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The Monacan Nation Pow Wow: Symbol of Indigenous Survival and Resistance in the Tobacco Row Mountains

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On Sunday afternoon, May 23, 1999, two eagle feathers dropped in the arena at the Monacan Indian Nation's Seventh Annual Pow Wow. This is one of the most serious occurrences at any pow wow, and may be dealt with in a variety of ways depending on regional, tribal, and community norms. In this case the emcee cleared the arena and an elder retrieved the feathers while the host drum played an appropriate honor song.

Approximately an hour and a half later—around 4:30 p.m.—the emcee announced that Thomasina Jordan, then-Chair of the Virginia Council on Indians (a state-funded advisory group consisting of representatives from Virginia's eight state recognized tribes¹), had passed away that afternoon after a long battle with cancer. Ms. Jordan's passing occurred at the same time that the eagle feathers fell in the pow wow arena. Whether anyone attached any supernatural significance to this occurrence, all Virginia Indians (and anyone who knew something of the peculiar and turbulent history of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in the state in the mid-twentieth century) realized the symbolic shock of the coinciding events. Jordan was a vocal political activist and proponent of Indian rights in a state where, until recently, Indians did not dare express discontent with state and local policies and power structures that relegated them to subaltern citizenship, at best. As Jordan drew her last breath, the feathers fell on soil in a county that was at the vanguard of Virginia racial integrity policies aimed at exterminating American Indians by removing them from the state's legal record, as will be discussed later in this essay—a county where no one would have dared to hold a pow wow until the late 1990s.

Yet such a pow wow did become a reality in the late 1990s, and, in addition to becoming a well-known intertribal gathering in the Southeast/Mid-Atlantic corridor, it marks one of the largest annual gatherings of Monacan tribal members.

This is an interesting phenomenon considering the fact that the majority of the people in the Monacan community had never attended a pow wow (nor do many of them frequent other pow wows) until the advent of the Monacan Nation's annual gathering. This article, then, explores the meaning of the Monacan pow wow to those who live in the host community. We contend that this pow wow constitutes a political expression for the Monacan people, a celebration of survival as indigenous people not only in a state where Indian policy took the form of "documentary genocide" (Smith, 1992), but in a county where local power brokers managed to configure a local political economy in which Indians were integrated at the bottom of a virtual caste system. Considered in a community context, this gathering also constitutes a space where the Monacan people can articulate, on their own terms their existence as a contemporary indigenous people with a unique history. In other words, this now-integral event based on Plains cultural forms must not be seen as a wholesale cultural appropriation, but rather, as a means of expressing the Monacan community's relationship with the rest of the world.

From Plains to Woodlands: Pow Wows in the Southeast

No discussion of the pow wow as an intertribal/inter-regional phenomenon would be complete without referencing Robert K. Thomas's (1968) provocative article "Pan-Indianism." Writing in the context of post-Termination-era Indian activism in the late 1960s, Thomas proposed an explanation for the rapid appropriation of Plains cultural forms by indigenous peoples across North America. On one level, he saw "Pan-Indianism" (as he termed this collective appropriation) as an attempt to forge and adhere to a common "Indian" identity based on similarities in historical experiences across disparate indigenous groups. However, elaborating somewhat on James Howard's (1955) observations in Oklahoma, Thomas also suggested that in some tribes "where aboriginal traits have disappeared, these new symbols of 'Indianness' are *the* distinctive traits of the community."²

While Thomas is correct in explicating the inevitability of a new ethnic (and hence, political) identity emerging from prolonged intertribal activity, one must not automatically assume that the adoption of pan-Indian symbols and activities, such as pow wows, by indigenous groups beyond the Plains are mere acts of appropriation. Nor are they necessarily attempts to reclaim indigenous culture without historical insight. Indeed, that was not Thomas's point. However, contemporary critics have elaborated on that line of argument regarding indigenous groups in eastern North America (especially those who are non-federally recognized) to suggest that these groups' prolonged contact and relations with non-Indians has diluted any semblance of "tribal" or "traditional" culture.³ Specifically, certain writers have leveled such criticism toward Southeastern indigenous groups in a manner so general as to be dangerous, arguing that appropriations of generic "Indian" culture by groups of questionable indigenous heritage are mere ploys to reap the benefits of federal recognition (Quinn, 1990). Such approaches fail to look critically at the manner

in which pan-Indian traits are situated in the context of the actual *communities* that have appropriated them.

Lerch and Bullers offer an alternative approach to understanding the intrinsic complexities involved when indigenous groups beyond the Plains, particularly in the Southeast, appropriate Plains (or Pan-Indian) cultural forms. They point out that “. . . pow wows and other Pan-Indian activities may exist alongside of more traditional activities or behavioral patterns that mark off *local* Indian identity and social community [emphasis ours]” They make their point through an examination of the Wacamaw Sioux Pow Wow in North Carolina, an event that has played an important role in local community life since 1970. Through structured interviews and factor analyses, the authors convincingly illustrate that this pow wow is an important “identity marker” for the Wacamaw people insofar as it is a *community* event that distinguishes them from their non-Indian neighbors and bolsters their visibility as indigenous people to a larger public.

Here, we intend to supplement Lerch and Bullers’ approach with a phenomenological methodology that delves even deeper into the community context by focusing on actual *dialogue* within the Monacan community about their annual pow wow.⁴ This ethnographic model is what Lassiter refers to as a *collaborative* approach as it “fully embraces dialogue in both ethnographic practice *and* ethnographic writing.”⁵ In other words, it is a “multivocal” (Tedlock, 1995) rendering of community reality, not simply because of our extensive reliance on oral reflections from tribal members, but because two of the authors are themselves Monacans, and are active participants in the pow wow and all endeavors necessary to make the pow wow possible. Through this approach, we intend to convey, if only to a limited extent, the meanings that Monacan people attach to the annual pow wow. While it might be said that pow wows have emerged as something distinct from any tribal/regional culture over the past thirty years, our conversations and experiences suggest that the Monacans (if not many other tribes) have incorporated the pow wow into the ebb and flow of community life as a means of celebrating their existing indigenous culture and identity. Our contention is that the Monacan pow wow is, indeed, an identity-maker, but not an identity *appropriation*. In a subtle but powerful way, the pow wow is a means through which the Monacan people articulate their identity as indigenous people who survived a peculiar set of historical circumstances where such survival seemed unlikely. In other words, the pow wow is a political act of resistance, endurance, and celebration.

“Just like the dust we come from”: The Historical Context

The present-day Monacan Nation—both as an ethnic community and as a polity—is evolved from a once-vast alliance of Siouan-speaking tribes that inhabited most of the Virginia and Carolina Piedmont (and the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains) at the time of Captain John Smith’s arrival on the Virginia shores in 1607.⁶ From then until the inception of the American republic, the history of most of the

Monacan-allied peoples was one of tribal diasporas and ever-shifting sociopolitical configurations (Hale, 1883).⁷ Those who remained in the vicinity of present-day Amherst County, Virginia were descended from Tutelos and Saponis, and possibly some settlers from Algonquian communities from the Virginia Tidewater (Cook, 2000).⁸ These Indians seem to have deliberately enclaved themselves in the remote Tobacco Row Mountains (a front-range of the Blue Ridge) in order to avoid excessive contact with European Americans. In particular, a core community was present around Bear Mountain by the 1750s, whose residents are the ancestors of the contemporary Monacan Nation.

However, like most indigenous groups in the East, contact with non-Indians was inevitable and prolonged. And as was true for most other tribes in the Southeast, such contact yielded both exogamous unions and tensions. Prior to the Civil War, this translated into a situation in which Indians were almost uniformly classified as “free people of color,” the lowest possible tier of citizenship.⁹ Yet even though the legal status of “free colored” theoretically disappeared with the emancipation of slaves, Indians in Virginia found themselves in a precarious legal situation that ultimately denied them the right to ethnic self-identification as indigenous peoples. After the Civil War, miscegenation laws (laws prohibiting interracial marriage, and often defining criteria for determining the race of individuals) became much more rigidly enforced in those states where they existed. To be sure, this reflected fears of challenges to the status quo with the (theoretical) enfranchisement of people of color.¹⁰ This trend, of course, coincided with the advent of the eugenics movement, which found one of its most stalwart proponents in Walter A. Plecker, director of the Virginia Office of Vital Statistics from 1916 to 1946.

A physician by training, Plecker was obsessed with the notion of racial purity. He single-handedly drafted the 1924 Virginia Racial Integrity Law—perhaps the most explicit articulation of miscegenation law to date—which essentially stated that there were only two “races” resident to Virginia: “White” and “Negro.” This effectively made it illegal for anyone native to Virginia to claim to be “Indian,” and Plecker knew it. He drafted a so-called “scientific” method for identifying people of color on the basis of surnames located in nineteenth-century vital records (where Indians were typically classified as “free colored”). Interestingly, he seems to have developed a particular vendetta against the Monacans, who were perhaps more fervent in asserting their Indian heritage than any other tribe in the state.¹¹ Unfortunately, local planters, who had turned toward an orchard economy on the slopes of the Tobacco Row following the post-war depression, found in these new miscegenation policies a means of exploiting Indian labor to perpetuate the quasi-feudal political economy of the Antebellum years. Monacans found themselves effectively integrated at the bottom of a local caste-system. Not only were they providing cheap, if not virtually free, labor for local orchard owners and farmers, but they were not allowed to attend county schools until 1963—not even those established for African Americans.¹²

Needless to say, these conditions had a severe effect on the collective psyche of the Monacan people. Many Indians who could find the means left Amherst County and Virginia entirely for places such as New Jersey, Maryland and Tennessee, where they could either conceal their identity or live as Indians without fear of persecution. Those who remained in the county often adopted racialized identities in ways that created rifts within the Monacan community.¹³ It was during this period that any vestiges of indigenous language faded away. The late Lucian Branham, a beloved patriarch in the Bear Mountain community for many years, recalled “[Monacan] people didn’t want to speak Indian. That’s what it was . . . they was pushed down to dirt and dust, just like the dust we come from.”¹⁴ Another woman expressed the pain of being an Indian in Amherst County during the mid-twentieth century in very sobering terms: “I can definitely sit here and say there were times when I was going through school [after public school integration], and things was happening to me, and [non-Indian] people was treating us like they was . . . there were times I didn’t want to hear the word Indian.”¹⁵

The early-to-mid twentieth century was undoubtedly a devastating time for the Monacan people. However, while many Monacans took no pride in who they were, there was certainly a core group of people who consistently asserted their Indian identity. In 1908, when the Episcopal diocese of Southwest Virginia opened St. Paul’s Mission at Bear Mountain (the only place Indians could obtain an education in the county until 1963), the founding missionary noted that residents of the community around the mission referred to themselves as “Indian” in a very stalwart manner. He noted in particular that they made a point of distinguishing themselves from other people of color in the county.¹⁶ During World War II, when Virginia Indians were placed in African American regiments at Walter Plecker’s insistence, a group of Monacan men initially responded by resisting the draft and finally filing suit in the U.S. District Court for Western Virginia, where they won the right to self-identification as “Indians” for the purposes of military service. Yet for many, the mere act of remaining in Amherst County without conceding to be anything other than “Indian” constituted the ultimate act of resistance. Reflecting on those who fled the area, Lucian Branham recalled: “A lot of them got up and left [Virginia]. They kept after me, said, ‘well, why don’t you pull up and leave,’ see? ‘We ain’t got a chance to make nothing for ourselves.’ And I said, no, probably not. But I was born here, and I’m gonna still fight and stay here until I’m gone . . . If I was ten years-old, I still wouldn’t leave.”¹⁷

Today, the Monacan Nation’s Annual Pow Wow is a fundamental symbol of that spirit of resistance and survival.

The Monacan Pow Wow: Beginnings

During our conversations with Monacan people, we asked if anyone thought that the Monacan Pow Wow could have taken place in Amherst County thirty years ago. The unanimous answer was *no*. For one thing, the sociopolitical climate in

Amherst County was still not favorable for Indians. "I don't think the outsiders would probably have come," said Dovie Ramsey. "Because it's still a stigma, you know. Not as much. Not everybody, but they [non-Indians] make jokes. They think some of the customs of the Indians . . . is really funny, and far out, and irreligious."¹⁸ To be sure, although racist views in Amherst County have retreated into the recesses of latency, they still exist and were considerably more blatant thirty years ago. Certainly, few local farmers or landowners wanted to have any association with the Monacans that did not place Indians in a position of subservience. As will be discussed, the first four Monacan Pow Wows took place in neighboring Bedford County, because the tribe found it difficult to find support for the event within Amherst County.

However, most Monacans believed that the internal barriers to putting on such an event in the past were equally as formidable. Kenneth Branham, who has served as Chief of the Monacan Nation for six years and who has lived around Bear Mountain since he was born in the mid-1950s, stated that "Even if we had our own land to do it, the know-how to do it would not have been there. And the connection with other Indians."¹⁹ Diana Laws, who grew up in east Tennessee where her grandparents (along with many other Monacan families) fled to escape the wrath of Virginia racial integrity policies in the early twentieth century, placed a great emphasis on the manner in which many Indians internalized the pain that one sustained for even claiming to be "Indian": "I think it took a time out for our people to be able to come to accept things. It took time for it to become acceptable to them [to embrace their Monacan heritage], for them to understand, for them to be able to receive it and then express it."²⁰ One of the most profound statements came from Buddy Johns, who as a youth in the early 1970s was rather active in indigenous political movements. He also attended the mission school for as long as he could and experienced firsthand the hardship of public school integration in Amherst County (described below). As he sat back and watched Saturday evening events at the 2001 pow wow, he pondered the past:

Thirty years ago this wouldn't have been possible. The atmosphere here wasn't right. I know some people in the tribe wouldn't have liked it. They would have been scared to try it thirty years ago. The pressures and the prejudices wouldn't have allowed it. I'm just trying to think thirty years ago who owned this land. They would have never allowed anyone on this land to do it. Now, I'd like to consider myself one of those who was, maybe, more to the forefront of pushing for our rights, and tribal status and things. And thirty years ago, no, I wasn't even ready for it.²¹

In fact, thirty years ago the Monacan people were facing profound changes in the social, political, and economic climate—locally, regionally, and nationally—that would allow them to challenge the bonds of racial oppression that had damaged their collective self-image, and to assert their autonomy and endurance as an indigenous community. By 1963, every county in Virginia had integrated people

of color into its public schools with the exception of Amherst, where a \$30,000 bond was pending to build a separate school just for Indians. However, the county abandoned this plan after much pressure from the Episcopal Church, and Monacans were finally accepted in the county's schools. Their experience there was far from pleasant in the beginning, as evidenced by the fact that the first Monacan did not graduate from public high school in the county until 1971.²² With time, public school education did benefit Amherst County Indians, and their matriculation coincided with the decline of the local orchard economy, the rise of a more diversified service sector, and the abolition of miscegenation and racial integrity laws. All of this transpired in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, which tended to instill in many ethnic groups a renewed sense of pride in their heritage. These changes motivated the Monacans to become more assertive—if not organized—as an ethnic entity. This became symbolically apparent in 1989 when the Monacans received official recognition as an Indian tribe from the state of Virginia.²³

Encouraged by these profound changes within and beyond the Monacan community, scores of Monacans who had left the area during the Plecker years or who were the progeny of such migrants began to move back to Amherst County, some of whom had developed a long association with other indigenous groups in a pan-Indian context. One such individual was George Branham Whitewolf, who was born in Glen Bernie, Maryland, where his parents moved (as did many Monacans) in the mid-twentieth century. During the 1970s, Whitewolf became active in the American Indian Movement and concomitantly became deeply involved in pow wow circuits across the United States. Eventually, he began sponsoring his own circuit on the east coast. In the early 1990s, the charismatic Whitewolf moved to Amherst County and became an active leader on the tribal council. He was determined to see the Monacan people sponsor their own pow wow, and with his guidance the First Annual Monacan Indian Pow Wow became a reality in 1993.²⁴

However, recalling the climate of dwindling, but latent, racism in Amherst County, the path to making the pow wow was not easy. Not only was Whitewolf the only one in the Monacan community at the time with a solid knowledge of how to plan and sustain a pow wow, but the tribe simply had no place to hold the event. At that time, the Monacans had no substantive official land base, and non-Indian landowners and civic organizations in the county typically found convenient ways to side-step Monacan requests for a venue. Tribal historian Diane Johns Shields recounted, "I know that we approached Amherst County to have our pow wow here, and they, of course, could not seem to find a place that they would let us have it. And we approached Sweet Briar College [a private women's college near the town of Amherst], and of course, they couldn't. And then once we had it in Bedford and they found out how much money Bedford County made, then they wanted us to bring it back to Amherst."²⁵ Indeed, from 1993 to 1996, the pow wow was held at a community center in neighboring Bedford County. Each year the crowds grew, as did the revenues, until 1997 when an Amherst County farmer in Elon, Virginia volunteered his land for the event. In spite of a pouring

rain most of the weekend, that pow wow drew the largest crowd of participants and spectators yet. It also marked the pinnacle of tribal participation in putting on the pow wow.

The fact that the pow wow drew such support from within the community in a relatively short period of time is impressive. After all, most Monacans had never attended a pow wow until their own tribe became sponsors, and those who were returning to Amherst County had to work to bolster respect within the community. Diane Johns Shields recounted her own return in 1994: "You know, when I first came, I had the feeling that they [Monacans who lived their entire lives in Amherst County] were afraid. They were afraid of things that were changing. Because they had come out of a dormant time, where everything just kind of stayed the same. And then all of a sudden, everything's starting to change." If those returning home had to endure the gauntlet of community scrutiny as "outsiders" before being accepted as vital members of the collective, one must wonder what the allure of a seemingly foreign institution such as the pow wow might have been. From Diane's perspective it was because, "Things were beginning to change, and they were either going to change with them or just kind of be pushed aside. And people are beginning to change now, and accept who they are and be proud of who they are. Because for so many years they were put down, and they didn't want to just accept that."²⁶

Community Institution or Pan-Indian Event?

Perhaps there was a temporal symbolism in the fact that the first Monacan Pow Wow took place at a community center in neighboring Bedford County, twenty-some miles from Bear Mountain. Not only were Amherst County officials and landowners reluctant or unwilling to endorse such an event, but many Monacans were still coming to grips with the negative ramifications of even claiming publicly to be "Indian" in Virginia. Some even feared possible backlash from local non-Indians for such a bold display of ethnic pride. However, for other Monacans it was time to catch the current of changing circumstances and to make sure that the times continued to change for the better.

The first pow wow, which took place in July of 1993, was modest but successful. Perhaps its most significant outcome was that it convinced many wary Monacans that such an open celebration of indigenous culture could proceed in the area without negative repercussions. By 1997, the Monacans were able to move the pow wow back to Amherst County to the community of Elon, where many Monacan families live. By then it had become the largest regular Monacan community event both in terms of turnout from the Monacan community and the amount of effort tribal members put forth to prepare for and operate the pow wow.

Actually, the Monacan pow wow is one of two major tribal events that take place each year. The second is the annual Homecoming Bazaar, which takes place in October. While the Homecoming is an impressive affair in itself, it is safe to say that it does not draw as many Monacans at one time as the pow wow does

(especially from those who live in Amherst County and vicinity). Even though the Homecoming is not as much a “public” event as the pow wow is, one reason it does not attract certain Monacans is because it has often been perceived as a “church” event. The Homecoming actually began as a gathering for those who attended the Episcopal Church at St. Paul’s Mission, all of whom were Monacans. However, past missionaries tended to exhibit favoritism toward certain Indian families over others, arguably on the basis of skin color. This served to exacerbate tribal rifts that were either created or worsened with the elaboration of racial integrity laws in Virginia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. People in the Monacan community are coming to grips with these factional tensions, and the Homecoming is slowly becoming more of a *tribal* (as opposed to congregational) event. From its inception the pow wow seems to have offered an alternative collective space for *all* Monacans to express their historical identities as local indigenous peoples.

It should be noted that some Monacans, especially those who live out-of-state, regard the pow wow and the Homecoming as events serving similar purposes. As Kenneth Branham pointed out, “You know a lot of our people travel from out-of-state. Some from Illinois, and even from Texas come to these two functions. When someone will travel that far just to socialize, that makes a difference.”²⁷ For many Monacans-at-large, then, both events serve as a means of reconnecting to the community and reinforcing familial ties that might otherwise be severed by distance. For some, such as Diane Laws (whose grandparents moved to East Tennessee during the Plecker years), both events help to narrow the distance between generations as well.

Well, I know for one thing that it’s [coming to the pow wow and Homecoming] important to my grandfather because he gets to come up here and he gets to talk to people, you know, maybe once or twice a year that he doesn’t see very often. And I know that it brings peace to his heart. And it’s good for me to see that in him, and it’s good for me to listen to the stories he tells when we’re seeing these things. Because when we see these things it provokes him and reminds him of things to tell me that he may not remember otherwise.²⁸

However, for many Monacans there is a marked difference between the Homecoming and the Pow Wow. Buddy Johns put it succinctly, “I guess basically ‘Homecoming’ is a good word because there’s more fellowship going on among the people. They’re not busy trying to run booths and maintain ticket lines. Some of the guys, of course, are parking vehicles and all, but not nearly as much. I think it gives our people more time to fellowship with each other.”²⁹ Indeed, the Homecoming is not nearly as labor-intensive as the Pow Wow, and allows for more flexibility and open socializing among tribal members. This, however, evokes an important point. Many Monacans will turn out for the pow wow and work all weekend—and even days before and after, setting up and cleaning up—who may not appear at any other tribal events for the rest of the year. A regular crew of Monacan men spends three days parking cars in the fields adjacent to the pasture

where the arena and vendors are set up; other men haul non-stop water and trash after having set up temporary fences and electrical circuits. Women tend the tribal concession stands and set up the tables for the Saturday night feast with food they have prepared in their own homes. As previously noted, most of these people do not attend other pow wows on a regular basis, and few dance at the Monacan pow wow except during specified honoring songs. What accounts for their dedication to this event?

It is tempting to attribute their efforts to the fact that the Monacan Pow Wow is the tribe's primary source of annual revenue. Indeed, with money raised from the first two pow wows the tribe was able to purchase 120 acres of land on Bear Mountain, which included a symbolically important settlement and Monacan cemetery. By 1999 the land was paid for in full, almost entirely from pow wow revenues. However, many of those who pour their efforts into the pow wow are not on hand the rest of the year to reap the material benefits of pow wow revenues.

Dovie Ramsey, who grew up in neighboring Rockbridge County in the mid-twentieth century spoke for many who have found the pow wow to be particularly appealing. "To be in the circle, you know, with the Indian people, the Native Americans, that's a time of renewal. And when you come to the Homecoming, that's coming home to gather. I say it's a spiritual difference in it."³⁰ These words may sound like common utterances in a pan-Indian context, but they must be understood in a local and *personal* context. Dovie came from one of a number of families in neighboring counties who, in spite of their proximity to Bear Mountain and surrounding areas, were increasingly isolated from social and political life in that community as the twentieth century progressed. While the situation in Rockbridge and other counties was no better for people whose surnames fell on Plecker's so-called "hit list" of people to be classified as "colored," they were not subjected to the layer of chastisement as a *community* of racial "others" that salient groups such as the Amherst County Indians were. At the same time, they had to contend with being victims of racial integrity policies without the same semblance of an empathetic community as Indians in historically visible communities. Thus, Dovie was part of a generation of Monacans who knew they were "Indian" but who were discouraged (if not forbidden) by parents and policymakers to voice or pursue a tribal affiliation, *per se*. (Ironically, Dovie is now regarded as an authority on certain aspects of traditional Monacan culture, especially for her impressive knowledge of local flora). Her use of the term "renewal" is understandable and telling in this context, and many Monacans concur for varying reasons.

Phyllis Hicks is one of the most respected individuals in the Monacan community. Even though she has always attended and worked closely with St. Paul's Church, she is held in high regard by those who felt alienated by missionaries in the past and those who never cared to attend the church. She grew up in the Bear Mountain community during the mid-twentieth century and was among the first Monacan children integrated into public schools (she attended the mission school through the third grade). Phyllis also spearheaded the Monacans' effort to gain state

recognition as an Indian tribe in the 1980s. Now she devotes most of her time to the Monacan Ancestral Museum, which she was instrumental in founding. For Phyllis, the pow wow and related activities generate a message of pride in Indian heritage that she believes will motivate tribal members—especially children—to grasp and preserve their heritage as *Monacans*. She expresses a strong desire for “our young people to dance, and for them to learn how to sing the Indian songs. Things that I didn’t get to do. I’m hoping all our young people will stay in it and try to learn it so they can pass it on to their children.” However, even though some dance styles and songs are adopted from Plains tradition, she does not regard this learning of “Indian” songs as an act of cultural appropriation, but as a means of escalating pride in tribal and community heritage: “Most importantly, as my great-grandmother would say all the time, jut remember who you are—you’re Indian. And that’s the reason the museum means so much to me, is that I want *our* history to be put in there so that when our children say they’re Indian they got history to back it up. They can say, ‘Hey, I got it, I know where it’s at, and I’m proud of who I am, and my history’s all together. And I don’t have to worry about trying to prove something, or trying to tell someone who I am and they not understanding who I am.”³¹

Phyllis’s words speak of both fear and lethargy as barriers to preserving and reclaiming Monacan history. Indeed, the politics of race, coupled with the colonial political economy that plagued the Monacans (and other Virginia tribes) for over three centuries resulted in intensive cultural loss and placed a strain on tribal, communal, and familial ties that held many indigenous communities together. Yet these ties were not severed completely, and these ties, coupled with the immense sociocultural fluidity of most North American indigenous groups have allowed the Monacans and others to survive as distinct indigenous communities.³² For Kenneth Branham, the pow wow is a celebration of the Monacans’ capacity to survive through adaptation to changing cultural and political circumstances, even when the odds seemed stacked against them: “I think [the pow wow] shows that although we are Indian, and we’re different in some ways, but yet we’re so much alike the community here in Amherst County and the state of Virginia, that that’s why a lot of people don’t feel like there are Indians here. Because we do blend in. But if it hadn’t been for that capability of blending into our surroundings we *would not* be here today. And that’s very important that we were able to do that.”³³

The recurring themes of survival, renewed pride, and change ring strong as Monacans ponder what the pow wow means to them. Dovie Ramsey’s eyes grew misty as she related her thoughts on what the pow wow means to her and what it should mean to all Monacans: “There comes a time in all of our lives when we need to stop a while—if they would do it, and while they’re going in the circle—just think, ‘What a heritage we’ve got!’ And how things had been once, and now we can really have a pow wow, where before they couldn’t even have a decent life.”³⁴ Indeed, there does come a time during the pow wow when all Monacans are beckoned into the arena, when everyone leaves their booths, gates, and sundry duties, and makes a round in the circle for an honor song. Whether all share her

sentiments while making the round is difficult to ascertain. However, it is perhaps clear to everyone in the circle at that time more than ever that the pow wow is an overtly *public* event.

In their study of the North Carolina Wacamaw Sioux Pow Wow as a *tribal* “identity marker,” Lerch and Bullers point out that the particular pow wow in question was important from its inception in 1970 to the community as a means of “communicating the presence of the Wacamaw to a much larger audience than ever before possible . . .”³⁵ Indeed, this is true of many tribally-sponsored pow wows in the eastern United States, particularly when the host is a non-federally recognized tribe. As Lerch and Bullers point out, the importance of “being known as Indian” is both personal and political.³⁶ While many Wacamaws have come to perceive their pow wow as a “traditional” community activity (perhaps by virtue of the fact that it has been in existence for over thirty years), tribes such as the Monacan Nation can certainly admit to the same personal and political interest in their pow wow. This public gathering marks the nexus of and blurring of lines between three worlds for the Monacans—the Monacan community, the Pan-Indian or intertribal sphere of activity, and the larger public of which Indians and non-Indians are a part. It is this interaction with the non-Monacan world that makes the pow wow meaningful within the community context. On the final morning of the Monacans’ Ninth Annual Pow Wow, Chief Branham contemplated the importance of the interactions taking place at this event:

I think it’s one of our major learning tools that we have. Ten years ago most of our kids, none of our grownups, knew how to do any type of dancing. And you know, we were just like the normal public, even though we were Indian people. Since then we’ve realized that there are a lot of different Indian people across this country and on this continent. And a lot of them went through the very same thing that we went through, especially the ones on the east coast. And we can also explain to people [who ask], “hey, you know, why don’t you look like the Indians we see on TV?” The pow wow has enabled us to get into our culture. I think it has brought a lot of respect to our young people and to our elders.³⁷

Lloyd Johns concurred: “[the Pow Wow] is very important to us. It demonstrates the community, our pride in who we are. It gives us a chance to show ourselves off in a good light to the county and surrounding areas. It also brings in other tribes and cultures, and we can share with them, and learn from them. They can learn from us. We get to see people from other nations, see how they react to things and what pride they take in their tribal status, or whatever. And I think that’s very enlightening to our people.”³⁸

Implicit in both of the above statements is a notion of incubating *political* solidarity with other Indians. Given the Monacans’ unique and turbulent history in their dealings with non-Indians, there is certainly a degree of collective comfort to be found in relating to other indigenous groups whose historical experiences have been comparable. However, such recognition from other indigenous groups

certainly helps to bolster the Monacans' political *image* as Indians at a time when the tribe (along with Virginia's seven other state-recognized tribes) is seeking federal recognition. Nonetheless, it is dangerous to assume that acquiring federal recognition is a prominent motive behind the pow wow from any Monacans. In fact, many Monacans, although they support efforts to pursue federal recognition, do not care whether they ultimately gain such acknowledgement. Instead, bolstering their political image as "Indians" is part and parcel to reclaiming their history as a community and as Monacans.

How might the pow wow, which is a fundamentally Pan-Indian activity, facilitate the process of historical and cultural reclamation (and in some cases, revitalization) within the Monacan community? Quite simply, it is a source of inspiration to pursue hidden elements of the Monacan past and to revitalize dormant traditions, however subtle. This occurs in a variety of ways. For instance, one finds that while relatively few Monacans own ceremonial regalia, an increasing number of them who do are trying to emulate traditional Eastern Siouan clothing to the best of their ability. While the use of Plains-style regalia is prevalent at many pow wows, one finds a growing movement in the east toward the use of Eastern Woodland styles that are tribally-specific when possible. While historical information on such clothing among the Monacans and their affiliates at the time of European contact is scant, efforts have been made to reconstruct the material past through subsequent anthropological data and through comparative research on other Eastern Woodland cultures.³⁹ When Kenneth Branham was first elected as Chief of the Monacan Nation, he was presented with a Plains-style head dress and buckskin shirt and leggings for ceremonial occasions, including the pow wow. While he took pride in wearing this regalia, primarily because he remembered a time when it would have been dangerous to do so, he explained his own transition toward more accurate regalia: "You know, we've lost so much here on the east coast. Again, we get into the stereotype stuff. But I think we need to show them [the general public] that yes, we're Indian, but we're also different. And I think we need to teach everybody that not all Indians killed buffalo and lived in tipis. So I think it's very important [to wear regionally accurate regalia]. And the reason I've been slow is because I've been trying to find what type of headwear that the chiefs wore."⁴⁰ Kenneth now wears an Eastern Woodland contact-era outfit which is predominantly made from trade cloth. Fittingly enough, he is also employed as a cultural/historical interpreter at a contact-era model Monacan village at Natural Bridge Park, thirty miles west of Bear Mountain. Dovie Ramsey, on the other hand, has never worn Plains-style regalia. For her it is important to dance with Eastern Woodland regalia (which for her includes a calico trade cloth dress) out of respect for her ancestors. "That was our grandmothers that wore the long dresses, you know. And after the settlers started coming over and they got material, they made dresses like this I got on. And I think it reflects your respect for them."⁴¹

By trying to wear (to the best of their knowledge) distinctly Monacan (or at least Eastern Siouan) regalia, Monacans seek to distinguish themselves from other

Indians. The pow wow presents the ideal occasion for such a moment of distinction. However, as the above statements indicate, it is also a time for the Monacans to realize what they hold in common, historically and politically, with other indigenous peoples. These statements also allude to the importance of the pow wow, both as an intertribal and as a community gathering, in conveying a message to the non-Indian public. While it is a positive experience for Monacans to have Indians from other nations attend their gathering and thereby embrace them as indigenous peoples, it is critically important that non-Indians respect their open assertion of tribal identity. Given the deplorable record of Indian and non-Indian relations in Amherst County, one can understand how sensitive many Monacans might be, especially in light of the fact that it took four years before the Monacans could actually move their pow wow to Amherst County. Yet the move seems to have paid off in many ways. In spite of pouring rains, the 1997 pow wow drew a record crowd, most of whom were non-Indians, and grossed over \$35,000 at the gate. Moreover, if the entire endeavor is too young for the Monacans to consider it a "tradition," it seems that it is not far from becoming one for many non-Indians in the community. Buddy Johns related the following observation to that end: "I was talking to a friend of mine who's Caucasian, and he was talking about how there's a group [of non-Indians] there that's talking about how they enjoy coming to the pow wow. That they see people here that they don't see but maybe every pow wow, and how it's really become a thing that's galvanizing the community. A lot of these people I see here every year. Seems like it's something that draws them all together."⁴²

The Monacan Pow Wow has had a galvanizing effect on the larger community of Amherst County and surrounding areas. County Schools send busloads of elementary school children for Students' Day at the pow wow (the Friday before the grand entry), where once these buses refused to pick up Monacan children who were legally entitled to attend public school. County law enforcement officials gladly provide assistance in traffic control and security (which has never really been an issue), where forty years ago their primary interaction with Indians entailed keeping them out of local restaurants. Most importantly, scores of local non-Indians *willingly* attend the pow wow on a regular basis. Words can barely convey what this means to many Monacan people, especially those who had to endure the peculiar politics of race that left no space for Indians in Virginia during much of the twentieth century. In the 1980s a core group of Monacans started the movement to reclaim their history (and community pride therein), a movement that was given a significant boost when in 1984 local historian Peter W. Houck penned a highly-speculative but sensitive book on the Monacans entitled, *Indian Island in Amherst County*.⁴³ However, the book was not uniformly celebrated by all in the Monacan community, and the process of gaining community support for the movement to reclaim Monacan history has not been easy. Yet the pow wow has made a difference, as Buddy Johns described as he relaxed after the Saturday evening meal during the 2001 pow wow: "I just passed a lady there a couple of

minutes ago that, well, I can remember when Dr. Houck wrote the book, *Indian Island*. I know a number of years went by she wouldn't even pick the book up. She didn't want to even mention the word 'Indian', you know. She'd been beaten so badly with the prejudice over the years she didn't want to do anything or get involved at all. And I passed her there and she's one of the most active members now. It definitely makes a difference."⁴⁴

The question remains: is the Monacan pow wow an *identity maker*? Perhaps not in the strict sense that Fredrik Barth crafted the term to explain how many ethnic groups use their most salient and distinct cultural elements (e.g., language, specific art forms, and so forth) to distinguish themselves as unique from all other groups with a single symbol (Barth, 1969). However, it is an identity marker in the more flexible sense that Lerch and Bullers use the term—not as a traditional activity, but as a community event that occurs along aide (and often accentuates) local cultural forms and dynamics. As stated, it is the only pow wow that many (if not most) Monacans attend (and many do not wear regalia), thereby obscuring the argument that it is a simple appropriation of pan-Indian cultural forms. Nor is it a distinctly (or exclusive) community event, as is the case with the Monacan Homecoming, which adds a layer of regional distinctiveness. For example, many Virginia tribes—notably the Chickahominies—incorporate their annual pow wow into their homecoming festivities. Yet many Monacans attend the pow wow who do not attend the Homecoming for previously stated reasons relating to past infractions within the community. For them, the pow wow provides a somewhat neutral space to reconsider their place in the community again, while for all Monacans the pow wow provides a space to reconsider and rearticulate their status as indigenous people in Amherst County. Thus, the Monacan pow wow constitutes a fluid identity marker that not only distinguishes the Monacans as a people, but serves as a point at which their cultural and political identity in relation to non-Indians locally and to other Indians nationally—and just as significantly, to each other—is constantly being negotiated.

“That’s what a Pow Wow’s about”

On Saturday, May 19, 2001, sometime around 3 p.m., emcee Marvin Burnette called all dancers into the arena at the Ninth Annual Monacan Nation Pow Wow and announced a dance contest to begin immediately. Within seconds, Bob Seeger's "Old Time Rock and Roll" blasted through the PA system, taking everyone by surprise. A few seconds passed before the shock and confusion wore off and almost everyone present burst into laughter as dancers ad-libbed it.

However, not everyone laughed. As Kenneth Branham stood on the outskirts of the arena trying to contain himself, a non-Indian woman with her children stood next to him with a half-squint and thought out loud, "Well, this is not what I expected." As Chief of the Monacan Nation, Kenneth recognized a situation calling for tact and diplomacy when he saw one. He explained to the disappointed

spectator, “Ma’am, we’re just like everybody else. We’re having a little fun. That’s what a pow wow’s about.”⁴⁵

Such is the ongoing predicament of being Indian in Virginia in the twenty-first century. Like most indigenous groups in the east, Virginia Indians have endured prolonged contact with non-Indians for almost 400 years. Ironically, the larger non-Indian public expects them to behave as if such contact has been extremely limited, or to resign any claims to Indian heritage entirely. However, the Monacans know as well as anyone that culture is not static. That understanding has allowed them to survive. It also lies at the heart of the pow wow. While most tribal participants work until they are thoroughly exhausted—so hard that it would be difficult to imagine them enjoying themselves by any means— they understand the pow wow as something that they present on their own terms. It is a space where they negotiate—or more appropriately, articulate—their identity as *contemporary* Monacans and as people of integrity with other indigenous peoples and with non-Indians. They do so because they *can*. That is why they have a pow wow.

Notes

1. The eight state-recognized tribes in Virginia are the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Upper Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock. None of these tribes is federally recognized as yet. In addition to including one representative from each Virginia tribe, the Virginia Council on Indians (VCI) includes “at large” members who reside in the state but belong to other Indian nations. The VCI also includes certain state legislators who have demonstrated an interest in Indian affairs.

2. Thomas, “Pan-Indianism,” 81.

3. James Clifford provides an innovative multi-vocal discussion of such criticism and its negative impact on a New England indigenous group in his essay on the Mashpee Wampanoags in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988: 277-346).

4. We use this less structured approach as a means of placing emphasis on *local* meaning. Such an emphasis on community dialogue guides Lassiter’s work on Kiowa Gourd Dance Song, the meaning of which, he argues, can only be understood through such discourses (as opposed to standard interpretations such as musical notation). See Luke E. Lassiter, “‘Charlie Brown’: Not Just Another Essay on the Gourd Dance,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* vol. 24, no. 4 (1997): 75-103; See also, Lassiter (1998: 154-167).

5. Lassiter, *The Power of Kiowa Song*, 10. For earlier discussions of the concept of collaborative or dialogical ethnography see, e.g., Elaine J. Lawless, “‘I was Afraid Someone Like You . . . An Outsider . . . would Misunderstand’: Negotiating Interpretive Differences Between Ethnographers and Subjects,” *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 301-14, and Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

6. For a basic description of pre-contact Monacan society and territory (ca. 900-1600 AD) see Jeffrey Hantman, “Between Powhatan and Quirank: Reconstructing Monacan Culture and History in the Context of Jamestown,” *American Anthropologist* vol. 92, no.

3 (1990): 676-690. Some of the better-known indigenous entities in the alliance were the so-called Monacans proper (settled near the falls of the James River at the time of European contact in 1608), Tutelos, Saponis, Occaneechis, and Manahoacs. While some scholars, including Hantman, often refer to the indigenous groups in this vast territory as comprising a "confederacy," we prefer the term *alliance* as it more accurately reflects the sociopolitical fluidity of the region.

7. Many of the Tutelos and Saponies migrated into the Iroquois Confederacy in the mid-eighteenth century and were adopted into the Cayuga Nation. Vestiges of their ceremonies and language survive on the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, Canada.

8. Peter Houck's suggestion that the settlers from the east were predominantly white traders (who brought with them English surnames, such as Johns and Branham, which became common among Monacans) has been commonly accepted until recently. However, the authors and others have recently found documents linking the lineal ancestors of certain Monacan families to Tidewater Indians in the early eighteenth century. For Houck's account see his book, *Indian Island in Amherst County* (Lynchburg, Va.: Lynchburg Historical Research Co., 1984).

9. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 56-60; McLeRoy and McLeRoy (1993).

10. For a good discussion on how miscegenation law was elaborated upon and interpreted to maintain white privilege in the postbellum South see Eva Saks, "Representing Miscegenation Law," *Raritan* 8 (1988): 39-69.

11. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 85-108. For an excellent discussion of the eugenics movement in Virginia, including Plecker's role in the international movement and his obsession with Amherst County, see J. David Smith, *The Eugenic Assault on America: Scenes in Red, White, and Black* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 1993). In fact, the Monacans were the focus of a major eugenic study during Plecker's tenure that characterized the people in the community around Bear Mountain as chronically retarded, mixed-race degenerates. This widely circulated book, entitled, *Mongrel Virginians*, is etched in the collective memory of the Monacan People as a dark moment in their history. It has also created a historical wariness of scholars seeking to do research in the community. See Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan McDougal, *Mongrel Virginians* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1926).

12. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 65-77.

13. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 108-114. There is another Indian community in Amherst County known as the Buffalo Ridge Cherokees, many of whom share lineal descendants with people in the Bear Mountain community. The contemporary existence of these two (relatively) mutually exclusive indigenous groups is largely attributable to historical factionalism among local Indian families that was aggravated by racial integrity policies. See, e.g., Horace R. Rice, *The Buffalo Ridge Cherokee: The Color and Culture of a Virginia Indian Community* (Madison Heights, Va.: BRC Books, 1991).

14. Lucian Branham, recorded conversation with Samuel R. Cook, Bear Mountain, Virginia, 1 July 1996.

15. Anonymous collaborator recorded conversation with Samuel R. Cook, Bear Mountain, Virginia, 20 June 1996. Some collaborators opted to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of some of the information they provided.

16. Gray, 1908: 1. Gray was specifically commenting on the Monacans' opposition to being called "Issues." Derived from the pre-Civil War term, "Free Issue," in reference to slaves who had been *issued* papers for freedom, by the turn of the twentieth century

it evolved into a derogatory term in Amherst County, roughly the equivalent of calling someone a mixed-race degenerate.

17. L. Branham, 1 July 1996.

18. Dovie Ramsey, recorded conversation with authors, Elon, Virginia, 20 May 2001.

19. Kenneth Branham, recorded conversation with authors, Bear Mountain, Virginia, 20 May 2001.

20. Diana Laws, recorded conversation with authors, Elon, Virginia, 19 May 2001.

21. Lloyd "Buddy" Johns, recorded conversation with authors, Elon, Virginia, 19 May 2001.

22. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 114-116; Houck, *Indian Island*, 104-108.

23. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 116-124. The process through which tribes become state-recognized in Virginia is quite rigorous. While the state legislature is responsible for codifying the act of recognition, the actual decision is in the hands of the Virginia Council on Indians, which examines evidence of a tribe's historical existence and community continuity.

24. The Monacan Pow Wow was officially part of his circuit for the first four years of its existence.

25. Diane Johns Shields, recorded conversation with Samuel R. Cook, Amherst, Virginia, 27 June 1996.

26. Johns Shields, 27 June 1996.

27. K. Branham, 20 May 2001.

28. Laws, 19 May 2001.

29. Johns, 19 May 2001.

30. Ramsey, 20 May 2001.

31. Phyllis Hicks, recorded conversation with Samuel R. Cook, Bear Mountain, Virginia, 20 June 1996.

32. Cook, *Monacans and Miners*, 60-65, 97-103. For a discussion of the endurance of indigenous (ethnic) groups in the context of intense culture change and nation-state development, see Edward H. Spicer, "The Nations of a State," *American Indian Persistence and Resurgence* ed. Karl Kroeber (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 27-49.

33. K. Branham, 20 May 2001.

34. Ramsey, 20 May 2001.

35. Lerch and Bullers, "Pow Wows as Identity Markers," 392.

36. *Ibid.*

37. K. Branham, 20 May 2001.

38. Johns, 19 May 2001.

39. Anthropological data on Tutelo-Saponi ceremonies that were incorporated into the Cayuga ceremonial complex after the latter were adopted into the Iroquois Confederacy have yielded some clues regarding Monacan ceremonial regalia. See, e.g., Frank G. Speck, *The Tutelo Adoption Ceremony: Reclathing the Living in the Name of the Dead* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1942); Gertrude P. Kurath, *Tutelo Rituals on Six Nations Reserve, Ontario* Ann Arbor: The Society for Ethnomusicology, 1981).

40. K. Branham, 20 May 2001.

41. Ramsey, 20 May 2001.

42. Johns, 19 May 2001.

43. Houck, 1984.

44. Johns, 19 May 2001.
45. K. Branham, 20 May 2001.

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