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## Elizabeth Warren's DNA and What it Means for Indigenous Folx

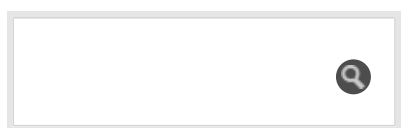
BY MORGAN LEARN on OCTOBER 29, 2018 • ( 2 )

Elizabeth Warren's recent claim to Native ancestry has caused a raucous controversy. Unsurprisingly, the conversation has not solely come from Indigenous peoples, but non-Natives as well! They have inserted themselves into the center of the conversation by claiming meaningless proximity to Indigeneity. They do this with the following phrases: "I have Native blood," "My grandma was part Native American," and the classic "I'm one-twelfth Cherokee." These claims are not only dreadfully laughable, but they come from what the Indigenous community refer to as "pretendians" : people who are not Indigenous yet nevertheless claim Indigeneity to excuse their racist behavior or validate their opinions. Elizabeth Warren's claim to Indigeneity stems from the idea that DNA is determinate of one's ancestry and cultural identity, and not only has it invited non-Natives and pretendians to participate in conversations surrounding Native identity, but her political critics have steered any discourse into racist jokes.

Elizabeth Warren has misrepresented the Indigenous community entirely and reifies the futility in DNA testing while also reaffirming a common misconception about Native ancestry and tribal affiliation. Claims to Native identity via DNA testing stem from the tendrils of violent colonialism and white assimilation otherwise known as "blood quantum." Blood quantum is exactly what it sounds like; it refers to "how much Indian blood one has." The idea was officially introduced via [The Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887](#), although there is speculation that its roots start as early as the [Civil War](#) and possibly before that. The Dawes Act forced white assimilation by stealing Native land only to then "portion allotments" to "competent Indians," thus encouraging "white farming" and assimilation. As land was stolen, divided, and sold, "kill the Indian, save the man" became terrifyingly true.

Some sovereign nations soon began to implement blood quantum laws as a requirement for tribal enrollment as people were displaced. However, this idea of blood quantum as a true representation of Native identity is not expressed across the Indigenous community. We believe that identity encompasses knowledge of traditional practices and beliefs, as well as one's connection to their ancestors. Most importantly, we value unity and the preservation of Indigenous rights all across [Turtle Island](#) . Elizabeth Warren has not only refused to meet with Chiefs and members of the [Cherokee Nation](#), but her political ideology disregards Indigenous sovereignty entirely. Her claim, at this point, is not intended to advocate for Indigenous rights, but rather to prove to Republicans she is telling the "truth." The Indigenous community wants their land back, however this goal does not sit well with colonizers. But at the very least, we want to be seriously recognized as sovereign nations. Warren cannot give this to us, not only because she contributes to the system that treats Natives unfairly but also refuses to acknowledge our existence. Her claims to Indigeneity are for political gain. As [Romeo Saganash](#) would say, Warren "doesn't give a f\*ck about Indigenous rights."

DNA testing is a fruitless endeavor and is the equivalent of an \$85 BuzzFeed quiz, but this does not deter non-Natives from discussing their "Native heritage." They like claiming Indigeneity when it is convenient, especially when it is to further their political agendas. Warren's "Indigenous" supporters and the like have derailed the conversation about the problems facing sovereign nations and have convoluted it with anti-Trump propaganda. Anyone who opposes Warren (or Democrats in general) is a Trump-loving honky. The discourse is not even remotely related to the validity of her claims; at this point, it's just political pretense.



Academic – ish.

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Warren has opened Pandora's Box. Senator Lindsey Graham stated he too would take a DNA test in the hope that he could "beat" Warren at a game of culture vulture. Trump called Warren "Pocahontas" during an event to honor Indigenous veterans, and former GOP Congressman, Jason Chaffetz, tweeted a picture of himself next to a wooden "Indian statue" saying, "Disneyland today with Senator Elizabeth Warren." Not only is it infuriating to see these racist remarks bombard media outlets, but it is harmful for Indigenous people. These epithets contribute to the violence Indigenous people face because we are dehumanized for the sake of a joke or critique. We are seen as an unfaced "other" rather than individuals with various tribal affiliations. It's also extremely stereotypical. Non-Natives expect Natives to "look" a certain way. We are all supposed to have brown skin, long black braided hair, and deer hide clothing. We have Warren's supporters, who are coincidentally experts on the science of DNA and Indigenous identity, on the one hand, and then we have her critics who are using racially charged attacks to discredit her claim. There are means to refute her claims without racist undertones. But again, this conversation is not centered on Indigenous voices, so this cycle of partisan pretense will continue. Meanwhile, the real Indigenous people are being silenced.

So, what does all of this mean for diasporic Indigenous folx? The conversation surrounding Warren's DNA test further delineates how fake claims to Native ancestry are indicative of unfair historical policy. It means that Indigenous peoples are worthless in the eyes of white people/non-Natives and the governments that occupy our land. What it means to be Native has been diminished to how much "Indian blood" one has, and conversations about us have never involved our input. We are now in between settlers explaining our livelihood. The conversation as to who is or is not Indigenous should be determined by Indigenous people. Personally, as a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) person, I feel like my community and our existence is being undermined. The intricacies of our traditions, knowledge, activism, and so much more are reduced to the faulted inaccuracy of DNA results. Claiming Indigeneity means nothing if cultural ties are nonexistent and the community does not claim you back.

DNA testing is futile in regards to cultural identity. Native identity is not something that can be proven through DNA testing, and this idealistic belief is something used to force Indigenous people into whiteness. Warren's claim to Native ancestry is false in a cultural sense. Having one distant relative who could have been Indigenous and "Indian blood" does not necessarily qualify someone as Native. Not only that, but the idea of blood quantum itself perpetuates a settler practice and has inflamed racist conversations. If Warren was truly Indigenous, she ought to consider meeting with her Tribe and advocating for Indigenous sovereignty. We have this joke in our community that is often brought up when non-Natives claim Indigeneity via blood quantum. A pretendian will claim Indigeneity by saying "my grandfather had Indian blood" usually to validate a claim they're trying to make in regards to Indigenous issues. Like clockwork, Natives will offer a reply similar to "really, where did they keep this blood, in a jar?" And with that I say, Warren, keep your Indian blood where it belongs: in a jar next to your bed.

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Judas Iscariot



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2 replies



**Hal Tamporello**

October 2, 2019 • 7:45 am

The heart of your writing whilst appearing reasonable in the beginning, did not really settle perfectly with me personally after some time. Somewhere within the sentences you actually managed to make me a believer unfortunately just for a while. I still have a problem with your leaps in assumptions and you might do well to fill in all those gaps. In the event that you can accomplish that, I will certainly end up being amazed.

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**Morgan Learn**

October 3, 2019 • 2:32 pm

I write for Indigenous Peoples. Your ignorance is not my problem, beloved.

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