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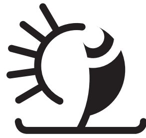
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Recognizing Our Past and Moving Toward Our Future: Decolonizing Attitudes About Skin Color and Native Americans

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The label *Native American* covers a broad range of peoples including more that 560 federally recognized tribes within the boundaries of the United States (US Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs, 2014). While Native Americans remain a small fraction of the population, their numbers are growing. According to the 2010 Census, there are 5.2 million Native Americans accounting for 1.7% of the US population (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012).

Native Americans are diverse peoples with many different languages, cultures, forms of governance, and spiritual traditions. In spite of this extensive diversity, there are societal assumptions that Native Americans are a monolithic group with significant commonalities. These assumptions include an expectation, often based on stereotypes, that Native Americans share certain commonalities related to appearance; in particular skin color, hair texture, and phenotypical features.

A quick internet search reveals questions posted on sites such as ask.com and yahoo answers inquiring about the skin color of Native Americans. As a Native American woman, many of these discussions strike me as bizarre, although they appear more naïve than malicious (i.e., what colors to use when painting a Native American sculpture to *get it right*). Other posts follow a variety of tangents from recommendations for make-up (because they presume to know my skin tone), to delving into discussions of sports mascots like the Washington Redskins (because this is the most prominent and controversial public discussion about Native American skin color), to how to find my Cherokee ancestors (because if I am doing this sort of internet search I might be looking for ways to prop up a claim to a Native American identity.)

These "answers" all leave a bad taste in my mouth and lead me to wonder about what would prompt these questions. Why do people care so much about what Native Americans look like? Why is so much power vested in skin color in United States society? It also leads me to reflect on the degree to which skin color might be invested with power in Native American contexts.

Skin color is a seldom discussed but potent issue throughout US society. It is tied in with ideas of who is an insider and who is an outsider; ideas about how we define us and them. It is tied in with self-concept and perceptions of legitimacy.

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In a previous chapter (Weaver, 2012), I reviewed issues of what Native Americans looked liked historically, who is a Native American, and the legacy of mixed heritage. Beyond this, I reviewed contemporary issues such as the politics related to light or dark skin color and connections between skin color and cultural identity. In this article, I move beyond that foundation to examine how issues of skin color, assimilation, and presumptions of legitimacy and competence are interwoven for Indigenous people. This article also includes a discussion of the relevance of internal and external value judgments about skin color and a review of current controversies around stereotypical images of Native Americans. Decolonization strategies are explored as tools to move beyond stereotypes and negative associations based on skin color.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND SKIN COLOR VARIATIONS

The territory now known as the United States has been colonized for more than five centuries, leading to interactions between Indigenous Peoples and those from other parts of the world. These interactions have included marriages and other sexual liaisons (voluntary and involuntary) leading to the birth of children of mixed heritage with various skin tones. Alliances between Indigenous Peoples and Africans brought to the United States often resulted in children who were Native American by tribal affiliation with darker skin or phenotypical features associated with their African or African American parent (Weaver, 2008). Likewise, some Native American women strategically had children with European or White American men who held power in order to have children who could hold sway with colonizing forces (Schmidt, 2012). Indeed, an elite, mixed-blood ruling class emerged among the Cherokee where many leaders had significant amounts of European heritage and light skin tones (Weaver, 2008).

The United States is not the only colonial settler society where lighter skin tones have become associated with power and privilege. Generally, European powers colonized areas where Indigenous populations had darker skin hues. The colonizers' lighter skin became associated with power and dominance. It became a desired quality. Conversely, Indigenous appearances (along with Indigenous cultures, languages, values, and spiritualities) were deemed inferior; something to be changed or depleted.

THE PUSH FOR ASSIMILATION

Colonization and assimilation have gone hand in hand. As colonists entered new lands, something had to be done with the current occupants. One "solution" was to rid the land of Indigenous Peoples through removal or population decimation. Indeed, encounters between settler societies and Indigenous Peoples often resulted in genocide (Barker, 2005). Another way to empty the land of Indigenous Peoples was to destroy their cultures, languages, and lifestyles to the point that they no

longer remained distinct from the settlers. The United States (as well as other settler societies) developed and implemented a variety of assimilation policies that some scholars equate with cultural genocide (Woolford, Benvenuto, & Hinton, 2014).

Emptying the land of Indigenous Peoples, either through physical or cultural genocide, clears the way for settler occupation and use of resources. Assimilation undermines the sovereignty inherent in Indigenous nations, thus undermining legally binding agreements such as treaties; that are, according to the Article 6 of the United States Constitution, the supreme law of the land.

In the US, assimilation was a prominent goal of many policies like the boarding schools. After the Civil War, it became federal policy to remove Native American children from their homes, families, and communities to teach them vocational skills and Christian values in often-distant residential settings. In these schools they were forbidden to speak their languages or follow their cultural and spiritual practices. Their hair was cut and they were forced to dress and act according to American values and standards. Richard Pratt, an American military officer, coined the slogan that would become associated with these schools, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (History Matters, 2015). Indeed, boarding schools were a major assimilation policy in both the US and Canada.

Many other US policies also had the goal of assimilation. For example, the allotment policy (also known as the Dawes Act) sought to divide reservation lands and distribute them to nuclear families as a way to both free up "excess" land for non-Native use and to undermine traditional values of collectivism and the communal nature of land stewardship. Native Americans who received allotments automatically became citizens of the United States (Venables, 2004). The ultimate assimilation policy came in the 1950s when Congress sought to end the legal existence of Native nations; a move that would eliminate all reservations and treaty obligations of the federal government (Kelly, 2010).

Some assimilation policies contained a genetic component, presumably represented by skin color. Implementation of the allotment policy at White Earth reservation provides a notorious example where tribal identity was regulated by the US government instead of Anishinaabe people themselves. For allotment to take place, the federal government had to determine who was an *Indian*, and therefore subject to this policy. The resulting process and outcome became known as the *White Earth tragedy* (Ellinghaus, 2008).

> Allotment required decisions to be made about tribal eligibility. Because the General Allotment Act failed to define what it meant by "Indian," these decisions were made in a variety of ways by different bodies charged with allotting the land of different

> nations. Several measures were used to decide whether a person- who might be of mixed white, black, or Indian descent, or even, in the case of intermarried whites or ex-slaves and their descendents, have no Indian ancestry at all; who might live on or off the reservation; who might or might not dress like an Indian was expected to dress; who might be rich or poor, educated or illiterate; and who might or might not speak the language or practice the culture of their nation- was an "Indian." (Ellinghaus, 2008, p. 82)

This federal process of evaluating *Indianness* reinforced appearance as a marker of legitimacy for Native Americans. Skin color became a proxy for identity. The situation became more complex as Native identity became connected with eligibility for benefits (Ellinghaus, 2008). This, in turn, set the stage for promotion of fraudulent identities.

The allotment process also led to an association between physical appearance and competence. There was a presumption that Native Americans with lighter skin (or of mixed White-Native American heritage) were more competent to handle their own affairs and did not need the protections of federal paternalism embedded in laws and social policies. Legal hearings were held to determine competency, with lighter skinned Natives deemed more competent (based on presumptions of assimilation). Ironically, after competency hearings, Native people with lighter skin were often targeted by swindlers.

The 1906/7 Clapp amendments to the allotment policy codified that being of mixed heritage (aka *mixed blood*) was a marker of competence, enabling an individual to be awarded a fee patent and control of lands under the Dawes Act (Ellinghaus, 2008). Skin color became a primary marker for identifying which Native Americans were of mixed heritage. While some mixed bloods facilitated the process of land loss, the majority of people who became landless were also mixed bloods.

> It was not that the US government explicitly excluded people of mixed descent from the tribe or from receiving their share of resources. But the assumption that these people were conduits of assimilation pervaded the legislative decisions of the period. That is why the lands allotted to people of mixed descent were more quickly unprotected and opened up to competition. (Ellinghaus, 2008, p. 98)

In the early 20th century, some anthropologists claimed they could determine who was of mixed blood based on physical characteristics. This evidence could be used in court cases. Anthropologists traveled to Minnesota reservations where they examined Native Americans' skin, hair, eyes, teeth, head, and facial shape. These findings were used to support claims of mixed ancestry that were necessary to be deemed competent to sell land. Under these circumstances, being of mixed blood was defined as having any

white ancestry at all; one drop of "White blood" was enough to establish competence. A Congressional investigation into these hearings documented "the exploitation of the Anishinaabeg in Darwinian terms, as the natural consequences of the contact between inferior and superior civilizations" (Ellinghaus, 2008, p. 97).

SKIN COLOR, EUGENICS, AND THE DESTRUCTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: AN AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLE

The colonial settler society in Australia provides a particularly clear and disturbing example of the relationship between assimilation and skin color. Initially, Aboriginal people were seen as primitive and inferior; populations that would die out when confronted with a so-called *superior* civilization. The belief (hope) that Aboriginal Peoples would disappear naturally was challenged as increasing numbers of *half caste* children were born from often forced relationships between white settler men and Aboriginal women. This led to fears of the Aboriginal population increasing. These fears were soon quieted as so called *half castes*, by virtue of their "white blood" had the potential to be assimilated (Bennett, Green, Gilbert, & Bessarab, 2013).

Assimilating Aboriginal people of mixed heritage soon became a government priority. This led to government formed settlements and church run missions with civilizing, social control, and religious conversion functions. By 1922, so-called *protective legislation* made all Aboriginal people wards of the state. Various aspects of life were managed in the name of protection, including mobility, marriage, employment, education, and sexual behavior (Bennett et al., 2013). Like with Native American boarding schools, Australian Aboriginal people at missions were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their religions.

Aboriginal cultures were seen as having no value, thus, assimilation became official policy in Australia in 1937. "'Whiteness' was seen as a more valuable signifier of racial superiority, hence a program of regulated reproduction to 'breed out' the colour of Aboriginal people commenced" (Bennett, 2013, p. 9). Government officials believed that by the 5th or 6th generation there would be no more *half caste* problem and Aboriginal Peoples would become completely absorbed into White Australia. It was believed that "because of the close affiliation between Aboriginal people and Caucasians, their children of mixed heritage could be rapidly whitened without the danger of Aboriginal characteristics reasserting themselves in later generations" (Bennett et al., 2013, p. 9).

The government's plan, articulated by the Western Australia Chief Protector, A.O. Neville, called for: (a) full bloods (Aboriginal people without mixed heritage) would die out; (b) half castes would be removed from their families and communities; and, (c) marriage among half castes would be controlled, including encouraging intermarriage

with Whites (Bennett et al., 2013). "Children were forcibly removed under the guise of protection in a targeted plan to breed out identity, culture and colour, and they were put into state care, placed into servitude or fostered out" (Muller, 2014, p. 40).

Forced servitude was linked with the deliberate breeding of a light-skinned servant class that would be more palatable to settler society than darker Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander people. Based on social Darwinist beliefs, "children, primarily female, were removed on the basis of their 'race' with the intention of breeding out the colour and creating a new not-quite-white servant class. These stolen children were taken away from parents, to be raised in institutions, or placed in white foster care to be raised in the colonisers' image" (Muller, 2014, p. 40).

When Aboriginal children were old enough, they were forced to work, often in unpaid capacities (Muller, 2014). In a poignant example, Muller quotes the words of an Aboriginal woman sent to work in the 1970s at age 14. At night, she was chained with dogs under the house. Reflecting on this time in her life she reported, "the only time I was let off the chain was when they wanted me to work or when he took me upstairs once a month when the wife was unable to do it" (p. 42). She often prayed for death and periodically ran away but was always caught and whipped.

Australian social policies toward Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Peoples present clear examples of a eugenic breeding program aimed at assimilation and whitening of the population (Muller, 2014). While the US may not have been as blatant in expressing eugenic intentions, the boarding schools did strive to assimilate Native children and train them in vocational skills for roles they could play in American society, thus, undermining the ability of traditional Native American societies to continue. The 1992 American Experience film In the *White Man's Image* (season 4, episode 12) depicts how Native children were taken from their families and made to look, act, think, and speak as White Americans. Notably, before and after pictures were taken of the children upon their arrival and shortly after, when their hair was cut and clothes were replaced so that they would indeed reflect the *White man's image*.

THE RELEVANCE OF SKIN COLOR

Clearly ideas about skin color are not neutral. While a discussion about whether blue or green is inherently better is superficial or childish at best, a discussion about skin color carries with it the weight of history steeped in racism and colonization.

For Indigenous Peoples, skin color, and other aspects of appearance, may be intertwined with pressures to be less visibly distinct (the safety associated with assimilation, the sense of belonging to a group that is powerful and has access to resources, and belief that you are less likely to be targeted, scapegoated, or threatened.) Being visibly distinct may mean more encounters with stereotyping and racism.

Of course, the opposite can also be true. Having darker skin tones and being visibly recognizable as an Indigenous person can also be associated with a sense of cultural pride, connection to ancestors, and belonging. An Indigenous person with light skin may (or may not) have insecurities about their sense of self and may be targeted by others for not looking “Indian enough.” Having a skin tone considered darker than that presumed typical for Native Americans may also lead to insecurities and/or stigma for not looking “Indian enough.” Clearly, skin color is vested with powerful, complex, and often contradictory meanings and associations.

There have been times in US history when Native Americans of mixed heritage were perceived by some policy makers as a civilizing force that could undermine traditional ways (such as communal stewardship of land), further integration, and ultimately end Indigenous identity as something distinct from the fabric of American society (Ellinghaus, 2008). This suggests that value judgments associated with skin color were at times purposeful. Some scholars also suggest that linking Native American identity to blood quantum has also been done purposefully by those who would have something to gain by the elimination of Native Americans as distinct nations. Blood quantum requirements combined with intermarriage have the power to statistically eliminate Native Americans and, by association, all responsibilities of the federal government to Native Americans (Ellinghaus, 2008).

Indeed, many forms of bias and many aspects of identity interact. As examples from both the US and Australia illustrate, the confluence of racism, class bias, sexism, colorism, social Darwinism, and a colonial sense of entitlement all feed into perceptions and treatment of Indigenous Peoples. Of particular note in the Australian example is the intersection between gender and color, as Aboriginal women of mixed heritage were targeted for eugenics policies designed to whiten the population. Growing scholarship on intersectionality may ultimately inform and guide scholarship on skin color and its relevance in Indigenous contexts.

Skin color can influence a sense of an Indigenous identity in a variety of ways. At times, privilege is associated with skin color (whether light or dark). Likewise discrimination can be associated with skin color (whether light or dark). Skin color can shape both how people are perceived and how they think of themselves.

EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS AND THE MEANING OF SKIN COLOR

People are often judged by their appearance. In the case of Native Americans, presumptions of what Native Americans should look like often influence whether a particular person is considered to be *really Indian*. In this case, skin color serves as a marker of legitimacy. A *Real Indian* should be neither too light nor too dark. (See Weaver 2012 for a discussion around the politics of skin color for Native Americans.)

If dark skin is a marker of *other* in US society, it may also have implications for differential treatment. For example, like many populations of color, Native Americans are disproportionally represented in prison populations and negative police interactions. Scholarship has yet to explore how visible distinctiveness intersects with differential treatment of Native people by law enforcement personnel and in juvenile and criminal justice settings.

If Native Americans possess skin tones that are lighter than those presumed to be typical or authentic for Native Americans, external entities may presume that an individual is some how less Indigenous. Indeed, it appears that there have been times when the US government has shared this perception or possibly even seen the whitening of Indigenous populations much as their Australian counterparts did.

There was a belief that Native Americans could, and should, become more integrated into US society as they became whitened through intermarriage. Assimilation would ultimately end federal government responsibilities to Native Americans once they no longer existed as (visibly) distinct populations. "In Minnesota, government officials used the biological fact of interracial mixing as a justification for declaring increasing numbers of Anishinaabeg 'non-Indian' and therefore unentitled to tribal benefits or legal protection of their property" (Ellinghaus, 2008, p. 83). In this case, some Native Americans were cheated from their birthrights for being too White.

Today, many Native Americans live in multiethnic urban Indigenous communities. For some, there is a fear that a distinct Indigenous identity will become lost. This fear is linked, in part, to a physical distance from Indigenous land bases that often serve to nurture and replenish culture. Also, as Native Americans continue to intermarry with a wide variety of people, it raises the question, what is the relationship between physical distinctiveness and Indigenous identity? If Native people have darker skin does that affect others' perceptions? Conversely, what if their skin is lighter?

INTERNAL REFLECTIONS AND THE MEANINGS OF SKIN COLOR

Skin color can influence how an individual perceives him or herself. Decades of research document associations between skin color and self-esteem (Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). This is particularly potent in combination with external messages about color.

Societal ideals that prize lighter skin tones may be internalized by individuals, thus leading them to feel that lighter is better and in turn that they would be better if they possessed lighter skin (Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). "European colonialism and contemporary racism have exacerbated such associations, constructing lighter skin tones as fair and attractive and darker skin tones as disadvantaged" (Swami, Henry, Peacock, Roberts-Dunn, & Porter, 2013, p. 468). Although not specifically examining the Native American experience, the scholarship of Swami et al. does establish links between colonization and beliefs about skin color.

Societal ideals have important psychological consequences for people of color (Swami et al., 2013). Individuals may internalize societal ideals and see color as a point of reference for attractiveness, self-esteem, and identity. While perceptions of skin color and phenotype may be linked to a sense of self, as well as emotional and psychological wellbeing, it is problematic to assert that lighter skin tones are unequivocally associated with better self-esteem. Although skin color is associated with self-perception, people of color have a range of experiences and outcomes (Swami et al., 2013).

It is possible for individuals to manage discrepancies between societal ideals and their own appearance (Swami et al., 2013). Various factors influence the impact of skin color (Mucherah & Frazier, 2013). For example, gender, context, and cultural identity may moderate the relationship between color and psychological outcome (Lopez, 2008).

There have been contradictory research findings on the relationship between ethnic appearance and self-esteem among Latinos. Lopez (2008) found that among Puerto Rican women, darker skin and stronger cultural attachment were associated with greater self-esteem. Lighter skin and less cultural attachment were associated with less self-esteem. Generally, ethnic identity is a better predictor of self-esteem than skin color. The strength of ethnic identity can be associated with psychological resilience (Lopez, 2008). While this research does not specifically examine the experiences of Indigenous Peoples, it may well be that Native Americans who are culturally grounded and possess a strong sense of identity as Indigenous people also display psychological resilience.

Some Aboriginal Australians struggle with the legacy of light skin tones resulting from government programs to whiten the population. Survivors of the eugenics programs of the Stolen Generations may wrestle with their sense of identity as light-skinned people who strive for the right to identify as Indigenous (Muller, 2014). Like other populations, cultural or ethnic identity may moderate physical appearance and psychological resilience, enabling them to claim their Indigenous identity and enhance their wellbeing.

THE IMPACT OF STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES

While many Americans have limited contact with Native Americans, ideas about what Native Americans look like continue to permeate American society through appropriated images and caricatures used as mascots for sports teams. Offensive labels like Redskins serve as constant reminders that color is a defining aspect of an Indigenous identity, at least in the minds of Americans.

Research has documented that for many people in the United States, boundaries blur between mascots (i.e., stereotypical images of Native people) and Native people themselves, thus promoting objectification and dehumanization. Mascots are caricatures that define Native people according to stereotypical perceptions (Taylor, 2015).

"Mascots are imperial images; they are the substance of colonialism and the essence of victory over the Native American in their use and display" (Taylor, 2015, p. 120). The promotion of these images and nicknames throughout American society conveys the message that the larger society has power to dictate what Native people look like as well as our values and behaviors. This is a way of communicating: *We define you, your skin color, your features, and your actions*. Through the appropriation and distortion of Native American images for sports mascots, Native American people are commodified as an aggressive, dark, other; largely for White male consumption (Taylor, 2015).

Studies reveal that Native youth exposed to mascots have decreased self-esteem. Likewise, Native American college students exposed to mascots have lower academic expectations. The use of Native American images as mascots also has an impact on the larger society. Non-Native college students exposed to mascots are more likely to hold stereotypes. A study found that "AI [American Indian] images are not just mascots, but may be emblematic of larger subjugating narratives regarding AI people. Many scholars have argued that AI mascots are so deeply entrenched in American society that, for non-AI people, these inauthentic representations define what it means to be AI" (Chaney, Burke, & Burkley, 2011, p. 57; emphasis in original).

The continuous use of Native American nicknames and images for sports mascots has significant implications. Mascots promote stereotyping of Indigenous people and solidify distance between perceptions of who constitutes us and who constitutes them. The term redskin is a racial slur and has been defined as such in most dictionaries for many decades. It is a derogatory term that many people, both Native and non-Native, see as on par with the N word used as a racial slur against African Americans. It is a term associated with bullying and hate speech, yet it persists throughout US society. Many believe the term is rooted in a time when bounties were placed on Native Americans and a body, decapitated head, or scalp was used as proof of killing needed to collect payment.

What does it say about US society that the R word is still used by some sports teams? What does it say about communities and teams that fight to continue to use this term when many others have let it go? What does it say that this heinous racial slur specifically references skin color? Many racial slurs incorporate references to physical differences, particularly skin color (McCalmont, 2014). Clearly skin color continues to be a primary marker of who is *us* and who is *them*.

STRIVING FOR DECOLONIZATION

Indigenous scholars and their allies increasingly point to the need for decolonization. In many settler societies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand it is painfully clear that the colonizing powers will never leave.

In these settings, decolonization takes on a much more complex meaning than abdicating land and power in favor of the original inhabitants.

Yellow Bird (2012) defines decolonization as both an event and a process. For Indigenous Peoples, this means, “reaching a level of critical consciousness, an active understanding that you are (or have been) colonized and are thus responding to life circumstances in ways that are limited, destructive, and externally controlled” (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012, p. 3). Likewise, non-Native people must recognize and challenge the on-going effects of colonization as an ethical imperative (Lewis, 2012).

> As a process, decolonization means engaging in the activities of creating, restoring, and birthing. It means creating and consciously using various strategies to liberate oneself, adapt to or survive oppressive conditions, it means restoring cultural practices, thinking, beliefs and values that were taken away or abandoned but are still relevant and necessary to survival, and it means the birthing of new ideas, thinking, technologies, and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples. (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012, p. 3)

Decolonization involves fundamental changes in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples occupying the same territory relate to each other. Beyond recognition of the impact of colonization, there must be a will on the part of the colonizer to give up dominance and share power. This reimagining of society is a tremendous undertaking fraught with challenges, yet necessary to true decolonization (Weaver, 2015). Muller (2014), an Aboriginal scholar and social worker, points to internal processes as the foundation for decolonization. She conceptualizes decolonization as consisting of processes of (a) rediscovery and recovery, (b) mourning, (c) healing and forgiveness that include reclaiming wellbeing and harmony, (d) strengthening and valuing Indigenous philosophy and knowledge (a phase known as dreaming and the dreaming), (e) commitment to societal change, and (f) action to decolonize knowledge.

Although color consciousness is not originally part of Native American traditions, internalized oppression has led many Native Americans to accept colonial attitudes about Native Americans having a particular appearance. We use these colonized attitudes to challenge the legitimacy of other Native people who do not meet our expectations of what a Native American should look like. Decolonization is a way to shed these negative perceptions and beliefs. If we are to borrow ideas about identity from other cultures, we would do much better to borrow from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who emphasized the importance of looking at the content of an individual’s character rather than the color of his or her skin. In an Indigenous context this might translate as examining community connections as a marker of identity, rather than skin color.

There are many reasons to move away from skin color as a proxy for identity. For centuries the US government has influenced definitions of Native American identity. Even though Native nations still define criteria for citizenship, this has largely been infused with colonial ideas such as blood quantum. We need to reclaim the right to define ourselves according to our own criteria as a central facet of decolonization.

Traditionally, for Native American people, our sense of self has never been defined by skin color. Only through on-going processes of colonization have we (at least partially) accepted colonial definitions of who we are. Colonial definitions of Native American identity have led to using blood quantum as a measure of identity that has been integrated into many tribes. Defining people according to fractions mirrors a largely discredited view of race as a biologically determined entity. Colonial ideas about Native American identity led to defining some tribes as *civilized*, compared to others. Historically the *Five Civilized Tribes* were Native Nations that readily adopted a farming and plantation lifestyle that included owning slaves of African descent. This definition of being civilized, along with other external definitions of Indigeneity, is best left behind.

To decolonize is to move away from these definitions imposed by others. Decolonization also involves letting go of the trauma incurred during centuries of colonization. It is time to shed internalized colonization. We take back our right to self define. Native American identity is based in community, land, relationships, responsibilities, and roles. These are the pillars of what it means to be Indigenous.

The process of decolonization must start with changing attitudes. This begins with an internal examination of how we think about things followed by external work to change the social environment. Yellow Bird (2012) draws on brain research to inform how Indigenous people can let go of trauma and change thought processes in preparation for changing society. Neurodecolonization is the foundation for subsequent work.

Decolonization must involve changing society including stereotypical and distorted Native images used by sports teams. As the larger US society recognizes the use of racial slurs is not acceptable, teams that refer to themselves by the R word must change.

In 2013, 62 high schools in 22 states continued to use the R name. An additional 28 high schools in 18 states have dropped the mascot over the last 25 years (National Congress of American Indians, 2013). The professional football team in Washington DC continues to cling to the name in spite of the controversy and loss of its trademark by the US Patent Office in 2014 (CBS/AP, 2014).

In 2014, the New York State assembly passed resolution K.1202 condemning the use of dictionary defined racial slurs such the R word as sports mascots (McKibben, 2014). As of this writing in 2015, the number of school districts in New York State using this name is dropping from three to two, as a controversial, painful, and contentious change process in the Lancaster school district draws national attention (Higgins, 2015).

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

As a Lakota person, I have received teachings about the Seven Generations that mirror those from many other Native American traditions. We are taught that generations ago our ancestors thoughtfully planned on our behalf to insure the survival and wellbeing of contemporary Native Americans. We are vested with this same responsibility. My peers and I must insure the future of generations yet unborn. Contemporary Native Americans are an increasingly urbanized population where many families have both multi-tribal and multiethnic lineage. While some people equate this with loss of culture and identity, this is not necessarily the case. Native cultures have never been static entities but have always adapted to changing circumstances.

As Indigenous Peoples, we retain the right to define ourselves and this includes a right and ability to disentangle our sense of self from colonial ideals and definitions. We have a right to challenge the power that the United States and other colonial settler societies have vested in skin color. Decolonization presents an opportunity to divest from the historical legacies that place power in the color of an individual's skin.

We can make positive, thoughtful choices for Indigenous generations to come. In fact, it is our responsibility to do so. For the generations yet unborn, their identity, culture, and sense of self, need not be lost, absorbed, depleted, or defined by the color of their skin.

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