle. This tends to be the case more often at large contest powwows such as the Denver March or the Gathering of Nations. Such powwows draw a large non-Indian audience that may or may not have communicative competence. As described by Kaeppler for audience members lacking communicative competence the event becomes spectacle (Kaeppler 1992). Frank E. Manning defines spectacle as a very large public event, similar to festival in some respects but much larger in scope (1992). It requires a mass audience. Contemporarily this is often facilitated by media such as television. The large scale allows cultural imagery and representation to be viewed by a larger audience. Spectacle also requires a striking visual presentation. In powwow, this is evident in the elaborate regalia.

### **Beyond Symbols and Toward Communication**

Schieffelin assesses the limitations of a symbolic analysis of ritual that is often meaning-centered and shifts his emphasis to an analysis of how formulation of meaning within social space through performance creates social negotiation and transformation (1985:707). He argues that there is more going on in performance situations than simply understanding and absorbing meaning from cultural frames and keys. Participants actively engage in a creation of reality that supersedes their role as interpreter

(Schieffelin 1985:707). Performance in this sense is one aspect of the cultural process within which human beings exist. What is important then is how the symbols in performance are organized and in turn how they act to maintain and construct culture (Schieffelin 1985:710).

As Schieffelin shows, with his example of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, participants in performance events are not passive cultural absorbers. They are aware of what is going on during a séance and engage in the event through their behavior and dialogue (1985:711). What differentiates the performance event from that of Western theatre is the expectation of belief that Kaluli participants bring with them thus, situating this particular performance within the realm of “reality” (Schieffelin 1985:713). This, however, does not mean that they blindly believe in what is going on before them. Audience members are well equipped to evaluate the shaman’s performance and even call them a fraud if he is not a competent performer (Schieffelin 1985:717).

Performances such as the Kaluli séances are important in the creation of communities. Kapchan referring to Victor Turner’s concept, “communitas,” argues that through performance group members create a shared understand and common experience similar to what Turner has found in his consideration of liminal stages (Kapchan 1995:480). Similar to Schieffelin, she has challenged conventional symbolic methods for studying performance. She argues for a study of performance that incorporates an

understanding of the symbols presented to the audience and the relation that these symbols have outside of the performance event itself.

Kapchan's study of the Moroccan "festival theatre" referred to as *halaqa* is important to consider here because in it she addresses the negotiation of cultural meaning. She suggests that the ability of women to take on typically male roles in this performance is a way for them to challenge prescribed roles and actively work to reinvent the idea of feminine public authority (Kapchan 1995:499). She suggests that women are able to challenge gender roles through performance and that through this benign act new ideas of gender are normalized. It is integrated in a subtle way even though the women may not be actively seeking change but the result, Kapchan suggests, is that over time these new roles will be accepted as normal behavior because they were first introduced through harmless and non-threatening performance (1995:499). While Kapchan did not provide solid evidence showing that this had indeed, taken place when her theory is combined with Schiefflin's theory that cultural meaning is constructed during performative events the idea gains credibility.

Transmission and negotiation of cultural information through performance may allow for cultural change outside of the event if the group is receptive to such change. However, it is also possible that through the construction of group identity within a performative event the group could reject cultural change by acknowledging that this acting is "unusual," of different from daily norms, and therefore not acceptable in everyday social

interaction. Women around the world have challenged prescribed gender roles in a variety of ways with varying degrees of success, which acknowledges that social change is dependent on much more than just performance, but also requires acceptance by the community. Native American women, for instance, have challenged their roles in powwow events with only limited success.

In the contemporary powwow women are active powwow participants and participate in dance categories that parallel those of men thus making up half of the performers who visibly enact culture for the audience. For this reason it is important to consider their specific roles in identity formation and negotiation. Further, women also participate in performance roles that were previously considered to be specifically male roles and are continually expanding their participation in powwow.

Women have resisted powwow's prescribed gender roles and for the most part the literature focuses on women who sought positions in drum groups (e.g. Vander 1982, Hatton 1986, Mattern 1996). Judith Vander provides the stories of four Shoshone women of differing generations. The youngest women, Helen Bonatsie, 43, and Lenore Shoyo, 23, performed in drum groups. In both cases, the women joined already formed family groups. Only Shoyo secured the position of lead singer for the group (Vander 1982:78-81). This shift toward mixed-drum groups, those with both male and female members, began in the 1960's when many marginalized groups were challenging social norms (Hatton 1986).

While activist groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) began to protest for the civil rights of Native Americans, Native American women started to challenge prescribed gender roles (Hatton 1986). Orin T. Hatton finds that women were most successful in creating change when they joined mixed-groups rather than when they formed all-female groups (1986:215). Hatton suggests that this is due to the style of traditional powwow song. He claims that women who were best able to mimic the aesthetic qualities of men's singing were the most successful. Yet, Hatton acknowledges that even the success of these women was limited (1986). Mattern's more recent study claims the number of women in drum groups is marginal, far from the success women have had in changing prescribed forms of dance (1996).

Participant observation and consultant interviews that I have conducted support Mattern's conclusion. In the powwows that I have attended in Colorado, I have rarely come across female drummers, and I have never found a completely female drum group. Nor have I found female emcees. Interviews with key informants indicate that such mixed groups and female emcees may have found more acceptance further north. However, that is not something that I am able to validate with my data as I have focused specifically in Colorado and mostly in the Denver region. Also, while I have not witnessed it at powwows interviews suggest that some women have taken on male dance styles, such as the grass dance. My interviewees suggest that such action seems to be met with varying degrees of acceptance.

## **Chapter 3: Historical Overview**

### **A Shared Historical Context**

In order to proceed with any discussion of contemporary Native American identity it is important to consider first the historical circumstances affecting Native American people. These factors influence the development of intertribal identity and its contemporary manifestations in powwow and other events. Stephen Cornell (1998) describes initial relations between Native Americans and Europeans as mostly reciprocal. This, he explains, was due to the European reliance on furs obtained through trade with Indians. Through this trade-relationship, Indians dependence on European goods such as blankets, knives, axes, kettles, firearms, powder, lead, as well as luxury goods such as alcohol and tobacco increased (Cornell 1988:16-24). The balance of this relationship quickly shifted as European interests diversified and colonists increasingly became self-reliant. Conversely, Native Americans' economic reliance on Europeans increased (Cornell 1988:24).

A diminished reliance on Native Americans, combined with an increased desire for land, led to legislation removing Indian groups from land coveted by European settlers. The 1830 Indian Removal Act, approved by President Andrew Jackson, removed members of eastern tribes including the



Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Creek and Yuchi, to west of the Mississippi River (Perdue and Green 1995:117). Legislation to remove other tribes followed. The reservation system solidified as Native American groups were forced onto increasingly smaller tracks of land (Cornell 1988:42).

Native American groups were largely subjugated by the end of the nineteenth century. Although an “Indian problem” still existed a military response now seemed inhumane (Adams 1995:7). The U.S. opted for a three-pronged approach to “civilize” Indian people instead. The premise for this approach was that Indian people could, and needed to be, saved from themselves and the perils of savagery (Adams 1995:7-8). The “Indian problem,” now facing the U.S. was addressed in efforts to eliminate Native American culture. Attempts to “civilize” Native American people encouraged men to participate in the capitalist economy as wage-laborers and farmers while women were encouraged to adopt the characteristics of western women and become versed in domestic skills (Albers 1983:186). Assimilating Native peoples would eliminate a need for reservations and obligation to treaty rights. Euro-American settlers could then purchase newly opened tracks of land (Cornell 1988:33-50).

One solution employed by policy makers was to encourage private land ownership through allotment. The 1887 General Allotment Act, or Dawes Act, allowed for the dissolution of the reservation system and encouraged assimilation through the distribution of land to individual families. Under this legislation reservation land was parceled out: 160 acres to each

family head (based on a Euro-American model this person was usually male), 80 acres to single persons or orphans over the age of eighteen, and 40 acres to single persons or orphans under the age of eighteen (General Allotment Act 1887). The presumption in the Dawes Act was that private land ownership would encourage Native Americans to live a Euro-American lifestyle in nuclear family units and would suppress communal tribal relationships. In reality, the result of allotment was more land lost to tribal groups. After the allotment of land, any surplus was available for purchase by white settlers. The allotted lands were held in trust for individuals for twenty-five years after which time individuals were free to sell their land. Many did in order to meet economic needs (Adams 1995:17).

The extension of the U.S. legal system to include Native people was a second approach used to “civilization.” This was accomplished through U.S. control over tribal institutions. In so doing, the federal government was able to patrol and uphold U.S. laws on reservations. This was extended in 1885 when Congress allowed federal courts jurisdiction over tribal courts in the case of major crimes such as arson, murder, manslaughter, and rape. The idea behind this legislation was that the enforcement of U.S. law would have a civilizing influence on Native American people (Adams 1995:18).

The third prong of the attempt to assimilate Native Americans, and perhaps the most influential to the creation of an intertribal identity, was the use of schools to socialize children with the “knowledge, values, mores, and habits of Christian civilization” (Adams 1995:18). There were several

arguments used to support the use of education to “civilize” Native peoples. The first was that children would be more receptive to the socializing factors of education than would adults. Children, it was presumed, would also be apostles of knowledge to their parents and thus affect the socialization of older generations. A second argument associated with the use of education was economic. Education, it was presumed, would teach self-sufficiency that would relieve the federal government of its financial responsibility to Native people (Adams 1995:18).

David Wallace Adams (1995) describes three types of schools related with this period in Native American history. The first was the day school. Adams argues that day schools were the least invasive. Children continued to live with their parents and went to school for an allotted number of hours a day. The schools were relatively inexpensive and children could act as daily “messengers of civilization” to their parents. However, due to their proximity to the reservation and the ability of children to leave school each day these were deemed ineffective (Adams 1995:28). Reservation boarding schools where expected to create greater cultural change due to the extended time that children would spend there. The greater institutional control did effect change but close proximity to home was still problematic (Adams 1995:30-36).

In an experiment with Native American prisoners, Richard Henry Pratt found what he believed to be the solution to the flaw in the educational approach. Pratt, instructed to oversee the incarceration of seventy-two Indian men who had been brought from Fort Sill to Fort Leavenworth, took stock of

the situation and began to implement military camp procedures and to educate his prisoners in Euro-American ideology. When his experiment seemed to work Pratt went on to employ this technique in schools. He became the superintendent of Carlisle Indian School, which opened on November 1, 1879. This off-reservation boarding school, and those that would follow, took a more invasive approach to education and was more forceful in its attempt to assimilate Native American children (Adams 1995:36-59).

Both boys and girls were enrolled in off-reservation boarding schools and attendance was compulsory (Adams 1995:48). Once enrolled, children were stripped of all outward signs of cultural identity. The schools mandated short hair for boys and western style school uniforms for both genders (Adams 1995:100). New names were given to the students that were easier for English speaking teachers to pronounce. Such renaming was also part of a larger attempt to provide surnames to Native Americans. As soon-to-be property owners socialized with the values of individualization such names would be necessary for keeping property records and tracing inheritance (Adams 1995:108). Modeled on the image of military training camps students learned to march and drill in military style. Stern discipline was a cornerstone of the institution. For nearly every infringement on the rules, including the use of Native languages, students faced corporal punishment and could be “imprisoned” in the guardhouse (Adams 1995:121, Trennert 1989:595-617).

Adams argues that in large part, these schools served as vocational training centers. While language, arithmetic, geography, and U.S. history

were included in the curriculum students spent countless hours learning skills they would need as laborers. Boys trained mostly in farm technique or in some cases, they trained in blacksmithing. Girls learned the domestic skills deemed necessary for Victorian women such as to cook, clean, and sew. A push for institutional self-sufficiency quickly put the newly acquired skills of girls to work. Adams states that, “in 1890 sixteen girls in Albuquerque’s sewing department manufactured 170 dresses, 93 chemises, 107 hickory shirts, 67 boys’ waist coats, 261 pairs of drawers, 194 pillowcases, 224 sheets, 238 aprons, 33 bedspreads, and 83 towels... and were ironing about 2,500 items each week” (1995:150). While the tasks of boys were different, the situation was not. Some questioned at what point such work lost its educational value and became mere drudgery but little changed (Adams 1995:150-153, Trennert 1989:604).

The boarding school experience had an effect that policy makers had not intended. As described by K. Tsianina Lomawaima (1994) these schools strengthened tribal identity and aided in the development of an inter-tribal identity. It brought together children from many different tribal affiliations. Lomawaima describes, through the use of narratives from Chilocco Boarding School alumni, how students would thwart school authority and bond together by secretly holding stomp dances or participating in traditional religious practices (1994:140). Their interaction within these institutions strengthened by their sense of a common history aided in the development of Indian

organizations such as the Society of American Indians (SAI) in 1911 and later the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) (Cornell 1988:114-119).

If assimilation had not been the sole focus of Indian policy up until the nineteen fifties, it certainly became so during the Cold War era. Indian policy began to reflect some of the postwar paranoia associated with the Cold War. Termination, a reaction, to what policy makers deemed a high degree of reliance on the government by Native Americans, was a policy that would remove federal recognition of tribal groups on a tribe-by-tribe basis as the government deemed them ready, or assimilated enough, to become “simply Americans”. Policy makers felt this would emancipate them from their dependence and would immerse Native Americans in the individualist ideology of the U.S. (Cornell 1988:122-125). For many Native Americans this policy was an affront to their identity. The government’s ability to mandate that one day someone was Native and the next day they were not resulted in inter-tribal protest (Cornell 1988:124). Terminated tribes lost governmental services they had previously been entitled to and the government no longer protected their land. Through this legislation, the U.S. used assimilation policy to rid itself of responsibility to Native American groups.

The Indian Vocational Training Act of 1956, associated with termination, also had assimilationist goals. The intention of the this program was to urbanize American Indians further enmeshing them in U.S. capitalism and individualism, by placing them in cities with economic opportunities. By

the nineteen seventies over one hundred sixty thousand Indians had participated in this program (Cornell 1988:130). Patricia Albers (1983) argues that the program was gender biased. It was male-oriented and provided almost exclusively male employment. She states that instead of incorporating women into this system, and allowing them to become economically self-sufficient, the federal government encouraged women to remain dependent on the state through welfare (Albers 1983:202)

### **Native American Women – The Literature**

Since my research considers the specific roles of women in powwow and how their participation in the event affects the negation of identity it is important to also consider the historical circumstances affecting Native American women. Reviews of the existing literature suggest that while considerable work has been done regarding Native American women the study is far from complete (Albers 1989, Green1980, Klein and Ackerman 1995:3-16). Rayna Green (1980) suggests, “Native American women have been neither neglected nor forgotten” but the existing literature lacks sufficient depth (249). Further, she finds that the topics have been selective and in this way stereotypical and damaging to contemporary Native American women (Green 1980:249). Two problematic stereotypes have been the conceptualization of Native American women as “squaws” or “princesses” (Albers 1989:132). The “princess” is a result of the mythologized status of

women such as Pocahontas and Sacagawea who in Western myth reject their own culture in support of a Western one (Portman and Herring 2001:190).

The image of the “squaw” is recognized in reviews of early ethnographic texts in which depictions as portray women as beasts of burden, degraded and subservient to their “warrior husbands” (Adams 1995:173, Weist 1983:29-51).

The princess/squaw dichotomy is not the only trend evident in the literature. Green notes a series of trends beginning in the nineteen twenties. Stories of notable women such as Pocahontas and Sacagawea make up the majority of the early literature and were followed by literature focused on women’s customs including those associated with menstruation, marriage, and ceremony. Writings on key female figures also continued through this period. By the nineteen forties, some of the research interest shifted to social issues. However, Green argues that it was not until the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies that the themes of these earlier generations were given more depth and time (1980). She notes that during this time Native American women more actively approached research by defining their own problems and proposing solutions. Autobiographies gained importance in the literature as a way for Native women to speak for themselves (Green 1980:248-267).

Patricia C. Albers (1989) finds that much of the literature presents Native American women as unchanging. She states, “American Indian women are frozen in the time frame of a mythical ethnographic present. Native women are pictured as unchanging – clinging to a traditional way of life that exists outside the vicissitudes of history” (Albers 1989:132). She



argues that with the exception of the Iroquois, due to a research interest in the potential of a matriarchal society, the literature has largely focused on women in terms of their art and technology. Such literature tended to describe women as extensions of material culture (Albers 1989:132). Albers agrees that the literature has grown since the nineteen sixties yet, she finds that it is still lacking depth. She notes that recent work often falls into one of two categories: autobiography or descriptive ethnography lacking in theoretical and interpretive focus (Albers 1989:133).

Albers finds two bodies of recent feminist inquiry useful. The first includes revisionist literature that illuminates the western biases evident in earlier research done by non-Native researchers. This work also illustrates the contradictory accounts within the literature that present Native American women as both autonomous and powerful while at the same time subordinate and dependent. Albers argues that these contradictions result from an androcentric bias in research as well as the considerable variation and change evident in a synchronic and diachronic study of Native American women (Albers 1989:133).

The second body of feminist literature is influenced by cultural constructivism and historical materialism. This approach is problem-oriented. It combines the cultural constructivist's desire to understand women in terms of how their cultures define, conceptualize, and privilege gender categories with the historical materialist's concern with diachronic and synchronic variation and change. This theoretical approach, Albers argues, is seminal to

current ethnographic work concerned with American Indian women (1989:133).

### **Historical Changes in the Status of Native American Women**

Prior to European contact Native groups were organized into “kin-ordered modes of production” (Wolf 1982:88-100). Tremendous variation in the specifics of organization existed between Native groups including band level foragers, lineage based horticulturalists, and “quasi-chiefdoms” (Albers 1989:139). Each of these organizational levels manufactures conditions that influence the roles and status of women (Sacks 1975). Frederick Engels suggests in his discussion of gender and the social evolutionary process from egalitarian hunters and gathers to capitalist society that as this evolution progresses women are transformed from productive equals into wards who are dependent on men (Sacks 1975:213). Engels suggests that with the rise in private property men gain status and that, in most cases, as the society progresses toward capitalism the control of production and distribution of goods shifts to men. Men’s association, then, becomes primarily attached to production for the group and the distribution of surplus goods. Meanwhile women become primarily associated with reproduction and reproductive duties. While women’s work is necessary, it is separate from the economic production of the group and as such is awarded less value (Sacks 1975:217).

*Women and Power in Native North America*, edited by Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman (1995), examines eleven indigenous culture groups in North America. This volume considers that Native women may have had more power and status than previously claimed. It directly confronts the stereotyped ethnographic image of Indian women as inferior beasts of burden. Klein and Ackerman's volume shows, Native American men and women's work tended to be highly complimentary. Tracing the major geographical regions of North America: the Arctic, the Subarctic, the Northwest Coast, the Plains, the Northeast, the Southwest and the Southeast one can better understand the flexible and complimentary gender relations characteristic of the pre-contact period.

The reservation era reified stereotypes of Native American women through legislation. Native American groups placed at the margins of U.S. economy were denied competitive access to the capitalist market system (Albers 1983:182). Native American women, specifically, were excluded from this system. As part of the process to acculturate Native Americans into the individualistic capitalist mentality, federal policy encouraged the disintegration of kin-based economy in favor of a nuclear family model. One way of accomplishing this was through the U.S. practice of distributing resources to those deemed heads of households. Those persons were often male (Albers 1983:184).

## **Native American Women: Contemporary Issues**

Beatrice Medicine argues that the imposition of the European patriarchal nuclear model of kinship combined with the patriarchal values of Christianity has reduced the autonomy of native women (1993:121-130). Further, she states that the long lasting, demoralizing effects of the reservation system have left Native people in a state of apathy and despair, which has reinforced the subjugation of Native American women. This apathy and despair is characterized as part of the “culture of poverty” indicative of reservation life (Medicine 1993:124). Aspects of the “culture of poverty” include frustration and depression in Native American men who are unable to provide for their families due to a lack of available employment. These frustrations may manifest in substance abuse that may be connected with increased rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Wahab and Olson 2004:355).

Men have for the most part, circumvented women’s roles in tribal government. The Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934 set up tribal councils based on the western model that men are governmental leaders. Currently matrilineal and matrilocal groups such as the Navajo have councils consisting mainly of men (Medicine 1993:128). It appears that where Native American women previously had a degree of equality with men drastic changes in culture and gender roles, combined with poverty has diminished women’s status. The major contemporary issues facing Native American women

include, poverty, violence, and loss of autonomy (Bhungalia 2001, Bohn 2003:334, Brzuzy et.al. 2000:193, Wahab and Olson 2004:353).

Theda Perdue (2001) argues that Native American women are not, nor have they been, passive victims of patriarchal imposition. While Native American women were often the target of assimilationist tactics they have only selectively adopted western culture, and have actively maintained much of their own (Perdue 2001:6). The literature shows they remain primary actors in the maintenance and transmission of culture to younger generations (Cheshire 2001, Portman and Herring 2001, Teuton 2003).

In a discussion of the lasting affects of abuse Diane K. Bohn claims that violence against Native American women, prior to contact, was probably rare (2003:333). Today, Native American women suffer the highest rate of violence of any group in the U.S. (Bhungalia 2001:1, Bohn 2003:334, Wahab and Olson 2004:353). The violent acts committed against them come from a variety of sources. Native American women suffer both sexual and racial violence from the dominant U.S. population. They also suffer sexual and domestic abuse from their partners. In many cases, they have few options for support. Years of oppression by the U.S. government have lead to mistrust of white agencies causing many women to refrain from reporting instances of violence (Wahab and Olson 2004:356). In other instances, confusion over jurisdiction has led to ineffective prosecution of violent acts (Medicine 1993:125).

Surveys indicate that the average violent crime rate against Native American women is 124 per 1,000 persons. This is approximately one violent crime for every twenty residents. This is twice the rate experienced by Whites or African Americans (Wahab and Olson 2004:354). Stephanie Wahab and Lenora Olson (2004) present a particularly grim case in their discussion of recent prevalence of IPV in Native American societies. A factor contributing to the risk of IPV within communities is institutionalized oppression such as racism, classism, and sexism. Institutionalized oppression, an effect of colonialism, increases the risk of substance abuse and depression that, in turn, increases the risk of IPV (Wahab and Olson 2004:355).

For example in 1979, all instances of domestic abuse reported on the Pine Ridge reservation occurred under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Wahab and Olson 2004:355). These factors also contribute to violence against children. A study done by Diane K. Bohn, DNSc, CRN, RN (2003) shows that revictimization, or lifetime abuse, is prevalent in Native American communities. Continuous abuse increases incidences of alcohol abuse, depression, and suicide attempts, which feeds back into the cycle of violent behavior.

Native American women also suffer abuse at the hands of non-Natives. Andrea Smith (2003) argues that there is a connection between colonialism and sexual violence perpetuated against women. Such violence serves to further subjugate a colonized people. She states that rape of minority women is not only gender violence but a form of racism (Smith

2003:70). Native American women's bodies are not considered "pure." Since their bodies are seen as "polluted," or dirty, they are inherently sexual and therefore cannot be violated – i.e. it does not count as rape (Smith 2003:73). Such belief has allowed non-Natives to assume patriarchal control over Native women's bodies (Smith 2003:70-85).

Forced and coerced sterilization further perpetuated the violence and patriarchal control over women's bodies instigated by the dominant culture. Sally J. Torphy (2000) found that during the nineteen seventies such abuse of women's rights was common for many minority women. Native American women, Torphy argues, were particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on the federal government through agencies such as the Indian Health Services (IHS), the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) (Torphy 2000).

Sterilization is not the only procedure that threatened American Indian women's ability to have children and in turn their role as mother. In many cases, social workers removed Indian children from their homes under false pretenses (Torphy 2000:5-6,17). Prior to the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 many of these children were placed in foster homes or adopted outside of the Native American community (Torphy 2000:17). Removed from Indian communities these children would grow up without any instruction in their cultural knowledge. Therefore, they would be unequipped to preserve the cultural identity. Some would argue that these children were as lost to their

communities as those children that were never born due to sterilization (Trophy 2000:17).

Tamara C. Cheshire (2001) argues that an American Indian women's role as mother is vital in contemporary society. As the primary care taker and provider for her children, she most influences and socializes them in cultural knowledge. Cheshire views the urban American Indian mother as the primary transmitter of cultural knowledge to her child. Through her guidance, children learn values, customs, perceptions, roles and rules of interaction that uphold cultural norms. Cheshire also notes, however, that Native American mothers know their culture from an oppressed perspective affected by colonialism, poverty, and violence that is pervasive in their lives (2001:1523). This perspective influences their own sense of self and their ability to teach their children. Yet, Native American women have proven themselves to be remarkably resilient, adapting to change while maintaining a sense of tradition (Teuton 2003:126). In so doing they ensure cultural survival through future generations by empowering them with the cultural knowledge and tools they need to maintain their ethnic identity (Cheshire 2001:1535).

Cheshire's assertion that Native American mother's act as the primary cultural transmitters is important when considering women's roles in powwow. As active participants in powwow women negotiate identity and cultural change and though their participation influence how their children understand culture as well as their children's relationship with their culture. In so doing women are directly influencing future generations who will,



through their own participation, or non-participation in such events, continue the dialogue and negotiation of this identity. As I will discuss the powwow participants that I spoke with often expressed the importance of sharing powwow with children and the importance of children's participation in powwow for future cultural survival.

## Chapter 4: Contest & Traditional Powwows

*The sun descends upon the trees. The heat is hypnotic... It is as if I am asleep. Then the drums break, the voices of the singers gather to the beat, the rattles shake all around – mine among them. I stand and move again, slowly toward the center of the universe in time, in time, more and more closely in time.*

There have been times when I have wondered what the dance is and what it means – and what I am inside of it. And there have been times when I have known. Always, there comes a moment when the dance takes hold of me, becomes itself and most meaningful and appropriate expression of my being. And always, afterward, there is rejoicing among us. We have made our prayer and we have made good our humanity in the process. (Momaday 1975:44, italics his).

The powwow was slated to begin at ten o'clock on Sunday morning.

When I arrived at quarter-till, a small crowd had gathered and the vendors were already open for the day selling their arts. I wandered through the booths and stopped for a cup of coffee as I made my way to the designated dance area, stopping to greet friends as I moved through the crowd. Held in the middle of May, this powwow was outdoors rather than in a gymnasium, as many of them in the Denver area are throughout the winter and early spring. Enjoying the sunny morning I sat down on a bale of hay and waited for the morning's festivities to begin.

The first round of Gourd Dancing began just before eleven o'clock.

The dancers, six men and two young boys (who remained very close to their

fathers) stood at the perimeter of the dance area dancing with the beat of the drum. Their rattles, several made from gourds and others made of tin, kept the beat as well.

After several rounds of gourd dancing, as well as announcements and joking from the emcee the Grand Entry, a procession of the dancer into the arena, began at noon. This procession is led by the color guard with dancers following in their respective categories and age groups. Typically, this is ordered from oldest to youngest beginning with the golden age men's categories and continuing through to the tiny tots. I listened, as the emcee described how this procession is not unlike that found in the rodeo circuit.

Glancing around, I noted that this powwow was not as large as popular contests events such as the Denver March or the Gathering of Nations. The crowd consisted mainly of powwow participants, families, and friends. Being a small powwow (or what some refer to as a "traditional" i.e. not a contest powwow) there were fewer category dances in favor of the more inclusive inter-tribals. Inter-tribals allow all dancers, no matter age or category, to enter the arena and dance together. Intertribals are not judged and these dances do not require the use of specialized regalia. Street cloths are ok although women are still encouraged to wear a shawl over their shoulders.

The inter-tribal set went on for a while. Men and women danced together inside the circle and friends chatted as they followed the clockwise pattern. A few, older male dances, maintained the perimeter of the circle in a counterclockwise movement. At the end of each song, a new drum group

picked up and the dancing began again. Each of the drum groups present consisted of all male members but female singers often stood around the men and joined in as support.

At around three o'clock the dancing transitioned into categories beginning with the youngest participants the tiny tots – who are often just old enough to walk. The emcee guided the participants through the categories ending with the teen boys. At the completion he asked for a round of applause for the, “all of our Native American young people” and encouraged them to remain active members of their culture. He shared with the audience how important it is to have young people involved in powwow, because, without them the tradition would stop.

The afternoon continued with the adult dance categories and several more intertribal dances concluding with the dancers dancing out the flag. This is sort of a reverse grand entry, although fewer dancers tend to participate. A closing prayer was given using both English and Kiowa language and we were asked to go home safely in a “good way.” There is something both reassuring and sad to the conclusion of the day. The crowd began to disperse as friends wished each other well and planned to see each other at the next event. I gathered up my things and said goodbye to a few friends before heading home myself (Field Notes 5/15/05).

The historical background discussed in the prior chapter provides a context for understanding the social and cultural issues affecting Native American people today. It is through this context that one may gain better

insight into how and why an Indian (or intertribal) identity has developed as well as how and why contemporary Native American people react and pursue cultural distinctiveness and self-determination in the ways that they do.

In this chapter I will utilize theories of identity and performance to discuss how Indian identity is expressed and negotiated through the context of large, urban, contest powwows. I base this discussion on the field work I conducted in Denver, and the surrounding area, beginning in 2005 and analyze this data using an action based approach that considers the inherent agency and motivation of actors within the community and the relation of this activity to the larger social system in which they exist.

## The Contest Powwow

Walking into a large contest powwow arena can be an overwhelming experience. The sheer volume of people inside The Stadium inspires awe each time I attend The Stadium Powwow. Walking into the building on a Saturday afternoon just before the evening grand entry one is met with the smells of the typical stadium foods such as burgers and fries but also by the aroma of fresh frybread, a welcome treat. The vendors set up along the outer hall that surrounds the entire arena and the crowds are thick.

The Saturday afternoon crowd at The Stadium Powwow is a mix, and here, in the vendor area that was most evident. Powwow dancers mill through the crowd, dressed to dance, families talk and people haggle over prices of

wares. Tourists walk wide eyed through the throngs and exclaim over new sights, and collectors focus on the vendor stations and items for purchase.

Stepping inside the arena the seats appear to be full as observers prepare to watch the grand entry. This crowd has evidence of diversity and non Indian audience members but overwhelmingly, much like the smaller local powwows, the crowd inside the arena appears largely to be families of dancers and other Native American observers (3/25/2006).

The literature suggests that performance can reinforce and aid in the creation of identity both within communities and express these ideas to the public. The contemporary powwow does attract tourists, hobbyists, and collectors, but in large part it attracts members of the Native American community. These large powwows encourage Native American people to travel hundreds of miles to share these events together.

One participant described how large contest powwows are exciting events where not only does she get to dance, and potentially win, but she gets to be a part of a large and enthusiastic community. For her, being engulfed in the feeling of the event itself with all of the “hustle and bustle” of the crowd was exciting and self affirming. Even when she attended a large contest powwow while she was unable to dance, due to illness, she described a sense of comfort just being there (7/5/2005).

The large contest powwows take on both the aspects of festival and spectacle as described earlier. In both performance genres cultural information is displayed through performance and then interpreted and

negotiated by both performers and audience members. The majority of powwow performers that I talked with suggested that a large part of attending powwow is being part of that community much like participating in local festivals may enhance cohesion.

Participants' answers as well as their actions suggested that participation at powwow, whether as a performer or a member of the audience, made them feel good and allowed them to be a part of a larger group. Participants also suggested that there is a need to be active within the community. For several participants taking part in powwow, and encouraging younger generations to take part, is of great importance and this theme was further evidenced in the commentary of powwow emcees. Since my research was done in a densely populated urban area the people that I spoke with were primarily educated, professionals, living in an urban setting. Most of them actively participated in a variety of pan-Indian activities, and were otherwise active in the local Indian community. While they all recognized and talked about ties to tribal lands and communities these powwow participants spent the majority of their time living in an urban setting. One participant suggested that in the busy day-to-day of city dwelling intertribal activities such as powwow are a point of connection.

They are also a place of release, enjoyment, and sportsmanship. Powwow participants, specifically dancers, are as one participant described them, athletes (10/17/05). Dancers work on and refine their styles as they travel the powwow circuit and for some dancers the competition is very

important. Carla, an athlete both inside and outside the powwow area explained:

Some people travel around all summer and, you know, that's how they basically live in the summer. Yeah, and those are the really serious people and they have a reputation that they win all the time. And they go to the big powwows and win over \$1000, \$1500, you know for people who live on a reservation and don't have a lot of expenses it's a good way to earn a living. And those people take it very seriously (10/17/05).

While winning may provide a monetary reward or prestige Carla indicated that it is not the only reason to attend large contest powwows. These large powwows usually last two to three days and that too influences attendance as traveling seems more rewarded if one is able to spend more time at the event.

Ultimately, as Carla put it when describing large contest powwows:

I always have fun, because there's still just a huge social element of it. I mean even if you're dancing your only contesting for two songs or something the whole social part is still a lot of fun (10/17/05).

In this regard the large contest powwow is community reaffirming.

Members of the Native American community travel from around the country to attend these large events and gather to celebrate their same-ness.

With thousands of people in attendance it is unlikely that all of the participants know one another but they share history and common goals which unite them. In this way reinforcing and sustaining an inter-tribal or Indian identity which is layered upon their individual tribal identifications.



These large powwows attract participants from various regions and tribal affiliations, and in this regard, they are a space in which various ideas regarding identity, culture, and politics are negotiated. They unite various conceptions of Indian identity and what the prominent issues facing Indian country are in one arena where these can be shared and debated. These differences are evidenced in a variety of manners.

Regalia, particularly in the men's and women's traditional dance categories often exhibit regional affiliations as do hair and dance styles. Drum groups are divided into northern and southern styles and their auditory differences are distinct with northern drum groups having a higher pitch. Such differences are expected since powwow is an event that incorporates participants from a variety of tribal and regional backgrounds.

These differences in style indicate that unlike Howard's (1955) description of pan-Indianism as an extension of Plains culture to other Native American groups contemporary intertribal events are attracting and exhibiting other tribal and regional symbols and styles and incorporating them into the pan-Indian identity. While much of the powwow tradition may have spread from a Plains heritage participants are exhibiting a desire to express their tribal backgrounds which may not be part of the Plains culture. Yet, these participants want to be a part of this inter-tribal activity and are not rejecting the activity as at odds with their individual backgrounds. Rather, these two identities appear to work together rather than at odds with one another.

This is an expression of the dynamic nature of cultural as well as of the negotiation of what Indian identity is. Participants are accepting a pan-Indian identity, which may be rife with Plains cultural attributes, but are, at the same time incorporating their backgrounds and performing this complex layering of identities at a large inter-tribal event such as the contest powwow.

### Traditional Powwows: Community or Non-contest Powwows

Large contest powwows attract participants from across the country, for a variety of reasons, and provide a space where ideas from this diverse population may be shared. Smaller local or community powwows (sometimes called traditional powwows) offer a smaller scale community based event. These powwows tend to attract a more regionally based crowd as they are usually held for just one day or evening and therefore may not provide an incentive for long distance travel. They often have a feel of a neighborhood get together a feeling of familiarity.

Walking into a community powwow in a high school gymnasium brings to mind a family reunion. The people there are friends and family, they spend much of their evening chatting and catching up while enjoying the atmosphere of the powwow. The crowd is filled with familiar faces. The emcee narrates the evening, provides updates on future local events, and shares anecdotes, dancers take their turns in the arena, moving to the rhythms provided by the drums groups, and people mill around the venue talking,

eating and generally enjoying the time together. In this regard the local powwow is much like its large contest counterpart but is greatly scaled down.

These smaller powwows are not tied by the time constraints as many of the large powwows which must stick to a time schedule in order to include all the contest songs and categories. A rented venue, for either a large or small powwow enforces time constraints, and, of course is not a concern at powwows held on tribal or reservation land. As one participant described it smaller or traditional powwows tend to have more intertribals, dances where everyone is invited to participate, and more socializing. She indicated this can be quite positive as a participant who attend for the social aspect but may not be the preference for participants who attends specifically to participate in their dance categories (10/17/05).

However, for some participants the smaller venues offer exactly what they are seeking. As one emcee commented about a large contest powwow he had attend the week prior, "it was a crowded contest powwow, you don't really get to dance except to contest." I spoke to him during a break and he explained that the flexibility and inclusivity provided by the smaller venues allows for many more intertribal dances and for him is the more enjoyable experience (5/15/05).

Intertribal songs are often held in between contest songs at smaller community powwows, these can also be seen at larger contest powwows but due to time constraints they are often fewer in number at large powwow events. During intertribals everyone is invited into the circle to dance and

participate in the event. Some dancers use this time to dance in their preferred style while others take this time to step in rhythm around the circle with their friends or family and to socialize. There is no judging during intertribal dances.

Powwow participants who attend local or community powwows often indicate that they do so for the community aspect of it or to support the community. These local powwows may be in honor of a specific person, for example in honor of a soldier or veteran, for a holiday, or as an annual event organized by a local community group.

The University powwow held in southern Wyoming celebrated its 27<sup>th</sup> annual powwow in 2005. This community powwow is organized by the Native American club on campus which formed in 1971 with the goal of preserving and promoting cultural diversity of the campus. The organization has created a mission statement for their powwow which reads:

The mission of the Pow-Wows is to promote cultural diversity, while providing a distinct atmosphere to increase awareness and understanding of the Native American heritage and ethnic identity. This Pow-Wow has a long standing tradition, while, it provides as exciting educational event for people of all ages and cultural backgrounds (Keepers of the Fire 2005).

This powwow was small in scale, perhaps the smallest I attended but it held that community feeling of walking into a room full of friends, most of which I had never met. It also, to a certain degree unlike most of the other community powwows I attended, appeared to have substantial non-native or new to powwow observers in the audience.

This appears to fall in line with the mission of the organization in promoting diversity and Native American culture on the campus. Their effort to create and maintain a visible presence on the campus, and within the community, included the inclusion of the general public. As observers to this performance non-native audience members are exposed to Native American culture and ethnicity as it is performed by the many participants including the emcee, dancers, drum groups, food and wares vendors, and other native audience members. They observe the performance and negotiating of identity that is going on among the participants and take from that their interpretations of the culture.

For the organizers of this event, and perhaps for the performers, the goal is to spread awareness and diversity through performance as described in their mission statement. This is aided through their event program which provides a list of definitions and descriptions for a variety of the things one can expect to see at a powwow as well as a guide to the etiquette expected at powwow (Keepers of the Fire 2005). Such information, seemingly aimed at the new-comer can often be found at online powwow sights and etiquette information can be found both online and in programs for powwows that tend to attract new comers or tourists.

In this way that powwows are a space for the negotiation of what it means to be Native American within contemporary society as both Native and non-Native participate, to some degree, in the performance event. Audience members are not passive recipients of information but also active participants

in the performance as they interpret and understand the event within their own understanding. However, much as the mission statement of the powwow expresses simply having a presence within the community encourages the conversation to continue and spreads awareness among those who hear about the event and certainly among those who choose to attend the event.

Not all small scale powwows have the goal of creating an understanding of cultural diversity as their goal. For many small powwows it is the community aspect, discussed earlier that appears to be the driving force. A Valentines Day powwow I attended in February 2006 was small in scale and held at a local Indian organization's facility. It was promoted by both the sponsoring organization and other Indian organizations in town and those that attended were primarily all community members.

The Valentines Day powwow had not been on my list of powwows to attend during the course of my field work. I happened upon the event through my consulting work with a local Indian organization and since many of the people I worked with were attending I opted to go along. This powwow was perhaps the most community based and community focused of the powwows I attended. Unlike many of the small powwows in the area this one was not co-sponsored by a university, museum, or foundation. There were no large prizes for contest dancing although many items were given away both to dancers and audience members.

Children and families left the event with laundry baskets full of goodies or at the very least a couple of stuffed animals. Dancers participated

in their specific categories and many others joined in for the intertribals. The emcee talked about local events and what was going on with community members. The atmosphere was relaxed and fun as people took time away from busy or hectic lives, away from troubles they may be dealing with just to “be.” Carla had described a similar feeling from just being in the audience at The Stadium powwow at this small community powwow I gained a better understanding of her meaning.

## **Chapter 5: Performance Roles: Enactment of Identity**

### **The Audience**

At powwows, both large and small, culture is enacted through performance. A narrative of what it means to be Indian in contemporary society as well as one that reflects upon history and cultural change is constructed and presented to the audience. This narrative is multilayered and interpreted at different levels dependent upon the audience member's cultural competence as I will discuss below.

During the course of my research I attended the Stadium Powwow twice. It is held annually and attracts a large crowd from around the country. During my first attendance at the powwow the emcee announced, after the Friday evening grand entry, that over one thousand dancers participated in the grand entry that night. The striking visual presentation of over a thousand dancers, in elaborate regalia, filling the Stadium floor fits the description of the performance category spectacle as described previously. The large scope this event brings together a large audience that includes both members with and without communicative competency, as defined by Hymes (1974:75). For audience members lacking communicative competency the event may very much embody the characteristics of spectacle. For audiences members



lacking communicative competency the nuances and details of the powwow event may be missed or misunderstood. These bystanders, as described by Toelken (1996), are most likely interested in the aspects of the event that best match their preconceived notions of the event or of Indian identity.

However, Native American participants and organizers recognize that these events, especially these large scale contest powwows, attract non-Indian audience members for a variety of reasons. Non-Indian audience members may attend the event out of curiosity or shop with the various vendors. They may be hobbyists or collectors or they may simply have an interest in Native American culture. For whatever reason non-Indian audience members are attracted to the event they often do so with different interpretive ability than do active, Indian, powwow participants.

For these first time or tourist attendees powwow committees, participants, and often the emcee seek to share information and guide non-Indian audience members in acceptable powwow etiquette and cultural knowledge. Websites for specific powwow events and those that list a series of upcoming powwows usually also contain a link to powwow etiquette – a list of “does and don’ts” for the first time attendee. Powwow programs often have a page dedicated to similar information. Often these programs also contain a guide that describes the various dance categories and events one sees during a powwow.

Emcees assist in this distribution of knowledge. They often speak of the heritage and history of dance styles or regalia. Some speak of historical

events that have affected Native American people. Often the emcee will specifically address the non-native audience and provide either a description of what is going on or a commentary on why something is occurring or the meaning of the event.

Both the written material aimed at non-native participants and the verbal messages provided by event emcees are aimed at informing the general public about contemporary Native Americans. Sometimes this commentary is very political. At other times the commentary is a description of Native American culture from the Native American perspective. It is targeted, though, at projecting cultural information to the non-native public in attendance and specifically at defining Indian as different from the general public.

In this way powwow is similar to the Wa-Swa-Gon Indian Bowl a cultural fair held by the Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. As discussed by Nesper (2003) cultural difference is enacted to resist assimilation and maintain cultural distinctiveness. In his discussion Nesper notes that the fair is aimed specifically at outsiders, non-Indians, and suggests that by enacting cultural difference this group was able to resist assimilation and maintain cultural distinctiveness. Similarly, one can find social negotiation between Native American participants and non-Native audiences at powwow.

However, as I've discussed, these events tend to attract a much larger Native audience than non-Native one. These audience members have

communicative competence and are not just observers and interpreters of the event but also actors. The reflexive nature of communication between performer and observer is blurred further by the fact that throughout the day, or weekend, audience members become performers and vice versa as participants take part in specific dance categories or as members of drum groups.

As described by Toelken (1996) this cultural, intended audience either approves or disapproves of the tradition itself thus influencing changes in the performance over time. It is through this negotiation between performer and audience that challenges to the norm can be made and then either accepted or rejected. Since members of the powwow audience may also act as performers, changing roles from audience member, to dancer, to drummer during the course of an event, they may affect change on either side of the conversation. In powwow this can be seen at a variety of levels. As with any performance powwow is ephemeral, the events and actions take place in the moment and then are gone. Performers, including singers, dancers, and emcees, can, and often do, use this as an opportunity to try new things that may simply be different or that may challenge accepted norms.

For example, some of the powwow participants that I interviewed talked specifically about traditional styles of regalia and their relationship to earlier styles or a dancer's specific tribal background. At powwow events several emcees also commented on the history of the regalia worn by participants and how the styles relate to specific tribal heritages. Largely, for

the men's and women's traditional dance categories regalia visibly appear to follow this sort of ideal although the image may be heavily influenced by Plains culture attributes. With the introduction of newer dance styles such as the men's and women's fancy categories (which are more athletic in nature and tend to attract younger participants) regalia too has changed.

In both the men's and women's fancy dance categories brighter colors and a variety of modern fabrics including gabardine and polyester are used. Outfits are embellished with brightly colored ribbon or yarn and while many utilize these materials to embellish the regalia with traditional patterns others opt for more individualized symbols that express their own likes or interests such as sports teams or popular characters. Largely, this change in regalia styles has been accepted and embraced by powwow participants. Participants describe these changes in regalia and dance style as evidence of the dynamic and changing culture of Native Americans. One interviewee stated that these changes show how Native Americans live with and honor tradition but also accept and embrace new ideas (5/15/2005).

Other cultural negotiations evident at powwow are met with more resistance. The powwow has several defined roles which have largely been gender specific. Both the literature on powwow and powwow participants themselves indicate that historically powwow emcees have been male, drum groups have been male but with female back up, and women previously danced at the edge of the circle rather than inside the circle.

Women's role as dancers within the circle has changed and women now have a series of dance categories similar to the men's. For women the typical dance categories are women's traditional buckskin or cloth, women's fancy, and jingle dance. For men the typical dance categories are men's traditional and southern straight, men's fancy, and grass dance. In women's traditional dance categories it is still common to find women who dance in place at the circles edge but largely women have moved into the circle and participate in athletic dance styles similar to the men's categories.

Based on interviews I conducted with powwow participants I discovered that women have also become successful emcees and drummers but this is not the common practice. One male participant suggested that it is just not tradition for women to participate in this role. A female participant, who stated that she had acted as emcee for a powwow, stated that the only difference she saw between male and female emcees was the type of jokes they told. She also stated that it is, indeed, not common to find female emcees. Another female participant stated that she recognized the gendered roles in powwow and that she had seen people challenge these roles but that she did not see anything inherently unequal in the gendered roles (10/25/05). This seemed to be the consensus among most of the participants I spoke with. For many there is simply a difference in roles but that there is nothing specifically good or bad about that difference. As Carla put it:

...it's a reflection of American Indian Society in general anyway. Women are, I mean I think you'll find a lot of times in American Indian, contemporary culture especially, women are typically holding their own (10/25/05).

There is recognition of specified gender roles in powwow and recognition that these roles are being challenged and changed over time. As men and women take on different roles in the performance the cultural audience can accept or reject these changes as part of the ongoing dialogue.

During the course of my research I did not witness many challenges to the defined gender roles of powwow. The powwows I attended all had male emcees and largely had male drum groups, although I did observe a few groups where women sat at the drum. I also did not witness any dancers who danced outside of their gender category. However, during the interviews I conducted powwow participants suggested that all of these do occur. One participant stated that she saw more flexibility of gender roles at some of the northern powwows than at the southern powwows which she felt tend to be more tied to traditional roles.

## The Emcee

The emcee, or Master of Ceremonies, is the narrator to the powwow. Typically the emcee is male although as previously discussed female emcees are not unheard of. He guides the audience through the powwow event providing commentary and narration. He announces upcoming powwows and

community events, updates the audience on community news, and jokes, tells stories, and provides political commentary.

As discussed previously there are two types of audience members who attend powwow, those with communicative competence, other Native American powwow participants, and those without, usually non-Native or first time powwow participants. The emcee has a role in performing and projecting identity for both types of audience. For those with communicative competence the emcee's performance is interpreted through cultural keys, patterns of speech, and shared cultural understanding. As described by Hymes (1974) they are members of a "speech community" – a social construct made up of member of a community who use and understand language in a common manner.

For members of this speech community jokes or commentary made by the emcee may resonate with a shared understanding of history or events. In my first conversations with powwow participants it was often suggested that as an outsider I "wouldn't get" jokes and commentary made by the emcee because his role as Master of Ceremonies and the commentary he provided was unique and perhaps indecipherable to an outsider (4/27/05). The presumption was yes, one would understand the language, but may not be able to interpret the meaning much as Agar (1994) described a metaphorical circle around language in which symbols of language such as syntax and semantics exist and outside of which exists speech – or what people do with language.

The participants who suggested this to me were right. I spent one year, March of 2005 to March of 2006 conducting field work, going to powwows, and interviewing powwow participants. During that time I also began doing consultant work with a Native American non-profit organization in town. In the beginning, going to the powwows I felt like an outsider and I did not always understand jokes and commentary made by powwow emcees. I recorded field notes on emcee commentary that at the time made little sense to me. It was my additional time in the community working with a non-profit and with the community outside of the powwow event that helped me to develop more communicative competence. After that, looking back at some of my early field notes where I had written down a comment by an emcee that I either did not understand the meaning of or took as serious when it was, in fact, a joke reinforced the differing interpretive levels of audience members at powwow.

Audience members lacking communicative competence may attend the event and be interested in the aspects that match their stereotypical or preconceived expectations of the event. From that they will interpret the event based on their own understanding and take from it a limited understanding of the event and of Native American culture. They are the bystander, as described by Toelken (1996). However, as touched upon earlier powwow participants recognize that a non-Native audience is attracted to the powwow event, particularly large powwows which may, become spectacle for them.



The emcee plays a large role in interpreting culture, or in some cases, teaching, non-Native audience members. During my field work I often heard emcees addressing the non-Native audience specifically to provide them with insight as to what was occurring. In some cases these interactions were guidance similar to the literature provided in event programs or online. Other times the communication also included an “inside joke” so to speak.

In one instance an emcee announced a cake walk was coming up. Cake walk is a social dance in which plates are placed in a circle and the dancers move around them clockwise. When the music stops the dancer stop and pick up the plate in front of them. The plates are numbered and a winning number is picked. The dance is not unlike musical chairs and often participants are youths. The emcee proceeded to direct the non-Native audience that this is a very traditional dance and during this dance there should be no photos or recordings. The comment was followed by the standard vocable “ayy” which, interpreted by those within the speech community, indicates that the comment was made in jest (5/21/10).

The emcee’s role in communicating with the non-Native audience is multifaceted. It includes, as seen above, some joking perhaps at the expense of those lacking communicative competence, as well as description or teaching when the emcee describes or explains history or tradition for the non-Native audience. In these circumstances the emcee provides information to both Native and non-Native audience regarding historical events or perceived traditions which are presented in a manner suiting the needs of the presenter.

They are based on the presenter's understanding of these events and encourage an understanding of Indian identity as interpreted by the presenter.

The commentary of powwow emcees is often pointed and targeted at promoting Indian identity and awareness of this culture. As one emcee explained to the audience:

We move with the times - living history. Sometimes we are put on the shelf almost like dinosaurs but that is not quite the truth. We have both traditional and fancy categories. I like that because it acknowledges where we came from but also shows us as ever changing – moving with the times (5/15/05).

In this comment the emcee verbally recognizes and addresses the concern that Indians are seen as a historic culture rather than a changing and dynamic one.

Emcees also address the concern of Native American's that their culture and identity needs to be strengthened and maintained. One emcee put it this way:

We Indians sometimes have hard ways. We have to remember our Indian ways if we forget these and become like mainstream society then we are no longer Indians (5/21/05).

One way that emcees promote cultural awareness and reinforce identity is in their discussion of the youth and tiny-tot dance categories. Maintaining a unique cultural identity, when faced with the assimilationist movements described earlier has become extremely important for contemporary Native American people. This is important not only to maintain heritage and tradition but due to the unique legal circumstances affecting Native American people it is important for maintaining legal definitions of identity. These legal definitions of who is and who is not Indian, as

recognized by state and federal laws, brings with it unique legal rights based on years of treaties and negotiations. No other ethnic group is legally defined and is subject to loss of identity or authenticity based on changes in legal status.

When powwow participants, including the emcee, promote and encourage young dancers to continue with these traditions they are encouraging them to maintain an awareness of their heritage and history and to maintain that uniqueness despite their existence within the mainstream American culture. One emcee exclaimed when the tiny-tot dancers came into the arena, “We don’t care how they dance, we are just glad that they do!” He later went on to say about the junior age dancers, “people say a lot of bad things about young people but we look around and we have so many young people doing good things at powwow. Powwow is good for young people (3/19/2005).” The emcee encourages younger generations to be a part of the conversation and to continue their participation within the community while also encouraging them to reject negative influences.

It is evident that the emcee enacts a prominent role as cultural narrator for the powwow audience. As part of the reflexive nature of performance his commentary and assertions may be rejected or accepted by the audience. His comments may also be interpreted based on the level of communicative competence the audience member has.

As mentioned previously emcees for powwow events are typically male. When a participant explained to me that she saw the only difference

between a female and male emcee as being the jokes they might tell she may have touched on a larger issue. Due to the emcee's prominent role as cultural narrator one might expect to find additional differences in the manner in which identity is described and encouraged or reinforced when a female takes on that role. Unfortunately, during the course of my field work I did not have the opportunity to observe any events emceed by a female and am unable to analyze if differences in their presentation exist. I would, however, suggest that the lack of a female voice in this prominent role may influence the information that is being conveyed.

## The Dancers

Dancers are arguably the most visible actors at powwow. Their elaborate regalia, which require time-consuming detail and work, are certainly prominent visible symbols. The bystander audience, as described previously, likely observes this at a level of spectacle and recognizes this "costuming" as a symbol of Indian-ness. The audience with communicative competence considers regalia at a variety of levels.

Powwow participants describe their regalia in terms of tradition and history. They talk about the symbols they use and how they relate to their specific heritage. However, because powwow is an inter-tribal event and incorporates a variety of ideas, powwow participants also talk about creating regalia based on what they like, new features they see others trying out at powwows or innovative ideas they wish to try. They also consider regalia in

terms of quality, and how well the work was done on the outfit, as well as how it holds up during the dance.

Regalia too is an area in which dancers negotiate change. Carla described a friend, a jingle dress dancer, who opted to wear a sleeveless jingle dress since she knew it would be hot and dancing would only exacerbate that fact. She described how her friend was criticized for showing too much skin inside the dance circle, an ideal that Carla maintains, stems from western influence (7/11/05). This attempt to change regalia style is indicative of a change that, at that time, was not welcomed by the audience and was not incorporated into common practice.

While regalia may be a highly visible component of the dancer's expression of identity the dances themselves also reinforce and negotiate identity as dancers try new styles or steps. In this way dancers incorporate their own aesthetics and style and also incorporate aspects of tribal affiliation.

## The Drum

The drum provides the backbone, the structural support, for the event. The songs created by the drum groups fill the venue with the sound of powwow keying audiences that dances are occurring and leading the dancers through their steps. Dancers must work hard to stay in time with the drum, to match the honor beats, and to stop precisely on time (5/11/05).

The bystander audience may miss the nuances of specific songs and while they may appreciate the songs they may miss the detailed role they play

in the event. Powwow participants describe the drums as sacred spaces and some maintain that this is why gendered roles at the drum must be maintained (10/21/05). As discussed previously some are more open to a fluidity of these roles than others and women are becoming more involved in drum groups.

This negotiation of tradition was described by Carla in this way:

Some tribes still do not let women sing with the drum or drum. They can sing on the peripheral as a support but they can't play at the drum. It's not traditional, which isn't necessarily I would say, I mean its just strictly defined gender roles, and I think that people are trying to break those, and sometimes that causes a little bit of you know kind of controversy, and I think that's where is kind of tricky. Yeah, actually I did drum a little bit. It's been a long time, it was like 10 years ago, and learning the songs and being you know a part of that. I mean drums are, are, I don't want to say completely sacred but at least somewhat spiritual. There was debate about how, by some people, how you should dress if you're a woman at a drum. So you should be wearing, you know, like a long skirt and your shoulders should be covered (10/25/05).

She described this experience as one she wanted to take part in due to her involvement in the community. She expressed a desire to understand this aspect as well and while she did not express feeling repressed by the tradition that women do not typically drum she did suggest that such strictly defined gender roles may, in part be due to western influence rather than stem from a strictly Native American tradition (10/25/05).

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **Summary of Findings**

As I have discussed the powwow is an intertribal event in which both Indians and, to some extent, non-Indians participate. These events draw together a diverse population of Native American people from a variety of tribal backgrounds and while differences may exist there are commonalities that encourage this inter-tribal event and the continued maintenance of an Indian identity, or inter-tribal identity, which coexist with tribal identification.

The historical circumstances affecting Native American people, particularly those aimed at assimilation, encouraged the formation of an Indian identity as a method for cultural survival. The boarding schools, specifically, brought together children from different tribal backgrounds, under stressful circumstances which strengthened their sense of commonality and aided in the development of inter-tribal organizations such as the Society for American Indians (SAI) and the National Congress of the American Indian (NCAI) (Cornell 1988:114-119). Such organizations utilized the common history and common goals of Native American people that extended past tribal boundaries and encourage inter-tribal identification.

Powwow, as an inter-tribal event, continues to reach participants at this level where people who may identify with distinctly different tribes unite due to common circumstances and common goals. Maintaining such an event, particularly one as popular as powwow, strengthens this relationship and this identity. Since powwow is a performance based event it is a prime place for the negotiation and maintenance of identity to occur. As discussed in the literature performance is a visible enactment of culture and one that allows for negotiation of culture as performative acts are interpreted and either accepted or rejected by the audience.

Aiding the audience in their understanding of the event are markers, or keys, as described by Bauman (1977:16). These keys can include the use of figurative language, special codes, parallelism, specific formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimers of performative ability. These markers create meaning within the community and the audience, based on an understanding of these markers, comes to the event with expectations.

As I have discussed the powwow audience is comprised of both members with and without communicative competency, as defined by Hymes (1974:75). For this reason each group understands and interprets of the markers or keys differently. A key that is often utilized in powwow is the appeal to tradition and this key strengthens Native American audience members' convictions, sense of self, and community. It strengthens this idea of a united or common past and aids in the negotiation and maintenance of an Indian identity.



Appealing to tradition also influences the non-native audience member's understanding of the event. Many non-native audience members come to the event with limited communicative competence and may exist as bystanders to the event. At this level the audience member is part of the discussion of what "Indian" is but is likely to be most interested in aspects of the event that match his or her preconceived ideas about Native American culture. The non-native audience member can take aspects of the event such as regalia, music and dance, and view them through his or her own understanding of Indian identity or the audience member may attend the event and have his or her interpretations of Indian culture challenged.

Further, the appeal to tradition utilized in powwow demonstrates uniqueness to the non-Native audience. In this way, maintaining a cultural boundary defines Indian people as different from other Americans. This is desirable, for many Native Americans, after having been the target of so many assimilationist programs. As I have indicated some powwows maintain a mission to promote cultural diversity and to educate non-Indian audience members. Through the powwow performance participants enact cultural distinctiveness in the presence of non-native audience members and negotiate what Indian-identity is through a dialogue with both natives and non-natives.

This identity is different from tribal identifications in that it incorporates members of a variety of tribal backgrounds and does not rely on specifically tribal traditions. Rather, it incorporates and builds on various

traditions and styles. It is also distinct from governmental definitions of “Indian-ness” in that it does not require the legitimacy of legalized status.

My research does not indicate that men and women construct Indian identity in different ways but does indicate that women actively participate in the negotiation of identity at powwow events. As I have shown women are active powwow participants performing in dance categories that mirror those of men. Further, contemporary Native American women seek to participate in powwow activities that were previously viewed as male roles. In taking this action women seek more opportunity to engage in cultural activities and negotiate cultural norms.

As suggested by Cheshire (2001) Native American women’s role as cultural instructors is evident at powwow as mothers bring their children to the event and encourage them to participate in their age appropriate categories. Mothers and grandmothers also carry children, too young to walk, during intertribal dances. My discussions with both female and male powwow participants indicated the importance they place on encouraging younger generations to participate in this event.

Powwow participants vocalized, in conversations and interviews, fears concerning cultural survival. These participants stressed how important they feel it is to maintain their ways and to encourage younger generations to do the same. My research indicates that this concern stretches well beyond the powwow and at some level is a driving force behind inter-tribal organizations and events. Further, it is a driving force in the creation and necessity of an

“Indian” identity, one that unites smaller tribal units creating a larger population, which can stand apart from the dominate Euro-American culture exhibiting distinctiveness and possibly a critique on assimilated culture.

Each day as Native American men and women transverse their daily lives they exist both within mainstream American society and outside of it. Discussions with powwow participants exemplify this fact and encourage one to question how and why people resist acculturation, or blending into the dominate society, and instead celebrate and promote a unique identity with ideals and values sometimes at odds with those of the dominate society.

Native American people do not exist in a historic vacuum relying solely on the ideals and traditions of their forbearers. As I have discussed and shown here many Native American people live in urban settings existing primarily within mainstream American society and they embrace many aspects of this society and of modernity. Yet, Native Americans have a unique standing within this society. Their identity is legalized and legally defined through federal and state laws of tribal recognition. This recognition provides specified rights to tribal members, based on ethnicity, something that is not done with any other ethnic group within the United States. Further, laws such as the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) provide specialized legal protocols when dealing Native American people.

It is understandable then, that to lose one’s status or recognition has substantial legal and political ramifications as well as ramifications for self

identification and authenticity. The powwow provides a space where people from a variety of tribal backgrounds come together to share what is common between them. In this space the concept of Indianness is negotiated and changes overtime as the powwow itself changes and people bring new ideas and needs to the arena.

The space also strengthens the Indian identity in that it is a celebration of this identity. The festivity and community aspects of powwow reinforce and strengthen individual desire to actively participate in the community and to raise their children within the community. Powwow is certainly not the only inter-tribal event Native Americans participate in but its scale and festive nature have a unique ability to draw people from around the region or even from around the country for some large powwows.

The people I interviewed suggested that they attend powwow for a variety of reasons – fun, athletics, competition, and community. They contended that living in a large city such as Denver this is a way to socialize with others who share this common heritage and cultural understanding and they described the event as reaffirming. I would contend that for many Native American people this event provides for participants exactly those things they described and is particularly important in its role in providing a space to reaffirm and negotiate identity and cultural norms.

## **Limitations to the Research**

I recognize that this study is limited in size, and is primarily a case study of regional powwows, I would suggest further research that considers other regional powwow scenes or provides a cross study of several powwow regions. This study has considered several urban powwows, primarily in the Denver-metro area. As with any event they are local and specific to the region. The powwows considered have involved a core group of powwow participants in the area who attend these local events as well as travel to several others around the country. This research does not consider powwows located on tribal lands or powwows in other regions throughout the country which would have their own distinct attributes.

Further, this study considers primarily powwows that were suggested to the research through a network of key informants within the community, and for this reason, one's that these contacts also attend. This, of course, could lead to a bias in what powwows were attended. To mitigate this, I reviewed lists of local powwows as found on several local community calendars as was satisfied that the powwows chosen are representative of the community. The powwows chosen appeared to be the most prominent and accessible to a wide audience in the area.

This research was also limited in time. Investigation was primarily conducted over a twelve month period during which I attended powwows as they occurred and set up interviews outside of powwows with powwow participants. Due to both time constraints on my part and of powwow

participants there were a limited number of formal interview sessions and many form informal interviews or discussions with powwow participants. These less formal interactions were recorded in field notes but were not tape recorded as some of the formal interviews were. These short discussions with participants were extremely useful and provided substantial information for this research, however, due to the informal nature some may have been limited in the depth of response provided.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study addresses the specific issues of identity reinforcement and negotiation found at the inter-tribal event powwow. It strives to find answers about how contemporary Native American people who participate in the powwow scene near Denver negotiate what it means to be Indian in contemporary American society and also why they choose to do so. A natural area for further study, to my mind, would be to expand the regional nature of this work to consider several regions and provide a cross study of these areas to see how and if identity is expressed and negotiated differently based on region.

I would also suggest continuing to explore these issues of identity through other inter-tribal events which also provide space for people of different tribal backgrounds to come together and were they share a common identity. It would be useful to understand how these events and organizations

overlap and if they provide similar modes of reinforcing and negotiating identity.

Finally, I would suggest moving from this study to one considering intertribal organizations and agencies that exist within cities as support networks for the diverse Native American communities that live in these urban centers. These organizations are intimately tied to the communities they serve and have a vested interest in maintaining community awareness and participation. During the course of my research I found that these organizations often sponsor powwows, and other inter-tribal events, or otherwise support these community events and promote them to their clients. Further research into the role of these community organizations would be useful to understanding the continually changing and evolving identities of urban Indians.

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