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**Reclaiming Indigeneity and Sovereignty:  
Anticolonial Resistance among Indigenous Peoples in Northeastern Turtle Island**

by  
Leah W. Kelly

In partial fulfillment of  
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with International and Intercultural Studies  
May 2021

Pitzer College, Claremont, California  
Professor Erich Steinman and Professor Lako Tongun

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## ABSTRACT

Indigenous peoples living on Turtle Island, or what is now known as North America, are under constant threat of both erasure and domination. This study explores the intersecting concepts of Indigenous identity and sovereignty through the perspectives of Indigenous interviewees in the Northeast region of the continent as they navigate settler-colonial society and practice anticolonial resistance. It reveals the ways in which colonizing forces reappropriate and redefine the meanings of indigeneity and sovereignty in order to control Indigenous peoples and inhibit their ability to live self-sustainably. Incorporating qualitative sociological research methods, decolonizing methodologies, a settler-colonial framework, previous scholarly literature, and interviews with 12 participants, this study seeks to answer two main questions: 1) How has settler-colonial society reconstructed notions of Indigenous identity and sovereignty in a way that harms Indigenous peoples? 2) How can Indigenous peoples reclaim the meanings and practices of indigeneity and sovereignty to achieve justice in a colonized world?

On a broader level, this thesis seeks to amplify Indigenous voices and contribute in some way to their fight for justice. It also attempts to provide non-Indigenous people with a better understanding of the challenges facing their Indigenous neighbors on this continent. Finally, it highlights a path forward for Indigenous peoples' resistance, illustrating how by reclaiming indigeneity and sovereignty, Indigenous peoples can more effectively assert their rights, escape settler-colonial control, and achieve justice for their communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, or what settlers call “North America,” over the past four centuries is one of erasure. I am not only referring to the physical genocide of millions of Natives, but also to the annihilation of their histories, cultures, and identities. Erasure is the dispossession of people from their lands, their forced cultural assimilation, the breaking up of families, exclusion from history textbooks, caricatures on football jerseys, appropriated traditions, loss of language, and the assumption of extinction by the majority of the non-Indigenous population. Erasure is being stripped of a way of living that has endured for millennia and forced into an invisible corner of the world without the basic means to self-sustain or make decisions. Erasure is being told one is not “enough” of one’s own identity to be considered legitimate, or being denied the right of autonomy, or to not even be given back the smallest fraction of what was stolen. Settler-colonialism, the type of colonization that replaces one people with another by force, functions through erasure.

This study focuses on two major concepts that are often invoked in contemporary discourse surrounding Indigenous resistance against colonization: identity and sovereignty. While they may seem like two separate ideas, they are in fact inextricably interconnected. Both Indigenous identity, also referred to as “indigeneity,” and Indigenous sovereignty are under constant threat from settler-colonial society, which dominates the U.S. and Canada today. As this study will show, settlers have consistently reappropriated the concepts of indigeneity and sovereignty and reworked them to their own advantage in order to oppress and/or erase Indigenous peoples. To steal a people’s identity and sovereignty is to steal everything that makes them who they are, a strategy that has worked time and again over centuries of colonization. I started this study eager to hear directly

from Indigenous peoples in the Northeast region of the U.S. and Canada about their experiences and about how indigeneity and sovereignty might play a central role in their everyday lives as they struggle to resist settler-colonialism. Thus, the two main research questions of this thesis are: 1) How has settler-colonial society reconstructed notions of Indigenous identity and sovereignty in a way that harms Indigenous peoples? 2) How can Indigenous peoples reclaim the meanings and practices of indigeneity and sovereignty to achieve justice in a colonized world?

More generally, the overarching aim of this study is to help amplify Indigenous voices and experiences so as to help counteract erasure. I believe that by examining the ways in which settler-colonialism has manipulated the ideas of indigeneity and sovereignty, we can better understand the subversive forces of colonization and thus how to combat them. Little sociological research has been done regarding Indigenous justice in general, let alone on these specific concepts, leaving me to rely on just a few bodies of literature as a starting point. Erich Steinman's article, "Decolonization not Inclusion: Indigenous Resistance to American Settler Colonialism" (2016) provides a comprehensive description of settler-colonialism and its effects on Indigenous sovereignty. Jean M. O'Brien's book, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (2010) gives a detailed overview of how colonization works to "erase" Indigenous peoples and their identities from history. Stephen Cornell and Joseph P. Kalt's *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (1998) presents the framework for examining issues of ethnic identity and identity construction in this study. Mark Edwin Miller's work, *Forgotten Tribes: Unrecognized Indians and the Federal Acknowledgement Process* (2004), demonstrates the U.S.'s restrictive policies aimed at tribal nations when seeking federal recognition and how these criteria are often tied up in issues of "proving" identity. Joanne Barker's collection of essays, *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-*



*Determination* (2005), discusses the significance of sovereignty as the concept developed in the modern world and the intersection between identity and sovereignty in Indigenous movements today. Finally, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012) guided my research methods throughout the study, ensuring I understood how to best approach working with Indigenous peoples in a way that would contribute to their cause, not harm it.

This thesis is one of very few sociological studies to center on conversations with Indigenous peoples themselves. I am therefore contributing to the effort to prevent further erasure and silencing. It also breaks barriers by focusing on the Northeast region of Turtle Island—what is now referred to as New England, New York, and southeastern Canada—as an area not well represented in the existing literature, which usually concentrates on tribes in the West. I hope to illuminate the existence of northeastern tribal nations and show that, despite an onslaught of attempted eradication by colonizers, they are very much alive and resilient. I interviewed 12 Indigenous people who in total represent about 15 distinct tribal nations from eight different states and provinces. I recruited them through family connections after obtaining approval from Pitzer College's Institutional Review Board. Interviews took place over video conferencing on Zoom and lasted from one to two hours each. I then transcribed each interview and used coding software to analyze the data. I sought to interview people from a variety of backgrounds and was successful in finding participants of different ages, occupations, tribal statuses, and cultural roles. Full transcripts of each interview can be found in Appendix B.

The findings from this study generally support the assumptions I held from the beginning as well as the information I discovered through my literature review. Participants held varying conceptions of the meanings of indigeneity and sovereignty, but they all seemed to agree that those

two terms are at the forefront of current dialogue surrounding Indigenous rights and tribal nations' goals. Their testimonies affirmed my working theory that although colonizer institutions have consistently used contrived notions of indigeneity and sovereignty against Indigenous peoples, those concepts can also be reclaimed and reconstructed by Indigenous peoples to attain their own goals. The most valuable insights from my conversations with Indigenous participants lay in their many real-life examples of issues I had only read or theorized about. They are on the ground every day, working for their tribal communities and organizing for social justice. Many participants talked personally about how their identities are threatened by settler-colonialism and what they want their sovereignty to look like. They expressed the tribulations they have undergone when attempting to get tribal federal recognition, make their nations more self-sustaining, and retain their cultures across generations. They taught me about essential Indigenous values such as respect for land and the Earth, the importance of passing knowledge, and constantly keeping ancestors close to oneself. Finally, they highlighted the ways in which Indigenous peoples are constantly resisting settler-colonialism and taking care of each other to persevere despite all odds. The experiences featured in this study support the necessity of increasing interactions and forming better relationships between settler-colonial and Indigenous communities.

Before delving into the body of this thesis, I must provide several disclaimers. I am not Indigenous to North America, and therefore I do not pretend to speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples. This study is an attempt to relay the opinions and experiences of Indigenous participants to primarily non-Indigenous readers in the hope of fostering more intercultural understanding. However, there are pieces of settler-colonial influence that are hard to avoid when engaging in this research. The English language, with its colonizer-derived names for certain places and things, is an inadequate form of real Indigenous knowledge transmission. For example, while I did decide

to call this continent Turtle Island in the title of my thesis, throughout the body of the thesis, I will have to use colonizer names like “North America,” “the U.S.,” and “Canada” to describe geographical locations, as most readers will be non-Indigenous and thus more familiar with those. To use such names is to deny the existence of millions of people who have lived here since as long as 15,000 years prior to the so-called “age of discovery.” It is to rewrite history from the colonizer perspective, in which places, things, and people only come into existence when they come into European awareness. As will be revealed later, many Indigenous peoples do not like any of the words non-Indigenous people use to describe them; while “Indigenous” or “Native” are the labels of choice today, they are still considered dehumanizing to some. Thus, while I will be using certain colonizer words throughout this thesis, I wish I did not have to. But the truth is that no non-Indigenous person on this continent can avoid falling into this trap of potentially erasing, denying, and rewriting Indigenous existence, because we live on land that bears the scars of four hundred years of colonization and genocide and we experience that legacy through everyday participation in the destructive, unremitting force known as settler-colonial society. Every action, from the common practice of speaking English to the razing of the natural environment, is deeply rooted in our colonial inheritance. To acknowledge this is to begin to undo Indigenous erasure and build toward an improved future.

The rest of this thesis will begin with a review of the existing literature on settler-colonialism, identity construction, Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, and many complex issues in between. I will then discuss the methodologies I used and how I conducted the study, including detailed information about the participants and the use of coding in analysis. The subsequent four chapters comprise the major analysis of the data. Chapter I discusses participants’ feelings about the impact of colonization, problems with the Federal Acknowledgement Process, and how they

work to resist settler-colonialism on a daily basis. Chapter II delves into conceptions of identity, what it means to be Indigenous, identity assignment and legitimization, and race-related issues for Native peoples. Chapter III explores opinions on sovereignty, including what it looks like in theory and in practice. Chapter IV concludes with an overview of how participants are continuing to help their communities, what their major aspirations are, and how non-Indigenous people can become effective allies. This thesis ends with a conclusion and discussion that will wrap up the interconnected themes of indigeneity and sovereignty and reflect on how future research may be conducted on this topic.

This thesis is a response to the deep-seated issues I have witnessed that impede the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples every day. One could argue that the situation is better for Indigenous peoples today than it was just a few decades ago; for instance, the U.S. government has replaced its policy of forced assimilation with one recognizing the “sovereignty” of tribal nations. But the same issues that have caused Indigenous erasure and oppression for so long are still in place, albeit in different forms. Indigenous peoples are still at the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder and are among the most vulnerable in society. Federal government relations are difficult to navigate. And the general non-Indigenous population remains oblivious to these problems, as it has been trained to filter Indigenous peoples out of collective awareness. However, while I may have begun this study dismayed and discouraged by these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, in the end I am left feeling hopeful and uplifted by the many inspiring conversations I have had with Indigenous people throughout this research. I want other people from settler-colonial society to share in the newfound insights this study can bring and be equally inspired to act on behalf of justice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Settler-Colonialism*

*Replacement myths.* One cannot write about Indigenous peoples in the “Americas” today without first seriously considering the impact of settler-colonialism. According to Glenn (2015), unlike traditional colonialism, settler-colonialism is a “distinct transnational formation” and should be seen “not as an event but as an ongoing structure” (pp. 54;57). Within this structure, settlers produce an ideological “replacement narrative” to justify their presence on stolen land (O’Brien 2010:xxii). By painting Natives as residing only in the past and white Europeans as bringing modern civilization to the land, settlers were and still are able to perpetuate a fictitious history about a continent that only came into existence upon the arrival of Europeans. Through the construction of this “origin myth,” settlers “implicitly make arguments about what counts as legitimate history, and who counts as legitimate peoples” (O’Brien 2010:xviii). Thus, public perception among members of settler-colonial society has been carefully crafted around a belief in their inherent right to live on colonized land. Steinman (2016) gives a more comprehensive description of the settler-colonial operation:

Settler colonialism aims to create a new version of the home or metropolitan society in a different land; settler supersession of indigenous nationhood and presence is the underlying goal for settler colonial societies. This requires settlers to displace the indigenous nations and populations rather than, as in “classic” colonialism, coercively control their labor in the process of extracting resources. Thus settler domination is for substitution or elimination rather than for extraction. Settler normativity is foundational; processes of settlement institutionalize settler privileges materially and discursively, constructing settlers and their culture as superior and modern and indigenous nations and their cultures as inferior and primitive. An asymmetrical settler-Native binary is sustained; separation between settlers and indigenous groups is rigidly enforced. (P. 221)

Glenn and Steinman belong to a growing group of scholars who call for the use of a settler-colonial framework in sociological scholarship about Indigenous peoples in order to “bring into clear view the ongoing modes of domination that contemporary indigenous peoples are resisting”

(Steinman 2016:221). Furthermore, Glenn suggests that this framework is vital to understanding the history of race and gender formation, arguing that “masculine whiteness thus became central to settler identity, a status closely tied to ownership of property and political sovereignty” (2015:60). As a hierarchy was established with white colonizers at the top and nonwhite Indigenous peoples at the bottom, Native dispossession became accepted as a natural consequence of progress; in other words, “settler colonialism obscures the conditions of its own production” (Veracini 2010:78). The violent massacre of Indigenous tribal nations was disguised as the protection of the settler community, while the illegal seizure of land and creation of borders was reconceived as a rightful confirmation of “territorial sovereignty that provides the contest for national identification of Whiteness” (Veracini 2010:78; Moreton-Robertson 2008:85).

The settler-colonial replacement narrative is especially relevant to the geographical area of what is now called New England. O’Brien (2010) writes that southern New England was the original site of the practice of “firsting,” a term she coined which “asserts that non-Indians were the first people to erect the proper institutions of a social order worthy of notice” (p. xii). The idea of modernity is implicit in this process, as its very premise relies on the existence of its opposite, the uncivilized-and-therefore-unworthy other. By preserving the idea of Indigenous peoples as “in the past,” settlers “actively produced their own modernity” (O’Brien 2010:xxiii). Through her examination of a variety of primary sources dating back to the early decades of colonization in the region, O’Brien shows how “local narrators took up the histories of the exact places their audiences lived...the overwhelming message of these narratives was that local Indians had disappeared” (2010:xiii). Because the authorship of local histories was maintained as “the exclusive purview of Anglo Americans,” the narratives remain entirely one-sided (O’Brien 2010:xxiii).

Equally as important is the practice of “historical production,” in which replacement narratives are validated by symbols referencing Indigenous pasts that are scattered throughout settler-colonial society, such as monuments, place names, relics, ruins, and landscapes (O’Brien 2010:56). These overt, ubiquitous symbols evoke in members of settler-colonial society the false memory of a history in which Indigenous peoples went extinct, “fill[ing] that silence with narratives of power about the event they celebrate” (Trouillot 1995:118). As Bonds and Inwood (2016) describe it, “national mythologies affirm settler histories, sanitizing violent dispossession through narratives of wild, untamed frontiers and rugged white individualism” (p. 723). Thus, as traditional colonialism persists in the present-day United States, settler-colonialism and its ideological discourse serve to purposely “obscure” this persistence as nothing more than a “historical trace” and to “naturalize settlers by habitation and descent” (Goldstein 2008:834).

*Capitalism and ideology.* A primary feature of ongoing settler-colonialism in North America is modern capitalism, a major contributor to successfully exerting and maintaining settler power. Murphy (2018) uses Karl Marx’s definition of capitalist primitive accumulation, or “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means to production” to argue that primitive accumulation is an active force in the implementation of settler-colonialism that continues to shape our social relations (Marx 1978:432; Murphy 2018:49). The expansion of modern capitalism across the continent went hand-in-hand with dispossession, as settlers sought to violently eradicate traditional Indigenous economies and political structures, replacing them with systems of private land ownership, displacement, debt, slavery, and state rather than tribal governance (Murphy 2018:47). Because Indigenous nations were and still are deeply rooted in their connection to the land, “white European capitalist accumulation” is built upon “the dismantling of indigenous sovereignties and relationships to land” (Murphy 2018:50). Capitalist colonization, then,

functioned by coercing Indigenous tribal nations into selling them their land under threat of violence, depleting the Indigenous population, forcing them into debt and slavery, and eliminating their tribal autonomy by legitimizing the colonial government (Murphy 2018:61).

Just as historical narratives cemented the myth of European “firsting” in North America, economic narratives validated the capitalist agenda by excluding Indigenous peoples from their accounts. Harmon, O’Neill, and Rosier (2011) write that because Indigenous tribal nations traditionally adhered to a communal structure of shared material resources, they “represented the legal and cultural antithesis of the individuals and corporations whose profit seeking was the driving force of an industrializing U.S. economy” (pp. 700-701). Viewing Indigenous methods as backward and anti-European, settler-colonial authors of economic histories often neglected to include Indigenous peoples’ role in U.S. development, which in turn helped “characterize Euro-Americans’ conquest of the continent as expansion rather than imperialism” (Harmon et al. 2011:701;709). The English colonizer language itself also helped solidify the myth of the past-versus-present dichotomy which was used to assert European supremacy. Evidence suggests that settlers created the idea of “tribes” to paint a picture of unsovereign, uncivilized groups, whereas Indigenous peoples considered themselves “more as nations or peoples than organized political entities Europeans called tribes” (Miller 2004:9). The equating of capitalist expansion with bringing light to a dark past was central to colonization’s success in the U.S. and Canada.

Capitalism and racial ideology exist symbiotically in settler-colonial society. Having analyzed First Nations policies in Canada, Pasternak (2020) determines that “assimilation and segregation are both tendencies of colonization that protect the interests of white capital” (p. 301). To maintain supreme authority and jurisdiction, the Canadian government constructed racial differentiation guidelines that either prevent Indigenous peoples from participating in the market



economy or allow them to participate but deny them autonomy over development (Pasternak 2020:302). This “racial capitalism,” a theory first discussed by Black Marxists, asserts that capital is made possible only by “producing, exacerbating, and organizing extreme inequality between people and naturalizing it” (Pasternak 2020:303). By rejecting Indigenous nations’ autonomy and instead championing the narrative of modern European civilization, settler-colonial governments relegate Indigenous peoples into a racial group with low economic prospects. Speed (2019) expands upon this theme, noting that the current neoliberalist phase of capitalism uses the guise of multiculturalism to enable the “resurgence of open white supremacy” as a “response to the changing needs of white settler capitalist power” (p. 76). In practice, this means that neoliberal settler governments promise “inclusion and rights” for Indigenous peoples not out of goodwill but rather as a means to force them to “accept the settler state as the sovereign power that could grant them rights” (Speed 2019:87).

*Capitalism and tribal nations.* One point of contention among contemporary scholars is whether or not Indigenous nations today should strive to integrate into the settler-colonial capitalist economy or stay away from it entirely. On the side in favor of integration, Miller (2001) believes capitalist participation is vital to tribal nations because it allows them financial autonomy, rather than being trapped under “federal government control of reservation economic life” (p. 763). Therefore, he argues, tribal nations should pursue “capitalist ideas of private business ownership” (p. 763-764). Other theorists who agree with Miller think that capitalist ventures can also benefit Indigenous nations in culturally significant ways. Buntin’s (2010) study of Indigenous-owned tourism businesses in Alaska and New Zealand concludes that “Indigenous capitalism” can be used to “achieve ethical, culturally appropriate, and successful Indigenous participation within the global economy,” and that these endeavors can be achieved without sacrificing traditional

Indigenous values (pp. 285-286). Likewise, Parham (2012) claims that Natives in North America have eagerly sought out business ventures “while protecting culture and tradition” and even contributing to their “identity formation” as they learn to “survive and adapt to changing circumstances” (pp. 447;450). In other words, the ability to better understand settler-colonial ways opens new opportunities for Indigenous peoples to regain financial autonomy and retain their cultures. However, in some instances, capitalist participation is an absolute necessity, not a goal: as Miller (2004) shows, for the struggling Tiguas of El Paso, the tourism business was a “survival issue” (p. 235).

On the other side of the debate, Johnson (2010-11) argues that the risks associated with participating in western capitalism can outweigh the potential benefits due to inevitable discrimination, (p. 107). In agreement with Pasternak’s aforementioned argument about capitalism’s racist tendencies, Johnson points to the example of the Model Tribal Secured Transactions Act (MTSTA), the goal of which is to provide “financial capital to privately owned business in Indian Country,” as a case that will only lead to “further exploitation” on the grounds that it does not provide adequate debtor protection and will likely result in “unfair dealing and manipulation” to Indigenous peoples “because of their race” (2010-2011:107,108,116,119). He does concede that tribes can succeed in the capitalist economy if they “amass the vast startup capital necessary for innovation,” outside the control of the U.S. federal government (Johnson 2010-2011:140). However, most proponents of rejecting capitalism point to the racial inequality and noxious vestiges of colonization ingrained in settler-colonial institutions that will constantly work against Indigenous peoples, despite how hard they may try to integrate themselves. The main economic question facing tribal nations, then, is whether or not the profit from individual private ownership is worth the potential sacrifice of collective tribal sovereignty. As Pasternak (2014) puts

it, “the struggle between individual rights and collective rights comprises the politically contested terrain of settler-colonialism today” (p. 180).

Another reason why some scholars believe Indigenous nations should refrain from participation in settler-colonial capitalism is that it negatively affects tribal nations’ internal structural cohesion, which in turn hinders the preservation of traditional Indigenous culture and community. Rata’s (1999) theory of “neotribal capitalism” describes the structure of the modern tribal nation as a classed power hierarchy in which the “corporate tribe,” run by those she calls the “new tribal bourgeoisie,” is the owner of “the lands, waters, and knowledge” and thus controls all tribal economic resources (p. 240). Additionally, these tribal elites use “revised” tribal histories to justify legitimate tribal ownership of capital, masking class exploitation within the tribe with “revivalist beliefs” about preserving traditional Indigenous communal relations and culture (Rata 1999:234). In the neotribal capitalist theory, tribal leaders portray their situation as a return to a communal way of living while profiting off of the tribe’s undemocratic political system and total ownership of the means of production. Schroder (2003) connects this argument to the debate over tribal sovereignty, claiming that “defenses of ‘tribal sovereignty’ are little more than the advocacy for and defense of neotribal power” (p. 235). He also notes that the federal government supports neotribal capitalism by providing Indigenous tribes—meaning the tribal elites—with privileges that allow them to consolidate economic and political power (Schroder 2003:230). In this way, it is no longer simply the U.S. government or settler-colonial society that wields the power to harm Indigenous peoples economically. Rather, the nature of settler-colonial capitalism creates class divisions within tribal nations in a manner that they would not have otherwise experienced: “in this ideology, capitalism is acceptable (if not preferred) when it is indigenous people exploiting the land and each other” (Schroder 2003:233).

Settler-colonial capitalism is founded on several imperatives, summarized concisely here: “the eradication of Indigenous populations,” “the seizure and privatization of their lands, and the exploitation of marginalized peoples in a system of capitalism established by and reinforced through racism” (Speed 2019:78; Bonds and Inwood 2016:716). Capitalism’s combined usefulness in disguising the most violent aspects of colonization proves its importance in the achievement of the overall settler-colonialist agenda. Replacement narratives inscribe the worthiness of this agenda into society, sowing a sense of inherent right into settlers and their descendants as they forget or deny the crimes of the past.

### *Indigenous Identity*

*Constructing identity.* Researchers who study identity, and more specifically racial and ethnic identity, have long struggled with the issue of its source: nature or nurture? However, a more recent approach to the subject has created a nuanced view that combines the factors of both nature and nurture in explaining human identity. Cornell and Hartmann (1998) define this “constructionist” approach as a focus on “the ways in which ethnic and racial identities are built, rebuilt, and sometimes dismantled over time,” emphasizing the importance of group agency in “shaping their own identities” (p. 72). Racial and ethnic groups form through “reciprocal fluxion,” which is the interaction between assigned identity, or “what others say we are,” and asserted identity, or “what we claim to be” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:72). The power and agency of a group depends on the level of assignment or assertion afforded them, but most cases involve a mix of both.

The constructionist approach is evident in the case of the resurgence of Indigenous culture and identity beginning in the 1960s, when chance environmental factors needed to converge with

Indigenous peoples' coordinated actions in order for a successful revitalization of cultural identity to occur (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:79). Cornell and Hartmann call on Joanne Nagel's 1996 study to outline the key causes of this resurgence: externally, the success of the Civil Rights Movement and increased autonomy due to changing government policies; internally, Indigenous peoples themselves, who chose to practice traditional cultural activities, organize politically, and establish more self-determining systems of tribal governance (1998:79).

A benefit of constructionism is that it can shift people's mindsets away from stereotyping others based on what they perceive to be "inherent" traits. However, many people still see race and ethnicity as inborn determinants of one's true nature, a belief that perpetuates racism. Thus, while the constructionist approach highlights the agency with which individuals and groups can assert identity, it also warns of situations in which some "struggle to resist the stories told about them or to make their own stories heard at all" (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:251). On a sociological level, using the constructionist framework can contribute to a better understanding of the complex influences that keep identities in a constant state of change, and how the extent to which an ethnic group's identity is affected by others in addition to itself may affect its ability to persevere.

*Defining Indigenous.* If Indigenous peoples are to reassert their identities, they must have some idea of what "Indigenous" and "indigeneity" mean. However, these definitions are often variable and subject to individual points of view, as "the dilemma over 'who is indigenous' has become increasingly politicized," not just in North America but across the world (Corntassel 2003:76). Some scholars focus on the cultural, political, and colonized nature of Indigenous populations, while others highlight Indigenous connection to land and ancestry, while still others stress the importance of self-identification and distinctiveness among groups. Yet almost all

definitions share the view that Indigenous populations are marked by a constant struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

Corntassel (2003) warns against inhibiting Indigenous autonomy by trying to establish a set criteria for such a diverse set of peoples, but at the same time he believes that allowing unlimited self-identification may prevent them from obtaining state rights and protections (2003:75). Combining these two approaches, he proposes a “balance between self-identification and establishing a working definition” that employs the concept of “Peoplehood” to “reconceptualize native identity” (Corntassel 2003:75,77). Peoplehood with a capital “P,” a concept attributed to anthropologist Edward H. Spicer, is “a unique social category...given their persistence over time and sense of solidarity” (Corntassel 2003:91). Corntassel’s suggested definition of Indigenous consists of four interrelated criteria: “sacred history, ceremonial cycles, language and ancestral homelands” while also placing importance on self-identification and connection between identity and culture (2003:92). While there is still no single agreed-upon definition and it is most important for the people in question to assert their own identities, Corntassel’s description is nonetheless one of the most dynamic, inclusive, and comprehensive available.

*Minority racialization.* As Indigenous peoples and tribal nations navigate the push-and-pull of identity formation, a recent trend toward racialized assignment by outside society may restrict their agency. As the federal government turned to more “inclusive” policies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, encouraging—or more often, forcing—Indigenous participation in mainstream American society, it also began to categorize “American Indians” more frequently as a single minority racial group, along with Blacks, Latinx, and Asians. Some Indigenous peoples latched onto this “supratribal identity” as a form of pride and solidarity with each other, a large factor in the rise of

the social movement for greater autonomy in the 1960s (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:113). This feeling is still prevalent among Indigenous peoples today, and when having to face a much larger, more powerful entity like U.S. government, it often makes more practical sense for a group such as a tribe to “subordinate one identity in favor of another, more comprehensive one” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:202). However, when settler-colonial institutions are creating labels without Indigenous consent, the effect becomes less of an assertion of collective identity and more a method of confinement, control, and erasure.

The motive behind minority racialization may appear at first glance to be the practical categorization of identity groups; after all, minorities can benefit from government aid and affirmative action policies. However, some scholars argue that the core purpose is to uphold settler-colonialism and its values. When the federal government depicts Indigenous peoples as one race rather than hundreds of distinct nations with their own cultures, languages, and governance systems, it implicitly denies each tribal nation’s sovereignty and in doing so bolsters its own. More broadly, racial designation in general is always a subordinating move, or “an assertion of the power to define the ‘other’ and in doing so to create it as a specific object” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:28). Just as the creation of racial differentiation in general is a tool to dominate and control, the creation of indigeneity by settler-colonial institutions is the transformation of independent, self-governing nations into a single dependent, non-autonomous group of people. As Barker (2005) writes, the “ethnicization of indigenous peoples has been a political strategy of the nation-state to erase the sovereign from the indigenous” (p. 16). This also functions to dilute Indigenous identity, causing it to be absorbed into the white population and contributing to the notion that “real” Indigenous peoples have been depicted as going extinct.

Such conflation of Indigenous peoples as one race has been common even among well-meaning sociological discourse on Indigenous rights and identity. Steinman (2016) wants to move away from this “minoritizing framework,” which he contends is still “routine at all levels of representation within the discipline” (p. 220). Furthermore, the use of the terms “Native American” and “American Indian” is emblematic of the widespread settler-colonial notion that “indigenous ancestry is socially salient even when untethered from tribal membership,” an idea that is “itself symptomatic of U.S. colonialism” (Steinman 2016:228). On a personal level, these “formal classifications” of Indigenous identity “narrow and restrict indigeneity” (Steinman 2016:228). Similarly, McKay (2021) contends that racialization is “an exclusionary strategy,” because by reducing the number of “legitimate” Indigenous peoples and tribes, the federal government can “systematically reduce the[ir] political and economic power” (p. 16). Furthermore, talking about Native peoples in racial terms denies their status as “distinct political bodies” with claims to authority on the same level as the U.S. or Canada, which they possessed for thousands of years prior to colonization (Steinman 2011:59).

Because of racial assignment’s restrictive effects, as well as the recent growing discourse over tribal sovereignty in the U.S., more contemporary Indigenous movements tend to “assert the distinct legal and political status of tribal nations” (Steinman 2016:220). For this reason, Indigenous peoples have “insisted on being identified as *peoples* (political collectivities) and not as *people* (minorities)” (Barker 2005:19). However, their ability to choose their identities is often limited because of the way in which Euro-American society labels and differentiates groups of people based on race in order to maintain a racial hierarchy in which Natives are at the bottom. Indigenous identity, therefore, is not just an Indigenous issue; rather, it is a critical tool for colonizers to restrict Native sovereignty and thereby increase its own power. As Lawrence (2003)



summarizes, current racial discourse in settler society has assumed “the right to define indigenous citizenship, reducing the members of hundreds of extremely different nations, ethnicities, and language groups to a common raced identity” (pp. 4-5).

*White supremacy.* As previously mentioned, one of settler-colonialism’s foundational principles is white supremacy, and the appropriation of control over Indigenous identity on the part of settler institutions is a crucial component to affirming and promoting this ideology. In majority-white societies such as the U.S. and Canada, white supremacy harms all people of color. Scholars of the new interdisciplinary field of Whiteness Studies argue that “whiteness acts as the unseen, normative category against which differently racialized groups are ordered and valued” (Bonds and Inwood 2016:717). In the context of colonization, the association of white Europeanism with progress and power rationalized “the brutality and dehumanization” of Indigenous peoples while creating a “White national identity” (Bonds and Inwood 2016:716; Moreton-Robinson 2008:85). To claim and retain sovereignty, settler governments had to “develop conceptions of indigenous peoples as lesser beings unworthy of consideration” (Glenn 2015:60). Today, this ideology, while not as overtly violent—though one could argue this is because colonizers have already succeeded in their initiative—is embedded in the continuing manipulation of Indigenous peoples and the implied notion that whiteness is not a race but rather a default, natural, and invisible “racial *position*” (Bonds and Inwood 2016:717). It is vital to view white supremacy in the context of colonization not as historical, as it is often portrayed in modern-day accounts of the past, but rather as a sustained system of power and domination that seeks to eradicate Indigenous peoples by rejecting their humanity.

*Legitimacy and authenticity.* Identity was not just an avenue to control and oppress Indigenous populations: for the settler-colonial project to succeed, it also needed to delegitimize

the very concept of the Indigenous. As Schmidt (2011) contends, Native peoples are “unlike any other American ethnic group” in that they “must constantly prove their identity” (p. 1). When white settlers were unable to vanquish every Indigenous person on the continent, they resorted to destroying them as peoples from distinct ethnic and cultural groups. The U.S. banned their traditions in the assimilation era, excluded them from contemporary discussions, and wrote false depictions of them in history lessons.

Today, the focus has shifted from simply delegitimizing Indigenous identity to also “policing” this identity (McKay 2021:12). The federal government, and even certain Indigenous people themselves have turned to a meticulous, almost obsession-like control over deciding who gets to claim “authentic” indigeneity and who does not, often through very arbitrary metrics. As Harris (2013) writes, “[f]orcas both from within and outside of indigenous communities seek to construct, define, name, and police indigenous identities” (p. 12). Even those who acknowledge the current existence of Indigenous peoples expect to see a specific manifestation of indigeneity in order to consider them “authentic.” From a constructionist perspective, this is a commonly apparent “social convention” in which a group of outsiders picks an “arbitrary” version of an identity and uses it to “distinguish among persons,” with that version denoting a “privileged status” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:92).

That outsiders need to legitimize others’ identities in the first place is problematic, but another prominent issue is that such legitimization ends up being a necessary precursor to survival for many Indigenous peoples. Schmidt (2011) writes that Indigenous peoples are forced to “adopt whatever Indian histories or identities are needed to convince themselves and others of their Indian identity, and thus their unique cultural heritage” (p. 1). For instance, some members of settler-colonial society are resentful of special rights extended to Indigenous tribal nations upon which

they are dependent, such as licenses to hunt and fish, and will protest if they do not believe the people exercising those rights are Indigenous—meaning, if they do not conform to their stereotyped expectations. Miller (2004) gives the example of Inuit and Athabaskan communities in Alaska, where non-Indigenous locals expected them to “still use seal-skin kayaks and bows and arrows if they were to continue to remain ‘Indian enough’ to exercise their treaty rights under United States law” (p. 6). The widespread myth among non-Indigenous people that Native peoples cannot be modern like everyone else is detrimental to their survival. Most notable in the area of legitimacy is the struggle for federal recognition, an achievement that often requires tribal members to represent themselves as ancient because “Euro-Americans expect Indians to remain in a primordial state if they are to remain authentically ‘Indian’” (Miller 2004:6).

*Blood quantum.* A major source of controversy among tribal nations and the settler-colonial government regarding Indigenous identity verification is the use of blood quantum, or a measurement of the percentage of one’s ancestry that is from a particular tribe. Miller (2004) notes that Indigenous peoples are “consistently defined as members of a group descended by blood from the first Americans” by the federal government and settler society (p. 10). Yet many historians suggest that traditionally, most Indigenous peoples did not have such exclusionary parameters for admitting members to their communities; rather, “[c]ommon values and needs outweighed objective considerations of familial ties or blood lineage” (McKay 2021:15). The idea of blood quantum only arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, created by the U.S. government as an excuse to detribalize many Indigenous peoples, erasing them from tribal rolls, and to dispossess them of their land (McKay 2021:15).

Rodriguez-Lonebear (2021) writes that Indigenous peoples are the “only population for which the racial logic of blood remains codified,” calling it a “racial project” meant to erase

Indigenous identity and sovereignty on the basis of an “inclusion/exclusion” threshold (pp. 2;3;4). Due to the widely-held settler notion that indigeneity is tarnished when mixed with other races, in order to be considered Indigenous by settler governments, Natives effectively have to provide evidence of “purity of blood” (O’Brien 2010:xxi). According to Thornton (1997), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) typically considers a one-quarter blood quantum to be the minimum requirement for identity legitimization, and it is solely responsible for doling out “Certificates of Degree of Indian Blood” (CDIB) to Indigenous peoples who are enrolled in federally recognized tribes (p. 36). Blood quantum can also play a role in whether or not a tribal nation gains federal recognition, as the Federal Acknowledgement Process requires an ancestral link to historically known tribes. These criteria are inherently race-based, an affirmation of the federal government’s intent to diminish indigeneity even as it is tasked with recognizing it.

The use of blood quantum delegitimizes many people’s identities based on an unreliable variable despite their own knowledge of their Indigenous roots. Steinman (2016) writes that the practice of measuring blood quantum “manifests the notion of Indianness as inherently degrading rather than regenerating and is critiqued as a form of demographic genocide” (228). It also contributes to the previously mentioned “disappearing Indian” trope, since as more and more people intermarry with Indigenous peoples from other tribal nations or with other races, their indigeneity is considered muddled and harder to measure. As Schmidt (2011) writes, the ultimate effect of blood quantum policies will be the “extinction of the original people of native North America” (p. 6). This is supported by Thornton’s (1997) evidence projecting that “within the next century, the proportion of those with one-half or more blood quantum will decline to only 8 percent of the American Indian population” (p. 39). This is detrimental to Indigenous survival not only because the increased number of people who do not meet blood quantum criteria will be

disenrolled and lose their federal rights and benefits, but also because the “traditional cultural distinctiveness” of Native tribes “may be replaced by mere social membership” (Thornton 1997:39). This compared to the “complete exemption” given to the white population in terms of the need to prove identity, even as white people intermarry with white people of other national or ethnic origins; as Green (2006) writes, “[w]hites are permitted to mix as much as they want with no effect on their racial classification” (p. 101).

With the caveat that, again, Indigenous peoples do not tend to view themselves as a race, there are comparisons to be made between the way they are treated versus Blacks in the United States. Green (2006) elaborates on this stark discrepancy, noting that while both Blacks and Natives have been racially classified by white institutions as a method of subjugation, “[a] narrow definition of race is used with Native Americans, while a broad view is taken regarding African Americans” (p. 94). According to the “one-drop rule” implemented by whites, anyone with a “drop” of Black ancestry is considered Black; however, for Indigenous peoples, this is the exact opposite (Green 2006:101). As Natives mix with white people, they are considered to “lose” their indigeneity, diluting their identities into the general population. The decrease in the Indigenous population is the goal for settler-colonial society, because colonizer classifications of their identities have “worked to dispossess Native Americans of their land and resources and also to dispossess them of the rights ‘guaranteed’ them by the United States’ government” (Green 2006:102). In contrast, Black Americans have largely been denied integration into white society, instead suffering from “persisting exclusion” (Green 2006:102). Both excessive assimilation and excessive exclusion function to denigrate Indigenous peoples and Blacks in the interest of white domination.

Blood quantum requirements have been internalized by tribal nations and individual Native people as well. On a personal level, blood quantum has become its own way of “conferring collective belonging,” which can be a pivotal aspiration for many Natives (Rodriguez-Lonebear 2021:1). Furthermore, because “notions of blood purity [are] conflated with notions of cultural competence and authenticity,” individuals can fall into the trap of using blood quantum to prove themselves to others (Rose 2015:229). On a tribal level, as nations struggle for recognition and survival, some have become fixated on blood quantum, even though pre-colonization, Indigenous nations did not use such types of measurements and tended to possess “higher degrees of sociocultural inclusiveness” than Europeans (Schmidt 2011:2). Tribes are allowed to set their own membership criteria, yet many have replaced their traditional, more inclusive methods with the colonizer requirement of blood quantum to exclude people from their rolls. Some have even denied legitimacy, and bullied, other tribes whom they consider not culturally Indigenous enough due to a lower blood quantum. Part of the motivation behind this is the fear of “diluting the cultural and racial significance of Indian status and identity,” shared by other tribal nations as well (Miller 2004:41). But opponents have argued that these tribes are only trying to block others from accessing federal resources (Miller 2004:41). In any case, McKay (2021) points out that ultimately, “[f]ederal agencies have exclusive power to determine tribal membership” (p. 16).

The debate over blood quantum is especially difficult to resolve because of the unanswered question of how to determine indigeneity. A person with no ties to Indigenous traditions could meet a blood quantum requirement, while someone else who grew up in Indigenous culture and possesses considerable knowledge about their tribal nation might not. Identity is very salient to Indigenous rights today, particularly in the U.S., because of the ongoing struggle for recognition that hinges on the ability to prove one’s indigeneity even as the larger society works to erase it.

Yet the issue of blood quantum has been imposed by colonizers on Indigenous communities as a way of sewing internal division, and thus such efforts to assert identity have come under serious threat. Rose (2015) sums up the matter quite well:

Emphasis on ‘bloodedness’, authenticity, and a return to ‘traditionalism’ and community as natural and apolitical categories conceals the power and class relations behind them. It hides the functional role of the federal government as the arbiter of indigeneity, rather than having the question of indigeneity and group membership being decided by the people themselves. (P. 235).

### *Indigenous Sovereignty*

*Tribal sovereignty in the U.S.* Sovereignty is the lead issue threading the last four to five decades of battles over tribal rights in the United States, and therefore has tremendous implications for Indigenous peoples’ survival as members of distinct governing nations. Steinman (2005) writes that the “advancement and defense of sovereignty is quite arguably tribal nations’ number one agenda” (p. 89). Since the 1970s, sovereignty has also become ubiquitous in settler-colonial legal discourse, as the U.S. government has shifted to a position where it “explicitly affirms Indian sovereignty, and support for tribal self-government” (Steinman 2005:89). However, this does not mean the government wants to give tribal nations complete freedom to exercise power without restrictions. Sovereignty discourse hits a roadblock when it becomes apparent that different people have different conceptions of it. For instance, Biolsi (2005) argues that Indigenous peoples should not be confined to the laws of a nation that is newer than them: “Because they are preconstitutional—their existence as sovereign polities predates the existence of the United States...they exercise their sovereignty without constraint by the federal Constitution” (p. 243). But while the federal government may use the term sovereignty, it certainly does not share the

belief that Indigenous nations exercise it without constraint. Thus, it becomes essential to understand what sovereignty means in context to various parties with different agendas.

Many tribal nations have latched onto the sovereignty discourse, promulgating it through Indigenous communities in a way that has “spurred continuing Indigenous political revitalization and invited new claimsmaking” and directing it back at U.S. policymakers in turn (Steinman 2005:91). Thus, in many ways, Indigenous peoples’ perseverance in asserting their political status as self-governing nations has kept this movement from dying out. However, even as the federal government and the courts continue to use the word sovereignty in their dealings with tribal nations, from the U.S. settler-colonial perspective, Indigenous nations still hold the same status that they did in 1830, when Supreme Court Justice John Marshall declared them “domestic dependent nations” under guardianship of the U.S. (Miller 2004:26). This is evident in the practical rights and resources “given” to federally acknowledged tribal nations, such as monetary aid, legal ability to govern their own members, and reservation land trusts: all of these “benefits” are bestowed under the condition of implied acceptance of the U.S. government as a benevolent caretaker whose authority reigns supreme in the end. As Steinman (2016) writes, “[tribal] recognition may function as a contemporary mode of extending colonial control...and the construction of indigenous identities and rights on settler colonial terms” (p. 222).

*Defining sovereignty.* While it seems easy enough to identify cases in which sovereignty is *not* being exercised, it is much more difficult to come to a consensus on a real definition for the word. Like indigeneity, sovereignty is a broad, convoluted term that may appear in different forms. Many scholars (it should be noted that the following are white Euro-Americans) have varying opinions on its definition, its significance, and in what ways it should be sought after and utilized. According to Cornell and Kalt (1998), sovereignty is foundational to Indigenous nations’



economic prosperity: “Without sovereignty and nation-building, economic development is likely to remain a frustratingly elusive dream” (p. 189). Thus, to them, sovereignty’s value lies in its role as a key to the doors of opportunity. Biolsi (2005) looks at the concept through the eyes of the settler-colonial government, explaining that tribal sovereignty in that context is seen as a “specific kind” which in legal terms is called “dependent sovereignty” or “internal self-determination” (p. 245). But for many Indigenous peoples, dependent sovereignty is an oxymoron and delegitimizes their existence as actual governing nations, not just groups of people. Rose (2015) criticizes the use of sovereignty discourse from an anticapitalism standpoint, considering it a buzzword of sorts that is used by the tribal elite for “the defense of neotribal power” and by the U.S. government for “the Westernization of indigenous societies in the form of increased statism...and the embrace of capitalism” (p. 235;221).

When attempting to locate the significance—or insignificance—of sovereignty, however, it is most imperative to listen to the opinions of Indigenous peoples themselves, who are directly affected by it. Joanne Barker (2005), a Lenape scholar, confirms that “there is no fixed meaning for what sovereignty is...[it] is embedded within the specific social relations in which it is invoked” (p. 21). Because of this, Barker writes, the goal is not to pin it down but rather to better understand it through the “historical circumstances under which it is given meaning” in order to determine “how and for whom sovereignty matters” (2005:21). For Barker, good, true sovereignty is antithetical to the ideology of race: “The erasure of the sovereign is the racialization of the ‘Indian’” (2005:17). Sovereignty became a renewed topic of conversation among Indigenous peoples across the world as a backlash against minority racialization and the oppressive practices of globalization over the past several decades. Fighting back, tribal nations reestablished their “concrete rights to self-government, territorial integrity, and cultural autonomy” (Barker 2005:18).

But it has now gone beyond legal claims to agency and reached into the vaguer realm of collective identity, with many viewing sovereignty as “an inherent right that emanates from historically and politically resonant notions of cultural identity and community affiliation” (Barker 2005:20).

While this rallying cry can create progress, the essentialization of sovereignty as an inborn characteristic can be also dangerous when it ignores the negative aspects of the term—notably, the fact that its origins in settler-colonialist ideology might come into direct conflict with “indigenous epistemologies of law and governance” (Barker 2005:21). In a similar vein as Rose (2015), Barker pushes back against contemporary scholars who overlook the role of colonization in creating normalized notions of sovereignty, marked by the rise of international law and the modern nation-state. Taiaiake Alfred (2002) of the Mohawk Nation goes further with this argument, asserting that sovereignty must be rejected as a “social creation” situated within “an exclusively European discourse” (Barker 2005:46;34). Alfred maintains that Indigenous scholars and activists must “transcend the mentality that supports the colonization of indigenous nations,” because perpetuating it is just form of internal colonization (2002 in Barker 2005:41). Instead, sovereignty should be replaced with a “notion of power” that neither comes from colonial roots nor conflicts with Indigenous values (Alfred 2002 in Barker 2005:46-47;43).

On the other hand, some Indigenous peoples are able to find alternative meanings of sovereignty that are better aligned with their Indigenous epistemologies. They reclaim and reinvent sovereignty in Indigenous terms, not settler-colonial ones. Kilipaka Kawaihonu Nahili Pae Ontai (2000), a Native Hawaiian of the Kanaka Maoli people, defines sovereignty “by the epochal journey of its native people over a millennium of spiritual, historical, and cultural landmarks” (Barker 2005:154). Ontai wants to create a “new” sovereignty from the Euro-American definition; this one must “define sovereignty in terms of traditional land values and spirituality—to bring back

a vibrant native society” (Barker 2005:166). This sentiment is echoed by other scholars who believe sovereignty is equated with land, which will be greatly expanded upon later. In general, though, the confusion over this ethereal concept that has taken on such significance in recent years is bound to engender conflicts among groups with different goals.

*A brief history of U.S. tribal policy.* It may be counterintuitive to realize that sovereignty was the dominant approach of the federal government for the first half of the United States’ existence. Prior to and for nearly a century following the founding of the U.S., settler-colonial governments had implicitly recognized tribal sovereignty through the common practice of signing treaties (Miller 2004:26). Even though by 1830 the U.S. had declared tribal nations to be “domestic” and “dependent,” its continued practice of seeking treaties to obtain land exposed its true position vis-à-vis the Indigenous population: it did not yet possess total jurisdiction over tribal land, and it had to negotiate with tribal leaders as it would with any other nations in order to achieve its goal of total domination. Treaties were the embodiment of tribal sovereignty, providing “unambiguous confirmations of a tribe’s self-government, of its territorial integrity” (Miller 2004:26). Nevertheless, the federal government conducted these seemingly peaceful “negotiations” in tandem with the genocidal processes of nearly eradicating the Indigenous population through disease, war, and displacement. Nearly all treaties were “subsequently dismissed or reversed, leading to seizures of land” (Bonds and Inwood 2016:723). The U.S. ended its policy of signing treaties in 1871, by which time the majority of Natives had been forced onto reservations anyway (Miller 2004:26,27).

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the federal government turned its focus to assimilation and the erasure of Indigenous cultural identity, denying any form of sovereignty to tribal nations—not to mention prohibiting their existence altogether—became imperative. The

Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 gave the government authority to divide tribal lands however it saw fit (Miller 2004:27). The government's "granting" of American citizenship to all Native peoples born in the U.S. in 1924 was a gesture symbolic of its attempt to repudiate tribal nationhood while still keeping them "excluded from national identity" (Steinman 2011:57). In the 1930s, however, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) gained new leadership which, surprisingly, switched the federal government's approach once again and turned to a pro-Indigenous agenda. This so-called "Indian New Deal" birthed the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA), an effort to reverse cultural assimilation, recognize and reorganize tribal governments, and help strengthen Indigenous communities in general (Miller 2004:27). Still, the tribal acknowledgement process was largely "political, arbitrary, or subjective" and lacked a strong emphasis on sovereignty (Miller 2004:45). Furthermore, in the post-World War II era, public perceptions of "tribalism" turned negative, and policymakers once again worked to "terminate" many tribal nations and reservation communities (Miller 2004:31). In part due to the Indigenous rights movements of the 1960s and President Johnson's Great Society programs, this began to change, and the sovereignty discourse emerged (Miller 2004:32). In 1978, the BIA released a new set of criteria to create a more specified and explicit Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP) to dictate which tribes it believed should qualify for sovereignty. Unfortunately, decades later, the FAP is rife with issues.

*Federal acknowledgement and identity.* Many of the tribal nations that helped revamp the FAP through the relentless filing of legal suits were from the Northeast, a geographical factor that actually proved to be a major hindrance in their pursuit of recognition and land. When the Gay Head Wampanoag sued for land rights on Martha's Vineyard in the late 1980s, local non-Indigenous people objected (Miller 2004:24). To them, the Gay Head Wampanoag did not look like the "horse-riding, buffalo-hunting Indians they had seen in Hollywood westerns" (Miller

2004:24). East Coast Indigenous peoples have “blended” with settler-colonial society to a much greater extent than those in the West and thus can tend to look more “white,” “Black,” or “mixed” than they did prior to colonization (Miller 2004:24). As the first to encounter colonists, eastern tribal nations experienced the brunt of assimilation and destruction, whereas once the U.S. was founded, federal policy came to neglect them and focus solely on the western tribes, who were able to secure more land (Miller 2004:19). Hence, while the Gay Head Wampanoag were eventually successful in their bid for federal acknowledgement and partial land return, they were not necessarily accepted by the broader non-Indigenous community because they did not fit the stereotype that non-Indigenous people expected. Their opponents argued that they were no longer a tribe because they had “abandoned their tribal organizations and assimilated into American society” and therefore were only doing this to gain money and property (Miller 2004:24-25).

Miller (2004) writes that the “core” of the FAP is “about modern Indian identity: how the state identifies and legitimizes tribes and how recognized tribes, non-Indian scholars, and the American public perceive Indians” (p. 2). Many other northeastern tribal nations have faced similarly challenging experiences to that of the Gay Head Wampanoag in their pursuit of federal acknowledgement and land; notably, the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot of Maine in 1972, who sought land reclamation, and the Mashantucket Pequot of Connecticut in 1983 and the Mashpee Wampanoag of Cape Cod in 1976, who sought tribal recognition. The belief that Natives only live in the West is widespread, a myth perpetuated by unrealistic representations of Indigenous identity; therefore, the western tribes that experienced interaction with colonizers at a later point were able to “maintain more elements of their aboriginal culture” and found “less difficulty securing recognition than eastern groups because they present fewer ambiguities to federal officials” (Miller 2004:20).

The fact that the bulk of the current FAP criteria involves “proof” of identity only worsens the matter. Two of its seven criteria, in Miller’s words, are to “[have] been identified historically and continuously until the present as ‘American Indian’” and “a substantial portion of the group...lives in a community viewed as American Indian” (2004:44). The unanswered question here is a problem of subjectivity: *who* is identifying and viewing these people and communities as “American Indian”? When the “who” it is the settler-colonial government, Indigenous identity is stolen, dismembered, and refabricated in a completely different form that Natives are then forced to embody: “the state exercises great power in defining Indian racial, ethnic, and political identity” (Miller 2004:15).

Race is fundamental to the “legitimizing” of identity that constitutes the Federal Acknowledgement Process. As Miller (2004) writes, “a petitioner can expect a bumpy road to acknowledgement if its ‘race’ is not readily apparent, its culture is not noticeably ‘Native,’ its Indianness appears borrowed” (p. 14). It is ironic that the aspects of indigeneity that are now essential to gaining federal recognition, such as race, culture, and history, were traits that the federal government had worked so hard to try to erase through assimilation just a century ago. During their petition for federal recognition, the Mashpee Wampanoag faced skepticism from non-Indigenous jurists who did not see enough evidence that they had “continuously existed” as a tribe, since many of them had been assimilated over time (Miller 2004:37). This was a prime indication of how Indigenous peoples whose identity is not clearly “evidenced” have lost it because it was taken from them. Similarly, another of the FAP’s requirements, which is that “the petitioner has maintained historical and essentially continuous political influence or authority over its members,” is also an impossibility for nations that were disbanded and terminated during the anti-tribalism era (Miller 2004:44).

For a long period, most tribal nations that were able to secure federal acknowledgement were ones that “manipulated the political system by projecting stereotypically Indian images of their group or ‘played Indian’ in public discourse” (Miller 2004:16-17). While the BIA’s latest regulations have shifted somewhat away from this requirement, the current criteria nevertheless expect a certain “proof” of identity to be readily apparent, proof that often does not exist (Miller 2004:17). The struggle to come up with this evidence has taken a toll on many tribal nations, with many having “surrendered to the task of conforming to definitions of tribalism dictated by the dominant society” (Miller 2004:21). This can negatively affect tribal cultural preservation if Indigenous peoples have to choose between retaining their true cultural identities and constructing new settler-legitimized identities in order to potentially attain more “sovereignty” from the federal government.

Some Indigenous nations have taken the side of the BIA in trying to protect strict rules for identifying “authentic” tribal nations. In some instances, it has been racially motivated; when the Lumbee of North Carolina sought recognition in the 1960s, “their African heritage and apparent lack of major Indian cultural traits engendered a racialized form of resistance from some members of the Indian community” (Miller 2004:34). As with the issue of blood quantum, certain tribal nations want to protect their people by ensuring that non-Indigenous people do not usurp Indigenous culture and community. Miller writes of a movement by “conservative tribes” to limit federal acknowledgement, citing Leonard Tomaskin, chairperson of the Yakima (notably, a tribe from the western region), who “wanted the government to acknowledge only ‘bona fide’ tribes with members having at least one-quarter Indian blood” (2004:41). While federally recognized tribes can obtain land, money, and power from the government, unrecognized tribes are often left

poor and unorganized. This hierarchy, built by settler-colonial institutions, has caused some rifts among tribal nations.

*Land and boundaries.* Practically every self-identifying Indigenous person will confirm that land is one of the most valued aspects common to Native cultures and one of the most essential factors to their survival. Alfred (2000) writes that respect for and kinship to land has always been a central tenet: “Indigenous philosophies are premised on the belief that the human relationship to the earth is one of partnership” (Barker 2005:45). Although the word “dispossession” is often used when referring to colonization, Indigenous peoples in North America had no concept of private land ownership prior to colonization, since “all land within a given territory was open for communal use” (Murphy 2018:51-52). This clashed disastrously with settler-colonial capitalist ideology from the very beginning, which views land as private property to be conquered and exploited.

Moreover, Indigenous perspectives on collective land were antithetical to the goals of capitalist colonization. Bonds and Inwood (2016) maintain that the narrative of “empty lands” and “wild, untamed frontiers” to be claimed and settled was “essential to supporting white settler colonial projects in the United States” (p. 722). Even when the U.S. policy was to sign treaties to obtain land, an act which affirmed the sovereign status of tribal nations, the contractual relations were unequal: treaties were about “the assertion of the respective nations’ status as the more powerful sovereign with a given territory” (Barker 2005:5). To qualify as a modern nation-state, a government requires “totalized territorial sovereignty, not jurisdictional rule, in which the geography of states takes the form of discrete, mutually exclusive, internally continuous domains, with clear ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ and linear borders” (Biolsi 2005:240). This explains why real political tribal sovereignty is impossible in the U.S.: if the federal government were to proclaim



tribes as entirely independent nations whose reservations are equivalent to the territory of other nation-states, its occupation on their land would be an illegal invasion by international standards. The U.S. would in essence be delegitimizing itself.

Long after westward expansion was completed, the U.S. government continues to deny land to tribal nations and to infringe upon the little territory they do have. It is therefore not surprising that land is of central importance to Indigenous peoples' movements today as a vehicle for sovereignty, community, and survival. As Steinman (2016) writes, "territorial protection and the indigenous reacquisition of lands are inseparable from the sustaining of Indigenous peoples themselves" (p. 229). A recent study by Huyser et al. (2018) used survey data to compare the mental health of Indigenous peoples living on and off reservations and found that "those who live a vast majority of their lives on the reservation have lower odds of psychological distress than individuals who spent portions of their life off or near the reservation" (p. 1). The researchers posited that this was because these lands allowed Natives to "practice traditional ways of life, protect cultural values, and preserve tribal languages," all of which "contribute[s] to an enduring identity" (Huyser et al. 2018:1). On a collective level, reservation lands that were just for Indigenous nations helped them form inclusive social networks and renewed tribal identity, because the physical borders defined and separated them from settler-colonial society (Huyser et al. 2018:3;83).

*Land and capitalism.* Reservations enable tribal authority over political and economic spheres. While they may be seen as enduring forms of colonization—they were created on the "less desirable lands" in order to move Indigenous peoples off the lands that were needed for settlements and capitalist exploits, an example being the infamous Trail of Tears—they have also enriched and empowered many federally acknowledged nations (Cornell and Hartmann

1998:110). Reservations may have been a method of confinement to subpar environments, but ironically, in designating specific regions to Indigenous nations, the U.S. government unintentionally “preserve[d] tribal boundaries” and “produced a situation in which Indian groups could survive as groups” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:111). Thus, reservations, and more importantly, boundaries “between ‘Indians’ and Whites,” helped Indigenous peoples retain and reinforce their tribal identities (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:111).

Pasternak (2020) contends that “jurisdiction...organizes sovereignty on the ground” (p. 303). Thus, control over a portion of land gives tribal leaders sovereignty in the legal sense: to choose leaders, enact laws, run a police force, protect borders, deliver justice, build companies, provide for their people, and live (mostly) without settler interference. As previously discussed, many tribal nations that have been able to secure land, held in federal trust, have taken the opportunity to participate in the capitalist economy by creating starting businesses open to outsiders. In the U.S., the most lucrative of these ventures—and the most controversial—is tribal gaming. According to Steinman (2006), “Tribal gaming is conducted based on rights derived from an understanding of tribes as sovereign nations represented by governments” (p. 296). Since the passing of the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988, which aimed to encourage economic development on reservations, more and more tribal nations have become encouraged to start casinos (Steinman 2004:108). Casino revenues are often used by tribal governments to provide for the wellbeing of all their tribal members, such as the funding of language revitalization and schools (Steinman 2016:231). Interestingly, the success of their casino businesses has also increased tribal nations’ standings in settler-colonial society; they have become “significant political actors” and are more invested in state politics than ever (Steinman 2004:112).

Economic endeavors such as gaming that are both the result and cause of increased tribal power and sovereignty are wholly contingent on the land over which nations have regained jurisdiction. Unfortunately, obtaining both federal recognition and land is a rare feat for Indigenous nations, and those without land are far less likely to be free from federal government control. Tribal gaming has evened harmed the Federal Acknowledgement Process, as tribal nations who already operate casinos have tried to prevent others from gaining recognition in order to protect their monopoly (Miller 2004:72). One certainty, however, is that having land, whether for cultural, social, economic, political, or survival reasons, is always a positive for tribal nations: their sovereignty, however defined, often depends on it.

### *Conclusion*

This literature review sought to outline the most relevant topics in contemporary scholarship surrounding Indigenous peoples as they fight for increased sovereignty and reclamation of all that was taken from them through colonization. However, in attempting to synthesize the most prominent literature in this field, it became evident that most scholarly research has been conducted primarily by scholars of critical race studies, cultural studies, and activists, while sociological literature directly related to this subject was difficult to find. Sociology, which has historically prided itself in revealing issues of injustice in society, has long neglected to recognize Indigenous peoples as not only the first population to be oppressed in North America, but also the ones who are arguably the most invisible and erased from the narrative. Unlike other non-dominant groups in western society, Natives are constantly on the verge of disappearing, as their lands, cultures, peoples, and identities are being destroyed and killed on a daily basis, just as they have been for 400 years.

It is only in the past couple of decades that sociologists have turned their attention toward this issue, which can be challenging for non-Natives because it first requires acknowledging their roles as settler-colonists whose very existence depended on the stealing of land and the genocide of millions of people, and whose society is still enforcing these injustices today. Yet the field of sociology still has a long way to go before it can call itself a real ally to Indigenous movements. For instance, there is almost no published sociological research that has sought to speak directly with Indigenous peoples themselves and collect their personal opinions, an absolutely necessary component when attempting to reveal the truths about a population whose voices have been silenced for centuries. This study attempts to be a leader in this area as one of the very first sociological studies to center on meaningful conversations with Indigenous peoples of varying backgrounds and perspectives. Such interactions may result in never-before-heard insights, told through the eyes of Natives, which can foster a better understanding in the wider world of the real challenges facing Indigenous peoples today. It may even inspire them to become active participants in rejecting and undoing the harms of settler-colonialism.

## METHODS & DATA

[T]he methodologies and methods of research, the theories that inform them, the questions which they generate and the writing styles they employ, all become significant acts which need to be considered carefully and critically before being applied. In other words, they need to be ‘decolonized.’ –Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012:41)

### *Research for Indigenous Justice*

*Settler-colonial framework.* As a non-Indigenous person, I have strived to conduct this research study with as much humility and gratitude as possible, treating each participant and every subject with care and respect. I must acknowledge I cannot ever fully understand what it is like to be Indigenous, but I can try to learn more about the lives of Indigenous peoples by conversing with some of them directly. To ensure I was meeting my responsibility to be a fair, empathetic, and social justice-oriented researcher, I conducted the study using a settler-colonial framework and a decolonizing lens. As described in this study’s literature review, the settler-colonial framework is an approach, applicable in research regarding Indigenous peoples, that recognizes and underscores the omnipresent forces of settler-colonialism that obstruct Indigenous efforts toward visibility and equitable treatment today. It also emphasizes the status of tribes as sovereign nations, not minority groups, with the autonomy to choose and lead their people without settler-colonial interference.

Steinman (2016) writes, “A settler colonial framework provides the foundation for bringing into clear view the ongoing modes of domination that contemporary indigenous peoples are resisting, for understanding a variety of nationhood based actions...and for understanding similarities and differences between these dynamics and the experiences of other groups” (p. 221). Settler-colonialist power, according to Steinman, has six primary dimensions: “denial of its own existence” (for example, the idea that settler society is natural and no one came before), foundational settler violence, ideological justifications (like the belief that Europeans brought

civilization to the land), “control of population economy” via dispossession and replacement, cultural appropriation, and denial and elimination of possible alternatives (2016:222). The convergence of these components in the modern-day U.S. and Canada has created a hierarchy in which Indigenous populations are not only at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, but also are often forgotten and erased from dominant society, despite having always existed and continuing to exist in the same space. I wish to help undo erasure by giving the Indigenous participants in this study a voice.

*Decolonizing methodologies.* Steinman (2016) considers the settler-colonial framework “*decolonizing in nature*,” which places it under the umbrella of “*decolonizing methodologies*,” the lens I have chosen to use for the entirety of this study (p. 221). In her seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012), Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith proposes a model called “The Indigenous Research Agenda,” which centers around the goal of self-determination, achievable through the four processes of healing, mobilization, transformation, and decolonization (p. 121). Decolonization is a complex and contested term; Smith does not give a concrete definition of the word, but rather concentrates on decolonization as an “intellectual project” that works to undo the lasting effects of colonization in the context of research and knowledge production (2012:23). Such negative effects include the cultural and knowledge appropriation of Indigenous peoples by western researchers as they simultaneously reject Indigenous peoples “and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations” (Smith 2012:30). However, Smith writes that decolonization does not necessarily entail a rejection of all western theory or knowledge; rather, for Indigenous people like her, decolonization is about “cent[er]ing our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes”

(2012:41). In order to accomplish this, decolonization “must offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonialism,” which will empower Indigenous peoples “to make plans, to make strategic choices...and theorizing the reasons why the world we experience is unjust, and posing alternatives to such a world” (Smith 2012:204).

According to Smith, the way in which Euro-American research has traditionally been pursued is fundamentally oppositional to decolonization, because these western practices are “a set of ideas, practices and privileges that were embedded in imperial expansionism and colonization and institutionalized in academic disciplines” (2012:21). Smith writes that research in this sense is “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” because it is an extension of colonization: non-Indigenous researchers enter Indigenous spaces, “telling half-truths, or downright lies, that misrepresented our world, and that gave authority about us to academic researchers” (2012:22;21). In this way, “the disciplines of Western knowledge were used as a platform for dismissing or denying the existence of indigenous knowledge” (Smith 2012:222). As I am coming from settler-colonial society, I must be wary of my research as a potential instrument of colonization. Guided by Smith’s framework, my effort to avoid this pitfall is a never-ending process of learning to de-westernize my work, prioritize Indigenous experiences and opinions, understand alternative histories and knowledges, and maintain awareness of my role as an outsider to the Indigenous community.

Despite the way research that has been manipulated by western academics, Smith clarifies that she is not against research itself but rather the way it is practiced by colonizers, and she believes that it can be redesigned to encompass “new ways of knowing and discovering, and new ways to think about research with indigenous peoples” and it can even be used for “advancing and developing indigenous aspirations” (2012:27). She thus calls for a decolonizing project that will

“set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world,” contending that it “needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities” (Smith 2012:23). While Smith’s book is written specifically for Indigenous researchers and does not directly address non-Indigenous researchers like myself, I have still attempted to apply her approach to my work because 1) it helps keep the study grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and 2) it is a research method created by an Indigenous person, rather than a settler, whose goal is to facilitate social justice.

That being said, despite my best intentions and efforts, I will never be able to fully decolonize my work because I am still a non-Indigenous person who attends a settler-colonial institution in a settler-colonial society. I am also writing in a settler language that has historically been used as a tool for erasure of Indigenous existence. While recognizing that my work is still a product of the settler-colonial world, I tried to keep in mind throughout the research process what Smith calls “the most consistent message” she teaches to aspiring researchers: “indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity” (2012:37). I continuously strive to conduct my research in a way that will contribute to the advancement of Indigenous goals, not my own. This means privileging the needs of the study participants and always considering how the actions of my research will affect Indigenous peoples. Smith hopes for “a dialogue within a framework that privileges the indigenous presence, that uses ‘the words’ (such as colonialism, decolonization, self-determination), and that acknowledges our continuing existence” (2012:37). My goal is to be a part of that dialogue.



### *Qualitative Research Methods*

On the logistical side of the research process, I used a qualitative sociological research method to collect data via in-person, in-depth interviews. This was the best method to use because the research questions required personal, individualized responses from participants with different backgrounds and a broad range of perspectives. Variety was necessary because Indigenous peoples and their tribal nations are distinct and ungeneralizable. Without a heterogeneous participant pool, the study runs the risk of centering certain types of people, tribes, and points of view over others, creating a false narrative and potentially causing its audience to assume a generic vision of Native peoples, which would directly oppose the study's aim to de-racialize the Indigenous population and present them as they really are: members of distinct heritages, cultures, nations, and histories. This may seem paradoxical when contrasted with another of the study's goals, which is to make certain general conclusions about the state of Indigenous peoples in the Northeast. However, because the number of interviews in the study is quite limited, it makes more sense to try to include as many different types of people and tribal nations as possible within these restrictions rather than assigning primacy to only a few tribes, for example, which would tell readers a lot about those tribes without showcasing the plethora of unique, lesser-known ones.

*Confidentiality and ethics.* Because the research is based on interviews with human participants, an application was submitted to and approved by the Pitzer College Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning research. I also completed the required CITI Ethics Training Program to learn how to conduct research ethically. The IRB application consisted of an overview of the study, its purpose and intention, the proposed research process, and a commitment to confidential and ethical practices. It also included an attachment of the informed consent form I planned to give interviewees, who would have to read and sign it before participating. The

consent form included a detailed, completely transparent description of the study and the participant's role. It disclosed the option for interviewees to remain anonymous and have all potentially personally identifying information removed from the end product of the study. However, the consent form also made sure to stipulate that I could not exclude the name of participant's tribal nation, their general role in the Indigenous community, and their approximate age from the results. If the person did not feel comfortable revealing this information publicly, they were advised to reject participation. The consent form emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants could stop at any time and ask to discard any collected information. They were also permitted to ask that certain parts of their interviews be excluded from publication afterward. Audio recordings of the interviews were to be stored only so long as they could be transcribed, after which they were discarded by the researcher. Finally, the consent form noted that there were no great risks or benefits to participation, other than a minor risk that information could be compromised and the potential benefit of amplifying Indigenous voices and contributing to the study's goal of social justice.

*Recruitment.* Interviewees were chosen with only one criteria: being an Indigenous person in the Northeast. Because I live in Connecticut, it was easier to find connections to locals in the region. I wanted to recruit participants in a way that seemed less invasive and more friendly, so I tried to find them through connections with people I already knew. I was able to do this mainly through my cousin, who is Nipmuc and an active participant in Native movements in New England. Others I was able to contact through my mother, who has done some activism with Indigenous movements in the past. Only once did I reach out to a member of a tribe whom I had no connection to, through the tribe's website. Once I had interviewed someone from a particular tribal nation, I tried to avoid interviewing more people from that tribe in order to increase variety.

I also wanted to ensure I interviewed someone from various regions in the Northeast and various types of tribal nations: federally recognized, state recognized, unrecognized, large, small, those with reservations, and those without. I predicted that these factors would engender differences in opinions on indigeneity and sovereignty.

Interviewees were each sent an email with a brief explanation of the researcher, the study, its purpose, and confidentiality. Each email included an attached PDF of the informed consent form, which provided all details of the study and the participant's rights to anonymity and protection. Once a participant emailed me back agreeing and informing me of whether or not they wished to remain anonymous, I asked them to "sign" the consent form by sending a reply email acknowledging that they read and understood it. These "signatures" have been stored in email form. Despite the option to remain anonymous, every participant chose to have their name, gender identity, approximate age group, occupation, tribal nation, tribal activities, and entire interview transcript disclosed in the final product of the study. No one asked me to delete or exclude any part of their interview, and no one withdrew from the study at any point. All participants appeared quite open to expressing their opinions, with many revealing deep emotions and personal anecdotes during their interviews.

*Participants.* The study's 12 participants<sup>1</sup> ended up representing a range of approximately 15 distinct tribal nations—11 federally recognized and four state-recognized.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this wide range of tribes, other demographic and background traits varied considerably among the participants. There are only two participants from entirely the same tribal nation, Penobscot (ME), but even they are very different from each other in other ways, as Sage Phillips is a young female-

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, the first time each tribal nation is mentioned, I will follow it with the name of its current location, using colonizer state/province name initials. For example, Penobscot from Maine (ME) and Akwesasne Mohawk from Ontario and Quebec (ON/QC, Canada).

<sup>2</sup> See Fig. 1 and Appendix A for more information about the participants in this study.

identifying college student while Alivia Moore is a mother and a two-spirit person (an Indigenous non-binary gender identity). Most participants are middle-aged or elderly, while Sage Phillips and Nia Holley (Nipmuc, MA) are young adults. Some participants are of mixed tribal ancestry, such as Jacob Ortega (Winnebago, NE/ Eastern Pequot, CT/ Seneca-Cayuga, OK/ Nipmuc, MA/ Narragansett, RI) and Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk, NY/ Mohegan, CT). They have chosen their tribal identities in different ways. Jacob Ortega decided to enroll officially as Winnebago, but he said he identifies much more strongly with Eastern Pequot. Meanwhile, Mixashawn Rozie is not enrolled in any one tribe but rather has Indigenous acquaintances all around New England with whom he practices Native traditions, though he often affiliates with the Windsor Indians, a group in Connecticut composed of Indigenous peoples of different tribal ancestries. Jacob Ortega and Cedric Woods (Lumbee, NC) are the only two participants whose main tribal ancestries are located outside of the Northeast, but they are included as appropriate participants for this study because they have both lived in the Northeast for a long time—Jacob has lived there his entire life—and are frequently involved in the activities of northeastern tribal nations. Jacob is a member of the Connecticut River Inter-Tribal Council, which hosts traditional Native ceremonies, as well as a chaplain for Native peoples in Connecticut prisons. Cedric worked for the Mashantucket Pequot (CT) as Deputy Chief Operating Officer, among other positions, for many years.

Occupations and tribal participation are also major sources of variation among participants. Some are strongly rooted in one tribal nation and even hold powerful tribal leadership positions, such as Shoran Piper, Clan Mother of the Golden Hill Paugussett (CT), Elizabeth Solomon, Treasurer on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Ponkapoag (MA), and Abram Benedict, Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne (ON/QC, Canada). Others also work in academic-related fields, focusing on research and bringing Indigenous issues to light, including

Cedric Woods, Director for the Institute for New England Native American Studies at UMass Boston, Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic, RI), Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum in Rhode Island, and Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy, ME), Executive Director of the Abbe Museum, an Indigenous museum in Maine affiliated with the Wabanaki Confederacy. Some participants are independent creators: Nia Holley and Lorén Spears are visual artists, Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) and Jacob Ortega are authors, and Mixashawn Rozie is a professional musician. They have all incorporated Indigenous themes into their art.

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Role/Occupation</b>	<b>Tribal Affiliation</b>	<b>Recognition Status</b>
Benedict, Abram	Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne	Enrolled: Akwesasne Mohawk (ON/QC, Canada)	Federally recognized
Holley, Nia	Artist; Co-founder of Eastern Woodlands Rematriation; works with Native youth	Enrolled: Nipmuc (MA)	State recognized
Moore, Alivia	Co-founder of Eastern Woodlands Rematriation; Co-Chair of the Board for Wabanaki REACH; Organizer for the Wabanaki Two-Spirit Alliance; Member of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Workgroup	Enrolled: Penobscot (ME)	Federally recognized
Newell, Chris	Executive Director & Senior Partner to Wabanaki Nations at the Abbe Museum; formerly worked for the Mashantucket Pequot Museum	Enrolled: Passamaquoddy (ME)	Federally recognized
		Unenrolled/Affiliated: Mashantucket Pequot (CT)	Federally recognized
Ortega, Jacob	Connecticut River Council of Indians; Chaplain for Native prisoners in CT; founder of Thunderbird Rising ministry; Author	Enrolled: Winnebago (NE)	Federally recognized
		Unenrolled: Eastern Pequot (CT)	State recognized
		Unenrolled: Seneca-Cayuga (OK)	Federally recognized

		Unenrolled: Nipmuc (MA)	State recognized
		Unenrolled: Narragansett (RI)	Federally recognized
Peters, Robert	Author; Artist; Poet	Enrolled: Mashpee Wampanoag (MA)	Federally recognized
Phillips, Sage	Student at the University of Connecticut; President of the Native American and Indigenous Students Association and Student Coordinator for Native American Cultural Programs at UConn	Enrolled: Penobscot (ME)	Federally recognized
Piper, Shoran	Clan Mother of the Golden Hill Paugussett	Enrolled: Golden Hill Paugussett (CT)	State recognized
Rozie, Mixashawn	Professional Musician; Author	Unenrolled: Mohawk (NY)	Federally recognized
		Unenrolled: Mohegan (CT)	Federally recognized
Solomon, Elizabeth	Assistant Director of Academic Affairs and Fellowship Programs at the Harvard School of Public Health; Treasurer on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Ponkapoag	Enrolled: Massachusetts Ponkapoag (MA)	State recognized
Spears, Lorén	Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum; Artist	Enrolled: Narragansett/Niantic (RI) (Niantic is no longer its own nation but many Niantic integrated into the Narragansett)	Federally recognized
Woods, Cedric	Director for the Institute for New England Native American Studies at UMass Boston; formerly worked for the Mashantucket Pequot	Enrolled: Lumbee (NC)	State recognized
		Unenrolled/Affiliated: Mashantucket Pequot (CT)	Federally recognized

Fig. 1 A brief overview of the study's 12 participants, including their roles/occupations, their tribal nation affiliations (whether they are officially enrolled or not), and the recognition status of each tribal nation listed. For more detailed information, see Appendix A.

## *Data*

*Data collection.* Interviews took place periodically between November 2020 and February 2021. Their lengths varied from approximately one to two hours each, with most lasting around 90 minutes, which was the maximum time interval advertised in the recruitment. Due to the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders, all interviews occurred over the video conferencing platform Zoom. Even though no interviewee chose to keep any information confidential, I still conducted every interview alone in a closed room to maintain privacy. As can occur when using technology, several of the interviews experienced difficulties with the video freezing or bad wireless connections, but this did not happen too often. In those cases, only several minutes of interview conversation may have been lost. Interviews were audio recorded but not video recorded. Audio recordings were stored on my personal computer until I finished transcribing them, after which they were deleted permanently, and no copies were made anywhere else. One participant, Lorén Spears, asked to receive a copy of the audio recording for her own records. Transcriptions were completed with help from the computer software Otter.ai, which did the initial bulk transcription. I then went over each transcription again and fixed any errors by hand.

After the interviews, I sent each participant a thank-you email. This email often included a few follow-up questions clarifying the spelling of a name or a piece of the interview that was incomprehensible in the recording. It also included an offer to donate to any cause or organization of the participant's choosing. The participants were not made aware beforehand that they would receive this offer of donation, because I wanted to interview people who wanted to be interviewed for no other reason than to talk about the topics in my study, but I still wanted to show my gratitude to them afterward. Most participants replied with the name of an organization, to each of which I

subsequently donated approximately \$25.00. I donated a total of \$227.94. The money for these donations came from a \$500.00 research award I received in the fall of 2020. This award was funded by Pitzer College's Racial Justice Initiative and was given to students whose projects related to furthering the cause of racial justice.

*Interview content.* My research questions guided the interviews. I made a list of dozens of questions ahead of time, but I did not intend to ask them all; rather, they were mostly for my own reference as I was guiding each interview in order to ensure we got to some of the main points I wanted to reach. These questions were sorted into several categories, including preliminary information about the participants, identity, sovereignty, and what the participants were striving for. I highlighted several of the questions I thought were most important and that I definitely wanted to ask each interviewee. The way in which these key questions were asked may have varied slightly for each participant, but they can generally be paraphrased as the following:

- What does indigeneity mean to you?
- Do you think there is a collective Indigenous identity?
- How do you view your own identity as an Indigenous person?
- Do you think Indigenous identity has changed over time or has been constructed?
- What does sovereignty mean to you?
- Are you in favor of the word sovereignty or is there a better word you might use?
- How important is sovereignty to you and to Indigenous peoples in general?
- How sovereign do you feel you are, and why?
- How important is land to you?
- What is a major end goal that you are striving for in your work for Indigenous peoples?
- What can non-Indigenous people do to help Indigenous peoples?

I allowed the direction of each interview flow naturally, trying to keep the structure conversational while still guiding the questions. Interviewees often discussed topics I had not originally anticipated, and I usually tried to get them to elaborate further. As each participant spoke, I took note of the most intriguing topics they mentioned in order to follow up on them later. I also tried to pick out which areas of conversation each participant seemed most enthusiastic and



knowledgeable about so that we could then focus in on them even more. Consequently, some interviews ended up concentrating more heavily on certain themes than others. For example, Chris Newell was eager to talk about his work at the Abbe Museum, so we spent a good portion of his interview discussing the ways in which the museum was trying to decolonize itself by providing a platform for Wabanaki artists and creating a safe space for Wabanaki peoples to thrive. Each interview, though centered around the same themes, turned out unique, with varying questions and topics covered. The benefit of this structure is that participants were able to reveal their own personalities, perspectives, and backgrounds, and share ideas and experiences that I would not have thought to ask about.

*Data coding.* After all interviews were collected and transcribed, I organized the interview data using the coding software Dedoose. I went through each transcript and created codes according to the content I wanted to use in future writing, then attached one or multiple codes to each section of text relevant to the category of data I was compiling. I ended up with 84 codes, attached to 351 text excerpts and divided among eight main categories. There were sometimes layers of subcategories as well, such as the code “decolonization of the mind,” which fell under “decolonization,” which fell under “alternatives to sovereignty,” which fell under the broadest category, “sovereignty.” Certain codes overlapped in meaning; for instance, I had an “importance of land” code that fell under the reservations/land subcategory, but I also had another code related to land called “identity and land/Earth” that fell under the identity category. Although the vast number of codes—and the resulting frequent multiplicity of different codes per text excerpt—could prove complicated at times, I found that the increased specificity of the codes outweighed this downside, because it allowed me to better visualize the numerous ideas evoked by the data as I went through it. I also did not plan to include each code as its own section in my final analysis;

it was solely a tool for my own organizational benefit. Thus, the section headings in the final thesis do not correspond to the many codes, even though all the data that is in the codes was incorporated into the final product. Rather, I ended up creating new headings in my thesis according to which themes I found most appropriate to include in which locations. Dedoose contributed significantly to the data visualization, automatically presenting the codes in data charts and pinpointing the areas of most overlap among the different interviews. This prepared me to organize my findings and analysis into relevant sections.

The following tables show the results of the study's data coding. Each table represents one of the eight main categories of codes: Colonization/Colonialism (fig. 2), Federal Acknowledgement (fig. 3), Tribal Nations (fig. 4), Reservations/Land (fig. 5), Involvement in Indigenous Community (fig. 6), Indigenous Identity (fig. 7), Sovereignty (fig. 8), and Social Change/Future Goals (fig. 9). As expected, Indigenous Identity and Sovereignty were the two largest categories, meaning they had the largest numbers of code occurrences in the interviews. The top row of each table shows the subcategories of codes, as well as the subcategories' subcategories, which are distinguished by their smaller font. The first column of each table lists the participants' names. The boxes under each column contain the number of occurrences of the corresponding code per participant interview. The boxes are each shaded according to weight, meaning boxes with larger numbers of code occurrences are a darker shade and boxes with fewer numbers of code occurrences get progressively lighter in shade. The bottom row of each table shows the total numbers of occurrences for each code across all interviews.

Fig. 2 Colonization/Colonialism

	Effects of colonization/ oppression	Capitalism	Erasure	History	Internalizing colonization	Assimilation	Religious conversion	Relation to settler-colonial society	Coexistence
Benedict, Abram	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2
Moore, Alivia	6	1	0	0	1	0	0	4	0
Holley, Nia	3	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Newell, Chris	9	2	6	10	0	0	1	9	2
Ortega, Jacob	7	2	3	3	3	2	2	5	0
Peters, Robert	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	6	3
Phillips, Sage	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	1
Piper, Shoran	4	0	3	2	0	0	0	2	2
Rozie, Mixashawn	3	2	4	2	0	0	0	2	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	11	2	4	3	2	5	3	7	3
Spears, Loren	6	1	4	4	1	1	0	5	0
Woods, Cedric	6	1	3	1	1	0	1	3	0
<b>Totals</b>	59	12	29	27	9	8	7	54	13

Fig. 3 Federal Acknowledgement

	Distinctiveness of each tribe	Intra- and inter-tribal conflicts	Nationhood/ nation-building	Tribal governance	Tribal membership
Benedict, Abram	2	0	1	7	1
Moore, Alivia	0	0	0	2	1
Holley, Nia	0	0	0	3	0
Newell, Chris	1	1	2	3	0
Ortega, Jacob	0	0	0	0	1
Peters, Robert	0	0	0	0	0
Phillips, Sage	1	0	0	0	2
Piper, Shoran	0	1	0	1	0
Rozie, Mixashawn	0	0	0	0	2
Solomon, Elizabeth	0	0	0	1	0
Spears, Loren	0	1	0	0	2
Woods, Cedric	2	1	1	2	0
<b>Totals</b>	6	4	4	19	9

Fig. 4 Tribal Nations

	How important is tribal recognition	Pros/cons	What it's like to have recognition	Casinos	Relation to colonizer governments	Canada/U.S. differences	State recognition	Struggle for recognition	Legal claims
Benedict, Abram	0	0	5	0	15	10	0	0	3
Moore, Alivia	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Holley, Nia	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Newell, Chris	2	2	2	2	12	0	0	1	1
Ortega, Jacob	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	0
Peters, Robert	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	3	2
Phillips, Sage	2	2	3	0	5	0	0	1	0
Piper, Shoran	2	1	0	1	6	0	3	8	2
Rozie, Mixashawn	3	2	0	1	3	0	0	1	1
Solomon, Elizabeth	4	2	1	2	4	0	3	1	1
Spears, Loren	1	2	1	0	5	0	0	2	0
Woods, Cedric	3	4	5	1	8	0	0	3	0
<b>Totals</b>	22	16	17	10	64	10	8	22	10

Fig. 5 Reservations/Land

	Borders	Importance of land/the Earth	Land claims
Benedict, Abram	18	0	2
Moore, Alivia	0	0	0
Holley, Nia	0	3	0
Newell, Chris	2	10	8
Ortega, Jacob	0	4	0
Peters, Robert	0	5	1
Phillips, Sage	0	0	1
Piper, Shoran	0	2	4
Rozie, Mixashawn	2	6	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	0	4	2
Spears, Loren	0	4	1
Woods, Cedric	0	1	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>21</b>

Fig. 6 Involvement in Indigenous Community

	Educational programs	Personal stories	Traditional Indigenous practices	Art	Food ways	Rematriation	Traditions	Tribal role
Benedict, Abram	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Moore, Alivia	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Holley, Nia	0	0	3	1	2	0	0	1
Newell, Chris	4	0	4	2	0	0	0	2
Ortega, Jacob	3	5	3	0	0	0	8	3
Peters, Robert	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Phillips, Sage	5	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
Piper, Shoran	1	0	3	0	1	0	1	2
Rozie, Mixashawn	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Spears, Loren	4	2	2	2	2	0	4	2
Woods, Cedric	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>

Fig. 7 Indigenous Identity

	Collective identity	UNDRIP	Conception/ importance of identity	Legitimacy/ authenticity	"Documented" identity	Paper genocide	Blood quantum/ ancestry	Identity assignment/ construction/ stereotypes	Performing identity
Benedict, Abram	6	2	4	0	3	0	1	8	0
Moore, Alivia	4	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	1
Holley, Nia	2	0	1	2	2	0	0	4	0
Newell, Chris	1	0	0	3	0	0	0	4	1
Ortega, Jacob	2	0	1	2	1	0	2	1	1
Peters, Robert	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Phillips, Sage	4	0	3	4	1	0	1	4	1
Piper, Shoran	2	0	1	5	3	0	0	2	1
Rozie, Mixashawn	10	0	3	6	4	0	4	7	1
Solomon, Elizabeth	3	0	0	1	1	0	1	6	1
Spears, Loren	2	0	3	3	3	1	2	3	1
Woods, Cedric	2	1	0	2	1	0	0	3	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>9</b>

Fig. 7 cont.

	Race, racism, and racialization	"Indian"	Intersection with other marginalized groups	Minoritization	Mixed race	Racism	Self-identification	Changing self-ID	Two-Spirit
Benedict, Abram	5	1	0	0	1	1	4	3	0
Moore, Alivia	3	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	3
Holley, Nia	2	0	3	1	3	2	6	1	0
Newell, Chris	2	0	0	1	0	1	3	1	0
Ortega, Jacob	2	0	1	1	3	3	3	0	0
Peters, Robert	3	0	3	0	0	3	3	1	0
Phillips, Sage	2	0	1	0	3	2	6	2	0
Piper, Shoran	3	0	0	2	0	1	4	0	0
Rozie, Mixashawn	3	1	2	1	0	4	2	1	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	2	0	2	2	2	1	5	1	0
Spears, Loren	1	1	2	1	0	2	4	2	0
Woods, Cedric	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	29	3	17	10	12	20	45	13	3

	What it means to be Indigenous	Land/place and identity	Are tribes nations?	Tribal affiliation or lack thereof
Benedict, Abram	0	1	0	0
Moore, Alivia	3	3	0	0
Holley, Nia	2	4	1	2
Newell, Chris	3	2	0	0
Ortega, Jacob	3	4	0	0
Peters, Robert	0	0	0	0
Phillips, Sage	3	1	0	1
Piper, Shoran	3	1	1	1
Rozie, Mixashawn	10	6	0	9
Solomon, Elizabeth	2	4	0	2
Spears, Loren	5	4	0	1
Woods, Cedric	2	4	0	1
<b>Totals</b>	36	34	2	17

Fig. 8 Sovereignty

	Alternatives to sovereignty	Decolonization	Decolonization of the mind	Examples of decolonizing practices	Self-determination	Conception/ importance of sovereignty	How sovereign they feel
Benedict, Abram	0	1	1	3	0	3	2
Moore, Alivia	0	3	1	0	0	3	4
Holley, Nia	0	1	1	0	1	4	2
Newell, Chris	0	5	0	4	4	4	3
Ortega, Jacob	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Peters, Robert	0	0	0	0	0	3	2
Phillips, Sage	0	4	4	2	0	2	3
Piper, Shoran	0	1	1	0	0	3	1
Rozie, Mixashawn	0	0	0	0	2	9	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	4	5	2	4	3	7	4
Spears, Loren	1	1	0	0	0	2	0
Woods, Cedric	0	3	0	1	4	2	0
<b>Totals</b>	5	24	10	14	15	43	21

Fig. 8 cont.

	How they exercise sovereignty	Jurisdiction/self-governance/autonomy	Other forms of sovereignty	Cultural sovereignty	Economic sovereignty	Sovereignty of the mind	What sovereignty looks like for them	Rights/citizenship
Benedict, Abram	4	9	0	0	4	0	3	9
Moore, Alivia	0	0	2	0	0	0	3	0
Holley, Nia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Newell, Chris	2	4	2	1	3	0	3	4
Ortega, Jacob	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Peters, Robert	5	3	1	0	0	0	5	2
Phillips, Sage	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0
Piper, Shoran	2	2	0	1	0	0	2	0
Rozie, Mixashawn	6	4	1	0	2	0	8	0
Solomon, Elizabeth	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	1
Spears, Loren	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	1
Woods, Cedric	1	5	2	0	1	0	3	2
<b>Totals</b>	22	32	11	5	11	2	35	19

Fig. 9 Social Change/Future Goals

	Collectivity/community/solidarity	Cultural preservation	Ancestors/Elders	Education	Language	Passing knowledge
Benedict, Abram	1	1	0	1	0	0
Moore, Alivia	2	1	0	0	0	0
Holley, Nia	6	1	0	0	0	0
Newell, Chris	3	8	0	2	3	4
Ortega, Jacob	4	6	0	3	3	0
Peters, Robert	1	2	0	1	3	1
Phillips, Sage	4	2	0	0	0	0
Piper, Shoran	2	2	1	0	0	2
Rozie, Mixashawn	3	2	0	0	0	1
Solomon, Elizabeth	4	4	0	1	0	0
Spears, Loren	6	7	1	0	2	5
Woods, Cedric	2	0	0	2	1	0
<b>Totals</b>	38	36	2	10	12	13

	Survival	Economic development	Resistance	What non-Indigenous people can do	What they are ultimately striving for	What they need to happen
Benedict, Abram	1	1	1	1	2	0
Moore, Alivia	1	0	0	1	4	1
Holley, Nia	1	0	0	2	4	1
Newell, Chris	6	3	0	1	3	3
Ortega, Jacob	4	1	0	0	3	0
Peters, Robert	1	0	1	1	3	3
Phillips, Sage	0	0	3	1	1	2
Piper, Shoran	2	0	6	1	2	0
Rozie, Mixashawn	3	2	0	2	2	1
Solomon, Elizabeth	2	0	1	1	5	5
Spears, Loren	9	2	0	0	1	0
Woods, Cedric	2	1	0	2	2	0
<b>Totals</b>	32	10	12	13	32	16

## CHAPTER I: COLONIZATION AND ERASURE

### *Histories of Tragedy*

Integral to undoing the centuries-long erasure of Indigenous peoples in the “Americas” is to hand the microphone to living Natives. An apparent pattern throughout this study’s interviews was the participants’ use of storytelling to express the horrific experiences their peoples have gone through since colonizer arrival. In addition to their general views on colonization, multiple interviewees shared detailed descriptions of their events in their tribal nations’ histories, many of which occurred long before their lifetimes. These retellings, or even first-time “tellings,” of overlooked moments in the long timeline of colonization are an essential component to the fight for justice, as they come from the Indigenous perspective. Again, bringing Indigenous viewpoints and histories to the forefront is one of the main goals of this study.

*Erasure, dispossession, and loss of nationhood.* Centuries of colonization in the U.S. and Canada are characterized by disappearing peoplehood. Many interviewees touched directly on the topic of settler-colonialism and its goal of eradicating the Indigenous population. Echoing Steinman (2016), Cedric Woods (Lumbee) said, “frankly, the biggest perception and need [settlers] have is for us not to exist, because that’s the core of a settler-colonial state, is to replace the Indigenous population.” Likewise, Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) expressed his belief that colonizer governments are constantly seeking erasure, saying that they are “always looking at ways to extinguish the rights of Indigenous.... [they have] wanted to, in the past, get rid of Indians so that they wouldn't be in the way of what they want to do.” Abram gave the example of the “White Paper,” a 1969 policy proposal by the Canadian government that sought to invalidate all legal documents pertaining to First Nations, including existing treaties, and as Abram put it,

“talks about wanting to annihilate the Indian problem over a period of time.” This annihilation of written acknowledgement of Indigenous existence is a case of what several interviewees called “paper genocide,” and reflects O’Brien’s (2005) discussion of the way records have constantly been produced by settlers to “erase” Indigenous peoples.

Cedric Woods also gave a particularly compelling view of settler-colonialism and the way in which Indigenous peoples have been portrayed, their legitimacy stripped away, to enforce their disappearance. He said:

[Indigeneity] is constructed in a way to emphasize Indigenous erasure. To emphasize and challenge the legitimacy of contemporary Indigenous communities, all of those things have happened. Because again, at its root, the settler-colonial narrative is one of a zero-sum game. You can't have Indigenous peoples and settler states, one's got to give. So for them to, in their mind and cognitive approaches, if we clearly recognize Indigenous presence, that means we're delegitimizing and deconstructing our own societies. Indigenous peoples don't believe in that approach or zero-sum games. But it's how they frame it. And so therefore, we are perpetually perceived as a as an existential threat to settler states.

Here, Cedric brought up a major feature of settler-colonialism: the us-versus-them ideology that drives colonizers to exterminate Indigenous peoples because they are a threat to the legitimacy of settler-colonial society. His remark that Indigenous peoples do not share the colonizer view of the world as a “zero-sum game” underscores the collective and more harmonic nature of Native society. Part of the settler-colonialist myth is that colonization is over, but Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) said that this is false: “people don't realize that just because the cavalry isn't charging and blowing bugles and fire doesn't mean they're still not trying to wipe us out. They're still doing it. A little more subtle about it now, but they're still doing it.” These testimonies support O’Brien’s (2010) argument that during original westward expansion, colonizers actively worked to deprive non-Natives of knowledge of Natives in order to perpetuate the myth of an open continent for the taking. Participants relayed that they are fully aware that this still continues today.



Another vital component of erasure is the dispossession of Native lands through the process of rejecting Indigenous peoples' legitimacy. Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) discussed how tribal nations that had previously been recognized by settlers via treaties were "detrribalized" by the U.S. government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This happened to the Narragansett in Rhode Island, and it resulted in the seizure of their lands. Lorén explained that this caused members to spread apart from each other, moving to urban areas and away from their roots: "And so we're scattered all over the place. There's a large population of Narragansett people living in urban environments.... And when colonization is happening, and land dispossession and displacement is happening, we're all over the state." Lorén's description of detrribalization is a major example of how colonizers used legal "justifications" to displace Indigenous tribal nations and scatter them throughout the settler-colonial population. These experiences also highlight Bonds and Inwood's (2016) claim that dispossession is a key tool for colonizers, because without their homelands, Indigenous peoples are far less able to remain a tightly connected group. It is a prime form of erasure as it inhibits Native tribes' ability to practice their traditional culture, disassociating them from their collective identity.

While the law ended up siding with the Narragansett and they became federally recognized again—albeit a century later—this was unfortunately not the case for many others. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) described the detrribalization of many tribal nations in Connecticut several decades ago: "And way back [t]hen there was a total of about 18 tribes in Connecticut, but of course, when the government got involved, they dismissed all the tribes and only kept the five recognized." Shoran's tribe was thankfully one of the five that were spared from detrribalization from the state rolls, but it is still struggling for recognition on a federal basis today.

Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) discussed the long and difficult journey his people have undergone, emphasizing the loss of nationhood they faced after the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Overpowered by the strength of the colonizer military and prevented from signing further treaties with the federal government, the Passamaquoddy had to concede to certain settler ways in order to survive. Chris described this effort as “play[ing] the game of nationhood, when it comes to our relationship with the states and with the United States government, to protect, or in some cases even restore, rights that the United States government have just blown over, taken away.” Yet Chris also noted that while the U.S. often preaches the status of tribes as “nations” today, in reality it is referring to a status in which they are dependent upon the federal government, which is not real full sovereignty. Chris said, “the U.S. government actually has...a want of keeping a certain status for tribes, with that ‘quasi’ or ‘domestic’ dependent nation-state.” This may be because it helps the U.S. keep up the appearance of a relationship between “sovereign” nations, which is how it first came into contact with Indigenous groups, while still retaining general major control over them.

Still, while some Natives staunchly advocate for their statuses as real nations, Chris also clarified that not all Indigenous people consider nationhood to be the appropriate term to describe tribes, saying, “Our idea of our homelands and who we are goes back 12,000 years, and is way before any idea of nationhood, this English language term [that] once again we're using, which is a Euro thought, the nation-state.” Nia Holley (Nipmuc) expressed a similar sentiment, stating her skepticism over the idea of nationhood. She said that any kind of nationhood that may have existed pre-colonization would have had a different connotation: “our nationhoods were more grounded in relationality, relationship to place, people and the land.” Hence, the act of seeking nationhood today may be more convoluted than it first appears. Although many tribes do consider themselves

nations, and in doing so are asserting their right to interact with the U.S. on a more powerful basis, this is not a fully agreed upon position.

*Assimilation and internalized colonization.* Participants had a lot to say about the horrendous experiences of assimilation to which Indigenous peoples were subjected at the hands of colonizer governments over the centuries. While “official” policies of assimilation no longer exist in the U.S., Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) addressed the ongoing difficulties of more implicit assimilation that Natives face while living in a settler-colonial society: “[P]retty much everybody that is in the tribe will always say [that] we are all assimilated to a certain extent. It's like, you cannot live in today's society and not be assimilated into the dominant society.” Meanwhile, Jacob Ortega talked about his own relation to assimilation, particularly in regard to the legality of practicing his culture. He frequently hosts traditional Indigenous ceremonies around Connecticut, but, he remarked, “Prior to 1970, it was actually illegal. If we were caught doing a nikkomo we did last week, we could be arrested.... It wasn't until 1978 when they passed the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act that this was able to come out in the open again.” Jacob’s current effort to continue these traditions, which were suppressed for many decades, is a potent force against assimilation.

Several participants discussed one of the most brutal instances of forced assimilation in U.S. history: the removal of Indigenous children from their families and their placement into boarding schools or white foster families. As another form of cultural erasure, not to mention a catalyst for lifelong trauma, this violent assimilation occurred from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to just 50 years ago. The U.S. government only stopped the practice of child removal in 1978 with the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act, spurred on by the activism of Indigenous groups. Chris Newell called these residential schools where Native children were placed, which were common

in his homelands in Maine, a “continuation of genocide.” In destroying families severing links to millennia of cultural heritage, the policy killed indigeneity and Natives’ peoplehoods. Jacob Ortega described these forced assimilation practices and their detrimental effects on Indigenous children’s identities and self-knowledge:

[Indigenous peoples] have been kidnapped, have been taken from homes and had white society forced down their throats. They have been taken to boarding schools, had their hair cut off, dressed as little white men and given whitey names, English names and so on and so forth. And so that's the irony there: they kind of had white culture forced down their throat, which is why so many Natives today don't know who the hell they are. They don't know their languages, some don't even know what tribe they are, because that's been taken away from them. It was literally beaten; they were literally physically beaten if they were caught speaking their language in some of these boarding schools. And they were systematically taught to be ashamed of themselves.

Indigenous peoples who went through cultural genocide often internalized the colonial ideology of the wrongness of indigeneity and the goodness of affiliating with white society. Jacob also noted the effects of assimilation policies on his own mother and the shame she went through growing up in an intolerant society: “unfortunately, she came from the generation that were really taught to be ashamed of their Native ancestry.... as far as anybody was concerned, she was French and Irish.” Elizabeth Solomon described a very similar experience, which her mother’s family went through. Like many other Natives, her mother’s mother and sister were taken away and put in foster care as children “and trained to be domestics” as an attempt to eliminate their ancestral roots. During Elizabeth’s own childhood as well, society taught her to reject her Indigenous identity. She said that no one would even admit to being Indigenous back then: “And even when I was growing up, it was like, the idea of having somebody who was Indigenous from New England was like, people would laugh at you.” Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) said he was taught not to tell anyone he was Indigenous when he was growing up: “we knew we were of Native descent, but we didn't talk, we didn't get political about it, because we knew that we were going to get ridiculed or neutralized in one way or another had we said that.” These experiences reflect the

way in which colonizers have used ideologies of Native inferiority to strip them of their identities and thereby take away their power as sovereign peoples, a collective, autonomous power that poses a great threat to settler-colonialism.

Like others, Lorén Spears also talked about how Indigenous peoples have been taught to take on the colonizer-perpetuated narrative that tells them to be ashamed of their identities. She said that outside influence continues to cause Indigenous peoples to internalize colonial thinking: “there are times that other individuals might want to control your intellectual knowledge around your own culture, and your own family, and your own community, your own clan, and things like that. So we call that ‘colonizing yourselves,’ when you take on colonizer mentality.” Lorén’s take on internalizing colonialist beliefs reflects Alfred’s (2002) discussion of how Indigenous activists must overcome this settler mentality in order to truly achieve their goals. Today, internalized colonization is not so much tied to self-shame, as indigeneity is more often seen in a positive light. However, the privileging of some peoples’ indigeneity over others’, a hierarchy established by colonizer institutions to divide and categorize people, has caused many of its own conflicts, as will be shown.

Mixashawn Rozie talked about this constructed hierarchy that certain tribes and their members ascribe to in which the “most Indigenous” people are at the top. Mixashawn, who tends to embrace inter-tribal relations among unenrolled Indigenous peoples to a relatively larger extent than those who affiliate themselves with a single tribe, believes that “this whole idea of very fixed tribal identity is really a colonial thing.” Mixashawn echoed Miller’s (2004) argument that colonizers originally created the idea of “tribes” as they are now known in order to paint Natives as uncivilized and unsovereign. Yet, Mixashawn said, this colonizer idea is adopted broadly by tribes today, especially those in tribal governance, presenting a newer form of internalized

colonization. This has led to internal conflicts within the Indigenous community and between tribal nations, often due to competition for resources. It occurs in the process of admitting new recognized tribal members based on how Indigenous they are deemed to be: “the tribal council is generally set up to exclude people, and there are many, many, many cases of this.” Mixashawn added that internal conflicts have also occurred when some Indigenous peoples deny the indigeneity of those in other tribes: “Native people exclude all the time. I know plenty of Native people, especially in the Midwest, they'll say, they won't recognize Natives from Mexico as Native.”

Jacob Ortega summed up the foundations of internalized colonization in his interview, quoting his Indigenous friend as saying, “The government can get ‘Indians’ to fight amongst themselves anytime at once.” These descriptions of exclusion within the Indigenous community are highly reflective of Miller’s (2004) research on the way that Natives can sometimes judge one another by how Indigenous they perceive them to be, even seeking to prevent certain tribes from gaining recognition. However, it is important to underscore that internalized colonization is entirely caused by colonizers (often intentionally for malicious purposes), and not by the Indigenous peoples whom it affects. Jacob and Mixashawn—notably, the two participants in this study who do not affiliate with one single tribal nation—represent the opinion of certain Indigenous people who think some tribal governments have internalized colonizer ideologies for the worse.

*Religious conversion.* A prominent feature of displacement, particularly in the Northeast, is the role of religion in removing Natives from their homes. According to Chris Newell, the original lands inhabited by the Passamaquoddy in present-day Maine were diminished through the establishment of Catholic missions in the region. These missions founded “praying Indian towns,” coercing local Indigenous peoples to congregate in one location so they could take over their lands.

In many ways, it was a case of survival: Chris said that when the Passamaquoddy suffered from smallpox epidemics, French Catholic priests recruited tribal leaders to move to the praying towns by telling them that they could protect them from diseases. Over time, Chris explained, the population of Indigenous peoples on their original homelands dwindled significantly: “So you had a multitude of communities based on these Indian missions already spread about, but then they started to become less and less populated.” Today, the Passamaquoddy only have claim to two areas designated as reservations, a tiny fraction of the territory they once roamed. Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) also detailed how his tribal nation’s land was turned into praying towns as a condition for it to continue to live in the area: “And one of the conditions on coexisting with colonists was to accept Christianity. And that basically gave us a pass to live on our own land. So fast forward 20 years, they took our land out of trust, and made it into a town.”

Religious conversion was not just a capitalist ploy to seize land, however; the colonizers’ desire to indoctrinate and convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity was also another form of assimilation. Elizabeth Solomon recounted how many members of the Massachusetts Ponkapoag, whose land was turned into a praying town, have retained the internalized legacy of Christian conversion. In accord with her fellow interviewees, she contended that praying towns “made it easier to basically access our lands,” but also that assimilation was an all-encompassing factor: “So many, if not most, of the tribes in Massachusetts came out of a lot of the praying towns.... it was very hard to stay as an independent Indigenous group because it really wasn't allowed.” Elizabeth noted that another motive behind the creation of praying towns was to isolate Natives from the colonizer population. She said, “I also feel it was also to separate us from the dominant culture, because even though the dominant culture wanted us to ‘convert’ to Christianity, [it] still

did not accept us into the dominant society.” Hence, praying towns served to both assimilate and isolate, two seemingly opposite ideas that Elizabeth showed can actually function simultaneously.

Jacob Ortega talked about his family’s connection to religious assimilation as well. His grandmother grew up on several reservations in New England, where her father was sent as a minister to preach Christianity to Indigenous peoples. According to Jacob, the congregation at the time thought that his great-grandfather, who had some Indigenous ancestry, “would be a good thing to kind of help them ‘convert the savages,’ so to speak. And that's really very common.” Then, while his great-grandfather was ministering, some Indigenous people convinced him to attend an Indigenous religious ceremony, and his great-grandfather started to sympathize more with them. The Christian church’s elders became consequently concerned, so “[t]hey sent him back to Connecticut and replaced him with a fully white minister where there'd be no more foolishness.”

Cedric Woods (Lumbee) was the final participant to mention religious conversion, contending that contrary to popular belief, Indigenous peoples were able to maintain autonomy and avoid actual indoctrination over the centuries. Cedric conducted research on the Mashantucket Pequot of Connecticut several years ago, a tribal nation that also has a history with praying towns. He found that the tribe’s acceptance of praying towns was “an adaptive strategy demonstrating Native agency.” Cedric asked rhetorically, “Did they necessarily want to give up their traditional belief systems? No, and I'd argue they didn't. They syncretized and they took Christianity, but also maintained these traditional belief systems and created something new from it.” This is an example of resistance to assimilation in which Indigenous peoples have sometimes been able to reappropriate imposed settler customs and turn them around to fit Indigenous-compatible systems of knowledge, spirituality, and culture.



*Generational trauma.* The result of centuries of genocide was, as one might expect, severe trauma. Robert Peters discussed the legacy of the Mashpee's suffering: "The thing is that it's a constant struggle. And when you have to fight for everything, you don't know what it's like to not have to fight. And believe me, Mashpee has had a lot of struggles that they shouldn't have had to endure. And then there's your generational trauma." Many interviewees also reflected on their ancestors, which was unsurprising as Indigenous culture often emphasizes the importance of inter-generational connections. Lorén Spears talked about her great-grandparents and their experiences with the dispossession of Narragansett land in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century: "They were adapting to the trauma of land dispossession, land displacement, and having had people within their history that had been enslaved or indentured, and just the subjugation of that...even if you were getting paid, that you were going to be working less-than jobs, and things of that nature." Likewise, Cedric Woods talked about the scars left behind from generations of oppression, especially due to the sacrifices his ancestors sometimes had to make:

[T]he centuries of oppression are the roots of historical trauma. I mean, there's a reason that we have high rates of substance abuse. It's driven not by biological imperative or need but by historical oppression. Yeah, absolutely, oppression has led to us being essentially at the lowest end of economic indicators, or educational attainment, choose the measure. We're going to come up on the lowest end as a result of centuries of active political, economic, and military oppression. And we've had to adapt and make some choices that were not great choices, but the only ones that ancestors thought at different points in times that would allow them to survive. Because that is exactly how real the threat was.

### *Tribal Recognition*

The Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP) in the U.S. is a long and difficult battle for most tribal nations, often requiring "proof" of indigeneity that no longer exists because it was destroyed by colonizers centuries ago. Some of this study's participants are in tribes that have had federal recognition for a while (though the struggle is never really over), while others are currently fighting for federal recognition, and while others are not seeking it at all. The differences between

state and federal recognition are immense when it comes to land, resources, rights, and funding. However, for some Indigenous tribes, the leap to federal recognition is not always worth the cost. Participants' views on the issue support Miller's (2004) findings that the FAP is a grueling process that is very difficult to pass, particularly due to its obsession with defining and regulating Indigenous identities.

*How important is federal acknowledgement?* Many participants were asked this question. Some seemed fairly disinterested in it, such as Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan), who said, "I mean, federal recognition, of course that would be good. But on the other hand, it's not one of my goals at all." Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) viewed federal recognition primarily as a source of income, saying, "I certainly support that. I mean, obviously it's a lot harder to, shall we say, 'screw with rich people,' or at least people who are fairly well off, than it is to fool around with poor people." Other participants have fought for many years to achieve federal acknowledgement, including Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett). She listed some of what she viewed as the best gains that come with federal recognition, all of which directly relate to services that would improve the lives of her people: "It's our land claims, it's actually money that's owed to the tribe. It's more of the benefits, the medical, like I said, still keeping our language alive, you need money on that, you need resources. Having our own cultural center for our youth." This as opposed to the very few benefits that come with state recognition. Shoran described what the Golden Hill Paugussett's current recognition under Connecticut state law is like: "State-recognized tribes, we don't get nothing. Yeah, we can apply for grants, but they're very small, like microgrants. And it only goes so far, trying to make wellness kits for the tribe, or people need tote bags, or t-shirts, or maybe the two reservations need a new tribal flag." For Shoran, federal acknowledgement would be an immense source of aid for her tribal nation.

Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) listed many benefits of federal acknowledgement that her tribe has benefited from, including “resources that can help develop your government and your administrative systems.” Furthermore, she said, the Narragansett now have more services and departments to address different needs of tribal members, as well as more jurisdiction over their affairs: “We have a help center and the whole administration, there's the governmental offices and things for the tribal council meetings, and there's a police department and there's the social services department to help families and community through, to support different needs.” While she said that in many ways, she was glad to have federal recognition, Lorén added that it is important to remember that “being in a federally recognized tribe doesn't make you Indigenous singularly,” because so many Indigenous people are excluded from tribal membership for arbitrary reasons. She went on to talk about the difficult process of gaining federal acknowledgement, comparing it to buying a used car without understanding all the features one is paying for. The complexity of the process makes it extremely challenging for tribal nations to understand what they need to do to win; as Lorén said, “The problem is, with federal recognition, you only get one shot. And so when you get tangled up in the web that they've created on the federal level through that process, sometimes you make rules that you don't realize are going to hurt you in the end.”

Sage Phillips (Penobscot) thinks that on the one hand, federal recognition has given her tribal nation the greater ability to make its needs known: “our voices are heard in a lot more spaces...now, the state has started to cooperate with us. And we're the first state to ban the use of Native mascots. And we have the Penobscot River Restoration Project, which the government was a part of, and we raised like \$60 million to remove dams.” On the other hand, Sage pointed to the ways in which her tribe is still not fully autonomous, saying, “there's still stuff that we cannot determine ourselves.... the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes had this big settlement, and they

got a ton of money from the government to buy lands, and now still to this day we cannot do certain things on those lands per the government.” Sage also voiced her ambivalence toward whether or not federal acknowledgement is worth fighting for. She said:

So it all comes back to—which I do not have an answer—is it worth it? Is it worth fighting? You have to go through so much to even apply to be recognized. That in itself, I think, is trauma. So then when you finally get it, and you still can't determine things for yourself.... I guess if you are recognized, you kind of have a leg up, but at the same time you're still fighting the same battles as someone who's not.

Alivia Moore (Penobscot) said that while federal recognition has helped her tribal nation in ways, she is concerned about the possibility that it could cause tribal members to forget or disregard the “shortfalls” of interacting with settler-colonial governments. As she put it, “I think what has been harmful and continues to be harmful for Native people in our own mindset is thinking that's the end-all be-all.” Thus, these participants seemed to agree that while federal acknowledgement is a useful resource, it is not the same as claiming true Indigenous identity or sovereignty.

Cedric Woods (Lumbee), who has many years of professional experience working with federally recognized tribes, gave a nuanced view of federal acknowledgement that reflects some of Sage’s sentiments. He said that many tribes want recognition for physical protection, such as through the Indian Child Welfare Act, and “to protect these things that are most sacred and precious to them” such as ancestral burial grounds. However, he remarked, federal recognition “creates the potential for things and programs; it doesn't guarantee it.” Because of this, Cedric said, deciding whether or not to seek recognition should be considered very carefully by the tribe, making sure to weigh the costs and benefits. He thinks that programs that come with federal acknowledgement may or may not make sense to a particular tribe, so the choices of which opportunities to go after must be “driven by what's going to be in the best interest of the community.” Not all of these opportunities have to be sought after through federal recognition.

Cedric advocated for examining the potential effects of federal acknowledgement on a case-by-case basis, since it is not a process to be taken lightly.

Another group of participants coalesced around the belief that federal acknowledgement can never be the answer for their tribes. From a perspective opposite to that of Clan Mother Shoran Piper, Nia Holley (Nipmuc) is firmly against the idea of her tribal nation seeking federal recognition. When asked her opinion on it, she replied, “Personally, it's definitely harmful and a waste of time.... I really feel like when you are federally recognized, you have less ability to really decide for yourself because you have all these federal guidelines that you have to adhere to.” Nia said she thinks that the Nipmuc actually possess more sovereignty being state recognized than do tribal nations that are federally recognized, because they are less beholden to federal oversight. This is reflective of Steinman’s (2016) posture that tribal recognition can be dangerous in its use as means for settler-colonial governments to extend their control over tribal affairs, and it even gives settlers power to set the parameters for who qualifies as Indigenous and consequently who is entitled to which rights. Nia hypothesized as to why other Indigenous peoples might not feel the same way as her, saying that she had encountered people in her tribe who thought federal recognition was the only way to “legitimize” their Nipmuc identity. This refers back to Lorén’s claim that federal recognition should not be seen as a symbol of indigeneity. Similarly, Nia said, “you don't need any of that to be who you are; you just are who you are. And you don't need validation from a governing system that doesn't care about anything.” The belief that one needs to be legitimized by an outside body is again symptomatic of internalized colonialism.

Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) is also not in favor of federal recognition. She said, “I feel like federal recognition has more drawbacks than it has advantages. Simply because the federal government has oversight of everything that you're doing. And your land, you

don't actually even own your land. It's held in trust by the federal government.” She talked about how 20 years ago, a lobbyist had approached her tribe asking if he could help them get recognition. They refused, thinking that the cost was too high at the time, as the legal fees can add up to millions of dollars. Elizabeth said that while the conversation about whether to try for it again is ongoing, her own opinion is that they should not, because she does not want to have to become more reliant on settler-colonial society and she finds the whole process of legitimizing her people problematic.

As she said:

[M]y personal opinion is that it just sticks in my craw that I should have to ask a society that basically stole my land, or stole my ancestors' land, tried to kill off all of my ancestors, deny my existence, and then I should ask them for recognition? It's like, 'No, I'm not gonna do that.' But that's me.... I'm just like, that just is ludicrous. We should be recognizing *you*.

*Capitalism and casinos.* An advantage of federal acknowledgement is the revenue that can come with it, not just through direct grants but also through the ability of tribes to start their own businesses and produce their own profits. Chris Newell discussed how the major changes that happened once the Passamaquoddy gained federal recognition were mostly related to finances: “Before recognition we were only given money by the state out of a trust fund when they when they saw fit. We didn't govern our own finances, and now our tribal governments are basically governing these multimillion-dollar yearly finances.” While this seems positive, Chris was critical of the way this business structure affects his tribal community, saying that the tribal governments are more preoccupied with money now as opposed to how they used to function, “which was making sure that when Indian agents came with supplies, they knew who everybody in the community was, who had the most need.... And now, our modern-day government is about stewarding finances.” This example is symptomatic of Rata's (1999) theory of neotribal capitalism, where the tribal government becomes more of a corporation than a steward of its community.

Many tribal nations that have gained acknowledgement have chosen to open casinos. Chris Newell also used to work as a slot attendant at Mohegan Sun, the casino owned by the Mohegan in Connecticut, and he touched on whether or not the casino, which used to generate over one billion dollars annually, was worth the investment. On the one hand, he said, the revenue gave the Mohegan “self-sufficiency,” which “allowed them to start the process of healing from genocide.” The Mohegan, as well as the Mashantucket Pequot, the other federally acknowledged Connecticut tribe and owner of Foxwoods Casino, used their casino profits to obtain good healthcare for their members and dole out incentive payments to them, among other programs. This supports Bunten’s (2010) argument in favor of tribal participation in capitalism because there is a way to do so ethically and in line with Indigenous values, as well as Miller’s (2001) belief that capitalism can help tribal nations become more financially autonomous. However, Chris said, the tribes had to take out massive loans that they were not ready to pay back when the recession hit in 2008, and because the banks could not legally help them due to policies of tribal “sovereignty,” the federal government stepped in to renegotiate the loans with strings attached. Chris said those strings prevented the tribes from exercising the same amount of autonomy they previously possessed: “by borrowing foreign money, they gave up their sovereignty as soon as the recession hit.” Looking back, Chris said he thinks the effects of the recession may have turned out better had the tribes saved and invested more of their money to begin with. In the end, this case might be more supportive of Murphy’s (2018) remark that capitalist endeavors are not worth the risk for Indigenous nations, especially considering that capitalist expansion was one of the major causes of their dispossession and near erasure in the first place.

Cedric Woods, who used to work as Deputy Chief Operating Officer for the Mashantucket Pequot, discussed the ways in which tribal casinos have changed not only tribes, but also outside

society, over the past several decades. He said the main change has been “the way people look at and think about tribes” as entities that are constantly seeking to start casinos: “every town lawyers-up as soon as they think a tribe may be pursuing federal recognition, because they assume there's going to be a casino.” This poses another obstacle for tribes in the FAP because they then have to pay millions of dollars in legal fees to fight against these lawsuits, and they often have to resort to relying on venture capitalists and developers to get this money. Still, like Chris, Cedric named some of the beneficial ways in which the Mashantucket Pequot spent its casino revenue, such as covering college tuition and fees, child development, and elder care, all to “support and sustain and rapidly increase the human capital development...for their community.”

Not all tribes want to go into the casino business, however. Although Clan Mother Shoran Piper has been fighting vigorously for federal acknowledgement, she said the Golden Hill Paugussett does not want a casino once the tribe achieves recognition because it is a “dead-end business.” Much of the political opposition to her tribal nation gaining recognition is the fear by some Connecticut politicians that they will open a third casino in the state in addition to the ones owned by the Mohegan and the Mashantucket Pequot. But Shoran said the possibility of future casinos has already been shut down, and since her tribe does not want one anyway, she thinks “the casino worry is just an excuse” to continue to block its recognition. It is clear that there is a link between capitalism and race here, or what Pasternak (1999) calls “racial capitalism,” because according to Pasternak, capitalism relies on the ability to create unequal groups in society. Since Indigenous peoples, when grouped together and compared with white people, tend to be near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, they have a much harder time gaining fair opportunities, often getting shut down before they even try. The downsides to capitalist participation for tribes are evidence of the way the system is set up in white settlers’ favor above all.



*Struggle for recognition.* Every participant whose tribal nation worked or is working to get federal recognition concurred that the process is arduous and seems stacked against them. Clan Mother Shoran Piper has had many years of direct contact with the Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP), and she talked about the ways in which the Golden Hill Paugussett have struggled with it. As she explained, the process requires a lot of very old evidence that is difficult to obtain: “you always got to show your paperwork, your timeline, vital statistics, your tribal role, your birth records, your everything from way back, 1800s. I'm talking from like, we have old journals, we have old books, where it was quill and ink, you need a magnifying glass.” In this ongoing battle, Shoran’s tribal nation has continually come up short:

[A] piece of paper’s missing. We didn't provide this or that. And then we'll say we did provide it, our lawyer will show it, and then we'll go and provide what they want, and then it's something else, or there's something occurring worldly, and they have to focus on that. And then they put us on the side. So there's always something. It could be any type of excuse. It basically comes down to money and politics. You know what I'm saying? And that's where the dead ends are.

Shoran said that in many cases, tribal nations seeking recognition have made sacrifices to obtain it, because the government is always trying to make a “deal.” For example, some tribes have dropped members from their tribal rolls at the behest of the government. All of these struggles that Shoran has faced confirm Miller’s (2004) explanations of the inadequacy and biases of the FAP, which Miller says is more focused on the colonizer state’s attempts to control Indigenous identity and legitimacy than anything else.

Even once tribes are federally recognized, they are never entirely safe from government policies. Shoran discussed how several years ago, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and politicians ruled that tribes that had already filed for recognition were ineligible to file again, despite the fact that almost every tribe had already filed. She thinks this was just an excuse to prevent more tribes from gaining recognition, as occurs often: “They find some type of loophole that doesn't even exist, because we meet all criteria plus more. So they just find any little thing to make an excuse

to take it back.” Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) echoed this sentiment. Even though his tribe is federally acknowledged, the U.S. government recently tried to take back the land that had been put in trust for the Mashpee. This was a political issue at heart; Robert said conservative administrations tend to try to confiscate tribal rights: “if you have an administration that’s to the right, then they’re going to try and stomp out everything you do.” Yet despite such constant obstacles, Shoran was adamant in her belief that the fight for recognition is worth it in the end and that all tribes should continue to pursue it, saying, “Don’t let the government win.”

Sage Phillips described the FAP very similarly to Shoran and contributed the opinion that the process is not only difficult logistically, but also personally and emotionally, because Indigenous peoples are forced to dredge up old memories of genocide and colonization that their ancestors endured. As Sage put it, “the process is so drawn out and just over generalized and unfair, and I think having to dig up histories is traumatic to your identity in itself, because you’re reading through it, you’re reliving it, you’re rehashing it.” Lorén Spears also talked about the personal harm that the FAP causes individuals. A lot of this is due to division, sparked by arbitrary requirements. For example, she said, the FAP requires the tribal nation declare a single county that it “serves,” even if the tribe has members that live in other counties nearby, so those members outside the designated county are thus denied certain resources. Lorén sees this as an illogical metric because counties can be very different sizes, and it really serves as another extension of colonization: “they’re all strategies to divide and conquer... [federal acknowledgement] divides us up so we’re different nations again, which is a good thing, but it’s also a bad thing, because we’re all not working as conjoined as we once were. Things like what county you live in affects people. And when it affects people, it hurts people.” Thus, while recognition has its benefits, it comes with a significant amount of anguish, including potential damage to identity as one relives past traumas.

## *Surviving Colonization*

To end this chapter on a more positive note, it is imperative to highlight the antidotes to colonization that are always at work in Indigenous communities and that continue to strengthen every day. Despite all the tribulations the participants of this study have experienced and continue to experience, there is no doubt that Indigenous peoples are resilient. During the assimilation era, many Natives risked punishment by practicing their banned traditions and languages in secret. Surviving centuries of genocide and oppression, they continue to exercise their cultures and remember their ancestors. Every interviewee in this study is involved in current methods of resisting the effects of settler-colonialism in distinct ways, each with the same goal of maintaining their indigeneity and creating prosperity for their communities and their descendants. Some keep up with traditional ways of living, while others focus on amplifying their voices through educational programs. Others are directly involved in their tribes' governance and leadership, while still others concentrate on activism for Indigenous rights. Collectively, such examples of perseverance provide a clear picture of how Indigenous peoples in North America are still beating back against colonization after all these years.

*Maintaining traditions.* Many, if not all, of the study's participants regularly practice their cultural traditions, which often take place on tribal reservations. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) spoke of how her tribe's two reservations are spaces where members gather to celebrate their culture: "[On] both reservations, we interact, we have ceremonies, we have sweat lodges, we have all throughout the years, family gatherings, so we're all connected." Nia Holley (Nipmuc) also spends a lot of time on her tribe's reservation in Grafton, MA, and she said a lot of other people in her tribe do as well. As with Shoran's, the Nipmuc's reservation hosts traditional ceremonies such as powwows, and Nia does a lot of gardening there. This is indicative

of the extreme importance of land to Indigenous peoples in keeping their culture and collectivity alive, as was previously proven in Huyser et al.'s (2018) study showing that Natives on reservations are much more easily able to form inclusive networks and tribal identity. Nia works in the area of Indigenous foodways, seeking to practice the traditional methods with which her tribal nation, the Nipmuc, has always grown and cultivated food, an important aspect of Indigenous culture. She focuses on making herbal medicines, and she also works with Native youth. This is all work which she says is difficult but necessary and central to her duty as a Nipmuc, and also “shows people that we can be who we are without a lot of the things that sometimes people are forced to think that we need.”

Besides traditional ceremonies and foodways, other cultural practices are salient mediums of anticolonial resistance. Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan), a professional musician, incorporates music from Indigenous cultures into his performances. During his interview, he showcased an Indigenous instrument from South America called a quena, which looks a bit like a wooden recorder. Mixashawn said music is an essential part of maintain culture: “without music, there is no culture. Because before we even had centralized language and writing and all that stuff, we still made music. Music was how we communicated.” Meanwhile, Alivia Moore (Penobscot) has concentrated on ways to preserve Indigenous tribal structures, as her tribe has always been matriarchal, contrasting with the patriarchal settler-colonial society. She and Nia Holley were two of the co-founders of the organization Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, which works to “restore matriarchies” in tribal nations. This involves tribal leaders, including Elders who are ceremonial leaders and knowledge and language keepers, who help keep their matriarchal traditions alive.

Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) talked about the importance of passing cultural traditions down through the generations and using them to foster community. She referred to these

learnings as “lifeways,” such as how to farm, gather plants, weave baskets, and create other types of art that are critical to her people and knowledge transmission. Indigenous peoples frequently use art forms and performances to pass on their cultures: “[O]ur communities are representing ourselves through music, and dance, and storytelling, and writing, and literature, in exhibitions, in art shows. The whole exhibits, they're telling our stories.” Lorén explained that while different people possess different pieces of knowledge, they each play a role in remembering and teaching others. She said, “I always like to say, if you could take every Narragansett person, and put us all in a complete circle, and if we were all touching hands, if we could pass that knowledge between each other all the time, we have all that knowledge.” What is critical, she said, is to ensure that knowledge transmission involves the sharing of pride and respect for their tribal nation’s history and traditions.

*Educational programs.* Some participants spend their time actively teaching others about Indigenous cultures and histories, whether through organizations, their tribes, or museums. Jacob Ortega helps run the Connecticut River Inter-Tribal Council, which works to keep Indigenous traditions alive by hosting gatherings for people all over the state to attend. This includes monthly teaching circles and four major spiritual ceremonies per year. Jacob said the purpose of these gatherings is to “create teachers who are going to keep the culture alive and pass it on to future generations.” The Council wants to encourage Indigenous peoples to learn about their tribal histories and share them with everyone else, because “by teaching us they’re learning themselves, and pass it on and help keep it alive in the world.” Members of settler-colonial society are welcome too, as the Council hopes to spread awareness about Indigenous communities and create more inclusivity and understanding. Jacob said he wants to tell them, “Look, this is what we're doing, this what we have to offer you and we're certainly wanting to share it with you.” Jacob also works

as a prison chaplain for Natives who are incarcerated in Connecticut. As he described it, “I serve the spiritual needs of the Native inmates” by conducting sweat lodge ceremonies and nikkomos, which are a type of gift-giving ceremony practiced by Algonquin tribes in New England. Jacob helps non-Native people in the prisons as well, teaching them about Indigenous cultures.

Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) is the first person from the Wabanaki Confederacy to hold the position of Executive Director of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, a Smithsonian affiliate which he described as “a museum focused on the culture, arts and history of the Wabanaki tribes.” Although it was originally a “colonial” museum meant to preserve Indigenous artifacts, the Abbe Museum is now focused on centering its materials around the voices of Wabanaki communities rather than those of anthropologist colonizers. At least one half of the museum’s board is Wabanaki. Chris said that by representing Indigenous artists, the museum allows for a survival of culture, traditional knowledges, and oral histories, and the sharing of it all with visitors from settler-colonial society. The benefits to the Wabanaki community extend beyond the profits from selling their handmade products and the ability to have their voices heard. Chris said that the Abbe Museum is also a safe haven for all Wabanaki peoples, who can visit free of charge: since it is situated on Wabanaki homelands, “any Wabanaki visitors should feel in that space as if they are at home.... we have to make sure that the voice of the museum does not speak to them as if they don't exist, [and] in fact, is inclusive of their voice. That they feel like they contributed to what the material is inside the museum and that they feel constantly welcome there.” Chris is also working to create a library, a research center, and a Passamaquoddy language culture trust “where Wabanaki people and non-Wabanaki people can come and learn.”

Lorén Spears is another Executive Director of an Indigenous museum, hers being Tomaquag Museum in Exeter, Rhode Island. Lorén said she is happy about how the museum helps

young Natives who often did not grow up fully expressing their cultures because they went to settler-colonial schools. By interning at the museum, these youth can “find their voice” by learning to “express themselves and express their cultural knowledge.” Tomaquag Museum provides teachings from Indigenous “culture bearers,” or artists who showcase their skills in different areas. Lorén says that the opportunities given to these artists are “a chance to share your identity, your cultural knowledge, your perspective on the world.... I mean, your life is woven into the work that you're doing.” By reclaiming their work through museums like the Abbe Museum and the Tomaquag Museum, Indigenous creators are exercising agency and taking back control from colonizer institutions.

*Tribal governance.* Several of the study’s participants hold significant leadership positions in their tribal nations’ governance systems. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) described her powers in a tribal nation that is traditionally matriarchal: “[M]y position is higher than the Chiefs’. I’m like the overseer. I get the last signature, last vote, the last say. Teachings, traditional medicines, getting the future generations ready. I work on everything and anything.... Everybody comes and asks me permission about attending certain ceremonies or going off to powwows.” Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) has been an officer on her tribe’s board of directors for two decades, and the treasurer for many years. The board functions similarly to that of a nonprofit organization because the tribe is not federally recognized. Despite this status in the eyes of the federal government, the board operates on a traditionally consensus-based level that is very different from most settler-colonial institutions. As Elizabeth put it, “in terms of the day-to-day functioning of the tribe, it really is a tribal council. [T]he tribal council meetings are open to anybody who is a tribal member.... we discuss just general issues at that time and really develop our decisions by consensus after extensive discussion.” Operating tribal governance

through traditional tribal structures, not settler-colonial ones, is key to these tribes' success as self-sustaining and culturally enduring entities.

Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) holds the senior position on the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, situated on the Canadian side of the tribe's reservation, which is split by the U.S.-Canada border. He has a 12-member council and is responsible for most of the tribe's affairs in dealing with the Canadian government, such as allocating funds and getting resources to tribal members. He described it as a "local government body that delivers services on behalf of the federal and provincial governments." Abram works with the Mohawk council on the U.S. side of the border, called the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, "for the advancement of our community." These two councils were established in order to have official relations with the colonizer federal governments, but the Mohawk also retain a traditional council, the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs, a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that predates the colonizer governments and runs on a hereditary system, as opposed to the elected system of Chief Benedict's council. While his council is a relatively newly established product of interaction with settler-colonial society, Chief Benedict sees his primary role as serving the people in his tribal nation and ensuring their survival.

Through traditions and knowledge transmission, education programs and museums, and tribal governance roles, participants resist the effects of colonization as part of their daily lives. They represent the broader Indigenous community that fights to reassert its presence and reclaim its culture in the face of attempted erasure. But first and foremost, their work is aimed at providing for each other and for the security of future generations. As one of the purposes of this study is to highlight Indigenous experiences, it is critical that these ceaseless acts of resistance and community care do not go unnoticed.



## CHAPTER II: INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

### *Self-Identification*

Before delving deep into the meaning of Indigenous identity, it was essential to ask each participant how they self-identify. Every participant included the name of their tribal nation in their response. When asked about how they refer to their shared ethnic group, they all listed “Indigenous” as a word they would use to identify themselves; this is why Indigenous is the primary term used in this study. However, the majority of participants were more concerned with making their tribal identities the main focus of their self-ascriptions because it centers the political and social, rather than race-based, community to which they belong. Additional themes throughout participants’ discussions of the meanings of indigeneity included their ambivalence toward labels and the changing use of such terms, as well as their opinions on identity as a concept.

*Terminology.* Because language has been a regularly used tool of colonization in suppressing Indigenous knowledge and rewriting history, many participants were skeptical about the English terms used to describe them. While all participants agreed that they would consider themselves “Indigenous,” they had varying opinions on other labels that are often used to classify them. Cedric Woods (Lumbee) said that “‘American Indian’ is what’s most accurate” in the “historical and legal context,” because that is the word used in official U.S. government documents. Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) noted that there are so many different “generic” labels for Indigenous peoples on this continent that were assigned to them and do not reflect the way they view themselves, including “Native American,” “American Indian,” “Indian,” “First Nations,” “First Peoples,” and “Aboriginal.” Lorén prefers to call herself Indigenous because of the word’s association with a “particular place.” Terms that include “American,” she said, can be

problematic because they “give way too much credit” to the U.S., a country that represents a tiny fraction of time on this land compared to the tens of thousands of years of habitation by Indigenous peoples. Sage Phillips (Penobscot) also noted that the word Native American has “colonial ties.” On the other hand, Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) did not have as much of an issue with the term Native American, which again reflects the diversity of perspectives on the topic among Indigenous peoples. Most, but not all, participants, including Alivia Moore (Penobscot) and Sage Phillips, were adamant that they never use the word “Indian” to describe themselves, which Sage said she finds “the most offensive of all.”

Other participants, like Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag), seemed less certain about how to characterize the general Indigenous population, primarily for the very reason of its generalization. Elizabeth said she alternates among different terms, including “Native American” and “Indian,” but she seemed fairly indifferent to terminology that is just “names that other people have given us.” Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) also spoke about the issues he has with English colonizer terms. He said non-Indigenous people often ask him which term to use, and he always tells them that all of them are “wrong” because they are so generalizing. However, he said, because they are speaking English, a foreign language from Europe that tends to put “the thousand-plus different Native cultures...under one umbrella term,” Indigenous peoples “have to use these terms occasionally.” Nia Holley echoed this sentiment, saying that sometimes she has to say “Native American” because it is what people can understand, even though “saying that doesn't really mean anything” to her.

*Tribal affiliation.* Participants seemed to agree that they preferred first and foremost to refer to themselves by their tribal nations’ names. This is because tribal names are more specific to how participants view themselves and also because the names originated in their own

Indigenous languages (even though the tribal names most commonly used in the U.S. today are anglicized). Elizabeth Solomon said, “if I had a preference, in terms of my Indigenous half heritage, I would say Massachusetts, because that's a Native word.” Likewise, Alivia Moore stated, “when I am speaking to my own very specific feelings or experiences, I tend to root them in my specific nation of Penobscot Nation.” Nia Holley said that when introducing herself, “I don’t ever really say I’m an Indigenous person, per se; I’ll just say that I’m Nipmuc,” because “it’s more grounded for me to say that I’m Nipmuc...Indigenous can mean so many different things.” Thus, despite their willingness to use the word Indigenous as a catch-all phrase, tribal affiliation is much more important to these participants. Lorén Spears explained that while she always says she is a “citizen of the Narragansett Nation,” she also feels there is “this indigeneity that's very much part of my identity.” This suggests that Indigenous peoples can possess a dual identity, one side specific to their distinct tribal nations and the other a collective identity shared among all Indigenous peoples, which will be discussed further later.

Still, other participants had less of an issue with referring to themselves with the primary label of “Indigenous” upon first introduction, putting less emphasis on the tribal aspect of their identities. Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) is not officially enrolled in any one tribe, which he thinks is more similar to how Indigenous societies used to function pre-colonization. He said that the current idea of tribal nations looks at them more in the territorial sense, which is inaccurate because they did not used to have clearly defined borders. Rather, most of the so-called tribes in the southern New England region spoke “the same Algonquian language” and he considers them to be “all the same people,” connected by the Quinnehtukqut (Connecticut) River. During the first stages of colonization, he said, when settlers started dividing Native communities, some gathered in areas like present-day Windsor, Connecticut, where there is still a community to this day. This

group, which Mixashawn is a part of, is called the Windsor Indians, and is comprised of Indigenous peoples with different tribal ancestries. He feels it is a far more salient part of his identity than are individual tribal nations. As he put it, “being Indigenous is not always connected to a state or federally recognized identity.”

*Shifting identities.* Like all identities, indigeneity is not stagnant; it constantly morphs over both time and situation and naturally varies extensively from person to person. As Lorén Spears said, “cultures evolve; living, breathing, people evolve.... things happen and change things. You're introduced to new things and new people.” This is a fact often ignored by colonizers, who write narratives painting Indigenous peoples as remaining in the “past,” uncivilized and unmodern. Sage Phillips said, “it goes from generation to generation, how we view ourselves.” For example, she said, older generations of Natives tend to more frequently call themselves Indians, while younger ones prefer Indigenous. Chris Newell said the same, noting that the common terminology started with Indian, then switched to Native American in the 1970s, and is now Indigenous or just Native. Cedric Woods also talked about how changing language has affected a change in these identifying labels, but that this does not necessarily affect how people view themselves. When asked if he thought ideas of indigeneity have changed over time, Cedric replied, “I don't know that the conceptions have changed, as much as how we describe it has changed, and the kinds of language we use to describe it.” Because there are certain concepts that cannot be “vocalized” as easily in English as they were in Indigenous languages, it is more difficult to assign words to those concepts today.

Many participants expressed having to alter the ways they identify themselves on an individual level across different settings in everyday life. Mixashawn Rozie said that as a professional musician, sometimes “it's been helpful and unhelpful, being Native,” the unhelpful

aspect being mainly due to discrimination. For this reason, he said he does not usually refer to himself as a “Native American artist” because there are “oftentimes people who will use that as a way to exclude me from things.” For Elizabeth Solomon, the struggle to self-identify stems from a feeling of entrapment between the Indigenous and colonizer realms. She said this is hard for her because “in terms of that identity, there's definitely this push and pull between what the expectations and values and ideas of the dominant society are, versus what I am seeing as the values and ideas and beliefs of the Indigenous society that I'm from...because I can't be in either one completely.” This affects her daily life as she does not seem to “fit” into a certain culture with which she identifies fully, an unfortunate example of the effects of assimilation and attempted erasure on one’s ability to maintain a stable self-identity.

How one identifies may also vary by location community. Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) said that because communities in northern Canada are more isolated, he thinks they may be “less concerned about their identity” since they do not have to interact with other cultures as often. On the other hand, in his community in southeastern Canada, his people have to interact with settlers daily because they frequently cross the U.S.-Canada border and are required to see the border patrol each time they do so. Abram said this enhances the “identity issue” because they have to prove they are Indigenous members of the Akwesasne in order to get permission to cross the border. He therefore sometimes needs to switch among self-identifying terms according to whom he is speaking. He said, “North American Indian [is what] I generally use when traveling in the United States or crossing at a U.S. Customs, because that's an American term. And in Canada, I'll tell the I'm a First Nation or Indigenous person.... if I see another Indigenous person, I'll say I'm a Mohawk from Akwesasne.” Still, it is important to note that despite the need to change terminology when dealing with settler-colonial society, many

interviewees frequently indicated that they have an internal sense of identity that does not waver and is usually tied to tribe and/or place.

*General conceptions of identity.* Not all participants were interested in the concept of “identity” itself. This is true for many Indigenous peoples who tire of having to identify themselves to settler-colonists, especially because they are expected to do so much more frequently than other groups of non-white people. This is again major evidence of erasure, as Indigenous peoples have been rendered so invisible by colonizers that, unlike Black or Asian people, they are often unidentifiable by many in settler-colonial society today. Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) expressed his exasperation with having to constantly answer people’s questions about who he is, saying, “you know what the questions are going to be, and you don’t want to hear it.” He added that he is proud of his heritage, but he still wishes that it “didn’t always have to be such an issue with all of these other ramifications attached to it. Why can’t I just be a person like anybody else?” Grand Chief Abram Benedict agreed with the sentiment that while Indigenous peoples are proud of who they are, the concept of identity is more of an individualistic, western European idea: “sometimes I think colonizers are the ones that are more concerned about what the identity is than [us]. Personally, I know who I am, and whether or not somebody else does or not, it doesn’t bother me.” These opinions are reflective of theories such as those by Bonds and Inwood (2016) and Glenn (2015) that regard “identity” as an ideology employed by Euro-Americans to create hierarchical divisions among groups and dehumanize Indigenous peoples.

On the other hand, some participants placed a lot of value on Indigenous identity due to the shared sense of community and cultural perseverance it brings. As Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) said, “it’s really important for us to really reflect on that identity of who we are as Indigenous people, and the longevity and the sustainability that we’ve had to maintain who

we are over thousands of years...to ensure that we're still here, and that we still know who we are.” Through her work running Tomaquag Museum, Lorén helps maintain this sense of identity by inviting Indigenous artists to teach the community and “share who we are through the art we’re doing.” Lorén talked about a quilt that the community made together, which hung on the wall behind her during her interview and which she connected to the idea of identity because “each person was picking, designing the square to represent themselves in some kind of way.” Lorén represented her identity in her square of the quilt by writing her Indigenous name and its meaning on it. Lorén’s views affirm Cornell and Hartmann’s (1998) position that assuming a shared identity can be positively utilized by marginalized groups to create and maintain a sense of community and pride, thereby empowering that identity.

#### *What it Means to be Indigenous*

In addition to their personal self-identifications, participants also talked about what indigeneity, and subsequently their personal identities in relation to it, really look like for them. Indigenous identity is constantly changing and varies according to how people perceive themselves. Interviews confirmed Corntassel’s (2003) statement that indigeneity is a highly variable concept. However, there are several prominent characteristics that have tended to demarcate Indigenous identity over the centuries, and which frequently came up in interviews; namely, collectivity and respect for land and ancestors. As previously mentioned, shared experiences of colonization can also be a source of connection among Indigenous peoples of different backgrounds.

*Collective identity.* Despite some disagreement on the importance of tribal affiliation, most participants seemed to agree that there is a certain relationship and shared understanding among

all Indigenous peoples, particularly those in North America, that creates a collective identity. Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) said that for all tribal nations, “there’s similarity in the conquest and colonization that took place,” including displacement and the forced removal of Native children from their families. She added that she thinks the effects of violent colonization “create the threads that weaves us together as Indigenous people across this continent.” Even though they know they are individual nations, she said, there is a “similarity in the indigeneity of our people.” Alivia Moore (Penobscot) said that today, she thinks the process of “trying to distance and protect ourselves from white society” has contributed to a rise in Indigenous pride in their identity. In the post-assimilation era, Indigenous peoples are reasserting their cultures and feeling “safe or brave enough...to be visibly Indigenous and to really claim space for that in society.” This supports Cornassel’s (2003) suggestion that indigeneity be defined in part by a shared persistence of “Peoplehood” over time.

Some participants expressed feeling more conflicted about the idea of collective identity. When asked her perspective on collective identity, Sage Phillips (Penobscot) talked about an event she helped host where Indigenous peoples from around the world shared their experiences. She was interested in how even though “all of our perspectives and histories, and even our own experiences [are] all vastly different,” they all also related to each other’s stories, so she felt “some communal sense of identity.” However, Sage also said that when she is in college, she views her own identity as individual, not collective, because there is not really a community of Indigenous peoples there. She is currently trying to build one, feeling a responsibility to “keep it going and establish that community.” Nia Holley (Nipmuc) said she sees collective identity in “some ways,” but in other ways she feels excluded from it because she is Black and “there’s anti-Blackness within Indigenous communities.” Nia also sees a lack of collective identity between western and



eastern Natives in the U.S. because their experiences of colonization were very different, so “Eastern Woodlands identities look very different than Western folks’ [identities].” While Nia said that in a way, there is somewhat of a “collective experience” of “colonization and invisibility” among Indigenous peoples, she is not so certain about a cohesive shared identity.

*Land, place, and indigeneity.* One of the most prominent themes that came up in every interview, as anticipated by Barker (2005) and Steinman (2016), is the value that Indigenous peoples put on land and place, and more specifically, their cultures’ respect for and responsibility to the Earth. This value is so important to them that most participants said it is the primary source of what makes them Indigenous and gives them their indigeneity. When asked what indigeneity means to her, Lorén Spears said, “being Indigenous means being the original people of a certain place. And so I think that's where the indigeneity comes into our relationship between Indigenous peoples.” She thinks that colonization across the continent “[took] away the indigeneity of peoples,” and because of that, “there’s an indigeneity to this place that we think of as the Americas.” Thus, Indigenous identity for Lorén is grounded in the connection to a specific “homeland” where peoples have existed for a very long time, but that was also the site of brutal colonization. The Narragansett’s homeland, what is now called Rhode Island, is of special importance to them and is ingrained in their identity. Lorén said, “we come from this place, and everything about us historically, as well as in our contemporary lives, is connected to this place. Our ancestors are in this land, our stories are in this land, our identity is in this place.”

Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) explained indigeneity similarly to Lorén, underscoring the relationship between place and people. Elizabeth said:

For me, [indigeneity] really grounds me in this place. And not just in terms of place, but also in terms of ancestry. I feel like I am of this place, that nothing can take me away from that.... And really, it becomes a source of strength for me, from the standpoint of that I am so connected to this place in a way that very few other people are. And that makes me feel whole in a way that, I don't

know, I really don't know how to explain that. It's just that I belong here. And nobody can take that away from me, no matter what they say, no matter what they do.

Elizabeth's emphasis on her connection to the place where her ancestors were from, dating back millennia, reflects a sentiment shared by most Indigenous peoples. The very meaning of the adjective "indigenous" is rooted in the idea of "place." Her feeling that no one can take that "belonging" away from her is indicative of the resilience Indigenous peoples have shown throughout the centuries. Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) also used the word "connected" in terms of the way his identity is related to the land: "So being Indigenous means that you're connected to this Earth, you're connected to those principles that are meant to preserve this Earth, and how you live your life." Nia Holley gave a similar perspective, noting that she thinks that before colonization, Indigenous peoples' "identities and nationhoods" were more "grounded in relationality, like relationship to place, people and the land.... For Indigenous peoples, land is not just a source of life; it is also an integral part of how they live their lives every day in their cultures." Sage Phillips gave a very similar answer about relationships and land, saying, "being Indigenous is like, you consider all your relations. You are related to the land, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the trees, everything Mother Earth has given us or our relatives.... just being culturally aware of your surroundings, and all that you're connected to."

Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) said that Native culture is a "tie to a particular piece of land, or a way of life on a geographical area that was developed because of the land." Chris considers Indigenous identity to be "land-based, where the code, the language, literally is born of the land; your lifeways are born of the land." The significance of Indigenous relationships to land lies in the tenet that "life is stewardship of the land," and these "life-sustaining policies" that Chris's people have always followed are what he thinks kept them surviving "sustainably" for so long. This echoes Steinman's (2016) claim that Indigenous sustainability is wholly dependent on

land. Colonization, unfortunately, goes against these practices of respect for the land, thus endangering the very foundations of Indigenous living. For example, Chris said, tribal nations that were forced to relocate from their homelands on the East Coast to states like Oklahoma, such as the Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw, suffered more than just physical pain from the Trail of Tears. Because Indigenous values are centered around “the way of life that is created by the landscape itself and your tie to it as an individual,” Chris explained, those dispossessed tribes were “robbed of indigeneity and had to create new indigeneity based on their new homeland in Oklahoma.” While they have succeeded at adapting to their new locations, Chris claimed that those tribal nations never forgot their original homelands in the East. Instead, they “keep all that knowledge alive” through “always talk[ing] about their homelands and the mountains they come from and where those places [are] that they call sacred.” This highlights the unbreakable bond that Indigenous nations have with not just land in general, but specifically their original homelands, since despite centuries of living out West, tribes like the Cherokee consider the Eastern mountain regions their true sacred spaces and an inherent part of their identities.

### *Identity Assignment and Legitimization*

One of the main forces of settler-colonialism that Indigenous peoples contend with on a daily basis is the assignment of a fabricated identity from the outside, a theme covered extensively by the likes of Miller (2004), Cornell and Hartmann (1998), O’Brien (2010), and Glenn (2015), among others. Settlers and settler institutions constantly try to erase the way Indigenous peoples see themselves—however that may vary—and replace it with false, stereotyped, prejudiced versions. The very use of the English language to name and classify Indigenous peoples is a prime example of such erasure because it essentially disregards any names they may have used prior to

European contact and creates concepts about identity that do not exist in Indigenous cultures. As much as Indigenous peoples struggle to reassert themselves and their cultures, the requirement of interaction with settler-colonial society makes this very difficult. Indigenous peoples are often forced to play into these false representations of who they are in order to obtain their basic needs and, in many cases, achieve “sovereignty” (the meaning of which will be discussed later) through the protocols established the colonizer governments. This can be painful for many Natives and detrimental to both their views of self and the struggle to survive unassimilated.

*Documented identity.* Participants often expressed how in relationships with colonizer institutions, documentation is often required to “prove” their Indigenous identity to settlers. As Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) explained it, “with Indigenous people, there's always a questioning of their indigeneity. We're the only people that have to pull out a card to prove who we are. We're the only ones that have to kind of fight our way to be Indigenous.” Other participants also mentioned having to carry a tribal ID card that they show to verify their indigeneity. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) said that in a way, their IDs are needed in order to prove their continued existence: “We have our tribal ID, we pull that out with our license, so we still show and let people know that there are Native American Indians still living and still around because many people don't know that.” Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) said he resisted getting a tribal ID card for many years, but he ultimately needed to get one. He recalled, “I had to give in, and I applied for the enrollment card, and I got it. And now if anybody gives me any flack, and I get a lot from even Indians for that matter, I say, ‘Well here, here you go, read it and weep.’”

Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) stressed that for people in his tribe, having a tribal ID card is not an option. Because they live on the U.S.-Canada border, the Akwesasne Mohawk have to show their tribal IDs in order to be able to cross, and since border

security tightened after the events of 9/11, Abram said, “government identification, has, unfortunately become part of our norm.... it's also kind of ingrained in our children to make sure they carry identification. Because if you pull up at the Canada Customs, U.S. Customs, you got to provide some sort of ID.” He said that despite this, having to carry an ID all the time does not really bother him because he knows it is not a real validation of his own identity as an Indigenous person: “I don't need a piece of documentation that tells who I am. I'm a member of this community. I'm from Akwesasne, I'm Mohawk, and that's all I have to say.”

Perhaps the area in which documentation of indigeneity becomes most contentious, however, is in the Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP). As discussed in Chapter I and detailed extensively by Miller (2004), tribal nations must prove their “authenticity” by providing documentation from hundreds of years ago. This is very difficult due to a history of systematic attempts at their erasure by the federal government. Lorén Spears explained this development: “the whole point was to eradicate us, and when they couldn't kill us all, then they started erasing us in different ways. And that's changing documentation.” A main way in which this aforementioned “paper genocide” is committed is through the use of tribal rolls to designate tribal status. Colonizer governments require proof that a tribe was named on a tribal roll from over a century ago in order to obtain federal recognition. Lorén discussed how the Narragansett had to go through that process of “looking for documents that prove that you're Indigenous” when they were seeking recognition. The tribe had to show that they were connected to tribal rolls from 1880, but this was a difficult obstacle because between then and now, there has been a lot of change and “chaos,” with different members relocating to different areas and marrying into other tribes. Additionally, Lorén said, some Narragansett families had refused to sign rolls that were forced upon them in the late 1800s, and so today, “if for whatever reason, no one in your direct line signed, then you're not Narragansett

on the federally recognized rolls.” The complexity of this issue is that while Lorén believes Indigenous peoples are still who they are without being on federal rolls, it also makes it nearly impossible to achieve federal recognition. This is an example of Miller’s (2004) claim that the FAP’s criteria of proof of continuous tribal existence can be nearly impossible to acquire for tribes that were, on paper, disbanded.

Such detribalization has happened in the FAP for many other tribal nations. Sage Phillips (Penobscot) said that according to the protocols for gaining federal recognition, one must be enrolled in a single tribe, so if one has ancestry from several tribes, they must relinquish the rest of their tribal identities in favor of one. Echoing what has been previously stated, she explained how she thinks that all of the documentation requirements in the FAP are destructive in their approach to identity, as the need for colonizer “validation” is another form of control, and it tends to erase other parts of a person’s identity in only recognizing one piece. As Sage put it:

I feel like the government has constructed it so that applying for recognition is like applying for your identity to be validated in a way.... you know your identity, but the government won't acknowledge it or recognize it. So now you're trying to get it recognized, and that's just probably the most harmful thing ever.

Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) illustrated Sage’s point when he spoke extensively of instances where he has seen people rejected from tribal membership, which is like a rejection of their identity. His own ancestors were once recognized on the Mohegan tribal rolls, but they were “expunged” when the Mohegans were trying to get federal recognition, which is not an uncommon practice due to certain membership criteria laid out in the FAP. Mixashawn said that many of the people he knows are not documented as Indigenous due to the trauma of colonization experienced by their ancestors. Those ancestors did not identify as Indigenous because “if they said they were Indians, they would be persecuted.” Thus, today, there is written no trace of their history, exemplifying once again the horrible irony of needing to prove an identity that was literally erased

from documentation by the very people seeking that proof. But Mixashawn emphasized that he thinks Natives should not place so much significance of this fake legitimization of identity by settler-colonial society, because “if you just identify yourself through that very thin identity that the government has set up, then you're lost.” This is evocative of Cornell and Hartmann’s (1998) discussion of identity legitimization, a practice employed by settlers in which they choose an entirely arbitrary metric for “proving” an identity and use it to restrict Natives from their own indigeneity.

*Blood quantum and proof of ancestry.* One of the most common criteria for being accepted into a tribal nation, especially a federally recognized one, is the ability to meet a certain “blood quantum.” As previously explained by scholars such as Rose (2015) and O’Brien (2010), blood quantum is a widely disputed and problematic policy among the Indigenous population. First, the concept of blood quantum is not a traditionally Indigenous practice, but rather a colonizer-imposed one. Not only does the U.S. government use official enrollment based on blood quantum as a criterion for federal recognition, but it also only allows each person to only be enrolled in one tribe, thus requiring Indigenous people to choose a single tribe even if they have ancestry from multiple. Moreover, the blood quantum criteria are inconsistent from tribe to tribe, as the U.S. government leaves it up to each tribal nation to determine the particular requirements. Second, for those tribes pursuing federal acknowledgement, there have been instances where tribal nations have opted to narrow blood quantum criteria in an effort to obtain recognition, resulting in the rejection of members from their rolls. While it may appear that tribal nations themselves are to blame for imposing such narrow restrictions on membership, colonizer policies are the real culprit. Such strict notions of “tribal membership” did not exist pre-colonization and neither did the need for identity “legitimization” by outsiders. Tribal nations who are not seeking federal recognition, but

who have nonetheless implemented blood quantum requirements, are also influenced by this colonizer framework, because they want to protect their community from outsiders who might claim indigeneity for the purpose of taking illegitimate advantage of tribal benefits. Third, the requirement to prove that one has a certain percentage of ancestry from a specific tribe ends up excluding many people from membership who consider themselves Indigenous but do not meet the blood quantum criteria.

Lorén Spears gave examples of how the blood quantum requirements contribute to the erasure of Indigenous identity. She said that someone could be of 100% Indigenous descent but unable to enroll in any tribe because their ancestors were from multiple tribes. Lorén said that the government “constructed” the notion of blood quantum because it made it easier to reject a person’s indigeneity. As she explained:

[I]f one parent was Narragansett, and one was Wampanoag, you're only 50% of either one of those, but you can only be on one federally recognized roll. So then if the next generation [is] Narragansett, Wampanoag, Pequot, and Mohegan, now all of a sudden, you're a quarter, a quarter, a quarter.... So, if it becomes the rule that you have to be 50% of something, all of a sudden, you're not 50% of anything, because you're all of those different things.

Thus, being of entirely Indigenous descent does not ensure one is able to be federally recognized as Indigenous or able to enroll in a tribal nation, because descendants of intermarriages among Indigenous tribes have lesser blood quantum. Another example of harm that Lorén gave is when the recognition process requires a single line of descent. Because settler-colonial society uses a patrilineal system of descent, for tribal nations that use a matrilineal system, if a person is Indigenous through their father but not their mother, they are prevented from being able to enroll in the father’s tribal nation. Grand Chief Abram Benedict discussed how this happens in the Akwesasne Mohawk community as well. For instance, he said, if a child has one Mohawk parent and one Seminole parent, the child is given fewer rights than a child with two Mohawk parents, simply because of how the system is set up. Rules like these, while enforced by tribal governments,



are the result of a framework established by colonizer governments to limit the recognition of Indigenous presence, and as Steinman (2016) writes, to perpetrate genocide on a demographic level.

Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) put it frankly when he said, “It is so complicated to be an Indian.” Colonizers have created many different arbitrary and confusing “legal classifications” for Indigenous peoples on a scale that conceives of their identities only in terms of how they relate to settler-colonial society: federally recognized, unrecognized, and so forth. Robert said, “All these classifications really divide us and make it difficult for us to get things done or complete conversations.” This echoes Miller’s (2004) assertion that the federal government exerts power over defining Indigenous identity, such as through these classifications, as a form of oppression and control. Mixashawn Rozie talked about these very divisions as he has experienced them in his own life, as a person who is not enrolled in any one tribe. He said that among Indigenous peoples, “some people will be very dismissive” if they learned he is not enrolled, while others are fine with it. From his experience, Mixashawn thinks that blood quantum can be and often is “manipulated,” and that it was “created to exclude people.” He compared this to Adolf Hitler’s use of blood quantum to determine who was Aryan enough, noting that the Nazis modeled their system after the United States’ system for classifying Indigenous peoples.

Jacob Ortega likewise questioned the logic of measuring blood quantum. He said this is an issue that tribes will have to deal with on an increasing basis, but he wondered, “Is there a point where it gets to be ludicrous? I mean, 1/32<sup>nd</sup>? I don't know.” Jacob discussed the constant difficulty in trying to determine how to evaluate a person’s indigeneity, pointing out that meeting a certain blood quantum does not automatically make a person Indigenous, which is why it is such an arbitrary metric. Rather, Jacob thinks that indigeneity is a fluid concept more related to culture

than anything else. Having met Indigenous peoples from all over during his lifetime, Jacob said, “I’ve met people who were 1/16<sup>th</sup> who are more Native than some full bloods, so I’ve had to rethink that process.” This reflects the struggles of many Indigenous peoples in trying to determine their understanding of what it means to be Indigenous.

Alivia Moore (Penobscot) held similar criticisms about blood quantum and the way it is perceived as an objective measurement of indigeneity. She said she has heard conversations in her community where people talk about being “100%,” which makes her question, “what does any of that matter if someone isn’t living culturally aligned or living in ways to give back to our community? What does being 100% blood quantum even mean?” Alivia said she thinks people who say this are “deeply internaliz[ing] this colonial way of identifying,” because when the U.S. set up the system of identification, it commanded Indigenous nations to follow its rules in determining membership. According to Alivia, such internalized assimilation is frequent and incredibly toxic: “we do that in-group-out-group to ourselves all the time.” Like many of the other participants, Alivia said her tribal nation also deals with the issue of disenrolling children of mixed ancestry from the tribe, leading to baseless exclusion: “when they turn 18, if they don’t meet blood quantum, they still come to community things, but they’re definitely made to feel like they’re not fully included anymore.” This exemplifies what Rose (2015) writes is harmful about blood quantum policies: they diminish the ability to count as a “real” Native, giving away Indigenous peoples’ ability to decide and assert their own indigeneity, while concealing the fact that it is actually the colonizer governments pulling all the strings. Blood quantum policies are thus intended to delegitimize and destabilize Indigenous identity by excluding Natives from their communities, erasing them from the records, and causing intratribal conflicts over membership.

*“Performing” identity and stereotypes.* Another harmful practice that Indigenous peoples are often forced to commit to when seeking “legitimization” from the federal government, or even acceptance by regular settlers, is to present themselves like the stereotypes created and expected by settler-colonial society. These false, stereotypical representations that generalize Indigenous peoples, from the “noble savage warrior” to the caricatured red-faced, large-nosed “Indian,” are still rampant across the U.S. and Canada, contributing to myths, discrimination, and identity erasure. Jacob Ortega talked about those stereotypes as he has seen them represented in popular media. He exemplified how most Indigenous characters in media are portrayed by non-Indigenous people, like “Iron Eyes Cody, the Crying Indian,” a caricature of a Native man who was featured in anti-pollution ads in the 1970s but was played by a Sicilian man. Jacob also pointed to non-Indigenous people who have appropriated Indigenous culture and identity for fame, such as “Chief Jay Strongbow,” a wrestler who was really Italian American. These performances of stereotypes of Indigenous identity amount to the rewriting of narratives from a white settler perspective. Likewise, Jacob said, Indigenous peoples who do not fit the stereotype are rejected from claiming indigeneity: “we allow the outside of society to affect us for sure. And we certainly take our cues; probably the first thing that comes to my mind is physical appearance. I mean, you have to look a certain way, and if you don't look a certain way, you're not an Indian.” He added that most Indigenous peoples in the Northeast, including him, do not have the physical traits that settlers expect because they tend to be mixed with non-Indigenous ethnicities; this means they have to struggle extensively for their real identities to be seen. Jacob reaffirmed what other participants seemed to think as well: “We are the only people that I know of that has to prove we are who we are and to what degree.”

Clan Mother Shoran Piper talked about the way people from settler-colonial society expect Indigenous peoples to appear on a daily basis. If Natives dress like anyone else, without displaying recognizable symbols of their culture, settlers are unable to identify them. Shoran said, “you get a lot of people who won't know you're Native American, Indian, unless you tell them or they see it from, you have something hanging in your car, a sticker, a window decal.” However, this did not seem to bother Shoran too much, as she enjoys showing her culture as a way of making her Indigenous identity more visible: “we go every day wearing our Native jewelry. You could just tell, the shirts that we wear, a lot of us just show our identity on an everyday daily basis, and we let people know we're Native American.” As long as these outward symbols of their identities are not false, settler-created ones, Indigenous peoples can assert and showcase their identities to non-Natives daily, helping to undo fictitious, preconceived notions about what Indigenous peoples look like.

But while these interactions with settlers seem to have been mostly positive for Shoran, other participants discussed not-so-nice encounters with non-Indigenous people. Sage Phillips recounted how when she meets people from “white culture” and tells them that she is Penobscot, they will ask her, “Okay, where's your feathers? Where's your head dress?” This is really hurtful to Sage because of how it minimizes Indigenous identity into a single made-up stereotype: “that's what they perceive indigeneity to be—it's all about the image.” Alivia Moore talked about experiencing the same kind of situation, in which people who find out she is Native make a disrespectful comment: “one of the first things that is almost always said is something about me physically that doesn't align with their idea.” Echoing McKay (2021), Alivia called this a “policing” of identity, which she thinks is “first nature” for settler-colonists. This is also very reflective of Miller's (2004) discussion of how settlers often cannot comprehend that one is

Indigenous if the person does not fit their stereotyped expectations, which makes it all the more difficult for Natives to assert their identities.

Nia Holley (Nipmuc) added to the idea that being accepted, or even perceived, as Indigenous in settler-colonial society tends to require a certain false image, because Indigenous peoples have so much variety in appearance and culture. Nia said, “you can't look ‘Native’ necessarily. And when people try to look ‘Native,’ that just makes it harder for other Native people, and then harder for how we're supposed to conceptualize and read what Native is.” This demonstrates how settler-colonial stereotypes not only harm Indigenous peoples because they are prejudiced, but also because they can complicate Indigenous peoples’ sense of their own identity. Nia touched on how stereotypes are another form of identity construction that is “forced upon people...rather than people just being allowed to just be themselves.” Like Alivia, she said she thinks the point of this construction of indigeneity is so that “whiteness can understand it and operate and harm it.” Nia’s opinion is emblematic of Cornell and Hartmann’s (1998) theory of identity construction, in which a person’s identity is damaged when outsiders assign their own definitions to it rather than allowing the person to assert it themselves.

Perhaps the situation in which the need to play into stereotypes is the highest stake for Native peoples is during the Federal Acknowledgement Process (FAP). As detailed by Miller (2004), there have been many instances in which the tribal nations that appear the most “Indigenous” in the settler-colonial vision of the term are the ones that most easily obtain recognition; for example, wearing traditional ceremonial clothes to court hearings. This is what several participants called “identity performance,” a practice they despise but will do if they believe it is vital to their sovereignty. As Cedric Woods said:

Natives, we're not stupid. We recognize when there needs to be a performative piece and aspect to convey what government officials view as being “legitimate.” And at times [we are] able to

manipulate that to our advantage, and other times not. All depending upon the frame, the colonial gaze, if you will; what they expect to see, what they think they need to see, to convey legitimacy.

Lorén Spears shared a similar opinion, noting that any “adaptations” to settler-colonial society that Indigenous peoples have had to make were done in order to overcome centuries of oppression. She said that this happily, this tends to be less prevalent today, especially with the rise of more Indigenous rights movements: “I think that there have been times in our history that there's maybe a more outward representation in order to kind of prove your indigeneity. I think that we push against that today [with] things like ‘I'm not your mascot.’” Lorén indicated that she does not feel a need to perform her identity because she is confident in who she is: “I don't have to dress up and be Indigenous on the outside to change the indigeneity of me on the inside. You're Indigenous regardless, no matter whether you're wearing contemporary clothes or your traditional clothes.” She pointed out how even though white Americans no longer act like their English ancestors from four hundred years ago, “no one tries to negate their lineage.... If they say they're English, nobody questions that.” This is a double standard because Natives are expected to behave like their ancestors despite living in modern times.

### *Race, Racism, and Racialization*

*Minority racialization.* Most participants felt strongly that the racialization of Indigenous peoples as a single minority group, in the way Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are viewed in the U.S., is inaccurate and injurious to their identities. This confirms Cornell and Hartmann's (1998) claim that oppressors use notions of race in order to objectify those it is oppressing. Race itself is a very western construct, stemming from the classic European practice of categorizing people on a hierarchical basis; the concept does not exist in the lexicons of Indigenous languages. Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) said that “the idea of Native people as a race is problematic” because it

is a product of colonization, whereas Indigenous tribes tend to use “relational words” for one another instead. This ties into the issue of sovereignty because according to U.S. law, tribes are sovereign “quasi-nations,” so grouping all the citizens of hundreds of different nations into one race contradicts that individual sovereignty of nationhood. Furthermore, Chris said, official documented racialization by the government, such as the option to mark “American Indian” on the U.S. Census, causes the general public to think of Natives in racial terms. This public perception is noxious not only because it is yet again a false construction of Indigenous identity, but also because it minimizes the significance of the distinct experiences of suffering that Indigenous peoples of a multitude of tribal nations went through at the hands of colonization. Chris tied together the concepts of sovereignty and identity within the issue of racialization, saying, “trying to classify Native peoples under the term of a racial category is just completely disregarding the sovereignty and indigeneity of the different Native peoples that still exist all across this continent.” Chris thinks that viewing tribes as nations helps non-Indigenous people understand that they were not nomadic, unorganized groups, but rather entities with governments and sovereign rights on the same level of the U.S. As Chris put it, “It's an absolute necessity for people to understand that we exist as nations that precede the existence of the United States of America.”

Nia Holley (Nipmuc) also said that the racialization of Indigenous peoples “definitely does more harm” because it “reinforces specific stereotypes, which excludes a lot of different Native people.” Because of colonization, Indigenous peoples tend to vary considerably in appearance, yet most settlers still picture them in one way, with particular features that are no longer accurate, if they ever were. Nia said she views Natives as different ethnicities rather than a race. However, according to Cedric Woods (Lumbee), many Indigenous peoples are reluctant to even go that far, instead rejecting the idea that they are ethnic minorities and only referring to themselves as

“citizens of individual nations.” Cedric said he sees it in a more nuanced way, considering himself a citizen of the Lumbee Nation when he is in Lumbee homelands but an Indigenous ethnic minority when he is a visitor somewhere else; this again exemplifies the important connection between indigeneity and place.

Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) further expanded upon the discussion of the stereotype of indigeneity as one racial grouping, saying that a century ago it was even more generalized because U.S. society did not even distinguish among different races of color. Rather, she said, there were only two options: “you were ‘colored’, or you were white.” Lorén talked about research she had done in which she came across the story of a Narragansett man who joined the U.S. military and, as she put it, “came out ‘colored.’” Lorén referred to this as another example of paper genocide, because such a practice “was like erasing your Indigenous identity.” This is evocative of Glenn’s (2015) statement that colonizers established their sovereignty in North America by designating Indigenous peoples as an inferior race who were not entitled to sovereignty of the same kind.

Some participants, such as Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag), discussed the concept of race as a “social construct.” This aligns with Cornell and Hartmann’s (1998) theory of constructionism. Elizabeth said that she thinks it was created by colonizer society to serve “whiteness,” because the majority white population wanted to “keep that idea of superiority.” Much like Moreton-Robinson (2008), Glenn (2015), Murphy (2018) have claimed, Elizabeth said she thinks the creation of race was also an excuse to exploit other people, in the same way it was done to African slaves, and that it became so widely accepted that society now sees race as an inherent trait rather than a manufactured tool of oppression. She said:

We were savages, we were not really human.... I think a lot of that has to do with the social constructs that come from domination and colonization, and that those things have really been



ingrained and continue to be ingrained in our society. And most people, particularly most white people, aren't even aware of it.

Cedric Woods talked about race in a similar way, calling it a “demographic fiction.” Like Chris Newell, Cedric emphasized the importance of recognizing Indigenous peoples as having their “own national identities” and tribal nations as “individual polities” on the same level of other so-called “nation-states” like the U.S. and Canada. He also said that the “characterization” of Indigenous peoples as a race under U.S. law is “a legal construct to make things easier for the colonizers to understand and articulate.” Thus, Indigenous peoples’ identities are erased and reconstructed all for the benefit of the people who oppressed them.

However, some Natives, like Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett), are okay with indigeneity, or “Native American,” being a “race.” Shoran said, “Native Americans, this is our blood. This is our race, we are Indigenous.” She recalled a situation she had heard of when an Indigenous person was told to write the words “something else” as their identity category on a document, which created backlash from others in the community. Shoran indicated that that was problematic, but it made her grateful that nowadays, most documents list Native American as an option and even allow one to write in a more precise identity beneath it. She said she thinks this is “a good thing, because now we can put down what we are and then we put the tribe’s name on a lot of paperwork.” In specifying that she is a citizen of the Golden Hill Paugussett, she has more power to identify herself in the way she wants to be seen. Thus, for Shoran, the ability to assert herself as an Indigenous person or member of her tribal nation, and having that option offered to her and accepted by the colonizer institutions, is a positive act of identity reclamation. She said it will help inform settlers who “should know that there are Native Americans here.” When asked if she ever worries that this could cause others to overgeneralize Natives, Shoran responded, “it’s hard to say because no matter what we say or no matter what we do, there’s always going to be a

problem that the government has with a tribe.” While some may view the labeling of Indigenous peoples as paper genocide, those like Shoran may see it as the opposite.

*Mixed racial identity.* Despite the majority of Indigenous peoples asserting that they are not one race, Natives who have mixed ancestry with races such as white and Black tend to have a complicated view of their racial identities. Sage Phillips (Penobscot) talked about the “struggle” she feels navigating between her white and Indigenous identities, particularly because she looks white but is more closely connected to her Indigenous roots: “I don’t appear to be what people perceive us Natives to look like. And that’s the hardest thing for me.” She said that for a long time, she “tried to escape [her] whiteness,” but eventually realized that her colonizer ancestors are an unavoidable part of herself. As noted previously, shifting senses of identity occur when situations change. Sage conveyed the confusion that she still experiences when she goes “into white spaces,” and the type of conversation that takes place there: “They’re like, ‘Oh, you’re white.’ And I’m like, ‘No, I’m Penobscot.’ And then I’m like, well, wait, I kind of am. They’re not wrong.” When Sage enters “Native spaces,” she said, she is “accepted regardless, because...a lot of us don’t look how our ancestors looked.” Thus, for her, the “most challenging part” of her identity is how it changes depending on the makeup of the people dominating a particular space. Sage said that while she is still figuring this out, she thinks that her effort in helping the Indigenous community is a way of reconciling her white and Native identities because she views it as “working to give back in my own way.”

Alivia Moore (Penobscot) also talked about being a member of the Indigenous community while appearing white. She had a slightly more negative view of what is it like for white-appearing Natives to enter Native spaces, saying that there is some prejudice against “whiteness” among Indigenous peoples. Alivia said having white skin can make one considered “like the enemy,” or

“that you're not Native enough.” Alivia recounted a moment in which a person from her Indigenous community told her that she “had the heart of a full-blood,” and that they said it as if “it was the biggest compliment they could give a light-skinned Native like me.” She thought this was wrong to say because one’s skin tone should not define how Indigenous one is. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) spoke of her intersecting Black, white, and Indigenous ancestry. She appeared to have a less fixed view of those identities in that she can choose to put herself on a “spectrum” and decide how she wants to identify. Elizabeth said despite her white ancestors, she never identifies as white, which she thinks might be because of the acts of racism perpetuated by white society, and also because she sees whiteness as not having to do with ancestry but instead “how other people categorize you.” Therefore, Elizabeth does not view whiteness as an identity to claim in the same way that one can claim other races or indigeneity, so she self-identifies as “Native American and Black.”

Nia Holley, who appears Black but identifies as both Black and Nipmuc, said she does not think that those two identities “necessarily affect one another” in terms of making her feel torn between them. This is because a lot of Nipmuc people intermarried with slaves of African origin during the beginning period of colonization, so she feels that her Nipmuc identity is itself “inherently mixed with Blackness.” However, echoing Sage, Nia said the issues with her mixed identity tend to appear outside of herself in context of situation, depending on whether she is in the Nipmuc community or the Black community. In this way, she sometimes feels “invisibilized,” saying, “I don't necessarily always feel like I'm being seen as my full self in either space, depending on the conversation.” There can also be a certain generalized perception about Indigenous peoples with mixed Black ancestry; Nia thinks that in the Native community, “sometimes people don't expect Black Natives to have an actual concrete relationship to their tribal community.” There is

hence a very fine line that Black Indigenous peoples must toe in order to not be seen as an outsider by either community.

*Racism and being “Indian.”* A negative effect of outsiders’ perception of indigeneity as a racial group is, as one might expect, racism. This can be implicit, through ignorance, such as when settler-colonists have misconceptions of Indigenous peoples due to false narratives of erasure. For instance, Alivia Moore said that when she was in the western U.S., she “was told a couple of times that they didn't fully believe that Native people still existed on the East Coast; that we're all just white people now.” This observation that eastern tribes have nearly disappeared from public awareness is one that Miller (2004) and O’Brien (2010) make repeatedly.

Racism can also be explicit, such as when schools and sports teams use caricatures of Indigenous peoples as their mascots. Sage Phillips has long worked to force change to end the use of Native mascots, and she said, “it's super traumatic and harmful for us to see, because we live it. I mean, not only by having the mascots are people calling themselves something they're not, but then they're calling us even worse because of it and they think it's okay to do so.” Thus, Native mascots normalize and perpetuate stereotypes, painting a constructed, backwards image of Natives and inhibiting society to move forward and realize that Indigenous peoples still exist and can look very different. Sage recalled that the high school that she and her grandfather went to had sports teams called “the Indians,” and that her grandfather used to be called racist slurs when he went there. Even though the name was changed in the 1990s, she said, she has still spoken to people who believed that being called “the Indians” would give them “more school spirit.” To this she responds, “No, we wouldn’t. Why, because you want to wear a headdress to a football game? No.” According to Sage, harmful ideas about “school spirit” are just “repercussions” of having those mascots in the first place. In some instances, tribal nations have given their consent to the use of

Native mascots, but Sage thinks that “you cannot honestly say you support these mascots and call yourself proudly Indigenous.” However, in more recent years, especially with the wave of increased Indigenous justice movements, the trend has been moving toward more and more abolition of these mascots and tribal nations that used to approve of them are switching their stances.

Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) also told a story of a racist incident involving some of his tribal members. Being a border community, some people in his tribe have to cross from Quebec to New York, and then from New York to Ontario, every time they want to go shopping in the nearest city. Recently, some of them parked their cars, which have Quebec license plates even though they are from Akwesasne, not Quebec, in an Ontario parking lot, and when they returned, they found notes on their windshields saying, “Stay home and stay out of our province.” While this was likely directed at Quebecers, as the authors of the notes did not know the cars belonged to Indigenous people, it also implied racism against the Indigenous community, because it proved how most people from colonizer society do not even think about Indigenous peoples as existing and having a right to be there. This is despite the fact that the city of Cornwall, Ontario directly borders the relatively large Akwesasne Mohawk reservation, which has been there far longer than the settlers, and the Akwesasne Mohawk is the second largest First Nation in all of Canada. Abram called this “super ignorant,” adding, “if you live next to a big community, you should know what the hell we're all about.”

Despite most racism coming from external, settler-colonial sources, some participants noted that internal racism within tribal nations does still occur. Alivia Moore said that there is a lot of “division” and “anti-Blackness” in Indigenous communities. She thinks this is not aligned with traditional Indigenous values but is rather a mindset of prejudice borrowed from colonizer

culture that has been “embedded” in Native communities, a fact that is “really gross and painful” to her. Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) also discussed the ways in which Indigenous peoples sometimes internalize racist ideas, such as referring to themselves as “Indian.” While he noted that he occasionally will call himself “Indian,” and there are those who use the term in a non-pejorative way, he thinks that the concept of being “Indian” itself goes against Indigenous autonomy because it is a colonizer label. Mixashawn explained of the term “Indian”: “if you're the person who's been named this, if you use it within your context, it's very different than when someone who's outside of it uses it, because historically, when they use it, that's to oppress you in one way or another.” In other words, as Cornell and Hartmann (1998) might explain it, asserting oneself as a particular identity is very different from having that label stuck to oneself by a dominating group.

Other participants talked about racism as a systemic issue and connected institutionalized discrimination against Indigenous peoples to that which is experienced by other non-white groups.

Lorén Spears discussed the issue of access to education, saying:

[There is a] disproportionate number of, not just Narragansett, but Indigenous people, not graduating from high school, not getting accepted into college, and if they can get into those things, not having the resources they need in order to maintain that and be able to go to college. Not having the economics. There's disparities around the number of Indigenous people that are forced into the school-to-jail pipeline. A lot of things that are similar to other communities of color, that fall into the traps of systemic racism, and biases, around to access to jobs, access to education, access to resources.

Therefore, while indigeneity is not a race, it is still true that Indigenous peoples as a whole experience many of the same inequalities as other minority races, especially when they are generalized and rendered invisible by settler-colonial society. Jacob Ortega talked about this overlapping experience, noting that he felt “alarmed” by the increase in racist events against not just Indigenous people, but also to “Black people and certain other people,” even when it feels like society is progressing.

Some think there is a positive side to shared experiences of oppression in that Natives can form solidarity with those other groups, building a stronger alliance against systemic white supremacy. For example, Alivia Moore said that it is necessary to “build unity among other Indigenous people here, and then building solidarity with other marginalized communities.... Black, Brown, refugee, working class, poor, disabled, queer folks.” On the other hand, Jacob talked about the difficulty in building those alliances, particularly between Blacks and Native peoples. He said that in the past, when some have tried to form coalitions between the two groups to fight against white oppression, it has not worked out well because their goals are so different. Jacob pointed out the historical irony in that Blacks were segregated and prohibited from participation in white society, yet Indigenous peoples were forced to assimilate. This is the same argument that Green (2006) gives: while Indigenous peoples have fought against erasure, their “blood quantum” disappearing into whiteness, Blacks have been discriminated against in the opposite direction based on the “one-drop rule,” in which they are still considered “Black” no matter how much they mix with white people. That is another reason why Indigenous peoples are not the same as minority racial groups in the U.S. While Blacks have sought to be more included and treated equally, Natives have long struggled to be free from white settler-colonial society.

Overall, the effort to assert identity is currently one of the most critical and defining features of being an Indigenous person. According to participants, identity was not a very important concept to tribes before colonization. Europeans brought the notion of identity, especially in regard to classifying racial groups, in order to construct a hierarchy based on made-up, assigned characteristics, without the consent of those named. Continuous racialization has caused more erasure of Indigenous peoples in the eyes of colonizers, stripping them of their unique tribal affiliations and sovereign statuses. Racism is rampant, with some Natives internalizing it in

their own ways. Today, Indigenous peoples place a lot of emphasis on asserting their identities in order to undo the false, stereotyping identities that were forcefully assigned to them. The culmination of all this results in a very complicated conception of what it means to be Indigenous today. Land, ancestry, and collective cultural values are all vital components, but each person's individual sense of their own indigeneity is as variable as the human race. Reasserting Indigenous self-identity is a cornerstone of their fight against colonization.



### CHAPTER III: INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY

#### *Defining and Evaluating “Sovereignty”*

One of the main findings of this study is that Indigenous peoples ascribe different meanings to the word sovereignty and have varying opinions regarding the level of significance that it should hold. This supports Barker’s (2005) statement that there is no fixed meaning of sovereignty. In fact, some participants, in agreement with Alfred (2002), do not even like to use the word, and others said they do not believe Indigenous peoples can attain sovereignty in a colonizer society. Much like identity, sovereignty is a sometimes-positive, sometimes-negative, always-complicated word for Indigenous peoples to contend with. Sovereignty is constantly brought up in conversations about Indigenous rights, particularly from the standpoint of the U.S. government, which currently “recognizes” tribes as sovereign nations. Yet the very fact that the U.S. has to legitimize a sovereign status, just as it does indigeneity, that predates European colonization by thousands of years while essentially retaining full control over their existence greatly complicates the meaning of this supposed “sovereignty.” In fact, for many Natives, this status as domestic and dependent nations is not really sovereignty at all.

*Conceptions of sovereignty.* Participants seemed to agree that there is no commonly accepted definition of the term. Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) said that within Indigenous communities, “it’s not uniform, how the sovereignty is. So that whole question of sovereignty, it’s a hodgepodge.” Likewise, Alivia Moore (Penobscot) expressed the lack of consensus among Natives: “I don’t even know...if we collectively know what sovereignty is right now. [But] that doesn’t mean we can’t reclaim it.” One way in which some participants conceived of sovereignty

is in the sense of full autonomy, where a tribal nation has complete authority over its internal affairs. As Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) explained:

Sovereignty is basically like our tribe is our own sovereign, our own tribal government.... We don't run to the state because we're having an inner tribal problem. We have our own meeting, our own council, our own vote. It's our rights of fishing and wildlife, certain types of gaming, having our own reservation, our identity, our tribal IDs.... So being our own sovereign [means] having our own land, and to be able to continue doing our own ceremonies, and whatever problems that we have in the tribe, we have our own tribal government to sit down, to meet, to council, vote on it and fix the issue.

Despite her given conception of sovereignty, however, Shoran said she does not use the word in her everyday life, noting, "I think some people don't really like it like that, because it's kind of basically saying, the government picked this one piece of land for you, and boom, put you there and there you go. So it's still like they're being controlled." However, Shoran was adamant about fighting against this government control, saying that she does not care "what the government's slapping on that listing or ruling." Likewise, Cedric Woods (Lumbee) said he "pulls away" from using the term sovereignty because "it's very much a legal framing" and "it's about control." This agrees with Alfred's (2002) argument that the word sovereignty should not be used by Indigenous peoples because it is caught up in European notions of power. Still, Cedric said, due to the need to govern and have jurisdiction, there is always a necessity to engage in sovereignty discourse.

The expression of sovereignty as self-governance appeared in several other interviews. Lorén Spears (Narragansett) said she thinks of the sovereignty of every tribal nation as "no different than any other nation in the world, with the exception of that word, 'domestic sovereign.'" This means having "the right to decide on their governmental structure, their economic policy, their laws, their rules and regulations that run their state, their government, their sovereign." Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) gave a very similar understanding: "I believe the tribe should have the right to run themselves, self-rule, self-govern.... I think they should have enough freedom to make their own laws and certainly uphold those laws and establish their own criteria." Yet Jacob

also pointed out that European colonizers have a very different conception of sovereignty. He said that while colonizers see it as “absolute and centralized in a small number of people,” in Native peoples’ view, “everyone is a sovereign, and the territory that you’re in, that is sovereign territory, and you need to respect the rules and customs of people there.” In other words, while western nation-states may see sovereignty as a power struggle, Natives see it as a mutual respect for all peoples.

Other participants focused on sovereignty as an inherent right, an idea that Barker (2005) also mentions. Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) said that sovereignty is “not something that can be given to you.” He asserted that tribal nations have always had sovereignty, and furthermore, the creation of the United States was only possible due to its “recognition of the sovereignty of Native peoples to govern ourselves.” Chris also noted that his people, the Wabanaki, were “the first tribes to recognize the sovereignty of Americans, the right of Americans to rule themselves in America.” Chris’s beliefs are evocative of Biolsi’s (2005) assertion that tribes are pre-constitutional and are therefore do not need to recognize the jurisdiction of the U.S. Constitution, although Chris did not go so far as to say that tribes should act outside of U.S. law. Rather, Chris said he believes that the U.S. is reliant upon the recognized sovereignty of tribal nations in order to uphold its status as a country, because this premise was written into its founding documents: “If you were to eliminate the sovereignty of Native tribes, it undoes the U.S. Constitution, and then some of the precepts of it.” Because of this historical precedent, Chris criticized the way the U.S. government currently forces tribes to meet many requirements in order to “give” them sovereignty that they have always already possessed. Sage Phillips (Penobscot) also said she thinks sovereignty does not need to be “acknowledged” for it to apply to her tribal nation. While she was not sure how to “formally” define sovereignty, she said, “I think it looks like what our ancestors looked like in that time before

colonization, and I think now, that's still there; we're still sovereign.” Like Chris, Sage said she does not like the way the U.S. enforces tribal “recognition,” as though it has the sole authority to decide if they are “valid.” Tribal recognition is thus a colonizer-constructed “legitimization” of both Indigenous identity and sovereignty, two intertwined features that are vital to Indigenous perseverance.

Alivia Moore also disputed the validity of a sovereignty “given” by a colonizer government due to all the restrictions attached, saying, “we have had to meet all this criteria to have sovereignty be acknowledged by this other entity.... so that means they have the power to decide that gives them some supreme authority over us? That doesn't feel like it's even possible to be sovereign in that construct.” Additionally, she said, the actions tribes have to take in order to be federally recognized “are not traditional ways of getting our needs done, and how can we have tribal sovereignty if we don't have like access to land and territory to sustain our economies and our food systems and our life ways?” In other words, by having to subscribe to colonizer ideologies in order to be “legitimized” as sovereign, Indigenous peoples face the tradeoff of giving up their own values, resources, and identities, which in turn could actually be considered a reduction of their sovereignty. Alivia is also against the typical western conception of sovereignty, which she said views it as individualistic and based on the idea of “freedom” in an “exploitative way” and focuses on power that can “diminish other people.” Alivia prefers to think of sovereignty in the “collective” sense and is not sure that tribal nations can be sovereign within a settler-colonial context. She said that perhaps “a tribe can work towards sovereignty,” but in doing so they would be “embracing those colonial structures” in “ways that are not culturally aligned.” She sees this in her own tribal administration that was established to interact with the federal government, which she thinks relies too much on “western values” in their exercise of “sovereignty.”

Some participants chose to explain sovereignty through the ways in which it affects them and their communities on a personal level and what it enables them to do. Nia Holley (Nipmuc) offered several different ideas as she thought about sovereignty, calling it an “ability and understanding of being able to decide for yourself...to support yourself or your community.” However, Nia was also very much in line with the opinion that being “sovereign” in the way that the federal government assigns it is not real sovereignty. Nia gave a very similar opinion to Alivia’s, saying that being federally “recognized” is supposed to enable more sovereignty for tribal nations, but in reality, “you have less ability to really decide for yourself because you have all these federal guidelines that you have to adhere to. And if that's the case, how are you sovereign?” In that way, Nia said, sovereignty is a fake term for an idea that does not exist: “I really feel like the legal side of what sovereignty means isn't sovereignty at all, it's just a ploy for the federal government.... a legal sort of sovereignty isn't necessary to be whole people and to be Native.” As an alternative, Indigenous definition, Nia said she likes to think about sovereignty as “reciprocity” and “the freedom to have choices in the ways in which you are, in whatever way that is.” She settled on the conclusion that for her, “to be sovereign” is “to be whole.” Nia’s definition is reflective of Ontai’s (2000) suggestion that sovereignty can be reconceived of in a noncolonial way, embraced by Indigenous peoples in a manner that reflects their own values. This will be explored further later.

Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) talked about sovereignty on a human level, considering it a fundamental aspect of one’s identity. He said, “When you're sovereign, you're sovereign, period. You're a sovereign person.... Sovereignty is a human condition. All life is sovereign.” He said that the Anishinaabe have a term that translates to “spontaneous being,” which he thinks equates to sovereignty because “if you're spontaneous, you're sovereign to act as you see

fit.” Mixashawn said that when he hears some Indigenous peoples say they are “glad” that the federal government gave their tribe sovereignty, he thinks “that statement itself is an oxymoron” because “no one gives you sovereignty.” Despite it not being given, however, Mixashawn does think sovereignty can be taken away, because living under the jurisdiction of a centralized body like the U.S. is antithetical to “the way that we live.” He was thus very skeptical of the ability to actually be sovereign within a settler-colonial society.

Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) was another participant who does not believe that sovereignty exists for Indigenous peoples in the U.S., and that there is therefore no real point in talking about it. As she put it, “It’s not possible, not the way things are constructed now.” As Shoran and Cedric had expressed, Elizabeth thinks sovereignty is not a good word to use because it is a “settler term.” She said, “the idea of sovereignty is one of ‘power over,’” which is not aligned with Indigenous ways of thinking. Much like Alivia, Elizabeth rejects the notion of sovereignty because she does not believe in obtaining power over others, but instead seeks “a more collaborative, reciprocal way of living.” She said she is against the European value system that breeds notions like sovereignty because “it takes us out, takes us away, from our natural interactions with the place that we live. It makes us feel like we’re separate from it.” This is reflective of Rose’s (2015) assertion that sovereignty is just a buzzword used as excuse to defend neotribal power and to turn Indigenous communities into more westernized, capitalist societies.

*Self-determination as an alternative?* Because of the colonizer connotations of sovereignty, several participants proposed “self-determination” as an alternate word choice, a term that is also frequently used in discourse about Indigenous rights. Chris Newell, Nia Holley, and Lorén Spears all mentioned self-determination at some point during their discussions of sovereignty, often using the two words interchangeably, and Mixashawn Rozie said, “sovereignty

simply means self-determination.” Cedric Woods stated directly, “self-determination, I think, frankly, is a much better term,” and he defined it as “making decisions for your community by your community, period. Regardless of what entity says you can or can't do it, you do it anyway.”

Elizabeth Solomon expressed both the pros and cons of using the term self-determination. On the one hand, she said self-determination is good because it means asserting the right to control one's own life despite outside forces of oppression. As Elizabeth put it:

[Self-determination is] the right to kind of say, “This is who I am. These are my values, this is the land that you stole, the land that you stole from one set of the ancestors and the lives you stole from another set of ancestors.” And that I have the right to determine, and those of us who come together have a right to determine, how we are going to define ourselves and how we're going to live.

On the other hand, Elizabeth acknowledged that self-determination is still not the most accurate word to describe Indigenous peoples' aspirations, because she thinks it “goes back to self,” which is not an Indigenous value. She said she does not “necessarily have the words” to express herself vis-à-vis settler-colonial society, but if she did, she would choose a term that includes the importance of “community” in its meaning. Cedric also mentioned that Indigenous peoples always underscore the “best interest of our community” over self, but he thinks it is possible to include self-determination within that context. For him, it is most vital to have the “ability and agency and willingness” to seek and exercise care of the community, which in itself means striving for self-determination.

Reflecting the varying understandings and uses of “sovereignty” by participants, this study uses the word to represent the ideals and/or end goals that Indigenous peoples are striving for, including surviving colonization, maintaining cultures, and ensuring the prosperity of future generations. In doing so, it rejects the traditional colonizer definition, as well as the way the U.S. government uses the word to continue to control tribal nations through “recognition.”

## *Sovereignty in Practice*

Sovereignty in real life is an everyday battle for Indigenous peoples as they resist federal government control. It can come in many different forms in its everyday applications, from jurisdictional self-governance to non-colonizer ways of thinking and practices. Yet it is clear throughout that in all of its uses, Indigenous peoples' exercise of sovereignty is inherently tied to the preservation and assertion of their identities.

*How sovereign they feel.* Participants did not all feel the same in terms of the amount of sovereignty they think they possess, although their opinions on this seemed to depend on each individual's idea of what sovereignty means. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) and Sage Phillips (Penobscot) both said they believe tribal nations have always been sovereign, and that cannot be taken away. Sage said that because of colonization, a lot of outside restrictions have been placed on her tribal nation, but that does not mean it is not still sovereign. Despite the laws and dictations put in place by colonizers, Sage thinks that "whatever sovereign is, we are it, but we're just not perceived to be it." In this view, sovereignty is inherent in the sense of how Indigenous peoples assert themselves and act within their communities and is not determined by outsiders.

For other participants, sovereignty can come in different degrees. As noted in Chapter I, Nia Holley (Nipmuc) thinks her unrecognized tribe is "more sovereign than federally recognized people" because it does not have to interact with the U.S. government and is therefore less constrained by it. She believes that internally, the Nipmuc can provide their community with "so much more" than colonizer society can. She was not alone in this sentiment, as participants emphasized the value of collectivity as a means of combatting settler-colonialism. Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) stated, "within myself and within tribal community, there's a



lot of [sovereignty].” However, because settler society has very different norms and ideas, she said, in terms of Indigenous peoples’ place within that society, sovereignty is “very limited.” Similarly, Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) said that because his tribal nation has its own reserve and recognition, he thinks “there are some benefits” that relate to having sovereignty, but at the same time, there are also “a lot of negatives” and “restrictions” that come from negotiating with the Canadian government.

Other participants were very skeptical that they possessed any sovereignty in the true sense of being free from colonizer control. Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) said, “although we have a degree of sovereignty, I don't think that we could really call it sovereign.” He said this is primarily because “we don't have control over our lands, we don't have control over the environment, we're living in a society that will just as soon push the environment aside so that you could build a strip mall.” Likewise, when asked if she thinks sovereignty can be achieved despite settler-colonialism, Alivia Moore (Penobscot) said she still could not picture her community as truly sovereign within the U.S. because under the federal government there is not “enough spaciousness to be able to even embody full sovereignty.”

*Rights and self-governance.* Yet despite certain participants’ reservations about the ability to attain true sovereignty in this society, it can be said that they all work toward it on a daily basis because they care about the wellbeing of their people. As described in Chapter I, they do so in their own unique ways, such as by uplifting their communities, assuming leadership roles, and asserting their rights in the face of threats. In addressing the question of what a sovereign tribal nation should look like on the ground, many participants painted pictures of full jurisdiction and autonomous governance, rights that they deem essential to striving for their goals beyond the reach of settler-

colonial society. In addition, they stressed the importance of having those rights respected by outsiders and ensuring Native peoples' treatment as equal human beings.

As was mentioned in their conceptions of sovereignty in general, many participants discussed what it would look like in terms of breaking away from colonizer government oversight. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Gold Hill Paugussett) envisioned her tribe's sovereignty in this way, saying, "you have to be able to live and just be with your own tribe and your own family and work together with each other in your own way, not to let that controlling take hold of you when it comes from states and governments." Elizabeth Solomon also focused on the idea of resisting "control." She said she thinks Indigenous societies and settler-colonial society can only reconcile if non-Indigenous people start to "think a different way," an Indigenous way, which includes abolishing the idea that one should have "power over" others. Alivia Moore brought up the concept of "power over" as well, stating that she thinks an "Indigenous world view" is necessary to their success. Alivia, who works to "rematriate" Indigenous communities—that is, returning them to their traditional matriarchal structures—said she thinks that a matriarchal community "flips" the idea of "exploitative power over" and instead encourages "supporting and nurturing the power within each of us." When considering what sovereignty could look like for her, Alivia wondered if it could be "applied to a framework of liberation and power-within," which would be better aligned with Indigenous values. However, she cautioned that before they can do this, Native peoples must first acknowledge "that we're not going to be able to achieve full sovereignty while we continue to be occupied and colonized here." Thus, for Alivia, sovereignty is a goal to be worked toward but not a currently attainable end in itself.

Robert Peters said his tribe is constantly fighting against settler control. He recounted how the Mashpee once controlled the town of Mashpee, Massachusetts, but after a surge in the non-

Native settler population due to investment and development opportunities in the 1960s, the tribe lost its “political control.” Yet rather than staying complacent, Robert said, the Mashpee formed its own tribal council so that there would be another Indigenous body that would “have control over our own community or what was left of it.” Hence, Robert thinks, this incessant fight on the part of tribal communities has contributed to their success in maintaining some level of sovereignty. They also do this by exercising the rights that make them more sovereign and never allowing those rights to be taken, such as taking non-Indigenous people to court when they violate the tribe’s hunting rights. Robert said that these legal battles, which his tribe has always won, have caused “anguish among other people that think that we're taking away something from them because we have the sovereignty.” This highlights the difficulty caused by conflicts with settler-colonial society that Indigenous nations go through on a daily basis when trying to exercise their sovereign rights. As Robert said, “So even when you do have that sovereignty, you still have to fight for it, and you still have to have that argument sometimes...or get arrested sometimes, to protect and safeguard that sovereignty.”

Grand Chief Abram Benedict gave his perspective on exercising sovereign rights from his position as a tribal leader responsible for the good of his community. For him, much of this relies on the tribal nation’s ability to make its own laws and retain jurisdiction over its land and people. Because colonizer governments are constantly trying to reduce the rights of Indigenous peoples, Abram said, “as a community, we want to ensure that our rights are not eroded, that the recognition that is there or that needs to be there continues to be there, or that we get the recognition so that we can enjoy our nationhood and our own community.” This recognition is “a respect issue,” meaning Natives feel they deserve the respect from settler-colonial society to acknowledge that tribal nations and their sovereignty predate European arrival. He also noted that the Akwesasne

Mohawk often “exercise our jurisdiction, our autonomy, with or without [the Canadian government’s] approval” when it comes to the rights that they believe are necessary to their survival. For example, “our police force will enforce community laws, our compliance department will enforce community laws, our Akwesasne Mohawk law court will adjudicate community laws. We’ll hear certain civil disputes within the community that one would argue have to go to the outside because we don’t have the jurisdiction, but we exercise it anyway.” Finally, Abram said, his tribal nation has been going through what they call a “self-government process.” This involves negotiations with the Canadian government to recognize the tribe’s “jurisdiction and authority over their communities.” He thinks that creating this “legal relationship” between the Akwesasne Mohawk and the federal government is an important step toward respecting tribal sovereignty.

*Sovereignty through land.* The role of land in achieving sovereignty is crucial for several reasons: land dispossession was the basis for colonization and genocide, complete self-governance necessitates full jurisdiction over one’s lands, and Indigenous peoples have always considered land (in the sense of respect for the Earth rather than exploitation) a central tenet of their cultures and identities. Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) described this centrality: “Land is everything to us. Land is our heart and soul; it’s the foundation of the tribes.” Jacob was one of many participants to reiterate the value of reservation lands, as was touched on briefly in Chapter II and promoted by the likes of Barker (2010) and Huyser et al. (2018). Jacob said reservations enable tribal nations to gather safely, retain solidarity, and practice their traditions; for example, the Narragansett’s reservation in Rhode Island, which includes a longhouse and church, “holds that tribe together” because “it gives you that sense of community.” Unlike large tribal nations, especially those in the West that have large reservations that house thousands of people, many tribes in the Northeast

have only small pieces of land. Jacob said that makes these little reservations all the more important for keeping the community together, which in turn contributes to its autonomy.

Lorén Spears (Narragansett), who grew up visiting her tribe's reservation frequently, said that it allows them "better access" to the "the ability to hunt, fish, and gather, where on, maybe your own personal property or just state or broader land, you don't always have the access that you should have." Lorén said she hopes one day the Narragansett might be able to reclaim their lands that are directly on the coast, because the ocean has always been a large part of their culture and houses many of their traditions. Nia Holley (Nipmuc) concurred with the sentiment that land is a vital aspect of community, saying that it gives Indigenous peoples "a place to live and build and connect." She also explained that she feels as though land is her people's "kin" and that it "remembers" their history. Such cultural values are also an expression of sovereignty, as will be explored later in this chapter.

Many participants' tribal nations have undergone long and difficult legal battles to get their lands back. Robert Peters told of his tribal nation's petitioning for the return of 50,000 acres of its lands on Cape Cod, which were taken by neighboring towns centuries ago for the purpose of harvesting cranberry bogs. As of now, the tribe only has several hundred acres of its original homelands, but it does own the deed to the town of Mashpee. Robert said that reclaiming "control" over his people's lands is extremely beneficial to "taking back that power, telling your own stories.... to be able to express your ideas and have them be prominent in the society you're in is a very important aspect of sovereignty." This affirms Pasternak's (2014) statement that control over land is essential to tribes' legal sovereignty. Robert also said he thinks that sovereignty is all about "your relationship to the Earth." Likewise, Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) said that getting land back, especially a large amount of land with ample resources, is vital to his people because it would

help them become more self-sustainable. This once again evokes Steinman's (2016) argument that sustainability and land go hand-in-hand. Chris said, "[if] we could self-sustain through our traditional methods, then that would lead us to self-determination; that would lead us to true sovereignty, because then we would not have to play the game of the federal government." Chris said this can benefit the Passamaquoddy's non-Indigenous communities as well, because he thinks his tribe "can actually teach to our neighbors and convert this whole landscape to making Maine a more healthy place where we don't have the social inequality that we have."

However, some participants were not so sure that reservation lands entail sovereignty. Elizabeth Solomon said, "you have multiple Indigenous tribes in the United States who do have land (granted, it's held in trust), but that still does not bring them sovereignty about what they can do on that land and how they will live on that land." Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) also pointed out that "the original purpose of the reservation was to restrict Native people, to kick them out of the most valuable areas." Still, he said, he sees the connection between sovereignty and land, because for Native peoples, "to preserve and protect the land supersedes everything." Like Mixashawn, Chris Newell was critical of the parceling out pieces of land, since "the idea of ownership of land is really a European concept" and today tribes are forced to "own" land rather than "steward" it as they had for millennia prior. But Chris said he thinks that getting land back from the U.S. government, even if it is a reservation, is good because "we have sovereignty within our own territorial boundaries." Thus, while land has been appropriated by colonizers for exploitative and oppressive purposes, it is simultaneously cared for and rejuvenated by Indigenous peoples, giving them sovereignty in return.

In addition to pursuing land back for the purpose of maintaining community, culture, and sovereignty, tribal nations also fight to protect their border rights. Non-Indigenous peoples are not

often aware of how significant the issue of borders is to certain tribes. For some, borders are essential to having jurisdiction, as Cedric Woods (Lumbee) said: “if you're talking about criminal or civil jurisdiction, it means there has to be a border, a boundary. And within that boundary, you exercise these powers of self-governance.” For others, particularly tribal communities that live on both sides of a national border, such as the one between the U.S. and Canada, the ability to ignore the border is the objective. Grand Chief Abram Benedict, whose tribal nation has a reservation straddling the border between New York and Ontario and Quebec, discussed the constant struggle to retain his tribe’s border crossing rights. The Akwesasne Mohawk have lived in the same region for thousands of years, prior to the establishment of nation-state borders, and they officially do not recognize its existence. Abram said, “we assert that the border is an instrument or tool that was put in for the non-Indigenous people and not our community.” While enrolled members are allowed to cross the border with a tribal ID, other problems occur. For example, people who marry into the tribe from outside are not permitted to cross if they have the smallest infraction on their record, and thus would be unable to visit family who live on the same reservation. Abram explained, “Those things impact our community all the time, and it's becoming more so as the United States and Canada look at border security, as our people continue to have mixed relationships.... That's why border recognition, border rights, is important to us.”

Chris Newell was another participant who mentioned border crossing as a critical issue for him and his tribe. The Passamaquoddy also live on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border, but they do not have a reservation straddling it as the Mohawk do, and the Canadian government chose “not to recognize the Passamaquoddies that live on the other side of the river, even though traditionally, we have always been there for 12,000-plus years.” Chris talked about borders in the global sense as well, saying that he would “love to see a world where Passamaquoddies get to travel the world

on our own passports, and they're recognized by England and by all these countries that came and colonized us originally...that they actually accept our self-rule and allow passage to their borders, based upon their recognition of our government.” Chris is not alone in this wish, as many other tribal nations in North America have asserted that since they predate the existence of colonizer countries on their lands, they should not recognize the same borders, and because they are sovereign nations, they should also have their own passports. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy has issued its members their own passports for nearly a century, but so far, the passports have only been accepted by other countries in a few limited instances. Having the right to cross borders would increase tribes’ sovereign status by asserting that there are no other nation-states existing within the boundaries of their land. For many Indigenous nations, border rights are sovereign rights.

### *Other Types of Sovereignty*

Sovereignty in the way most people think of it, as a political and legal status, is not its only form. As Ontai (2000) encourages, some Indigenous peoples have reappropriated the word to describe it in non-political contexts, often relating to Indigenous cultural values and community development and wellbeing. These forms of sovereignty were mentioned frequently in interviews. Cedric Woods (Lumbee) said he takes “a much longer-term, holistic approach and understanding of that word.” As he explained, “there’s cultural sovereignty, there’s spiritual sovereignty, there’s economic sovereignty,” forms over which “we can have much greater degrees of control” than political-legal sovereignty, which is more often beholden to colonizer government jurisdiction. In these alternative contexts, sovereignty is vital to Indigenous peoples in their everyday lives as they work to resist colonization and ensure the security of their people for generations to come.



*Cultural sovereignty.* Many subcategories of sovereignty fall under cultural sovereignty. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) talked about sovereignty in terms of keeping traditions alive in spite of colonization: “Keeping our sweat lodge ceremonies going and our old traditional ways, because at one time, they took a lot of the ceremonies and songs and stuff away from the tribes, and we weren't allowed to practice certain medicines, and we weren't allowed to practice certain ceremonies.” Lorén Spears (Narragansett) also said the continued practicing of not only customs, but also of Indigenous knowledge, are types of sovereignty, because “we're maintaining and continuing our traditional life ways and are passing on our cultural knowledge.... that's what I would put under cultural sovereignty, is all of that. It's your language, it's your ceremonies, it's your cultural knowledge, it's your traditional ecological knowledge.” In discussing passing down these knowledges as a form of sovereignty, Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) also pointed to larger-scale projects, which Indigenous peoples in recent times have initiated in order to demonstrate the power of their unique cultural histories. Elizabeth cited the example of a group of Melanesian men who turned to traditional Native Hawaiian navigation practices in the 1970s in order to “recapture” the way of their ancestors, which had almost disappeared due to assimilation. They ended up circumnavigating the Earth in a traditional double-hulled canoe, which they named “Hōkūle'a,” without any modern-day tools. Elizabeth called this accomplishment “a sense of reclamation” for those people.

Lorén Spears also talked about purposefully implementing education as a necessary component to cultural sovereignty, since “traditional cultural knowledge” has often been “usurped and blocked through the educational system” by colonizers who only teach settler-colonial histories and ways of thinking. She said that reclaiming that passing of knowledge “generationally,” such as traditional ways of “hunting, fishing, gathering, agriculture,” can help

fight against such educational assimilation. Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) agreed, saying, “sovereignty to me would be being able to have control of how you educate your children,” including the teaching of Indigenous “spirituality.” Likewise, Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) emphasized the significance of Native people “going back to their roots, to their traditional spirituality, and their culture.”

Jacob noted that another major part of cultural resurgence through education is keeping Indigenous languages alive. He said that tribes such as the Mohawk and Mohegan are working to revive their languages, which were almost lost because of assimilation, through “immersion schools” and other educational programs. Jacob believes that “language is the cornerstone of any culture” and therefore it should be a priority. In reviving languages, he said, Indigenous peoples can “get back to the real roots, the real people. They're trying to get back into the true way.” Lorén has also focused on language education, as she is fluent in Narragansett. She tied language sovereignty into technological sovereignty, explaining that the technology era has increased access to language learning for many Indigenous peoples. She said, “when you do technology, it becomes something that people can have access no matter where they're at, if they want to utilize it to learn language. And language is fluid and its living, and when it's been interrupted...you reassert your right to speak that language.”

Cedric Woods (Lumbee) called cultural sovereignty “critically important” as a goal for tribal nations. He said, “I would argue that the more spiritual and cultural sovereignty tribes have in terms of access to sacred spaces, preservation, reclamation of language, food ways, makes us healthier human beings.” He noted that these different practices must all combine in order to be “sufficient” enough to achieve sovereignty in general; when settler states “block” them from pursuing certain types of sovereignty, Indigenous peoples can turn their attention to other types.

For example, Cedric said, Indigenous peoples in Mexico “rank very high in terms of spiritual sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, but rank relatively low in terms of this political legal definition because they don’t have clearly defined political statuses.” This stands in contrast to tribal nations in the U.S. and Canada, which tend to have more political-legal sovereignty. Cedric thinks this does not make Natives in Mexico “any less Indigenous,” but rather, “it means that their indigeneity is more visibly articulated and understood under these other aspects of sovereignty.” Hence, Cedric recognized the relationship between sovereignty and Indigenous identity, in which outwardly practicing one’s Indigenous cultural identity is a way to achieve more cultural sovereignty.

A last form of sovereignty within this category concerns the protection of one’s culture. Lorén Spears called it “sovereignty of the mind,” describing it as “not letting oppression happen, where people stop you from practicing your own culture.” She that there “are times that other individuals might want [to] control your intellectual knowledge,” such as when Indigenous person tells another to not to try to speak their own language. This expression of what Lorén called a “colonizer mentality” can only be resisted by “protect[ing] the sovereignty of your mind, even from people within your own community.” In all of these ways, cultural sovereignty also functions as a method of reasserting identity, as traditions are preserved, knowledge is passed, and Indigenous ways of thinking are maintained.

*Food sovereignty.* For many Indigenous peoples, the great importance of food, including the growing of food, lies in its intrinsic connection to the Earth and subsistence living. Many participants mentioned “foodways,” which describes Indigenous efforts to maintain their traditional cultural and ecological practices for growing food. As discussed before, Nia Holley (Nipmuc) is one participant who actively practices this. She said Indigenous foodways involves “not only growing our food, but having access to land to harvest things, caring relationships with

other food producers, and trading.” However, Nia said she does not really consider her work as a means to obtain sovereignty, but rather a way to “reinforce that we are sovereign in ways.” For Nia, her work with foodways is about more than just food; it is about the connection to other living creatures and the centrality of land in Indigenous cultures.

Chris Newell discussed food sovereignty in the context of his tribe’s sustainability. He said his main goals are “being able to sustain our people, be able to sustain our government, and provide housing, food.” Chris conveyed food sovereignty as a prerequisite to total sovereignty because it means that tribes no longer have to be as dependent on settler-colonial society to survive and can focus on self-governance. As he put it:

[I]f tribes are really going to gain sovereignty, that means we’ve first got to be able to feed ourselves again, one hundred percent, and not be dependent on grocery stores and people having to make money, but [instead]...living sustainably off of the land. And if we are able to do that one hundred percent for our own people, then we become more self-determined. We're less dependent upon the U.S. federal government.”

Lorén Spears discussed her tribal community’s efforts to promote food sovereignty. She said that her brother-in-law and his wife founded the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative, through which they grow traditional Narragansett flint corn. Lorén said this is not only beneficial because they are bringing back their traditional crops, but also because the corn “is being grown communally again.” Thus, foodways brings people together as they work toward self-sustenance. Lorén described the practice as “beautiful” in that “the whole community was going there, and they were learning about it, and they were helping plant and they were helping tend and they were helping harvest.” The museum she works for, Tomaquag Museum, has an exhibit on this food sovereignty program, which she finds meaningful because it is “spotlighting just our food and our food systems and our traditional ways of knowing food, and how that connects. And we talk about how corn isn't just corn; it's edible, it's medicinal, it's spiritual, and it's useful.” Again, this example

illustrates how food sovereignty is about much more than food, and how food itself has so many uses and values in Indigenous cultures.

*Economic sovereignty.* For many tribal nations, financial security is critical. As has been noted, involvement in the capitalist economy is not necessarily aligned with traditional Indigenous values or ways of living. However, economic sovereignty, even in the settler-colonial context, is often the key to self-subsistence and autonomy. Cornell and Kalt (1998) are major supporters of this link between sovereignty and economic prosperity. Often in the U.S., economic sovereignty is achieved through political sovereignty, as evidenced by the financial benefits of federal recognition. As Cedric Woods stated, “the better governance structures and the more political authority tribes have, they're able to be more economically self-sufficient or demonstrate economic sovereignty.” In a similar vein, Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) said, “if [tribes] are federally and/or state-recognized, there are certain rights and resources that they have access to that allows them...more economic self-determination than other people.” He also noted that “much of the sovereignty is evolved around economic development.”

Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) pointed to some of the negative consequences of participating in the settler economy. As summarized in Chapter I, when Chris used to work for the Mashantucket Pequot, their casino went into major debt due to the economic recession, and as a result, they fell back into the grip of the U.S. government. Therefore, Chris said, “every time we take the white man's money, our sovereignty goes out the window.” But Chris is not entirely pessimistic about tribal business ventures, because he thinks economic sovereignty is possible if tribes can stay away from becoming financially reliant on settler institutions. He sees this happening if tribes can “get to a point where we are self-sustaining the income portion—that is necessary in this capitalistic world that America is created—but also taking care of the basic

needs.” Chris said this involves not only investment as a tribe, but also ensuring individual tribal members are succeeding financially, such as when “people can work to get all the food that they need, and we have proper shelters for them to live in and things like that.” To achieve sovereignty, this must also be coupled with safeguards to ensure Indigenous peoples are still remaining true to their non-capitalistic values. For example, Chris said, “We start building healthy communities based off of our culture rather than based off of how much money they make. We measure success back to our original traditional ways, by how much we're able to contribute to the community...that's how we get back to where we [are] self-determined.” By promoting community over monetary wealth, Chris thinks tribal nations can “decolonize ourselves to get off of this need of making money and buying things from stores, and all of that, that has been created around us, and getting back to sustainable usage of our own homelands.” For Chris, economic sovereignty is about community subsistence within traditional Indigenous ways of living.

Lastly, Robert Peters said that economic sovereignty today depends on technological sovereignty. In the same way that Lorén Spears talked about the value of technology in language and education sovereignty, Robert said that Indigenous peoples must learn to adapt to modern technologies in order to survive financially. He said this is because “this economy was not including us, just running us over,” because “everybody’s doing things online,” and Native peoples and other people of color are generally “computer illiterate.” Robert therefore believes that “having technological sovereignty,” meaning learning to use technology, “can become more important than other kinds of sovereignty” for Indigenous peoples in the modern world, in part because it goes hand-in-hand with economic sovereignty.

To conclude, sovereignty is not a concrete concept. Indigenous peoples have varying definitions and perceptions of the term and differing evaluations of its significance. Some think it

should not be used because of its settler-colonial origins. Others think their sovereignty is constantly being infringed upon and they resist this colonizer control on a daily basis. Still others think of sovereignty in a non-colonizer way, as a characteristic intrinsic in Indigenous peoples that cannot be taken from them. Thus, sovereignty can be conceived of in the settler nation-state context, or as the ability to self-govern without outside control, or as land rights, or even in the contexts of culture, food, and economics. Yet in general, “sovereignty” represents the goals this study’s participants seek to achieve. Its strong relation to Indigenous identity is undeniable in that both affect each other and have significant impacts on Indigenous lives today.

## CHAPTER IV: RECLAMATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

### *Activism and Resistance*

In seeking to contribute to social justice for Indigenous peoples, this study looks to the future where changes can be made. Many of the study's findings in this area were not founded on preexisting literature, since very few prior studies have conducted interviews with Indigenous peoples about resistance in their everyday lives. As described in Chapter I, all participants are actively involved in helping to improve the lives of their communities and to prepare them for many generations to come. This chapter demonstrates participants' eagerness to provide for times to come and meet their aspirations through activism, knowledge preservation, and collective solidarity. It also focuses on the path forward and how goals might be achieved far into the future with the help of people from settler-colonial society.

*The fight continues.* Despite all of the hardships Indigenous peoples have faced, their survival after so many centuries is evidence that they have never and will never relent in their fight against oppression. Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) said, "It may get stressful at times, it may get tiring, but you don't give up. You keep continuing to fight for your family and your people." That is why Shoran and her tribe continue to strive for federal acknowledgement even after repeated rejections. Activism is also a major part of Shoran's day-to-day work. She recently participated in a movement to remove statues of Christopher Columbus in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut. While they were initially successful, there has been a new initiative to put the statues back up, which has been frustrating but not discouraging, because again, Shoran believes in never giving up. Likewise, Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) recounted an instance in which his tribal nation had to put its foot down and fight for its rights.



Not too long ago, the tribe protested the federal government's decision to provide customs officers with firearms by forcing the government to shut down the border crossing station. As he described it: "the community took a stand. They closed the border, and that border post, the actual inspection station, is no longer where it was before. It's moved out of the community.... And so our people, we're not afraid to take an approach or action, if needed to preserve our rights."

Another way in which Indigenous peoples build toward a better future is by passing down their traditional cultural knowledge to keep it alive. Lorén Spears (Narragansett) said she hopes to see that cultural knowledge retained by her grandchildren and generations beyond. For example, she brings her two-year-old grandson cranberry picking, "because that's something that we're passing down.... you're picking cranberries at a place that our ancestors undoubtedly picked cranberries." In addition, she envisions her grandson "being fluent in our language; if not fully fluent, at least an increase on the fluency that we currently have." Lorén also discussed the value of storytelling, saying that every object has a story that is waiting to be "recovered." At Tomaquag Museum where she works, she said they are "trying to find those histories about our people, our place, our life ways. And they're all here. It's just recovering that or uncovering them." These stories about their ancestors enable Indigenous peoples to hold onto their cultural identities. Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) shared a similar view on spreading knowledge. His work hosting traditional Indigenous ceremonies and teachings goes by the motto, "keep the fire alive, pass it on." He said he hopes that he can help more Indigenous people "learn as much about [their] tribal heritage as you can and teach us about it. And of course, by teaching us they're learning themselves, and pass it on and help keep it alive in the world."

*(Co)existence with settlers.* When attempting to survive and flourish within a settler-colonial society, Indigenous peoples often have to figure out how to coexist, or even form good

relationships, with settlers. When asked about her community's relationships with the outside society, Clan Mother Shoran Piper said the Golden Hill Paugussett have a lot of non-Indigenous supporters for whom she is grateful, including "councils and committees that are not tribal, who have come to our tribe and other tribes to help.... having outsiders to try and help tribes, not just our tribe or individuals or whatever's in the community or the city." Sage Phillips (Penobscot) agreed that "allyship is super important and valued in our communities," adding that she thinks "the fact that they're willing to come and learn...is an accomplishment in our eyes, because then they take that and they go back to their communities."

Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) mentioned that some Native people do not want to work with people from colonizer society, but he believes "we have a responsibility to that relationship" with non-Indigenous people. Going beyond that, Robert wants to include non-Indigenous people in his community and share his culture with them. For example, he thinks the Mashpee "should be teaching our language to white kids, too, because they're in our country." Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) agreed with the emphasis on teaching and spreading Native languages, saying that he thinks the U.S. should "put everything into preserving Indigenous languages here." Chris said one of his dreams is to see a better relationship with his tribe's non-Indigenous "neighbors" in Maine. However, this aspiration to "equalize" Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations alike in Maine is dependent on a stable relationship between them. As Chris put it, "we really need to get back to an era of equitable collaboration between Native peoples and our non-Indigenous neighbors that live with us, so that we can sustain this landscape for our future generations, not just mine. Because you live here, too; you're gonna have kids."

Elizabeth Solomon (Massachusetts Ponkapoag) conceived of relations with settlers as a way of bringing them "closer to Indigenous values, ideals, ideas, beliefs." Instead of keeping

Indigenous peoples separate from colonizer society, Elizabeth actually thinks the best solution would be more integration, because “we are all here in this same place and we need to figure out a way that we can be here together in a way that works for everybody.” She came up with the idea of “assimilation in the other direction,” in which settlers would learn to live with the values system of Indigenous peoples in an Indigenous cultural society, not the other way around.

On the other hand, Nia Holley (Nipmuc) said she was fairly pessimistic in thinking about how Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples could work together. She said that it might be possible “if people are able to work more collectively and collaboratively together and not with a transactional sort of relationship, but again, something that's more reciprocal.” This involves settlers needing to ask, “What are we doing to support one another?” in order to create a more equitable experience. Unfortunately, Nia said, she has struggled to work with people from settler-colonial society because “some people really just don't want to listen,” and even those who do listen decide to “continue to be oblivious because it was too much for [them].” Because of this, Nia is not certain that it is “worth going through all of that effort and time and pain” of speaking to settlers when they might not end up taking action anyway.

*Collectivity and community.* It is not just outsiders with whom Indigenous peoples must join forces; they must work with each other as well. A central theme found throughout the interviews was the priority Indigenous peoples place on the collective over the individual, which causes them to think about and work for the good of their communities above all else. This is vital to their cohesion and therefore to their survival. Some participants discussed how different tribal nations are able to unite to work toward the same goals. Clan Mother Shoran Piper said that while there can be individual differences among and within tribes that cause conflicts, “We all work

together. Because it's more powerful; we're all there to help each other out, fight for the same things that we're all fighting for, to make a change.”

Lorén Spears talked about how the Narragansett frequently come together with other tribes in the area to benefit from the same resources, such as tribe-based vocational programs. Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they have had to adapt to meeting virtually for events like yoga classes. Still, she is happy that different tribes include each other in their events, inviting everyone in the region to participate. Lorén said these collective activities are “part of the identity” because they enable Indigenous peoples to form a wider community: “we have our individual tribal nation, but there's also that kinship relationships and just relationships between communities in a social way, that was in some cases historically there as part of alliances and in some cases, maybe they weren't part of our alliance, historically, but are today.” These intertribal gatherings foster solidarity among people from different tribes and build a stronger coalition to work toward future improvements.

Grand Chief Abram Benedict also stressed the importance of “the collective,” saying that he wants members of his community to “come back and support us as a nation, because, again, our rights are driven by collective, not individual, and if the collective is not there anymore, then there isn't anything.” Similarly, Alivia Moore (Penobscot) depicted the crucial nature of collectivity in Native communities. She said, “the heart of anything that any Indigenous community needs...is true collectivism, and to truly be embedded in reciprocal, humbled relationships with one another and with the Earth.” Alivia thinks it is critical to “heal” and “restore” her community because “building collectivity really helps to buffer us from the harms of settler-colonial empires like the United States.” She said that this restoration of collectivity, not only between humans but also with the land, is “a really important way of just decreasing the harms and rebuilding more of our

resilience to continue to survive.” Collectivity and solidarity support the resilience of all Indigenous communities.

### *Long-Term Goals*

As does anyone working for social justice, participants in this study have large aspirations that they hope will one day be fulfilled. Participants were all asked what their ideal visions are for the future and how they think they can be achieved, with most answers focusing on providing for their communities and focusing on the generations ahead. This entails not only preserving cultures but also, on a wider scale, protecting the Earth from destruction and gaining more allies from broader society. While participants seemed to agree that this will take an immense global effort and that their goals may not be achieved for a long time to come, inviting non-Indigenous peoples to learn from and form relationships with Indigenous communities is a key step forward.

*Envisioning the future.* When asked what they believe they are ultimately striving for, some participants were straightforward in expressing their desire to simply live free of the oppression and pain that their people have suffered for centuries. For example, Nia Holley (Nipmuc) said, “my goal is to have the opportunity to just be and live rather than be in like a constant state of survival.” Meanwhile, Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) connected his aspirations to the ability to assert identity and have that identity accepted by everyone. He explained this ideal future as when a Native person “can stand up and proudly announce that ‘I am a Mohawk or Chippewa or Cherokee or Passamaquoddy,’ whatever they are, and be accepted as part of society, be able to be a part of modern society and function, but at the same time, hang on to their tribal roots.” Mixashawn Rozie (Mohawk/Mohegan) also touched on this idea that Indigenous peoples need to

retain their real identities by following “Indigenous philosophy” and incorporating it into their daily lives. He said he thinks if Indigenous peoples can do this, they will survive far into the future.

Robert Peters (Mashpee Wampanoag) said his end goal is “that we’re self-sufficient.” This seemed to be a common objective among participants, one that reflects some of their broad conceptions of sovereignty and the right to self-determine. Tribal self-sustainability brings with it the ability to resist colonizer control and choose which actions to take in the interest of the community. Robert also said that being self-sufficient will allow Indigenous peoples to “walk into a room on equal footing” with people from settler society, because they will finally have the same resources and capacities. Lorén Spears also talked about building up tribal resources, such as those contributing to education and occupations: “we like to see the opportunity, and then also the success of people through these opportunities.” Thus, Lorén views these measures of success as the key to ending the current disparities in levels of standards of living for Indigenous peoples compared to non-Indigenous people, which will carry them into future prosperity. Another participant who named economic success as a primary goal was Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk), who said, “I need a stronger economy here.... I want to be able to deliver \$100 million in services of our own money, not of the government’s money.” Like Robert, Abram highlighted the importance of self-sustainability, but he also added that this requires creating “working relationships” with settler outsiders. He believes that it is “extremely important, not only for people to understand who we are, what our rights are, but also to know what the opportunities are.”

Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) further discussed the essentiality of resources, but in the context of the environment. He stressed the devastation that will happen to Indigenous communities within the next few centuries if climate change and environmental destruction

continue at the current rate, since Native lifeways are symbiotically dependent on the land. Chris said he sees a way of preventing this only if settler-colonial society can “turn back to Indigenous ways of knowing” and “give up their colonized ways.” This is similar to the previously discussed idea of changing people’s mindsets and Elizabeth Solomon’s idea of “assimilation the other way,” through which settlers could become allies, not enemies, and work together for the preservation of humanity. Since people from colonizer society are primarily responsible for the rate of environmental degradation, Chris thinks that changing their mindsets to follow Indigenous values of caring for the Earth could save it and consequently all the people living on it, Native and settler.

Another major vision that Robert Peters said he has for future is one that is much more specific and based on a political and social relationship with colonizers. He said he wants to “have a relationship with the Native American residents of Boston and the city of Boston, and have public land dedicated to Native cultural use.” Robert thinks that this will create a “cultural space” that could be replicated around the world and will make Indigenous peoples more visible to settler-colonial society, de-erasing them from popular perception. Robert tied this aspiration of identity visibility to the theme of sovereignty, saying that “to recognize Indian people as people” is a goal that could “go along with sovereignty.” While participants had varying visions and different ideas for carrying them out, their long-term goals all shared the same desire to fight back against colonization by strengthening their communities and improving the lives of their people.

*Decolonization.* “Decolonization” is a long-term goal shared by many Indigenous peoples, but it can also be a contentious term. Due to its prominence in current Indigenous rights and anti-settler-colonial discourse, all participants were asked what they thought of it. As with sovereignty, they possessed varying opinions on the significance of decolonization and whether it is even possible to fully obtain. Chris Newell is one of the participants who actually uses the term in his

everyday occupation, because as Executive Director of the Abbe Museum, he is currently in charge of putting the colonist-founded museum through “a decolonization process.” Chris acknowledged that decolonization “has a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people.” While recognizing that the museum will “never fully decolonize” because it is “an artifact of colonization,” he supports decolonization as a process rather than the “end goal.” For Chris, decolonization in the context of “colonial museums” means “undoing” centuries of harm and “creating a model for other museums to also undo the harm that they’re doing in their colonial institutions.”

Alivia Moore (Penobscot) also views decolonization as a process. Much in the way that some conceive of sovereignty, Alivia said she thinks decolonization is not fully possible “until occupation ends,” but she believes that it can still be worked towards over many generations, even within a settler-colonial society. Meanwhile, Sage Phillips (Penobscot) is working to “decolonize land grant institutions,” including her university, the University of Connecticut. To her, this means “break[ing] it down.” She plans to start with giving free tuition to Indigenous students who are from the land that an institution is currently occupying. Sage also wants to “build up” resources for Indigenous students, with “the goal of getting Native students into higher education, because we need representation in courtrooms and operating rooms and classrooms, wherever it may be.” That is how Sage views her efforts to decolonize higher education.

On the other hand, some participants were less enthusiastic about attempting the process of decolonization because they do not see it as a viable possibility at all. Nia Holley agreed with Alivia that decolonization cannot happen in the current settler-colonial society. She said that decolonization cannot occur without “everything else also being undone too, because it's just not doing anything. It's just false.” Nia thinks that no matter what, Indigenous peoples will always be trapped within the structures of colonization unless all colonizers and all traces of settler society



go away, which is not going to happen anytime soon. For that reason, she believes that within current discourse, decolonization is “just a buzz word.” Cedric Woods (Lumbee) shared a similar perspective, saying that when people use that word, which they do frequently, he questions what they mean by it. He said that “at its most radical...nobody’s leaving, nobody’s going anywhere, so nothing’s getting decolonized.” Thus, Cedric thinks it is critical to really delineate what decolonization looks like as an objective, whether that be through “decentering of colonial thought processes” or “change in terms of the hierarchical relationships.” He does not have a concrete answer, instead saying, “I continually push back against it to try to make sure I even have an understanding of why it’s been operationalized as and what the end goal is really.”

However, there was one form of decolonization that some participants seemed to agree is a tangible goal, which is “decolonization of the mind.” This has a similar meaning as “sovereignty of the mind,” the difference being that it concentrates on changing one’s way of thinking to be less settler-colonial, while sovereignty of the mind is about not letting others control one’s way of thinking. Also, decolonization of the mind tends to be geared more toward people from settler-colonial society, whose perspectives Natives wish to see change. Sage Phillips discussed this concept, thinking about how non-Indigenous peoples can help fight colonization if they are “willing to come and learn and decolonize their mindset.” This means shifting their perspectives to “think Indigenous, and how we might perceive things.” While she said that the government is never going to give all the land back to Indigenous tribes, Sage, like others, thinks it is still possible to work towards a goal of undoing colonization, step by step. She said, “it all starts with mindset and then turning that into action and how you can provide reparations, and on and on and on.” Likewise, Elizabeth Solomon said she likes the phrase “decolonize your mind” when it comes to changing the thinking of non-Indigenous people, because it is a way of challenging the status quo

and realizing the fallacy of the idea that “everything that is valid can be validated by dominant society.” In other words, by helping non-Indigenous people realize that settler-colonial ways are not the only ways of thinking, Natives can shift away from or even break down the foundations of settler-colonial society in a manner that is beneficial to all.

*Generations before and after.* A constant theme throughout participant interviews was the intense focus on preparing for future generations. Considering their ancestors and descendants in all of their decision-makings is a prominent aspect of Indigenous lifeways. Jacob Ortega (mixed tribal ancestry) discussed the duty he feels to enable the next generation to prosper, especially through teaching them their traditions. He said he has “an obligation to keep this alive and to pass it on.” He thinks this is a “responsibility” that all Indigenous peoples have, “to learn some of your culture, some of your legends, your lore, anything that you could pass on to the future generations.” Jacob brought up an idea that is ingrained in Indigenous culture and repeated frequently: “when we think ahead, we always think seven generations to come: how is this going to affect the seven generations ahead of us? Seven generations past, seven generations forward. So seven is a sacred number to us.”

In Indigenous cultures, thinking in terms of “seven generations” means paying respect to one’s ancestors, who helped prepared for the world one currently lives in. Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) talked about her grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ generations, who lived through so much pain and suffering yet still worked to ensure that their descendants would survive and continue to keep Indigenous culture alive. She said of her ancestors:

It's because of them that we have the traditional ecological knowledge that we have. It's because of them that ceremonies and culture continued. It's because of them that we have rights that we have today. It's because of them that we still pull forth as Narragansett people and have an identity as a Narragansett. It's because of them, that pushed that forward, our Elders, our ancestors, that ensured that we're still here, and that we still have that identity as an Indigenous person.

Likewise, Sage Phillips said, “the most important thing is my ancestors and thinking of them. And just being Indigenous to me means being able to even be here because of them and all that they went through.... being able to fight through those hardships and still be here and still provide for the next generations to come.” Sage was one of the only young people interviewed for this study, and even at her age, she has already been preparing for future generations because she knows that her ancestors did the same for her. She also mentioned how proud she is to see a new youth movement rising up to carry on the fight, whether by protesting Native mascots or standing up against environmental destruction. Sage said, “[O]ur youth are our future ancestors; we're the ones who have been passed the baton to carry on the fight now. And I think that's really powerful for us to see, that our younger generation is willing to fight like our ancestors did.”

This idea drives many to continue working for the future despite all odds. For example, Nia Holley, like Jacob, said that she has a “responsibility” to work for her community, because it is “a part of who I am as a Nipmuc person.” Nia shared, “one of the values that I've always understood, growing up, is that the stuff that you do in your life is never for you. It's in preparation for seven generations from now.” Likewise, Clan Mother Shoran Piper (Golden Hill Paugussett) said her vision for her people is “to not have to worry about the future or the youth.” She said that she does not want younger generations to “have to fight for everything” in the way that she and her ancestors did. Instead, she wants to see them continuing their cultural traditions without the constant struggle to survive: “We want them to be able to live happy and in peace and still practicing the traditional ways, medicines, how to live off the land, knowing where our history comes from, keeping the history live, the songs alive, the beat of the drum alive.” This is the fuel for Shoran’s perseverance, because even when she and her tribe experience hardships, she said, “I don't want to give up hope because I look at our future generation and I don't want them to go

through what our generation went through, or the generation before, because it gets harder and harder year after year.”

Similarly, Chris Newell explained, “what we're doing now is going to affect our future generations.” He said that all of his work is geared toward “creat[ing] a better world” for his people’s descendants, and he thinks that “the value of self-determination” lies in the ability to “self-sustain our culture” and “begin the process of healing from genocide.” However, Chris said that this will only succeed if they ensure that the project keeps going through the future generations, which means it is the current generation’s duty to pass on the fight and the knowledge.

As Chris put it:

[I]t took multiple generations for these things to happen. It's going to take multiple generations to truly undo them. So the work that I'm doing now, I will probably not live to see the end result.... But that does not mean I don't do the work. Because the step that we're at right now says that this is how we get [to] the next point.”

Thinking seven generations past and ahead is central to Indigenous perseverance over time. Participants shared the certainty that this duty to the future is a part of their cultures and identities that will continue to guide their communities for many generations to come.

*What non-Indigenous people can do.* As mentioned earlier, with a decolonial and social justice lens, this study aims to inspire a non-Indigenous audience to become active allies of Indigenous peoples who are currently fighting for their rights and to use newfound knowledge from this study to transition away from settler-colonial mindsets. Being an ally, however, comes with several caveats. First, an ally should not assume they know how to help, but instead should listen to the people they are trying to help and ask what they want them to do before jumping into action. Second, an ally should always remember that they can never fully understand what it is like to be Indigenous and what the movement requires, so they must stay humble and open to learning. Last, an ally should always be a follower, not a leader; instead of taking the megaphone, they

should watch and respect those at the forefront. Keeping all of this in mind, the study's final question to each participant was, "What can non-Indigenous peoples do to help Indigenous peoples?"

Clan Mother Shoran Piper said, "What [non-Indigenous people] can do is they can basically spread awareness, show people that we are coming together as one for the community to help everybody out, every situation. And just having supporters, that's it." For example, Shoran said, supporters can send letters to politicians asking them for help in getting the tribe federal recognition. Meanwhile, Alivia Moore's answer was that settlers "need to give land back," which is not only a way of reconnecting Indigenous peoples to the places that were stolen from them, but also a way of colonizers "giving up power." She clarified that this does not mean leaving the whole continent to Indigenous peoples, but rather doing smaller acts such as "transferring [land] deeds." Alivia said another way in which non-Indigenous people can give up their power in order to create more equity and justice is by "deferring to the leadership of...communities of color" and "not needing to have all the answers from us either." In other words, she said, "we need white folks to just kind of step back and to throw their collective power behind the moves of Indigenous and Black folks like that."

Other participants talked about how non-Indigenous people should want to learn more about Indigenous peoples and unlearn the falsities created by settler-colonial society; this again relates to the idea of decolonizing the mind. Chris Newell said this can start with acknowledging that "when we speak about these issues in the English language that we're doing it under the blueprint of England, and we're doing it through the mindset and worldview of England." Sage Phillips also focused on changing common beliefs, saying people should understand that "a lot of the narratives you've learned about us probably, most likely are not true. In my school, we were

taught Thanksgiving was awesome and so was Columbus, and that was it.” Sage also said that she would like people to “use the knowledge you’ve acquired and put it back out into the world and just help us with representation and acknowledgement, and just really knowing the truth of the genocide that we’ve experienced.” Grand Chief Abram Benedict (Akwesasne Mohawk) agreed, saying, “People need to educate themselves. We’re not going anywhere. We’re going to continue to be neighbors for a very long time, and we need to coexist. And if we want to prosper, we need to have better relationships. And it starts with understanding each other.”

Echoing the participants who discussed coexisting with settlers earlier in this chapter, some others answered the question of what non-Indigenous people can do to help with the suggestion that they should participate in mutual understanding and forming better relations with Indigenous peoples. Mixashawn Rozie thinks interacting with Native peoples open-mindedly is essential to changing settlers’ perspectives: “what non-Indigenous people could do is understand more about Native people.... Talk, see how they feel. And it really boils down to, just live. Live, look at the world around you without a whole lot of preconceived thoughts about what is reality and what is not...don't be so judgmental.” Cedric Woods gave a very similar opinion, saying that “the biggest thing” is to “listen to Indigenous people, ask and then listen and take it seriously when they respond.” Cedric pointed to issue of Native mascots, where Indigenous peoples are saying they “are not honored” by those caricatures, but certain non-Indigenous people continue to ignore pleas for change. Nia Holley said that listening is key to “building genuine relationships versus building a relationship because you want to help.” Nia expressed that she does not just want allies in the movement for Indigenous rights; rather, she wants true, respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, because that is the only way to make lasting change. She explained, “And through those relationships, you’ll learn how you might be able to help, how you

might support, but you only really know and understand that if you're really in relationship with someone.”

The road ahead for Indigenous peoples may be just as wearisome as the road that got them here, but they will always keep resisting for the good of their communities and cultures. They do this daily in different ways, through activism, practicing traditions, focusing on collective solidarity, and more. Participants have many large-scale aspirations for the future and feel a responsibility toward both their ancestors and their descendants, seven generations removed. But their success cannot just come internally; it must rely on the help of outsiders. Non-Indigenous people must listen to and form authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples. By shifting their mindsets in these ways, non-Indigenous people will be taking steps toward becoming effective allies in this crucial work for justice.

## CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

As Barker (2005) writes, “[I]ndigenous identity is foundational to the structure, exercise, and character of sovereignty” (p. 17). The results of this study confirm this claim, illustrating how in the case of Indigenous rights issues across North America, indigeneity and sovereignty are constantly connected in nearly every way, even though conceptions of these themes may vary from person to person. In this conclusion, I will summarize and interpret this study’s primary findings associated with the intersection of indigeneity and sovereignty, including their relation to my research questions and the connections between the findings and prior literature. After that, I will consider this study’s contributions not just to sociological research, but more importantly, as a medium of allyship and support to Indigenous communities. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study, how future research can build upon its findings, and its potential real-world applications.

### *Intersection of Indigenous Identity and Sovereignty*

*Research questions.* As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the main guiding research questions were: 1) How has settler-colonial society constructed notions of Indigenous identity and sovereignty in a way that harms Indigenous peoples? 2) How can Indigenous peoples reclaim the meanings and practices of indigeneity and sovereignty to achieve justice in a colonized world? Numerous answers were provided throughout the study. Settler-colonial society has created deleterious parameters based on contrived conceptions of primarily indigeneity, but also sovereignty, in an attempt to restrict Indigenous rights and liberties. From the beginning of North American colonization, settlers have portrayed Indigenous peoples as backward, primitive, and



uncivilized, pitting them against the “modern” and “sophisticated” Europeans who supposedly brought light to a dark continent. Ever since, indigeneity has been menaced by narratives of disappearance and “dilution” that attempt to cover up a history of genocide. Even today, as the U.S. government switches to a “pro-sovereignty” approach, it still denies Indigenous peoples the ability to assert their own identities and to operate without settler-colonial oversight. As for sovereignty, many Indigenous peoples perceive it as a mere buzzword used by colonizers to describe the domestic and dependent status of tribal nations under federal government jurisdiction, rather than as independent nations equal to the U.S. and Canada.

However, a main conclusion of this thesis is that Indigenous peoples can reappropriate these same concepts used by colonizers to work toward undoing erasure and attaining their goals. For many, to be Indigenous is to be sovereign and to be sovereign is to be Indigenous. Thus, by rejecting settler-colonial guidelines for identity “legitimization” and asserting themselves as individual tribal nations instead of a minority race, Natives exercise the power of their identities. Through identity reclamation practices such as cultural preservation, knowledge transmission, and community sustainability, Indigenous peoples unite themselves against forced assignment by colonizers, which engenders more sovereignty. Likewise, regaining sovereignty through land rights and more self-governance gives Natives more room to exercise their identities and build community cohesion, ensuring their cultures are never lost. It is through these forms of reclamation and perseverance, this thesis suggests, that Indigenous peoples can achieve justice. The following elaborates on the main conclusions of this study.

*Identity and sovereignty are essential to Indigenous peoples.* This thesis depicts the significance that Native peoples place on the concepts of indigeneity and sovereignty, even as their views of them may differ. As detailed by Corntassel (2003), since the Indigenous rights

movements of the 1960s, sovereignty has increasingly become a primary aspect of Indigenous identity. Chris Newell and Sage Phillips, among other participants, made apparent that for many Natives, it is imperative to assert themselves as independent, sovereign nations that predate colonization. Most Indigenous peoples, including Clan Mother Shoran Piper and Mixashawn Rozie, see sovereignty as essential to survival and possessing full humanity. On the other hand, along the lines of Alfred (2002), some Natives like Elizabeth Solomon reject the word's Euro-American connotations, as well as the way that the federal government incorrectly claims that Indigenous nations under its jurisdiction are sovereign. Still yet, others reappropriate the meaning of sovereignty to represent their goals in a non-legal or political way, reflecting Ontai's (2000) belief in the value of alternative forms of sovereignty. For example, Nia Holley and Alivia Moore both view sovereignty as a reciprocal, collective way of being rather than as the power of a colonizer nation-state. Sovereignty through culture, food, frame of mind, and other types all stem from the practice of asserting Indigenous identity by holding onto the aspects of themselves that colonizers have attempted to eradicate.

Indigeneity and sovereignty are also connected by their shared reliance on land and the Earth. As Barker (2010), Steinman (2016), Pasternak (2020), and others explain, having land equates having sovereignty. Participants such as Grand Chief Abram Benedict and Robert Peters confirmed this perspective, view, saying that land is a necessary component to maintaining its autonomy and control, as it enables them to direct self-sustaining practices such as agriculture, business ventures, and governance meetings. Furthermore, Jacob Ortega, Lorén Spears, and Chris Newell demonstrated how their tribes' reservation lands give them a place to gather, which increases tribal cohesion and solidarity, and to practice their traditions and cultures, which strengthens their identities—particularly collective identity. On a deeper level, Indigenous peoples

treat the Earth with the utmost respect, a tenet that is a profoundly intertwined part of indigeneity. All participants affirmed that without land, they lose their indigeneity, thereby supporting the theory that land is one of the main avenues for them to claim both identity and sovereignty.

*Colonizers restrict Indigenous identity through erasure and control in order to diminish their sovereignty.* Interviews affirmed that the concept of indigeneity has been continuously manipulated by settler institutions to manipulate and/or eradicate Indigenous populations and tribal nations, for the purpose of establishing an unopposed settler-colonial society. As Glenn (2015) and Steinman (2016) explain, settler-colonialism is founded on ideologies entirely incompatible with Indigenous ways, so colonizers needed to undermine Indigenous identity in order to prove themselves as the sole sovereign authority of the land. Grand Chief Abram Benedict and Cedric Woods both stated their belief that colonization relies on erasure of the Indigenous, not just through genocide but through constructing false notions of indigeneity. Barker (2010) and Bonds and Inwood (2016) support this claim in their depictions of how Native identities have been painted as inferior, unmodern, uncivilized, and therefore unworthy of the land they inhabit.

Barker also describes how settler “replacement” narratives, such as books about “bygone” Natives and drawings of them that only portray them in the “past,” are key to dispossessing them of their identities and therefore their survival as a people. Similarly, through paper genocide, colonizers deny Indigenous existence by deciding who gets to be written into the official records and who is removed. Lorén Spears and Clan Mother Shoran Piper discussed as example of this, the detribalization of their members by the U.S. government. Their struggles to reclaim their indigeneity and hence their federal recognition stem from the destruction of any documented historical traces of their tribal nations by colonizers. Miller (2004) demonstrates the result of this constructed erasure of the Indigenous, relaying how many people in settler-colonial society do not

know that Indigenous peoples still exist, and the ones who do usually expect them to look like the stereotypes they see in popular media and history books. This is detrimental because people are less likely to be kind to people they do not know or understand, leading to harms such as the perpetuation of Native mascots in sports and the appropriation of Native clothing and symbols by white people.

Identity erasure also functions through assimilation. By blending Indigenous peoples into the dominant population, colonizers attempted to annihilate Indigenous cultures, languages, and all other facets of their indigeneity. Participants shared many stories of how their ancestors were made to relocate to “praying towns” and convert to Christianity and have lost some of their own spirituality as a result. They also recounted more recent experiences of relatives being kidnapped from their homes, forced into boarding schools, and taught to be ashamed of themselves. Jacob Ortega and Elizabeth Solomon described how the internalized shame of being Native caused their relatives to cast aside their indigeneity, preventing it from being passed down to their own children. These painful histories and generational trauma make it even harder for current Indigenous peoples to define their identities today.

Furthermore, the racialization of Indigenous peoples is a current threat to their sovereignty because it rejects their status as distinct nations. As Cornell and Hartmann (1998) describe, colonizers have appropriated the concept of identity in a way that is meant to divide and hierarchize people by race, with white supremacy the driving force behind it. In the case of Indigenous peoples, for example, they do so by grouping them into the category of “American Indian” in the U.S. via the U.S. Census and by giving them a singular “minority” status. Barker (2010) claims that racialization of Indigenous peoples is a political strategy to make them unsovereign. All participants agreed that indigeneity is not a race, as “race” is not even an Indigenous concept. Chris

Newell, Nia Holley, Lorén Spears, and Elizabeth Solomon were among the strongest advocates against using terms like “Native American” and “American Indian” to essentialize all Indigenous peoples as one. Despite their status as not a race, however, many have experienced racism; for example, according to Sage Phillips, seeing sports teams with Native mascots causes Indigenous peoples serious emotional and psychological distress. The colonizer construct of race has unfortunately created conflicts within Indigenous societies as well, as “mixed” Natives have come to be seen as less valid.

Settlers also implement legal protocols that classify and restrict who is considered Indigenous in order to suppress the Native population. As detailed by Miller (2004), the required “legitimization” of indigeneity causes many issues for Indigenous peoples who are trying to be accepted and recognized by settler-colonial society. Many participants, such as Clan Mother Shoran Piper, expressed their struggles seeking federal acknowledgement and the trauma they have experienced trying to “prove” their identity and existence after centuries of colonization. They do not want to perform false stereotypes created by white people in order to be given back what was taken from them in the first place, but they are sometimes forced to during the Federal Acknowledgement Process. Furthermore, the requirement to prove blood quantum, which Green (2006), Thornton (2011), and Rodriguez-Lonebear (2021), among others, describe as harmful and inaccurate, is one of the most prominent issues that Indigenous peoples are forced to contend with. Lorén Spears explained how by creating this arbitrary metric of identity “proof,” colonizer governments decrease the number of “real” Natives, further erasing them and isolating them from their identities and diluting them into the general population. As they disappear, they lose the strength and ability to claim rights to sovereignty. Blood quantum causes internal tribal divisions as well; as Grand Chief Abram Benedict relayed, many tribal members, even children, are

disenrolled and left without community because they do not meet a certain blood quantum. Moreover, tribal nations face divisions over who should be given tribal “membership” that was not required prior to colonization, thereby reducing solidarity that is vital to maintaining thriving Indigenous communities. Certain tribes have also tried to deny legitimacy to other tribes, a symptom of internalized colonization that hurts identity. When tribal governments take on colonizer mentalities, they further distance themselves from the values that make them Indigenous. In sum, the assignment and control of Indigenous identity by settler-colonial society is one of the most deleterious tools of colonization and an inhibitor to true sovereignty.

*Indigenous peoples can reclaim identity and sovereignty for anticolonial resistance and social justice.* A final, potentially novel finding of this study is that just as settlers construct the concepts of identity and sovereignty to erase Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples can in fact reverse the process and redefine those concepts to resist colonialism, reassert their rights, and attain their justice-oriented goals. This theory has thus far not appeared as a main focus in sociological literature, although it does follow logically from existing research that highlights the importance of identity and sovereignty to Indigenous peoples, as well as how those concepts are socially constructed to build power dynamics. Identity reclamation is a salient way for Natives to control their visibility in the eyes of the general public, which in turn can shift settler perception toward a more understanding and compassionate view of their Indigenous neighbors.

As a means of asserting their identities, participants such as Elizabeth Solomon and Alivia Moore use Indigenous words to refer to themselves by tribal nation instead of by racial terms. Nia Holley and Clan Mother Shoran Piper spend their time and energy on their homelands, holding traditional ceremonies and growing food through foodways. Participants constantly practice the Indigenous values of collectivity, respect for the Earth, and connection to ancestors and

descendants by gathering frequently, caring for their lands, and ensuring the sustainability of their communities for generations to come. Those such as Chris Newell and Lorén Spears pass on knowledge and traditions, and even share them with non-Indigenous peoples to showcase their real identities, through education, art, and anticolonial museums. All of these practices, no matter how small, contribute to the assertion and reclamation of indigeneity, proving to the world that they are not footnotes in history books, but rather thriving, complex, and modern cultures. This in turn engenders sovereignty because it liberates them from the constraining expectations of settler-colonial society.

In turn, reasserting sovereignty strengthens indigeneity. This is not only because regaining land provides a space for identity expression, but also because for many, being sovereign—in the non-legal, non-colonizer sense—means being Indigenous, since Indigenous peoples were inherently sovereign for thousands of years prior to colonization. Even those participants who said that sovereignty cannot be given or taken by colonizers agreed that Indigenous peoples can increase their own sovereignty in various ways. For example, Grand Chief Abram Benedict focuses on maintaining self-governance and asserting border rights for the Akwesasne Mohawk, and not letting the Canadian government prevent him from providing for his people. Chris Newell sees sovereignty happening through land-back claims, which enable more tribal self-sustainability and helps tribes connect back to their roots on the Earth. Then there are those who, as mentioned earlier, practice Indigenous types of sovereignty through cultural preservation, passing on knowledge, and resisting colonial assimilation. Many participants such as Sage Phillips and Clan Mother Shoran Piper participate in activism against oppression by protesting Columbus statues and getting legislation passed to ban Native mascots. Lastly, all participants were adamant about their duty to past and future generations, seeking to ensure the wellbeing of their peoples for many,

many years to come. Sovereignty in any of these forms coincides with the practicing of indigeneity, and these two themes work symbiotically through Indigenous peoples' reassertion of their own lifeways, paving the way to a brighter future.

### *Significance*

In sum, an important conclusion from this study is that for most Indigenous peoples, sovereignty is indigeneity and indigeneity is sovereignty. One reinforces the other: asserting indigeneity through traditional practices and other methods helps Natives break free of colonizer control and reinsert themselves into the narrative. Likewise, sovereignty, whether through land, sustenance, culture, or other forms, provides a path forward for indigeneity to grow and flourish. One of this thesis's major contributions is the representation of Native voices and viewpoints through interviews in this study, exploring how they view their own identities, the importance of sovereignty, and the world they live in. Participants detailed the various ways in which Indigenous peoples conceive of the themes of indigeneity and sovereignty as they are relevant to their lives and their work fighting for their communities, opening the door to further exploration of the best ways to achieve Indigenous justice.

One question that remains open for consideration is to what extent Indigenous identity and sovereignty reclamation might rely on the use of settler-colonial structures. A prime example at the forefront of current debate is the casino business. On the one hand, casinos can provide tribal nations with billions of dollars of revenue that they then put toward providing their members with free higher education, cultural revitalization, and economic stability. On the other hand, participation in a capitalist economy can put tribal nations at the mercy of a volatile stock market, large amounts of debt, and federal government regulation. Some tribes have had to submit to



federal demands that reduce their sovereignty in order to keep their businesses afloat. Others have changed their governing systems and cultural attitudes to fit less Indigenous, more colonial ways of being. Economic endeavors have pitted different tribes against one another and even caused conflict between members of the same tribe. Hence a paradox arises: Is the increase of one's economic and quasi-legal sovereignty via settler-colonial structures such as federal recognition and business licenses worth the potential sacrifice of one's identity, which consequently decreases cultural sovereignty? Or does the possibility for identity and culture reclamation funded by those same ventures end up counteracting any such sacrifice? Perhaps the two approaches are compatible. I infer that the way in which tribal nations go about exercising their sovereign rights, even if it involves settler-colonial interactions, may decide the answers to these questions. For example, Grand Chief Abram Benedict explained how even though he has to work with the Canadian government to distribute federal resources to his tribal nation, he is willing to stretch the boundaries of the law if he believes it is in the best interest of his people. However, this is a very difficult line for tribes to toe, and questions concerning the meanings and proper exercise of identity and sovereignty will persist for a long time to come.

This study's focus on Indigenous experiences not only helps to fill a gap in the existing literature that has yet to truly integrate settler-colonial research into interactions with Indigenous peoples: in doing so, it also helps reject traditional oppressive forms of research in which Indigenous peoples are objectified and given no voice. Unlike past studies, the sociological qualitative research methods employed here produce a more personal, individualized, and in-depth portrait of Indigenous peoples' perceptions and experiences. This study provides a closer look at the lives of Natives and their tribal nations in the Northeast today, underlining the most crucial barriers to their survival but also the inspiring ways they persevere. It amplifies Indigenous voices,

adding to the unraveling of systematic erasure that has sought to silence them for so long. It asks non-Indigenous people to critically examine their roles as members of settler-colonial society, encouraging them to break away from the negatives that come from it. It creates the opportunity for stronger relationships and better understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In doing so throughout, this thesis highlights the ways in which Indigenous identity and sovereignty are interconnected and their cruciality to the future of Indigenous resistance and justice.

### *Moving Forward*

A limitation of this study is its scope, as it was conducted by a single researcher over just a few months. It would be beneficial to continue to interview more Indigenous peoples of other backgrounds. I focused on Indigenous peoples in the Northeast region of Turtle Island because they have arguably faced the most narrative erasure, but more varied perspectives will likely be found among those in other parts of North America who have had different distinct experiences with colonization. I do not believe there are many factors that could have compromised my findings besides the small number of participants. Because I reached out to nearly all participants through mutual connections, the sample may not be representative of the northeastern Indigenous population, but that was not my intention anyway would not have been possible within the limits of this study. I did try to interview people from as many different tribal nations as possible so as to provide more variety. I do not believe participants may have answered questions any differently due to compromising variables, because they all appeared to speak with me on an honest and sincere basis. However, there is a possibility that if I had been an Indigenous person or someone closer to them, they might have revealed even more personal information than they did with me.

As these factors are uncontrollable, I would not make any major changes to my research process were I to do it again.

Future research can easily expand upon my thesis by simply replicating it with more individuals to see if the patterns still emerge, which I predict will be the case. This is because most Indigenous peoples share a sense of solidarity and similar perceptions of the world due to their mutual experiences of oppressive colonization. Since this study was open-ended and exploratory in style, there is much room for expansion. There are many new directions in which further research on indigeneity and sovereignty could go, and many questions to be asked. For example, one could look more specifically at comparing federally recognized with non-federally recognized tribal nations, or home in on the significance of land, or examine explicit cultural practices, or study the role of Indigenous social movements, all in the context of using indigeneity and sovereignty to achieve justice. Any expansion of my work should first and foremost stay dedicated to the goal of listening to Native peoples with respect.

These findings suggest a new way to think about the broad themes of Indigenous identity and sovereignty. These words are commonly used in the field of study, but few studies have centered on asking Indigenous peoples what these concepts mean to them and how they affect them in their daily lives. Few have thought about the ways in which indigeneity and sovereignty exist symbiotically and can therefore be reappropriated by Natives to empower themselves. There is also much to consider regarding the implicit ways in which settler-colonial society contributes to Indigenous suffering by perpetuating false stereotypes and narratives and failing to acknowledge Indigenous presence today. Even the most well-meaning settlers fall into these traps by committing microaggressions, such as talking about the “founding” of U.S. as if nothing predated it or

celebrating Thanksgiving. Future sociological research needs to do a better job of acknowledging its role as a both a product and perpetuator of settler-colonial society.

To conclude, issues facing Indigenous peoples as highlighted in this study present a gaping need for public action. It seems that most policies today aimed at helping Indigenous peoples are too small in scale, attempting to solve problems with financial solutions. While Natives do need economic resources, capitalism is not the best answer to centuries of oppressive colonization. This study explicitly demonstrates how Indigenous peoples can effectively reclaim their own identity and sovereignty, but there is much that non-Indigenous people can do as well. In Chapter IV, participants detailed what non-Natives can do on an individual level, namely freeing their mindsets from settler-colonial ideologies. On a wider level, we settlers must collectively use the understandings we acquire to create large institutional changes. I believe the momentum toward increased Indigenous rights and sovereignty in this society is currently at a tipping point forward, but its true success requires sweeping policy reforms. Examples include mandating the teaching of Indigenous histories and current events in schools, giving back greater amounts of land, eliminating borders for Indigenous peoples, minimizing the arbitrary requirements for federal recognition, and increasing tribal nations' rights to self-governance until they are viewed as their own true sovereign nations on the same level as the U.S. and Canada. This thesis provides a solid case for why these changes should be made, both for its participants and for broader social justice.

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## APPENDIX A: Participant Bios

**Abram Benedict** (he/him) is a lifetime resident of Kawehno:ke (Cornwall Island) and is now serving his second term as Grand Chief. During his first term as Grand Chief, Abram lead a dynamic 12 member Council that focused on building stronger relationships, creating new opportunities and raising the positive profile of his community. During his first term as Grand Chief Abram and his Council brought to a conclusion two large land claims worth over \$284 million. His other goals for his first term as Grand Chief included providing greater accountability and transparency mechanisms, greater engagement with the community through social media to encourage instant community member feedback, meaningful job creation, increased economic development, and relationship building. In the position of Grand Chief Abram continues to ensure our youth have a prosperous future. He had previously served three terms as District Chief of Kawehno:ke. Within that capacity, he served as Portfolio Chairman for social services and housing and was Portfolio Co-Chair for education. (Source: self-reported)

**Nia Holley** (she/they) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work is deeply influenced by what survival and healing look like within Black and Indigenous communities. Her work ranges from printmaking, ceramics, metalsmithing, and traditional arts to bringing tribal communities together around food justice, agroecology, land, & history. She strives to cultivate relationships across tribal borders to rebuild a more inclusive and historical process of kinship and survival. She has actively engaged with Indigenous-led grassroots organizations as an outreach and project coordinator and has participated in Nipmuc programs since before she could walk and talk. Nia is a part of the Eastern Woodlands Rematriation collective. (Source: self-reported)

**Alivia Moore** (she/they), of the Penobscot Nation, is a two-spirit community organizer committed to restoring balanced relationship with the earth. As co-founder of Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, they support the revitalization of indigenous food & healing systems, including the development of a Wabanaki Community Herbal Apothecary. They organize with Wabanaki two-spirit Alliance and serves as board co-chair for Maine-Wabanaki REACH. Alivia has a lifelong commitment to child welfare having grown up in tribal foster care. She is now a member of the

ICWA Workgroup, serves as an ICWA Qualified Expert Witness, and fosters Native children. (Source: self-reported)

**Chris Newell** (he/him) is Executive Director and Senior Partner to Wabanaki Nations for the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. He is a multi-award-winning museum professional born and raised in Motahkmikuhk (Indian Township, ME) and a proud citizen of the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township. He also serves on the Board of Trustees for the New England Museum Association and current member of the Maine Arts Commission. Chris is a long-time singer with the acclaimed Mystic River singers based out of Connecticut and has travelled the US and Canada singing and participating in cultural celebrations, pow wows, and live stage performance. Chris is a co-founder of Akomawt Educational Initiative, an educational consultancy working with schools, universities, museums, and all areas of education to incorporate Native perspectives in a culturally competent manner. (Source: self-reported)

**Jacob Ortega** (he/him) identifies as a mixed-blood urban American Indian who traces his ancestry to several tribes. JC “Indio” Ortega’s youth was spent struggling with alcoholism, drug addiction and a life of petty crime. With the help of the Creator, he was able to put this negative lifestyle behind him and began a journey on what he calls “The Good Red Road.” He has been a boxer, has trained in the Martial Arts of Eagle Claw Kung Fu and Tae Kwon Do. He has been a competition pow-wow dancer, an actor with over 40 stage productions and a movie under his belt and destroyed his knees running over 100 road races and two marathons. As a member of a Traditional Inter-Tribal Medicine Society, he now works to keep the culture, traditions, and languages of the tribe’s he’s descended from alive so they can be passed on to future generations. (Source: self-reported)

**Robert Peters** (he/him) is a Mashpee Wampanoag artist, writer, and poet. He is the artist/author of “Thirteen Moons,” a 2020 calendar featuring thirteen acrylic paintings accompanied by poetry, essays, and thoughts, written over a span of twenty years. “Thirteen Moons” was created to promote understanding and healing among indigenous people everywhere. Robert published his first book *Da Goodie Monsta* in the fall of 2009. *Da Goodie Monsta* is an illustrated children’s book based on a dream his son had when he was three years old. Robert is a fire keeper and organized the Annual Wampanoag Medicine Fire from 2001 to 2010. It was hosted in Mashpee,

Assonet, Hassanamesit (Nipmuc Nation) and Boston (North American Indian Center of Boston). Robert was also the director of the “Menz Wetu Project.” This project consisted of five instructors and 23 Mashpee Wampanoag tribal youth who constructed a 32-foot longhouse on their reservation in Mashpee. Robert is currently working with the Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Abuse and Services developing Native youth drug prevention booklets and curriculum. To date, two booklets are in use, “Coming Home” and “Stories and Poems for Eastern Native Families.” (Source: self-reported)

**Sage Phillips** (she/her), from Old Town, ME, is a junior double-majoring in Political Science and Human Rights with a minor in Native American & Indigenous Studies at the University of Connecticut. As a young panawáhpškewi (Penobscot) woman of the Wabanaki people, Sage has made it her mission to make the Native and Indigenous community at UConn more diverse and visible to the campus. Dedicated to social justice in Indigenous environments and communities, Sage hopes to pursue American Indian Law to focus on issues related but not limited to resources for Native students in higher education. Sage serves on the President’s Council for Race and Diversity as well as the founding President of the Native American and Indigenous Students Association. As the Student Coordinator for the Native American Cultural Programs, Sage has presented herself among faculty members to initiate conversations fostering discussion around expanding the NACP to become the sixth Cultural Center at UConn. Sage hopes that through navigating the process of expanding NACP, she can pave the way for UConn as a land-grant institution to be a home for Natives pursuing higher education. (Source: self-reported)

**Shoran Waupatukuay Piper** (she/her) is Clan Mother and tribal leader of the Golden Hill Paugussett Nation. Her father, Chief Big Eagle Piper, passed away 2008. Her position is higher than the Chief’s. She lives on the oldest continuing reservation, dated 1659. Her tribal nation has two reservations, in Trumbull and Colchester, Connecticut. The Golden Hill Paugussett are Eastern Woodland American Indians. (Source: self-reported)

**Lee “Mixashawn” Rozie** (he/him) has been a practicing multi-disciplinary and internationally acclaimed Jazz artist for the past three decades. Mr. Rozie holds a degree in History and Ethnomusicology from Trinity College and is equally at home in academic and cultural settings.

Beginning from the point of Indigenous artist, using ancient cultural principles, maritime arts and historical data, both written and oral, he has developed a system of "Hemispheric Principles" to inform and guide his artform, more directly referred to as "Wave Art": sonic, aquatic percussive and harmonic. Mixashawn offers musical performance and educational workshops on Indigenous music traditional and contemporary, as well as original, workshops that utilize his extensive experience as performer, Indigenous artist and educator to inspire creativity and natural expression for all ages. (Source: Lee Mixashawn Rozie website, <http://mixashawn.com/>)

**Elizabeth Solomon** (she/her) is an enrolled member of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag. She is currently the Assistant Director of Academic Affairs and Fellowship Programs at HSPH. Elizabeth has nearly 30 years of public health experience including positions in research project management and academic affairs at Harvard Chan as well as positions in management and program development in community-based organizations. Elizabeth is a member of a number of advisory and management boards including boards affiliated with the Boston Harbor Islands National Park and the Digital Archive of Native American Petitions in Massachusetts. (Source: Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health's Office of Diversity and Inclusion webpage, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/diversity/elizabeth-solomon/>)

**Lorén M. Spears** (she/her), Narragansett, Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum, has been an educator for 25 years, has served as an adjunct faculty at Brown University and at University of Rhode Island. She shares her cultural knowledge and traditional arts learned through her family with the public through museum programs. She has written curriculum, poetry, and narratives published in a variety of publications such as *Dawnland Voices: An Anthology of Indigenous Writing of New England*; *Through Our Eyes: An Indigenous View of Mashapaug Pond*, *The Pursuit of Happiness: An Indigenous View*, *From Slaves to Soldiers: The 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment in the American Revolution*. Recently, she co-edited a new edition of *A Key into the Language of America* by Roger Williams. She works tirelessly to empower Native youth and to educate the public on Native history, culture, the environment, and the arts. She was appointed by Governor Gina Raimondo to serve on the Board of the RI State Council on the Arts and the RI Historical Records Advisory Board and serves on many other boards including The Pell Center's Story in the Public Square and South County Tourism Council. (Source: self-reported)

**Cedric Woods** (he/him) is a citizen of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina. He combines over a decade of tribal government experience with a research background and has served as the director of INENAS since 2009. The institute's purpose is to connect Native New England with university research, innovation, and education. Currently, Cedric is working on projects with tribes in the areas of tribal government capacity building, Indian education, economic development, and chronic disease prevention. Prior to arriving at UMass Boston, Cedric completed a study on the evolution of tribal government among the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation. While pursuing his doctoral studies at the University of Connecticut, he served in a variety of capacities for the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation. These positions included director of career development, research analyst, tribal government spokesman, and deputy chief operating officer. Cedric has served as a consultant for the National Museum of the American Indian, the Haliwa Saponi Indian Tribe of North Carolina, and the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of Plimoth Plantation, a bicultural living history museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts. (Source: UMass Boston Institute for New England Native American Studies website, [https://www.umb.edu/inenas/institute\\_staff](https://www.umb.edu/inenas/institute_staff))

## APPENDIX B: Interview Transcripts

### *Interview with Abram Benedict*

Part 1: Thu, 1/14/21 2:26PM • 51:30

Leah Kelly

So I wanted to ask you a few questions about yourself, actually. So the main Mohawk Nation council is in Akwesasne. Do you live there on that reservation?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, I do. So our community is dissected by the international border. [Unintelligible]

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's.... Oh, sorry. Can you hear me?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, I can. So our community of Akwesasne has two elected councils and one traditional council. The elected councils govern...the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne governs the Canadian portion of Akwesasne. The St. Regis Mohawk Tribe is the governing body for the southern portion, the American portion. And then the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs is the traditional council, the hereditary system that predates colonization and contact; they still have an organization, they're still organized, part of the larger Iroquois Confederacy, which is the other nations that are Iroquois. Or Haudenosaunee Confederacy, they also call it, or Six Nations is also referred to as well. So I am the elected Council Grand Chief for the Canadian portion of the community. I have a 12-member council that are similar to, or 12 members of council, which are similar to city councilors, but we call them district chiefs. And I'm the Grand Chief. So that's the, and then the organization that we represent as well as the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne is the local government body that delivers services on behalf of the federal and provincial governments. We deliver services to the community on with our partners, the federal and provincial governments.

Leah Kelly

Right. Okay. I'll ask you a little more about that. But I forgot first, would you mind stating the name that you want me to use in my thesis, and then also your pronouns?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, so it's just Abram Benedict, Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne.

Leah Kelly

And should I refer to you as Abram or just Mr.?

Abram Benedict

I guess Abram if it's gonna be in the research. It's probably the most appropriate for that.



Leah Kelly

Okay. And then your pronouns?

Abram Benedict

Him.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So this is interesting. So, even though there are these different names—I found several different websites for the different councils—you still consider the Mohawk Nation one unified nation, even located in different areas and even located across international borders?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, we do as people as a whole. That [unintelligible] tribe delivers a wide variety of programs as well, on behalf of the United States federal government and the state of New York, some for the state of New York. So we are service delivery agents, we have the government sort of speak, I mean, I don't say agents, I say that kind of lightly. Because if, that kind of goes back to the days of Indian agents and stuff like that, but those are our contribution partners that provide resources to provide services to the community to meet the needs. The Mohawk Nation holds a role as well within the community and the Confederacy. But as far as, rights go, things like that...we have, we meet regularly with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe and the Mohawk Nation to discuss land claim files that generally impact the entire community and specifically border, because the border runs through our community. We have a lot of, well, enough challenges with the border being there. In fact, you know, if there is an exercise of rights, as has always been around the border, rights of the Mohawk of Akwesasne. Specifically, former Grand Chief Mike Mitchell had taken the border rights issue straight up to the Supreme Court of Canada, you know, one at the appellate level and then was subsequently lost at the federal level of appeal. But nevertheless, we've always continued to exercise the rights that we have here as a self-determining nation, as an Indigenous community on both sides of the border. You know, we assert that the border is an instrument or tool that was put in for the non-Indigenous people and not our community. You know, the practicalities of that is it's quite challenging though because depending on where you are and what service and things like that, do have a different bearing on our people. So we always struggle with that as well.

But yeah, I mean we've been successful in settling a number of our claims, our land claims in Canada. Most recently the Dundee land claim, which was about a 100-year-old claim that had been the, the Crown, had breached its fiduciary responsibility and had leased some lands out and had got the Chiefs at the time to elite to surrender their interest, which we alleged was not a valid surrender and nor did the Crown live up to its responsibility and doing things proper. So we negotiated that claim for about probably 15 years, thereabouts, that was an actual negotiations, we just ratified it in 2018. It took a year of appeals to get it mitigated, and since then, has been finalized and the proceeds have been returned or provided to the community. So there are a few other claims that we're researching now or are still in research; we've been researching them for a number of years, those are other land claims where the government was supposed to uphold its responsibility to the community and didn't. The New York State claim, we work in collaboration with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe and Mohawk Nation; this is a litigated file that the tribe is the main appellant for that case, but we are actively part of that. We were actually the initial appellant back 20 years ago when we filed that claim. So those are some of the land claims that we work on together or through our community, to help bring justice to the wrongs that have been done to our people over

the number of years in relation to the government finding a way to take land away from our people and use it for other reasons that we didn't necessarily consent to.

We also have a, so we're an elected Council, arguably empowered under the Indian Act of Canada. And you know, the Indian Act prescribes certain activities and powers that a band can do. They refer to it as a band, we say Council and we don't say reserve, we say community. Reserve is what the language is in the Indian Act. But for the most part, we have always exercised our own jurisdiction and rights over our community, regardless of what the what the Indian Act says. We currently have our own... [call froze]

Leah Kelly

I'm sorry, you froze. Hello? Oh, you're back. Oh, you're frozen again. Sorry. Maybe it's my Wi-Fi. Maybe I should try to fix this.

[Zoom call was cut off. Reconnected about five minutes later.]

Abram Benedict

I was talking away and you were frozen. And then they kicked me off. And then it started...

Leah Kelly

Same. I think the previous recording saved, but I'm not sure where it got cut off exactly. But you can keep talking about whatever your last thought was.

Abram Benedict

One of the things I was talking about was our access to Mohawk court. Right, and how I talked about the Indian Act and how it prescribes certain powers for bands or communities and elected leadership.

Leah Kelly

And is that just in Canada?

Abram Benedict

That's in Canada. Yeah. And we have always for several years or probably 50 years, exercised our own authority outside of what the Indian Act says. I mean, we have the Mohawk courts, that we developed our own court law, about five years ago, I think, the first one in Canada that codified you know, justice or a judicial institution in a First Nation community. But prior to that, we've always had a Mohawk court, just not codified in a law. And so this is an institution that mitigates our own community laws within our jurisdiction from membership disputes to, they have basically a civil judicial system that's existed there. We as well, we have our own Akwesasne Mohawk police service, which actually is funded by the federal government and provincial governments, but they do issue citations returnable to our court, and they are adjudicated through our court. So this is an exercise of our jurisdiction that we have done for about 40 years. It started, in fact, under the Indian Act; the government of Canada or a governing council, I think it says, can appoint a justice, section 107 justice, who can act as a justice of the peace but only can mitigate what they call "bylaws" under the Indian Act, and these were laws for, you know, speeding, curfew, disputes around financial regulation of farm animals, you know, these are really archaic sort of things. So that's where we started with the 107. Now we appoint our own justices that hear wide variety of

community laws that are not bylaws under the Indian Act but they're laws that we have developed within a community under our own inherent right and jurisdiction to do that. And we have been doing that for probably 30 years now. Because the Indian Act says that you can only regulate these certain activities, very archaic activities. And it used to say that the Minister of Indigenous services or Minister of Indian Affairs had to approve these bylaws. That sentence had actually been removed but we haven't had an approval from the federal government on our laws for a very long time. So, you know, this is a process that we've been using for a long time.

The other thing is that we have is what we call is a "self-government process" underway. So there is a policy of the federal government that's been existing for probably about 25 years, it's called the "inherent right policy." And essentially, what that is, is that the government has said that they want to negotiate with willing communities, to negotiate specific arrangements with them for the recognition of their jurisdiction and authority over their communities. And essentially, what it is is a modern-day trading. And what it does is replace sections of the Indian Act, and it becomes a piece of legislation specifically between the federal government and the First Nation community. So we have been in this process for about 15, 20 years now, we are very close to the end of it. And it's called our "nation-building process," where we're negotiating a final agreement between Canada and the Mohawks of Akwesasne that recognizes all the areas of jurisdiction that the Indian Act either does or doesn't. And in the areas that they do under the Indian Act, it's more expanded and modernized, because the Indian Act has been around for you know, 100 years or something like that. I mean, the first version was 1890, or something like that. So it's been amended a gazillion times in different areas. But this self-government process we've been in will solidify, you know, will formalize a legal relationship between Mohawks of Akwesasne specifically, and the federal government ourselves. So, but really while it's a process that we've been in, we already exercise a magnitude of areas already under our own inherent right, without, you know, we'll see, you know, I say lightly, legal recognition from the Canadian federal government.

Leah Kelly

I want to get much more into the relationship with the governments a little bit later. But just talking about the Mohawk Nation, could you first explain how the Mohawk Nation navigates being on two separate sides of the border, and how much complete freedom you have to cross the international border?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, so I'm not, I mean, I have to put a disclaimer, I'm not a representative of the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs, I am of the Mohawk Council. So I mean, I can tell you my understanding. But if you want I could put you in contact with somebody to talk to one of their representatives there who would give you a more detailed, official...

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So I'm not even really thinking in very legal terms, but just more as a person, your ability to travel freely, to exercise rights.

Abram Benedict

Yeah, so the Mohawk Nation, their position would be is that the border, they don't recognize the border. I mean, that it doesn't exist there. You know, they, in fact they'll... and we take that position as well, to a rights degree, anyway, as far as rights go, that when the border was placed there, they

told the Indians that the border was over the tallest person's head, a certain amount over the tallest person's head. And that's how, that's where the border was, so therefore, it didn't apply to you, it was for the non-Indigenous people that came here. So you know, the Mohawk Nation exercises their jurisdiction, just as the border doesn't exist, right. And they actually in fact, they have a seat at the United Nations as a recognized nation under the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that they've had for a number of years there.

So I mean, we rely on them to be the, you know, to be, not the defender of our rights, but more so the...I don't even know how to explain it. More of the, like, if anybody's going to assert an aboriginal right, we are going to do it with their blessing and perhaps in collaboration with them. Because the reality is that the organization and the position that I hold is, it is empowered by the community by an election system, but you know, traditionally, and it's based upon a piece of legislation that said, "We create this governing body to watch over the Indians," you know, who happens to be now a representative of their own people, right. In the past, there was an Indian agent who was not a representative of the people, it was a representative of the government. So that's the real reality of how it works. So that's, you know, and I respect that and understand that, and that's why in areas of rights and jurisdiction that's inherent to the Mohawks or to the Iroquois, Haudenosaunee Confederacy, we rely on them to support us on that.

Leah Kelly

And then, how is it recognized by the UN? Because certainly by the U.S. it's not recognized as a nation on the level of the United States. Is it recognized as a sovereign nation?

Abram Benedict

No, they are not. Well, of course, it's according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I mean, by the UN?

Abram Benedict

Oh, no, I mean, that's why they wouldn't be recognized by United States. I honestly don't know. I don't know the answer to that question.

Leah Kelly

Okay. But I understand that the Mohawk do have their own passports that say that they are Mohawk.

Abram Benedict

Yeah, the Mohawk Nation is the one that...

Leah Kelly

Yeah.

Abram Benedict

And it says they're a member of the Haudenosaunee, not of Canada or the United States.

Leah Kelly

Oh, okay. So prior to the legal battle that resulted in the Mohawk Nation laying claim to the region that straddles the river, was the tribe more fragmented between Canada and the U.S.?

Abram Benedict

I think it's the other way around. I mean, in the past, Akwesasne has been here for a couple hundred years anyways. We're not originally from this area. I mean, it's more down into New York a bit. But the border was not here when we settled here to be part of, to be Akwesasne.

Leah Kelly

Oh, yeah, no, I didn't mean originally, before the U.S. and Canada. I mean like one hundred years ago, that recently.

Abram Benedict

Yeah. I mean, it's, um, repeat your question again, what you said.

Leah Kelly

Before, because there was a legal battle, I'm not sure what year precisely, that told the Mohawk Nation from a federal level that they had claim to that area that straddles the border?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, I don't know, I'm not aware of what you're referring to.

Leah Kelly

Oh. Because, I mean, when was the land deemed as belonging to the Mohawks by the federal government?

Abram Benedict

It's been forever, it's been a long time since they created reserves, I think.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so it was it was always on the border.

Abram Benedict

Yes. Well, yeah. I mean, yeah, they put the border over the community and created reserves, essentially, right.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. I mean, I've been focusing primarily on the U.S. federal government's policies, so I'm wondering how that works with the tribe split between jurisdiction under Canada versus under the U.S., and how those two halves, can they be perfectly compatible if there are different laws, different policies on either side? I mean, it's my general perspective, I'm not really sure, but from common knowledge, it seems like Canada has been a little bit ahead of the U.S. in acknowledging Indigenous peoples as calling them actual nations as opposed to just tribes.

Abram Benedict

I can only speak to the Canadian recognition, right, I mean, because we're the recognized Canadian government for the community. You know, I do see differences between Canadian and the American, right. I mean, in Canada, there is much more recognition of the fiduciary responsibility of the federal government to the First Nation community or the Indigenous communities. So we deliver a wide variety of services on behalf of the federal government. And in a number of areas, we assert that they have a fiduciary responsibility to our people for certain services and that's all kind of over and above services that would be available to all Canadians per se, right. And in Canada, while the Indian Act is a piece of legislation that's terrible and challenging on the best days, there's less of a recognition of jurisdiction, but there's more financial support for Indigenous communities. On the United States side, there's more recognition for the authority and jurisdiction of the tribe, the sovereignty of the tribe, but less financial support. So I mean, that's why you see enough Indigenous communities or tribal nations in the United States have economies, sometimes around gaming, you know, tobacco, things like that, that will generate revenue for their communities. And so that's a recognition of the jurisdiction they have. But there's not a whole lot of federal supports to support all kinds of other programs, right. So, in my community right now we have had very little layoffs in our community government as a result of the pandemic. I can't say that about the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe. I think that they probably laid off 30 to 40 percent of their workforce. One, because their casino was closed for a number of months. And I think that the federal government has scaled back in different areas. There's a number of factors, I can't speak to all of them, but you know, there is, so it's a bit of a, you know, there are some real benefits of having sovereignty recognition. But there's also some downsides as well.

Leah Kelly

So you called them the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe. So do you consider them a different tribe within the Mohawk Nation, if they have their own council? Oh, you froze again. If you can hear me, maybe leave and then try to come back.

Abram Benedict

There are different bodies in the community of Akwesasne. One is the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, the other one is the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe. We consider our community one entire community but it's governed by two separate organizations. And that's the Tribe and then the Mohawk Council. The Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs is a body here as well, that is the traditional government that governs the community—well, they have a role in governing the community as well; they don't deliver services though. So when we say the “tribe” we don't... tribe is more of American term that is used because the BIA recognizes tribal nations.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So you were saying that Canada tends to give more financial support to Indigenous nations. Then if you live in on the on the U.S. side, under the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, do you still get the same benefits from the Canadian government?

Abram Benedict

No. So that's why we're two different service deliveries. A lot of the programs that we deliver on behalf of our funding partners, provincial or state, are driven by residency. So specifically is healthcare. Healthcare in Canada is covered by the provinces, and you have to be a resident of the province. So we are not able to provide certain health services to members who live on the

American side. It's the same way for them, they can't provide some services to us; there are some that we can, but for the most part, we're not able to.

Leah Kelly

Right, so how is it dictated who gets to live on which side? Is it just where you're born?

Abram Benedict

So there's no dictation around that. I mean, community members will move amongst the community probably, you know, I mean, now in days, maybe two to three times they could move for various reasons. There's no restrictions at all. There's a lot of factors that would lead to that. You know, I know that some families move around for the cost of living, right. I mean, within the center of our community, ten kilometers away, within a ten-kilometer radius, there is five electricity rates. And believe it or not, people move around the community for the cost of living, and electricity rates is a huge factor for them. So I mean, there's some of that. The other thing is the Canadian government and the provincial governments provide certain supports for families. And some, you know, some people will start a family and the areas that there are additional supports for families to, you know, to grow and live. So there's a number of different factors, you know; if a person in United States for bulk of their work, moved to Canada, worked for a little bit more, and then retired, may go back to the American side, because of the benefits that then they would have now as a retiree. I mean, so there's a number of factors that people would move around, but there are no restrictions on where you want to live other than personal preference, essentially.... Well, I take that back; availability of housing is a is a big factor of where people will live as well.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Alright, so I guess for now we can move into the portion of my thesis where I am looking at identity.

Abram Benedict

I just have to let you know that I do have a 2:30 appointment. If we don't cover what we need to cover we'll have to rebook for next week to finish it off.

Leah Kelly

No worries. We can stop at 2:30 and then just finish it later. So can you talk about how you how you identify? When someone asks you, like, what is your ethnic or racial or national identity, what is the first thing that you say?

Abram Benedict

I mean, for me, I mean, it's odd, because we are a border community. And I'll tell you that because we're such a large community, understanding that we're the second-largest Indigenous community in Canada by population, so we're very large. We're small but we're large, right, in the grand scheme of thing. Between the two registries, meaning Canadian and American, we're probably around 22,000 to 25,000 people, right. And that's small, but it's a lot for Indigenous communities. But because we're on the border since you know, 9/11, the border security has changed quite a bit. We're all required to provide identification when we cross the border. So government identification, has unfortunately become part of our norm. But it's also, you know, I would say that

it's also, I can't say sensitized, but it's also kind of ingrained in our children to make sure they carry identification. Because if you pull up at the Canada Customs, U.S. Customs, you got to provide some sort of ID. And it's not passports, either; we don't generally have passports. We will have a tribal card, which is issued St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, or will have a Certificate of Indian Status, which is issued by the federal government under the Indian registry. So for me personally, depending on where I'm going and this situation, I will tell them I'm either North American Indian, or Mohawk of Akwesasne. North American Indian I generally use when traveling in the United States or crossing at a U.S. Customs, because that's an American term. And in Canada, I'll tell them I'm a First Nation or Indigenous person. And then if they ask again, it depends on where you are. So if I see another Indigenous person, I'll say I'm a Mohawk from Akwesasne, or if I'm crossing a border or an official, being, I don't know, asked by a cop or whatever, mostly it's around border, I will be Indigenous, or North American Indian.

Leah Kelly

Okay. How do you feel on a personal level, like just seeing yourself?

Abram Benedict

I don't, I mean, I think that because we have to have these IDs all the time, it doesn't, I mean, it doesn't bother me. I mean, in my role some people really stick to you know, "Oh, I got a Certificate of Indian Status, blah blah blah," or you know, they kind of hold to that. But, to me, what I say is that I don't need a piece of documentation that tells who I am. I'm a member of this community, I'm from Akwesasne, I'm Mohawk, and that's all I have to say, right. But, of course, that's my personal. If I'm wearing my Grand Chief cap, it's a little bit different.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I am kind of looking at it more from a personal level right now, thinking about how you see yourself. And in a way it does seem like you're saying that how you see yourself might be influenced by where you are, who you're talking to, and how other people see you. Do you think that's something that you see that's quite prevalent among Indigenous peoples on this continent, that their identity is a little bit fluid in that way, because of how perceptions vary region to region or era to era?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think communities in the north are isolated communities; I think they're less concerned about their identity. And mostly because they're the only people that would be there. Here people...we have our norms to be able to cross the border, but I think that when people do press the identity issue, or the rights issue, is when there's a challenge with a border crossing situation, right. Somebody gets stopped, they're questioned, you know. The most, the normal one is that somebody gets stopped and they're asking a bunch of questions, and they've done a secondary examination, you know, pull them over, check the trunk type thing. You know, people will get upset about that, say, "Well, why are you pulling me over? You know, I mean, I come through every day." What is it today now that you have to be doing this sort of activities, right?

Leah Kelly

Do you think that there is maybe a collective Indigenous identity because of that connection?



Abram Benedict

Yeah, I think so. I mean there's, I would say that, I mean, more so in Canada, I would say yes. I mean, because there's a lot of instruments in Canada that recognize the rights of Indigenous people, right. The latest one is that the government now has introduced legislation in Canada to codify the UNDRIP, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. That's, you know, that's kind of the new one, right.

Leah Kelly

Did Canada sign the UNDRIP?

Abram Benedict

Yeah. So I mean, now they're working to codify it in Canada. So when things like that, or there have been the Truth Reconciliation Commission here in Canada that made, you know, made a number of recommendations as a result of the Indian Day School, and the residential schools, and the treatment that happened to our people. So things like that, that's when there is a national unity and identity for Indigenous people. Right. And then, as you break it down a bit more that's where the identity starts becoming a little varied from nation to nation. But otherwise, yes.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. It seems like you're feeling a little bit like identity is something that perhaps is more important to people of settler-colonial society than to people of your nation, or maybe that that was not really a concept as much before Europeans came over. Do you feel that in any way, that identity is more of a way of classifying rather than actually being?

Abram Benedict

I don't know, that's a tough question. I mean, you know, I mean, traditionally, right, the Mohawks have been always known as fierce people. Right, in that they were people, other nations prior to contact, were scared of the Mohawk, right. And, in fact I mean, I think through some of the Revolutionary Wars, the Europeans made allies with the Mohawk, so that they could have the muscle and the power to protect, you know, to win the wars. So I mean, that's, you know, that identity arguably has been there, right? I mean, but I think that because the Iroquois Confederacy is large—I mean, it spans along a long area—so I would say I don't historically know what the position of other nations would be upon the Mohawks or the Iroquois. But I mean, today, when we fast forward a bit we're proud of who we are. But sometimes I think that the colonizers are the ones that are more concerned about what the identity is than ourselves. Personally, I know who I am, and you know, whether or not somebody else does or not, it doesn't bother me. But as a community leader, absolutely, I want people to know who we are and what our rights are, especially being a border community.

Leah Kelly

Do you think that Indigenous peoples have been—or maybe this is just the U.S., that would be interesting seeing the comparison here with Canada—but at least in the U.S., I feel that colonizers like to classify them as a minority race, and really, they were different nations. So I'm just wondering what you think of the racialization, as if they're one group. Are they one group, all the tribal nations, or are they very distinct?

Abram Benedict

I think that, well, they are very distinct. Right. I mean, I think that when...I would say that, in the example that I provided earlier, it's the same, right. I mean, so when the government's introducing legislation that affects all nations, we are Indigenous people all together, right. But if they're trying to introduce legislation that tries to make everybody one uniformity, of say—well actually, it used to be, a bad example, it's better now, but Canada's introduced the Indigenous Languages Act, right? There's hundreds of Indigenous languages across Canada. And so it's not, you can't introduce a piece of legislation that says we recognize Mohawk languages as an Indigenous language, because there are several other languages of Indigenous people across Canada. So, I mean, it's not...so we are all individually unique and not of the same for the next community over but you know, from a different perspective, yes, we are.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Because in the U.S., legally American Indian is a race. Is it like that in Canada?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, it is. It is, I guess from a legal perspective, yes. But they're all distinct. They're all distinct communities in themselves.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, for sure. Okay, I know you have to go soon so we can get to the sovereignty portion another time later. But thanks for taking the time today.

Abram Benedict

What I'll do is, I'll shoot me an email just so I don't forget. But what I'll do as well is I'll shoot you an email to two of the individuals I know from the Mohawk Nation; it'd be really good for you to have a conversation with them, right, because I represent the elected Canadian system. Their perspective may be quite a bit different than mine, or may not be, but they'll have more in-depth information to share with you on you know, the larger of the Iroquois, the Haudenosaunee, and then you know, the Mohawks.

Leah Kelly

Okay, thank you.

Abram Benedict

Take care. Talk soon.

Part 2: Tue, 1/19/21 7:35PM • 51:03

Leah Kelly

Okay, we'll start recording again. Let's just see where we left off. Okay, so I think I wanted to move on to the sovereignty portion of my thesis. I'm going to start with a very broad question, which is, I know you said that in Canada, it seems like sovereignty isn't as big of a topic as it is in the U.S. Could you elaborate a little more about what you think?

Abram Benedict

Well, I wouldn't say that it's less of a topic. It's less, there's less federal recognition for the sovereignty thing there is in the United States. The United States gives more sovereign immunity, sovereign autonomy to the tribal nations, than the federal government in Canada does for communities. But having said that we exercise our sovereignty in many ways that are outside of the legal frameworks of what the government of Canada recognizes.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so I guess what I'm saying is, the Canadian government doesn't focus as much on sovereignty as the U.S. government, but do you think that Indigenous peoples in Canada are just as adamant as U.S. tribal nations in saying they want to assert their sovereignty?

Abram Benedict

No. No I don't, I think that, you know, just in my experience, there are some communities that will only operate within the confines of what the legislation allows them to; they won't operate outside of that. And so that's not the case here by far. But there are some communities that won't push the jurisdictional limits of their actions or operations.

Leah Kelly

Right. Well, I mean, in the U.S. also, just because the government says, "Oh, we're recognizing you as sovereign," doesn't really mean that they're completely free to do what they want. They still have to operate within laws and certain...

Abram Benedict

Mm, I mean, yes and no, right. So I mean, when I say the laws I mean the Indian Act, right, is super prescribed of what powers you have and what you don't, right. And we don't operate within that, because it's archaic and it doesn't, it's contrary to who we are as a nation anyways. And it's not conducive to modern self-government. It's not conducive to economic development. It's not conducive to growth. In fact if you operated under the confines of it all, it's completely opposite of what we aspire to be as an as a community and as a nation.

Leah Kelly

So are you saying that the Mohawk Nation purposely is protesting by not obeying that law?

Abram Benedict

They're not obeying but we're exercising our autonomy and jurisdiction further, I mean, outside of what the government would recognize as our jurisdiction. I mean, like I spoke earlier, we have our own court law, right. There's nothing in Canadian legislation that allows for a First Nations community to enact a court. In fact, they would argue that those powers are vested to the state and to the provinces, right, or the federal government and to the provinces, and is not a jurisdiction of a First Nations community. And we say, "No, it is," right. I mean, we've developed a law that's supported by the community and we operate within the confines of our own law.

Leah Kelly

Do you know what the Canadian government's official policy or term is for the status of First Nations? In the U.S., for instance, they're legally considered domestic dependent nations. Is that similar in Canada, do you think?

Abram Benedict

Well, they would be...well, so there are some changes that they've made to the Constitution in relation to the Indian [unintelligible] and Indigenous communities. But by virtue of the legislation, it still says Indian communities or Indian bands or First Nations [unintelligible]

Leah Kelly

Okay, so it's not—

Abram Benedict

No, so it's not, it...but it's a government directive that it's, I think that it's Indigenous, but the law says Indian.

Leah Kelly

And yet calling them First Nations: is that supposed to be literal, recognizing them as nations? Or is that just kind of a word that's used?

Abram Benedict

I don't know; that kind of goes back to the conversation we had earlier about identity, right? These things are for the government to feel warm and fuzzy about, right, not fixated on whether they call us First Nations, or because we're the first people, or they call them Indigenous because we're a recognition of being from here, versus Indian. And some people prefer Indian. In fact, there's enough bands in Canada that still have the word Indian in their official titles.

Leah Kelly

So you think the word Indian is directly in opposition to sovereignty?

Abram Benedict

No, I don't think so. I don't think, I mean, we're, you know, I know, the UNDRIP talks about "peoples," right. So I mean, we're Indigenous peoples. Whether or not Indian takes away from that, I don't know. I mean, I'm not fixated on titles, it doesn't make any difference to me.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I'm just trying to understand what you were saying about it still saying "Indian" in laws and documents. Why were you pointing that out? Like, what about that is significant to you?

Abram Benedict

Nothing. I mean, that's just how the government's own legislation refers to our people.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Can I ask, is sovereignty as a concept important to you as an Indigenous person, and do you think it's important to your tribal nation? Or is there something else that you would consider more appropriate?

Abram Benedict

Well, I think it's important, I mean, because we have to coexist anyways with the non-Indigenous people of this world. So I mean, obviously, having the recognition and the respect of that is extremely important to be able to coexist. So I think that having that is important; it's always been the difference of opinions, though, right? And that and of law, because that's how, you know, how these things have made their way into the various levels of court, is through law.

Leah Kelly

And so, I guess, to clarify what sovereignty is—because it means a lot of different things to different people and different things in different contexts—so do you think that sovereignty is inextricably tied to the colonizer governments and relations with the colonial state? Is it mixed up in those legal terms, or could it exist separate of that?

Abram Benedict

That's kind of a...I don't know, that's a tough question. I mean, I'd say that we, you know, we exercise our jurisdiction, our autonomy, with or without their approval, right? I mean, that's just how we've always done it, right. There are some areas that we have to abide by what is allowed, i.e., in service deliveries, mostly, because understanding that we deliver over \$100 million annually on behalf of predominantly the federal government, but also in partner with the provincial governments, we deliver services, and those things have certain restrictions on those delivery and service delivery models. So there are some areas that we do push the envelope in that case, but as far as community jurisdiction, community, sovereignty...I think we push it, but at the same time, there is also...I mean my community, at least under the Mohawk Council, is not a self-sustaining community. Therefore the \$110 million that we spend annually to operate the government and operate the services probably, you know, if even five, six million dollars of that is our own revenue. Which means there's \$100 million, over \$100 million, that comes from the governments. One would argue that they have a fiduciary responsibility to provide those services to our people, and they just fund it, and we provide and we deliver the service, but it also puts you a bit over a barrel, that they have the ability to call the shots to a certain degree, right.

So when I talk about the difference between Canadian sovereignty and American, that is a big, big area there. Whereas a lot of the tribal nations in the United States, they operate economic engines, i.e., sometimes casinos, and tobacco, and gasoline, which are pretty predominant big engine drivers for communities, and that generates revenue for them. While those arrangements to generate that revenue may be in forms of compacts with states and licensing under the federal government, et cetera, you know, it does see a generation of revenue to the community, which then gives them the ability to determine more broadly how they either invest or provide services to the community. I don't have that luxury; I have \$100 million that I have to deliver in accordance with how, essentially, they say it. Now, is it negotiable in some areas? Yes. In some areas, it's not, so. That is restriction of working in the existing confines. Now, do I have community laws that have been developed by us? Yes. Who has paid for that? We have. So then we have our police force will enforce community laws, our compliance department will enforce community laws, our Akwesasne Mohawk law court will adjudicate community laws. You know, we'll hear certain civil disputes within the community that one would argue have to go to the outside because we don't have the jurisdiction, but we exercise it anyway.

Leah Kelly

So it sounds like you're talking about economic sovereignty in a lot of ways. Does the Canadian government not allow that ability to run fully self-sustaining businesses the way that the U.S. does? Is that part of the agreement?

Abram Benedict

No, they would allow. They do allow, I mean, in areas. But it depends on community location as well depending on what resources that community has, how large it is. I mean, if we were in northern community, or even middle of Ontario, and had hundreds of thousands of acres of forestry, yeah, that'd be ours, and we're in a better, we're in a different position. But for us, I don't have forestry here. But also unfortunately, the way it works is that if I want to open a casino, I have to go through the licensing process. Now, I could assert, and have jurisdiction over it, but it's, you know, if you're going to wage a battle with the federal government or provincial governments, you gotta be prepared to make sure that you have a pretty solid case to make that in these areas or not.

Leah Kelly

Right. Okay so I want to talk about, again, going back to the very unique position of the Mohawk Nation being in both Canada and the U.S. Do you think that that freedom to cross the border makes your nation more sovereign than others?

Abram Benedict

It's probably more of an area that there's a required recognition versus other communities that don't, that aren't on the border. So while they may, while they could assert that right that they do, it's not practical, right. If you're in the middle of Oklahoma, and the border is several, you know, it's quite far north, not sure that those border rights are going to be recognized, and if they are, they're not going to be—not that they are not applicable, but it's not practical. Here, it has to, I mean, here, the border literally runs through my community, right. So like this corner of my office [gestures to a corner behind him] is literally in the United States; the line is running diagonally through here. And there are homes right over there, that is technically in the United States. So if they didn't recognize my right to go across that border we're gonna have a real problem.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's interesting.

Abram Benedict

But also there is, in order for recognition of rights, it's also exercise of it, right. So if you...arguably, all American Indians do have a right to cross the border coming back into the United States. You know, the United States government recognizes Indians' right to come into the country, whether they're United States citizens or not. Canadian Indians can go into the United States because they're registered Indians; they're recognized as an Indian in another country, as far as First Nations or North American Indian. But rights exist, but they're also, unless they're exercised, then they're just kind of there. Right. So the border, the whole border right—we have to exercise it here. Because the border is here and it is a reality.

Leah Kelly

I'm still trying to understand a little bit from you, just on a personal level, not representing the tribe, but how sovereign do you feel that you are? And how important is it to you to retain that sovereignty? Are there other things that are more important, like is having that economic support from the government more important than having as much freedom or less red tape to get through?

Abram Benedict

Well I mean, aboriginal rights are not individual rights, they're collective rights. So without me, there wouldn't...without us as a people, or me as a person, you know, those rights aren't afforded to Abram Benedict, they're afforded to us as a community. I enjoy the rights that are afforded. But it's, you know, it's not individual. So, I mean, what are my thoughts and feelings around it? I mean, I respect that it's because of me and us that those exist. It's not about me individually. Now, how can I benefit from them? I mean I live in a community where we're on a little postage stamp called an Indian reserve. You know, there are some benefits that we have living here. But there's also a lot of negatives to being, restrictions to living here, right. I mean, that create disadvantages for economic development.

Leah Kelly

It seems like you're a little ambivalent about the concept of sovereignty in general. Is there something more important to you that's, for instance, the goal that you feel as a leader of your tribal nation, a goal that you're trying to strive towards? Do you think there's a word that encompasses that better?

Abram Benedict

Nothing I can think of offhand. You know, I mean, as a community, we want to ensure that our rights are not eroded, that the recognition that is there or that needs to be there continues to be there, or that we get the recognition so that we can enjoy our nationhood and our own community. There's always, I mean, the federal governments are always...well, I don't know if they would openly anymore, but they're always looking at ways to extinguish you know, the rights of Indigenous or First Nations people. I mean, that's simple in Canada by the residential schools and by the residential schools, the 60s scoops, you know, the things that happened in the child welfare systems to our people. You know, the White Paper that you know, talks about wanting to annihilate the Indian problem over a period of time. So those things are ingrained in the history of Canada. And though, that's real, right. I mean, the government has wanted to in the past, get rid of Indians so that they wouldn't be in the way of what they want to do or have to be something that they have to support. Because in the Constitution, you know, the responsibility for aboriginal people—which, you know, the word “aboriginal” is used in the Constitution, which is different than the Indian Act, because it uses “Indian” there, and now we use, “First Nation” is used and now “Indigenous”—but anyways, you know, is the vested with the federal government.

So it's, in the last 15 years, there's been a bit more of a shift; we've seen a recognition of the damage that the residential schools have done to our people. There has been some acknowledgement of the 60s scoop, and how children were just taken from the communities because they were, you know, they were “better off” without their people. So, I mean, there has been a movement in Canada to make things better, but it's, you know, these things didn't change over a short period of time. Hundreds of years, you know, decades of damage, will not heal in a short period of time, that's for sure. So, so I mean, there is more recognition of the sovereignty of nations now, because it's a respect issue as well. You know, there's more respect that our people

existed prior to there being Canadian and the United States, or British governments being here, what have you. And we're building upon that, and hopefully can continue to coexist in a respectful and peaceful manner, but also support one another and thrive.

I mean, the aspirations that I have for my community is not any different than any other, you know, sovereign state. And that's to provide for the people and to ensure that people are safe, secure, but have opportunity as well. I mean, I want my people to continue to be educated and have opportunities to go off of reserve and to receive education and to prosper, and to start businesses and come home to support our community as well. Not everybody wants to leave their community, some do, some don't. But those that do, you know, we want them to come back and support us as a nation, because, again, our rights are driven by collective, not individual, and if the collective is not there anymore, then there isn't anything, you know, there's no recognition needed of nothing anymore.

Leah Kelly

The Mohawk Nation has a reputation for, I think you called it, being “fierce,” and constantly trying to retain and assert its rights. Is it currently pushing for legislative reform, negotiations to get certain rights for things with the government? Does it like to be involved in those broader discussions?

Abram Benedict

Well, I mean, we're the elected councils, so those, arguably, are our responsibilities to ensure that we are protecting and safeguarding and advocating and lobbying for reform, change, new implementations, what have you. But I think that when there is a need to take a stance, our people do, you know. Like the border here in the 80s, they stood up to, they shut the border down, because they didn't recognize our right to cross freely with goods. And fast forward in 2009, we closed the border down again, because the federal government wasn't responding to their policy decision of wanting, at that time, to provide the customs officers with firearms, which they'd had forever in the United States, but in Canada, they didn't. And you know, the reason why we pushed back on it was because the relationship between the Canada customs officers and our community was deteriorated to the point there was a nonexistent relationship. And the position of the people was that if we put firearms in the hands of the border officers, we're probably gonna have a bad situation. So the community took a stand. They closed the border, and that border post, the actual inspection station, is no longer where it was before. It's moved out of the community, it's on the outside of the community now. The only problem is land border crossing, where the actual customs station is not on the line. And so our people are not, we're not afraid to take an approach or action, if needed to preserve our rights.

Leah Kelly

So the customs offices used to be actually on your land, and now they're not. And so you can cross the border, but when do you have to go off the land to see the customs officer?

Abram Benedict

Yeah, so they're on the outside of the community now.

Leah Kelly

Do you have to go to them every single time you want to step over the border?



Abram Benedict

You have to go see them every time you want to. Have you looked at the map here? Have you looked at a map from our community?

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I have. [Okay.] So I wanted to ask a specific question that I saw; what your take is on it. On the Mohawk Nation's website, it says that they don't officially recognize the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe Council. And they seem to think that it was put there without their consent. Could you talk about that a little more, and how that relationship works, if the Mohawk Nation doesn't maybe want to work with them? How does that operate?

Abram Benedict

Well, I mean, as I described last time and just a little bit earlier, we deliver a lot of programs on behalf of the government. You know, their statement is absolutely exactly what it is; I mean, we're talking like pre-contact when the non-Indigenous government showed up here and said this is how you're going to have to operate your governance system. And the Mohawk Nation said, "No, it's not, we'll continue to operate it as we have for hundreds of years, and it's not going to be this elected system that you think is gonna work best for us." So, we coexist; you know, I know the position of them. We do work together in different areas, and those areas are usually of rights, assertions, and border rights, and larger rights and recognitions that affect us as a whole, right. Because we're still, I mean, even if they don't recognize the institutions that we represent, because we're to them arguably just an extension of the Canadian and the United States government, the people sitting in those positions are still people of the community. And they're still, I'm still a Mohawk, I have a title as Grand Chief. I'm still a citizen of this community and so are they, right. And so we have to work together where we can now. Whether they respect my authority as Grand Chief, that's completely up to them, but I still, where I can, work with them. And they're open to that anyways.

Leah Kelly

How important is it to you to have interactions or have rapport with the outside settler-colonial society?

Abram Benedict

Very important, absolutely.

Leah Kelly

Right, and I'm not talking on a legal level; I'm not talking about working with the federal government. I just mean society in general. Is it important to keep kind of a blending of cultures in a way, keep your nation prevalent in showing settler-colonial society that you still exist, that you're here? Or is it more important to stay self-contained in order to retain that autonomy?

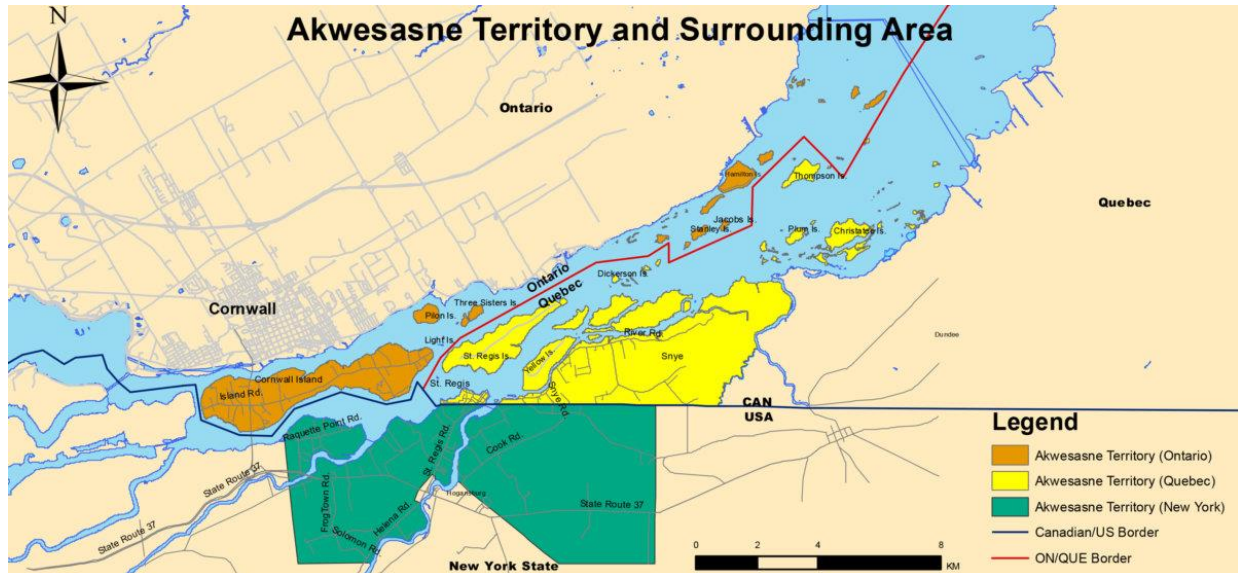
Abram Benedict

Well—can I share screen here?

Leah Kelly

Sure.

[Abram pulls up screen share of a map of the Akwesasne Mohawk territory, below. Image was originally in color.]



Abram Benedict

So this is my community, right? This is Cornwall Island. This black line that runs here is the international border. This red line is the Quebec/Ontario border. This here is St. Regis. This is Snyc. These two parts [points at orange and yellow sections], all this part is under our jurisdiction, under the jurisdiction of the Akwesasne Mohawk Council, including all of these islands, and this big island here. [Unintelligible] The green part is what is under the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe jurisdiction. The Tribe has jurisdiction over this. Now the Mohawk Nation has jurisdiction essentially over all of the community regardless of where it is. That's their position. But we govern the Canadian portion, they govern the United States portion. So if I look at this map here, and this is just how this—

Leah Kelly

Sorry, who governs the United States portion?

Abram Benedict

The St. Regis Mohawk Tribe.

Leah Kelly

Right, that's why I'm confused why it's located on the Canadian side.

Abram Benedict

It's not, because the tribe is under this green part.

Leah Kelly

But St. Regis is in Quebec.

Abram Benedict

It is, but it's landlocked by United States. This little fine line here is the international border. So this is all in Quebec. This is Ontario. This is all in Canada. All this green part is in the United States.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. For some reason I thought St. Regis itself was in New York.

Abram Benedict

No, no. So I live over here [points to Cornwall Island]. I live on this island here. I live right in the middle. There is a customs right here on the American side right by the water. And the Canada customs used to be here [points to other side of river]; it's now over here on this part in the city of Cornwall. So when I leave home, I go from down this road, I go over this bridge over the water, and then I have to go through a customs right here, and they process, I provide them identification, and then I'm on my way. I drive all the way through here [points to bottom left, part of New York], this is non-reserve area, then I drive into the tribal jurisdiction [points at green area]. I drive all the way through, then I come back to this road here, St. Regis Road. And I head north back into this area here, this yellow portion. I cross the international boundary line, there is no customs there, and then I come to my office. This entire line here [points to section of international border between yellow and green areas], there is no customs here at all. You can drive in and out of this, into Canada and the United States freely. But there's nowhere to really go because it's landlocked. So when I go home, and this is where I said, literally this little line here [points to red line to the left of St. Regis Island], that's when I said the corner of my office is literally right on this line here. So like this part is on that line, runs through. So when I go back home, I leave St. Regis, I go down St. Regis Road and take the route back. There's no customs here, so what I have to do is I have to drive into the city of Cornwall, go to the Canada customs, get processed by them, and then drive back to my home. [Oh, okay.]

So there is no—in all of this area [points at yellow area], the only thing we have is small corner stores. We probably have, within the Canadian jurisdiction, maybe six small corner stores, which just don't have anything significant. Within the tribal jurisdiction [points at green area], which is this main route here, Route 37, this is pretty...it's a state road, and it's quite heavy traffic. There's a number of gas stations and a number of cigarette shops on this route. They have a number of smaller convenience stores there as well. So for our community, who live in St. Regis here, or Snye, including Cornwall Island, they leave Snye, they drive all the way through and they go to the city of Cornwall to get groceries and then they bring it all the way back. So from this point of Akwesasne [points at yellow area again] all the way down and around to the city of Cornwall is probably about 40 minutes. This is where they would go to access, the hospital is there, the banks are there, the grocery stores are there. So going from the border to do all that stuff is a daily routine for our community.

Leah Kelly

So where is the Mohawk Nation headquarters?

Abram Benedict

The Mohawk Nation headquarters is actually on State Route 37. And it's about, let me see...Helena Road. It's about right here where a little hand is. [Points to a spot in green area near Helena Road.] That's their office building there.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Cool. Wow, that's complicated.

Abram Benedict

So again, there's no custom stations at this border [points at line between yellow and green areas]. There is over here [points at line between orange and green areas]. So that's why when we talk about the recognition of our rights to cross the border freely and us asserting our border rights is extremely important. Because if every time I cross that border, if I had to pay duty on my goods, or if I was refused entry because I wasn't allowed, I mean, it'd be insane, you know. I wouldn't be able to get to my office if I couldn't go through the United States. I could, but I'd have to take a boat. I mean it's minus-frickin'-10 [degrees] out today; I'm not gonna be sitting on a boat going to my office.

Leah Kelly

That's really interesting, and it's something that I feel like the general public does not know about.

Abram Benedict

They don't, they don't, you know. And that's only the international boundary line, right. There's two provincial boundary lines in my community. And so child welfare, infection control under public health, are two major areas that are regulated by the provincial governments. And so in my community, depending on where you live, or where the service is being delivered, you could potentially have two sets of standards in how you deliver these services, which is super challenging for us, right. Or licensing, it's silly, like, you have to be licensed by the province of Ontario and licensed by the province of Quebec to be a doctor, right. So if you want to work in my community, you got to have a license from Ontario, and a license from Quebec. And so you know, those jurisdictional challenges challenge us all the time. So when we, you know, we go to bat to the provincial governments and the federal government to say, "Look, I can't have two sets of rules in my community based on where you live, it just won't work." That's like you living in one part and me living in one part and I get the service delivered this way, and you get it delivered another way. But we're still the same people, you know. So that's why we heavily push hard on the governments to say, "Look, hey, there has to be the same, or we develop our own law, and you recognize our law, or you recognize the fact that we're gonna have jurisdiction over this. And we're going to deliver this way, because it's not fair to our people."

Leah Kelly

Can I ask you as a leader in your community, what are some of the really big things that you would like to see improved in the future? Because there's always room for improvement, no matter what, right? Is there anything that you would really like to see change?

Abram Benedict

Overall or with the government?

Leah Kelly  
Overall.

Abram Benedict

Well, I mean, we need, I need a stronger economy here. When I talked earlier about, you know, us delivering \$100 million in services, I want to be able to deliver \$100 million in services of our own money, not of the government's money, right. And but that comes with having a sustainable economy. And we're always looking at ways to do that. Now, what that answer is, I don't know offhand, right? I mean, it doesn't, it will have to include off-territory investments, it will have to include off-territory partnerships. So when you talked about earlier how important is it to be interacting with the outside, I believe extremely important, not only for people to understand who we are, what our rights are, but also to know what the opportunities are, or to have good working relationships. Because I can't, you know, if I build a casino, or a hotel, or a manufacturing plant in my backyard here, the way that border is all split up, one, it will create a lot of barriers, because you can't just import/export commercial goods easily, but also, they gotta know where to sell it to. So I gotta have partnerships. I got to have opportunities either into the communities around me or globally or regionally, what have you. So I mean, I think having a sustainable economy is extremely important to our people.

Leah Kelly

Would you like to see the Mohawk Nation actually have its own real passport, in the way that the U.S. and Canada do and the way that it was recognized by the UN that time? Would that make it so much easier so you wouldn't have to do this weird, three-part border crossing or be able to trade more easily, establish—

Abram Benedict

So the Mohawk Nation does have their own passport. It's only actually recognized by the United States and not by Canada. It would be very helpful if Canada would recognize the passport. Because our community, depending on which way you go, because of that border—you know, I have a certificate of Indian status, I have a tribal card, I have an enhanced driver's license, I have a I have a passport, right. These are all documents that, I need one of them to cross that border. Having a single would be very helpful.

Leah Kelly

Okay, all right. I see.

Abram Benedict

[Unintelligible] but being on a border community is that the United States recognizes under their codes is what they call the Jay Treaty. And the Jay Treaty recognizes the rights of Indigenous people to come into, well, of many other things, recognizes their ability to cross the border freely. And the United States government codified it and that's one of the avenues where, even if I was a straight born Indian in Canada, I can go into United States and get a social insurance number, or social security number, and work in the United States. It doesn't work in the reverse. A straight born American Indian of any other tribal nation except for Akwesasne cannot go into Canada freely and cannot work in Canada. They have to follow all of the same norms that any other immigrant—that's what they would consider them—would have to follow. That is a challenge for

our community, not as much as it could be, but it does create barriers. And that's generally with interracial relationships or marriages with children, or even other tribal marriages. Between a Mohawk community and say, the Seminole Indians, if they have a child, they don't have that same right, they potentially may not have that same right, as if it was with two Mohawk parents.

Leah Kelly  
Oh, really?

Abram Benedict  
Yeah. And that's the way that that law would work.

Leah Kelly  
Wow, that's interesting. Okay.

Abram Benedict  
Well, those border anomalies play a lot in our community in all aspects. Because if I, I mean, technically if I had a wife that was non-Indigenous, and she—and I live on that portion where I said, where Cornwall Island is—was an American citizen, and if I wanted her to live with me, and say, we had a child together, and say she had a criminal record from, I don't know, whatever, from 20 years ago, including a DWI, and I wanted her to live with me on the Canadian portion of Akwesasne, she would not be able to. Unless she got an apartment. Or even if she was able to get an apartment, she couldn't come visit me, because Canada would say, “Look, you have a criminal record. Even if you were an American Indian and not a Canadian Indian, they wouldn't let you in.” Right? So the reason why I tell you this is because those are real situations; we have families that cannot go into Canada because they have spouses or partners that are not Indigenous or have reasons, have blemishes on the record that makes them not allow one scandal. And there's a lot of impacts of those sorts of things.

Leah Kelly  
Wow, that's complicated.

Abram Benedict  
When you look at the map as a whole, we're one community, right. If this community was in the middle of the United States, that exact situation, my wife could have the longest record of life and she wouldn't have a problem, right. But because we're on the border, she would not be able to come in, or if she wanted to go visit my mother, she wouldn't be able to do that. Those things impact our community all the time, and it's becoming more so as the United States and Canada look at border security, as our people continue to have mixed relationships, you know, which is not a bad thing, but it creates a whole set of different issues. That's why border recognition, border rights, is important to us.

Leah Kelly  
Okay, well, I just want to wrap up here with one more question that I ask everyone, which is, in your opinion, what can non-Indigenous people do to help Indigenous people?

Abram Benedict

Well, the first thing is educate themselves. I don't know if you've read the media, but we had this surge of—not a surge; we had a little incident here that happened. And I'll just go back to put my trusty map back up because it helped explain a lot around when you look at these things. [Shares screen with map again.] So the city of Cornwall is where predominantly enough of our community goes to get groceries, and for lots of reasons. It's not uncommon. In fact, when you live over here in Snye or St. Regis, this is Quebec. According to Quebec, if you live in Quebec, you should have Quebec license plates. And if you live in New York, you should have New York license plates and if you live in Ontario, you should have Ontario driver's license and Ontario license plates, right? Some of my members that live in Snye and St. Regis, two of them in two situations in the last week, got their groceries in the city of Cornwall, in Ontario, came out of the grocery store and found notes on their windshields that said, “You are not from this province. Stay home and stay out of our province.” Essentially, that's what it said. And the problem is that somebody likely just took one look at the license plate and said, “These people are not from here.” And we're in a pandemic, so everybody's scared of everybody that's not from their backyard, right? So these are Ontarians, they see Quebec plates, they put this this nasty note on there that said, you know, “Stay home, you're not wanted here.” And we issued this open letter to our neighbors and explained that, you know, exactly that map that I showed you. While members of my community may have Quebec plates, you know, Cornwall, Ontario is our closest city center. And in fact, we see it all as one. New York is the same way; New York plates may be the same thing. And it's just ignorance of people. But people in Akwasasne have been shopping in the city of Cornwall for you know, a hundred years, for God's sakes, and when it wasn't even Cornwall, you know, have been trading there. And you have ignorant people that think that, “Oh, well we see Quebec plates, we see New York plates. That means are from New York City.” They see Quebec plates, “Oh, they're from Montreal, they're full of COVID. They shouldn't be here.” And it's like super ignorant. And the reason why I tell you this is because what would I think people should do is they should just learn more about who Indigenous people are and the realities. And especially if you have a community that is your neighbor, right. Akwesasne is the second-largest First Nation in Canada by population. We're very big, and if you live next to a big community, you should know what the hell we're all about. Right? And that's ignorant people. And I don't think that they did it...you know, I had a radio interview today at noon with one of our sister communities, and the guy says, “Do you think this was out of racism?” I said, “Likely not. The person had just seen that there was a Quebec plate here and immediately thought that they were from somewhere in the middle of Montreal, and put the note on their on their vehicle around there.” Did they know they were Mohawk Akwesasne? No. But should they know that Mohawk Akwesasne could have a New York or Quebec plate? Absolutely. You know, so how many communities are like that that exist around, you know, whether being in Canada, United States, how many, I mean, how many neighbors to First Nations communities, Indigenous communities, have ignorant neighbors? People need to educate themselves. We're not going anywhere. We're going to continue to be neighbors for a very long time. And we need to coexist. And if we want to prosper we need to have better relationships. And it starts with understanding each other. And that goes for my people, too, right. I don't think for one second that if there was a way to identify white people's license plates, and they were in the middle of my community, you know, I can't guarantee the same thing wouldn't happen in reverse. But is it acceptable? Absolutely not, right. And especially during this pandemic, we need to be good to each other because, you think we're having a bad day? We're all having a bad thing.

Leah Kelly

Alright, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Abram Benedict

No. I hope I didn't bore you but I hope I provided some insight.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, you provided a lot of really interesting information.

Abram Benedict

I mean, I'm not a philosophical, I'm a real practical person. And I have a 12-member council. I have the Mohawk Nation here, we have the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe here, you know, I mean, I work with them and for the advancement of our community and all aspects as we can. But I hope that I've been able to provide a different perspective. And I ran because I wanted to be in this position because I wanted to have a more modern and progressive approach. Of course, I've been in it for 14 years now, so I don't know if I still have it anymore. But that's really what it was about for me. I'm not that old. I was elected when I was 24 years old.

Leah Kelly

Alright, well, thank you so much. Hope you have a good rest of your day.

#### *Interview with Nia Holley*

Wed, 12/16 2:59PM • 1:21:30

Leah Kelly

So to start off just with some logistical questions, would you mind stating the name that you prefer to go by as well as your pronouns and the name of your tribal nation?

Nia Holley

Yep. Um, so Nia Holley's my name. I just go by Nia. And I use the pronouns she/her/hers, or they/them, and I'm Nipmuc.

Leah Kelly

Do you have a preference for when I'm writing my thesis to be referred to as she/her/hers or they/them?

Nia Holley

I guess you could just say Nia? I don't know.

Leah Kelly

I mean sometimes, it's just if I'm referencing you a lot, sometimes it's just better to use pronouns.

Nia Holley

Yeah, you can. Either one is fine. You can, whatever you want to.



Leah Kelly

Okay. You don't have any preference?

Nia Holley

Um, no, I guess for me, it's, I have a hard time with that question. Just because I feel like she/her and he, those words, I don't know. It's like, hard to try to identify with any of them. But I think for me, it's just because people like, were, I don't know, it's, it's hard to have something that's like such a large spectrum and something that can be so expressive be like muddled until like three choices. And I just feel like English is like a really flat and sometimes violent language. So it's hard for me to have a preference using English I guess.

Leah Kelly

Could I use a different language with more appropriate terms?

Nia Holley

I don't know what the words would be. But really she/her/hers and they/them is fine. So, whatever you choose, I won't be an issue.

Leah Kelly

All right. And so I was wondering if you could explain to me a little bit, I was trying to understand the differences among different parts of the Nipmuc Nation. Is it is it split into the Chaubunagungamaug and the...?

Nia Holley

And the Hassanamesit? And the Natick?

Leah Kelly

Yes.

Nia Holley

Yeah, so it's like Nipmuc, it's not like we're necessarily split. Because like, well, because Nipmuc was like a name, like a term given to all the people in like the interior. We all had different villages and different places, like home bases. So there's like one area, Natick, one area in... Chaubunagungamaug is like Webster, like Thompson, Connecticut, like Massachusetts, and Connecticut, sort of borderline. Hassanamesit is like where modern day Grafton and like Upton, and a few of those other towns are. There's like Pakachoag, which was like in Worcester, Quinsigamond. So there's all these different places where people gathered. And so like Nipmucs really have like, always been like a, like a various bunch of people. And, like in times of crisis is like when we would come together pretty much. Not that we're like, super separate, but we all have sort of like, like different contexts within the same history, if that makes sense.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So I'm just wondering, today, if you really consider yourself one tribal nation or if you consider yourself sharing a name but having distinct features.

Nia Holley

I mean, I think Nipmucs are Nipmucs. But I like some Nipmucs, like some Nipmucs, they have certain, like, genealogical lines, like family lines. So, like, for me, like I have some ancestry that, I had a couple ancestors that were living in Natick, I had ancestors in Grafton, and also some in Chaubunagungamaug. So, it, I think, like a lot of Nipmucs, because there's like, so few of us left honestly, like a lot of us have, or most of us have, like, mixed family lines. But I think because of like, all the way, all the different ways, like, colonial violence occurred, at least for like federal recognition...with federal recognition, like, you had to, like, you can't be on more than one roll. And you have to, like, prove your family line had Nipmuc in some certain areas and certain times. I think it's just like, yeah, like, again, I don't think we're separate. It's just like, we're a community and some people are related and some people aren't, but we're still a community.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, definitely. Okay. And then according to the [Nipmuc] website, the reservation is in Grafton. Is that the only piece of land that has been “officially” recognized as a...I don't know, by the state, or?

Nia Holley

Yeah, yeah, no worries. Um, yeah, pretty much. But the Chaubunagungamaug folks, they have a reservation too, but it's like, I think with that reservation, I think they might have bought in or like, gotten that piece of land back somehow, and then they call it a reservation. I don't know if it's like registered like as a reservation, though, kind of like how the one in Grafton is. And like the one, the piece of land in Grafton, it's like this four acres has been in our community for like, since time immemorial, pretty much because after King Philip's War, they started to continue to like sell off land and divide it up. So in Hassanamesit, it was like, at the time, like after they started to take land and after the war, I think there was like, maybe like 7000 or so acres left. And then they started to divide it up; they divided up between seven families, I believe, and where the reservation is today, that's all that remains from the Moses Printer allotment. Um, so like, as that piece of land like went through his family, eventually there was someone named Zahra. It was either Zahra or her mother Sarah, who, like got it registered as a reservation or something.

Leah Kelly

And do you and other members of your community spend a lot of time at the reservation in Grafton?

Nia Holley

I do, and other people do too. There are like ceremonies there that take place. We do, I do a lot of gardening there. That's where we have our powwow but yeah, it's, no one like lives there, but people spend time there for sure.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I think we can.... Actually, well, I like to start with a question which is to ask, do you consider yourself an Indigenous person?

Nia Holley

Um, yeah, I do. Um, but at the same time...yeah, yeah, I do. Um, but I guess like, like more than that I consider myself Nipmuc. Because I really feel like—well, Nipmuc and Black, but for the

sake of this conversation, like I, I feel strongly in and I feel confident in saying that I'm Nipmuc. Because in my personal opinion, I feel like if you are, if you are Indigenous, and you are claiming, like a tribal community, I feel like in order to claim that you really need to, like there's a responsibility that's involved or responsibility to the land, the responsibility to the people, to the community. And there's not a lot of people that do that anymore. So I always say there's like a difference between claiming and acknowledging. So I claim that I'm that Nipmuc. But I acknowledge that I do have Narragansett ancestry as well. But because I'm not affiliated in any way with Narragansett, I don't say that I am Narragansett, I just say Narragansett ancestors.

Leah Kelly

So I'm focusing a little bit on the theme of indigeneity. And so I want to get into sort of the difference between acknowledging that you're Indigenous versus claiming that you're Nipmuc. So, to begin, when you acknowledge the Indigenous part of your identity, what does that mean to you that's sort of distinct from saying that you're Nipmuc? What is Indigenous identity to you?

Nia Holley

It's just like, very broad. So I don't really ever say I'm an Indigenous person, per se, I'll just say that I'm Nipmuc. Because it's like, not this random statement that's like, in the clouds. You know, it's like more grounded for me to say that I'm Nipmuc. But, yeah, like, I mean, Indigenous can mean so many different things. And also, like being Black and descending from people that were enslaved, like Indigenous people from Africa that were enslaved, I acknowledge that. But because of slavery, like I don't know exactly where I came from, I can't say like...I can't claim much of that. So I don't often really refer to myself as Indigenous if I'm just introducing myself. I hope that answered the question.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, I'm sort of thinking about Indigenous in terms of just right now, Indigenous to this land that we're on right now. I don't know if you ever use the term Native American, or if you say you're Nipmuc to someone who's uninformed, they say, "What is that?" And then you have to say, "Oh, that's a Native American tribe." I'm just kind of wondering how you differentiate among those terms?

Nia Holley

So yeah, if I say I'm Nipmuc and someone doesn't know what I'm talking about, it depends on the conversation. Like if I feel like they, if I were to say...well normally, yeah, typically, I would say it's like a Native American tribe. But sometimes I feel like they might know what I mean. when I say "Indigenous to this place." I'll say that but usually, if I have to go like deeper in an explanation, I have to say "Native American" just because that's like, what people can like, understand, even though even saying that doesn't really mean anything, because it's just, I don't know, another really broad thing.

Leah Kelly

So yeah, you're saying that Indigenous is a very broad term, which it is, and probably has a lot of different meanings to different people. I guess as, as a non-Indigenous person, I'm trying to learn—well, as a non-Indigenous to where I live now—I'm trying to sort of grasp the meaning of the term. I'm very interested in collective identity and the construction of identity, and how perhaps, a legacy

of suffering at the hands of colonizers, if that creates a sort of a solidarity and a collective identity, even if another tribe is as foreign to as another country. Do you feel that Indigenous identity is a collective identity?

Nia Holley

Um, I, in some ways, perhaps, but I think because of like how everything is kind of like set up the way we're supposed to identify, the way we're supposed to treat people, the way we're supposed to, like, interact in the world, for me, that's hard to feel like it's a collective identity, because I'm also Black and there's anti-Blackness within Indigenous communities as well. So for me, it's hard to feel like I'm a part of the collective identity. And again, like, I think context is really important. Like, I'm Nipmuc, my people are from this area in Massachusetts. Like the East was, like, one of the first places of contact, so like, even like, Eastern Woodlands identities look very different than, like, Western folks. Because of just like, the contact, and like, I feel like the, like the sheer experience of colonization is just like, different. I feel like people in the East were kind of like guinea pigs for folks to like perfect their methods on people in the West. And I don't know if that's something that's necessarily understood collectively. Um, I think collectively, people identify as like, like experiencing colonization and invisibility. But, um, but I mean, like, anyone can, like, identify with that, you know. So I don't know. Like yes but like but no, at the same time.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I hear what you're saying exactly. There's just a large difference between the east coast and the western tribal nations just because of the difference in the way that they were colonized, and how they've sort of been erased from the narrative in the east more so than in the west, even though they've been erased from the narrative everywhere. But that is a big part of what I'm looking at in terms of autonomy and sovereignty. So we might get back to that, but I'm interested in going back to something you said earlier about being both Black and Indigenous. I was wondering if you could go a little bit more in-depth into how that affects your identity. How being Black affects your Indigenous identity and vice versa. And maybe a little bit more about your position as a person of mixed race in the Indigenous community.

Nia Holley

Okay, yeah, so I wouldn't say...I guess for me, like I don't necessarily think like those two identities necessarily affect one another because also with like being Nipmuc and again like having that like first contact, a lot of Nipmuc people intermarried with like, either freed or enslaved men especially, because after King Philip's War and all the following wars after that, a lot of Native men were either in war, dead, or like shipped off into slavery. So just like being Nipmuc, my identity or whatever is like inherently mixed with Blackness as well. So but then like my dad, so I'm Nipmuc from my mom; my dad's family's from Alabama and West Virginia. So like, I don't, I don't think the two necessarily impact the other for myself, but I think out in the world, that's where it causes, like issues. Like I don't necessarily always feel like I'm being seen as my full self in either space, depending on the conversation. And then I think also because I've, I grew up within like the Nipmuc community, I have a very strong relationship to our land, to our community, our history, our understandings, which I think, again, I sometimes I feel like, like, not necessarily like seen, especially like in them more recent, like Afro-Indigenous, like, sort of like, thing that's happening right now. And I'm still trying to work out that because I don't know if...I'm not like excluding people, but I think like sometimes, even within like, being invisibilized due to being

Black within the Native community, I think sometimes people don't expect like Black Natives to have an actual like concrete relationship to their tribal community. I think also so it's, I feel like that is sometimes sort of complicated in ways that it doesn't need to be. But then at the same time, like, Black Native people who don't have a relationship to their tribal community oftentimes can be for the sheer fact that they're Black. So it's like, I don't know. I don't know if I'm even answering your question anymore, but.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, definitely. And just to, I should have prefaced by saying if I ask any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering, or if I say anything that you think is insensitive or disrespectful in any way, please let me know. Because that's not my intention at all. So, I'm wondering if you could describe your heritage a little bit more. So, you're Nipmuc on your mother's side. Is your mother's side also mixed African American, or is it just through your father's side?

Nia Holley

My mom is also Black. And both of her parents are Nipmuc too. My mom's mom...okay, so I'm visibly Black. My mom is visibly Black. My mom's mom is visibly Black, but my mom's dad can pass. He's Black but I guess at the time when he was young, like he could also pass as being white. So yeah, so but he's still Black too. But I think my grandfather was like also...like we're also Irish, French Canadian, and Scottish. And I think it's mostly from his side. I think my mom's mom I so might be Irish, but yeah, everyone's Black basically. But yeah.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. This sort of gets into my interest in the construction of identity. I actually did this in a research project last year when I was looking at Asian Americans. But I'm wondering if you think that Indigenous identity or even the identity of specific tribes, do you think that that has been in any ways constructed or changed over time? And if so, by whom and in what ways?

Nia Holley

Yeah, absolutely. Like just the term Nipmuc. Like, I don't know what my ancestors called themselves, they probably just called themselves people. But it wasn't until, like, white intervention, in which that name, like came up. So I go back and forth, because I'm like, all these like, names that we like, go by, like Nipmuc, Wampanoag, Abenaki, like all of these terms, were, were terms that were given to us. So in that way, I do feel like our identities are constructed. And I think also with like...yeah, I think it like it shifts, and it moves like because you'll see, like, with Nipmucs, there's certain communities that like, there will be like historians that will be like, "Well, they're not Nipmuc, they never said that they were." But like they were people living in this area in certain areas that were deemed Nipmuc. And, like, they maintained their identities and the ways that they understood how to. I don't necessarily think like you need to explicitly say you are something to be that. But I think with the construction of identity, like that's what is forced upon people, so rather than people just being allowed to just be themselves, people are forced to be a thing, so that, really, I feel like whiteness can understand it, and operate and harm it, basically. Because I really don't think like anyone really gave a fuck about half the shit that like we're forced to nowadays, you know. So, and even the concept of difference, I think is just, like vastly different than...the concept of difference in the ways in which we're forced to understand and adhere by it

now, I think, is vastly different than that before colonization. Because obviously, there's conflicts and there's like a multitude of different people from like, different areas, but it wasn't like, the way in which difference played out once the English arrived and other folks arrived that had a much stronger idea, like what difference meant, and like how that made you mean something in society or in community. So yeah, definitely constructed.

Leah Kelly

That's really interesting, what you're saying, because it's almost as if the idea of identity itself is constructed, and is more of a European sort of idea, in terms of, you have to name someone or name a people for them to have an identity. Otherwise, they're just like, no one, right? And it seems like that wasn't the frame of mind that people had, living here for thousands of years, that you need to construct identity in order to validate the difference among different people. And the point of difference is usually to create borders and put up walls between people in order to usually commit violence. So yeah, that's a really, I think that's a really interesting way of looking at identity as the cause of that, in a way, or it's a tool to bring that about. [Yeah.]

So I was wondering what you think about, speaking of identity, is the, I mean, in a lot of ways, as we were saying all the Indigenous nations in this country are sort of grouped into under the umbrella of Native American or, or whatever other term, and generalized and that's been really harmful. But in a way there are also colonizer people who use the racialization of Native Americans as a racial group to try, or they think that they're doing it to sort of help, by painting them as another minority group that needs to be treated in the same way with the same rights as other minority groups. I think you might have an interesting perspective about that, being of another minority group, being Black. I'm wondering, what do you think of that racialization? Does it do more harm than good? Or more good than harm?

Nia Holley

Um, yeah, I mean, it definitely does more harm because, like, Native American definitely isn't a race like because it's not, you can't look Native. Which then like, reinforces, like, specific stereotypes, which excludes a lot of different Native people. And because of colonization, Native people can look any sort of way. So like, in college, I did, like, American Studies, so like critical race theory classes, and like, when they like, lay out the difference between like race and ethnicity, so I really feel like with Native American or whatever, those are, like ethnic groups, different ethnic groups, different ethnicities. So yeah, like, for me, I'm like, it's not a race. And, like, my race is Black because that's how I'm read in society. But my ethnicities, like vary, so. That's how I see it within that realm. But like, in my own reality, I'm just Nia. So yeah, I guess. Yeah, I feel like it definitely creates more harm because you can't look Native necessarily. And when people like try to look Native, that just makes it harder for like, other Native people, and then harder for how we're supposed to like, conceptualize and read what Native is. For whatever reason, we're forced to do that.

Leah Kelly

Do you consider different tribes to not only be different ethnic groups, but also different nations in the way that the U.S. considers itself a nation? Because that goes into sort of the question of sovereignty, which I am getting to, but I'm wondering.

Nia Holley

I think that depends, like I, I know some people will be like, “As Native Americans, we have dual citizenship. Technically.” And I'm like, I don't know. But like, I just, sometimes I feel like people read way too much into like, the construction. So I'm like, I'm not gonna waste my time saying I have dual citizenship when I don't. I have just one passport. And it's United States of America. But I think it depends on.... I'm not a part of a federally recognized tribe, so I don't know if they have something different. Like I, I think I remember like, or at least I've heard, like, you can just use your tribal ID if you're from a federally recognized tribe and that's sort of like a passport in a way. But I don't know a lot of details about that, because I'm not from a federally recognized tribe. Um, so I think like, that kind of depends on who you talk to. For me, sometimes when people say that it just sounds really corny, so I don't really think too much of it. But to each their own.

Leah Kelly

Right, because the Nipmuc, they technically call themselves the Nipmuc Nation, right? I mean their website calls them that.

Nia Holley

Um, but...yeah, sorry to cut you off.

Leah Kelly

Oh, no worries. I'm thinking maybe it's a different conception of the term “nation.” And I'm wondering if tribes before colonization in this land, if they saw themselves in the same way that European countries saw themselves, as very distinct sovereign bodies. I mean, so the idea of the modern nation-state is very European. But I'm wondering how much you think that is a concept in traditional sort of Native beliefs. Or if nowadays, now that being a nation does seem to bring with it, or being more sovereign, as they call it, does seem to bring with it more recognition, more attention from the federal government, et cetera, have tribes sort of become willing to consider themselves nations? Has that changed or has that always been there?

Nia Holley

Yeah. Well, I wouldn't, not all Nipmucs consider themselves like Nipmuc Nation, like I don't say that I'm from the Nipmuc Nation. Nipmuc Nation is like an entity that was created for federal recognition. No one said that before the whole process. So like, the Nipmuc Nation itself is like, I don't even know if it's a 501c3, but it's a 50 whatever, sort of thing. And then there's Hassanamesit, there's Natick, there's Chaubunagungamaug. And like, they have their own ways of operating their tribal or government bodies, or people. So I can also like send you like different, like, Nipmuc websites that are a little bit more, I feel like more grounded and like what most people sort of consider Nipmuc. I never recommend the nipmucnation.org. Because it's just, I think the tribal council runs it, and the tribal council doesn't do anything with our community. They're their own thing, their own problematic thing, like a lot of tribal communities deal with it but um, yeah, like, I don't even necessarily align myself with Nipmuc Nation at all. Um, but yeah, so I don't know, before colonization and like before, like how we consider nations now was the same for tribal people. Like, all I can imagine. is, yeah, I think it just like, it depended on like, where you were, like, who you were responsible to. And I guess touching back on, like, one of your questions earlier, like, like, instead of like, maybe introducing yourself as Nipmuc, or as something, a lot of people would introduce themselves from like, where they're from, like, who their family is, where they were living at, things like that. So I think it's more, I feel like our identities back then, and

like, perhaps even our nation-hoods, were more grounded in like relationality, like relationship to place, people and the land. Because when you like look at language, like our language, it's reflective of that, of being in relationship to all the things around us. And that's how you communicated. So whereas now, I feel like identity and nationhood is not necessarily like a relational thing. It's like a thing that has to be created for other people to deem you as, like viable in some sort of way, versus like, deeming you as a person and what you could be in relationship to. It's not like an even like playing, like horizontal understanding, it's more like a top-down approach I feel like today. So um, I feel like that's like, I don't know for sure, obviously, but I feel like that would be like maybe the closest thing, so I don't know.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I hear what you're saying. And it seems like nationhood isn't really the most important thing in your eyes to who you are as a tribe, and so forth. That's kind of a segue into the topic of sovereignty, which is something I'm still trying to wrap my head around, even though I've been digging into this thesis for a while. So, I want to first ask you just the general question, what does sovereignty mean to you? And, how do you feel about it?

Nia Holley

Yeah, I'll just start with that. Sovereignty to me is, like, the ability like...I feel like a textbook, I'm like, "self-determination." Um, but yeah, like the, the ability, um, the ability and understanding of like, being able to decide for yourself, to not like necessarily support yourself, but I feel like to support yourself or your community. Sovereignty to me is, like, the freedom to have choices in the ways in which you are, in whatever way that is. I guess sovereignty to me is, um, like, in a way, like maybe, I don't know, I'm thinking about reciprocity, but at the same time, I'm not. I think within reciprocity, sovereignty is a part of that, because to be sovereign, I think part of it is to be whole. Yeah, to be whole, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Right. So I'm feeling like there could be two different ways to look at sovereignty. And one way is very legal, governmental, what the U.S. government can give you. And then the other is sort of however you want to imagine it, as your own conception. And I guess I want to focus on the first one, the legal version: how important is that to you and to your tribe? Do you think that's something that should be a priority or do you think it's just something that comes from colonizer language that is irrelevant or even harmful? Or a mix of both?

Nia Holley

Yeah, yeah. Personally, it's definitely harmful and a waste of time. And then again, like some people really believe in being validated by like the government. So a lot of people think that like, if you are federally recognized you are truly sovereign. But I really feel like when you are federally recognized, you have less ability to really decide for yourself because you have all these federal guidelines that you have to adhere to. And like, if that's the case, like how are you sovereign? Like you are barely able to like wipe your own butt without like government permission. So like, yeah, so I really feel like the legal side of what sovereignty means isn't sovereignty at all, it's just a ploy for the federal government. Like Nipmucs are state recognized, but even with that, like we have more sovereign, like legal, sovereign abilities than some of the Federal tribes. And then I think, like some people really feel strongly in being recognized by the government. Um, but a lot of that,



I think, just stems from like greed and, or, like, just lack of resources. People like really feeling like, the federal government will, like, offer people resources, and maybe they'll offer some, but without it, I really feel like our community can offer so much more. So it just depends on like, who you're talking to, and like, who has an understanding or belief that that it's not sovereignty, like federal recognition, and like, a legal sort of sovereignty isn't necessary to be like whole people and like, to be Native. Like a lot of people will be like, "We need to have federal recognition, or else I'm not Nipmuc," or whatever. And it's like, you don't need any of that to be who you are, like you just are who you are. And you don't need validation from, like, a governing system that doesn't care about anything, so.

Leah Kelly

So the validation itself, and the acknowledgement itself is not favorable, exactly. But do you think that there are things that result from it that might lead to more sovereignty in terms of, I mean, there are lots of different types of sovereignty, right? Economic sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, not only the ability to self-govern, again in a legal way, but also the way, "Well, now that we have much more land, we can have much more space to grow our culture revitalize, or fund the revitalization of our language," that kind of thing. Do you think that any of that could be worth it? Or is that still too high a price to pay?

Nia Holley

I think it's still too high a price to pay, because I'm like, there's just so many examples of that just like going wrong, basically. And yeah, like, just like, it's not always guaranteed that you'll have land return or like, resources to fund projects like that. It's really yeah, I think it depends, like I do notice, like, some grants are specific for federally recognized people, but so then with that, like, you have like, federally recognized people all competing for this little bit of money. So again, it's like I don't know. Yeah, like it's just not worth it to me. It's just, yeah.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, I get that. Also just sort of playing into the system, right. of capitalism and everything. It's like, what values does that sacrifice in a way? I was going to ask about the Nipmuc in particular: what kinds of resources or anything do you specifically get from being state recognized? And...actually, let's just start with that and then I'll go on.

Nia Holley

My mom would know a little bit more about that. But from what I know, like we, you can get like a tuition waiver. And I think we have like hunting and fishing rights. And the tuition waiver is only for state schools. So there's that. Um, and then I don't know. Okay, the hunting and fishing rights...there might be like one or two other things, but I'm not positive. My mom would know a lot more about that question.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, no problem. And then does the tribal council—I want to get back to them what you were talking about—do they come as like a stipulation of the state recognition? I mean, you don't have to be very specific, but just generally, how do they function or what's their purpose?

Nia Holley

Yeah, question of the century. Um, I mean, their purpose was, they were created for federal recognition. I don't know, I think we might have been state recognized before that process. I'm not positive, but they were created to be like a body of people to communicate with the government, I think. So. But, I mean, because there's no federal recognition, they don't talk to anyone. And I don't really know what they're supposed to do. Because they haven't done anything.

Leah Kelly

So they haven't done anything? Okay.

Nia Holley

Yeah, I'm like, I don't know, I had just asked it at the last community meeting. I was like, "I'm still waiting to know what tribal council does."

Leah Kelly

And then, so you're mentioning community meetings. So in a way, you have your own more traditional way of self-governance. Could you talk about that a little bit? Is it consensus-based? Like what kinds of decisions do you focus on?

Nia Holley

And yeah, so we have a traditional government, which is the Sachem or Chief or Sunsquaw. And then the Elders Council, so they, yeah, so they sort of figure things out. And like, really, it's like the Elders kind of like, guide the process. And then the Chief or Sunsquaw or whatever will, like take things to the Elders and get their input. But then there's things where they'll go to the people and get their input, as well. So it's a good combination of stuff. But again, like we're all spread out, so it like some people aren't at the meeting, then like, there's some things that are decided, sometimes, that isn't like, not everyone was asked, because not everyone's there, I guess. But yeah, that's another question for my mom, I don't really do that.

Leah Kelly

So, what you were talking about, sovereignty in terms of relationality, and those things that are important. You are using the term sovereignty, but I'm wondering, is there a different term that you would prefer to use in place of sovereignty that would encompass what you were talking about in a better way?

Nia Holley

Yeah, that's what I was trying to figure out I was trying to say like what sovereignty meant to me, because I really don't say...

Leah Kelly

Yeah, because you don't have to use that word. I mean, yeah.

Nia Holley

Yeah. Um, because I'm like, I only use it when I like prove the point, like, "We're more sovereign than federally recognized people." But yeah, I think, for me, I don't know. I'm not sure. I have to keep thinking about that.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, sure. So could we dive a little bit deeper into those types of, I guess values or practices that are, that are important to being sovereign or whatever you want to call it? I know that you're an artist. Do you want to talk a little bit about what you do or the work that you've done in your community? And maybe how that relates to the obtaining of more sovereignty, or whatever word?

Nia Holley

Yeah, I guess, um, I would shift that...like, the work that I do doesn't necessarily obtain more sovereignty, it's just work that that I guess continues to, like, reinforce that we are sovereign in ways. So I do a lot of work within like foodways, I work a lot with like, making different medicines. So like herbal medicines. I do a lot of youth work. Um, and I think, I guess just like the, not like the flexibility of all those things, but the, maybe the versatility, versatility of all those things. And, like, the various ways that all of that can be done, I feel like kind of like, reinforces that we are sovereign, because I don't necessarily have to, I don't know, like, try too hard to make a lot of the stuff happen. That's not to say that it's easy work, it is extremely difficult work because a lot of work...not that it's hard because it's unpaid, but it's unpaid work, it's a lot of time. Like it's, it's not even work, like this is it's my responsibility, like this is a part of who I am, as a Nipmuc person, this is like what I have to do. Because, like one of the values that I've always understood, growing up, is that like, the stuff that you do in your life is never for you. It's like, in preparation for like seven generations from now. So, I think like, I feel like understanding that is key for sort of like reinforcing that sovereignty because.... Yeah, that and like, making sure like, doing work that shows people that like we can be who we are without a lot of the things that sometimes people are forced to think that we need, I guess sort of does that too. But a lot of that work is just, again, grounded in relationships and like reciprocity and just like a rebalancing of like the shit that we're dealt with, and the stuff that we need to do, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Could you talk a little bit more about foodways and what it does and the importance of land in all of this?

Nia Holley

Yes, I guess foodways...I guess not only growing our food, but having access to land to harvest things, caring relationships with like, other food producers. And like trading, things like that. Yeah. And then, yeah, with foodways, I mean, the land, land is just central to everything I really feel like. And it's not even, like it would be great if we could have like all the land back, whatever, but at the same time, like I don't necessarily think it's necessary. I think some of it is like just so people can have like access to their lands and have a place to live and build and connect in a way. But realistically, we're probably like, I don't think we'll get it all, but in saying all that, like, I feel like land is central because like, we may not remember everything or know everything, but the land does and like the land is our kin. So that's why I think like relationality is so key to being able to, like, claim who I am. And being able to do the work that I do. Because like, the land is like central to that. That's like what the land knows. Sorry, I feel like I sound like a fortune cookie, but the land, it knows. And like, when you're in relationship to it, you start to know, too. You may not know the explicit words or like, it may not be in English or, like a verbal communication like this. may not be like a communication like this, but it communicates with you and it guides like your work. And I think because like the land is our kin, it has memory, but also like it holds water, it

holds blood. And all of that is still, all of those things are still alive, even if it's not like a human, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Does the Nipmuc tribe grow its own food? Is that part of its work?

Nia Holley

We grow a little bit. Um, but we also.... So I do, there's like a garden plot on the reservation. And a little bit of food is grown there. It's not a lot. A lot of it goes to like Elders if they want it and other people if they want it. Um, but then like the work that I do with Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, um, that's like a, like an inter-tribal network. So we work a lot with like different food producers, mostly Native ones. And we like trade and share resources in that way. So that also supports like Nipmuc people too. But it's not necessarily like a tribal food bank, or, like, it's like a Nipmuc farm and we're farming for the whole community. There's not enough space and I don't know how to grow food like that.

Leah Kelly

Just um, I guess this is a really big question, but...I'm trying to figure out how to phrase this. I guess, do you do you feel like there is an overarching goal that you're striving for as a member of an Indigenous tribe, as a member of a people who were basically the victims of genocide? Is there something that you're striving for that's bigger overall, like a liberation from colonization in general? Or are you more focused on sort of the day-to-day things, or both?

Nia Holley

Yeah, I would say it's, it's, but...yeah, I think at least my goal is just, again, like the opportunity to just be and live rather than be in like a constant state of survival. Is that gonna happen in a few days, or within my lifetime? Probably not. And will it happen before, like, the Earth implodes because of global warming? I'm not sure. Um, but I think, again, like that's kind of like part of like the work of, like, really understanding or the value of like, understanding of like, the work you do is for the future generations. So I try not to necessarily, like focus on the day to day, but I don't know, I guess I balance the two. But so, yeah, it would just be nice if, like, all people could just be themselves and not forced to do all the shit that we're doing.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. In order for that, to be attained, though, and in order to escape that struggle to survive, do you think that requires the complete end of colonization, of at least the way of thinking that has permeated white society? I'm just wondering if that in order to achieve that, does it need a very large change or push?

Nia Holley

Yeah, absolutely. It needs to be like burned to the ground. And then, like, wherever it burned, that needs to, like, also be destroyed by like, a meteor. Um, and, yeah, and like, I guess it's like not, I guess I'm thinking like, what needs to be destroyed is like, like white supremacy as like a global structure, which like, then that also relates to like colonization, that relates to all the other -isms and like, -ion words that I can't remember now. But yeah, I mean, if that is destroyed, and then,

hopefully, a couple generations later, no one remembers this terrible 500 or so years, hopefully, it'll be better. I just hope no one, like does the same thing and makes the same mistakes.

Leah Kelly

When you say destroy, do you mean like, the idea, like the type of society that we're in? Or do you mean like, just the whole continent? Like, I don't know, what are you trying to obliterate here?

Nia Holley

Yeah, no, the society that we're in like globally needs to just not be this way. Yeah, like I don't...yeah. And if this continent ends up being destroyed too, physically, or the world does physically, like, hopefully whoever is a human again after that, like just doesn't do the same shit. But yeah, I just, yeah, I don't know. Our world is just like really disturbing to me. And I feel like if people don't see that with like what we've been experiencing with this global pandemic, I just am at a loss for words, thoughts, and just like completely baffled by people just like not seeing like glaring red dots being put together. So yeah, like, I would want, like our system in which that we are forced to operate to be destroyed. I don't necessarily want the end, like the apocalypse, to happen, but at the same time, like I think if all of that was destroyed, it would turn into the apocalypse too. So I don't know.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Do you think that decolonization is something that Indigenous people should be working toward? That's kind of sometimes a controversial term. What do you think of that as, maybe not something that could actually happen before the world explodes or whatever, but as sort of an idealistic goal? Or how important is it for Indigenous peoples, let's just say specifically in this country, to reclaim what was taken from them, to get land back, to establish themselves as more fully independent from colonial society, all those types of things? Maybe not full decolonization, but how important is it to not just, like you were saying, just kind of wipe it away and then start over, but even just right now, sort of work towards that.

Nia Holley

Um, well, I feel like decolonization can't happen, unless, like, everything is like, not there, you know. Because like, like, you can't like decolonize like a college institution, Like you're still within like, an institution that is operating within a system that is inherently colonial, and like, white supremacist, and completely oppressive. So I don't really believe that decolonization can happen without everything else also being undone too, because it's just like, I don't know, like, you're not like, it's not doing anything. It's just, like, false. Because once you are outside of like, whatever that was just like, decolonized, you're still within the same shit that is, like colonizing you, or you're having like, whatever patterns that are still alive. kind of like, I don't know, I guess like the difference between, like, reform and like, abolition. Like yeah, like one means something, and the other is like, "No, this is done," versus like, "We'll keep them in cages and doing slave work, and not treat them as human beings. But we're gonna have like, some nice rules now." Versus like, offering, like, actual, like, resources for people that are, like, addicts, or like mentally ill, or just like fucked up people. Like maybe if we had better therapy, like, some people wouldn't be so fucked up and end up in jail, or like, maybe if people had access to other resources, there wouldn't be stealing, like, there wouldn't be theft, there wouldn't be like, all the other sorts of crimes because there's like resources or things for people to actually fucking do, versus try to figure out how they're

going to survive in the world that we live in. Or that we're, like, forced to live in. So it needs to be like a holistic approach versus like, a spa treatment. You know? So, decolonization, or to decolonize, I'm like really critical about because, yeah, it's just like a buzz word. And like, I don't know. Like how do you decolonize academia is, like...I don't know.

Leah Kelly

What's the alternative then, or what's the right way to do it? I mean, do you think it's possible to just change minds, to change ways of thinking over time? In which case you're kind of not decolonizing literally, but maybe decolonizing people's minds. I mean, if it's futile to try to completely decolonize, what's the next most viable path?

Nia Holley

I think working collectively and collaboratively with people. I don't know, it could be fucked up. Like, I don't necessarily think for me...like I have a hard time working with, like, white people, just because I feel like there's a difference between...I don't know, I just, I don't think intentions matter. It's really like the impact. And I feel like people that are like trying to do good, but are creating like more harm, like really need to do work themselves, and like, really reflect. And not just like, reflect for a moment and then get tired, because it's like a terrible thing to have to like, reckon with, like harm that has been happening for thousands of years or hundreds of years. I don't know. But I think if people are able to work more collectively and like collaboratively together and not with like a transactional sort of relationship but, again, something that's like more reciprocal, and like understanding that, not like, "I do this for you, you do this for me," but like, "What are we doing to support one another?" So I guess, sort of like a relationship in a more equitable way versus like an equal way. Make sense? Um, I think that's something that should be worked on a lot more. And yeah, I don't know. I don't really have an answer. I'm pretty pessimistic in some ways, so I'm like, "I don't know, like, let's just have the world burn, since people don't want to not be trillionaires and let other people live." So like, I really don't know. And, like, I don't know if we can decolonize like all the minds that should be decolonized. Like some people really just don't want to listen. And some people really just like, when they are listening, if it's like, terrible words that they're listening to, like a terrible reality that they have to accept, like, like, I don't know. Like, is it worth going through all of that, like, effort and time and pain for someone to just like, be like, "Oh, well, that was really hard for me to hear. I'm just gonna continue to be oblivious because this was too much for me. And like, I didn't actually do anything." So I don't know. Sorry, I'm like...

Leah Kelly

It's okay. I guess, what about for the people who do want to help, the non-Indigenous people? For you as an Indigenous person, what can they do?

Nia Holley

Um, I think listening and like building like genuine relationships versus like, building a relationship because you want to help. I think if you just try to build a relationship with someone, just because it's another person versus like, "This is something that needs to be done because this is gonna, like, make me a better person or ally." I think if people can just like level it back down and like be more grounded in the way that they're building relationships, I think goes a long way. And through those relationships, you'll learn how you might be able to help, how you might

support, but you only really know and understand that if you're really like in relationship with someone.

Leah Kelly

That's the end of my questions. Do you have anything else you want to say? Any questions?

Nia Holley

I guess I'm okay. I can, like email you like a couple of different websites or resources that might be helpful for like Nipmuc stuff.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, sure, thank you. You don't have to say anything else. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to speak with me.... I hope you have a good rest of your day. And nice to meet you.

### *Interview with Alivia Moore*

Wed, 11/25 3:51PM • 1:28:18

Leah Kelly

Great. Okay. So to begin, I guess we could just start with some more logistical questions. Do you want to state your name, your pronouns, and the name of your tribal nation?

Alivia Moore

Yeah, absolutely. So my name is Alivia Moore. Thank you for asking the question about pronouns. I use pronouns she/they; I'm often misidentified or categorized as a woman, but I'm a two-spirit person. I'm a member of the Penobscot Nation, and that's the community that I was raised in and do most of my organizing. I am one of the cofounders and builders of Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, the other cofounders being Kristen Wyman, your cousin, and Nia Holley.

Leah Kelly

Great. So when I'm writing my thesis, do you want me to always put "she/they" when referring to you?

Alivia Moore

If you feel like you need to. If you feel like you need to use a pronoun, I would just probably just say "they" is fine. But, yeah, I don't take offense to "she," you know, like, and even I do it to myself, but I feel like "they" is more reflective, but thank you for asking.

Leah Kelly

Okay. And just to clarify to people who end up reading this and might not know, could you explain what being two-spirit means?

Alivia Moore

Sure. So I, I give full like, full talks and presentations on this, but the incredibly abbreviated is that it is, it's, you know, there's not even one Indigenous grounding or, or representation of what a two-spirit identity is. It's sort of, the term two-spirit is a modern catch-all for, for Indigenous gender and sexuality, variability and variance. And so it essentially is a gender and sexual identity that also is grounded in Indigenous identity, which also has important ceremonial and social roles connected to it. Not really something that can easily be translated in the... [audio cut off]

Leah Kelly

Sorry, you're getting cut off. I don't know if you can hear me.

Alivia Moore

I can hear you. I got a phone call. So that was why.

Leah Kelly

No problem.

Alivia Moore

Yeah, I mean, so basically, it's a gender role and a sexual identity that is grounded in important spiritual and social responsibilities. I'll stop there, but it's really hard to like simply...so it's, it's neither man nor woman, but both. And the way that it's expressed for each two-spirit person is very, very highly specific. And there's not one representation of, of how that's embodied in our communities.

Leah Kelly

Okay, and so it would be unique to Indigenous people, would you say?

Alivia Moore

So two-spirit is an identity, yes, that is rooted—and I would say you can't even say Indigenous people, because it's so reflective of each individual nation and tribal nation—and so it's not even one overarching, but that is correct that it's not an identity that non-Indigenous people can embody. And it's, again, really specific to like the tribal community and cultures and spirituality and really like the Earth and land where our cultures developed from.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that that actually connects to what I was going to ask about what you like to be referred to as a member of this greater community of Indigenous peoples around the world because I know that different people have different preferences for being called different terms.... I know that they have been kind of labeled as Indigenous or Native American by colonizer society, so I was wondering, just so that when I'm writing my thesis, I want to make sure that I'm using the right terminology that the participants of my study want to be referred to. Because I know that the ideal is to just refer to you by your specific nation, but it is kind of hard to get around when I'm trying to say, "Indigenous people in general," or "the collection of Indigenous tribes in this country." So is Indigenous okay, or is there a term that you would prefer?

Alivia Moore



I think, yeah. When I think when you're making a broader comment that is about a collective, you know, a collective or collective like theme that you're seeing, that totally makes sense. And that would be a way that I identify myself too. Though, when I am speaking to my own very specific feelings or experiences I I tend to root them in my specific nation of Penobscot Nation, but yeah, I mean, I think, yeah, so that kind of broader question of how to simplify and categorize and communicate about Indigenous works for me. Native, I also refer to myself as Native. Yeah, I do not use Indian. But, yeah.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Great. And so yeah, to get back to your tribal nation, I was looking into it a little bit online, and I was wondering if it actually owns land, or if it is just the Wabanaki that owns the land and you're one of the tribes in the Wabanaki. Could you explain that a little?

Alivia Moore

Yeah. Okay. So yeah, sure, there's, yeah, a couple a couple pieces there. So the Penobscot Nation is one of one of the nations that comprises of the Wabanaki Confederacy. The Wabanaki Confederacy is an overarching... [unintelligible]

Leah Kelly

Oh, sorry. It got cut a little bit cut off but I think I got what you said.

Alivia Moore

Okay, so yeah, so the Penobscot Nation is not um... [cut off]

Leah Kelly

You still there? I can't hear you.

Alivia Moore

[unintelligible]

Leah Kelly

Hi. Oh, sorry. Yeah. No, it's okay. Your voice is like a little distorted and then it cuts in and out.

Alivia Moore

Yeah, it just might be where I'm driving right now.

Leah Kelly

I think I think you're good now. You can keep going.

Alivia Moore

Okay. So the Penobscot Nation does have a reservation. And so we have a reservation community that sort of like the center of our community now, and where our tribal government is seated. We also have other reservation and trust lands, kind of like speckled throughout, throughout what's now known as Maine. I'm not sure if there was something else that you wanted?

Leah Kelly

Yeah, no, that's okay. That's basically it. So and then could I ask you, do you have a specific role in your tribal nation or in governance? How do you participate in the structure?

Alivia Moore

Well, so for me, I see there being our tribal governments and our tribal administration. And then I see our tribal nation, which is, like, connected, but separate. How much to say on the record? Um, I struggle with, I see the tribal government structure that we have in place now, our tribal administration, as illegitimate. It is not a traditional way that Penobscot people have governed ourselves or organized ourselves as people. And so the government structure that, because Penobscot Nation is a federally recognized tribe, and it is the government structure that has been handed to our nation, and okayed, and sort of this interface for, for the U.S. government to be able to work with us, understand us, but also, I believe, a form of control. And so you know, I've worked for, within tribal administration, I've developed and managed programs, I've held all these different roles of various forms, I was elected to our tribe's school board, I am no longer...I have run for Tribal Council, I did not get on Tribal Council. I am...so there's this sort of like interface, that I think too often people like refer to as the "nation" or the "tribe." And then when they say the "tribe," they're referring to the administration, and not necessarily traditional leaders, or traditions, or traditional ways of organizing ourselves. or traditional ways of like, meeting our needs collectively. So, I'll pause there. There's a lot more than I could say, but I'll just pause.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, no worries. Do you feel like...is there a structure that's more similar to the traditional ways the tribe has been run that's informal that you participate in? Sort of away from the formal, like, U.S.-based governance system?

Alivia Moore

I mean, really, a lot of the work of Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, though we're a space that is intertribal, so this isn't, you know, it's not work specific to Penobscot Nation, that's being done in the collective. But the work that I in particular do and support is work that is grounded in my community, like supporting the work of my...so yeah, with Eastern Woodlands Rematriation, we really look at "to rematriate" as a verb. And so we're really working to undertake what it what it really means to rematriate, to restore matriarchies. So yeah, again, traditional governance structures of many Eastern Woodlands people including Wabanaki people, and Penobscot people, were governance structures that that were matriarchal, which is not what we have fully functioning at this time. So but there are absolutely traditional leaders that are still in place in our communities, and a lot of them are ceremonial leaders, are elders, are knowledge keepers, language keepers. You know, the people who are organizing mothers, parents, queers, two-spirit people, you know, there are incredible male men in our community who do still embody traditional ways of expressing masculinity and showing up in community. Too few. But, but there, we know, but there are those men. So in terms of my involvement, so definitely, I'm connected to, like I'm involved in a lot of things and supporting a lot of spaces of community, a whole host of community work and engaging with other organizers in my community, my nation and other Wabanaki nations. Yeah, connected and tied into traditional ceremony. I hesitate in whether to like, share this, and I don't always know the purpose. So I think there's an important reason for you to include this, as you're doing your research, it's okay to, but I don't want it to be like, a western way...and I'll say what I'm...so, so I'm a pipe carrier. And so I'm a ceremonial leader in my community, very much, I feel like, growing

into that responsibility and understanding what it is. So I, but I hesitate. I don't think I've ever shared it in an interview outside of my community. But I am really hearing you ask questions where you're really looking at the layers of like, how we organize ourselves in tribal communities. And so.... So do you think it's important that it connects to something that you're seeing somewhere? You know, you can include that, but I just don't ever want someone to...because I see people who are like, I'm a ceremonial leader, so what I say is more, and this sort of intent, like whatever I say is more has more weight than someone who perhaps doesn't have.... So I just struggle with that a little bit. And I wouldn't want just because someone has a particular responsibility that anything is weighed any differently. But if it fits into something that's connected to broader themes, then sure if that means.... I don't know if that's making sense.

Leah Kelly

I don't have to include anything you don't want me to. I'm more interested in just you, sort of just understanding kind of your position, as an Indigenous person, as a member of the Penobscot, how that relates to your identity and your feelings about tribal sovereignty. Those are the main themes. So I think I'm just trying to understand how you fit into the community. But I think you covered that. So we can move on.

Okay, so if we get into sort of this theme of indigeneity that I'm interested in, because I think that, I mean there is a lot of generalizing about Indigenous peoples. And I think that I'm coming from the premise that I feel like it's been constructed in a lot of ways, by different groups with different interests. And it's seen in a lot of ways. It's seen as one way by people of settler-colonial society, and then differently by Indigenous people themselves, but I'm interested in how much it has changed over time and how much of it is constructed by the individual versus the group versus the institutions. So I guess my first question would just be, how do you see your identity as an Indigenous person? And what does indigeneity or Indigenous identity mean to you?

Alivia Moore

And, and so it sounds like really reflecting on that particular word of indigeneity.

Leah Kelly

Just Indigenous identity, I mean, you might not really feel like you have that, but I'm just wondering what your perspective is, on Indigenous identity as a whole, because in a lot of ways, it's been turned into a race when it's not. So I'm just wondering, just anything personally, how you see your Indigenous identity.

Alivia Moore

Absolutely. Yeah, so, I certainly feel like when you look at the various categories, and when Indigenous is kind of listed, even when it's included in BIPOC, Black Indigenous people of color, sort of equating groups, conveniently grouping those categories, those, those groups of people, but also as if they are distinct groups of people. Or like, they're separate, that's why we need to name them each, but they're all kind of generally some range of color. And some sense of like, you referred to these racial features that can be associated with being Indigenous or indigeneity. For me, indigeneity really is about a political identity. And just having a completely different relationship to, to the United States government. And then within indigeneity, right, there's just a huge array of what physical like representation of that, and how that is embodied, but that they're all, that we are all Indigenous people, like, for Indigenous we're Indigenous, right. However, it's

difficult because I feel like so this, so, there's definitely more that I could say there. So, please, if you want to loop back to that, I'm happy to. I'm also thinking I feel like indigeneity is, is...using that really broad term, I think it's, it's problematic because I feel like people can be like, "Well, I'm Indigenous. So you know, I'm like, I'm from..." say, just use myself for example. So I'm like, "Okay, I'm from the Penobscot Nation. This is like my community where my body is built from, and my worldview has been shaped from someone Penobscot person, so I'm Indigenous." So then as if I can go anywhere on any piece of the Earth in, you know, in the United States, and say, I'm Indigenous, and that I can speak as an Indigenous person, I feel like that's problematic. I mean, yes, I'm still an Indigenous person, and I still have my own experiences of voice that are important, but I think it's important if I'm not in my home territory, that I can be Indigenous and I can also be a visitor. Right, like I'm not from this place so I can't speak on behalf of like the Earth there. And I can't like make decisions because on the Earth there, or the community's needs there, I'm, I'm a visitor so I'm in service of here like you like, I'm a visitor so that means you're going to take care of me but that means I'm also going to submit to myself to the law of the land here. Just like that's what I'm like fighting for in my community that you know, Wabanaki people, Penobscot people in our home territory, can restore our matriarchies, have our matriarchies respected. People who are in our territory, we will care for you and our matriarchal values and ways of caring for our kin. But that also means you need to respect the ways that we govern ourselves. So, so just I feel like when people say Indigenous, and like kind of claim that and then they can speak as being an Indigenous person without acknowledging the times that they're also visitors, if any of that is making sense.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that really makes sense. And I think that kind of connects to my other question, which is do you think that it really varies on an individual level, how someone views themselves, if they view themselves as Indigenous? Or do you think that there is some kind of overarching theme that maybe connects to some kind of solidarity among Indigenous peoples, or sort of a collective understanding about what it means to be Indigenous? Or it could just be on a tribal level, or it could be on a Confederacy level. I'm just wondering if you have any sense of some sort of collective identity. And I hear that you're saying, in a lot of ways, no, because of your individual experiences and land and everything. But I'm wondering if there has been some kind of constructed view of what it means.

Alivia Moore

I think, I think there's absolutely incredible power and beauty in, in the unity that being an Indigenous person and, and having this broader kind of identity of indigeneity. So, so I mean, I think my first response to the identity of being Indigenous, my first thought is actually that it's powerful, right? And that it is this, it does create, or connect, right? It just kind of I feel like, it's a convenient way of communicating the history of shared, some level of shared history of resistance, resistance to genocide, and continued genocidal attempts and occupation by what's now the United States. So I think, really, like indigeneity here, in the context of the United States is really developed in contrast to and in resistance to the U.S. colonial empire. And so in those of us who struggle against, in various ways, but struggle against the U.S. government, as Native people, like, indigeneity, is, you know, sort of communicates that and creates.... So I would say, first and foremost that I think it is a really, like powerful identity. And I think it's important for us to, because an important tactic and strategy of genocide and colonization has been division and isolation, and

you know, like breaking down our political alliances among Indigenous people, and breaking down our trade routes, like the work that Eastern Woodlands Rematriation is doing, like we're restoring our traditional trade routes throughout the Northeast, we are reengaging in our social relationships with one another again like...

Leah Kelly

Uh oh. No worries, you paused for a second.

Alivia Moore

So funky. Um, so I would say to be an Indigenous person, there's real power in it, and in the shared identity. And then the nuance that I think is not acknowledged enough is that first piece I said, about, about sort of recognizing where we are Indigenous to, right. And that's like, and what we can really speak on behalf of and really humbling ourselves to the scope of what we have responsibility to speak to and where we need to respect other Indigenous peoples' views on their own territory.

Leah Kelly

Okay, yeah, that's, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So, I was wondering, I mean, we know a lot about stereotyping of Indigenous people in this country. All of the misguided beliefs and perceptions that colonizer society has about them as possibly existing only in the past, not the present, of this sort of this stereotyped traditional view of one's mascot representing all Native peoples. I'm wondering, do you think that—and that view has really developed over time, right, it's taken centuries and to get where we are today, and I think just in this point in time, where it is a very contentious issue, like with mascots and everything—I'm wondering if you think that you, the U.S. government, and/or colonizer perceptions of Indigenous peoples affect their own views of themselves or their identity in any way. Or this sort of false identity that has been constructed for them, how that has affected them as people.

Alivia Moore

Yeah. So I want to, I want to make sure I'm, I want to answer what your question is. So I hear you speaking to the ways that settler society has created these myths of who Native people are. But are you asking about do I feel like this myth making processes also shaped white folks' identity?

Leah Kelly

No, actually, I was wondering how it might have affected Indigenous peoples' own view of themselves.

Alivia Moore

I mean, internalized oppression is real... [Unintelligible] So yeah, as I hear you, as I hear you speaking about, like how settler folks are, you know, we're always being policed about our identity as Indigenous people. And it's like I don't know everyone's experience, but I am white-passing. And so I have very light skin and I have blue eyes. And it seems like, like if someone doesn't know me yet, and I mean, everything I do in my whole life.... So it's like, if we have a two minute conversation, you're gonna learn that I'm Native. And like one of the first things that is almost always said is something about like, something about me physically, that doesn't align with their idea, or a question about blood quantum. And so, so like, the policing is like, it's like, not even

second nature, it's first nature. Non-Native folks, for a person, you know, at least from my standpoint...

Leah Kelly  
Sorry, you're cutting off.

Alivia Moore  
[Unintelligible] Is this any better or?

Leah Kelly  
It's still distorted. Maybe like, wait a few seconds, or...

Alivia Moore  
Okay, I'm gonna try going out to my car, and it seems better in there.

Leah Kelly  
Okay. It sounds better right now.

Alivia Moore  
Great. Um, so, I mean, absolutely. I feel like in our communities, I think part of like, trying to like distance and protect ourselves from like, white society and settler folks and the process of colonization and genocide, has also meant that I feel like right now, where people are like becoming proud to be Natives again, and like feeling like safe or brave enough to be Indigenous and to be visibly Indigenous and to really claim space for that in society. But I think also people tend to like...that some people can also, anything that they equate with whiteness, even if it's having white skin, that then you're like the enemy. You know? Or like too close to the enemy or whatever, I don't know. Yeah, but like that, that ladder or that you're not Native enough or, you know.... One person, one Native person in my community was trying to give me what I think they felt was a really high compliment by saying that I "had the heart of a full blood." And you know, and they said it, like with tears in their eyes, as if this was the biggest compliment they could give like, a light-skinned Native like me, like, that that could be like, the best thing that I could ever hear. But instead, it just felt like they just like, yeah, yeah, just like, I don't know, I don't know. And, and there's also conversations in the community where people are like, you know, "Well, they're 100%." And I'm like, and I just think, well, what does any of that matter if someone isn't like, living culturally aligned or like living in ways to give back to our community? Like what does being 100% blood quantum even mean? So they deeply internalize this colonial way of, of identifying. Because, yeah, in the traditional blood quantum system of how we determined who was a Native person, and who had a U.S., you know, federal, whatever, tribal status, or, and they told us, "this is how you determine membership, you've got to determine who's in, who's out." And so we really deeply in our communities, we do that in-group out-group to ourselves all the time. Children are raised in our communities in ceremony, but like when they turn 18, if they don't meet blood quantum, like, you know, like, they still come to community things, but like, they're definitely made to feel like they're not fully, they're not they're not fully included anymore. They're not equally, they don't have equal kind of, I don't know if "right" is the right word, but right and responsibility to be there. It's, it's painful, and like, especially doing, like tribes out west, where they have had a different experience with colonization, yeah.... You know, out west, I was told a

couple of times that they didn't fully like, they didn't believe that Native people still existed on the East Coast, that we're all just white people now. You know, like, right to my face. So there's, there's a lot of, like division, and a lot of anti-Blackness, absolutely, in our tribal communities. It's very real. Yeah, it's very real. And I don't think that's like, our traditional way. Again, I think it's very much this colonial mindset that we embedded and like made our own which is really gross and painful.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, you touched on something that I am interested in exploring, of sort of how identity is related to legitimacy, and how much that may have harmed Native communities, especially when I think about the federal recognition process and blood quantum and the need to fit into the stereotype in order to be considered a “real” Native tribal member. And how, I mean, I've read some articles on how certain tribal nations, particularly I think western ones who have large populations, they've had to sort of conform to those expectations in order to appear legitimate, which means like wearing their ceremonial garments to, like the courthouse or you know, so I think that that requirement of legitimacy—but it's not actual legitimacy, it's just conforming—I think that that also sort of relates to the other half of my exploration, which is the ability to obtain autonomy and self-determination while being forcibly constricted by colonizer society.

And I think, if you don't mind, we could sort of move on to this subject of sovereignty. And that's like, a really, like, hot word right now. Especially within, like, the past few decades, the federal government is switching to a position of like, which one of these tribes are we going to, like, recognize as sovereign. But not really sovereign, obviously, because they're still under the government. But I'm wondering if you could talk about what sovereignty means to you? Or you know, if you think maybe it's, it's too much of a colonizer term to use. We can first start with sovereignty in general, and then tribal sovereignty, but I'm just wondering how much importance you place on that term, and the ability to achieve that, especially in this country where the government has sort of talked about it in a way that it hadn't before when it was assimilating people. But there's still all these issues that come along with that.

Alivia Moore

Yeah, a lot of different threads to that. And one thing you had just said, how these ways that some Indigenous folks or communities, or the way that we might push or encourage conforming to these, these ideas of what it means to be Indigenous, and what my mind went to was “performing,” right, performing indigeneity. And so now, and so now, when we're talking about sovereignty, and again, thinking through a lens, more specific lens of tribal sovereignty, and I'm thinking about these tribal administrations, right. The Penobscot nation tribal administration, with this, like, government structure that has been handed to us by the U.S. federal government, I feel like we're performing sovereignty. You know, it's that we are that, yeah.... This is really, I yeah, I mean, if you really, really think about it, like, is it even possible to obtain like, true, lived, let's just stay with tribal sovereignty: tribal sovereignty, being federally recognized, is that even possible? Right because we have had to meet all this criteria to have sovereignty be acknowledged by this other entity. Like how does that...so that means they have the power to decide that gives them some supreme authority over us? That doesn't feel like it's even possible to be sovereign in that construct. Let alone all of this specific ways that like, “Okay, you're a sovereign nation. And so now you need to have these different administrative, like processes so that you can manage the funds and distribute it.” Again, which are not like traditional ways of like getting our needs done, and how can we have

tribal sovereignty if we don't have like access to land and territory to sustain our economies and our food systems and our life ways? Like, it's not possible, money isn't culture. So even if like the U.S. government is like providing some grants, like, that's not culture, you know. You can do important cultural activities, but that's, that's not like culture and values necessarily.

Leah Kelly

What is the importance that you place on federal recognition? Like, do you think that that, even though it is sort of another way of dominating on the part of of the federal government, do you think that there are any sort of positive effects that it allows your tribal nation, in terms of potentially giving you more freedom to exercise certain practices? Do you see any positive outcomes from it?

Alivia Moore

I would, yeah, I would say that absolutely there is, in part, to being federally recognized, because there's like some level that's to engage with us, consult with us, you know, meet certain obligations and write and respect various treaties. Though, like, how often that ever happens, and how fully that ever happens. Right. But like, there's still some, like, small, like, ways that it absolutely has benefited us. I think what has been harmful and continues to be harmful for Native people in our own mindset is thinking that's the end-all be-all: "Well, we're federally recognized." And so in not acknowledging the shortfalls and not acknowledging that our government structure is illegitimate and like all of these things, and not acknowledging that we're not going to be able to achieve full sovereignty while we continue to be occupied and colonized here, like we, we just cannot, like it's not, we're not gonna achieve, like true sovereignty. But we're not saying that. And we're not like even internally like having that depth of conversation, reflection and like realness. So it's like, we're just gonna keep spinning our wheels or like thinking we're doing something that is sovereign, but I don't even know if we know what sovereignty, like collectively, know what sovereignty is, right now. That doesn't mean we can't reclaim it. But it feels, especially from a tribal administration perspective, I'm like, they just seem grounded in a totally different reality.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's so interesting to me, what you touched on about, like, is there even consensus on what sovereignty is? And I think that there are a lot of differing opinions and views. So I'm wondering, do you think that it's possible to obtain sovereignty in a different way that doesn't rely on the federal government agreeing to, or doing anything or acknowledging, that doesn't rely on that colonizer society's political view?

Alivia Moore

I want to be able to say yes, but then when I think about you know, okay, so say we don't have, say we don't engage with the United States' process of legitimizing our nation or not through this like federal recognition process. Say we don't engage and we're gonna say we're not going to go through that—we're still colonized here, right? Like, we're still like displaced from our homelands, so it's like, I still don't like, I still can't picture a way that the weight and like the power and the influence in the extractive-ness of what this nation, the United States, is, that we would be able to have enough like spaciousness to be able to even embody full sovereignty that way either. I think, I think it really, I think it's going to come one of two ways, it's going to either come from continuing to build unity among other Indigenous people here, and then building solidarity with other



marginalized communities. So including, again, not that these communities are distinct from Indigenous folks, but, but also are Black, Brown, refugee, you know, working class, poor, disabled queer folks. So like really building that solidarity here in the United States, but also globally, really would take you know.... And this is what we're building towards every, every, every day. Um, but yeah, like building global movements of change, right, like knowing that we need...I mean, capitalism is going to fail, capitalism is going to fail. This belief that growth can continue forever without there being natural limits, like, that's cancer, cancer kills its host, like, capitalism will fail. But will like these people I'm talking about building solidarity amongst, can the people like build community and resilience so that we can be supported when capitalism fails? Or the Earth is just going to cleanse us all, and there'll be a reboot, and we won't have anything to do with it. [Laughs] So that's kind of the trajectory, I feel we're either on one of those two, and I'll do what I can. So I don't know, I don't really think it's possible to achieve sovereignty when the U.S., like this extractive, like horrible, empire exists, I just, I don't think it's possible. But I will work hard to like support our community, to repower our people during this time, to build relationships and skills and values so that we can be as prepared for whenever, you know. I'm not like one where I'm like, "I know the date when this is going to happen." You know, this could be many generations in the future, but yeah, yeah.

Leah Kelly

Well, it sounds like you are doing things to, little by little, reclaim sovereignty, or, maybe sovereignty isn't the right word. But I was hoping you could talk a little bit more about the rematriation process and, and sort of what it looks like, and what kind of work you do, and what you see is the end goal.

Alivia Moore

Yeah, I mean, I think like the heart of, of any of this, the heart of anything that any Indigenous community needs, but that any that all of us need, like, whether we're incredibly privileged folks, or incredibly marginalized folks, what we need is like true collectivism, and like to truly be embedded in reciprocal, humbled relationships with one another and with the Earth. And so that feels like that's the formula for what sovereignty could mean or tribal sovereignty could look like. But really what like any like balanced society or societies feels like, at the very like, minimum, you know, like you need collectivity and reciprocity and just really like humbling and listening and being really responsive to like the Earth where you are. So yeah, that's the work that Eastern Woodlands Rematriation [does]. We are a collective of Indigenous women and two-spirit people in the northeast of what's now the United States. And so we are, we really focus on like food and medicine systems, but really seeing food medicine systems as this connection point to the Earth. And that transforming our relationship to the Earth, again, through food and medicines, is this blueprint for transforming our social and our political and economic structures also. So we see it all very much intertwined. So yeah, we have all kinds of food projects and supporting Indigenous people in their reclaiming our traditional food knowledge, food cultivation practices, seeds, you know, butchering work, fishing, smoking meat and fish, cultivating traditional perennial foods. We also are developing or have developed a Wabanaki community herbal apothecary that I coordinate that works with doing traditional medicine, and herbal medicine also. They're connected, but we also include non-traditional herbal medicines and that work. So yeah, like restoring those, those healing ways, and what that means for empowering those social roles, and the leaders of women and two-spirit people in our tribal communities. We are developing a

rematriation school. We, within the collective, are undertaking more intentional work around ending or addressing violence towards women, girls, our two-spirit queer relatives, you know, how they're being disappeared, kidnapped, raped, murdered. You know, like, this stuff is real, this isn't just like, things that happen. This, this has been happening to all of us in all of our communities. So, like really building for our community the prevention, but also the response, to when horrific tragedies.... So just, again, really seeing all these pieces of restoring matriarchy, healing systems and relationships to the Earth, and in a more balanced economic structure, not capitalism, that just is about coming into balance and being in balance.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, it sounds like you're actually getting to my whole research question for guiding this project, which is looking at the relationship between Indigenous identity and sovereignty. And I think part of what you're saying is that this reclaiming, or this rebuilding, of your tribal culture, and sort of bringing back that culture that was kind of taken from you, that that cultural identity in a way is important to remaining or reclaiming that, whatever word we're using for sovereignty. That, that autonomy, that agency, that the ability to exercise one's freedom and culture.

Alivia Moore

Hmm. Yeah. So it's interesting the way you're talking about sovereignty right now, it feels like a very, like, an expression in an individual. When I think about sovereignty, at least when I think about tribal sovereignty, I think about it for a collective. I feel like if you were to apply the word sovereignty to an individual, that it's sort of like the United States' application of freedom, where it's like freedom is an expression of power in an exploitive way. Like freedom in the United States context is, "If I can, if I have the ability to do this, then I have..." What am I trying to say? If I, you know, just feels like really coercive, in that like, in that freedom, it just feels like it's something that like, is diminishing to others. Or if I'm going to express my full self that it may do harm to you, but I need to be able to express my full self. This like sense of like expression that's harmful to others and like taking.... Whereas so I think that's like this, this like western framework of what being in one's power is, that power can diminish other people. But again, from a framework, if we were to have a completely different worldview, Indigenous worldview, matriarchal worldview.... Not all Indigenous communities were matriarchal and I, those are not communities I'm from, I can't speak to what their process of re-indigenizing is. But for matriarchies, it's flipping, so it's not thinking about freedom in this like exploitative power-over kind of way. Matriarchy, is, is about supporting and nurturing the power within each of us. And, and again, that power within allows each of us to express our innate gifts in our needs, and our gifts are things that we're contributing to this broader collective. So again, I feel like there's this really interesting difference between freedom. Again, this like power-over and liberation, which is this like, again, supporting the power from within, so we're all are our full selves, but our full selves are not diminishing and harmful to others, they're actually uplifting others when we're in a space of like liberation. So it's interesting to think about sovereignty from a lens of like, could sovereignty be applied in a framework of freedom and power-over and exploitation? Or could sovereignty be applied to a framework of liberation and power-within and balance? And, sorry I'm like, going, I'm developing my own thesis here. [Laughs]

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I was, I was actually, I wasn't thinking of sovereignty on the individual level. I was thinking of it on like, the community or collective level, like, the tribal level, how bringing back those sort of the roots of the culture of your tribal nation, how that could be, perhaps, a form of sovereignty. Like how culture that traditionally was stripped from so many Indigenous peoples, if that...just, I'm just wondering how intertwined those two things are, how interrelated and how potentially like codependent that Indigenous or tribal identity is to—maybe self-determination is a better word—but to sort of achieving their goals, as reclaiming what was taken from them, I guess.

Alivia Moore

Yeah. I mean, I think there are ways that that tribal nations can be...so maybe this is what's happening now. Maybe like, I think there are ways that tribal nations can be exerting their sovereignty in ways that are absolutely not culturally aligned. And so hey like, maybe my tribe is sovereign. Maybe this is what it looks like when doing it in a way that is not like reflective of, of I don't know. I mean, I guess it is an Indigenous identity, right, like they are Penobscot people, but having a different expression of like values of what it means to be Penobscot people. And I don't know, a lot of the values that I see espoused in our tribal administration and how they make choices for our community and for future generations, it feels like very western values. So maybe that can be what sovereignty looks like, that's really disappointing. Maybe that's what it looks like.

Leah Kelly

I mean I'm thinking, on the other hand, what if sovereignty is the opposite of that, and it's rejecting all those western values that have been forced onto them?

Alivia Moore

I think that's [unintelligible]. I don't think that's innate, though, right? Like, I think a tribe, like a tribe can work towards sovereignty, and it might be a sovereignty that is embracing those colonial structures. And I think it's also possible for tribal government to—and you're going, it's going to be a lot harder fight, and you're going to achieve, you're going to arrive at this process, you're not gonna just be a singular place—but you're going to get to a place of sovereignty a hell of a lot slower with a hell of a lot more work, if you are looking at it through a lens of like traditional values and reclaiming and restoring. So, yeah, I guess there's kind of like different...and I don't think they're either they're completely distinct paths, either; I think it's important to not create false dichotomies, but, so I guess it's possible. Yeah. Yes, this is causing me to think.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, it's a lot of questions. I think I'm struggling with sort of using the word sovereignty. And I'm wondering, is there another word that represents sort of the vision for you as an Indigenous person? Or to have your people, your tribal nation...if you were to see it in the end goal that you're trying to achieve, what would you call that?

Alivia Moore

I think again, if we're just trying to like use a simplified like phrase to capture it, it would be like collectivity, and then working to build or rebuild collectivity. You know, and like, and interdependence. And I think it's really just that, like doing like the day-to-day work, like committed relationships, again relationships in this really expansive way, in like, rebuilding our kin networks and giving really generously to one another. And so I guess, yeah, interdependence

and collectivity are kind of what I feel like are at the heart of Indigenous sovereign bodies, right? Because we weren't sovereign, even like our tribes are interconnected. So I don't know. I feel like it's kind of a false premise.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, what you're saying about collectivity—do you think that sort of ideally, or sort of in your vision of like, know how to achieve that, do you see, do you think that that's possible? Or even, do you think that's attainable underneath or within the settler-colonial framework that this country is now? Or how much does that rely on, like you said, “liberation” from the colonizer oppressors? Do you think that you could achieve this sort of interdependence and kinship within the United States? I'm just wondering, in an ideal world would colonizers just need to go away? I don't know. I'm just thinking about what that looks like.

Alivia Moore

Yeah, I think I think we're doing it. You know, I think it's like, I think it's a process, I think we're building that now. And, again, it's not something that's just going to be solved quickly. This has been like, 400-plus years here in the United States, but like all of the tools of oppression and genocide were perfected over millennia in Europe and Africa and the Middle East by Europeans. So, like, it's going to take time to heal that and to restore our ability to being community again, and to trust again, and to share with the generosity. I think Indigenous people are closer to our lived experiences of experiencing collectivity, deeply reflective of the Earth that we develop in relation to. So I think we're doing that work now. It's not something that's going to just happen quickly. I think building collectivity really helps to like buffer us from the harms of settler-colonial empires like the United States. So I think it's a really important way of like, yeah, just like decreasing the harms, and, and rebuilding more of our resilience to continue to survive. We need more of us to survive this because like, there's far too many harms occurring, and not enough of us are surviving. And, and hopefully, I don't know, I don't know, I mean, hopefully, enough people in positions of power, they don't have to be like the 1% in the United States, they just, you know, like, white-skinned, white settler folks. Like to really examine and to upend and address, like, their power and other people like them. I think, yes, like the 1%, or the top 5% needs to be challenged, but like, they have little motivation to. It's really like this, like middle people who are still perpetuating the harm and still benefiting from it, that really, like could do more to really be...and I'm seeing it happening, where people are really examining their role in it and working to give up power, give up power.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, what does that look like more specifically, what people in colonizer society can do to give up that power to participate in decolonization? What does that look like to you?

Alivia Moore

Well, decolonization is its own big hype word [laughs], that we could have this whole other conversation, another hour and a half long one, on decolonization. Because you can't decolonize while still like, occupying and settling in someone's territory. So like, “land back” is not just like another hot phrase, it's like, it's real. Like you need to give land back like, the land to go back. That's happening, like we are having commitments of land returns and land returns are occurring. So that's like a, a way of like white folks or settler folks giving up power because we know land

and access to land in this colonial framework is tremendous power, like the seat of all wealth and all assets come from the Earth. Not that we want Indigenous people to just, “Okay, we access all wealth and blah, blah, blah,” no. But being able to redevelop relationships, our relationships with the land and our relatives on the land. But anyways, but yeah, I mean, really, so settler folks giving up power, whether that's transferring deeds, whether that's deferring to the leadership of Black Indigenous people, the Earth that they are occupying with, like following the leadership of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. And just like not needing to have all the answers from us either, and like trusting in our leadership and trusting in our direction. And yeah, I mean, and that means people who are at the head of organizations doing racial justice work or equity work or whatever, step down, like step down, and it's, you know, like it should be, should be a Black person, it should be an Indigenous person, like running that organization. And I want to say, just because it's a Black person, just because it's an Indigenous person, doesn't mean they're coming from a framework that's going to solve things, and that's important to acknowledge. But yeah, we, we just, we need white folks to just kind of step back and to throw their collective power behind the moves of Indigenous and Black folks like that. That's what we need them to do and...[unintelligible] and we need to act boldly. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

Definitely, it sounds like you are thinking sort of, like the yielding of like, agency and, and leadership to Indigenous and Black and minority folks. So, do you think I'm going back to the idea, the word decolonization, it seems like you don't really think it's possible for settlers to work on decolonization because, as long as they're still occupying and being part of the colonizing society. Do you think it's possible for Indigenous people who are living either like on reservations or in their own communities, do you think it's possible for them to work on decolonization even though they're still within this settler colonial framework or like surrounded by it?

Alivia Moore

Yeah, so I'll make a distinction. So, so I believe that settler folks can work towards decolonization [unintelligible] but we can't arrive at a place of being decolonized unless and until occupation ends. Um, this conversation is not something we're going to snap our fingers, it is going to be multigenerational [unintelligible] the work of decolonization occurring, but again, I think it's important that people know that decolonization is not a single act [unintelligible] but is not a place to arrive at, and that it really truly, if what someone wants to achieve is decolonization, it means like the ending of...[unintelligible, cut off]

Leah Kelly

You back?

Alivia Moore

[Unintelligible] yourself false solutions that like “Oh, this this college has a president that you know, is Indigenous so we have decolonized” or “this curriculum has, we have Indigenous people teaching, faculty in each school of the college, we have decolonized something,” like really even though that will take generations for even that to occur. Anyways can Indigenous peoples decolonize while still being occupied? Abso-friggin-lutely, every day, in like, I think like, analyzing, like, reflecting... [cut off]

Leah Kelly  
Hello?

Alivia Moore

Hi, sorry. So the short version is yes, Indigenous people absolutely can be decolonizing even while occupied, but we can't arrive there without occupation ending.

Leah Kelly

Mm-hmm. So it sounds like it's kind of a process that step by step, parts of the process can succeed, but the very end of it, that's kind of not possible at the present time.

Alivia Moore

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we can't say we've arrived at decolonization. No, I don't think.

Leah Kelly

Do you think that Indigenous peoples can achieve true agency and self-determination if they are also a part of settler society or if they have grown up with settler-colonial ways of thinking, or do you think that they need to break away from that?

Alivia Moore

Um, I'm having lots of thoughts. I think the one that feels the most important to name is, is, I don't think something is bad or wrong just because it comes from white culture or people that that are settler folks. I don't think something is necessarily good, or what we want to maintain, just because it comes from our ancestors. So I just want to make sure that like, I'm not saying that, like, all things from white culture must die. [Laughs] Because I think it's really important that white people know that they have like, their own culture, and they have their own, like healing, and like, some of that shit totally needs to go away. But like they've got their good things, too. I don't necessarily know what they are, but like, I believe it's there. [Laughs] So, so I don't know that I'm saying that Native people need to have exclusively Indigenous minds. I don't know if we know what that is anymore. We're saying indigeneity, for myself, I said that it's an identity that has been developed in resistance to colonization, I think we only have now. We only know what it means to be a Native person that has been colonized. We don't know, we don't have pre-colonized minds. You know, I think it's impossible, because we are, our bodies and lands are occupied, you know, we're being colonized. So I don't think there's like a hard and fast line there, but we totally need to, like, take a look at like, what are the gifts that our ancestors gave us and what are the values? And I think it's really important that like, when decisions are made, if we're saying it's like, if we're harkening to our ancestors, and like, the values and what they like, how they guide us, like, does this decision right now—you know, I'm thinking about different things our tribal government does—I'm like, this is so not aligned like with our traditional values. I don't understand how you're saying that, like, our ancestors would be so proud, like, because we're opening a casino? Like, I don't really think so, actually, you know, like, I don't think so. So, yeah, I think I think we just need to, like, you know, reflect, just to, like, reflect on where decisions are, like coming from, like, what values are guiding them, and how it impacts our future generations being humans and more than humans. So that includes like the Earth, the water, trees, plants, fish animals. So like how our decisions impact our future generations. I don't know.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah. So I think we have a few minutes left. I was wondering if there's anything else you want to talk about or add?

Alivia Moore

I really appreciate the the nuances and the levels that you're thinking about this project, about this work. So yeah, I mean, I really enjoyed...I don't know if there's, I would love to see the final paper or project. I would love to see your analysis of it. I really have appreciated your, your questions and your reflection so far.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely I will share it with you. I am you know, kind of concerned about trying to do this the right way. And to kind of write it through or using like a decolonial lens kind of, and one with a goal of social justice. And I think it is kind of difficult for me, coming very much from settler society, just trying to have my projects sort of informed and possibly guided by Indigenous peoples and what I've learned from them. And so I think it's a path I'm still, you know, still on, still trying to figure out, but we'll see. It won't be finished till probably April. But yeah, thank you so much for taking this time. I know it's a big chunk of time you're taking out of your day. So I really appreciate it.

Alivia Moore

Yeah. Thank you so much. And I would just encourage you, if it helps, because I tend to feel kind of like, I hear what you're saying, as like, you're really seeing this, that you hold a responsibility in this like writing and telling and this work. It might help if you even like, write that somewhere in this and just name that and name some of your challenges or your process or your hopes or whatever, that may be freeing for you to acknowledge that you're in the process and you don't need to have all the answers to have something important to say.

*Interview with Chris Newell*

Tue, 12/22 5:21PM • 1:47:34

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I guess we can get started. Just a few logistical questions to begin. I was wondering if you could state your name, your pronouns, and the name of your tribal nation?

Chris Newell

Yeah, my name is Chris Newell. Pronouns he/him/his, and I am Passamaquoddy from the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township.

Leah Kelly

Great. And that's one of the five tribes of the Wabanaki Nation, right?

Chris Newell

Yes.

Leah Kelly

And I just wanted to clarify a little bit. So it seems like the Passamaquoddy tribe has several different locations, including the Indian Township. Is that right?

Chris Newell

We have two communities. Actually, we have three. You know, the Canadians for a long time didn't recognize that we lived on both sides of the river. So they're just recognizing the Schoodic Band of Passamaquoddies on the St. Andrews Side of New Brunswick, so, yeah, we actually have three communities. Traditionally, we would have migrated you know, throughout the seasons. So you know, the Sipayik, which is Pleasant Point, Maine, is located at the mouth of the St. Croix River, Schoodic, which is our traditional tribal headquarters, I guess you could say, where we would gather at the mouth of the river every year for the sea run of the pollock as they came in to spawn, you know, which provided...that's where our name comes from: Peskotomuhkati is "the people who spear pollock." Peskotomuhkatik is "the place where we spear pollock." So that's, that's where our name originates from, is from that that seasonal gathering at the mouth of the river to you know, to harvest pollock, which we did with fishing weirs, you know, not with fishing poles and hooks and things like that. We did a lot with fishing weirs, and that's, and it would supply enough that you could create a food supply after you dried it and got it ready for the winter, you would have a food supply to get you through the winter months, to add to what you were gathering and hunting as well during the winter.

Leah Kelly

I'm sorry, are you saying fishing wires or fishing wares?

Chris Newell

Weirs. W-E-I-R-S.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Interesting. Yeah, sorry. I don't know all the...

Chris Newell

Fishing weirs is basically a fence-like structure to create a large fishing trap in the waters.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Cool. I just wanted to get a little more background on your tribe from you. So I understand it's federally recognized. [Yep.] And it's also recognized in Maine. [Yes.] Does it own land as a tribe or do you just live there?

Chris Newell

So the idea of ownership of land is really, you know, it's a European concept. We occupied and stewarded land for millennia prior to European colonization, but you know, under this, you know, the way of life these days, we do have to own land. But the way it happens for federally recognized tribes, is that the land is owned in trust by the federal government, and we have the rights on our own land to rule ourselves. In other words, we have sovereignty within our own territorial boundaries. And we had a large land claim settlement that was settled in 1984 for actually 12 and



a half million acres, so two thirds of the state of Maine was actually.... You know, because of our treaty rights, and the violation that had happened based off of federal law, that 12 and a half million acres during our land claim settlement for you know, as we fought against what happened in our history, was actually something that the federal government took up on our side and sued the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, you know. So this was a legitimate land claims, which put 12 and a half million acres of the state of Maine up in arms of who actually had rights to it or rights of ownership under proper U.S. law, and we settled in 1980 and ended up from that procuring a sum of money, but also the rights to purchase more land. So we own about, I think around 600,000 acres within the state of Maine.

Leah Kelly

Got it. Okay. Not in Massachusetts, though, even though they sued Massachusetts?

Chris Newell

At the time of the signing of the treaties, there was no state of Maine. Maine doesn't come about until 1820. And those treaties were being signed in the in the 18th century, you know, 30 years prior. So they were signed with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. But when the state of Maine was created, in its constitution, Article 10, Section 7, in the constitution, they actually take over the treaty obligations from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to the tribes of Maine.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so that's really interesting. That seems like I mean, for northeastern standards, that seems like actually a good amount of land. Obviously not compared to western tribes, but is that like, the largest reservation in the northeast?

Chris Newell

Um, I mean, it's not all necessarily reservation, some of it is what they call "trust land." And a lot of it is unoccupied. It's, it's, we use a lot of it for hunting purposes, we have a maple syrup farm on part of it. A lot of it's in the western part of the state and then the communities are in the eastern part of the state, you know, but we use it all for the purposes of trying to keep up subsistence living, living off the land, trying to become as self-sustainable as possible. But yeah, it's, you know, it's not all reservation land. So it's governed a little strangely. And then, based on the Maine land claim settlement, it really created a unique relationship between the state of Maine and the tribes, which actually hurt a lot of our federal sovereignty. And so some of the things that we do, we actually have to do under state law, rather than working as a federally recognized sovereign, which is unique just to the state of Maine, as a result of the land claim settlement. It's been something that we've been trying to undo for the last 40 years. Because there was language that was thrown in there about jurisdiction at the very last second, that the folks like my father, you know, who didn't speak English growing up, you know, weren't quite sure what they were signing off on. They were being told one thing about this language about municipalities, that it was a grant of power on top of your federal sovereignty. But the state of Maine was actually using that language to limit sovereignty of tribes, to put us back under state law. So we have a unique situation just in the state of Maine where actually the sovereignty of the tribes based off a settlement agreement that we agreed to in 1980 has been adjudicated in the state courts in the favor of the state of Maine, to still have sovereignty or still be able to rule over us in a lot of different ways.

Leah Kelly

So do you do you live in Indian Township?

Chris Newell

Not currently, no. My entire family lives on both of our communities in Pleasant Point and Indian Township. I have been living in Connecticut for the past 20 years. And I just recently took over as the Executive Director of the Abbey Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine. So I am currently residing in Ellsworth, Maine, which is about an hour and a half away from Indian Township.

Leah Kelly

Okay. And forgive my ignorance, but is Indian Township an actual town?

Chris Newell

That's the name of the reservation.

Leah Kelly

Oh, the whole reservation, okay.

Chris Newell

Yeah, yeah, that's the English language name of it. I mean, before the federal government created a reservation, that was just literally one of the living communities we had in the inland areas, you know, we had that land under treaty. And the state didn't know what to call it. So they just called it a township of Indians. So Indian Township.

Leah Kelly

And so there are different there are different Passamaquoddy communities in different locations in Indian Township?

Chris Newell

There actually is, yeah, so there's Peter Dana Point, which is the the portion I grew up in, was a little bit more isolated, off the road. U.S. Route 1 goes right through the other part of our reservation, which we call "the strip," you know, and that's located next to another body, inland body of water as well. So we're all connected by this lake system, which we can get to both communities by canoe. And that's how we traditionally did it until the roads were built in the 50s. The state of Maine just decided against our will to build a road that was split, one half of a part of our communities, way back when, and also actually put a lot of people in danger because they built it very, very close to where people were living, very close to the front of their houses. And so over the years since the time of the construction of U.S. Route 1 we actually had...and the state had control over the speed limit, which was 45 miles an hour, you know, winter roads in Maine, bad visibility, things like that; people walking as the main way of getting around, no cars. You know, we have people that were hit by logging truck traffic which comes through that area on a constant basis. And so when it comes to that, you know what I just mentioned that, you know, that idea of language of municipalities being added into jurisdictional language and the land claim settlement, part of the reason for that was the history of people dying as a result of getting hit on a state road where we didn't have any control over the speed limit, which is way too high for the safety of the people in our community. And we wanted to have that control, the state was promising that control

with that language. We did not know that they were going to then use it to limit us down to the power of municipality only, rather than having to deal with this on a government-to-government basis.

Leah Kelly

And the three different communities within your tribe, are they very distinct from each other? Or are they pretty much culturally the same? How do how does that relationship work among them?

Chris Newell

Well, I mean, traditionally, once again, we would have you know, migrated to the mouth of the St. Croix River and been ocean, coastal peoples during that time of the year. And then in the winter months, moving inland to freshwater areas and hunting and using the rivers as superhighway, so we, you know. And journeys were made all the way to Quebec, the western side of Quebec, you know. In fact, Quebec in our language translates to "where the river ends," and that's where the St. Lawrence River stops being wide and actually narrows down to a very small river, where Quebec City is, you know. So we were able to journey thousands of miles and make it over the territory quite easily. But traditionally, for food gathering sources, we roamed our own territory and were all over the place. So the fact that we have a freshwater community and a saltwater community is just reminiscent of the way that we traditionally lived pre-colonization. And we are all blood relatives to one another, and we frequently move from one community and back and forth. So my, my sister grew up with me in Indian Township, she got married, moved to Pleasant Point, lived there, raised her kids and now moved with her husband back to Indian Township. It's all Passamaquoddy land. So with the way it's governed, each community has its own governance, a chief, a tribal council, and then the tribe is governed as a total body under a joint Tribal Council, which is made up of the tribal councils from both communities.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so not all the communities are in Indian Township?

Chris Newell

No, I'm talking about two main communities of Indian Township and Pleasant Point. There are two separate governments, essentially, two community governments. And we operate as, to operate as the body of the Passamaquoddy tribe as a whole, that's run by the joint Tribal Council, which is made up of the tribal councils from both Pleasant Point and Indian Township. Indian Township has smaller communities inside it. And that's just what I was talking about, they're all governed under the government of Indian Township though.

Leah Kelly

Okay, but are there two reservations?

Chris Newell

Yes. Indian Township is located next to Princeton, Maine, which is about 25 miles away from Pleasant Point, which is next to Eastport.

Leah Kelly

Okay. I suppose I'm just wondering sort of what the benefit was of having multiple communities living separate from each other, but still considering itself one tribe. Was because there wasn't enough space to have everyone in living in one place?

Chris Newell

Well, I mean, we had traditional communities that existed all over the area, and there was multiple ones. It wasn't just those two communities. But we had a couple things happen. Number one was the smallpox epidemics. And what ended up happening as a result is that a lot of tribal chiefs would start to congregate around Catholic Indian missions. So that's where you start to see the development of some of the not the nontraditional communities of people who are trying to escape the epidemics. And basically, were being told by the Catholic priests, you know, the French Catholics, "If you look at us, we get these diseases, we don't die. If you follow our way, you won't die as well." So as a last-ditch effort, you see a lot of tribal chiefs uprooting their communities, mobile communities where they were moving them around seasonally, and then putting them permanently around Indian missions for the entire year. So that's part of it. So you had you know, multitude communities based on these Indian missions already spread about, but then they started to become less and less populated. And then we ended up with just the two main communities of Indian Township and Pleasant Point. And they both existed—Indian Township was not, you didn't get to it by roads, you know, it was totally isolated. Passamaquoddies living, subsistence living, 100% of the time with a Catholic Church in the community. Pleasant Point was accessible by a road, by the ocean, once again, though, it was pretty isolated from everything else and had a Catholic Church and both of them were called St. Anne's, by the way. And that's culturally because in our culture, elder women achieve the highest social stature, and St. Anne is the mother of Mary, which is the grandmother of Jesus. So hence, the, the patron saint of both Catholic churches was chosen as the grandmother of Jesus, because of the cultural ties. You know, so you have that reason happening.

And then, in the 20th, early part of the 20th century, we had a disagreement happen mostly in Pleasant Point, where people wanted to shift from the traditional mode of transferring chiefdoms by heredity down through family lines, to voting in chiefs. And so there's an episode in our history that happens around the late 19th century, early 20th century where, what they would, what they would do back then is the chief would have a pole erected in front of his house that designated, you know, him, as the leader of the community. And they had a vote within the community, and they voted somebody else. So the people that voted erected a pole in front of that chief's house; the people wanting the hereditary chief went and cut that pole down. And then it kind of you know, you know, went back and forth where the people that elected their chief went and cut the hereditary chief's pole down. And it split politically over that divide over to whether to keep traditional hereditary chiefs or to vote them in. And most of the ones that wanted to keep traditional hereditary chiefs moved to Indian Township, the more isolated community where that was still being done. And Pleasant Point started to vote in chiefs since then.

Leah Kelly

And today is it still like that?

Chris Newell

No, with federal recognition, you have to kind of play the game with the federal government of following the rules of federal government. And that requires the creation of a constitution, you

know, like all of these types of things, you know, the Indian Reorganization Act, forces us to protect our sovereignty under the rules of nationhood, which requires, you know, under U.S. law, things like a constitution and stuff like that. So, these days, the way our government was set up after federal recognition, which happened in the 1970s, this was, you know, we existed as wards of the state, only recognized as Indians by the state of Maine, you know, from 19th century, mid-19th century onward, until the 1970s, when we won our federal recognition in a court case. And that was called Passamaquoddy vs. Morton, which was a very important court case, because that was the first court case that opened up the ability of East Coast tribes to gain federal recognition. The problem, the reason why we didn't have it up until that point, is because all of our treaties were with bodies that were either colonial, which predated the United States federal government, or were with European countries, kings and queens from places like that. They were not with the established United States federal government. Therefore, the United States federal government did not recognize East Coast tribes until our case was adjudicated in 1972, the Passamaquoddy vs. Morton case which gave us federal recognition. So, you know, we had to live through that history. And, you know, when it came time for creation of a government that the U.S. government would recognize that once again, you know, required a constitution, all those types of things, one of the things that they were, you know, definitely pushing for was not having hereditary chiefs, but having democracy, which was what America was, you know, that's the big promise of America's democracy, is the best thing in the world. So we transferred our entire governmental system from consensus-based, you know, council decisions to democratic or majority-based decision making, and also began voting in our chiefs from that point on.

Leah Kelly

What spurred back before that, when the tribes split into the ones who wanted hereditary versus democratic choosing of chiefs what? What caused that that group of people want to break away from the hereditary?

Chris Newell

Well, some of it was the community members were getting out in the world a little bit. So World War I is a great example of that. A lot of Passamaquoddies, you know, including one of the Chief's sons volunteered, you know. They were not citizens of the United States, yet, they volunteered to fight and fought bravely. And there's, you know, lots of records of that. And they're, they're going out, and they're spending times in Europe, you know, getting to know other cultures, other worldviews and expanding their worldview. So when they come back home, they see, you know, certain things, and they want to bring back what they think is better. And so there's a progressive mindset that changes from the traditional, and that's how those things happen is that you know, all cultures are dynamic, all cultures change as we gain new information. So that's what was happening is as these, you know, soldiers are going back and then they're coming, they're, they're seeing the world, and they're coming back home to these small isolated traditional communities. And they're saying, you know, there's other ways to do things. And this is how we do it, you know, and some things get tried out. It's a, you know, a process of trial and error in a lot of ways. But, eventually, some of these processes get, you know, because the world has changed, so they become necessary.

You know, that's one of the things about our tribal governments these days. Before recognition we were only given money by the state when, you know, out of a trust fund, when they when they saw fit. We didn't govern our own finances, and now our tribal governments are basically, you know,

governing these multimillion dollar, you know, yearly finances. And that's the main purpose of their job versus what they were previously doing, which was making sure that when Indian agents came with supplies, they you know, they knew who everybody in the community was, who had the most need. Tribal governors or chiefs would make sure that those people got their needs met first. And now, our modern-day government is about stewarding finances, money. And that's really you know, that's the one of the biggest changes that happens with federal recognition.

Leah Kelly

I definitely want to get back to federal recognition, nationhood, et cetera. We will get to that when I get to the sovereignty portion of my questions for my thesis, but first, I'd like to move back a little bit and ask you more about yourself. So could you talk about your position as Director of the Abbe Museum and very briefly what you've done to get there, and what your goals are through your work?

Chris Newell

So yeah, I am the first Wabanaki Executive Director of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, and the Abbe Museum is a museum focused on the culture, arts and history of the Wabanaki tribes, you know, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Mi'kmaq, Makiseet, and Abenaki peoples, you know. So it's a really great time for the Abbe Museum in that there's been a decolonization initiative, which began under my predecessor, Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, and what that meant was taking the material of the museum first, and starting to...instead of centering the voices of anthropology and archaeology, you know, which is a non-Native interpretation oftentimes. The voices of the material presented in the museum are created and presented centrally by the communities themselves. You know, which is a vast change, you know.

So I was working at the Pequot Museum previously, a big fan of what Cinnamon was doing. I began work with some of my colleagues at the Pequot Museum and founded in 2018 something called Akomawt Educational Initiative. And what we began to do is start to work with all areas of education, k through 12 schools, colleges, universities, other museums, and incorporating Native content, to really un-silo you know, the information that was in being held in tribal museums and museums like the Abbe to make sure that it gets out into the world and it's just a normal part of history. It's not a separate history, you know, we're, you know, which is oftentimes how it's treated. Native people have been, you know, part of this country and have contributed to it all the way through, but unfortunately, you know, the public school system has done a really good job of erasing us. So Akomawt was formed with that idea in mind and really undoing that damage and social change. So you know, the work I was doing with Akomawt, you know, we were doing work, we still do work with a lot of Boston's major museums, the MFA Boston, the Leventhal Map Center, revolutionary spaces. And it you know, it really aligned with what the Abbe was doing. So when the transition of executive director changed over they changed the job from President/CEO of the Abbe Museum, to Executive Director and Senior Partner to the Wabanaki Nations, as part of this decolonization initiative, which, you know, really needed a Wabanaki person to take over that role. If you're going to be a partner to the nations, it really takes somebody that is from one of them.

So, you know, my fit at the time, really, you know, just made the most sense, considering, you know, my history in tribal museums, the great work that I'd done at the Pequot Museum, you know, and then founding Akomawt Educational Initiative, expanding our network outwardly through the southern New England region, and then being able to bring all of that experience back

home to my homelands in the state of Maine, and work on my own tribal culture, not my my wife and children's, you know. Not to not to say that I didn't love doing that, you know, this, my children being seen in this world is extremely valuable to me, which is why I put my heart and soul into my time at the Pequot Museum. But it's really a special place right now for me, that I get to come home and do this for the Abbe Museum, especially with this, its expanded role. It began as a small trailside museum, just an ethnographic collection of spear points and arrow points and things like that, you know, with really a third person interpretation. And in 2000, opened the downtown location. And then over the last five years, that downtown location has been completely, you know, upended and redone under the decolonization initiative to really stand out as a different way for colonial museums to handle Native content, Native histories.

Leah Kelly

Um, and your wife and children are Pequot, you said? [Yes.] Can I ask, are they...

Chris Newell

Mashantucket Pequot.

Leah Kelly

Yes, Mashantucket Pequot. Because there's Mashantucket and Eastern, right, so, okay. I actually wanted to ask, do you feel that the Abbe Museum has a target audience of outsiders, or is it also for Indigenous peoples, or both?

Chris Newell

Well, you know, for the longest time, the Abbe Museum was run with the idea of attracting, you know, the tourists people that come to Mount Desert Island, you know. Mountain Desert Island in the state of Maine is where Acadia National Park is, you know, nearly the entire park is located on the island. So it attracts 3 million visitors a year to, you know, to the island, it's a tourist destination, not to mention cruise ships coming through there. You know, so that was really kind of part of it was, you know, it was a trailside museum to be added to the park, you know, to increase the, you know, the presence of the park. And so it was, you know, it was a non-Native institution run for an audience of non-Native people. And the voice of it spoke that way. As a Passamaquoddy young boy visiting it, I can distinctly remember the fact that the museum's caching and other things spoke to me as if my community didn't exist, you know. Just the regular way of doing things in the museum world in the 70s was really, you know, to write about us in past tense all the time, not showing anything of the current arts that we had, you know, it was just everything was from the past and from people that were long dead and gone. And I was living in a community of vibrant artists and I didn't see any of their work exhibited there, you know, so yes, it definitely you know, in the past has served as that and you know, we're still going to do that where we you know, we're in a tourist destination, we attract cruise ships, you know, that is a big part of our audience, is not just the state of Mainers, but you know, the worldwide international audience of tourists that come through there as well.

But with our changes and decolonization, one of the things I would like to do, I mean, you know, the Abbe Museum is located within Wabanaki homelands. Therefore, any Wabanaki visitors should feel in that space as if they are at home and a home away from home in another way. So you know, the use of language and things like that are going to be incorporated in the bathroom signage and other things like that. So that you know, there's an experience that can be had by the

non-Native visitor of course, and exploring the world of Wabanaki people through the eyes of Wabanaki people and first person perspectives, but also very welcoming atmosphere for a Wabanaki visitor coming to explore, you know, the collections and other things that we have to make sure that you know, the voice of the museum does not speak to them as if they don't exist, in fact, is inclusive of their voice. That they feel like they contributed to what the material is inside the museum and that they feel, you know, constantly welcome there. And so you know, the you know, museum, of course, one of the things they did was make it free for all Wabanaki visitors. So that's what we're gonna continue. And then some of my plans for the future is, we have a library, but it's not in public space; I want to expand the building, put that library in public space. And also I'm working with another initiative to create a Passamaquoddy language, culture trust. Passamaquoddy language is the most documented Indigenous language in the entire world. And the materials are not centralized. And I'm working with different bodies to centralize those through the Abbe Museum. So one of the additions is the library and a research center where Wabanaki people and non-Wabanaki keep people can come and learn. And that will include a lot of resources about language, you know, and that really serves the Wabanaki researcher more than anything.

Leah Kelly

Why is the Wabanaki language the most well documented?

Chris Newell

It's not the Wabanaki language, it's the Passamaquoddy.

Leah Kelly

Oh, right, sorry. Yeah.

Chris Newell

But, you know, it's something my father began 50 years ago, when he was in Cambridge. He started working at MIT with Phil LeSourd and a few others. And they began creating the writing system and documenting our language and creating the first dictionary for our language back then, and in the early 70s. And in that 50 years, my dad and David Francis and others have worked with folks like Dr. Robert Leverett. And the dictionary has increased from a small, you know, 80-page, you know, book of terminology to an actual dictionary of 20,000-plus entries, that entire dictionary is also online, fully accessible. And throughout the process over the last 40 years, most of it has been documented on video by a man named Ben Levine. So there's 700 hours of video documentation of the language as well. So as far as we know, that, you know, and there's no other single Indigenous language that has that level of documentation in existence anywhere in the world, you know. These are folks that work outside of, they don't just work with Passamaquoddy language, they work with helping to preserve Indigenous languages in South America and other parts of the world as well.

Leah Kelly

So I wasn't planning to talk so much about the museum, but I'm actually getting quite interested in it as you're talking about it. So I just was wondering, from your perspective, I mean, I know you've got this decolonization initiative and trying to include Wabanaki voices and everything. And I'm wondering how you navigate when, you know, non-Native people come to visit, how do you prevent or try to rebuild or deconstruct the sort of traditional way of looking at museums as



representing the past, as being static, as being almost in some ways voyeuristic of the exotic or the unknown? How do you prevent that when you're showing things some people might consider artifacts, even though they're just symbols of your culture?

Chris Newell

Yeah, I mean, you know, that's really what, you know, changing the content was all about was, you know, we want to present, you know, traditional artifacts and things that have been found that are part of our traditional collection, we didn't want to erase that. But you know, as part of that presentation, we also want to present you know, the living arts. Wabanaki peoples across the Northeast in the U.S. and Canada are known for our ash splint basketmaking. It's, you know, risen to a level of art, you know, fancy basketry began in the 1890s as a way to convert our subsistence economy into the market economy by creating basketry that would be bought by Euro-Americans. So they're creating things, you know, sewing baskets, and tanning baskets, and, you know, all types of different things, you know, and weaving just about anything you can imagine out of ash flint and it began to become a real art and in this modern day world, these artists are, you know, some of them have risen to a level where they're selling a basket for \$20,000 per basket. And they are, you know, literally harvesting the tree and, you know, going from a log to a finished basket, you know, the entire process, all through the same traditional way we've always done it. So you know, to have that exhibited alongside, you know, those pieces from the 1890s shows that we can maintain our culture, maintain these traditions, you know, we have a lot of living knowledge within our communities, that when this institution, the colonial institution, like the Abbe Museum, just opens its doors up to the collections to allow the Native communities to come in and view them, then that allows the sharing of that information.

You know, the archaeology and the anthropology that has been learned over the years is all of a sudden married to the traditional knowledges that live within our communities, to oral histories and living, you know, the history, living the culture out, and keeping it going that way. And it really increases the experience, you know, and knowledge of the institution and also changes the entire visitor experience, 100%, you know. And it's really interesting, if you look at our Google reviews or TripAdvisor, we get so many high marks for the fact that, you know, we do include, you know, living artists, and, you know, we include the living culture, we include the languages, we include the things like the emerald ash borer coming into the state of Maine, and now destroying the ash trees, you know, and what that's going to do to the basket making economy, and that's part of the exhibits, and people are aware of how, you know, the Indigenous environment around them is being affected by colonization in 2020. You know, you know, that's, that's extremely valuable to the visitor experience. And the only people that knock it are the ones that had these expectations that they've just been, you know, raised around with all colonial museums that they only want to see things from 100-plus years ago. And so the only ones that give us kind of, you know, so-so reviews, they're usually just like maybe three stars, not one star, but the ones that would give us a three star, and they're very few, are the ones that say, "There's too many things that are from people that are alive." You think about that for a second. That's how we're getting you know, that's where we're getting criticized, is for not fulfilling the fantasy of the vanishing race theory that the 19th century American conservation movement was founded on. And as a colonial museum, their expectation is that we would be upholding that yet we don't. And so it shocks them sometimes. But guess what, this is the way of the future when it comes to museums, and they're going to start seeing a whole lot more of this, so.

Leah Kelly

Quickly, before we move on, I was wondering if you could compare your experience at the Pequot Museum with the Abbe Museum, and possibly talk about differences between the Mashantucket Pequot tribal nation and yours. Because I am interested in sort of comparing different tribal nations because they can be very different and distinct. And both of those nations are federally recognized. But you know, the Mashantucket Pequot, they have this really large casino business, and it sounds like the Passamaquoddy have a much more rural, nature-based environment. Could you talk about comparing and contrasting those? And I guess, what do you see as the benefits and downsides of different types of methods that tribes use to...

Chris Newell

You know, this is all important, because a lot of times, you know, like, the way Native people are taught about, oftentimes by geographical areas, so there's a tendency for people to think of the Northeastern tribes as we're all exactly the same. And that just couldn't be further from the truth. You know, and, you know, that's one of the great things about my time at the museum is I got to really invest my time understanding the nuances and differences, but also the connections, because there are connections, and I'll explain that a little bit as I get going here. But when it comes to, you know, the Abbe Museum versus the Pequot Museum, you know, we're talking really two different worlds because the Pequot Museum is a tribal museum, created by the tribe, completely 100% their perspective on their history. The Abbe Museum is a colonial museum, originally, the place to house an ethnographic collection of what they felt was a vanishing race and all those other things of the American conservation movement. So yeah, and so we are not unapologetically—or, we're working towards that. But we're, you know, we haven't traditionally been unapologetically, you know, Native in our perspective. It's really, you know, favored the voice of anthropology and archaeology, which is really, you know, non-Native sciences. You know, so that's, that's a couple of the major differences. There's also major differences in size. The Pequot Museum is the world's largest tribal Museum, the building is 385,000 square feet, or 305,000 square feet, there is over 85,000 square feet of exhibit space alone in that museum. And a tour, when I would run tours, runs you through 20,000 years of history, we try to do it in an hour, but it really takes more than an hour and a half. And that's still giving you just highlights along the way and not seeing all the exhibits, you're just seeing, you know, pieces and getting, you're going through the major parts, but not everything. So, you know, there's a couple of major differences, I always call the Pequot Museum, you know, the Disneyland of museums, you know, it's just, you know, especially for kids, adults, you name it. There's places in that museum where the way they were designed, I mean, the Pequot village exhibit is a half-acre indoor diorama, life scale, you know, diorama that you walk into, and, you know, just an experience that is unreal, you know, to be able to have that type of level, you know, to have an entire village constructed around you and see all the elements of the 15th century, you know, going about and to have an interactive audio guide to go with it as you explore the space, and no signage or anything like that to interrupt what you're looking at, you know. So I mean, it's incredible space, it's really, it's life-changing for a lot of people. And that's important, because you got to remember in Pequot history, I mean, the Pequot reservation, Mashantucket Pequot reservation was established in the 17th century and is the oldest continuously occupied reservation in the country.

In fact, a lot of times people just kind of gloss over the fact that reservations began in Connecticut; even anthropology books that describe Native histories will often describe the early reservation period as happening in the 19th century, with western tribes. But what that really was

the federal government creating reservations by the, they were following the model that was created by the colonial governments in the 17th century, first in Connecticut, and then in Massachusetts, of you know, creating reserve lands and putting Indians and pushing them and making them live just there so that we can take over everything else and colonize it and farm it. So, you know, there's a lot of history to this particular piece of land, you know, at Mashantucket where the museum is located. And it's, you know, it's been only lived on by Pequots, at least for the last 10,000 years, literally, you know, so that's one of the beautiful things about it, is that it has that deep connection, it's unsettled territory, you know, though only 200 acres of it is like that. But, you know, they were able to, you know, reconstruct a lot of the reservation up to about 1100 acres. But the Pequots experienced a true genocide that lasted for 400 years, they were the first tribe to experience a war of aggression by Europeans, by the English, with the intent of wiping them out, which they nearly did, and then they enslaved them. And then after a portion of enslavement, forced their children to become indentured servants and forced-aculturated them into Christianity and speaking the English language only. And use them, the census data by the Connecticut state government, because the federal government recognized East Coast tribes yet, but the Connecticut state government would take census data every year as a way to try to erase even more Pequots. And so this paper genocide continues even with the remnants of what they have left. And so they suffered the effects of genocide, not just once in their history with the war, but several times in several different waves through different parts of their history all the way into the 20th century. So that museum stands in stark contrast to the genocide that was perpetuated against them first by the colony and then by the state of Connecticut. And what is largely the history that's fed to all people that are raised in the state of Connecticut is that the Pequots are all gone. You know, so that you know that big Disneyland of a museum is a life-changing place where people walk into it, and literally will ask at times, if the Pequot tribe is actually alive, because they've been fed through from the biases of their history teachings that a genocide happened, the Pequots are all gone. And even with a Pequot educator leaving their tour, they will ask that question, just not making the connection, you know, it just is. But by the time they leave, not only has that whole perception changed, but they're very excited about a world where this living federal tribal government is actually impacting the state that they live in a positive way, you know, providing jobs, you know, the casino and all the other...it's just, the world changes for these people. And kids especially, actually leave the museum more excited than when they showed up, because of the level of erasure the Pequots have experienced, and what that museum does to undo that, you know, that's the true gem of that museum, you know, and the power of it. And so, you know, it's, it's a dream of a museum in that it is not created along typical museum lines of a chronological timeline, it's a cyclical type of way to experience and, you know, you start at the last ice age, and you go forward in time from there, but really, you can cycle through the museum and experience a timeline through a cyclical fashion, rather than through a chronological fashion, which is, you know. So there's little nuances built into the design work of that museum that actually give a much better experience. And so, once again, you know, unapologetically Pequot in how they do their history. So when they talk about the English they are talking about, you know, all, not the greatness of these towns that were being, you know, they're talking about people that were very much after them, wanting to kill them, that burned their, their relatives, children, in a massacre in, you know, in 1637. And make it, being real about it at all. It's a profound experience for people to get that, you know, because they've been fed the foundational mythology of the first Thanksgiving narrative, you know, that makes colonization sound all fine and pretty, and all of these other things that have been going on, so that's really the you know, the experience that you get there.

The Abbe Museum is a colonial institution that is going through a process of decolonization, which is a very important thing, because all museums are colonial museums, except if they're tribal museums. In fact, colonial museums are colonial artifacts. Because we don't have museums unless we're colonized. The idea of creating museums begins in Europe, and was, you know, transported here. And so as a Native educator, I oftentimes, you know, use colonial museums as a way to study why Americans believe the stereotypes and other things they do about Native peoples, and oftentimes, it's because of this whole nineteenth century way of displaying, you know, the decision making and the capturing and all that type of stuff that museums are, you know, feeding. And you know, that's why in 2020, somebody can walk into the Pequot Museum and ask if the Pequots are still alive. Foxwoods is right next door; that's owned by the tribe. I mean, like just every thought, like there's like a million signals in the world. So the Pequots are here as they walk in and they still have that bias as they walk in and have to ask that question to have it settled. You know, and that's, you know, that's the harm that they're undoing there. And, you know, colonial museums have been perpetuating this harm for such a long time, that by undoing that with this process of decolonization to the Abbe Museum, we're creating a model for other museums to also undo the harm that they're doing in their colonial institutions.

So the Abbe has gone beyond just the content change. We are now, the board has been changed, you know, so the board was once all just Bar Harbor residents and people from MDI or whatever. Now in the bylaws it is written that half of the board is Wabanaki. We also have a Native Council, which advises the board, and the board has no selection over who those people are. The living communities, the five communities that we have in the state of Maine, appoint two members from the communities to serve on the Native Council and they're paid, which is different from the board of trustees who are volunteer. So we have a parity on the board of half Wabanaki membership, half non-Wabanaki membership at least. And there's a co-chair system in that one of the co-chairs comes from the Native Council, so one of them will always be Wabanaki, and the other co-chair comes from the board of trustees so they could be or could not be Wabanaki. So there's actually not just parity in the governance of the Abbe, in decision making, there's actually Wabanaki control over the governance and decision making level of the Abbe Museum. And that's an important thing, that sharing of power that really needs to happen, you know, and then we can start to convert what we do, especially now with a Wabanaki executive director, from, you know, the past of third person interpretation to really moving forward with first person interpretation of Wabanaki cultural arts and histories, which, you know, just further impacts, you know, and gets rid of those harmful implicit biases that colonial museums tend to feed.

Leah Kelly

So I want to move on to this theme that I'm exploring of indigeneity. First, I was wondering, do you identify as Indigenous?

Chris Newell

Well, when it comes to these English language terms, right, you know, that's, like, the most common question, especially when I started creating Akomawt and started working with teachers is, you know, "Which do I use? Native American, Indian, Native, Indigenous, I don't know which one's right." And what I always tell people is that, when it comes to all of those generalized terms, they are all wrong. I identify as Passamaquoddy. Um, but we are speaking in a foreign language, English, and English uses generalized terminology, the concept of, of, you know, putting us under an umbrella term, you know, the 1000-plus different Native cultures that they were experiencing,

under one umbrella term begins with Europeans, the French and English especially. And that concept is transferred over, we're speaking in their language. So therefore, we have to use these terms occasionally. But what I tell people is that they're all equally wrong, which is why they change over time. So the, you know, the older version is Indian, which is actually legal terminology, and we're never going to get rid of that word, by the way, it's in the U.S. Constitution. So whenever the U.S. government makes laws about tribes as a whole across the country, that word Indian is used in the law: Indian Child Welfare Act, American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. So that's actual legal terminology. As a generalized term for the Indigenous, you know, federally recognized Indigenous peoples of this country.

You know, nowadays, I mean, it was in the 70s, in the 80s, 90s, it was Native American, nowadays, it is going to Native with a capital N or Indigenous with a capital I. And the reason for that is because, if you divorce Native from American, America is only, you know, been thought of as America since the 1500s. You know, so that's a new concept. So what it does is it divorces it from the idea of America, and then you know, is inclusive of that 12,000 years. So, what do I prefer, you know, I coach people to use the terms Native with a capital N or Indigenous with a capital I if you have to generalize. Indian is okay in certain constructs, but I will coach you against it because younger generations find it offensive, sometimes. Our older generation, they didn't speak English first. And the word they were introduced to use was Indian. So my father's generation will use that amongst themselves constantly. So I use them pretty interchangeably. So but what I would coach people on, if you have to use a generalized term use Native with a capital N, Indigenous with capital I. But I do not identify as either of those because they are, you know, just put me under an umbrella of 1000-plus different cultures, we're all so different from one another, all speaking different languages. I am a Passamaquoddy. And Passamaquoddy is also identified under that other umbrella of cosmology of Wabanaki peoples or People of the Dawn.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so the concept of indigeneity doesn't apply to you? Is that what you're saying?

Chris Newell

No, I wouldn't say that, I'm just saying that when it comes to English language terminology, sometimes we can get bogged down in concepts that don't exist within the cultural context of some of the people you're talking about. So Indigenous is an English language concept, you know, and it does apply, you know, to any people that you know, are Indigenous to a region, you know, that their cultures are born of the land where they're from, and that can include Irish people, that can include the Basque people in France. So this includes, European cultures as well can be Indigenous, and in fact, many, you know, the country of France pushed out a lot of its Indigenous communities and created the country of France over the top of it. So that was essentially colonized as well. Even in Europe, they have a history of it, you know, so indigeneity absolutely applies, you know, to Passamaquoddy people, we are an Indigenous people of you know, Peskotomuhkatik, the place where we spear pollock.

Leah Kelly

I think I'm thinking more about you personally, as you see yourself, as you see your identity, because obviously you're Passamaquoddy first. I suppose, just that some Indigenous peoples I have talked to have thought, "Yes, I'm Indigenous," because indigeneity can be a collective identity that roots people to a place and creates a type of solidarity with people, even if they are from different

cultures, just because of that similarity of having suffered from colonization and living in a settler-colonial society. Do you feel that has become an identity in itself, just that, that connection among those who have been colonized, who have suffered, who have shared that experience?

Chris Newell

Yeah, no, you're definitely right, when it comes to you know, how the term is, you know, because it's developed over time, and has slightly changed over time. And what you're talking about is exactly where it is going, and what the most conversation is about. Indigenous cultures to me, anybody, you know, a person that would identify as Indigenous comes from a culture that, you know, is land-based, you know, you know, where the code, the language literally is born of the land, you know, your lifeways are born of the land, you know. It's really that tie to a particular, you know, piece of land, or a way of life on a geographical area that was developed because of the land. So that's really that connection between, you know, life is stewardship of the land, the life-sustaining policies, and all of that, you know, that kept, you know, our ancestors going for thousands of years sustainably, and then colonization happens and we're living unsustainably now. You know, 200 years from now, our resources are gone, we're all suffering from trying to figure out where to find water, the way we're going right now. And that's just in a couple hundred years of work, so it really is going to require the colonized population to actually turn back to Indigenous ways of knowing, which is actually in a lot of ways going to indigenized, the colonized population, you know; they're going to have to give up their colonized ways and take over Indigenous ways. And so that's where I tie it to oftentimes, it's the way of life that is created by the landscape itself and your tie to it as an individual. And that's really where I see it from. And some tribes have been robbed of it; all the tribes that went to Oklahoma, they were they all were forced to walk there. And some of them came from as far away as Pennsylvania and New Jersey, or, you know, Georgia and places like that. They were robbed of indigeneity and had to create a new indigeneity based on their new homeland in Oklahoma. And you see that really, you know, happening, although they do talk about the migration in their tribal histories, and the fact that they come from somewhere else, and that's really where their language was born. You know, so there's, there's you know, once again, dynamic natures of cultures, our oral histories change, but we keep all that knowledge alive. And it really goes back to that tie to the land you know, even in those cultures that have been forced into Oklahoma, they always talk about their homelands and the mountains they come from and where those places that they call are sacred.

Leah Kelly

Okay. I am very interested, just from being a sociology major, in the construction of identity, and it sounds like you touched on that a little bit. With the term "Indigenous" being from colonizer language, could you talk a little more about how Indigenous identity has been constructed and changed over time? And also about how colonizers have created that identity through their own perspectives and how that could affect Indigenous peoples' possible view of their own identity or even cause them to construct an identity that didn't exist before?

Chris Newell

It really goes, you got to tie yourself back to your language. Because your language is the blueprint of your culture that existed pre-colonization. And, you know, just to give an example, we did not have words in our language for "Native Americans," or "Indigenous people," or "Native people," or, you know, we just did not have that. We had to create those words as Europeans arrived, and

our first word for Europeans when they arrived, was we called them “hairy-faced men” You know, that's because we only saw men, you know, and this is the days before anybody was recording landings, you know, this is back way as early as the 15th century. And there's Portuguese fishermen, and French fishermen coming, you know, to our coasts, because the cod fish were so ridiculously plentiful, it was their little honey hole, they could fill their boats up, you know, in a day, and return, and it was very high quality. So this was, you know, there was a lot of landings that happened, you know, way early on. And so, yeah, our language, you know, our first words for what we call a “white man,” we're not wanting to call them white. I mean, this idea of race is once again developed in European countries, that, you know, different colors of skin define who you are somehow, you know, so we didn't have these words of race, you know, so we called the first Europeans we saw “hairy-faced men,” we didn't call them “white men.” And we still don't have a word for them that calls them white men. And most tribes don't either, you know. So the word we use now is “wenuhc” and we translate that to English speakers these days and modern day world as the word for a white or a Euro-American. But really the etymology of that word derived from a question: “Who are you? Where do you come from?” So the strangeness of the Europeans that were arriving is being you know, exhibited there.

And we have a relational way, the way our Algonquin dialects work is relational, the world is described through animate and inanimate, not through this noun, subject, verb, you know, type of placement and other ways of describing things. There's no words for ownership and things like that. So, you know, as we start to work with Europeans, you know, and that word wenuhc, you know, we start to see women and other folks so the word develops, you know, wenuhc, then we develop a word for ourselves, because we're all seeing, you know, we're Peskotomuhkati, we're Panawahpskek, that's Penobscots, you know, Mi'kmaw, the Malisit, that [means] “they speak slowly.” We all had our words for each other, which describe where we lived. And then even other tribes like the Inuit, which were in our northern territories, our words for them were, you know, “the people who eat their food raw,” you know, once again, that relational aspect that we had. So when we had to create a word for an umbrella term for Native peoples in general, you know, our ancestors settled on “skicin” [pronounced “skee-jin”] which is what we once again in 2020 would translate to a Native American, a Native person, an Indigenous person, whatever, you know, you want to choose. But the etymology of that word originates as a translated word of “surface dweller,” which is once again in relation to the Europeans who are coming on ships and living on their ships, living on the water, coming from water, versus the Native peoples who lived on the land. So that's, you know, that's where it comes from, you know, so that, you know, we translate in modern day times under these, you know, these ways that English speakers can understand but you know, the etymology of the words are really more back to that relational aspect. So, you know, skicin is what we would use to describe anybody that would be Indigenous in the English language these days, so we actually have a word for it, but really, that word just translates the “surface dweller,” which just means that we live on the land.

Leah Kelly

Interesting. So you basically touched on this already, but I had this as a question and maybe you can add on to it, even though I kind of know what your answer is gonna be. But I was wondering, there's been a racialization of Native Americans in this country. I mean, they are legally considered a race on the census and everything. How do you think that that view of Native Americans has affected both colonizer society and Indigenous societies? What are the ways in which it does harm?

But are there also ways in which it could maybe undo harm by giving minority status to an often completely neglected group of people?

Chris Newell

Yeah, well, it's actually problematic because it does not, you know, once again, you know, we don't have, Native tribes don't have words for races, you know, we had different, you know, relational words for each other. And some of them, you know, for their enemy tribes, they weren't so nice, you know. But, yeah, I mean, you know, this, the, the idea of Native people as a race is problematic. And now, I'll disagree with you in that it is not legal terminology, we're not legally a race. In fact, on the U.S. law, tribes are sovereign nations, quasi-sovereigns under the rulings of the federal courts, but still have the, you know, the notion of sovereignty, government-to-government relationship, and under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, we operate as quasi-nations. So therefore, as Native peoples, we are all citizens of our particular nations, you know, so, once again, when the U.S. Census does something like put Native American as a race, people tend to think of us along the lines of racial terms, which is where they end up screwing up. You know, because of once again, you know, the implicit biases of pop culture, Native mascots, things like that, people tend to think that all Native peoples across the country all experienced the same thing and we all think the same way about everything, when all of our histories are different, all of our cultures are different, all of our tribes are different, all of our histories are different. And, you know, there's, really, we need to stop simplifying this for people. And we need to complicate it. It's an absolute necessity for people to understand that we exist as nations that precede the existence of the United States of America. And we do so within the confines on a government-to-government relationship basis with the United States of America as citizens of our own nations. And that's the way we see ourselves. When anthropologists, and once again, when you center on non-Native sciences, you know, the, the categorization of peoples, that's where you end up with these problematic, you know, ways of classifying people, and especially trying to classify Native peoples under the term of a racial category is just completely disregarding the sovereignty and indigeneity of the different Native peoples that still exist all across this continent.

Leah Kelly

That goes into the next part of my thesis about sovereignty. I'd like to know more about how you see nationhood, because what does that really look like to you? Because in a lot of ways, the modern nation-state is a completely European colonizer concept, not really compatible with what it was like pre-colonization, with very strictly defined borders, land ownership, et cetera. So, what does that mean to you to be a nation? But then also, some Indigenous peoples I've been interviewing have said, you know, it's not real nationhood, because the U.S. and Canada, those are nations but the tribes within the U.S. are sometimes considered domestically dependent entities.

Chris Newell

Yeah, that is exactly how, yeah. So I mean, it's actually "domestic dependent nations." So that's, that's the legal determination for the status that we have when it comes to our relationship with the United States government. When I talk about these things, you know, you've got to remember that, you know, at one point, we were literally, you know, Wabanaki peoples were the first tribes to recognize the sovereignty of Americans, the right of Americans to rule themselves in America. So, you know, the United States owes its sovereignty to Native peoples. And, in fact, under U.S. law, the sovereignty of the United States is actually reliant upon the continuing sovereignty of Native



tribes. If you were to eliminate the sovereignty of Native tribes, it undoes the U.S. Constitution, and then some of the precepts of it. So, you know, the, the U.S. government actually has something, you know, a want of keeping a certain status, you know, for, for tribes, you know, with that quasi or domestic dependent nation-state. What I talked about, you know, as you know, our peoples, you know, the state of Maine is 200 years old, you know, they're, they're making a big deal out of it, you know, but in the timeline of my peoples history, 200 years, compared to the 12,000 years that our ancestors lived here, is like the snap of the fingers. Yet to the state of Mainers, it seems like forever. You know, so, when it comes to that perspective, you know, that's, that's one of the things that happened.

But colonization did happen, and we did have to suffer through it. And we did end up having to, you know, due to disease and other things, we were not militarily able to defend territories. So we had to, you know, organize politically in ways, you know, that were nonmilitary, that, you know, did not have that force of military where the U.S. government had it, which put us at a significant disadvantage. So to protect what we had left. Because the U.S. government and the state government in the state of Maine, you know, had proven that they were willing to continue genocide and residential schools, and, you know, because all that was continuation of genocide, and then the taking of our children and putting them in forced adoption programs, and then, you know, foster care and things like that, that's all a continuation of it, you know, both the state government and the U.S. government proving that they will continue to violate our rights if we do not do something to stand up for them. And so, after the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, tribes no longer have the ability to treaty with the United States federal government. And so as a result, we have to, to protect our rights, play the game of nationhood, when it comes to our relationship with the states and with the United States government, to protect, or in some cases, even restore, you know, rights that have just, you know, the United States government have just blown over, taken away, stolen, you know, over the years, you know. So the this is the game that tribes play, I should say, you know, when it comes to that, but our idea of our homelands and who we are goes back 12,000 years, and is way before any idea of nationhood, this English language term, once again, we're using, which is a Euro thought, the nation-state with the standing army, and, you know, all those types of things and ability to protect borders. That's the game we're being forced to play, you know, under the rules of colonization after the effect of genocide.

Leah Kelly

Do you feel that that's something that you should continue to strive for in terms of, would real nationhood to you be no longer being domestically dependent or actual, you know, having the same amount of power as the U.S. in terms of having complete sovereignty over our jurisdiction, or complete self-rule? Do you feel like that is a goal or something favorable?

Chris Newell

Yeah, no, I mean, no tribe wants to be dependent upon the United States federal government for basic needs, which were guaranteed in treaties, and have never been, you know, fully fulfilled. And that's true of my tribe as well. And, in fact, a violation of those agreements was just the regular way of doing things. So none of us want to be, you know, have to be dependent upon the federal government. And yet they've always kind of created the situation where we're forced into that dependence. And that's what maintains the quasi, the domestic dependent nation status of us, which is something that, you know, plenty, plenty of people throughout history have and the federal government have wanted, and in fact, wanted less than that, you know, for a long time. It was

ironically Richard Nixon of all people that ended the termination policy era of the federal government, when they were just eliminating tribes and eliminating their rights and just, you know, gone, and changed federal policies to one of self-determination. And since the 60s, we've been fighting towards that. What we would love to do is to be able to sustain our people, be able to sustain our government, and provide housing, food, you know, you know. And food sovereignty, that's one of the reasons why you hear that coming up a bunch, is because if tribes are really going to gain sovereignty, that means we first got to be able to feed ourselves again, you know, 100%, and not be dependent on grocery stores, you know, and people having to make money, you know, but you know, living subsistence living sustainably off of the land. And if we are able to do that 100% for our own people, then we become more self-determined, we're less dependent upon the U.S. federal government.

And that makes us more of a sovereign state, you know, than, because every time we take the white man's money, is what my dad says, you know, so this is something that comes from him, every time we take the white man's money, our sovereignty goes out the window. And so what we need to do is we need to get to a point where we are self-sustaining the income portion that is necessary in this capitalistic world that America is created, but also taking care of, you know, the basic needs. People can work to get all the, you know, the food that they need, and we have proper shelters for them to live in and things like that. We have, we start building healthy communities based off of our culture rather than based off of how much money they make. You know, we measure success back to our original traditional ways, by how much we're able to contribute to the community. And that's what our wealth was measured by, that's how we get back to where we, you know, we self-determined, versus measuring our wealth by how much money we accumulate, or how many possessions we accumulate, which is one of the things that culturally, we're still doing as a people right now. And we're, you know, working within, you know, efforts to decolonize ourselves to get off of this need of making money and buying things from stores, and all of that, that has been created around us, and getting back to sustainable usage of our own homelands.

Leah Kelly

I want to backtrack for a second there and get to the idea of sovereignty in general. I was wondering what that means to you. As a colonizer word is it relevant? And how is that different from self-determination?

Chris Newell

Well, once again, sovereignty is not something that can be given to you. With something we've always had, the United States cannot give us sovereignty, we have always had it. And, in fact, the creation of the United States is reliant upon the fact that the recognition of the sovereignty of Native peoples to govern ourselves. So if we were given the land and resources back that were taken through illegal processes to the point where we had a land base large enough that we could self-sustain through our traditional methods, then that would lead us to self-determination, that would lead us to true sovereignty, because then, you know, we would not have to play the game of the federal government. The federal government says that if you don't play this game, we're gonna withhold funding. So what? So be it, go ahead and do it, we're going to play by our rules on our land. And that's the way I would love to see it going forward in the future. Because the rest of the state of Maine can learn from us because our neighbors in the state of Maine, my mom's non-Native, so you got to remember that you know, we're very much on a policy of being good neighbors, with you know, the residents in the state of Maine. We want them to live sustainably

as well, you know, and so this is something that you know, we can actually teach to our neighbors and convert this whole landscape to making Maine a more healthy place where we don't have the social inequality that we have, the rural counties that just grow up with bad you know, schools because they don't have the tax base that you know, a place like Mount Desert Island with all the millionaires living in the you know, the beachfront, the waterfront houses, who are supplying the tax base, you know, it's not that way anymore. And it really starts to equalize.

Leah Kelly

Okay, on the topic of federal acknowledgement, how important do you think that is, your tribe being federally acknowledged? Do you think that that is something that would benefit all tribes? And like you're saying, the goal is to kind of eventually break away from the federal government, but in some ways it has helped you. I mean, it's sort of in a way given you back some of the rights that were taken. Is that a crucial step to getting sovereignty?

Chris Newell

Well, I mean, you know, once again, playing by the rules of the United States, Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution says that treaties shall be the supreme law of the land. That includes the treaties made with tribes, that supersedes the Constitution itself. Therefore, you know, by playing by these rules, we can use that, and we have been, you know, effectively, finally, slowly overturning these things back to that original, you know, article from the Constitution that, you know, the federal government has a duty to fulfill the treaties that were all made as a result of getting a country. You know, that was, we prepaid for all of these resources by giving a country to the United States government. You know, so when it comes to treaties, nothing is an extra, or, you know, these are all things that were guaranteed to guarantee peace between all parties, and sharing of territory, you know, and that, that was really the motivation behind it, you know. The United States government, people talk about it as if it was all done by war. It was not. It was all done by signature of the pen. That's how this country was formed. The Louisiana Purchase, we did not purchase land from France; the United States government purchased the rights from France to negotiate with the tribes in the Missouri River Basin, which, you know, covered all of that territory with that we know as Louisiana Purchase. So and then from that right to negotiate from the French, then they negotiated and signed treaties with the tribes in that territory. And that's how they became property of the U.S. government. You know, that's the real history of this country is that, you know, the religion of the paper document is what we live under these days.

And when it comes to the notion of sovereignty, you know, we'd kind of have to play by that rule of, you know, using the paper document, where traditionally we had other symbols, you know. Wampum belts were one of the ways that we kept the rules of our confederacy and peace and equality in territory and protocols between one another, between nations, were held on mnemonic devices such as wampum belts, you know, which you know, even for tribes in Maine, we don't have the materials to make wampum; they come from the Long Island Sound area. So we're traveling all the way down there, trading with those tribes. That's the network that all existed all over the Northeast here. And the big differences between the tribes often just, you know, rotated around just the way the geography of the land forced them to live. So up in Maine, we have, you know, the great birch trees. So that means we developed birch bark technology, you know, to make buckets, baskets, but also birch bark canoes, which are extremely lightweight, extremely easy to [unintelligible], very advanced material of canoe. But down in the southern New England area, they do not have those great birch trees, so they don't have that resource. So they still in that region

make dugout canoes, they burn them out of very large trees, and the old growth trees, they were so big, they could transport 40 people per boat, you know, so they're still making dugout canoes and burning them out and they're ocean-going vessels and, you know, they still work quite well if you know how to construct them properly. So the bark that cover their homes is the thick bark of the trees from southern New England, where we use birch bark up north. Because we have, that's a resource that you can harvest off of the tree and not kill the tree, which is different from the southern trees, you know, the Oaks and things that they're using down here—I'm in Connecticut right now. So when you do harvest, the bark does kill the tree, and then you would have to use the wood for other resources, you know, firewood or creating, you know, nutrients for the soil by burning it into the soil and things of that sort. So, you know, but they were better agricultural farmers. We did not have the environment for agriculture necessarily up in my territory. So we traveled all over the territory. We remembered ways by you know, traditional protocols by mnemonic devices such as wampum belts, birch bark scrolls, or we actually had written language, which were all destroyed by the French and others as colonization happened, you know. They're really easy, because birch bark burns very easily.

You know, those are the things that we're trying to get back to, is just an acknowledgement that number one, you know, America isn't a brand-new idea, and has only been here a couple of hundred years. And Indigenous knowledge of this landscape, if you want to have the knowledge base of sustainable living on this land base, where that would create an economy that works for all people, provides all of their basic needs, that really goes into the 12,000 years of Indigenous knowledge that exists all over the landscape. But it requires, you know, going and traveling all, you know, living in one place and learning the people's way of life in that area first, and then moving to another place. So there's a lot to be learned. But there's a lot that was learned already and has been documented. And it's really a matter of getting off of this idea that America is the best thing that ever happened to the world when in fact, from an Passamaquoddy perspective, America has actually been one of the most damaging things to this landscape that we've ever seen in our history.

Leah Kelly

What you said about treaties is interesting, because on the other hand, pretty much all of them were broken by the colonizers. So does that invalidate them? Does that just make them, that they were just a facade and that the colonizers were planning to come and just completely ignore them anyway?

Chris Newell

The U.S. government would like it to go that way, but tribes don't see it that way. So I'll give you a great example of Black Hills, which are, you know, Paha Sapa, the place where Lakota people see their origination coming from and very sacred territory to them, gold was found there, you know; this was on land that was given to them in the Fort Laramie treaty, and then gold was found in the Black Hills, and, you know, white, you know, gold miners wanted to have it. So the U.S. government basically, you know, allotted land, used the Allotment Act to eliminate a lot of that territory and just take over control of it for themselves and then allowed miners to go in there and, you know, mine the Black Hills, gold and things like that. So by treaty, Lakota people have, under the U.S. Constitution, legal rights to the Black Hills, where Mount Rushmore is. That's Lakota land by treaty under U.S. federal law as it is currently constructed; they are just not recognizing it. And what they tried to do was they gave them a settlement of money 20 years ago, and the tribe

won't take the money. And by not taking the money, they are holding the U.S. accountable to that original treaty. And one of these days, the U.S. government is going to eventually have to give the Black Hills back to the Lakota people if they're persistent, because that's what self-determination is leading to is, you know, the broken treaties. Just because they were broken does not mean that they are not valid. They were signed by the U.S. government, the U.S. Constitution says that they are shall be the supreme law of the land, which is one of the reasons why the Oklahoma decision that you saw, which pretty much converted half of Oklahoma from state land back to reservation territory happened is because Neil Gorsuch, you know, who is a conservative justice, is actually, you know, because he's so conservative, believes so strongly in the Constitution that he takes that to heart that this treaty was made, this article exists in the Constitution. Therefore, just because they chose to disregard it for the last 150 years doesn't mean it's not valid anymore, and was the one who wrote the decision that granted, you know, the five tribes in Oklahoma treaty reservation rights to the eastern half of Oklahoma now.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So I know this interview is supposed to be 60 to 90 minutes, but not we're quite done. So do you have a little bit more time? [A little bit more, yeah.] Okay. All right. Thanks. So it sounds like you think that in playing the game, as you said, of the federal government and everything, you think that the benefits outweigh the costs in the end?

Chris Newell

It's our current reality, and our reality changes over time. And that's one of the things that we've got to understand about our future, is that what we're doing now is going to affect our future generations. And that's what we're looking towards, is how do we, you know, affect, create a better world for our future generations. And that's where I see the value of self-determination and all those types of things, is that it provides a way to self-sustain our culture, it gets rid of the policies of forced assimilation and you know, all the other things that the Federal government has done to us. It starts to undo that process and allows us to begin the process of healing from genocide, which is the first step towards actual self-sustaining governance, is that we have to get through the intergenerational trauma. And when it comes to that, it took multiple generations for these things to happen. It's going to take multiple generations to truly undo them. So the work that I'm doing now, I will probably not live to see the end result or my desired end result. But that does not mean I don't do the work. Because the step that we're at right now says that this is how we get from the next point, which is, you know, once again, leading us towards true self-sustaining self-determination, governance.

Leah Kelly

Okay. It seems like you're optimistic about possibly getting there sometime in the future, even if it's generations ahead, and your work at the Abbe Museum is called the decolonization initiative. Do you feel that decolonization is one of the primary goals? But that being said, is it even really possible to decolonize within a settler-colonial society?

Chris Newell

Yeah, I mean, people when they use that word, decolonization, that has a lot of different meanings to a lot of different people. And when it comes to the museum world, you know, we're a colonial museum, we're in a decolonization process, but we are never going to fully decolonize because

we're a colonial institution, we're an artifact of colonization, you know. So therefore, you know, that's not the end goal, necessarily, is an elimination or sending back of people back to Europe, and you know, all those types of things. And that's where people sometimes, that oppose, you know, the idea of this type of work, will carry it to, is that that's what we're looking for. Yes, there is a lot of effort in tribes to get land back. That's because they want to get to a land base size that they can self-sustain their own populations. Now, that's real. And there are treaties that say that they have the rights to do so.

So people are going to, you know, the access to the land, that's the number one thing that really we're going to be needing, you know, for the future. And also the recognition that, you know, things like international borders, like the U.S.-Canada Border, are not our border. Passamaquoddy people lived on both sides of that border. In fact, the Passamaquoddy people, at the request of George Washington, sent to Colonel John Allen to preserve what he called the "northern border," which ended up becoming the St. Croix River. If the Passamaquoddy people had not preserved that border, it would have been the Penobscot River, that would have been the U.S.-Canadian border, you know. So the Canadian side, once again, they have just chosen—because we, the Passamaquoddy, sided against what would eventually become the Canadians—have chosen not to recognize the Passamaquoddies that live on the other side of the river, even though traditionally, we have always been there for 12,000-plus years. So there has to be some changes along the lines of not just working with the U.S. government, but internationally. And, you know, so what's gonna become of it, it's going to be something new. It's not going to go back to the way it was; there's just no way for that to happen. But I would love to see a world where Passamaquoddies get to travel the world on our own passports, and they're recognized by England and by, you know, all these countries that came and colonized us originally, you know, and France and places like that, that they actually, you know, accept our self-rule and allow passage to their borders, based upon their recognition of our government, you know, here and in our homelands.

Leah Kelly

Hmm. And so for you, it seems like total self-government is really vital to sovereignty. Do you see other types of sovereignty as being important? For example, cultural revitalization, the maintenance of the language, economic freedom?

Chris Newell

It's included, you know...the idea of wilderness, right, you know, wilderness seems like a benign word in 2020, but actually, you know, in the early days of colonization was a term of erasure. In fact, the word savage comes from the French "savage," which means "of the wild." And by classifying Native peoples as "of the wild" versus living in a civilized world, which is the European construct—civilization was where people lived, the wilderness was where the animals lived—therefore, they come to this world, they don't see towns and roads, things like what they call civilization back in Europe, and therefore they classify the people as living of the wild, therefore they're less than civilized humans. And when you do that, by dehumanizing people with that idea of wilderness, then what you're doing is it gives the perfect conditions for the Doctrine of Discovery from 1493, for people to come to wilderness, plant a flag, declare it in the name of their king and discover it, and claim it for you know, their country's territory. You know, so but what the Europeans were seeing as wilderness was really not that at all, it was actually very, very stewarded landscapes. And you know, the trees were not growing crazy wild; they were being manicured. The ones that were growing fruit were being taken care of; the undergrowth was being

burned out so that the edible plants that will grow up every year would come and you can forage so much more. And even Verrazano, when he came through southern New England in 1524, well, he was met by the Narragansetts in a very friendly manner, spent time amongst them, went as far as 15 leagues inland, and would describe a forest full of fruits and vegetables just growing wildly everywhere, and the forest looked like a park. Right. So that is not wilderness, that is actual agriculture happening. It's just a different way of looking at it. And, you know, that's where, you know, the need to change, I think, is the idea of Native people getting back into reengaging the landscape in that fashion.

And I'll give you a couple examples of where science is finally catching up to this. So in Rhode Island, there is a public access water area, and the Narragansett tribe wanted to have access to it to harvest coal hods. And the people of the town said, "No, no, no, no, we can't let you do that. You're going to come and take all the coal hods and there won't be any there left anymore. And we can't have that happen." Meanwhile, the tribe said, "No, no, no, that's not the way it works. If we come and we regularly harvest that actually makes the clam bed healthier. And the next year more clams come back." And finally they were actually given permission. And what they did was they cleaned out all of the old dead clams, they harvested that year, they came back the next year, and eventually over the next two or three years, the clam bed was creating two to three times more harvestable coal hods than was being created with no care whatsoever.

And another example, in Acadia National Park, our people, Passamaquoddy people, we harvest sweet grass as one of our sacred medicines. We use it in our basketry and just about everything. And sweet grass grows in Acadia National Park. And, you know, we've been asking Acadia National Park for years, "Can we come into the park and harvest sweet grass?" "And they've been saying," Well, you know, it's federal land, you know, federal government has rules. So first, we have to do a scientific study." So that's what's going on right now. Now, so the biologists from the US government come in, and they say, "Okay, we found higher occurrences of sweet grass in this area, this sort of this area, we're going to allow you to come in and harvest in these areas. And then we'll study and see what happens." And then the sweet grass pickers would come in and they would say, "No, that's not grass that we would harvest. It is very low quality. It's not in the right places." And they instead chose other spots. But the biologist didn't want to give that up. So they harvested from their spots anyway, with the low-quality grass, and the sweet grass pickers chose their own spots, and harvested year after year. And what ended up happening once again, is the way the harvesting happens is a sustainable fashion; you only take, you know, two to three strands from each root pack, which has about eight strands, so you leave more than half of the root pack each time. And the next year and the next year, more and more occurrence of this high-level sweet grass, this very tall sweet grass, was growing in these areas because we were coming in and we were harvesting. And the way our Elders talk about it, when they look at the spaces that are overgrown with other grasses, which are perfect beds for high quality sweet grass, the reason they talk about it looking like that is because our people haven't had access to it. And so by having access to it, and by engaging in our cultural practices, we will actually make the land healthier. And that's the thing that you know, the colonized world needs to learn more about.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I have like two more questions. I wanted to get back to a few conversations ago. You were talking about how you thought, or at least your father would say, that I relying on the economy of the colonizers is reducing one's sovereignty. Can you talk about how that how that functions with the Mashantucket Pequot and their large casino business? How are those two ideas reconciled?

Because in some ways, you know, the revenue from the casino allows them to expand their culture and revitalize and keep their traditions alive. But how...

Chris Newell

Yeah no, there's a lot of truth to that, you know, the self-sufficiency of the casino has allowed them to start the process of healing from genocide. However, to build that humongous casino, they didn't have the money, they had to borrow it. So they are over a billion dollars in debt. Now, in the time when the recession first began under President Bush in 2008, somewhere around there, when the recession first began, the first places to get hit were entertainment venues like casinos. And I was working at the Mohegan Sun casino at the time. And as a slot attendant, you know, the tips were so good, you know, we were, they were pulled into a toke rate, we were, you know, the toke rate was \$15 an hour on top of, you know, the \$9-an-hour base rate that we had. So we were making \$25, \$26 an hour. And then on busy weekends, were making \$35 an hour, you know, so, you know, the money was just pouring in, right, and everything was fine. And then the recession hit and all that dried up really quickly. And what happened was, both tribes, the Mohegans and the Mashantucket tribe, they have to pay back those lenders, that billion dollars, and they have to pay it back at a certain rate. Well, when the recession happened, they weren't making that money anymore, they laid off a bunch of people, that didn't do enough. And so they defaulted on their loans. And so what happens there is, the banks can't come in and just take over the tribes' land, because they're considered a sovereign entity. So the U.S. government steps in and says, "Okay, we're going to renegotiate the loan. But now there are limits on the way you as the Mashantucket Pequot tribe can now use the profits from your own casino. First, you have to pay back your creditors, that's the first chunk that goes away. You also have to pay your state compact, that goes away as well. And what's left over, you have to use in the way that we prescribe." So once again, by borrowing foreign money, they gave up their sovereignty as soon as the recession hit. That's when the effect of it happened.

Leah Kelly

And do you think it was worth it?

Chris Newell

I think if they were to go back and revisit that time, they would have done a lot more investment in their future, rather than thinking that things were just going to continue the same way without changing. If they had known what restrictions they would be under currently, the way they live under, the way they have to manage their money, they would not have made the decisions they made back then. They would have put a lot more into just stocking the money away, you know, and making sure that their business would be sustainable through a recession. But they didn't do that; they had just expanded and created the MGM Tower at the time, which is now the Fox Tower expansion, which was a \$250 million expansion at the time. You know, so they had just finished that, and then the recession hit. So boom, I mean, all of that power that they had, where they were just influencing the entire state of Connecticut and you know, they're giving money away to the municipalities, they're giving money away to tribal members and incentive payments, and they're getting by, and they can, you know, get high wages working for their own tribe—they can't do any of that anymore. And, you know, so they're, you know, back to basic services. They have great health insurance, which is one of the one of the benefits of having the casino that we still get to



operate with, but those incentive payments, those are all gone. You know, we don't see any of that financial windfall anymore.

Leah Kelly

Alright, final question. And this is kind of broad, but just because non-Indigenous people will be reading my thesis, I just wanted to give you the opportunity to say anything you want to say potentially to people who don't know a lot about all the issues, all the erasure, and the ongoing fight for self-determination. Is there anything you want to say about what non-Indigenous people can do to help, to follow, to decolonize their own lives or minds or?

Chris Newell

Yeah, I mean, some of it comes in the basic knowledge and acknowledgement that you know, when we speak about these issues in the English language that we're doing it under the blueprint of England, and we're doing it through the mindset and worldview of England. And that's one of the failures that we're having here is, you know, in trying to get these concepts across, is that we're not learning Indigenous languages. And I would encourage that America needs to preserve, needs to put everything it has into preserving its Indigenous languages here, because that is where the blueprint is for sustainable living for Americans for the future on this continent. And that's, you know, and it goes into our past. I mean, you know, World War II, we talk about the Navajo Code Talkers are the most well-known. But there were 33 tribes that were code talking during World War II, including the Passamaquoddy tribe. You know, that's one of the reasons why the Germans or the Japanese could never break the codes, is because it wasn't just one language being coded, you know, being used, it was 33 different languages that were speaking in coded ways. And some of them, in Passamaquoddy, they would even use humor as a way to hide that. So some of the radio communications actually sound funny when you translate them to English, when they talk about eagles swooping and things like that; they're describing bombers and bombing targets. You know, so it's a, you know, that's, it's really a part of how America, you know, became, stayed, continued to be America, at the expense of Native peoples. And we really need to get back to an era of equitable collaboration between Native peoples and our non-Indigenous neighbors that live with us, so that we can sustain this landscape for our future generations, not just mine. Because you live here, too, you're gonna have kids or you know, your friends are gonna have kids and there's a generation coming after you. And I think about them too, you know.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Anything else you want to add?

Chris Newell

No, I'm good there.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. If you have any follow-up things, feel free to email me, if I have any follow up questions, I might email you. Not that I will. But yeah, hope you have a great rest of your day.

*Interview with Jacob Ortega*

Sun, 12/13 10:05PM • 1:22:24

Leah Kelly

Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. So, just to begin, I will say, I try to do research on the people I'm interviewing beforehand, but I couldn't find a lot of information about you on the internet, so...

Jacob Ortega

[Laughs] I'm not a celebrity.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so I'm not actually sure which tribal nation you're from.

Jacob Ortega

Okay. All right. I actually, you know, that's, that's too bad. You should have emailed me because I've actually written two books.

Leah Kelly

Oh, okay.

Jacob Ortega

You could have skimmed. And actually the first one in particular would, you would know me inside, outside, frontwards, backwards, the works. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

I can still look at those.

Jacob Ortega

Yeah, you can. Yeah. I'm actually by descent a mixture of tribes by enrollment. I'm one, I'm a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. My grandfather was a full blood; he was, this was on my mother's side. He was Winnebago through his father, but his mother was out of the Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma, which is actually a mixture of Iroquois tribes. And I've been doing some research on them the past few years and even though they use the word, the name Seneca, it seems the main lineage is actually Cayuga, but it seems that all the Iroquois tribes are represented there to some degree. And she was on that tribe, she was Deer Clan, and she died relatively young, I guess, and his father remarried a Winnebago woman, she became his stepmother. But his actual biological mother was Seneca-Cayuga. Now my grandmother, my grandmother's father was one-fourth Indian. And he is, he apparently, his grandfather was actually classified a Nipmuc from Boston, but he was, he had Pequot from Stonington, Connecticut in him, along with some little bit of Narragansett and possibly Niantic. He actually started out as a whaler, started out very young, did this for eight, nine years, suddenly decides he wants to become a minister. He wants to spread the word. He got a church to back him up, went to Hartford Divinity School, became a congregationalist minister, married a woman who was five-eighths what they call French Huguenot, and three-eighths Seneca, Seneca Wolf Clan. And so they had six kids you know, this being my

grandmother. So break it down, I'm one-eighth Winnebago, one-eighth Seneca-Cayuga one, three, whatever, what were the three-eighths...three twenty-fourths...

Leah Kelly

Hold on one second, I'm trying to read write this down. So one-eighth Winnebago...

Jacob Ortega

1/8 Seneca-Cayuga. 3/32 Seneca through my mother and 1/24 Nipmuc with some Pequot with a little bit of Narragansett, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Okay, but you consider yourself essentially a Winnebago member?

Jacob Ortega

I'm a member of the Winnebago tribe, I am an enrolled member, my card says I'm Winnebago. I have always felt a close connection to the Pequot. And I think it was what was done to them. I mean, they were, they were almost wiped off the face of the Earth after the war, and in fact, the name Pequot was outlawed, the language, they could not speak their own language. And, frankly, the fact that they've survived to any degree at all is a miracle. And my grandmother grew up believing that her father was at Pequot, which he did, but he was, his grandfather was actually classified a Nipmuc. We didn't find it out until later on. And but, I've always felt a connection to them.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Yeah, I want to get back to what you're talking about. But just to begin, I was wondering if you could state your name and your pronouns. [What?] Your pronouns? [Pronouns?] Yeah. Sorry. How you refer to yourself, like "he," do you go by "he/him/his"? Or some people go by "they/them."

Jacob Ortega

Ah, I never thought about that. Well, my full name is Jacob C. Santana-Ortega, hyphenated. I usually just go by the name Jake Ortega. I write under the name of J.C. Ortega, my first two initials. I guess you could call me he or him, or yeah, guess. I never thought about that.

Leah Kelly

Okay, sounds good. So I want to go back to the all of the mix of tribal nations that you are. Just to clarify this a little bit, because, I assume you were you grew up in Nebraska then.

Jacob Ortega

No, I did not as a matter of fact, no, I was actually born in the Bronx, New York City. I have very vague recollections of it. Very vague. I, we, I think we I know we lived on Grand Concourse. But we moved to Hartford when I was very young. So actually, my clearest recollections were Hartford. Later on, we made a little pitstop in Springfield, and we moved to Boston after that. In fact, interestingly enough, when we were in Boston, in fact, I still have relatives there to this day, we lived in Chinatown. We actually lived in the residential section of Chinatown.

Leah Kelly

Okay. I live in West Hartford, so that's interesting.

Jacob Ortega

Okay, but we, yeah, we...so actually, no, I've lived in cities all my life. As a matter of fact, I've never even been to Nebraska.

Leah Kelly

Oh, okay. So which city would you consider yourself from then? Mostly?

Jacob Ortega

Oh, good question. I guess it's kind of a toss-up between Hartford and Boston.

Leah Kelly

Okay, and where are you located now?

Jacob Ortega

Springfield.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So, I guess you were talking about your grandmother and your grandfather and their parents. I'm wondering if, were your parents involved in tribal life?

Jacob Ortega

No, they were not. My father was actually Hispanic. My father's father was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico. His mother was born in Cuba. I don't know where in Cuba. But he was, I know he was born in Spanish Harlem, but grew up in the Bronx. He spent a good deal of his life in and out of the army. As a matter of fact, my parents actually met in the army, my parents served in the Second World War. And when they met in the army, he, he did eight years in the regulars, and another 12 years off and on in the reserves. He actually wound up doing 20 years between the regulars and the reserves.

Leah Kelly

Got it.

Jacob Ortega

Now as far as my mother goes, it actually skipped a generation. She, unfortunately, she came from the generation that were really taught to be ashamed of their Native ancestry. Now my aunt, in her family was my mother, she had an older sister. It was my mother and my aunt, and my aunt was into it a little bit. She was a pretty good storyteller, which she got, I'm sure, from my grandmother. I was telling somebody not too long ago, when my when my mother died, when she passed, one of her cousins showed up, and actually had a little drum and a beater and did a honoring song for her in Seneca and I was actually sitting there expecting my mother to come out of her casket and strangle her. Because honest to God, that's how she felt about it. She was, as far as anybody was concerned, she was French and Irish. And that was, and if they pressed her and prodded her, "Well,

yeah, I get a little bit of Indian in me.” But yeah, you know, she was taught to be ashamed of it unfortunately, and she got past that.

Leah Kelly

Okay so you’re only Native on your mother's side.

Jacob Ortega

Well I mean, my father probably had Garroaquitaini or whatever in him, you know, Puerto Rican. But yeah. [Okay, got it.] My grandfather, as I said, was full blood and Nana was around three-eighths give-or-take, a little less than half.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So I'd like to get into...

Jacob Ortega

While we're talking I'm gonna have lunch, you know, so...

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's fine. So, could you talk then about how you got into being involved in your Indigenous roots? Like at what age also?

Jacob Ortega

I was fortunate because my grandmother grew up on two reservations. As I said her father was a minister. She spent eight or nine years on the Passamaquoddy reservation, which is up in Maine. And from there, they went to the Mohawk reservation in Canada. Well actually no, I'm sorry. And in their case it was the St. Regis reservation, which is actually half in New York State, half in Canada. Okay, now this is an interesting story. My great-grandfather, according to story, was a very nice, ordinarily nice, very quiet, you know, very soft-spoken individual. However, when he got up on the pulpit he, something took over him, he became a real hellfire and brimstone preacher and he would rave and I mean, really, you know, flames came out of his eyes. And there were three, shall we say, religions, on the Iroquois reservations. There's the Catholic Church, the Protestant churches, and what they call the lawnhouse. Now the lawnhouse was founded by a man named Handsome Lake, back around 1800. And it's a traditional way of life among the people, which is very small, but it's actually growing. It's actually, you know, it's actually taken, it's taken root, and it's rolling. Well, God help any poor Indian who even walked too close to the lawnhouse because my great-grandfather would condemn them into the lake of fire, you know. Well, this went on for a while. One day, he's out tending his garden, and two traditional Elders came down to the path and they, they asked him in broken English, “What have we done to cause you to hate us so much? What is it? You know, what seems to be the problem?” And he said, “Oh, my god, no, I don't hate you at all. I love you, you're my children. I'm here to show you the way, I'm here to, you know, to teach you the way and bring you to the truth, you know, bring you to Christ.” “Well, have you ever been to the lawnhouse?” “Well, no, but I don't have to, I have the Bible. I know what's right. I know what's wrong.” “Well, why don't you come? Why don't you come once as our guest and see what we're doing? And see how we are and if you think we're that evil, fair enough, but at least you'll know what you're talking about.” Well, he chewed on that. And he said, “All right. All right. I will. All right.” So he did, he came once. He came twice. The third time he

brought his wife and his six kids. And the fourth time he brought his wife and his six kids. And he came no more. All right. Now what happened was as he began to, he eased up a little bit in his preaching, he caught he started taking kind of a live and let live attitude. All right. The three younger kids, Jack, Nelly and Agnes, my grandmother, started sneaking over the lawnhouse. Now they had different clans in the tribes. The Wolf Clan Mother began instructing them in private. My grandmother told me years later, she thinks she was kind of getting back at the black ropes. You know, "You're teaching our kids, okay, I'm going to teach yours." And she taught them a lot about the lawnhouse and about the traditions and about the legends and so on and so forth. Well, as time goes on, it gets back to the Church elders that you know, you know, brother Crowley, Reverend Crowley may be going back to the blanket, may be going back to the breech cloth and all. That was never going to happen with him. He, for all intents and purposes, he was a white, Bible bleep, you know, minister. But as I said what is happening with his kids, especially the three younger ones. So they pulled him out of there. They sent him back to Connecticut and replaced him with a fully white minister where there'd be no more foolishness with his lawnhouse. So when I was a kid, my grandmother used to tell us stories and legends about the lawnhouse and about the, she was a great storyteller.

Leah Kelly

I'm sorry, are you saying longhouse or lawnhouse?

Jacob Ortega

Lawnhouse. It's called the lawn house religion. The lawnhouse.

Leah Kelly

L-A-W-N?

Jacob Ortega

Yes. Lawnhouse.

Leah Kelly

Is it two words or one?

Jacob Ortega

One. [Thanks.] So and I listened and it didn't go out, I mean, it's a time I really didn't grasp the significance, but it didn't go out in one ear and out the other either. I kind of stashed it away in a vault for future reference. She also had a friend, a very dear man of, he was supposed, he was a distant relative named Strong Horse, Kenneth Smith. He was Narragansett. He just passed about two years ago. He would come to visit us when we lived in Hartford. And he was also a great storyteller, he knew a lot about the Narragansett So between the two of them, they were probably my first two teachers. Okay, long story short, we leave Hartford, we wind up in Boston, I start drinking, I leave school, I... Well, you don't want to know. If you read my first book, you'll know what happened. Anyway, I quit drinking. My grandfather and I start hitting the pow-wow trail here in New England, okay. And I meet a man named John Brin, also known as Running Deer. He was Abenaki. And he ran an organization called the Algonquin Medicine Society, which was dedicated to keeping the traditions and the ceremonies alive. And I thought it sounded great. And I said, "Well, you know, I think, you know, I would like to become a member." He says, he said, "Well,

the only stipulation is, it doesn't cost any money, but you must agree never to make money off it; you are never to charge for any ceremonies or anything like that." Well of course, I agreed to that. And I went home, I wrote him a letter, and he welcomed me into the circle, and I was with him for about 13 years.

Leah Kelly

Working with him, or just living with him, or?

Jacob Ortega

No, I would, we would do, well, during the winter, from October to April, he would do a circle in his house, a teaching circle. And we would get over. And those of us who had to travel would usually stay over and go back the next day. And we would do four gatherings a year. And those gatherings would be in a place in Mansfield, Massachusetts, Grandfather's Woods, and we would camp out, we would do sweat lodge ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, things of that nature. And we would learn herbal remedies, and basically whatever else he could teach us and we would, these would last for days. And they would they place in May. For us, spring is a new year. Then in July, then usually around September, that's our harvest, and then we do a nikkomo in December, which is...

Leah Kelly

A what? How do you spell that, sorry?

Jacob Ortega

N-I-K-K-O-M-O. Nikkomo. As a matter of fact, believe it, I've done one at Bay Path. We just did one last week on the outside. And what they are is it's a giveaway. People bring this, we put them on a blanket. And people get their, take their their gift, you know, you can...it's kind of a midwinter ceremony, sort of. It's a nice ceremony. So we would do four ceremonies a year with the with the Medicine Society.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so it sounds like you learned a lot about your Native roots through your grandparents. And was your grandmother around a lot growing up? Is that where you heard these stories?

Jacob Ortega

Yes, yeah, we kind of all lived together. It was my father, my mother, my aunt Dottie on my mother's side, her husband, my uncle Jerry, and my grandparents, and my brothers and sisters. So we're kind of a, we were a big family. We lived together in Hartford and that was true in Boston. We went to Boston, so.

Leah Kelly

Okay, and then so about how older were you when you started attending those pow-wows?

Jacob Ortega

I would have to say was in my late 20s, mid-to-late 20s.

Leah Kelly

All right. So, at that point, did you also start exploring your family history and your grandparents growing up on reservations and that kind of thing?

Jacob Ortega

The actually, the only member of my immediate family who lived on a reservation was my grandmother. And as I said, that was because her father was a minister. My grandfather was born in Omaha, Nebraska. So he was also born in the city. And we're not quite sure where my grandmother was born, we're not sure if she was born in Connecticut or Massachusetts. But um, she was definitely in a city either way. And my aunt and my mother were born, were both born in cities.

Leah Kelly

So which reservation did your grandmother grow up on then, the Seneca one?

Jacob Ortega

No, she actually, she lived on the Passamaquoddy reservation in Maine, because as I said her father had a church there. And later on the Mohawk reservation in New York state for about six years.

Leah Kelly

Okay. I want to go back really quickly to what you were talking about, with your grandmother growing up and her father being a minister. So he was part Native, so he was living on a reservation, right? [Yep.] And yet he was fully Catholic, like he didn't know anything about the Native religion or anything? [Not really, no.] Even though he was living among them?

Jacob Ortega

No, the reason he was sent there was because he did have some Native ancestry, you know, and they thought he would be a good thing to kind of help them, you know, "convert the savages" so to speak. And that's really very common. That's very common, more common than you'd think. I mean, there, I would say the past couple of decades, maybe two, three decades, people have been going back to the, the old ways. But keep in mind, it wasn't until 1978. Prior to 1970, it was actually illegal. If we were caught doing a nikkomo we did last week, we could be arrested. If we were caught doing a pipe ceremony, we could be arrested, it was actually illegal. It wasn't until 1978 when they passed the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act that this was able to come out in the open again. Up to that point, it survived in, secrecy it was underground.

Leah Kelly

I see. Okay, now that we kind of got all your tribal history sorted out, I think we can go into more of the questions I have for my thesis. So, I suppose I want to know a little bit more about your current role in the tribal community. You said that you feel very close to the Pequots. Have you participated in a lot of things with the Pequots, or do you know them personally?

Jacob Ortega

I know some personally, not too much. We have our own Inter-Tribal Council. And I do a lot of work with them. And I also work in the prison system. As a matter of fact I'm a chaplain for Native prisoners in Connecticut. I'm a person chaplain. And as I say, I serve the spiritual needs of the Native inmates. And we will accept anybody, I mean, it's even though it's primarily constructed



for the Natives, we will accept anyone if they want to participate, you know, all you gotta do is sign up. And we don't care if they're white, Black, yellow, brown, whatever they are, I mean, we will take them. And we do not do the pipe for several different reason, but we do do sweat lodge ceremonies. And prior to this COVID situation I would do the nikkomo. I would bring a blanket into all the prisons I work in and bring gifts, usually newspapers and magazines, those kinds of things. What else, we do the strawberry moon in the harvest moon ceremony, we have a feast, it's a special meal. And what else...I do do naming ceremonies, if they show me something, if they show me, you know, they're sincere. I might give them some prayers to learn, maybe some language to learn. And if they do that, if I think they're making some progress I'll give them a name. It takes time, but give them a name.

Leah Kelly

Okay, and you said, it's in Connecticut. Which area? Is it one prison or several?

Jacob Ortega

I do several. Well, right now I'm only working in one. Prior to the COVID outbreak I was covering several facilities.

Leah Kelly

Got it. Okay. And then you're also part of the, or John Jarvis said that you're the Chairman of the Connecticut Inter-Tribal Council?

Jacob Ortega

Well I don't have an official title. I mean, I, I help run the ceremonies. I hope, and the only reason I do that is because I'm, well, really up until recently, I was the only one who had experience. But I you know, we're all, we're all in this together. It's a circle, we meet in a circle. And we're all equal. We, you know, when we make a decision, it's done unanimously. It's, you know, nobody's the boss, nobody's.... We actually came out of a situation like that, where we had a chairman of the board for life and we had a secretary for life and they ruled by, you know, with an iron fist and we decided we didn't want that and we walked away from that. So no, I really don't have a title. I just I help run the ceremonies. I serve the people.

Leah Kelly

Does the Inter-Tribal Council have a website or any information I could look up?

Jacob Ortega

Yes. Yeah. Yeah, we actually have a Facebook page. There's two, you can look up. Our inter-tribal council is the Connecticut River Inter-Tribal Council.

Leah Kelly

Okay.

Jacob Ortega

And you can also look up "Thunderbird Rising, The Circle of the 4 Directions." Now, Thunderbird Rising is more or less a ministry, it's something I set up for the inmates when they get released. And I think I'm going to take it into a 501c category, because I think I, I want to be able to get

some funding so I can purchase some land and set up a lawnhouse, as I mentioned, a sweat lodge and maybe a medicine circle, you know, because they need something when they get out. And there's another chaplain who agrees with me.

Leah Kelly

And the Inter-Tribal Council, what does it do exactly?

Jacob Ortega

Well, once again, prior to COVID, we were having a monthly teaching circles, and we would have a different topic, we would usually, a lot of time, it would fall on my shoulders, but not all the time. Sometimes we would have a film. And usually the education, the focus is this: we want to create teachers who are going to keep the culture alive and pass it on to future generations. Our motto is “keep the fire alive, pass it on.” And we're hoping to, let's say for instance somebody is of Cherokee ancestry, or Mohawk or what have you, Nipmuc whatever it is, learn as much about your tribal heritage as you can and teach us about it. And of course, by teaching us they're learning themselves, you know, and pass it on and help keep it alive in the world. Our goal is to develop teachers. We would have monthly circles. And we have also, like the Medicine Society, we have four ceremonies a year. We have New Year in the spring. As a matter of fact Professor Jarvis has been our guest, a number of times. We have the strawberry moon in July, we have our harvest ceremony in October, and we have nikkomo in December.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So is it open to all Native people in Connecticut?

Jacob Ortega

It's open to anyone. We have Native people from Massachusetts and Connecticut and Rhode Island. Um, we have people travel from Boston, we have people from Rhode Island. We have a lot of non-Natives who come as guests. You know, it's, it's, you know, we're actually pretty liberal in terms of, you know, we're not a hate group. Let me put it that way. We're not a hate group. We're not, you know, “This is this is ours. And you're...” You know, we know, we know, we believe it's, we believe it's a good thing to share our culture with others and let them see what we're doing and get to know us and...because what you don't know you hate, what you fear you hate, you know, and we, we've been through that, believe me. And we want people to see, “Look, this is what we're doing, this what we have to offer you and we're certainly wanting to share it with you.” You know, and there's really nothing to be afraid of or threatened by, you know, it's hopefully, it'll benefit everybody in the long run.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So I'm going to move into part of my thesis topic, which is indigeneity. And I was wondering if you could tell me, do you consider yourself Indigenous?

Jacob Ortega

Yes, yes.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So one could call you an Indigenous person. And I'm wondering if you could just tell me in general, there's no right or wrong answer, but what does it mean to you to be Indigenous?

Jacob Ortega

Oh, well, to me, it means I have an obligation to keep this alive. Okay. And to pass it on, and when I say keep it alive, I'm talking about the languages, I'm talking about traditions, the culture or cultures, as the case may be, the spirituality and just about everything that encompasses. I mean, the entire culture, because it, we almost lost it forever. So much of it has been lost already. It's been lost forever. We can't get it back. We'll never get it back. And I think it's, it's our duty, every single one of us if you really, truly consider yourself Indigenous, Indian, Native, or whatever you want to call yourself. I think it's, you have a certain degree of responsibility to make some sort of a contribution to keep that alive. To learn at least some of your language, to learn some of your culture, some of your legends, your, your lore, anything that you could pass on to the future generations. The number four is sacred to us for several reasons, and so is the number seven, because when we think ahead, we always think seven generations to come, how is this going to affect the seven generations ahead of us? Seven generations past, seven generations forward. So seven is a sacred number to us also.

Leah Kelly

And when you talk about keeping your traditions alive, do you look back at the specific traditions of the tribe that you're enrolled in, the Winnebago tribe, or are you more focused on New England, because you've lived here your whole life?

Jacob Ortega

Well, that's the thing. I mean. Unfortunately, my grandfather, and I don't blame him for it because he came from a generation that certainly wasn't encouraged to learn their culture, he knew very little. And that bothered him. And he used to admit that he says, "I know so very little," and I know it bothered him, but I never blamed him for that. Compare and contrast it to my grandmother, who was a walking encyclopedia. And most of her knowledge, it's come from New England. Okay, and of course, I've lived most of my life in New England. So most of my teachings does come from New England. However, because I am enrolled Winnebago, I do feel an obligation to at least keep some of that alive. Also, I'm currently trying to instruct myself in the Winnebago language, and learn as much of that as I can. And I'm hoping to get, I've actually put together a halfway decent vocabulary, but I've got a long way to go. And I probably will never be fluent in it, but I hope to improve and at least, you know, keep part of it alive. So um, yeah, I think yeah, I see myself as a combination of two. Yes. Yes, definitely Winnebago, but also New England too. Very heavily New England.

Leah Kelly

And so I'm interested in, I'm a partially sociology major. But for sociology, I'm very interested in the construction of identity, and how it's constructed both by the individual in question, but also society. And I'm wondering, do you think that Indigenous identity and Indigenous peoples' view of their own identity have been affected? Do you think that has changed over time? And do you think that's been affected by changing perceptions over time from the outside society?

Jacob Ortega

Well, I think, without question we allow the outside of society to, to affect us for sure. And we certainly take our cues, I mean, probably the, well, the first thing that comes to my mind is physical appearance. You know, I mean, you have to look a certain way, you know, and if you don't look a certain way, you're not an Indian. I mean, I mean, and I don't really, in my opinion, I don't really look that much like an Indian, like the stereotypical Indian you see in the movies. You know, I'm a mix, most of us here in the East are. Then again, I've seen people who I can introduce you to, people who look much less, much less than me. Ralph Sturgis, who was chief of the Mohegan, he's passed a few years ago, if you saw him walking down the street without his regalia, you would swear he was just a bald-headed white guy, you know. My friend Dean Stanton from the Narragansett, you would swear he was a Black guy, you would never believe he was an American Indian. He's Chief of the Narragansett. When people say to me, "Well you don't look like an Indian," I show them a picture of Iron Eyes Cody. Okay, Iron Eyes Cody was an actor who was in 200 movies and commercials. He is probably best known as the "Crying Indian" back in the 1970s. It was an anti-pollution commercial. You know, he would look at this polluted river or something and then he turned to the camera, there'd be a tear coming down his cheek, and the voice in back would say, "People start pollution, people can stop it." And he was, you know, for all intents and purposes, he looked like a real full-blown Indian. Well, when he died, it all came out. He was he was a full-blooded Sicilian. He had no Indian whatsoever. He made a career out of playing Indians all his life. Same was true with one of my favorite wrestlers, Chief Jay Strongbow, who was supposed to be a Cherokee. And I found out his real name was Joe Scarpa. He was a full-blooded Italian from the "Wapaho Tribe" (I'm him now). And I was, talk about your idol being shattered, you know, and I thought about and I said, "Well, you know, I still liked the guy." Even to this day, it was a kick in the rear end. So I think that's probably one thing. Yeah, the physical appearance has always been there. I mean, you, if you don't look a certain way, you know, you're, you can't possibly be... We are the only people that I know of at least that has to prove we are who we are and to what degree.

I mean, you have to have a, I have a card, I have to have a card. And I struggled and I fought against that for years and years. I did not want to do that, I did not want to give into it. And finally I had to, I had to give in and I applied for the enrollment card, and I got it. And now if anybody gives me any flack, and I get a lot from even Indians for that matter, I say, "Well, here, here you go, read it and weep." You know, but yeah, I mean, that's, that's one thing. Um, another thing too, is blood quantum. I mean, this is an issue that the tribes are going to be dealing with more and more in the future. And at what degree does it become ridiculous? Does it become ludicrous? Is there a point? I mean, for example, when I was growing up, it was, the government had a criteria of one-fourth. If you were a quarter blooded, if one of your grandparents was a full blood, you could be considered an Indian. Anything beyond that? No, your great-great grandfather was, but you're not, you're white or Black or whatever. Well, as time went on, as I go all over and get connected with other Indians, I've met people were one-16th who are more Native than some full bloods, you know, so I've had to rethink that process. But the question remains is, is there a cutoff? Is there a, is there a point where it gets to be ludicrous? I mean, 132th? I don't know. So these are all issues that we're going to have to be dealing with, and we have been dealing with and will continue to deal with, I'm sure, in the future. They're not going to go away.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's exactly what I've been looking into, is in this country, the need to legitimize identity. And identity, we think of as inherent, but for most Native peoples, if you want to be recognized in

the way that you already see yourself, you need to be legitimized. And I find that very interesting. Because identity really is about tradition and culture, like you were saying, what you're trying to keep alive. Why do you feel it's so important, and that that's your mission, to keep that culture and history alive?

Jacob Ortega

I don't know. I guess I don't think anybody really wants to see their culture die. I mean, part of you die out I think. And not only that. In my opinion, in my honest and sincere opinion, the Indian people are the soul of this continent. Okay. The entire Western Hemisphere. And if they die out, I think, I think the continent is going to die. I think the countries, I should say, are going to die out. It isn't because they haven't tried to wipe us out. They are still trying. I mean, people don't realize that, you know, just because the cavalry isn't charging and blowing bugles and fire doesn't mean they're still not trying to wipe us out, they're still doing it. A little more subtle about it now, but they're still doing it. And we have a lot to offer. And everybody does I mean, every single culture does, every single culture has its unique gifts, and has its unique strengths and so on. And, and we have ours, you know, and in my case, I mean, I don't think, you know, it's not the case that we're, I mean, we're basically the same as everybody else. We're no better, we're no worse. I mean, it's, it's not that we're superior, or anything like that, but it's, we do have a very, I feel a very beautiful, very unique culture, cultures, I should say. And that can really benefit mankind if they're if they're willing to look at them open mindedly, you know, and accept them.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. And it sounds like you're saying that keeping the culture alive is part of keeping the people alive and that if the culture disappears and Natives are assimilated, then it's almost like they no longer exist in a way.

Jacob Ortega

Somebody asked me a question one time a few years ago, and I had to ponder it, and I thought about it. And the question was, if someone just up and says that they are Indian, because we, we have people that they call them "wannabes." In other words, they want to be an Indian. Okay. All right. And they kind of take on a persona, Iron Eyes Cody, for example, was one and there were people out there like that. Some of them do it for financial reasons, okay. And this individual asked me if somebody just up and said that they were part, they were Mohawk or they were Cherokee, they didn't cause any trouble, they weren't an embarrassment, they didn't take any money or didn't exploit the spirituality, would that be a bad thing? And I thought about it, and I said, "Yeah, it would, it would, because here's why, in terms of identity, it blurs the line." Okay. It causes a lot of confusion as to who is an Indian and who isn't. Because here's the thing, if anybody can just up and decide that they're an Indian at will, then that means potentially everybody is. The government would love that. Because then they can rule all the treaty null and void, move in and take all the land, the rest of it. And, "Come on, let's share it because after all, we're all Indian, right?" So yes it would.

I was at a at a powwow a few years ago, in fact it was down in Farmington, Connecticut. And it was a Sunday and we waited for grand entry to start. And this this white couple came up to me. They were in their mid to late 30s. And they had four kids like maybe like this, you know, the oldest might have been 13 to 12, and two boys, two girls. And the woman said to me, "What what tribe is running this powwow?" And I said, "Well, it's run by the Connecticut River Powwow

Society. And it's kind of an inter-tribal thing. I know they have some Cherokee, they have some Mohegan, and so..." And she said, "Well, we're, you know, we're looking for a tribe that will adopt us." And I said, "Well, do you have any Native ancestry?" She said no. And I, I thought that was kind of strange. And I said, "Well, why would you want that?" And she said, "Well, we want to get back to you, we want to get connected to the Earth. And we think that the, the Indians can help us do it." I really didn't know what to say. Well, it just so happened that two of my Elders, Strong Horse and another man named Wild Cat, were sitting fairly close. And I said, "Come here, I want you to meet these two men," and I brought them over and I introduce them I let them talk to them. And afterwards I invited them into the circle, we did the round dance. The thing is this: you do not have to become an American Indian to become close to the Earth. All you have to do is become a human being. And like everything else on this Earth, it takes training, it takes practice, it's called humane being. And people don't realize that at one time the white people in Europe were a tribal people, they were a Native people, they knew how to live off the land. They knew how to hunt, they knew how to farm, they knew how to fish. They knew how to make herbal remedies, and so on and so forth. You know, and they got away from that. And there were their reasons why they did.

As matter of fact, another story when I was with the Medicine Society, we were having one of our four-day gatherings. And on the last day on the fourth day, this woman named Ingrid who was from Sweden, now she was Swedish, showed up, all dressed up in this buckskin regalia. I mean complete with a headband, moccasins that she made, it was homemade, right. Now there was a time in my life I'm sorry to say I would have insulted and embarrassed and ridiculed this poor woman like there was no tomorrow. I would tore her a new one. Well, I'm very happy to report I didn't do that. Instead, I very politely complimented her, I said, "Gee, what a nice job, was you really look..." I mean, she did. I mean, it was a nice job. It looked a little ludicrous on her maybe, I mean, it was this blond-haired, blue-eyed Swedish woman. I think she was 60, dressed up like Miss Minnie Ha-Ha, you know, and it looked a little ludicrous but here regardless, well of course I made her very happy, you know, and so on. And on the way home I'm doing one of these things, "You know, you really handled that very well. You did much better than you would have done in days gone by you know." But I was thinking about that, about a year after that or so. And I realized I missed a moment, I missed a teachable moment, I missed a real solid opportunity. How much greater would it have been, if rather than showing up dressed like an Indian, if she had shown up dressed in traditional garb, native to Sweden? Which if she was at a depth of making Native regalia, I'm sure she could have made that. She would have been adding some serious strength and balance to the circle, because the white people are part of the circle, as are the people of Asia, as are the people of Africa, everybody else. Right. And I realized that by bending over backwards not to hurt or not to embarrass her, which I'm glad I didn't, because, I mean, she was a very nice person, and I knew she meant well. But the point is, by going out of my way, to go the other way opposite of what I would have done in days gone by, I had missed a moment that really would have helped her on her path, and would have added strength to the Medicine Society. So a lot of times people mean well, but they go about it in kind of a half-baked way, and those are, those are just two examples. You don't have to become an American Indian to become a human being and to get connected to the Earth. You just have to become a human being, you know, and we're all part of the circle, everybody's part of the circle, you know, and it's just...everybody has their own unique gifts and their own strengths that they bring to the circle, they bring to the table, you know, and that should be respected and celebrated.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. It's interesting what you're talking about, it's kind of a difficult paradox. Because on the one hand, you don't want just anyone claiming to be Indigenous so that they can reap the benefits. But on the other hand, you're saying that there was there's this very strict attempt to classify people based on blood quantum. And I'm wondering, how do you navigate between that? Between trying to not make it all about blood quantum but then also not wanting just anyone to claim indigeneity? How do you then define who is Indigenous?

Jacob Ortega

That's the question, that's the question. I guess, um, if they can, if they can prove that, if they can verify any blood.... For example, I mean, the Narragansett out of Rhode Island, the Narragansett are predominantly what you would call "Black Indians," okay. They were heavily mixed with Blacks during the day, okay. And many of them today, you know, look really more Black than Indian. A number of years ago, they got federal recognition. Okay. And they got some money. Well, they had people from South Providence coming out of the woodwork, okay, who had maybe a drop of Narragansett, looking for their payout. You know, that happened with the Pequot, the Mashantucket Pequot, when they got the casino, right. And that's the thing, it's, there's all kinds of gray areas there. There is no black or white answer. I mean, there is no...I guess the only thing I can say, I think every tribe should have the right to set their own criteria as to who they want to accept as a tribal member and who they don't. And even in some cases, those things always go with that fear, you know, that sometimes, people are going to slip through the cracks. I mean, non-Indians are going to get recognized and real Indians are going to get, you know, turned away. I mean, and that's unfortunate, but it's just you know, it's I think part of it too is money. I mean, like for example, my teacher, my main teacher in the Medicine Society, he was a I mentioned was John Brin, also known as Running Deer. He used to always say, and he was he was right, and this is true in a lot of in a lot of instances, "The government can get Indians to fight amongst themselves anytime at once. Take five Indians, give them three dollars." Okay, and that's the truth, you know, it's unfortunate, but it's true. Of course, that's true. And that's true with a lot of people, you know, not just Indians, but money has a lot to do with it, you know. The less people enrolled in a tribe, the less people you have to pay out, you know, in terms of, you know, casino dividends, and so on and so forth. You know, so I mean, these things are all a double-edged sword, I mean, casinos and all this stuff, you know, it's, some tribes will do very well with those, other tribes is going to destroy them, it will destroy culture, you know. And I see, I don't see casinos as a, I mean, there was, I see them as a tool. I see them as a tool, but I don't see them as the end, as the answer, you know. Every single tribe that tries to get recognition always wants to get a casino. That's the first thing.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I want to get back to that. But first, just to tie up this theme of identity. I find that some very well-meaning people outside of Indigenous communities tend, or of recent years have tended, to try to group Native Americans into one racial category, as a minority racial group, in order to give them the same ability to speak out as a minority group. But I know that a lot of Indigenous peoples have a problem with that because they like to see themselves as individual tribal nations, not one generalization. And I'm wondering what you think about that; if you think having solidarity and community with all Indigenous peoples is more important, or if you think that having individuality of tribes is something that should be held onto, or an alternative, or what do you think exactly?

Jacob Ortega

Well, I mean, of course, there's strength in numbers; unity is always I mean.... When they created the Iroquois Confederacy, the five tribes initially, later on the six, and the five initial tribes were the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida and the Onondaga, okay. They were constantly at war—later on they admitted the Tuscarora, that came later, became the six nations but initially was five—they were constantly at war with each other. Okay. And two men, a man named Deganawida and Hiawatha, now there really was a real Hiawatha, went to the sachems of these tribes, all the chiefs, and they took a bundle of arrows. First they handed them one arrow, said, “Break one arrow.” Of course, a little trouble. They went, “Then take a bundle of arrows, lash them together, okay break that one.” You know, you get the point, you know, there's strength and number, unity. Of course, there's always strengths in numbers. The problem with that is this: there is no and there never has been any unity among the Indian people. The idea that the Europeans came over and beat the Indians is really a fallacy. The Indian beat the Indian. All the Europeans did was give them a little push in the right direction. And they're still doing it to this day. The full bloods against the mixed bloods, the traditionalists against the non-traditionalists, the mixed bloods that are mixed with white against those that are mixed with Black, the this one, the that one. I see it constantly, I've seen it all my life. And it gets to the point where you want to say, “God help us. Wake up and smell the coffee. Is it ever gonna stop?” And they still keep doing it. You know? It's about anything and everything. You know, I mean, I never anything, I never saw a group of people fight among themselves like that. Never. And I mean, if a group of people that really have that much common ground cannot come together and find some sort of something to unite them, is a really truly hope for all of humanity? I'm not so sure but yeah, of course it would be better if the tribes came together and of course, it would be better if we work with other groups, you know, but it just it's like.... For example, I mean, they've tried to build coalitions between Indians and Blacks, okay. And for the most part, it hasn't worked for the simple reason they don't want the same things. See, most Blacks want parity with the whites, they want equality, they want equal jobs, equal housing, equal education, this.... Most traditional Indians would be happier than hell if the whites went away, let them alone and never bothered them again. The ultimate irony here is this: the Blacks have always been excluded from white society, whereas the Indians have been taken had been kidnapped, have been taken homes and had white society forced down their throats. They have been taken to boarding schools, had their hair cut off, dressed as little white men and given white names, English names and so on and so forth. And so that's the irony there, you know, they, they kind of had white culture forced down their throat, which is why so many Natives today don't know who the hell they are. They don't know their languages, some don't even know what tribe there they are, you know, because that's, that's been taken away from them. It was literally beaten, they were literally physically beaten if they were caught speaking their language in some of these boarding schools. And they werethey were systematically taught to be ashamed of themselves. And this is, this is true fact. So yes, it would be great if we could have unity. It hasn't happened yet. And I'm not going to hold my breath. You know, it just, for some reason or other it's just not in our nature, I don't know, it's just not in our nature. Um, I don't know it, I wish. And I've written about it, and I've spoken on it when I've spoken in public and so on, but it's just, I don't know, I don't know if it's ever gonna happen.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, well, it sounds like that's sort of something that you're trying to do with the inter-tribal council and everything. So I kind of want to move on to the second part of my thesis, which is the



topic of sovereignty. And I think, I think your position is quite unique out of the other people I've been interviewing, because you don't live in the same place as your tribe and in New England, where you've lived most of your life, you aren't really affiliated with one single tribe here. I'm wondering, is sovereignty even relevant to you or important to you? Because usually when you think of sovereignty, it's like one tribe's sovereignty. Or do you feel sovereignty could be applied to just Indigenous people as a whole? So I guess, sorry, to simplify that question, what does sovereignty mean to you in general?

Jacob Ortega

Well, I believe the tribe should be should have the right to run themselves, you know, rule, self-rule, you know, self-govern. I believe in that, I think that they've earned that right. You know, I think they should have enough freedom to you know, make their own laws and certainly uphold those laws and make their own you know, establish their own criteria. Yeah, I mean, I mean, as you said, it doesn't really affect me that directly you know, but yeah, I'm certainly, I'm supportive of it for sure. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, because I know you said you have a strong connection to the Pequots, one of the two recognized federally recognized tribes in Connecticut. And...

Jacob Ortega

In my case though, I trace by people and ancestors to Stonington, Connecticut, which is...actually, there were two there. There were two at one time, two tribes living in the Stonington reservation. There was the Pawcatuck Pequot, which were primarily mixed with white, and there were the Eastern Pequots, which were mixed with Black. Okay, both living on the same reservation. They have since conjoined and they're now known as Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation. Now the ones who have attained federal recognition are the Mashantucket Pequot. Now there is some question as to whether they are actually Pequot. What happened was this: there was one woman living there in a trailer back in the 1970s named Elizabeth George, who may or may not have had Native blood. If she did, the consensus was it was probably Narragansett. She died and her grandson, his name was Skip Hayward, and his wife, lived in her trailer. And this Passamaquoddy man named John Stevens came in looking for the Pequot tribe and encountered these two who he thought were white hippies. And he said, "We're looking, I'm looking for the Pequots." He said, Well I guess that's us," and, "Oh, well, we're, we want to get you guys organized and get you, you know, recognition." You know, that sounded pretty good. So he brought back his entire family. And they got, they got actually recognized as the Pequot Incorporated. They did it very cleverly. Okay. And they tried a number of things. First, they tried maple, sugar curing, hog farming, a couple of other things. Finally, they hit on Bingo. Bingo took off. Bingo was very successful. And then then they got the casino. You know, they got federal recognition, I believe it was in 1983. And of course, the rest, as they say, is history. But they're the ones who have federal recognition. I don't actually trace my answers to them. I trace it to Stonington.

Leah Kelly

Oh, okay, so you're talking about the Eastern Pequots? Is that what you call them?

Jacob Ortega

Yeah. Well, Eastern, or the Pawcatuck Pequot. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

Okay. And do they have state recognition?

Jacob Ortega

Yes, yes. Okay. They've tried [to get federal recognition]; they came close at one time. I think they had preliminary recognition. But that [unintelligible], that's all. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

And do they have any property?

Jacob Ortega

Yeah, they have a reservation in Stonington. It's a fairly, it's fairly, it's fairly sizable. It's not far from [unintelligible].

Leah Kelly

Okay. So if you're talking about the Eastern Pequots, and you feel closely connected to them, then do you think that it would be a good thing for them to get federal recognition?

Jacob Ortega

Uh...yeah. I suppose so. I mean, um, yeah, for reasons other than a casino. Yeah. Yeah. It would help them, yeah. It would benefit them. Yeah. Yeah. If that's, if that's what they wanted, I would certainly support them on it. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

And is that something that they are continuing to try for?

Jacob Ortega

I think they're still trying. I think it's, I don't know if it's going to happen at this point. But, um, they're still trying, they're still working on it. They're still.... Yeah, they're, I think they're still, in the back of their minds it might happen. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so on the one hand, you've got this state recognized tribe. I am interested in your perspective on sort of the bigger federally recognized tribes that have done well for themselves financially through casinos and other businesses such as that. Do you think that their ability to gain federal resources, land trusts, all sources of income, makes them more sovereign?

Jacob Ortega

Yes, yes. Um, money is power. Money is political power. Money is influence. And yeah, and I certainly support that. I mean, obviously it's a lot harder, to shall we say, screw with rich people, or at least people who are fairly well off, than it is to fool around with poor people. And so yeah, I support that because, um, we really need every single...we really should pull together, we really should pull together. And I mean, I understand that a lot of...I understand the historical problems we've had the past, but irregardless, we should, we should overcome those and start working

together. There's too much, there's too much at stake. There's so much been lost. And we're still, we still may go, we still may see this all go away and people don't realize it. I mean, it's just you know, just because.... You know, Kit Carson and Lord Jeffrey Amherst and a lot of other people are alive and well. I mean, I think we've seen that spirit. The fact that that spirit is still alive just the past few years. You know, I think that a lot of things have come to the surface that people thought were, were really done and gone, you know, and they're not. They're still there, that mentality is still out there. And we really need to...

Leah Kelly

What mentality, the one of division?

Jacob Ortega

Yeah, division and the old, the frontier wild west, you know, "Gun them down and ask questions later" mentality. That type of thing, you know, and yeah, it's just, several things have happened the past few years that really have certainly alarmed me. Not just what's happened to Indian people, but to other people, Black people and certain other people, you know, and some of the stuff has been very alarming, you know, and you think, you know, you get to a point where you're kind of [unintelligible] a place and say, "Well, geez, we rounded a corner, we've kind of progressed, we've made progress," and then things happen and it's like, wow, I mean, you know, it's like, we never really came that far at all, you know, so. Yeah, it's just, um, I don't know, it's, I was very optimistic. When I was younger, I thought things were going to get better and the [unintelligible] by and by, but I, I'm not quite so sure anymore. You know, I just, I do believe this. I do believe that people who are close to the Creator, close to spirituality, close to God, however you want to call it, it really doesn't make any difference how you call it, or how you see it, I do believe those people will be okay. Which is why I have stressed that as strongly as I possibly can. Not only to the people I work with on the tribal council, but to the men I work with in the prisons. Get close to the spirit, get close to the Creator, and stay close to it and accept the teachings accept the Spirit, because we're going to be needed, I believe. I mean, you've seen—look at just the past year, look what look what's happened the past year, look at the changes that have come about just the past year. I mean, we never thought—this is something out of a science fiction movie. This is something we might've watched on a sci-fi channel, in a movie, a few years ago, and say, "Geez, this is, that's pretty interesting. But it's, you know, that's not gonna happen." Yeah, well, guess what, it's happening. And who knows what's going to happen next, you know, so we really have to, we really have to start finding the common ground and start working together. This business about, you know, "This one's why this one's Black, this one's rich, this one's poor," get over it. It's, we got to start working together, we got to start finding common ground. I believe that common ground is the spirit, I believe it's the spirit, I believe it's the Great Spirit, God, the Creator, however you want to see it, it really, that's just semantics. It's, it matters little how you call it. Very little how you call it, it's just it's, it's the great unknown, you know. The Sioux, the Lakota call it "Wakan Tanka," that means "the great mystery." And that's pretty profound when you [unintelligible] because that's what it is, a mystery. Nevertheless, that's our salvation. For all of us.

Leah Kelly

I'm wondering if you if you see a difference between the sovereignty of tribes on the east coast versus out west in like the plains, because, you know, you have tribes such as like, the Diné/Navajo,

who possess a lot of land on their reservations. And land is very important to Indigenous peoples, right. So I'm wondering, how important is that relationship between sovereignty and land?

Jacob Ortega

It's everything. It's everything to us. Land is everything to us. Um, I mean, land is our heart and soul, it's the foundation of the tribes. And here in the east, I'll give an example. Chaubunagungamaug Nipmuc tribe, okay. They don't really have a reservation, per se. They live around the Worcester, mid-Massachusetts area, Webster, Oxford, Sturbridge, so on so forth. But they have a little piece of land in Webster Mass. It's about a two-acre reservation. There's a little circle, okay. Really a nice, beautiful spiritual place. As a matter of fact, if you ever watch Dr. Jarvis's documentary, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, you'll see that reservation. As a matter of fact I show up at the end dancing in the circle, I think in one of the last scenes. And that kind of holds them together. That land, that little reservation holds them together. Same with the Narragansett down in Rhode Island. Their little reservation, their lawnhouse and their church holds that tribe together. It really does. Because it gives you that sense of community. Whereas they wouldn't have it otherwise, because they don't live together like, like the Navajo do, like the Lakota do, and so many other tribes out west. So that little piece of land, that's just as small as one might be, is really vitally important. Land is everything to us.

Leah Kelly

So do you think that more land and therefore more area to live communally equals more sovereignty?

Jacob Ortega

Oh, by far, by far, yeah, without question. Without question, absolutely no question. Absolutely. Land is everything to us.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. And that seems like something that was really taken away from especially the Eastern tribes, because it's completely populated by white settlers. Okay, I think we can sort of end there with the sovereignty portion, but I am interested in knowing from you, what would you say is the end goal for Indigenous peoples in this country, in terms of sort of breaking away from the centuries of colonization and all of the destruction, decimation, that has come with that? For instance, is the goal complete decolonization? That's a very hot word right now. Or is it complete sovereignty, whatever sovereignty means? What does that look like to you that, that ideal thing that you're striving for?

Jacob Ortega

Oh, that's an interesting question. Um, there is no easy answer. I mean, you've got to figure however many years or generations it took us to get there, it's gonna probably take at least that to get us out of it. I mean, don't forget, we're dealing with generations of systematic...we've been taught to hate ourselves. We've been taught to be ashamed of ourselves, to be ashamed of our ancestors, of our families, of our relatives, of our culture. You know, it was a joke. It was useless. It was.... I'll tell you a story. When I was, when we lived in Boston, they sent me to a parochial school, okay, in the north, in the Italian north, okay. And those nuns were brutal, God, they were brutal. And although I'll say this, my writing skills, I will attribute to those Catholic nuns, I can

write like hell, and I attribute that to them. Um, but they could wield a ruler or a yardstick like a samurai could reel a sword. And they would take the rosary beads and whip them across your eyes. I mean, they were brutal, you know. But we would, there was a, I knew very little about New England at the time. I used to, I always wished John Wayne would play a pilgrim in one of his movies so at least there would be some kind of a balance, you know. And there was a chapter on King Philip's War, Metacomet. Metacomet was the Wampanoag leader who led a rebellion against the the settlers here in the 1600s. So we're getting closer to that chapter and I couldn't wait. I, man, I wanted to read that chapter. Well on the day we're gonna study King Philip's War, she said, "Okay, so we're gonna skip that, we're going to..." Well my hand shot up, I said, "Sister, hey, you know, I'd really like to study that chapter." And she gave me a withering look and she said, "You know, look, that stuff is no good, you don't you understand? That's useless you know. That's water over the dam. Forget about it. It's useless. It's a waste of time. Put that out of your head now and forget about it." Well, she got so flustered she told us to put away our history books and take out our religious books. We were going to study the life of St. Dominic, okay. Well St. Dominic lived in the 1500s. Philip, or Metacomet, lived in the 1600s. Well, if Philip was water over the dam, what the hell was this guy? [Unintelligible] So my hand raised, went up again. I said, "Sister," I said, "Is this guy alive today?" "What do you mean?" I said, "Is St. Dominic alive today or is he water over the dam too?" Oh my God, you would have thought to call the Pope a bad name, you know. I was hauled down to the Mother Superiors office where I was wrongly thrashed with the yardstick, you know.

So we have got a lot of, I mean, we have got generations and generations of self-hatred and alcoholism, and drug abuse and spousal abuse and child abuse and disunity, and that self-hatred, that's part of the reason for the disunity, you know. Uh, what do I see as the end? Well, ideally, I guess when a Native man or a woman can stand up and proudly announce that "I am a mohawk, or Chippewa or Cherokee or Passamaquoddy," whatever they are, and, and, and be accepted as part of society, be able to be a part of modern society and function, but at the same time, hang on to their, their tribal roots, hang out to their, their ancestral roots. And that takes a little bit of doing. It's a balancing act. It's a juggling act, but it can be done, people have done it. A beautiful example is Gladys Tantaquidgeon, who was the Mohegan medicine woman. She lived to be 106. She was a doctor of anthropology. But she also was the medicine woman and was very knowledgeable in herbal remedies and legends and the Mohegan, you know, and she operated the, the museum down there for years and years. So it can be done. I think, when we can finally put all that behind us, and probably say that we're...not, not to the point of arrogance, it's, it's, as I said, we're, we're not better than anybody else. We're no better, but we're certainly no worse, you know, and it's going to take a long time, it's gonna take a long time. Um, I mean, I'd love to see it. But I hope I can make some sort of a contribution that will allow somebody else to.

Leah Kelly

What do you think are some of the best things that are going on now that Indigenous peoples are doing to sort of change that narrative and fighting to obtain sovereignty and self-determination?

Jacob Ortega

I think the fact that people are going back to their roots, to their traditional spirituality, and their culture. And I see some of the tribes are trying to revive the languages. Now you gotta remember the language is the cornerstone of any culture, of any culture. You go to a certain sections of Montreal in the French Quarter, walk into a restaurant; you cannot order a cup of coffee if you

don't try to speak French, and they don't care how poorly you mangle it, how badly you speak it. If you don't attempt French, forget about it [unintelligible] they won't piss in your mouth. Okay? You have got to try French. Jewish children learn Hebrew at a very young age. And yet a man or a woman will proudly announce they're Cherokee, they're Lakota, they're...and not know one word of the language. And I don't blame them, I understand the history of it, how it was taken away. But we've got to get that back. We've got to get that back. And a lot of tribes are making the some pretty good headway and reviving the languages and teaching them and they're, for example, there's this Mohawk immersion school. And there's a Lakota that are doing that. The Mohegan are trying to do that now. They're trying to revive the language. So that's, that's one thing. And I think, I think they're trying to get back to the, the real, the real roots, the real people, you know, they're trying to get back to the Earth and they're trying to, they're trying to get back into the true, the true way. Not taking their cues from movies and books and what have you, you know, but really trying to get back to the ancestors, to get back to the Elders and really going about it hopefully the right way. You know, and I think that's, that's a good thing. I think that things are changing. They're slowly, they're little by little, but they're changing. They're, they're, we're making some progress. We have been making some progress.

Leah Kelly

Great, so we're just about done. But before we wrap up, I was wondering if there's anything else you would like to say or add even ask.

Jacob Ortega

Well, I hope you will check out my two books. I think you will like them. The first one is called The Black Wolf. By J.C. Ortega. The second one just came out this past May and it's called The Thunderbird Returns. And they're both available on Amazon. And I hope you will come to one of our gatherings very soon. Dr. Jarvis has come and you can certainly come with him.

Leah Kelly

That sounds really cool. Yeah.

Jacob Ortega

We're not far from, you're in West Hartford, you say? [Yeah.] Yeah, we actually, we have a nice little piece of land in Enfield, Connecticut, where we do our circles. We have a little medicine circle there. We do pipe ceremonies. And as I said, we just did our, our nikkomo, but our next one will be in May, that'll be our New Year. And I'd love to have you there. I think you'd like it. And I think you'd like the people. And you know, we have a good group of people. And I think you'll get a lot out of it. You know, I think it'll be good to have you see it up close and personal and really participate. You know, so that's, so that's my thoughts. Read my two books and as a matter of fact, bring them and I'll sign them for you. And yeah, come to our circles. I think you'll get a lot out of it.

Leah Kelly

Great. Well, thank you so much again, um, it was so nice to meet you and talk to you. And I might email you if I have any follow up questions but feel free to email me if you have any questions.

*Interview with Robert Peters*

Fri, 2/12 12:11PM • 1:02:00

Robert Peters

I only have about an hour.

Leah Kelly

That's okay. All right. So we can try to get through this. Let me just get my list. [Thank you.] All right. So could we begin by you just stating your name, pronouns, and the name of your tribal nation?

Robert Peters

I'm Robert Peters. Mashpee Wampanoag. Pronouns, I guess that's a millennial thing. Well, I would have to say, mine would be "we."

Leah Kelly

We? Well, if I had to, okay, if I had to refer to in writing...

Robert Peters

I'm only joking. [Laughs] I think, well, my pronoun would be, would just be he. Or him, he, whatever.

Leah Kelly

Okay, great. Okay, so could you talk a little bit about the Mashpee right now, because I know that there has been a recent legal battle. And I was wondering if maybe you want to give some context as to its history struggling to get that recognition and the land and then I guess where it is right now, the state of the of your people. Does that make sense?

Robert Peters

Yes, well, we, our tribe is based on the 1849 census of the Natives in Massachusetts. And I think we were fortunate that we had that census to identify us with the lands that we were reduced to having. Because all of the land was ours, you know, prior to that, and it is through disease and defeat that we will pushed on to smaller and smaller parcels of land. And everybody in my tribe has to connect back to that census, birth, marriage, death certificates. So that's about 3,000 people that all appear on that census in Mashpee. And there are other communities where that census was taken. And most of them are, some of them were traditional communities and others were praying towns. And one of the conditions on coexisting with colonists was to accept Christianity. And that basically gave us a pass to live on our own land. So fast forward 20 years, they took our land out of trust, and made it into a town. And it took a hundred years or so for us to, you know, through sale of land, through land getting taken for taxes, land being taken because the people who own the land didn't even have any concept of that and they just took the land. And we had political control of the town, up until the late 60s because most of the people in the town were Native. And then there was a surge of people coming in and development and investment. That led to the majority of people in the town being white, or non-Native. It wasn't just white. And we no longer had political control of the town. So that's when our tribal council was formed. So when we lost

one form of political control, we formed another where, we formed another body that we would, you know, have control over our own community or what was left of it. And it was around that time that we started talking about petitioning. It wasn't suing; we petitioned for land, the return of our land. And one of one of the things that we do have is we have the deed to the entire town of Mashpee. Somewhere around 50,000 acres on Cape Cod. And there were chunks of it taken—Mashpee was taken by the towns of Barnstable, Falmouth, and Sandwich. And one of the observations that I've made on the lands that were seized by the towns around us, were all bog lands. So they seized these lands to take away from us economically. So all of those, if you look at the map, all of the lands that were taken by the surrounding towns were cranberry bogs, which was, you know, it was a very lucrative industry back there or was becoming one. And that industry became, you know, Massachusetts was the capital of cranberries in the world. Up until recent years, I think it's Michigan, or one of those Great Lakes states that has overtaken us in cranberry bogs. But it was, those were the first lands that were taken by the towns around us. And after becoming a town, and the land being divided up among tribal members, and—I don't know if it was all divided up; I know that ten years later, there were large parcels of land that were owned by Harvard University and trustees of Harvard University. I believe that's interesting, because Harvard was established as an Indian School. Maybe we should sue for that back. Maybe we have the right to that. Maybe that was, that's the way it was, you know, laid out; it was supposed to be a school for Indians. But as you go on, the conversation changes. And when we petitioned for our land, there were also two tribes in Maine that were petitioning for land, and they were looking for two thirds of the state. And they got big parcels of land from that. For the Mashpee, they really dug their heels in and denied that we were a tribe, they denied that we were Indian, they said that because we were mixed, we didn't have the right to claim our Native heritage. And that went on for years. So when the petition went to court, it was decided that we didn't exist for the purpose of claiming our land. That was an all-white jury that decided that and presided over by Judge Skinner.

Leah Kelly

When was this?

Robert Peters

This was federal court that took place in the federal court in Boston.

Leah Kelly

No, what year did it take place?

Robert Peters

We petitioned for the land originally in 1976. [Okay.] And I think it was '78 or '79 when they rules against us on this. So then we petitioned for federal recognition, as a tribe. And we had to put together documentation showing that we were a tribe, showing that we were continuously living there, which we were able to do, because we were among the first, so there was a lot more documentation about these encounters than there would be with other tribes. You know, the farther you move out west, it was less important for them to learn the culture of the people or learn the language of the people. And it became more of a routine for them to just, you know, push people aside. So it took 25 years for them, for the federal government, or Department of Interior, whoever does that, to hear our petition. And my father was Chairman for a big part of those 25 years. And I guess in all, he was chairman for 25 years off and on. And he didn't live to see it. He died two or



three years before we were granted our federal recognition. And 270 other members of our tribe died waiting for that petition to be heard and answered.

But the conversation on sovereignty keeps changing and evolving, too, because it's a different conversation now than it was back then. It's you know, just like, the attention paid to, like, you asked me, the first thing you asked me, what's my pronoun? That was not the conversation 30 years ago; 30 years ago, it was different. And it evolved into a lot of different things. As has Indigenous rights. And the way we refer to Native people, Native, Indian, Indigenous, First Nation, this is all that conversation evolving. And I like to say because, you know, like tribes will sometimes do dumb things, you know, and part of the reason is, you're never given two good choices. You're given a choice between two bad things, you know, so you will see people do dumb things. And I say, no matter how dumb we are, you know, at doing things, when everything plays out, and sovereignty and Indigenous rights becomes a worldwide thing, then whatever changes are going to come about because of our Indigenous rights are going to take place anyway. No matter what we do, here, we just have to, you know, exist. But we do; we fight for things, you know, we fought to have a casino. They said, "Oh, well, we want to help you economically so we will allow you to have gaming." And in Massachusetts they even voted to allow for Indian gaming. And in Massachusetts, the last people, you know, we still have yet to see a gaming facility. And they've bankrupted us twice. They've bankrupted Aquinnah, you know, for attempting to, you know, pursue gaming.

Leah Kelly

So they ruled in favor of it, but then economically they made it so it couldn't happen anyway?

Robert Peters

They'll come up with other reasons not to be able to do it. And it has to do with political administrations too. You know, like, there are certain, you know, if you have an administration that's to the right, then they're going to try and stomp out everything you do. You know, ones that are more to the left might be a little bit more willing to work with you. When Bush Jr. got into office the Nipmuc had achieved federal recognition. But one of the first things that Bush did was take away their federal recognition. During the pandemic, Donald Trump tried to take away our recognition, he did. It was fought. And it was so insensitive to, in the middle of a pandemic, to take away you know, your services, that it was overturned. But these are the things that we have to fight all the time. And still, the conversation evolves. But that evolution of the conversation also includes all the other aspects of society. And in evolution, you have different mindsets. You have your baby boomers, which have one mindset. And I guess I'm at the end of the baby boom, you know, and then you have your generation X. And then you have your millennials. And in each of these groups of people, there's different thinking. And there's a certain, it's like, when two bodies of water meet, they have to, you know, seek their level, and find that level. And in my generation, you know, things were said and done that we were so desensitized to, that it was normal. And a lot of, there's a lot of things that were said that nobody could get away with today. But that's how things evolved through the diligence of the other generations behind us, you know, so the notion of sovereignty, you know, and what sovereignty means and what the scope of it is, is always changing. And it doesn't always move forward, it ebbs and flows. And you see things working against each other, you know, many things.

You know, and like, right now, the politics in this nation, you know, where you have your Trump supporters, I really think that the phenomena of Donald Trump was something that was

always simmering beneath the surface. The Civil War: the outcome of the Civil War was never accepted. And you had, you know, first of all, you had all of these rights given to people who were slaves, and they were able to elect people to offices. And that's when the Ku Klux Klan came along, and Jim Crow came along. And it's almost like, we're really right back there right now, at that Jim Crow thing. Because that element of society feels that entitlement; they feel that, you know, that this land was put here for them. And they don't want to give that up, alright. And they don't want to give up the fact that, you know, however they got it, that they should be able to keep the privilege that they had. I remember, you know, when I worked for the transit authority in Boston, there was older white men that were on the job, and because of affirmative action, most of the new hires were younger Black men, some women, a few women, but mostly, you know. There were white people in the mix, but it was more people of color being hired. And the old-time white people were really afraid of this. They felt that something was being taken from them, and they would, you know, say, "Hey, you got my kid's job." You know, another thing about it was, you know, in Massachusetts, they didn't hire most of their Black hirees from Boston. They hired them from down south. And I think they hired them from down south because they wanted people who were more used to Jim Crow than people from living in Boston, you know. And they wouldn't as readily talk back to authority as somebody, you know, from Boston would, because they didn't have to deal with the Ku Klux Klan and stuff like that. And not to say, I'm not saying Boston isn't racist. If you look at the footage of busing in the 1970s, that's some of the most chilling racial animosity that you that you could ever see. You had adults coming out throwing rocks at buses, and there's footage of this, footage of somebody running an American flag into a Black man's stomach. And that's a very famous picture on the steps of City Hall. So these things continue to ebb and flow. And you have the people who were the conquistadores who took over our lands wanting to retain that; they want to retain all of the power that they have. Even though we have, we have laws, and we have evolved as a country, you know, that says otherwise, you still have this notion of white privilege there. In the last election, it was like 49% of our population, you know, because that's how many people voted for Trumpism. They would really like to take things back to where, you know, a society where white people have more rights than people of color. Where the disparities and income and the disparities in medicine and other aspects of society, you know, are prevalent.

Leah Kelly

I want to move on to this theme of indigeneity or identity. And I was wondering, first of all, how do you refer to yourself? How do you see yourself as an Indigenous person? If someone were to ask you, you know, what is your identity, what would you say?

Robert Peters

It depends. But I would say, you know, if I chose, if I thought it was something I should answer, I would say I'm Native American, I might say I'm Native American and African American. And a lot of times people will ask you and ask you questions and stuff like that, and you just don't want to talk about it, you know. You don't want to—you know what the questions are going to be and you don't want to hear it, you know? So, you know, it's like a lot, you just want to exist, and you just want to be a person. But I refer to myself as Native and African American descent, and I'm proud of my heritage, but I just wish, you know, that your heritage didn't always have to be such an issue with all of these other ramifications attached to it. Why can't I just, you know, be a person like anybody else. You know, and with everything that's happened in the last few years with Black

Lives Matter and all of that, I don't think that I could sit down and enjoy a football game, the way I used to be able to sit down and you know, bring out junk food, and, you know, just sit there, because they bought that race into football. And Colin Kaepernick kneeling, you know. But the slave mentality of the football culture, you know, you have your owners and you have your free agents and you have your players under contract, so it's almost like a slave brothel. And, you know, after George Floyd, how can you see that as any other way? So that's evolving also. The conversation is evolving.

Leah Kelly

I'm thinking, what about just how you see yourself? It doesn't have to be how you answer to other people. But you're an enrolled member of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, right? [Yes.]

Leah Kelly

So would you consider yourself a citizen of that nation? Or would you say, "I'm Mashpee"? I'm looking at just your self-identity and hopefully not what is affected by other people. Would you think that you're Mashpee Wampanoag first and foremost, or do you think that you're, I don't know, American first and foremost...?

Robert Peters

No, I am Mashpee Wampanoag first and foremost. The thing is that it's a constant struggle. And when you have to fight for everything, you don't know what it's like to not have to fight. And believe me, Mashpee has had a lot of struggles that they shouldn't have had to endure. And then there's, you know, your generational trauma. And one of the things that I've come to realize, with Corona coming and all of that, is that nobody's okay. You know, it sort of brings everybody in the world down to where what our reality was, because when the settlers first came here, they came here because a pandemic wiped out half a million people between Plymouth and Southern Maine. So now this pandemic comes and it turns off the world, right. On the anniversary of the pilgrims coming to our land, four hundred years, on that four hundredth anniversary, when they were gonna have all these celebrations, and everybody's planning this or that, you know, it's like, "Nope, everything's shutting down." So it's like everybody was brought back to where we were anyway. And if everything were brought back to normal, one of the things I ask myself is, you know, would I even know what to do? Would I even know how to feel about that? And I look at, over my lifetime, the things that we've lost. We used to have our own businesses. And I think in the Native community and the Black community, we're about two or three generations from really having our own business structures. You know, and as far as business goes—and I say this more for the Black community although the Native community is parallel with that—business-wise and economy-wise, we were better off segregated. We had our own businesses, we had our own stores, we had, you know, now, after the Civil Rights Movement, you've seen a lot of our businesses, most of our restaurants and nightclubs and stuff like that, you know, don't exist anymore. We have a generation of people that don't know how to run a business, or don't know how to own a business. So that's one of the losses. So for the right to sit in someone else's restaurant, we gave up the privilege of sitting in our own. And when I was young, I actually had about 30 minority businesses. This is a town of like, four thousand people. We had a lot of businesses, we knew how to run business. We do not now.

That's one of the things that I see that we've lost. And those are the things I'd like to try to get back, you know. And I think having everything reset, having the whole society stop, gave

everybody a chance to step back and think about things and think about how they want things when things do get back to normal. And I don't think anybody really wants to go back to the normal that we had accepted before the pandemic. It was a very spiritual thing that this happened at this time in this way, and I think where people are feeling the loss of it, they're also feeling that reset in themselves. And no matter who you are, it's not a racial thing or anything like that; people are feeling reset. And, you know, there's a certain amount of relief that, you know, this economy that was not including us, that was just running us over, you know, and now it becomes obvious, when everybody's doing things online. We don't, as far as computer and technology, we're like ants. People of color and Native people are like ants, we're like cavemen, compared to the technology that's out there; we're completely cut out of the meat of that industry. And just with like, signing on to get your Corona, you know, most people of color are unable to sign up to get their shot, because they're not that computer literate. And to know that this is a disease that affects people of color more, to come out with a standard right off the bat that is going to put us at a disadvantage of getting the help, is a prime example of where we stand, you know, and one of the things that we really need to demand, you know. We need to have inroads into these industries. And we need to have people like Tim Cook with Apple, take us by the hand and say, "Here, we want you to be able to run a part of the computer business, we want you to be able to do this." And he was on TV talking about coding and stuff like that. And we should be building our own computers. We should be, you know, adept with that and trying to keep pace in that kind of industry. And it's obvious that we need help in that area. So that's a whole nother area of sovereignty, you know, having technology, technological sovereignty, and that can become more important than, you know, other kinds of sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Right, can we actually get more into that, on the topic of sovereignty? You're, mentioning that there are these different types of sovereignty, like technological sovereignty. Do you have any personal definition of the word sovereignty in general, not dictionary definition, but rather how you see that concept? Because it's such a big word in the realm of tribal nations in the U.S. today. So does it mean to you and how much importance do you place on it?

Robert Peters

Well, I don't think that we're as—although we have a degree of sovereignty, I don't think that we could really call it sovereign. You know, and I wish that there could be a greater degree of sovereignty. And sovereignty to me would be being able to have control of how you educate your children, of the way you have control over your environment, the lands, you know, your relationship to the Earth, your spirituality, you know, all of these things are part of that sovereignty. And we don't have control over our lands, we don't have control over the environment, we're living in a society that will just as soon push the environment aside so that you could build a strip mall. And that's the prevailing wind in our society. And when you can get beyond that, and start to reclaim your control over your lands, and, you know, that's one of the reasons why getting your languages and getting people speaking your language again, is so important. And taking back that power, you know, telling your own stories. I'm a writer and artist, you know, and anytime you get people sitting down and listening to you tell your stories, or looking at your art, you're taking back a measure of power that we give away. And we give away our power simply by turning on the television. And we give away our power by turning on the television and knowing that none of the programming on that television is ours. And none of the ideas coming out of that are our ideas,

you know, so to be able to express your ideas and have them be prominent in the society you're in is a very important aspect of sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I was gonna ask, how do you exercise sovereignty and how do the rest of your tribal members try to fight to be able to exercise sovereignty?

Robert Peters

They fight for it all the time. I think it's a constant fight. And they fight by learning the language, by exercising their right to fish and hunt. And we never didn't have the fishing and hunting and gathering rights. We never gave those up. But you were living in a society that didn't recognize that. So people would hunt and get arrested, and go to court and win. Because that was our right. But we had to do that over and over and over again, to the point where now you have certain areas that your game warden and your fish warden recognize that sovereignty. You have anguish among other people that think, you know, that we're taking away something from them because we have the sovereignty, you know. Like having lobster traps in Cape Cod Canal, you know, there's a lot of resentment that we could do that. So even when you do have that sovereignty, you still have to fight for it and you still have to have that argument sometimes, or that fight, sometimes, or get arrested sometimes to protect and safeguard that sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. What would full sovereignty look like to you, for your tribe?

Robert Peters

That's a funny one. Here we have—we've been coexisting with people living in our sovereign territory for the most part, you know, 50, 60 years, and most of it being 25 years or 30 years, but you know, it's not complete linear. And when Indigenous rights becomes this worldwide thing, and there's a worldwide, you know, attention to Indigenous rights and to the treatment of Indigenous people, there will be a recognition of us having jurisdiction over our lands, whether we own the individual property properties or not. Just like, you know, in Mashpee, you know, a white person will say, "Oh, those are Indians", or they will, you know, feel that. Well, being a sovereign people, and given the full sovereignty, we will have to say, "Oh, those are our white people." And we will have a certain amount of responsibility for that relationship. But it will be, it will come from a greater position of sovereignty, and a greater position of recognition of what our rights are. And we would have to not neglect what their rights are.

Leah Kelly

So, it's not necessarily about land ownership, is what you're saying? It's more about ability to exercise jurisdiction?

Robert Peters

Well, I mean, when you get something that's so entangled, you know, if we got sovereignty over everything, you know, would retribution be to kick everybody off of our land, and you know, tear down all the houses and restore the land to like it was? I don't think so. All right? And I think part of our sovereignty—I've had this argument with people in our language program, you know, in

Mashpee schools, you know, we should be teaching our language to white kids, too. Because they're in our country.

Leah Kelly

Living on your land, right?

Robert Peters

Yes. But the fact that they're there, we have a responsibility to that relationship. But that's what sovereignty is about, is being responsible for, you know, what your lands are, and what the realities of that is. And I don't think the solution would ever be, even if we were given full sovereignty, and they say, "Well, we want to make you whole," I don't think part of being made whole would be to say, "Okay, we want all these people to go away." That's not, I don't think that that would be, I don't think that would be something we would do.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I mean, that's interesting. Could you talk very briefly about like that coexistence of the non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in the town of Mashpee? Do find it's very segregated just in terms of who hangs out with who, where?

Robert Peters

I think this is segregated in very large respects, but I think that there's a want for it to not be. You know, I mean, I think there's a realization among white people or non-Natives that live here, what their coming in and not acknowledging us for 40 years has done to us. And I don't think that they want to continue doing that to us.

Leah Kelly

I see. Yeah. And is the town itself run by mostly non-Indigenous people and then it has to work with the tribe, or are they one body?

Robert Peters

Well, it's run by mostly non-Indigenous people, it's run mostly by outsiders. But here's the other thing: Cape Cod is occupied mostly by people who are not from Cape Cod. And even white people who are Cape Cod-ers, that are, you know, here for generations and generations, they feel that the same way we feel it. You know, there's a Cape Cod accent that is going away. And, you know, that if you think about all of the accents that people have, there's more variations of the English language within 60 miles of Boston than anywhere on the planet. And a lot of those dialects are dying out. And, you know, Mashpee has its own dialect. And if you ever get a chance to listen to tapes of Earl Mills, Chief Flying Eagle, he has a very beautiful Mashpee accent. And, you know, it's also a Cape Cod accent. I think what makes Mashpee distinction is, you know, the language structure of our original language and the vowels, the way the vowels are, and the way the vowels are pronounced in our original language, spilled through into how we speak English. So you have people talking like they have a hot potato in their mouth, you know, and that's a Mashpee accent. But there's also a Cape Cod accent that's kind of related to that, you know, and then, you know, different neighborhoods in Boston, by neighborhood, there's different accents. So I think that the fact that anybody can get displaced, you know—just because you're not Native doesn't mean that you can't get displaced from the culture that was there. Like the old cottages, most of the cottages

were owned by Natives, Cape Verdeans, or Black people back in the 50s and 60s, you know, and we don't have those anymore. And there's no such thing as going to an old Cape Cod cottage; when you go to the Cape, you go to a condo, you know, just like you're at home, wherever you come from. And I for one think that some of the old cottages should be restored so that like, people could come and visit Cape Cod and have that experience of, you know, staying in a cottage just like you might stay in a log cabin up in the wilderness somewhere. Well, it's not just our culture that got overrun. It's the entire culture of Cape Cod. So when you have an old Cape Cod, or there's a white person in old Cape Code or there's an Indian, they're going to be able to relate better than the people who came in and brought all of their ways and ideas to replace the culture that we had there.

Leah Kelly

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I know you said you have to go, but one quick question I have is, how important is it to be federally recognized and have that land? And do you think that that's something that everyone should strive for, all Indigenous peoples?

Robert Peters

It is so complicated to be an Indian. We have about nine different legal classifications of being an Indian. You know, you have federally recognized, you have state recognized, you have tribes that are blood quota. All right, you have offspring of tribes that are blood quota, that aren't blood quota. So your kids can't even be in your tribe, you know. You have Indians that aren't recognized, you have, you know, people that know they're Indian that, you know, don't care about being recognized, you know. And all of these classifications, you know, really divide us and make it difficult for us to get things done or complete conversations about things, or to be able to take an idea and bring it forward. And one of the things that I really would like to achieve as being a resident of Boston, is to have a relationship with the Native American residents of Boston and the city of Boston, and have public land, that is public land, dedicated to the Native cultural use. And the idea wouldn't be for us to take back the land, the idea would be to have the city own that land, and the city own a relationship with us. And to be able to have that cultural space and when other cities see that, to replicate that, to recognize Indian people as people, which could go along with sovereignty. It could go hand-in-hand with sovereignty. And, you know, if you had all the cities in America, the larger cities, because smaller tribes can't provide for their members that live in cities, you would have Indians with one classification: you're just Native people, you're Native residents of that town, you're Native Americans, Native American Americans. And what that could possibly lead to if you keep pulling the thread on the sweater, would be ten congressmen and two senators. And not being under the Department of Interior.

Leah Kelly

Do you have to go or can you stay longer?

Robert Peters

We could go a couple more minutes.

Leah Kelly

Okay. It seems like you're in favor of finding some kind of common ground and not just denying all the American settlers who are here. What is that vision that you are striving for? What looks to you like a fair and just system for everyone?

Robert Peters

Well, that, that we're self-sufficient. That what we do, you know, amongst ourselves, be sustainable. So that we can, you know, walk into a room on equal footing, you know. And we can say, "Oh, well, we take care of ourselves and we take care of our land, and we have our relationship with our lands, but we're also part of this bigger picture." And I think one of the things that people need to realize is everybody is Indigenous to someplace. And you know, to make people look back at their own Indigenous origins and you know, which they are there are. Siberians are Indians, Genghis Khan was an Indian. [Laughs] You know, you have tribal traditions in Europe; you have your Celts, and you have your Basques, and you have your Gauls. I'm part French; I tell people, "that's where I get my gall." But, you know, to respect your origins and to respect the ancestors, and to be able to appreciate them and what they bring to the table, and to be able to, wherever you are, be able to respect your host people.

Leah Kelly

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Robert Peters

No, I'm good.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Well, thank you so much for meeting with me. I don't want to make you late for your next appointment.

Robert Peters

Good luck on your paper. You know, if you want to get back to me on something you can.

*Interview with Sage Phillips*

Tue, 12/29 10:27PM • 1:07:42

Leah Kelly

Do you have any questions before we get started? I know you read the informed consent form.

Sage Phillips

I don't think so. I think I'm good.

Leah Kelly

Okay, awesome. So we can just start then. Just if you could, if you wouldn't mind stating your name and pronouns and the name of your tribal nation.

Sage Phillips

Okay, I'm Sage Philips, she/her/hers. And I'm Panawahpskewi, or Penobscot in more modern terms, and then we are one of four tribes that belong to the Wabanaki people.



Leah Kelly

Cool. Okay, so you're the first like, young person-slash-student I've interviewed. So do you just want to quickly talk about your college and the programs or things that you're involved in that have to do with Native American Studies, et cetera?

Sage Phillips

Do you want the long version or the short version? [Whatever you want to give is fine.] Okay, so I go to the University of Connecticut in Storrs. And I'm from Maine. So it was definitely like an adjustment. And I was looking for schools with the best Native programs and UConn never crossed my mind. And then my mom was like, "Oh, no, I'm gonna make you apply to UConn. It's great school." And then I found like, no, like nothing about the Native program there. And so I really didn't want to go. And then my dad was like, "Go make it your own," like, you know, "You could go elsewhere and benefit off of a program already established, but like, go do it." So I went to UConn to do that. So in the end of my freshman year, I was hired at the Native American Cultural Programs (NACP). And since then, we've expanded and I created NAISA this fall, which is our Native American Indigenous Students Association. I received a grant called Bridging the Gap which assesses the needs of Native students looking to you know, pursue a higher education. So that calls for a full reassessment of UConn's land, and also dialogue sessions with Connecticut tribal youth and looking at how UConn is not serving them rightly and why they're not choosing UConn. And also the land reassessment will evaluate why UConn needs to uphold the land better, and how they can do that is bringing the students in. And then one of my coworkers received a grant for a mentorship program, which works with Connecticut tribal youth as well. I'm on the President's Council for Race and Diversity on behalf of NACP and myself. I could probably name a million other platforms I speak on for us, but I'll leave it there.

Leah Kelly

So are you a junior? [Yeah.] Okay, so there wasn't really anything there when you got there?

Sage Phillips

No. So they have an Involvement Fair, and it's like the second or third week of the semester in the fall, and there's one in the spring, but when I got there in the fall, I went to the Involvement Fair looking for this table. And I mean, Fairfield Ways, like our main strip is like, lined with hundreds of tables. And I finally found the Native American Cultural Programs. And I was like, "Hi, I'm Sage, I'm Penobscot. I really want to get involved." And they were like, "Come to book club, every week. And then we have craft night, biweekly." I was like, that sounds awful. And like, to me, I was like, craft night to me like appropriation and like, I'm not much of a reader. So I really didn't want to go to book night. And I just like really wanted to get involved and like, do the work. And like, because I was there to like, expand this program. And I wanted to know how I could do it. So literally, that steered me away until the end of the spring semester to follow. But I was like, did I make the wrong decision coming here? Like they literally like told me to go to book club. So there was pretty much nothing there. Which was sad to see, but I'm glad I got to build it in a little way, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Was there any academic component in existence with the NACP?

Sage Phillips

So nothing coincided with any NACP, nothing went with it. But we do have a minor for Native and Indigenous Studies. So I did tack on that. And it's been a struggle. The course catalog, I've been lucky every semester so far to find only one course that fits the requirements because they're just not offered. No one teaches them anymore. But I mean, the course catalog is like full of them and I sat down with my advisor and she was like, "I've been here for like four years, and I've never seen any of these offered," which is scary for me, because I'm at the point where it's like, if I don't see more of these courses offered, then I won't graduate with the minor. Which is not my fault.

Leah Kelly

That's interesting, because a few years ago, I mean, I'm sure you know, Glenn Matoma, right? [Yeah.] Because he has done things with trying to bring about Indigenous Peoples' Day and that kind of thing. And that's kind of how part of how I was introduced, through my mom, who also does work with that in our town; we live in West Hartford. And so I thought, I don't know. It's like the Human Rights Center, right? [Mm-hmm.] And then there's the Upstander Project that's related to that and does some work with Indigenous rights and movements. Yeah, so it's surprising to me to actually hear from a student standpoint, that there wasn't really anything there. But it sounds like you've done a lot since you've gotten there to really...

Sage Phillips

It's definitely been tough. But I mean, like, I went out and found Glenn on my own. I got into Leadership Legacy and like, for that you pick, like a staff or faculty mentor, and I had heard of his work. So I like sought him out myself. But then I saw, like, our office should have these resources, just like available for students. And then also my freshman year, I was like, I want to get involved in Indigenous Peoples' Day, and I knew we had the powwow on campus. But again, like there was no, they were not very visible to the campus, and I just had no way in, so I steered very much away from that.

Leah Kelly

So what would you say is the biggest contribution or change that you have made to UConn in general, in relation to improving the Indigenous program?

Sage Phillips

I would like to think that the work I've done so far has not necessarily solved the problem by any means but has moved UConn further towards coming to be with good relations with the land. And that's through catering to your Native and Indigenous population, which clearly they hadn't done before. And now, you know, we have like a new partnership with undergraduate admissions and college horizons, basically like trying to recruit Native students from across the country to come. And I think just like work like that really makes you become a better place in making them aware of the land they're on and how they need to improve relations with that by bringing in students and catering their needs. So I think that's like what means the most to me about it all.

Leah Kelly

Cool. So I want to talk a little bit more about your background with the Penobscot Nation. Did you grow up on the Penobscot reservation, or around the area?

Sage Phillips

Yeah, I grew up around the area; my grandmother taught at the school on the Rez. Um, so, before I was born, my parents were like, obviously, she's going to go to school on Rez, because my grandmother was so well-known there. And then she died before I even reached the age of one. So then I went to the school off- Rez in my town, which was great, and you know it made sense because you know, the school on the Rez is only K-through-8 so then you have to pick a high school in the area. My parents were like, "Well now that her grandmother is not there obviously we don't want her to have to like make new friends when she like eventually grows up." So it was good for that but no, I did not grow up on the Rez. I have a lot of family. I mean, they're literally two minutes from my high school. So like it's not a far travel but yeah, sometimes I wish I did, but, oh well.

Leah Kelly

Are both your parents Penobscot?

Sage Phillips

No. Just my dad.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Cool. Alright, so even though you didn't live there, you've had some interaction or...

Sage Phillips

And my grandfather like always made us aware of our roots and traditions, cultures, all that jazz and we would always go on the island for powwows and gatherings, you know, socials, all that. We just weren't physically like residing there/

Leah Kelly

Is it actually an island?

Sage Phillips

Yeah. Yeah, it's in the middle of the Penobscot River. There's like a bridge you drive to it.

Leah Kelly

Oh wow. Okay. It must be a big island though right?

Sage Phillips

Not really, it's like three miles around I think. It's actually referred to as Indian Island.

Leah Kelly

That's weird; I thought I read somewhere on the internet that it was like several towns long. [Oh God, no.] All right, well that's...they were mistaken. [Laugh] Okay, but then do a lot of Penobscot grow up just around it, like a large population in the surrounding area?

Sage Phillips

I mean, yeah, I would say there's a lot of us you know, kind of scattered throughout, but the majority, they're on the Rez just because, you know, community is such a big thing. But I mean,

everyone who went to my high school was from the Rez, everyone that I identified with. So I never, like, knew of anyone close to my age off the Rez, but like my grandfather doesn't live on the Rez. He lives in the town over. So it really varies.

Leah Kelly

So everyone at your high school was Penobscot?

Sage Phillips

No. It was a predominantly white high school, but all of the kids, because like I said, once you graduate on the Rez, you get to choose your high school, like wherever you want to go. Um, so there are probably under 10 of us who identified as Penobscot at my high school. And then others went to some towns over.

Leah Kelly

Okay I see. And what is your relationship with the Penobscot Nation now? Do you still always attend their cultural events and participate in traditions? Do you ever get involved in tribal governance or tribal affairs?

Sage Phillips

Yes, so I would say, even though I'm away from our community, being at UConn, I think I'd like to say that my relationship with my roots has strengthened, and that I'm not there so like, I have to keep reclaiming old practices and traditions to like, keep it with me and keep them alive for the next generation. So I've actually like taught myself how to bead since I've been at college. I've learned how to smudge and perform ceremonies on my own, and other you know, just like working with leather and birch bark, all of that. I haven't done any tribal governance just because you kind of have to be there for that. We do have a youth council that I was never really involved in, didn't know much about it. And it was like on the Rez, so I wasn't like super comfortable. And now that I'm you know, at UConn, I'd like to say that I carry my community with me and the work that I'm doing.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I kind of want to get into the first part of my thesis, which is about identity and indigeneity in particular. I was wondering, do you identify as Indigenous? [Yes.] And what term do you use most often to identify as an Indigenous person? Like Indigenous or Native or Native American?

Sage Phillips

I say Penobscot always first and then I would never say, you know, my go-tos are Native or Indigenous. I never say Indian; I find that the most offensive of all. Native American is like okay, but still like I find "American" is like colonial ties. And then the same with like, American Indian is right up there with like Indian, it's like a whole colonial term. So I like Native or Indigenous, but I prefer Penobscot.

Leah Kelly

So I suppose, on the one hand being a citizen of the Penobscot Nation, and on the other hand, being Indigenous, I mean, those are two very separate terms in a way, but still both terms that you can

strongly identify with. So I'm wondering, what does indigeneity or Indigenous identity mean to you when you call yourself Indigenous?

Sage Phillips

Um, for me, the most important thing is my ancestors and thinking of them. And like just being Indigenous to me means being able to even be here because of them and all that they went through, and you know, even like, my close relatives, like my grandfather, like the stuff he's gone through has really, you know, that is being Indigenous, is being able to fight through those hardships and still be here and still provide for the next generations to come. And I think the other part is the cultural component to it. Like, for me, claiming indigeneity isn't just to claim it, it's reclaiming it and doing the work to...I guess, like, if I didn't go and reclaim my culture for myself, what would I have to give to those to come? And that's how, like, I would hate to be a part of the cause for why our culture gets lost over time.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so are you saying the obtaining or the reobtaining of Indigenous identity is directly linked to the ability to practice one's culture?

Sage Phillips

I mean, yeah, I think to a certain extent. It definitely differs for everyone. You know, my answer here is way different from if you interviewed someone on my Rez. Just being, you know, I think being raised in your community is significantly different from like, how I grew up. So now I'm definitely like, yeah, I have to go reclaim it, especially not being there, you know, I'm not in Maine a lot of the time anymore. So that has a lot to do with it. And just like, small things, like, for me, being Indigenous is like, you consider all your relations, like you are related to the land, you know, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the trees, you know, everything Mother Earth has given us or our relatives. And I think for that, like that goes right along with culture, like just being culturally aware of your surroundings, and all that you're connected to as well.

Leah Kelly

And so what would you say would be differences that people who grew up on your reservation, how they would see it differently?

Sage Phillips

I mean, I don't want to, like speak for anyone other than myself. But coming from my perspective, like, I mean, it differs. I guess, like, I have some friends that grew up, you know, I have a friend whose family has a drum group. And he started drumming as soon as he could walk, and he knows the songs and their meanings and all that. And I have a cousin who I'm trying to teach to bead, and they both grew up on the Rez. So I guess it really does differ in how you're raised and you know how much you want to go out and learn this stuff. I'm unfamiliar, I believe the school [on the Rez] did some sort of culture class. But again, like I didn't go there, so I'm not sure. But I would say that just being, like, just growing up with that communal structure, and that sense of belonging, community, really boosts your confidence and your identity. I feel like that would have been the case for me.

Leah Kelly

Okay. And then do you see indigeneity as a collective identity or an individual identity? Or both? Because you said that different people's perceptions of their own indigeneity can differ a lot. But at the same time, do you see indigeneity as sort of connecting people across the world who all understand what it's like to be colonized and suffer from that?

Sage Phillips

I think, yeah, I mean, we did an event, it was a global perspective, and we had Indigenous people from all over the world, like Australia, South America, you know. And it was really interesting and like, are all of our perspectives and, you know, histories, and even our own experiences, we're all vastly different, but we were all able to relate. So I think there is some communal sense of identity in that. But also, I see the individual identity myself in that, at UConn, I don't have that community with me all the time. I'm trying, that's what I'm trying to do. Every day, I'm trying to build the community. So for me, it's an individual Indigenous identity in that I have to, you know, keep it going myself and I don't have others to identify with around me, you know, for us to keep it going and establish that community elsewhere. So I think that's hard, but also like, I'm more white than I am Indigenous. So I mean, if you look at blood quantum, which we won't get into, but you know, my blood says I'm more white than Indigenous. So I see those as two separate identities, but also like, my duty is that I have to acknowledge both sides of who I am. So there's definitely a communal sense, but I also experience a very individual reality of it as well.

Leah Kelly

So being both white and Indigenous, is your goal to create community just by finding other Indigenous students at UConn and forming solidarity with them, or are you also attempting to foster community in terms of having everyone be a part of that?

Sage Phillips

Yeah, so our goals are definitely to cater to Native and Indigenous students at UConn, but also prospective students. And then beyond that, we really try, like we have all this programming so that we can engage UConn's full community and have them learn. Especially being on the land that they're on, we want them to come and learn about the people who they're affecting. And, you know, it's just out of respect and honor that the whole community learns and acknowledges the people who were here before us, and the current students that are there. Um, but yeah, I think it's just like, I have to be in solidarity, but in a sense, for a while I just tried to, like escape my whiteness and not acknowledge it. Because I've always like, even as a kid at the doctor, whenever I check the box, it says, you know, "Alaska Native/American Indian," and I've never wanted to check white. And then I came to terms with the fact that like, I can't just escape this, like, this is who I am. And like, I have ancestors who were colonizers, but also I have ancestors who were affected by colonizers. So I'm still working with that. I'm still trying to figure out like the middle ground, and sort out the gray areas. But every day, you know, I'm doing the work to benefit the community, which is, I would like to say, coming from, like, my white identity, is like I'm working to give back in my own way. And then it benefits my Indigenous identity, because I'm doing the work for my community, if that makes sense.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. Do you ever feel stuck between those two identities?

Sage Phillips

Oh, yeah. For I still struggle with it. Like, I clearly do not look the part, you know, I don't look Indigenous, whatever that means, you know, stereotypes, events, so nicely created for us. But I struggle with that the most in that, like, I just don't, I don't appear to be what people perceive us Natives to look like. And that's like, the hardest thing for me, you know, it's just like, what do I do now? Like, because a lot of the times when I go into like white spaces, they're like, "Oh, you're white." And I'm like, "No, I'm Penobscot." And then I'm like, well, wait, I kind of am, like, they're not wrong. But then I go into Native spaces and I'm, like, accepted, regardless, because we've faced, like, a lot of us don't look how our ancestors looked. And that's fine. But it just depends on what space we're in. And that's like the most challenging part of my identity.

Leah Kelly

That's also interesting, because I know that some Native cultures or some tribes have really been caught up in that idea of blood quantum and what qualifies you as Native and what gives you permission to be a member, to identify that way. And that can be harmful to a lot of individuals who are mixed or don't represent, like you were saying, what people expect. But you seem to be saying that your community has always been very welcoming of everyone?

Sage Phillips

Yeah, and I mean, like, I'm enrolled, my dad's enrolled, my grandfather's full-blood Penobscot. Um, so like, people know who we are; my grandfather's like, very well-known, a very respected Elder. We've never been like, you know, shunned or anything. I've always felt welcome. But like, if you look at my mom, on the other hand, if she drives onto the Rez, like she gets some weird looks, because they're like, "Why are you here?" I mean, she's like, this white lady, blond hair, like, you know, blue eyes, and they're just like, she just gets looks driving through, like, "Why are you here?" But then like, we get to the social and, you know, people are welcoming of her because they're like, "Oh, yeah, that's like, you know, that's Sage's mom" or whatever. So I've definitely always felt welcomed. But I'm also grappling with like the idea of blood quantum myself. Because, you know, our tribe does use it. You have to be a quarter to be enrolled, so.

Leah Kelly

So growing up both in a white community but also having the reservation to go to and experiencing all of that Penobscot culture, and then coming to state school for college, have you felt any kind of tension between Native cultures, which tend to be more collective, more tied to land less, focused on money? Is that ever a struggle to try to balance that, like conflicting values?

Sage Phillips

What do you mean specifically, like, comparing my tribe to Connecticut?

Leah Kelly

Like even just in your town, like going to a mostly-white high school versus also going to the reservation, are there values that conflict between the Penobscot traditional values and the ones of white colonizers or settlers?

Sage Phillips

Oh, I see what you're saying, okay, I thought you were talking about like distinguishing between Native communities. I would say, coming from my high school, so like, my thing was, like, I was trying to get out of like, a predominantly white school. And that's why in my college search, I was like, I want like, the best Native community I can find, like, I want to find, you know, I want to like immerse myself in it. And then I came to UConn, and I was like, this is no different than what I've been, you know, with my whole life, and, you know, the school system that's, like, pretty much just white. So I really didn't, like, have a hard time with it. And now that I've become like, more connected with my roots, and my culture, now I'm starting to be like, wow, it'd be really nice to like, have some people to, you know, talk with about this. And we have some, we have some new faculty that have been really great, some new Native faculty that I've been able to, like, resonate with and talk with, so that's been good. But yeah, it's so different, like, immersing yourself in a white community and seeing ideas, and then also being in your Indigenous community, and seeing, you know, all of our values and like, it's just crazy how different they are. It's crazy to think, but.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. So as a sociology major, I'm interested in identity as kind of a social construct, and the way that people construct identity. Because I think the general way of thinking about it in our society is like, you have to find your identity, but really, you're constructing your identity. And it seems like you are sort of on that path, so I'm wondering, do you think that the idea of what it means to be Indigenous, or the perception of indigeneity, has changed over time or has been constructed over time?

Sage Phillips

I think it depends who you ask. I think like, for the white culture, if I tell them I'm Penobscot, then it's like, "Okay, where's your feathers? Where's your head dress?" Like, that's what they perceive indigeneity to be, it's all about the image. And then it's like, "Oh, can you speak your language?" And I'm like, "Kind of. Like I can say, I can tell you a few things. But like, I'm not expected to know it all because your ancestors wouldn't allow me to." And then if you ask like, Native culture, I think all of our traditions and values and beliefs have changed. I think it's a matter of like, it goes from generation to generation, how we view ourselves. So like, things like how we identify, like my grandfather wants to be called a Penobscot Indian, like, that's what he wants, and I would hate for anyone to call me that. So I think stuff like that differs. But I think how like us Natives perceive indigeneity hasn't really changed much. We like know who we are, we know how we're connected and we know our roots. So, it definitely comes down to like, having experienced it from like a white side of things and from a Native side of things.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, it's interesting to think about how Indigenous peoples, how their culture, like any culture, can be affected by other cultures, by interaction with settler society. I mean, that can change another society in a lot of ways. I don't know exactly what I'm asking here, but something I've talked about with other Indigenous peoples who I have interviewed is the idea that pre-colonization, there's no concept of indigeneity, because there's nothing else, you just are who you are, living on your land. And colonization is the only thing that makes one Indigenous, I mean, really, it's weird, because Indigenous identity, which is something that you cling strongly to, entirely dependent on colonization. And I guess I'm just wondering what you think of that. Is



Indigenous identity constructed, or at least affected, by colonization, and then the resulting settler-colonial society that we live in today?

Sage Phillips

I think there was Panawahpskewi identity at one point, and there still is. You know, I think before Indigenous identity, indigeneity, there was very much that for each, you know, respective tribe as we now know them. Um, yeah, I guess, I think you're right. I mean, that term is coined, you know, from settlers. And like, the term Penobscot as well, like Penobscot came because they didn't know how to pronounce the way we say it. And that's what you'll find with a lot of other nations as well. So yeah, I think the settler views and just colonizing in general, like, a lot of the stuff we operate on is from them, only because we have to, we have to acknowledge certain things without, you know, just throwing in the towel and giving up all together. So I think that's really interesting to think about. But yeah, I think like, there's always been Penobscot identity. It's just now, like, that's a part of indigeneity.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so we can move on to the portion of my thesis where I'm focusing on sovereignty. Could we just start with, I want to ask you, what does sovereignty mean to you in general? Or is it even a thing of importance to you? Because there could be something else that's more important than sovereignty.

Sage Phillips

Yeah, so we were sovereign on our own before colonizers, without sovereignty even being like, a social concept, I feel. And then obviously, genocide, history, you know, all that happened. Um, I guess now, it's important because we're not recognized as sovereign. My tribe is federally recognized and still, it's like, we don't have the ball in our court to like, make all of our own decisions, you know. Sovereignty is, I think it's like a colonized term. Like we were what you would call sovereign on our own. We had our own ways, we had our own civilized way of life, whatever that means. And then the colonizers came in, were just like, "No, you're not sovereign. You're these savage people who don't know how to live." And as a product, my ancestors were put into the boarding school system. And then when they came back, it was like, "You're still not sovereign." And we're still not, whatever, you know, they coined that term to mean. Even though you know, we've achieved the highest point of recognition in the government we possibly could, there's still things we struggle with, like food sovereignty, you know, water. Our neighboring tribe, the Passamaquoddy, they're fighting for clean water. So like, we, whatever sovereign is, we are it, but we're just not perceived to be it.

Leah Kelly

Right. So could you sort of explain more how you would define sovereignty? And not the dictionary definition, but what to you does full sovereignty look like? And you mentioned food sovereignty: is sovereignty more than just a sort of legal recognition? Just what is your personal take on it? I guess go back to: what does a fully sovereign tribal nation look like to you?

Sage Phillips

I think it looks like what our ancestors looked like in that time before colonization, and I think now, like, that's still there, you know, we're still sovereign. And I think although like, we're not

perceived to be such, like, I think that's complete B.S. And like, I think it stems more out of like, "We don't want to acknowledge you as sovereign. We know you are." And like current events and issues, like to me speak volumes to that, like, it just screams like, "Yeah, we know, you can do it, but we're not gonna let you." It's like the power construct of our society and our government. I guess I don't know how I would like formally define sovereignty, but like, I've seen how my tribe operates, and like, we're fine. We would be fine, you know, on our own. And I think the whole, like, requirements for recognition is also B.S. And like, that's also like a form of acknowledging sovereignty. And like, just the way that the government goes about treating us and recognizing us, it's just like, such a, I don't even know how to say it. Just like, such a blow to us as Indigenous peoples, like, our ancestors weren't considered valid and we still feel like we aren't either. So I don't have like a definition of sovereignty, but sovereignty looks like how our ancestors once lived, and how we could, like we still live today. But now we just have like this colonized term for it.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I get what you're saying. And I guess you're also saying that other people can't take away your sovereignty, like colonizers can't take it away just because they say it.

Sage Phillips

They can take the term away. Yeah, they can say we are not sovereign, but that doesn't mean we're not.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, exactly. So then in a way, that would kind of mean, or from the point of view you're saying it, sovereignty doesn't really rely on legal recognition, because the legality of it is so arbitrary, because those rules are made by invaders.

Sage Phillips

I think it does rely on it, but it shouldn't. And our ancestors would not agree that it relies on it, but in the world we live in and the government we're dealing with, like, it absolutely has to do legal recognition, whether we want it to be or not. We can't really escape it no matter how much we try. So like I said before, like we kind of have to comply with certain terms in order to benefit off of them and not just like, give up.

Leah Kelly

I want to talk about federal recognition. First, what do you think about it, and I guess state recognition too, with your tribe being both. Do you see it primarily as a good thing or a bad thing? Is it sovereignty or is it more dependence? There's obviously pros and cons of everything, but do the pros outweigh the cons or vice versa? Just in general, what is your take?

Sage Phillips

I guess, like my tribe, I've always just known us to be recognized. And then I came to Connecticut, and it's like, we do a lot with Mashantucket Pequot Nation. And then like, I obviously they're recognized, and the Mohegans, but then like, there's a couple tribes in Connecticut that like achieved recognition and then had it pulled away. And now they're still not recognized. So I think that is just ridiculous. And there's just no place for that at all. Um, I think like, we all recognize each other. That's the thing, and that comes back to like these different ideologies of indigeneity.

And how like, we recognize each other as Native and like, you know, very well capable of living on our own. But the government has made it so we can't do that. So that's where recognition has to come into play. And we have to acknowledge it whether we like it or not, because at the end of the day, the government will have the last say, which is unfortunate. But I think that we have to decolonize our perspectives, especially in the non-Indigenous community, and just think about, like how these things really contribute to the intergenerational traumas that, you know, we all live with today. I think like, we have to acknowledge our recognition, and I think the government has made it so that's like what tribes strive for, is federal recognition. But again, like the requirements for that. I had a course this year, we went over the requirements in depth, and it was just like, harmful stuff. Like you can't be enrolled in two tribes if you want to apply for recognition. And so like, it's literally a law that you cannot enroll yourself in more than one Native tribe in the U.S. And it's just stuff like that that's like, is it really worth it? Like, is recognition that important? And it is, I think it is, only because, you know, the settler mindset has made it so it's that way.

Leah Kelly

Do you feel like it's something that every tribe should be striving for? Like it's necessary on the path to self-determination, or?

Sage Phillips

I don't think I would fully agree with that only because, like, we're fully recognized, and there's still stuff that we cannot like determine ourselves. Like, we had this big, I don't know if you've heard of the Maine Indian Land Claims Act in 1980, but basically, the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes had this big settlement and they got a ton of money from the government to buy lands, and now there's still to this day like, we cannot do certain things on those lands per the government. And in writing, like they still have certain jurisdiction. So like, it all comes back to like, which I do not have an answer, is it worth it? Is it worth like fighting, like you have to go through so much to even apply to be recognized, that like that in itself, I think is trauma. So then when you finally get it and you still aren't considered like self, you know, you can't like determine things for yourself, it's like, you know.... I guess if you are recognized, like you kind of have a leg up but at the same time, like you're still fighting the same battles as someone who's not. So I don't really have like a full answer, but that's kind of like my idea.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's what I was wondering. I was also wondering if you're familiar with, I guess some of the benefits and negative things that have happened to the Penobscots after having gained their state or federal recognition. Do you know what kinds of like good things have come out of it and potentially bad things?

Sage Phillips

I'm not like super-aware, so I don't want to like speak falsely. I just, I feel like now we're, our voices are heard in a lot more spaces. In this, I mean like modern, like now, the state has like started to cooperate with us. And like, we're the first state to ban the use of Native mascots. And you know, we have all these, we have the Penobscot River Restoration Project, which like the government was a part of, and we raised like \$60 million to remove dams out of the river and restore the river. So like I see a sense of like cooperation that has formed in my lifetime, at least, but I don't know what it was prior to [that.]

Leah Kelly

Could you talk a little bit more about what tribes have to go through to get recognition, and how much of it do you feel is maybe related to identity in terms of having to legitimize one's identity as an Indigenous person?

Sage Phillips

Yeah, so from what I know, you have to be enrolled in the tribe to apply, you cannot be enrolled in more than one, you have to have proof of history of the tribe. Because they don't want to have someone just make up this tribe out of nowhere. And then there's a few others that are slipping my mind. But basically, like, you have to compile all this information into like, a however-many-page document, and then even once it gets submitted, like the process is so drawn out and just like, over generalized and unfair, and I think like having to dig up histories is traumatic to your identity in itself, because you're like, you're reading through it, you're reliving it, you're rehashing it, like you cannot read that without thinking like, this was my ancestors. And I bet some of the names as you're going through the histories are recognized, I think that's super harmful to identity. But also, like, now we can, I feel like the government has constructed it so that applying for recognition is like applying for your identity to be validated in a way. That's how I feel, like you know your identity, but the government won't acknowledge it or recognize it. So now you're like trying to get it recognized. And that's just like, that's probably the most harmful thing ever.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So, you know, we've established that sovereignty is a colonizer term. Do you feel that there is a large goal that you are striving for in your efforts to combat the effects of colonization, restore identity and culture and land? Do you have a far-off future vision in mind of what all of this cumulative effort is heading towards?

Sage Phillips

Like, personally, or?

Leah Kelly

Yeah, personally.

Sage Phillips

For me, what I'm, like, striving to do is, especially like, I've lived the struggles within higher education and being Indigenous. But also, like, I'm at a university where I see like, why students aren't coming, like why they aren't attending the state school that's in their own backyard. So what I want to do is I want to decolonize land grant institutions, and I want to make it so they acknowledge—like, we have a land acknowledgement, but I consider it to be an empty land acknowledgement, because the university sometimes reads it off, you know, and then what are they doing past that? Nothing. They're not supporting us Indigenous folk, anywhere beyond that. So for me, I want to break it down. And it's going to start with free tuition, especially at land grant institutions, like, the University of Maine was in my backyard. I could have gone there for free. And a lot of kids from the Rez go there because of that. So that's one thing. And then resources are another; clearly I'm trying to build that up. And that's another thing, it's like, we asked, you know, a leader from a tribe that we work with, and they said, "Well, we, you know, I think a lot of our

students tried to look for resources at UConn and there's not much in the past.” And so we're like, “Okay, then we're gonna be more visible.” And that's what we've done. So I'm trying, like, I want to have a legal nonprofit that you know, fights for free tuition, and also just like, reassessments of land and dealing with treaties and all that jazz. All to come full circle with the goal of getting Native students into higher education, because we need representation in courtrooms and operating rooms and classrooms, wherever it may be. But it all starts with, you know, being able to obtain a higher education. So that's my personal goals. Hopefully it works out.

Leah Kelly

So you've mentioned decolonization. I was wondering if you could talk more about what that looks like to you and what that means to you.

Sage Phillips

I think just shifting the narrative, and like some things I still decolonize my own mind on. But I think, you know, getting the non-Indigenous community, the white community, whoever it may be, to see like, our perspectives more, and you know, decolonizing their mindset, shifting their mindset to think Indigenous, and you know, how we might perceive things. Like you know, the strongest example is probably the idea of like, how women are, you know, treated in different societies. So like, white society, it's like, women, you know, there's a fight for, you know, a women's rights, and, you know, just being like, equal. And then Indigenous communities, women hold the most power, like, we look up to our grandmothers and our women, and like, even you go back in history, and you'll see that the women were the ones to, you know, appoint the men who would go to war, who would go meet with the settlers; the women make all the decision making. So like, just decolonizing certain perspectives and ideologies of different things, is like, what decolonization is to me, and I guess, just being able to shift your narrative to see otherwise.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so you see it more as decolonizing ways of thinking, rather than...

Sage Phillips

And that once you decolonize your thoughts, you can turn that into action, which is like what I would call on the university to do.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so yeah, and so decolonization, technically speaking, full decolonization would mean the settlers go away, which is pretty impossible as of now. And so I guess I'm wondering when you're saying decolonizing, I mean, you've kind of already said, but what does that mean if you can't actually physically get to the actual end of colonization?

Sage Phillips

Um, well, it would be things like, we need to focus on environmental justice, and decolonizing how we approach that, and land back is a huge thing. Obviously, like, where do you draw the line? Because the government is not going to say, “Here, have the whole land back, like have it.” Um, so yeah, I think like I said, it all starts with mindset and then turning that into action and how you can provide reparations, and on and on and on.

Leah Kelly

Mm-hmm. So do you feel that it's therefore vital to have white people, colonizer people, involved in that process, and working in cooperation?

Sage Phillips

I think allyship is super important and valued in our communities, especially because like I said, at the end of the day, like, no matter what we're doing, like, a lot of the times we still have to go through the government, the federal government, state government, whoever, for final say. So I think like having those allies and members of like the outside community join us is like, just like the fact that they're willing to come and learn and decolonize their mindset is an accomplishment in our eyes, because then they take that and they go back to their communities. And, you know, they provide that information. Like that's like what I did with Thanksgiving this year; I was posting all this stuff, and I was like, "Decolonize your dinner table. Take what actually happened and talk about it at your Thanksgiving table." And a lot of people did that. And that's just how you make awareness and you decolonize however you can.

Leah Kelly

I guess, since you're the first young person I've interviewed, I'm interested in hearing more about what Indigenous youth are doing in the movement. And have you seen any difference between how Indigenous youth approach these issues versus older generations?

Sage Phillips

Um, I mean, I've definitely seen youth movements, like our youth are our future ancestors, you know, we're the ones who have been sort of, you know, passed the baton to carry on the fight now. And I think that's really powerful for us to see is like, just seeing that our younger generation is willing to fight like our ancestors did. Like, we're still here, we're still going. And I think that's the biggest message is just like, "We are still here. This is still Indigenous land, whether you want to recognize it or not." I don't know. I think like, I think back to AIM, the American Indian Movement, and, you know, Alcatraz and Wounded Knee, and I definitely see like similarities in how like the movement is today versus then. But also, like, there was a lot more occupation in those movements, I think, but also like, now there's movements where there's like, the pipelines are trying, you know, to be built, and there's occupation there. But the thing is, like, we're not, you know, for the most part, we're not violent, especially the youth, like we're not trying to be violent. It's like peaceful protest. And it's like, we go, like, whoever's, wherever they go, they pray, and they have ceremony and they drum. And I think that is vastly different from how the white community would approach certain things. So I think our youth are really upholding respect and determination and just carrying on what our ancestors started.

Leah Kelly

And are you surrounded by a lot of youth or majority youth, people your age, in the work you've done? Like, in your effort to ban Native mascots in the state of Connecticut, are you seeing a lot of young people join these movements, just because of the fact that young people tend to be the ones to drive the movements?

Sage Phillips

Yeah, I think like, at UConn, we've had so much student group support, being like, "Give NACP the justice they deserve, give them a cultural center, like we've had so much support through that. So I've definitely seen that. Whereas like, we do have a lot of faculty that support us, but not so much like admin. And then like things like the group to ban mascots in Connecticut. Um, we had, you know, our first meeting was back in March, maybe. And we had like, all these youth leaders there, and it was so cool to see. And then we had like a dialogue session in the summer and non-Indigenous youth were coming together with Indigenous youth just so we could like talk to them. And they like had a bunch of questions for us. And that was super cool just to exchange because we were able to like really break it down and being like, "Here's the history. And then now this is why like, it's not okay." And it was super cool to see that they were like there, like willing to learn. And I've seen that in Maine too, like, we had, at the last school that we were fighting to change their mascot, the last school to hold it, they had a forum, and a lot of the students from the high school got up and they were like, "We're not comfortable calling ourselves Indians because we're not." So that really emerged too; that was really cool to see. So yeah, definitely I think the youth are on the move now and they're really making a big impact.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's really interesting. I want to ask you quickly, I'm almost done, about the mascot issue, because I know it's a very small percentage, but there is like a tiny population of certain Indigenous peoples, members of tribes, who actually haven't really opposed Native mascots. And like an example of that is, when I was a sophomore in high school, we had a whole crazy debate in our town about trying to get rid of the Native mascots at both our high schools. And the other side who wanted to keep them was arguing was like, "We're honoring them." And then they went and talked to the Mohegan tribe, and they got them to release a statement saying that those mascots were fine. Even though our Native mascots at our high schools were like total caricatures of people from Western plains tribes, not from the northeast. And I just wondered, why would they say that? Like, why would they work against themselves? And I mean, I think the obvious answer is that they're running a billion-dollar casino, but I guess I was wondering, what do you think of that? And also, do you think there's maybe a difference between older generations who lived during the era of assimilation, or even the era of annihilation, and maybe they're more okay with allowing practices like Native mascots to continue because they're just more used to it? Whereas you might be like, "No, this is not okay, we're here now." I don't know, I'm just throwing out ideas, but what do you think of that?

Sage Phillips

I think the Mohegans have since said that they're like, not in support. And I know, like, the tribal youth leader from Mohegan has actually been involved with our group, which has been awesome. For me, and I've watched a few videos, just because like, I have heard of that as well. And the resounding answer is like, you cannot honestly, like, say you support these mascots and call yourself proudly Indigenous. Like, they're just, there's just such a, like, stigma and stereotype like, tied to it. And these tribal leaders I was listening to were like, "This is hurtful to all of us." And I don't, I think like, I attended a high school formerly called the Indians. And my grandfather went to that high school and he was never comfortable there. He was like, you know, "The things we got called were just ridiculous." And so finally it came time in the 90s, I believe, to change it. And he was right up there and he was like, "Yep, change it." And I still lived, like, the repercussions of that, like, I was still like, you know, kids were still like, "Well, if we were the Indians, we'd have

more school spirit.” And I'm like, “No, we wouldn't. Like why? Because you want to wear a headdress to a football game? Like, no.” And the one thing I always come back to, and it just shuts people up right in their tracks, is I'm like, “You would never use, you know, a black person as a mascot. You would never use a Muslim as your mascot.” And they're always just like, “Oh, you're right. Yeah, you're right.” I'm like, “I know I'm right.” But I think like, even the generations, like they're just like, fed up with it, too. And it's time to go. And I think what speaks volumes to schools that still haven't made the change is we now have these national sports organizations who are agreeing to change their names and giving up their mascots. And then we have like Killingly, who's just like, “Nah, we're gonna keep ours.” Like, what is that? So I think it's just like, it's super traumatic and harmful for us to see, and just, because we live it. I mean, not only by having the mascots are people calling themselves something they're not, but then they're calling us even worse because of it and they think it's okay to do so. So.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I definitely feel like we might be like on the precipice of like actually changing it, after all these decades of trying to. And definitely more tribes are really actually taking a stance against it. And like you were saying, a bunch of sports teams are now deciding to change their names. And I think that's really interesting. And, I mean, I do personally think it's a little bit resulted from the Black Lives Matter movement in a way. There's been solidarity with all people of color. But yeah, do you see that as coming soon, the day when all the mascots are gone?

Sage Phillips

I'd like to think so. I mean, and then we see places like Killingly that are just like, totally not willing to cooperate. Um, but I think I think it's on the rise for sure. We're in 2020, and I think Black Lives Matter has definitely, you know, set the precedent for a lot of things. So yeah, I just, we can hope that the rest of the national organizations are ready to change, and then state level schools, whoever will follow.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I just have one more question, which is, do you want to say from your perspective, what do you think non-Indigenous people can do to help Indigenous communities?

Sage Phillips

Definitely to learn and to be willing to educate yourself. And just understanding that, like, a lot of the narratives you've learned about us probably, most likely are not true. Um, you know, when in my school, we were taught Thanksgiving was awesome and so was Columbus, and that was it. And then we were also taught the narrative that like the Trail of Tears was great for America. Like, it was this great thing. And me as a kid, I was like, “What? No.” But just going out and like decolonizing your mindset and what you were taught, and educating yourself and then use the knowledge you've acquired and put it back out into the world and just help us with representation and you know, acknowledgement, and just really knowing the truth of you know, the genocide that we've experienced.

Leah Kelly



Awesome, well, thank you so much again for meeting with me. Have a good rest of your day. [You too.] And if you think of anything else you want to send me or if you decide later there's something you want me to redact from anything you said, feel free to email me.

*Interview with Shoran Piper*

Wed, 12/23 2:16PM • 57:12

Leah Kelly

Would you like to begin by just stating your full preferred name, as well as your pronouns and the name of your tribal nation?

Shoran Piper

Sure. Clan Mother Shoran Waupatuqua Piper. I'm the tribal leader of the Golden Hill Paugussett Tribe. We have two reservations in Connecticut, one in Trumbull and one in Colchester. And the reservation is mostly like the main office, tribal office in Trumbull. It's since 1659, the oldest continuing reservation.

Leah Kelly

I just want to make sure I'm spelling your name correctly. Could you spell the middle name that you gave?

Shoran Piper

W-A-U-P-A-T-U-Q-U-A.

Leah Kelly

Okay, perfect. Thank you. Yeah, so the Golden Hill Paugussett. Like I said, I wanted to ask you about that. You already went into a little detail, but I want to get a clear picture that before we go into the topics of my thesis, if that's okay. Could you give a brief overview of the history of the tribe's interaction with the federal government of the U.S. and its struggles for recognition? And it's still a continuing battle, right?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, it is. A few years back, the BIA, Washington, and the politicians—and it wasn't just for our tribe in Connecticut, it was for three tribes in Connecticut, including ours, but it was also tribes around the U.S. —they had stated that if you already filed for federal recognition, you could not file again, to basically let other people who haven't filed to give a chance to file. But that's basically everybody who has filed; everybody's filed, you know, there isn't no tribe that has not filed. So they put that ruling in the book. And so right now, all the tribes who are on the list, and there's a good amount of tribes around the U.S. that are still on that list that are only state recognized, that are still trying to fight to get that one ruling out of the books. So we still continue.

Leah Kelly

Right. And how many years has your tribal nation been trying to get federal recognition?

Shoran Piper

Oh, wow, probably since the 90s. At one point, like other tribes had it, but they gave us like a 60- and 90-day probation. And for whatever reason, for our tribe and other tribes, they'll just go out there and nick and pick and say, "Oh, we're taking back your federal recognition because of this, that, and other." They find some type of loophole that doesn't even exist, because we meet all criteria plus more. So they just find any little thing to make an excuse to take it back.

Leah Kelly

I definitely want to get more into that, the ways that they have blocked you from accessing that recognition. We will probably get into that a little later when we talk about this theme of sovereignty. But could you talk a little bit about the reservation in Trumbull? Was that recognized as belonging to your tribe by the state or by the federal government? And when was that and has it—

Shoran Piper

Both, actually, both like since the 1800s. My uncle George Sherman and my grandfather, in 1825, the state had put him down as the first Native American Indian living here in Trumbull on the reservation. They put that in the books for our tribe. But you know, before that, our first sachem and his son landed in Milford, Connecticut on a beach. Yeah, so it's been a long fight, you know, since then, but yeah, both of them acknowledge that. And way back when there was a total of about 18 tribes in Connecticut, but of course, when the government got involved, they dismissed all the tribes and only kept the five recognized including the Paugussetts, and everybody else was dismissed.

Leah Kelly

How big is the reservation? And has the size changed over time?

Shoran Piper

Yes. We were left with a quarter acre. And there's a book from Claude Clayton Smith called Quarter Acre of Heartache. Way back when it was one big reservation with one big, huge circle all the way around. And a lot of these homeowners who own their homes will tell you that they bought their homes from the BIA after we fought and they took it away with our land claims. They left us with the reservation of a quarter acre of heartache, a quarter acre of land. And that was it. Our Colchester reservation is 116 acres.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so what are the differences between those two reservations then? Do they serve different purposes?

Shoran Piper

No, they are the same, same tribe, same family, same bloodline, same leaders. The state ended up giving the grant to the tribe, and told them to go buy a piece of land for all the tribal members to be on, when we were all back in the day fighting for the land, and our reservation rights. And that's where that reservation comes in. And there's families that live there.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so the larger one is a place where people actually live. What else takes place on the reservations, including the smaller one?

Shoran Piper

Both reservations, we interact, we have ceremonies, we have sweat lodges, we have all throughout the years, family gatherings, you know, so we're all connected; meetings, you know, just getting together.

Leah Kelly

Okay. How many people are in your tribe now?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, well, you know, with a lot of our old ones, our Elders, you know, passing away, but a lot of our members who still continue to birth children, you know, we may take a few steps back from 250 down to 150. But then, you know, when the children are being born, it brings our numbers back up.

Leah Kelly

I see. Does the Golden Hill Paugussett have a tribal council that is used to interact with the U.S. government or the state government, or?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, we all work together, but everybody has a bracket of a position. So we have a tribal council, you know. Different of us will go to like schools, colleges, out-of-state meetings and intertribal meetings. So yeah, there's a bunch of us who all work together. And we all have a spot and a position of who goes to what, you know, together.

Leah Kelly

Right, because I'm wondering, because I know that tribes have always had their own form of governance for themselves. But I was wondering, because sometimes when you get mixed up in the legal business of the settler-colonial governments, then they sort of require certain positions in the tribe in order to be able to communicate with them and say, like, these are elected officials and that kind of thing. Do you have that?

Shoran Piper

Yes. We have that for certain committees and councils. Yep.

Leah Kelly

Okay. I was wondering if that was separate from your internal tribal governance, or all mixed together?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, it's kind of all mixed together. Because we all work together. We all talk about, we all vote on it. And then the group goes, you know, two of us might go, three of us out of the, you know, the five of us might go.

Leah Kelly

Okay, and so are you all elected by the tribe?

Shoran Piper

Oh, yeah. It's all in the tribe. Yeah. And we, we write a letter letting them know: the agencies, committees, or other councils, whoever it is, we let them know who's been appointed so that when they come, yeah.

Leah Kelly

So could you talk about your role as clan mother, what that means and what your duties and responsibilities are?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, my position is higher than the Chiefs. I'm like the overseer. I get the last signature, last vote, the last say. Teachings, traditional medicines, getting the future generations ready. I work on everything and anything, everything and anything, basically. But a lot of it, you know, a lot of traditional ways. The old ways; we still keep on with the ceremonies, our women's group, woman's healing circle, methods, and like I said, traditional foods. Everybody comes and asks me permission, you know, about attending certain ceremonies or going off to powwows. And so yeah, I do it all, everything and anything.

Leah Kelly

Wow. I'm really interested in hearing more about your tribe in particular. We'll get back to that. First I want to go into...part of the theme of my thesis, as you may have read, is identity, and particularly Indigenous identity. And I guess to begin, could I just ask you, would you consider yourself an Indigenous person?

Shoran Piper

Oh, yes, of course. Yeah. My ancestors. Running right through my blood. Oh, yes.

Leah Kelly

And so that's a term that you would use to self-identify, and you would be comfortable with other people using?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, I mean, everybody has their own way of feel, if they want to be called, you know, Golden Hill Paugussett Nation, Golden Hill Paugussett Tribe, Indigenous, you know, whatever everybody's comfortable with. Yeah, as long as so not a derogatory term I'm okay.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So, I would assume that primarily, you would call yourself Golden Hill Paugussett. [Yeah.] I'm just wondering, so Indigenous identity is kind of a complex thing, because Indigenous peoples are so diverse. And using that umbrella term I think in some ways can cause outsiders to reduce that diversity, and you know, not really understand that diversity. But at the same time, I think that there's something to be said about being Indigenous in terms of a collective identity, about sort of coming from a place and having experienced colonization and that kind of thing. I was wondering,

what does it mean to you to be Indigenous, or to possess Indigenous identity, and do you see it as individual or collective or both?

Shoran Piper

Um, basically “walking the red road” is how we call it. I was raised on my father's knee. We're all learned at a very, very young age. We're learned how to preserve our land, preserve Mother Earth, our ceremonies, our songs, our teachings, living off the land, our medicines, keeping our history alive. We go to our tribal meetings, our intertribal meetings, you know, other ceremonies and our tribal our ceremonies, powwow socials, we still continue to keep our heritage and history alive. You know, we have a lot of tours at the reservation, well, you know, before COVID shut everything down. You know, we would go to other schools, teaching, and the actual ages and grade could be from pre-k all the way up to adult. And that was schools, colleges, it was churches, youth groups, you know, whatever the case may be, summer camps. So as an Indigenous person as long as you keep those stories going, the history going, you keep speaking your ways. We still go by the old traditional ways. We have not changed our bylaws or constitution.

Leah Kelly

Do you think that in a way, what it means to be Indigenous has changed over time? Because even the term itself has changed, because Indigenous is more of a recent term. It used to be Native American, and then way before that Indian. Do you think that the meaning of the way that outsiders see “Indigenous,” and maybe even Indigenous peoples themselves see that term and that identity—do you think that that has changed in any way?

Shoran Piper

No, I think everybody calls it Indigenous because it's basically we're all one. So it's all the tribes and nations all together, you know, fighting for the same bracket of items.

Leah Kelly

So you feel solidarity with all the other tribes? [Yeah.] And do you feel that—I don't want to give an either-or, but I'm just wondering if you feel that that solidarity among all Indigenous peoples, do you feel that's more of the important way to look at it in order to achieve justice, rather than on an individual tribal basis?

Shoran Piper

I mean, all tribes come together, we all work together. Because you know, it's more powerful, we're all there to help each other out, fight for the same things that we're all fighting for, to make a change. And then every tribe has their own little issues that they still have to individually fight for. So it's both.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Just to go more into that, what do you think about, when you're trying to get recognition and you're trying to get resources and land and fighting for all those rights back, I can see how that that sometimes causes friction between tribes if there's a limited number of resources and a very large number of people. What do you think of that those potential conflicts that can come about?

Shoran Piper

I have seen over the years some tribes belittle other tribes and find it very funny. But they were once in the same predicament as the ones that they are belittling. Basically just bullying them. And some of us, including our tribe, and my father, has helped some of those tribes achieve and be where they're at today. So, you know, I, you know, that's a little sad part there.

Leah Kelly

One thing I'm interested in just as a sociology major, in general, is the idea of the construction of identity, which isn't just for Indigenous peoples, but everywhere as human beings. The way that we construct our own identities, but also almost more so, the way that the outside world influences our identities, and even sometimes tries to impose identity based on how they view us. And I'm wondering, do you think that the idea of what it is to be Indigenous or Native American, especially from the white settlers' point of view, do you think that that has caused the identity to be constructed in any way?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, I mean, you get a lot of people who won't know you're Native American, Indian, unless you tell them or they see it from, you have something hanging in your car, a sticker, a window decal. A lot, a lot of my tribal members, including myself, we go every day wearing our Native jewelry. You could just tell, you know, the shirts that we wear, a lot of us just show our identity on an everyday daily basis, and we let people know, you know, we're Native American. We have our tribal ID, we pull that out with our license, so we still show and let people know that there are Native American Indians still living and still around because many people don't know that because of what the white settlers have done. They think that there is no more, you know, Indians about.

Leah Kelly

Mm-hmm. And that's really interesting what you're saying about showing your identity. Do you feel like when you walk about you're trying to portray your Indigenous identity in a way that is trying to undo stereotypes, or you're trying to show the individuality or uniqueness of being Indigenous?

Shoran Piper

No, I just go, I kind of like just go about my everyday business. Um, people look. They'll know, you know, just by looking at you, your appearance, you know, if you're a Native or not. They could tell the difference. So, you know, I go about my everyday business, basically. And I show you know, yes, I'm a Native American, you know, Indian woman, and, you know, this is how I look every day. People will look, there'll be some people who will smile, some will ask and say, "Oh, I noticed these earrings, are you Native?" And you know, you'll get that once in a while, or my shirts say it all, my sweat shirts, you know, all of that, so.

Leah Kelly

Do you worry about stereotyping in terms of, maybe people will look at you and then they'll generalize that to other Native Americans and think that's what they all look like or anything?

Shoran Piper

No, no, I'm not worried about it at all. When I step off the reservation, for one, I know, my ancestors are with me, and they're guiding me. So I walk as if I have like, 300 ancestors walking beside me,

you know, so I don't worry about all that, you know. If somebody, if I was, if I ever heard somebody say something, I would correct them, I would jump in their conversation. And I would set it straight and correct them.

Leah Kelly

What do you think about, in this country at least, we are very focused on race and race issues. What do you think about the attempt to racialize Indigenous peoples, I suppose, without their consent, in a lot of ways, and to consider them all one race in the way that Blacks are considered a race and whites are considered a race? Do you think that that's harmful, or helpful, or both?

Shoran Piper

I think they should stop trying to basically put tribes on the back burner and keep trying to hide them. They've been trying to hide tribes since back in the colonial times, and they still try to put everybody on the back burner like nobody exists. They still continue to take and take and take. And that's why everybody continues to fight for what they're taking, and letting everybody know who we all are, where we all have come from. And, you know, we're still here, you can't get rid of us, you know, so I see like that, that they still continue to just kind of hide that race. They have wiped out the Native tribal race for many, many, many moons, and they still continue to do it. But as you see, we still stand up strong, and we still fight and let them know that you know, we're still here.

Leah Kelly

Right. I'm also thinking about, there are some people from settler-colonial society who are who are more well-meaning in that in terms of their thinking, "Well, if we consider them a minority, then they can get some of the benefits that come with being labeled as a minority, minority rights and that kind of thing." And I think that those people, maybe even if they're misguided, still have that intention of wanting to help. Do you think that they're still hurting more than helping in terms of erasing difference, in terms of removing the distinctiveness of different tribes in favor of categorization, I suppose?

Shoran Piper

Our tribe is thankful, we have a lot of supporters that are different race. And we have a lot of other councils and committees that are not tribal, who have come to our tribe and other tribes to help. We've helped them. We're thankful for that. I know I'm grateful for that. You know, having outsiders you know, to try and help tribes, not just our tribe or individuals or whatever's in the community or the city, you know, town-wise. And then like I said, we've helped those other committees or councils, but sometimes it does not fully help, and sometimes it does fully help. It depends on what you're working on. I, I see and was happy with a lot of changes with a lot of different groups, a lot of different races. But again, even though Indigenous tribes stepped up to help others out, we still did not really, you know, what, what did we all get? The Columbus statues taken down? Yeah, that's great. You know what I'm saying? Either way, in my opinion, I could care less if it was up, down, or whatever the case may be. There's other important issues that should be worked on. So it all depends on what the issue is, if you're getting help, or you're not getting help, whether it's much better, whether it's much worse. So, you know, like I said, I see a lot of the tribes still, you know, nothing kind of basically opened up and helped any other tribes around the world, just the Columbus statues taken down and that was that. You know, other changes were

made for other people, other races, other towns, states, you know, committees, councils, and that's great, you know, but again, the Indigenous still are in the backburner, or their paperwork is thrown in the basket, and you're forgotten about.

Leah Kelly

And so you would not consider Native American a race?

Shoran Piper

I do. I mean, Native Americans, yeah, this is our blood. This is our race, we are Indigenous, you know. I'm, I know when it was voting time somebody mixed up on the voting and said to put "something else" and you know, that was a big stir that we were "something else," you know. But there are a lot of paperwork that comes asking if you're Alaska Native, Hawaiian Native, if you're Native American. So that has changed, and that is a good thing, because now we can put down what we are and then we put the tribe's name on a lot of paperwork. And then when it says "other," because it's not phrased there, you say "other" and you write it, so that is a good thing. People should know that yeah, there are Native Americans here. I mean, the census has tons, tons of them, tons of them. Now, here in Connecticut, New Haven County has 2500 alone. So it's good that the census does that.

Leah Kelly

So you're not afraid that considering Native Americans one race could hide their differences or what makes different tribes unique?

Shoran Piper

Um, I, you know, it's hard to say because no matter what we say, or no matter what we do, you know, there's always going to be a problem that the government has with a tribe. You know, we could put down on all paperwork we are Native American, birth certificates, all of that, you know, the government just really doesn't care.

Leah Kelly

Do you think that identity is important to I suppose, the Indigenous cultural resurgence, the reclaiming of rights, the obtaining of agency, and self-determination, and all of that? Do you think that you need a certain reclamation of that identity that was in a lot of ways stripped from you because of the era of assimilation, erasure?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, identity is important. It's who you are and where you come from, especially your bloodline. And that should be you know, well-known for others who don't know that, especially for the government.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I would like to move on to the portion I'm exploring about sovereignty, which in a lot of ways I do think is connected. Before we get into it, I want to ask you what you think about the term sovereignty and what it means to you in general.

Shoran Piper



Sovereignty is basically like our tribe is like our own sovereign, our own tribal government. So a lot of the politic in the tribe is settled within our tribe. We don't run to like the state because we're having an inner tribal problem. You know, we don't run to the government or politicians; it's handled in our own tribe. We have our own meeting, our own council, our own vote, you know, it's our rights of fishing and wildlife, certain type of gaming, having our own reservation, our identity, our tribal IDs, you know. There's a certain subject of brackets with that. Keeping our sweat lodge ceremonies going and you know, certain ways of our old traditional ways, because at one time, they took a lot of the ceremonies and songs and stuff away from the tribes, and we weren't allowed to practice certain medicines, and we weren't allowed to practice certain ceremonies. So being our own sovereign, you know, and having our own reservation, our own land, and to be able to continue doing our own ceremonies, and whatever problems that we have in the tribe, we have our own tribal govern, you know, to sit down, to meet, to council, vote on it and fix the issue.

Leah Kelly

Are you in favor of the term sovereignty itself? Do you use it often or do you use a different term in place of that?

Shoran Piper

No, I don't use the term much because I think everybody knows, you know, basically, everybody knows, you know, tribes are their own tribal governed sovereignty. So we don't really need to use that term. It's in our paperwork, our constitution, our bylaws, Secretary of State, everybody pretty much knows that tribes, you know, have their own tribal government sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I suppose I'm wondering, because some people have a problem with the word "sovereignty" because they see it as too much of a European colonizer term.

Shoran Piper

Yeah, we don't use the term, it's never brought up or mentioned. I think some people don't really like it like that, because it's kind of basically saying, the government picked this one piece of land for you, and boom, put you there and there you go. So it's still like they're being controlled.

Leah Kelly

So it seems like you see sovereignty, you see it mainly in a legal context, then, or governmental.

Shoran Piper

As just in my own family, my own tribe, my own people, I wouldn't include the government or outside tribal-wise government, you know, politicians and that. I see it as just in my mind frame, this is what it's going to mean, for me and my family, I don't really care what the government's slapping on that listing or ruling or. You know what I'm saying? It doesn't even be used, but you know, they put that out there. So we don't really like use it or bring the word up like that, and anything, but it's kind of, you know, like I said, if the government said, "Here, you have a certain number of rations to use for a week," I would rephrase that as an, "Okay, well, if it's my rations, and it's for me and my family, I'm gonna do it my way, not kind of like the government way." It's all about control with them. So you know, you have to be able to kind of just live and just be with your own tribe and your own family and just kind of work together with each other in your own

way, not to let that controlling take hold of you when it comes from states and governments, to never them control you every day.

Leah Kelly

I suppose I'm wondering, do you feel like there is some kind of goal that you're striving towards, with your people in your community? In terms of essentially, what would it look like if you were to be able to achieve what you feel is right for your people?

Shoran Piper

To not have to worry about the future or the youth, the youth that you know, our future generation, we don't want them to have to fight for everything. We don't want them to be stressed or worrying. We want them to be able to live happy and in peace and still practicing the traditional ways, medicines, how to live off the land, knowing where our history comes from, keeping the history live, the songs alive, the beat of the drum alive. We just, you know, you worry, as the old ones get older, you know, and they fought so hard, and they tell each generation, you know, that they fought so hard, and that, you know, they won't be here much longer, and they would like to see us to continue a lot of the things that were taught to us from our ancestors, but we also don't want to see them having to fight for what is rightfully ours. You know, to have to go through that because we all know what that is like and we want them to have a nice, healthy, prosper, abundance, you know, life you know, in the tribe and not have to be stressed out or worrying.

Leah Kelly

Could you explain a little more specifically what that is that you said, fighting for what is rightfully yours? What is it?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, the basically the federal recognition, you know, funding, our land claims, our health, medical schooling, our language teachings, things like that.

Leah Kelly

So do you feel that federal recognition is a big step in gaining more sovereignty?

Shoran Piper

Yes because with state you don't get nothing. State-recognized tribes, we don't get nothing. Yeah, we can apply for grants, but they're very small, like microgrants. And it only goes so far, you know, trying to make wellness kits for the tribe, or, you know, people need tote bags, or t-shirts, or maybe the two reservations need a new tribal flag. You know, some families may need a grocery gift card, because, you know, they're losing jobs, and they have children. And, you know, it all depends, some may need gas, because we have tribal families who live off of the powwow trail, and because of COVID, that was shut down. So you know, it's a, it's a lot of things like that, where we don't really, aren't entitled to a lot, you know, a lot of the federal funding, you know, trying to have our own Indian health services and being able to use our tribal ID. So it comes with a lot. State-recognized, you really don't get much. If we want gaming, we can only do bingo, that's it.

Leah Kelly

With state recognition do you get any special hunting rights or education waivers or anything like that?

Shoran Piper

We have an Indian Council that helps like when you get out of high school, and you're going to college, you know, you give them the bill. And I guess they'll pay you back or pay it. [Unintelligible.] But you have to, you have to meet a certain amount of requirements on that, you got to be qualified, a lot of our tribal members have used the program. That's really it. We don't we don't get free Indian Health Services anymore. We used to, but they stopped all the state tribes. And a lot of people who can't afford medical, you know, the free Indian Health Services is good, but the state tribes can't use it anymore.

Leah Kelly

Is the land that you have, is that only recognized by the state or is it recognized by the federal government as well?

Shoran Piper

It's recognized by the state. The federal government, Washington and BIA, they have all that paperwork, they know what tribes, you know, are on the status. And, you know, they know that. They acknowledge it, they just won't put that "federal" word on it.

Leah Kelly

I see. And so what do you believe is the biggest benefit of getting federal recognition? Is it more autonomy or more resources or more land?

Shoran Piper

It is. It's, you know, our land claims, it's actually money that's owed to the tribe. You know, it's more of the benefits, the medical, like I said, you know, still keeping our language alive, you know, you need money on that, you need resources. Having our own cultural center, you know, for our youth. So, yeah, it comes a lot.

Leah Kelly

And how important is land in regaining sovereignty? Do you feel that that's a vital component?

Shoran Piper

Well, I mean, yeah, I mean, it's our land, documented in our trust and was taken away. So it's rightfully ours. I mean, obviously, yeah, we probably wouldn't get all the land claims. I know a lot of tribes 'til today, they haven't gotten all their land claims or there was a deal made and they didn't get no land claims, maybe they got one piece or portion. I know we wouldn't get all the land claims, but getting majority or some of our land claims that is rightfully ours back, you know, is a good thing to have. You know, you have commercial land, you have green land, so green land is Native American Indian owned. So we're able to do and put whatever we want in those green land. A commercial land, we would have to purchase and we would have to pay the state, you know, and government taxes, because it's a commercial land. It's not Indian-owned.

Leah Kelly

The land that you said you used to have was held in trust and then it was taken away?

Shoran Piper

Well, I'm saying way back when, all tribes, you signed a piece of paper, you didn't know what you were signing back in the day, the colonial times, where they would say, the government would say that they will put this in trust for you, they'll put that in trust for you and then as years went on, there was no trust. It was all a lie for government to get what they wanted. And you thought that you had something for your people and then you don't.

Leah Kelly

Were there any treaties that your tribe had that were broken?

Shoran Piper

Oh, of course, this happens with everybody, that's happened with everybody. Land, money. It's happened with everybody.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Do you think that federal recognition is something that all tribes should be striving for? Because there are some that aren't really looking for that as much.

Shoran Piper

Yeah because it's a dead end all the time. And again, the government will try to make a deal with you. If you drop some people from your tribal role, we'll give you federal recognition. You either want land claims or your reservation. So there's always a deal to be made. You know, I know a lot of people who are now absentee members dropped from their federally recognized tribe, because their tribe wanted the federal recognition. So the government wanted them to disenroll members. So I think all tribes, they should be continuing the fight for federal recognition. Don't let the government win, you know, don't give up.

Leah Kelly

I see. So you're saying that the the fight for it is really difficult, but it's still worth it? [Oh yeah, oh yeah. Yeah.] I see. Now, I do want to go a little bit back more into the struggles that the Golden Hill Paugussetts had with the case that happened like 15 years ago? Or there was a more recent one, like six years ago? Am I right? [What is it?] Sorry, I'm just thinking about the legal challenges, the main obstacles that have occurred in your fight for federal recognition.

Shoran Piper

All the time, it's all the time.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, and it's still ongoing. I was just wondering, could you explain a little bit more the certain things that have happened in terms of what you said, like excuses that they have made and used in order to prevent you from accessing it?

Shoran Piper

Oh, a piece of paper's missing. We didn't provide this or that. And then we'll say we did provide it, our lawyer will show it, and then we'll go and provide what they want, and then it's something else, or you know, there's something occurring worldly, and they have to focus on that. And then they put us on the side. So there's always something. It could be any in any type of excuse. It basically comes down to money and politics. You know what I'm saying? And that's where the dead ends are.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. What exactly occurred with, I believe you said that there used to be 18 recognized tribes in Connecticut, and then they reduced it to five. Why was that or what was their rationale?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, the government does what they want. They just dismissed all the other tribes and only kept the five. There's a map that has every name in Connecticut on there. Old maps. So you know, why the government does what they do? I don't know. But it's always the government.

Leah Kelly

I was reading an article about inside Connecticut, the struggle for recognition, and I saw that a bunch of political opponents to it were worried about more casinos. Do you think that's big reason for them, for why they don't want to grant recognition?

Shoran Piper

Well, a casino is a dead-end business, you know, whether it's a tribal or non-tribal. Our tribe doesn't want a casino. So, you know, we're all set with that. You know, I think it's more of the money that they owe us. More that they see that you know, how much of the state is rightfully ours that is documented from way, way, way back when. So I think that's what they're worried about, is other reasons. I think the casino worry is an excuse because they know our tribe doesn't want a casino and there can't be another casino in Connecticut. That was already shut down numerous of times and it's going to continue being shut down; there cannot be a third casino put in Connecticut. And there's contracts and agreements so you can't break those.

Leah Kelly

In your fight for federal recognition have you had to in any way prove your identity? Whether it be like clothes...

Shoran Piper

Oh yeah, you always got to show your paperwork, your timeline, vital statistics, your tribal role, your birth records, your everything from way back, 1800s. I'm talking from like, we have old journals, we have old books, where it was quill and ink, you know, you need a magnifying glass. We have all those old, old, old records that are secured and locked up. But um, yeah, you have to show all of that, all of that connection, you have to show.

Leah Kelly

And you do possess that evidence, it sounds like, but that hasn't been enough.

Shoran Piper

Oh, no, no, that's why I said we meet all criteria plus more, and there's always some loophole.

Leah Kelly

That's, just crazy. If you meet all criteria, what are you supposed to do? Anyway, do you think that there could be other forms of sovereignty in terms of like you were saying, you've done a lot with trying to keep your culture and history alive, education, going into schools, that kind of thing? Do you think that the protection and the maintenance of culture is a part of retaining that autonomy and agency and ability for self-determination and survival?

Shoran Piper

We basically, we survive, you know, we survive, we don't put terms on our tribe or family. We don't use those terms like that. We are survivors. We're warriors. You know, we still continue the storytelling. Like I said, we still continue all of that. Yes, we have to put a yearly report together and give it to the Secretary of the State. So even then, they're still in our lives wanting to know every meeting we have, every ceremony we have, every baby that's born. What school do we attend, what did we do all year round as an individual tribal person and as a tribe, and we have to put all that in there, and we still have to even show proof. So we kind of don't like to use those terms or be caught on those. We don't word those terms on a daily basis. We just continue to go, you know. Live our lives, survive, show, teach, keep our name alive, we just keep pushing through. We don't kind of just keep using those words. We don't really actually have those stuck in our mind on a daily basis. We just let them know that we're here. And we're not going anywhere. So we keep our name and our tribe and our people alive still every day.

Leah Kelly

And could you explain a little bit more about how you do that through education?

Shoran Piper

Yeah, just the same that we've been doing, powwows, socials, meetings, ceremonies. We have our own newsletter. We have our own Facebook page that is private for tribal members only and we keep updating it on a daily basis. People who don't have access to the internet, they get postal mailings. So we keep everything going throughout the year for all ages, even the Elders, we still keep everything going. We still do those, you know, teachings and talking and, you know, showing. We still continue to do all of that. And that's how we continue to do that.

Leah Kelly

Do you do any education for people outside of your community to try to inform settler-colonial people?

Shoran Piper

Um, yeah, if there's a certain committee that our tribal members have joined or partnered up with, we do it that way.

Leah Kelly

I want to talk about another "term," as we put it, which I know, terms aren't the most important thing. But from sort of more of a scholarly standpoint, there's this sort of hot topic with the term

“decolonization.” And I was wondering if that's something that you believe in or think that people should be striving for.

Shoran Piper

Decolonization as they're coming on sacred grounds and desecrating?

Leah Kelly

I'm thinking, so, I know total decolonization in literal terms would be like, get rid of the colonizers. I'm not really thinking of it that way. But I'm thinking about sort of every day, what people are doing to try to extinguish that, the remaining impact of colonization.

Shoran Piper

Basically, it really doesn't matter if you agree or not, yeah, it really doesn't matter if you agree or not, because you're not going to get rid of something. You can try and fight to get rid of something, to make a change. But again, it always comes down to the President, the Congress, the politicians and the government. And what they say goes, no matter what the tribes or other Indigenous or communities are saying or doing, so it really doesn't matter. You know, you try to even do that, you know, so.

Leah Kelly

So on the one hand, you're saying that it's almost impossible to...

Shoran Piper

Yeah for example, look at the Columbus statues, a lot of them were removed, a lot of them that were removed, they were put back up. So it really didn't matter what anybody said, what anybody did, or the rallying, trying to change this, change that. Some of those statues were put back up. I'm in the middle of a fight with the city of Bridgeport right now. And it looks like they're about to put that statue back up. [So weird.] I mean, all the committees, all the councils I was working back-to-back with on a daily basis, you know, with so many people going out there, all the news briefings, and it doesn't really matter. Because if you try to change something, if you could work as hard as you can, it comes down, from what I was told, to the politicians and the parks and rec department. I said, “Oh, okay, then. I see how it works.” So, you know, they're working on putting that back up, raising the funds at all.

Leah Kelly

So it's so interesting to me, because it seems like even though you're saying it's been, you know, it's just so hard to fight against that when in the end, it's just up to the politicians—at the same time, you seem to continue to keep fighting.

Shoran Piper

We would not give up. Our ancestors, no. I don't see a reason to give up. You know, it may get stressful at times, it may get tiring, but you know, you don't give up, you keep continuing to fight for your family and your people.

Leah Kelly

So if you're not giving up, does that mean that there is maybe a little fraction of hope that you have for the future?

Shoran Piper

Oh, of course, I'm always gonna. I don't want to give up hope because I look at our future generation and I don't want them to go through what our generation went through, or the generation before, you know, because it gets harder and harder year after year.

Leah Kelly

I hear you. So do you think that—actually, you said this a little bit, how you have some people who have helped you and come into your community from outside, and how you appreciate that. Could you talk a little bit more about maybe what non-Indigenous people can do and what those people do for you?

Shoran Piper

What they do is they basically spread awareness, show people that we are coming together as one for the community to help everybody out, every situation. And just having supporters, that's it.

Leah Kelly

Okay, what do you mean by supporters?

Shoran Piper

Supporters of like friends of the tribes that support the tribe, they support you, you know, they agree with you, they're on your side, they might send letters to all the politicians, you know, for us to be federally recognized, or, you know, to help us with this or help us with that, and that's what they do.

Leah Kelly

And do you think that in addition to just practical changes, we can also work to change minds change the way people view society?

Shoran Piper

Yes and no. It all depends. You can't change everybody's mind. Yeah, it all depends, you know, so 50-50. It all depends.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. And I mean, that's a long term thing, but, you know. [Yeah, yeah.] Okay, that's actually kind of the end of my questions. Do you have anything else you want to add? I mean, feel free, even if it's totally not related, you can say whatever.

Shoran Piper

I really don't. Um, if you have any more questions or need anything else for me, just feel free to email me. I will get that consent done today, sometime today. I haven't forgotten about it. No, I just, you know, I want everybody to just be healthy, be safe. You know, there's a lot going on in the world. And you know, we're all praying hard. We're praying for everybody. So you know, just be safe. Be mindful, you know, be well.



Leah Kelly

Alright, thank you so much for taking the time. [Yes, thank you. I'm glad I could help.] Thanks. Have a nice day.

*Interview with Mixashawn Rozie*

Fri, 1/8 3:10PM • 1:22:48

Mixashawn Rozie

[Strumming guitar] Well, is this distracting you? Because I was just, this is time I'll usually practice but...

Leah Kelly

That's okay. Oh yeah, if you want to, that's fine. What instruments do you play?

Mixashawn Rozie

Simply reeds, strings, percussion. Let's see. That's basically it.

Leah Kelly

Cool. Alright, so you read the informed consent form, you know what this is about. [Yes.] Could we start by having you just introduce yourself? Just state your name, the pronouns you like to go by, and the name of the tribal nations that you come from.

Mixashawn Rozie

My name is Lee Mixashawn Rozie. Usually, I'm old school, just "mister" is fine for me. But I come from my dad's side...my dad comes from a community known as the Windsor Indians, which is a community of people that come from the place now called Windsor. Quantic is the original name, which means "village by the water," and he's of Mohawk and Mahekanew descent, which is the original way you say Mohegan, and on my mom's side I'm of Cherokee descent.

Leah Kelly

Okay, could you just explain that a little more about, if you're from Mohegan descendant, how that connects to Windsor?

Mixashawn Rozie

Okay. Well, here's the thing. I don't know if you had a chance to glance at my book at all. But the thing about it is, one of the reasons why we're in the situation that we're in is because tribal nations is really looking at it more like territories, because, for instance, Mohegan, Pequot, Schaghticoke, you know, Paugussett, we all speak the same, even really the Narragansetts and the Wampanoags, we all speak the same Algonquian language. Different dialects of it, yes. Just like people in Massachusetts have a different dialect of English they speak. But we're all the same people. And the river, the Quinnehtukqut River, has always been the central artery that joins us all together. So the point is, around colonial times, they started breaking up Native communities by starting praying towns, and some of my relatives come from praying towns, in Stockbridge up in

Massachusetts. But we also congregated in places like Windsor, where we didn't have state recognition. But community always recognized us as Native people, and how that has to do with Native people, there's always been a community there in Windsor, the so-called Windsor Indians. That's why I say that. And that's, yeah, so in other words, I'm looking at...being Indigenous is not always connected to a state, or federally recognized identity.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that's great. We'll get into that actually, later. But you're saying you grew up in this community of Indigenous peoples who congregated to this place?

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah, well, my father was born there. But the people, we always congregated together. Sometimes we'd be in Windsor, most times we'd be on the river, but we would always like, the community, different bits and pieces, we've always connected and stay connected.

Leah Kelly

And they're just people from all the different so-called tribes?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, yeah, different. Yeah. And I wouldn't say so-called tribes. But yeah, different territories. And the thing about it is, it's not just from colonial times, because this has been a connection with these, these economic, social, and tribal ties, they go back millennia, because we've always been in touch with each other. The thing is, the simplest way to put it is if you've ever been on a canoe on the Connecticut River and gone down the Connecticut River, you realize that you can get into a wide area very easily, and people always did. And the way that colonialism has affected us that we, and especially the outside world, looks at us, in distinct little tribal cubicles, that although the territories are valid, yes, those are the territories we come from, but we always intermingled with one another. We always traveled, we always intermarried one another and we've always been connected in those ways. So that's the easiest way to explain it.

Leah Kelly

So you're saying Mohegan, like the Connecticut Mohegans, right?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, yeah Maheekanew was originally the way you said it because the Mohegans started out as Pequots. Pequots started out as what they say, Mohegans, but Maheekanew was the original way you say it.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I don't know why, but somewhere I read that you were part Mohawk.

Mixashawn Rozie

Yes, Mohawk and Mohegan on my dad's side.

Leah Kelly

Oh, sorry. Okay, got it.

Mixashawn Rozie

The community where he was born. That's what we come from, right.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So okay, so you're both. So the Mohawks are mostly...

Mixashawn Rozie

Well three actually, because of my mom's side is Cherokee, as I said earlier.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah. I'm kind of focusing on New England tribes at the moment. So the Mohawks are mostly located in upstate New York, right. So do you have any connection to that place?

Mixashawn Rozie

To individual Mohawk people, yes. I've been up there and, you know, interacted with people on different occasions. But no more really, at this point, no more than a social connection with different Mohawk people in different places. But that also, before colonial and even during colonial times, Mohawk people were always around in this area. I mean, even if you read the colonial like, for instance, the Pequot War, and during the King Philip's War, you know, the war chiefs went to the Mohawks as well as the Narragansetts and other people to ask for help in you know, in fighting the colonists, and the Mohawks, at that time, decided not to lend their weight to it. But there's always been, we've always been connected with each other. That's, that's the main myth I want to really clear up because people think that you know, your tribal identity, or your Indigenous identity, is tied to one specific territory in a place that is connected by an extremely efficient system of waterways and paths that have always been, that we've always moved along. We were not static people.

Leah Kelly

Okay, that's great. I really want to get back to that, which is a big theme in my thesis. So first, I'm just trying to learn a little more about you and your role in the tribal community. Are you an enrolled member in one of those tribes? [No.] Okay, so you identify as having heritage from them, but you're not affiliated with any single one of them.

Mixashawn Rozie

Not in...well, affiliated socially, I mean, many people know who I am. And you know, they acknowledge who I am. But, you know, as far as getting the monies and federal benefits that go along with it, no. And it's important to remember that, really, more than 90% of Indigenous people in this country are not recognized by the government. And there are reasons for that.

Leah Kelly

And why do you choose not to be?

Mixashawn Rozie

I don't choose not to be. It's mainly the way that you prove that you're Indian in New England and many other places, is to be connected to a reservation. And I don't know if you're aware of the

conditions that existed on the reservations. But until recently, and many reservations are still in a ratchet state, but not all of them are. But in the past, being on a reservation was more like a sentence. And especially, you know, if you're on a reservation, you are expected to be on the dole or the way they would call it, "welfare" now, and live in these miserable conditions. I mean, I talked about some of that in my book. And most Native people chose not to be on the reservations. Now, I'm not saying that people who are in reservations, I'm not putting them, I'm not judging them in any way. That's important. I'm glad that we still have people who stayed on the on the actual land that the government recognized, but many people like the people I come from, we stayed in the region, in the area that we're from, and that's the river valley. And actually the areas around the river valley, between really Albany, New York, to like, to Boston, that whole area is where we've always, I mean, I've got relatives scattered, many of us have relatives scattered throughout that whole area, because that's our traditional home, including Manhattan. I've always had relatives on the island of Manhattan. I mean, I lived there for a while myself. So I mean, that's why it's not necessarily choosing to be on, you know, a different roll. But the regulations that they have to be on those rolls are punitive and designed to not have you. Like for instance, I don't know if you've ever watched that TV show Survivor?

Leah Kelly  
A little bit.

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah, you've probably heard of it. But I mean, I don't really watch it. But when I did look at it, I had to check it out, when they want to kick someone out of the tribe, the so-called "tribe," they call a tribal council. And when you look at the role of the colonial system and apparatus that set up as the tribal council, in colonial times, that's what the tribal council does: it eliminates people from the tribe, and the, the program Survivor really just reinforces that and just goes along that, that same route, just like you know, we reinforce these myths and narratives that are not true, like Columbus discovering America, it's the last of the Mohegans, there's a lot of, there's a lot of reasons why those apparatuses and those narratives are set up, and how they're directly connected with why most Native people are not on the rolls of federally or state-recognized tribes.

Leah Kelly

Okay, yeah, it's interesting what you're saying. I think I'm still trying to understand a little bit, so, I mean, the Mohegans are federally-recognized, they have a reservation with the casino, they do have a lot of enrolled members, but you are choosing to not be one of those.

Mixashawn Rozie

Well it's not like, relatives, it's not even choose...some people choose not to be. But it's the, it's like the haves and the have-nots. There are, most treaties that are signed, the government has you create a roll that you're on. And if your, if your relatives, or you, were not living on that reservation at that time, you were excluded from the rolls. [Okay.] So I mean, I mean, for instance, parts of my extended family—and there's a person that you should talk to who's very knowledgeable about this, I'll give you his name later—but part of the families that I'm, that my family's connected with, they were originally on the Mohegan rolls, and they were expunged from the rolls, when the Mohegans were on the verge of getting their federal recognition. But that's a story he needs to tell you.

Leah Kelly

Okay, but doesn't the tribe itself get to decide who its members are? And it has certain qualifications?

Mixashawn Rozie

Of course, and within tribes, there's certain qualifications, but within tribes and those rolls that are set up, there's, there's a lot of money involved in this. A whole lot of money, especially now in this this day and age, but even before, there was other resources involved that, you know, people decided to either have you part of the roll or not. I mean, and this is not just with my family, a whole lot of families throughout this whole country, are, are in the same, a similar situation. And just, you know, a tribal government, while you know, they do a lot of good things, not all tribal governments, not all ways that people are recognized to be on those rolls are fair. I mean, that's the reality.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so you're saying that there's some there is some exclusion in terms of...

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Encouraged by the powers-that-be. But I mean, Native people exclude all the time. I know plenty of Native people, especially in the Midwest, they'll say, you know, they won't recognize Natives from Mexico as Native. They say, "Oh, those are just Mexicans. Those aren't Indians. We are the real people." And it really goes down to identity. You know, there, there's a lot of I mean, some people don't even call themselves Indians. Some people, you know, they'll get very mad about it. So there's not a monolithic thing. But basically, to answer your question, it's not really so much of choosing not to be. As I said earlier, the apparatus that we know as the tribal council is generally set up to exclude people, and there are many, many, many cases of this. It's an ongoing pattern.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so let's talk about this identity. So how do you identify if someone asks you what you are?

Mixashawn Rozie

I identify as Indigenous. But I mean, Martha Redbone, the Indigenous, she's classified as a Black Indian, she has a very good way of responding to this, it's like, Indigenous is not necessarily about the blood quantum. You know, it's, and because blood quantum can be manipulated. Like all numbers, they can be manipulated, and they are manipulated quite often. So the way that she puts it is, "I'm mixed, but I'm not confused." So in other words, when I say, "Yeah, I'm of Indigenous descent," it's true. "Yeah, my father's side, Mohawk and Maheekanew, and my mother's side, Cherokee, but also, you know, I also know I have relatives, I can trace my ancestry directly back to Africa, Guinea, West Africa. I can trace my ancestry back on my mom's side to Robert E. Lee's family." And again, on my dad's side, I found we found out through DNA that his biological father was actually Mongolian, another Indigenous group of people. And throughout the years, you know, there are Native people that have always intermarried who are on these tribal rolls. And you know, you wouldn't, unless they told you they were Indigenous, you would never guess, you would think

they were white or Black. So, I mean, this whole idea of blood quantum is really hypocritical. That way, it's hypocritical. Yeah.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So let me get this straight. So first and foremost, you identify as Indigenous? [Mm-hmm.] And then after that you might go into, "Okay, I'm also descended from Mohegans, Mohawk, Cherokee," right. [Mm-hmm.] But you don't strongly feel connected to any single one of those tribes? You just feel like you you're descended from them?

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, I've learned a lot from all of those different tribes.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, but is there one that to you, you're more?

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, no, no. Because that's like, you know, it's like, people ask me—I'm a musician—they say, "Well, what's your favorite song?" I said, "Well, depends. Depends on how I'm feeling." You know, I don't necessarily have an all, you know, you have to say one thing, because I know that I am of Indigenous descent. But I'm not a recognized citizen on the federal government, or the state government, which doesn't have anything to do with Indigenous identity, that's the sad thing about it. Many people base their identity on the powers-that-be, that have worked over time for us not to exist. That's, that's the hypocrisy of it. Even, there's some people who say, I mean, I remember listening to, I won't mention any names. But you know, there's a federally-recognized person who was talking about, "Yes, we're so glad that the federal government gave us sovereignty." And that statement itself is an oxymoron. No one gives you sovereignty. You either have sovereignty or you don't. Now whether or not you have recognition by the government that's been trying to extinguish you for the last few hundred years, that's another question.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Okay, that's another huge thing I want to get to later. So just let me know if I'm right, you're saying that you feel more connection among all the Indigenous peoples, or at least the ones in this area, rather than feeling specific distinctions between those tribes.

Mixashawn Rozie

Yes, because there are political and sociological reasons for that. So I have, I have just as much respect for them as, as any other Native people. But I know that the territory I come from, you know, in the Connecticut River, I'm very attached to that. And it's, it's interesting because, you know, the different tribes that are recognized and talked about, you know, within the historical context of talking about the Quinnehtukqut River, or the Quinnehtukqut, it is like, you know, Wangunk is very prominent, of course, the Podunk, Saukiogs, and you know, the Poquonock, but we're all, even though you know, those are different territories, you could just paddle across a river, and you'd be in another so-called "tribe," when the fact is, we're going back and forth with the currents through the years. The way that our lifestyle doesn't necessarily recognize that identity other than, you know, okay, your, your wife's people come from, your children are from there, you know, that's where you live, but that doesn't, you know, define necessarily who you are. In colonial

times, this became, “Oh, well, you know, I’m, I’m Eastern Pequot, or I’m Western Pequot. Yeah, I’m Mohegan.” You know, it’s like, that’s all fine. But the way that the colonial histories are set up, they encourage that, instead of really just looking at—it’s fine to have your, your territory, we understand that, but if you understand the way that we were, our original instruction, we know that we’re all connected deeply. My connection is, is, you know, has always been the river, because even though we weren’t on a reservation, the river has always been a very important part of my understanding of who I am.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, for sure. Okay, so I want to get to this main question of what indigeneity, or Indigenous identity, mean to you? What does it mean to be Indigenous?

Mixashawn Rozie

What that means is a person who...to me, means that I am connected to a place and a culture that regardless of what’s happened over the years, I’m connected to it. I’m very much connected to this land, and being connected to this land, this region, I understand the currents that connect it, and the lifestyle I live, you know, it’s like, it’s one thing to talk about culture. But if you don’t do things that reinforce that connection in your everyday life, then you won’t be connected; you’ll have an abstract connection. Try not to make the.... So being Indigenous means that you know, you’re connected to this Earth, you’re connected to those principles that are meant to preserve this Earth, and you know, how you live your life. That’s how I look at being Indigenous, and I am fortunate that, you know, I come from a community and we know that this region is ours. But we also know that we’re connected to different tribes, you know, the tribal nations that are recognized by the government, and that precede the United States government, or the colonial government. And those cultures, each territory has their own spin on things, but except for the Mohawks, we all speak the same language. And the Mohawks interconnected with us anyway. And as I go further, living out in the Midwest, when I met more Native people who aren’t connected to us, because many of us went out to the Midwest, it’s a similar thing.

Leah Kelly

So when you say you’re connected to this place, do you mean, the greater New England area? Do you mean the whole continent?

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, well, I feel connected to the continent, but yeah, this area that we call New England, you know, and you know, New York state, which, you know, is borderline on that, but I’m glad I don’t live in New York state. I don’t want to live in the Empire State. Except New York City.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. So there’s a difference between “place” or “land” and “territory.” [Yes.] Because it was shared by everyone in this area, in this region. But then colonizers come, they have very strict definitions of property ownership, borders, and then suddenly it’s drawn into a map of who’s where. [Exactly.] And that to you, it seems like it was something really harmful, and one of the negative effects of colonization.

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, I mean, it's not even really judging it to be harmful. It's just merely looking at, at the purpose: divide and conquer. That is the purpose, the purpose of, of coming to...like Thomas Hooker and his crew coming, you know, from the Bay Colony, to come here and settle, you know, his house in the Bay and Plymouth Colonies, coming into this area, into Saukiog, that they founded as Hartford. You know, the reason why they came there was because of the corn trade. The corn trade was something that preceded colonialism, because the corn trade connected, that's, you know, our economic and cultural system, is what connected us all. And we were always, you know, seasonally, always involved in trade and travel through...that was part of who we are. You know, it's like, there's a reason why Native people use canoes, or mishoons, as the Wampanaog would call it. There's a reason why we use canoes to understand, you know, it's like, when most people think of Native people they say, "Oh, the teepee would be symbolic of Native people." Well, for us, what would be symbolic of us would be the canoe or the mishoon. Because that is our, that's how we that's how we exist. Because movement was always an important part of who we are. Because even within just a year's time, we would live in one place during the summer and another place during the winter. Often they would be close by, but sometimes they weren't that close by, depending on the circumstances of the people. Sometimes a man or woman would have their family living in this area, and ten years down the road, the family might have moved or elements of the family might have moved to Shinnecock or to Montauk or to the Narragansetts or further up, you know, with the Wampanoags. This was not uncommon. And that's why this whole idea of you know, very fixed tribal identity, is really a colonial thing.

Leah Kelly

Right. What about when they fought each other, though? Were they establishing individual identities in that sense?

Mixashawn Rozie

No, feuds that people had with one another, this is just what people do. You know, it's like these people are married, you know, they argue, they fight, you know, those things happen. But when they go to war, they didn't wipe out everybody, you know, that was, when colonialism came, you know, that idea of total war was put into people's heads. But yeah, people had had beefs; that was a natural thing. But one of the reasons they had beefs was because they were interacting with each other so intimately and at such an extensive level. Like some of the first treaties that were signed by the pilgrims with the Wampanoags. So like, within the first year, year and a half of them being there, really within two years, they were signing treaties that were also signed by sachems that come from the Connecticut River. And there's a reason why people did it, because we were connected to one another. Yes, we had our different territories. Absolutely. No one's disputing that. But our connection really was much deeper than just this tribal identity that the colonial idea of, like you said, ownership of land, they take an identity and/or territory and they try to make it exclusive for the benefit of colonial powers because it benefits colonial powers because we were all interconnected, just like NATO, just like the United States. I mean, we're connected just like Hartford is connected to the 169 municipalities, we're connected.

Leah Kelly

Do you feel like that connection of traveling from one place to another, visiting each other, intermingling, has been lost as a result of colonialism?



Mixashawn Rozie

Well to a certain extent, but at the same time we still intermarry each other. That's not unusual. It still goes on.

Leah Kelly

Right. Do you think that the official tribal bodies, like the recognized tribes, do feel like they are more isolating from each other now, because they have their own to look out for, their own to protect, in this federal acknowledgement structure?

Mixashawn Rozie

I would say yes, and no. I would say yes and no. Like on one hand, they reach out to different Native people across the board, and in that sense, there's a lot of interaction. But then, oftentimes, not all the time, but oftentimes it falls into you know, they reach out to people who are federally recognized like their own. It almost at times can be like a club. It's not always like that, because not everybody feels that way. But oftentimes, it can be like that. Like for instance, about two years ago, there was a national Native American Educational Conference that was taking place in Hartford. I mean, I worked for the Board of Education. I know plenty of people around, Native people around here, and just people who are with the educators. And I never even knew this was going on until I just happened to see a Facebook post by a friend of mine, who said, "Oh, yeah, we're gonna be singing at this conference in Hartford tomorrow." And I was like, "I didn't even know this is going on." And s I went down to the conference, even though I wasn't registered, even though I'm not federally recognized. I went down there. And I interacted with the people. And everybody said, "Hey, what's up?" It's cool. It's all that. But then, you know, I tell them, you know, nobody in Hartford even knows this is going on. It's only federally recognized people who are even aware of this, or even people, hardly anybody from this region was even there. And that example was, you know, I think speaks to what you're talking about. On the one hand, yes, there's more interaction between Native people, because it's federal recognition and resources that people have to reach out. But on the other hand, oftentimes, it falls into only those who are under the jurisdiction that the federal government has recognized. And that's very sad.

Leah Kelly

So this Windsor Indian community that you're part of, do you think that's maybe going more back towards how it used to be and preserving that mix of peoples and connection, in a way?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, I think we were always like that. We've always been like that, you know. That's why Native people went and...because I've even talked to Native people who...a Nehantic man who was telling me that, you know, his parents moved away from the Nehantic territory, which is still connected to here—it's only a day's canoe ride from here—and moved to Windsor. And from Windsor, they went up to Massachusetts to live. And it's very interesting because he lives around the area of Greenfield, Colrain. And it's interesting, because the first Native American to be published in the United States was William Apess, who was a Connecticut Indian, who was from Colchester. But when his mother and father were expecting him, they went up to Colrain, Massachusetts, to a wigwam, and had him there and then brought him back. So why just bring that up, is because these connections, I mean, we're connected to people through this whole region. And even talking about what was going on in Colrain, although I don't have any evidence, but I'm

meeting a lot of people who are Native people who are from there, and some of them come from right here in Connecticut, and their parents and grandparents moved up there, because there's always been connections up to those places that are not necessarily documented. And they're not documented because people, if they said they were Indians, they would be persecuted. Just like it's an old known fact that many Native people, communities, would never tell white people who sons and the children of the Chief were, because they knew if they do that they would be neutralized. And just like when I was growing up, I mean, we knew we were of Native descent, but we didn't talk, we didn't get political about it, because we knew that we were going to get ridiculed or neutralized in one way or another had we said that. Now, of course, it's very different. Now everybody wants to be an Indian. But it always wasn't like that.

Leah Kelly

Do people come from all over New England when the Windsor Indians hold gatherings and ceremonies?

Mixashawn Rozie

People come from all over New England and people come from different parts of the country.

Leah Kelly

Do you find that there are a lot of people, have you found this community of a lot of Indigenous peoples who are like you in terms of not strongly affiliating themselves to one tribe?

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh yes, yes. Many, many, many. You go to any powwow and you'll meet all kinds of people who are not necessarily affiliated with colonial governments.

Leah Kelly

And do you think that those people are maybe culturally, or in terms of how they think, perceive the world, do you think that they're different from the people in those structured tribal nations?

Mixashawn Rozie

No, no, not at all. Not at all. The only, you know, there are some people who are not recognized who are more knowledgeable than people who are and vice versa. I mean, it's a hodgepodge. Some people, you know, they know they're of Indigenous descent, but they don't know much more than that. And that's, that's very common. But on the other hand, there are those people who are extremely knowledgeable and don't even really want to even recognize the colonial government, but they're recognized by other Native people. And that's an important thing, we recognize each other.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So when you go and visit the Mohawks or the Mohegans, and just travel around and you have relationships with them, do they accept you equally even though you're not registered to the tribe as they are?

Mixashawn Rozie

Yes and no. Yes. Yes and no. Like oftentimes, you know, in my case, when I encounter Native people, it's not even a question. They know I'm Native, you know, and other people who don't "look" as Native as I do, you know, they'll encounter, you know, more hostility. But you know, not only by the way I look, but I'm knowledgeable as well. So I mean, just like I was telling you, when I went to that conference in Hartford, I mean, it was funny, I roamed all through there, interacted with people. Because they just, I mean, by my demeanor, by the way that I spoke and carried myself, they didn't even question it. But when it comes to, "Okay, are you registered?" No, I'm not registered here. And let me tell you that I've also worked with the Board of Education and involved with education. I didn't know about this. And nobody I know who comes from Hartford knew about this. And that's a shame. So I mean, it's a hodgepodge. It's a real hodgepodge. And some people will be very dismissive. "Oh, well, you're not on the [unintelligible] and you know, forget you." And other people, "Yeah, you know, you're cool with me." And that's really the Indigenous way, is it had nothing, you know, these blood quantum, these blood quantum were created to exclude people. Because the person who paid the most attention to blood quantum and used it as his model was Adolf Hitler. The SS modeled their whole thing of Aryan descent on the way that Native American people are quantified and identified by the United States government. Matter of fact, Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*, even said he admired what the Anglos did in North America. He tried to replicate that in Europe.

Leah Kelly

If you were able to enroll in a certain tribe, would you want to or would you say no?

Mixashawn Rozie

I wouldn't say no. But at the same time, you know, being enrolled in a tribe, that would be nice, but beyond...I mean, I already have relationships with Native people and people around here. Yeah, the advantage of being a tribe, you know, would be benefits, you know, for my children, but, and that would be beneficial. But on the other hand, I also know that one of the reasons why we haven't been on reservations is because my family has always made it on their own, and thrived and not only survived but thrived. And many Native people who are not on the reservation are doing very well. Some aren't, but many are. And that's the reality of it. You know, sometimes, I know for like, in my career as a musician, it's, you know, sometimes it's been helpful and unhelpful, being Native. At this point, I don't really identify myself as a "Native American" artist. I am, but I don't necessarily say that upfront, because there are oftentimes people who will use that as a way to exclude me from things. So you know, and it's been, like my family, my brother, he doesn't, you know, go around telling...he knows he's of Native descent, but he doesn't go around, you know, with that as a badge. And he's the principal bassist with the Hartford Symphony. He's been, you know, a member of the Mexico City Philharmonic and Kansas City Philharmonic and played with all kinds of greatest jazz musicians around the world, as myself, I have too. But not as a Native American. That, yeah. We recognize it, but if you use that as your sole way of coming in, no, no, that's not the way to go.

Leah Kelly

What you said about, you go somewhere, and other Indigenous people automatically recognize that you're Indigenous, by your mannerisms, your appearance, et cetera: I'm interested in exploring how identity portrayed. Do you think that identity in terms of the "markers" that indicate that you're Indigenous, do you think that's changed at all over time?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, that is a, that's a major question, because it's just like.... I guess you could even, with all ethnic groups—I'm not gonna say race, because there's only one race—but all ethnic groups, it's like, look at for instance, how Indians from India, look how their caste system is set up by, you know, your complexion. The darker you are, the lower you are on the totem pole. And that, and that goes, that's true in China too, because I know, like, I'm seeing how, my biological grandfather, he came from under this jurisdiction of China, but he's Mongolian, and I see how Mongolian people are treated in China. And they're usually darker than the Han people. I see in Southeast Asia, you know, it's like, people who are lighter are treated differently than people who are darker. I see it in the African American community, there was a time when people who were lighter were treated better than darker people. And then during the black pride era of the 60s and 70s and 80s, light-skinned people were looked down on because they weren't dark enough. So I mean, this is...I mean, even Italians. Italians that come from northern Italy are lighter than Italians who come from southern Italy or Sicilians; some of them don't even recognize Sicilians. So I mean this is a human problem. If that answers your question.

Leah Kelly

Kind of. Do you consider all of the Indigenous people of say, North America, to be one ethnicity?

Mixashawn Rozie

No, no, no. There are different cultural groups, of course, of course. But certain regions, the people are...like this region we call New England, really Algonquin is the most widely spoken language in North America, period. There is even dialects of Algonquin that are spoken in the Caribbean, and in South America as well. But this region that we live in here, this is solidly Algonquin, and most of the East Coast. And the Mohawks, they're not Algonquin speakers, but they came in here later and they're very much connected to us. So I hope I'm...I try not to be too nebulous when I answer these things, because, unfortunately, the way that our consciousness is shape, follows along colonial lines. All of us, not just you, all of us. And you know, really undoing that that colonial mentality is...

Leah Kelly

Yeah, no, I understand what you're saying. Yeah. I'm kind of thinking about, how important is it to you to maintain and protect that Indigenous identity, the way you described what that meant to you earlier?

Mixashawn Rozie

By living it every day, is you know, it's living it every day and defending it when those times come. And someday defense of...you know, I remember when I was living in Minnesota, a white maintenance worker who was working on my apartment, you know, we started talking, and he just came out and said, “Well, you know, your people are a conquered people.” I said, “What?” “Oh yeah, you're a conquered people.” And I just looked and I said, “If I'm a conquered people, why are you my janitor?” And he just got really mad and I said, “You know, check yourself, man, what are you talking about?”

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I want to move into this theme of sovereignty. I guess, give me your take. What do you think of sovereignty? You mentioned it earlier, you mentioned how it can be important to certain tribes. It's an important part of federal recognition, right? What do you think of it?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, sovereignty is a human condition. All life is sovereign. Sovereign is self-determination. That's all it means. And, you know, the idea of sovereignty in a centralized government is abhorrent to those who run the government, and we're all under the jurisdiction of centralized government. So you know, it's the opposite of the way that we live. So sovereignty simply means self-determination, is all it means.

Leah Kelly

And so then, do you think it's something that tribal nations should be constantly seeking to achieve?

Mixashawn Rozie

They're—it's not even...they're constantly seeking to protect. And I think human beings just as individuals, no matter who they are, it's constant...I mean, when people get married, people, you know, have to fight for their sovereignty. When kids are trying to grow up and, you know, make their way in the world, they're fighting for their sovereignty. Sovereignty is just...it's life. Life is sovereign. And [unintelligible.]

Leah Kelly

What does a fully sovereign tribal nation look like to you?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, I mean, the best example that we have here would be you know, the Caughnawaga (Kahnawake) Mohawks, they're a sovereign nation, they have their own passport. They can travel across the border of the United States and Canada, on the fact that they're tribal citizens of their nation. I think that would be the best example. Because the Mohawks have sovereign.

Leah Kelly

Who are the Caughnawaga?

Mixashawn Rozie

That's a part of the Mohawk Nation. That's the most sovereign community, Caughnawaga. Yeah, they're the fiercest. You know, not that the others aren't fierce, but I mean, they have gone to war with the United States government like every 20 years since the American Revolution, and before that they were at war with whoever was trying to trample on their sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

What you said about passports and crossing borders. Those are things that were brought with colonizers, right, and that's looking at sovereignty from kind of a political, legal, governmental view. [Right.] Do you think that's compatible with traditional, Indigenous ways of thinking?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, yes, but see, the thing about it is, not all tribal nations that are recognized by the government are as knowledgeable in their traditions as for instance, the Mohawks and Lakotas and Anishinaabe and different groups. You know, because of the interruption of colonialism. So I mean people's idea of...we're not a monolithic—there's no one thing that you know, you can say, “Okay, all sovereign nations or all recognized nations are this way.” It's really a hodgepodge. But, you know, the fact that if they are federally and/or state-recognized, there are certain rights and resources that they have access to that allows them to act in more sovereign ways...well, I won't even say more sovereign ways, but more economic self-determination than other people. Because really, at this point, most of, not all, but most of the sovereign...like the Mohawks, that's just sovereignty. But you know, like, much of the sovereignty is evolved around economic development, much of it. Because they're even having problems with you know, like, for instance, I'll give you an example. The Paugussett Nation, they're from a place called Bridgeport, which, of course, the original name is Poquonock, it's, you know, just like Windsor. And they're all connected by water. And we're down with the Poquonock, we always have been, you know, we intermarried with them and all that stuff. But, for instance, when the reservation in Colchester was under attack by the state government, because they're not federally recognized, they're the oldest tribe here that's been recognized by colonial governments, yet they're not federally recognized. And there's reasons for that, which I won't go into now. But they had a second reservation that was granted to them by the state in like 1980, '81, something like that. And when I was living out there, and working with the tribe, and you know, just dealing with living out there and wigwams and all that other stuff, the state made a statement that the state police have jurisdiction on all Indian reservations. And we knew that legally was just not true, because the treaty with the state of Connecticut preceded the United States. So the federal government did not have jurisdiction on it, because in the original treaty, sovereignty was with the state. But, and it's complicated, because the 1789 Intercourse Act made that very muddled. So the point is, legally, we knew that the state had no jurisdiction to do anything on the reservation. And when the state wanted to enforce it, we forcefully rejected it to the point of, thank God no one was shot, but it was an armed standoff, and they could not enter. So I mean, sovereignty has, there's so many levels of it, but just on the basis of what it means, just simple basic is self-determination. And the state didn't have a right to go on there. Now things have changed. Things, not with the Paugussett, but like, for instance, the Mashantucket, when they signed the compact to get their casinos, they signed a compact with the state police to have jurisdiction to go on their reservation, and the state police do. So I mean, every recognized nation has—it's not uniform how the sovereignty is. So that whole question of sovereignty, it's a hodgepodge.

Leah Kelly

Right. It just seems like sovereignty in the legal terms with the borders and jurisdiction, it just seems like that was really brought with the Europeans.

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, well, no. Well, I mean, the way that it's enforced, yes. But sovereignty, the idea of sovereignty, you know, the so-called Ojibwe people, Anishinaabe is the original way you say it, what that means is “spontaneous being.” And to be a spontaneous being automatically tells you that you're sovereign. Because if you're spontaneous, you're sovereign to act as you see fit. So, you know, yes, the idea of how sovereignty is carried out, I mean, even European nations, they have, the crown of

England has sovereignty, when in European governments, or any government. That's the definition of a government: sovereign control over their jurisdiction.

Leah Kelly

But didn't you say that you feel like for instance, like the tribes in the Northeast, they weren't really separate entities? They were all kind of mixed.

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, well, yeah, but sovereignty—here's the thing. What you're saying is correct in terms of borders...well, not even borders because people have, that's why I use the word territories. People, you know, sovereignty and territory, you are free to travel through other persons' territory as long as you abide by the original instruction: respect. As long as you respect the customs of those people, you're welcome to come through. If you don't respect them, you're not welcome. So I mean, the idea of sovereignty is a universal thing, but how it's carried out, well, I mean, how it's carried out is how it's carried out in how people look at it. I mean, this idea of just the basic meaning of sovereignty is the same for everybody. How it's carried out, that's another thing.

Leah Kelly

Are you thinking of sovereignty more on an individual basis, or a tribal basis, or a collective basis of a people?

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, yeah, individual basis. Because, as I said, life is sovereign. No one tells the toads what to do. No one tells a snake what to do, or whales what to do. And when they try to, they die, or they revolt. [Okay.] So humans, because of the way we set up our social structure, we have different ways that we enforce sovereignty. And I mean, the sovereignty of Russia is one thing, they have different laws and customs that you're going to have to abide by if you're in Russia, and the United States, at least, you know, hopefully, we have, you know, rules and degrees of sovereignty that differentiate us from other governments, totalitarian governments.

Leah Kelly

Right, but does the U.S. government, in some ways, by imposing these restrictions on Native peoples, is that trying to take away their sovereignty?

Mixashawn Rozie

When the sovereignty of the United States government supersedes the sovereignty of an Indigenous nation, of course. Yes, they're taking away your sovereignty. Because it's, you know, it's like, I guess the way the way to look at is, sovereignty in the way that Europeans look at it is absolute and centralized in a small number of people. Whereas sovereignty in the way Native people look at it, everyone is sovereign, and the territory that you're in, that is sovereign territory, and you need to respect the rules and customs of the people there.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I want to go to the topic of federal acknowledgement, that whole process federal recognition.

Mixashawn Rozie

I don't know if I'm the right person, because I'm not federally recognized.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, but no, that's actually good. Because in a way you can give a certain perspective on it. Now I forget, are the Mohawks federally recognized?

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah, well, yeah, yeah. And there's a lot, there's Mohawk people who are not recognized by the government too. I mean, it's like, but yeah.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. And the Mohegans obviously have this billion-dollar casino that comes with federal recognition...

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah. There are Mohegans in Wisconsin too, who are federally recognized.

Leah Kelly

What are your feelings about it in general? Do you feel like it's something that tribes should go for because of the benefits it brings, or do you think that it's not worth some of the restrictions it might bring? Just, what do you think?

Mixashawn Rozie

You brought up a good question, because there are communities that don't want to go for federal recognition, and there are people that feel that way, I mean...

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I've talked to some of those people.

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah, I mean, it's like, it's really...I mean, yeah, federal recognition, of course that would be good. But on the other hand, it's like, I'm not, it's not one of my goals at all. I mean, if it happened, I'd be fine. But if it doesn't happen, that's fine, too. It's like, because federal recognition can...it's just like me saying, "Oh, I'm a Native American musician." And sometimes that might be helpful, sometimes that might be a hindrance. You know?

Leah Kelly

This might be kind of a difficult question, but how does the ability to be federally recognized shape one's identity?

Mixashawn Rozie

I don't really think it shapes one's identity, unless you want to go in circles where that will shape your identity. If you want to be, you know, subject to and privy to the resources, laws, and jurisdictions that deal with federal recognition, then, you know, it's...I'll put it to you this way: it's such a double-edged sword. I was listening to—and again, I'm not gonna mention any names—



but this is a federally recognized person who is talking to, you know, some non-Indian kids. I don't even want to say non-Indian, because half the kids in there were of Native descent, obviously, probably, and from what I can see blood quantum, if you're gonna go by that, they probably had more Native blood than this person speaking. But they're federally recognized. And, but he was knowledgeable, and he was talking about, you know, different things you can do as a federally recognized person, and he held up an eagle feather and he says, "This eagle feather can only be possessed by people who are federally recognized by the United States government." And that, I think, you made me think of that, when you were talking about how does that affect you, it's like, if you think that only a person who's federally recognized can possess eagle feathers, that's monstrous. That's hideous. You know?

Leah Kelly

Yeah. I hear what you're saying. And also, I think a main issue that people take with federal recognition is that you have to prove your identity to some foreign body who came and invaded you. And then that you have to get them to legitimize you when you're already, I mean you were there first. I mean, is that problematic in itself, having to perform and have one's identity legitimized by an outside body?

Mixashawn Rozie

It's horrible. It's, yeah, you have to just, you know, it's just like I was saying earlier, you know, some people say, federally recognized, you know, "Oh, the federal government gave us our sovereignty." It's like, you got the whole thing backwards. You know, and I know plenty of federally recognized people who are mad, cool. You know, it's a hodgepodge. If you just, you know, identify yourself through that very thin identity that the government has set up, then you're lost.

Leah Kelly

Exactly, yeah. So there's this given identity that's kind of constructed versus the identity that has always been there. [Right.] Okay. And then also I want to touch back on what you said at the very beginning about reservations. Could you say again your view of reservations, as...

Mixashawn Rozie

They were set up to restrict people on the land because most reservations, and especially here in Connecticut—where the people lived were where all the cities are now; that's where most of the people lived, because those are the best places to live. They set up reservations to remove people from those places and not be on bodies of water where you could actually travel. Because most people now live on places where they're connected by water, because that's just how you exist, you can't exist unless you're connected to a navigable body of water. And all reservations right now in Connecticut are not on navigable waters except the Schaghtigoke, that's last one. And that's very minimal, I mean, it's on the Housatonic river, but that's navigable, you know, with very small crafts. But that's the only one; all the rest of them are in places that are isolated.

Leah Kelly

And so are you against the ideas of reservations in the first place?

Mixashawn Rozie

No, not necessarily. But I do know that the purpose, the original purpose of the reservation was to restrict Native people, to kick them out of the most valuable areas. I'm not against reservations, I think it's good we have reservations. But I do understand the original role. The purpose of a reservation was to kick people out of a place, the land that the colonists want. And that's it. That's the simple fact. That's reality.

Leah Kelly

And when you enter a reservation, do you feel restricted, or do you feel at home?

Mixashawn Rozie

I feel cool. You know, I'm on the Rez, I'm on the Rez. You know, it's cool. Because I'm around people, you know.

Leah Kelly

Do you think that maybe, despite the history of reservations, that they could be reclaimed by tribes as a place to have control again?

Mixashawn Rozie

In their original locations? Is that what you're saying?

Leah Kelly

No, I mean, that's probably not going to happen, right? So I guess...

Mixashawn Rozie

Yeah, but that's the whole point. That's why the reservation was created. So I mean, I don't think we could even start the argument or the discussion from that point, because it's a moot point. I mean, it's like, reservations can be places where, and they are places where economic development happens, and you know, people do things that are good. But we still understand that the purpose of the reservation was not that at all.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, of course. And different tribes have done different things with their reservations. And in New England, the past few decades, the big topic that it surrounds is the gaming and the casinos. What do you think of the different things that the tribes that you're from, like the Mohegans, what they've done with their reservations and with the financial support that they've gotten through federal recognition? What do you think is the best way to use those resources?

Mixashawn Rozie

I think they've used the resources in good ways in other ways I think they haven't. I mean, I think that the, I mean, gaming has been good economically for some people. But ultimately, gambling is a vice. I mean, it's just simple as that. And although it's done some good, I don't think it's going to be a long-term tool for keeping for keeping people together at all. Not at all, because there's so many other—and some places have stretched out to other industries, and other livelihoods, but not nearly as much as they could. I think there could be so much more that people do, but people are afraid. I mean, there's even been, some people say, “Why haven't the tribes with all the resources they have, why haven't they got into, you know, making sure that cannabis is legalized?” Because

that's a huge industry, but people because of, you know, their Christian beliefs, and you know, that even though cannabis was used in ancient times, and not necessarily in the way they use it now, just like tobacco is used, just like the coca leaves are used, but they turned them into, you know, so-called controlled substances and caused misery and pain the way that they're used. But I'm just using those examples, like there's so many other livelihoods and industries that Native people could be doing that they're not because this whole thing is all gaming, gaming, we have gaming. It's like, okay. And now we see it start to level off now.

Leah Kelly

I see. Okay. I guess one more question about sovereignty is, is there a relationship between sovereignty and land? And do you see that as...

Mixashawn Rozie

Yes, yes. That's why reservations were created, because they wanted to have control or control certain areas. So yeah, of course, there's a connection in sovereignty and the land. And, you know, but the interesting thing is that the sovereignty of all life and the sovereignty of the land supersedes what an individual human might want to do. That's where modern and Indigenous philosophies really clash. Because modern society just does with the land whatever an individual or individuals want them to do. As whereas for Native people, what is necessary to preserve and protect the land supersedes everything.

Leah Kelly

Hmm. Interesting. Okay. And how important is sovereignty to that Indigenous identity and vice versa?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, if you if you're not a sovereign being, you're not Indigenous. [Laughs.] Pretty simple.

Leah Kelly

Really? Interesting.

Mixashawn Rozie

You're an Indian, I guess.

Leah Kelly

Oh, so what is that distinction, then?

Mixashawn Rozie

When you're sovereign, you're sovereign, period. You're a sovereign person. When, when you're...and not all people who call themselves Indians are like this. But I mean, just the idea of using someone else's term to describe yourself, you know, you'd just be a little Rez boy.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so considering oneself like "Indian," that's not sovereignty, because...

Mixashawn Rozie

Not necessarily, I mean, there are Indians who act in a sovereign way because that's the way they're taught, but I mean, I'm talking about the concept, just like we're talking about reservations, the concept of it.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Okay. And so that's like the harm in that word: it's not yours. Is that kind of what you mean?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well I mean, it's just like, you know, Black people use the N-word to talk to each other. But when white people use it, they want to fight. I understand that. I get it. You know, it's just, if you're the person who's been named this, if you use it, you know, within your context, it's very different than when someone who's outside of it uses it, because historically, when they use it, that's to oppress you in one way or another. Every now and then I use the word Indian, but I don't really think of myself as an Indian. But yeah, you know, yeah, I'm an Indian, but I don't really think of it that way. Indigenous is the way I think of myself.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I hear you. Okay. So lastly, I kind of want to go more into the themes of the centuries-long struggles against colonization, settler-colonial society, and what's happening today. What is being done to fight back? Some people use the word decolonize; some people don't like that word. What do you want to see, personally to improve the conditions of Indigenous peoples in this colonized society that has been very oppressive?

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, it's just like the Funkadelics said: "Free your mind and your ass will follow." And when I say that, it's very, it's pretty simple, like a way that you could help yourself is truly follow Indigenous philosophy, and incorporate it in your everyday life. Now, yeah, legislation would be good. But if you get into legislation as laws, we're gonna go into the same thing. "Well, who's an Indian? Who's not? They're not an Indian." No, no, it's like, the way that you're going to, it's just like, with the Black Power Movement, you know, people are saying legislation, that would be good. But if you go to the principles, those original principles that Indigenous people in Africa use, you would be much better off. If you go back to those principles that have developed here in the United States and in the so-called New World, then you would be much better off. Because not everything that developed out of this era that we call colonization, much of it has been hideous, but some of it has been great. For instance, jazz music is great. You know, some is just great. But you know, it's like understanding what those differences are. So getting back to what you asked about what could help Native people: get back to your original instruction. Get back to and practice it, and understand it, that'll help you.

Leah Kelly

And how do you do that in your personal life? How does music fit into that for you? Because that's most of what you do.

Mixashawn Rozie

Well, yeah, just what you said, it fits in. How could it now? Without music, there is no life. without music, you won't live. Without rhythm, your heart will stop. Without rhythm, the Earth will not

spin. You know, music is...and if you can, you know, feel and add to that pulse, you're good to go. So, I mean, how do I do that? I believe in a lot of the original instructions, which is, you know, first of all, when you're thinking bad, I know, when I have bad thoughts—and we all have them, I mean, we're just human—but when I'm thinking some bad thoughts, you know, because everybody knows, no matter how peaceful, someone's really pissed you off, and you're thinking, “Oh, man, I just wanna like the knock the hell out of that person.” And you catch yourself—me, if I don't if I don't catch myself, I'll be thinking that and I'll trip down the stairs. I'll drop something, you know, there'll be a sign. And part of being Indigenous is paying attention. In modern ways they say, “Oh, you fell while you were thinking that but that was just a coincidence.” No, it wasn't a coincidence. There's a reason why that happened; there's a reason why things happen. You know, so it's like, understanding who you are, understanding your dreams, understanding, you know, just when you see... I saw a picture I really liked of these two otters that were swimming on their backs, and one of the otters was waving. And somebody asked me, he looked at picture and says, “Why do you have that picture up there?” I said, “Because I like the way the otter was waving at me.” He said, How do you know he is waving? That's just a coincidence.” It's like, when the truth is right there in front of you, you have to recognize it. So that's, that's basically it.

Leah Kelly

Do you ever look into or explore traditional music from Indigenous culture?

Mixashawn Rozie

[Holds up a wooden reed instrument] That's one form.

Leah Kelly

What do you call that instrument?

Mixashawn Rozie

Now that's from South America. That's a quena.

Leah Kelly

That's really cool. And so that's like, music, part of culture, keeping that alive. That's really cool.

Mixashawn Rozie

Oh, yeah, without music, there is no culture. Because before we even had, you know, centralized language and writing and all that stuff, we still made music. Music was how we communicated. It still is. And you know, depending on like, even hip-hop music, hip hop culture, I mean, people are, that's how they're talking; they're talking in rhymes, they're talking musically. Music is so important. You can't live without it.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I think I just have one last question for you. You talked about what Indigenous people can do to keep the culture alive and keep their identity strong. What do you think non-Indigenous people can do in this society, or in the U.S., to diminish the harmful effects of colonization, to help Indigenous people preserve that sovereignty, like you said, or preserve that self-determination?

Mixashawn Rozie

They could do exactly what you just said. Do those things to help. Take an Indian to lunch. [Laughs] There's all kinds of things you could do. But I mean, basically, what non-Indigenous people could do is understand more about Native people. Just like, you know, you're talking to me, you're talking to different people. Talk to people. That's what you can do. Talk, see how they feel. And it really boils down to, it's just like, just live. Live, you know, look at the world around you without a whole lot of preconceived thoughts about what is reality and what is not, I mean, and try to...don't be so judgmental.

Leah Kelly

Is there anything else you want to say, or add, or anything at all?

Mixashawn Rozie

You're the one conducting the interview. I don't know what else I could tell you.

Leah Kelly

No problem. Well, thank you so much. Oh, actually, I do have one more question. So I've got your book right here, *Indigenous Roots of Social Evolution*. I've been looking through it. It's really interesting. I was just wondering, what compelled you to write this?

Mixashawn Rozie

Exactly this conversation we're having. So many people don't understand. I mean, they say, "Well, what tribe do you come from," you know, and yeah, what territory, what community you come from, that's important. But you know, this idea of tribal identity is a lot more complex. And at the same time, very simple. That people don't understand. What I want to do is have people not have such a colonial state of mind. And for instance, as you know, you know, all this controversy is about Columbus, and I'm involved in different committees that are dealing with this. And it really boils down to, if we don't reexamine how we've been taught, you're going to have more scenes like what happened yesterday at the Capitol with, you know, people, even people who, you know—it's funny, because I was watching on the news, and they tried to put a human face on, you know, everybody was mad about the thugs going in and burning up the Capitol and vandalizing it—but then they showed, you know, they interviewed people from West Hartford, who went there, who went there to protest. But their belief, even if they didn't condone what the extremists did, they're still condoning it, because the whole reason they're there is on a falsehood. And the falsehood is you know, that the election was somehow rigged when it wasn't. That's the falsehood. And that's what, it's like when people say, "Oh, why do we have to take down the Columbus statue?" Because it's a falsehood. If we can look at our falsehoods, then I think that...the best way that non-Native people could help is just being a human being. If you be a human being, you're doing it. That's what we need.

Leah Kelly

All right. Well, thank you so much. If you have any questions or anything, feel free to email me. If I have any follow-ups, I might email you. But this has been a great conversation. So hope you have a nice rest of your day. And good luck with practicing.

*Interview with Elizabeth Solomon*

Sat, 12/5 9:48PM • 1:20:45

Leah Kelly

Okay, just for logistical purposes, would you like to sort of introduce yourself, your name as well as your pronouns? The name of your tribal nation?

Elizabeth Solomon

My name is Elizabeth Solomon. I'm a member of the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag. And I suppose you could refer to me as Ms. Solomon in the thesis, and I use she/her/hers pronouns.

Leah Kelly

Great. I was looking up your tribe a little bit, but I was kind of trying to understand, is your tribe encompassing the whole Massachusetts Nation? Or is it a part of it?

Elizabeth Solomon

So first, as far as we know, we are the only tribe that really traces its ancestry back to original Massachusetts people. The original Massachusetts territory ran from the north shore down to the, to the south shore, basically, and then inland and intersected with Nipmuc country, close to where, like, I've talked to like Kristen Wyman and Nia Holley, where kind of like, where I live in Halston is sort of like boundary lines between Massachusetts and those kind of things, you know, kind of intersected. But the Pankapoag were originally the band of the Neponset, who basically had their summer homes in and around Boston Harbor in terms of Quincy in Boston, and then came inland in the winter. And we were actually removed to Ponkapoag during colonization and Ponkapoag was praying Indian town. So many if, if not most, of the, the tribes in Massachusetts came out of a lot of the praying towns, because that was a way that if you didn't, if you were going to be in the Mass Bay Colony, it was very hard to like, stay as an independent Indigenous group, because it really wasn't allowed. Most of us went, you know, there was, you probably know most of it.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, would you mind explaining very briefly, sort of the structure of a praying town or the history? What it looked like?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah. So basically, I mean, a lot of people have in the area have heard of John Elliott. John Elliott is frequently referred to in the dominant culture as the "minister to the Indians." And he was a minister in the church. And I don't know what they call themselves now, they morphed into congregational churches, and UU, but basically, he proselytized to the Indians, who were here, and some came willingly, in terms of, you know, you know, they were inspired or encouraged or interested in what Elliot had to say. Others, I think, really kind of did it from the standpoint of, you know, trying to have some semblance of preservation of culture and family, and some kind of autonomy. So, but basically, it was to—now some of this will be opinion—but it was to both convert Native peoples to Christianity, but I also feel it was also to separate us from the dominant culture because even though the dominant culture wanted us to, quote, "convert to Christianity," still did not accept us into the dominant society. So even though we were supposedly being

Christianized we were still kept apart in praying towns. And it also made it easier to, you know, basically access our lands

Leah Kelly

And has the legacy of having been a praying town, has that lasted through today?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes, I mean, in terms of, we've always we've always known where we're from, you know that that's something that we all grew up knowing, we all went—I can remember as a child going to visit the land where my great-great grandmother lived and owned and lived on until I believe the 1930s—and so, so, yes, that is that's very much part of both our legacy and our identity. I mean, that's not, it's not something that we kind of go like, “Oh, well, you know, that just happened.” It's really, it's very much a part of who we are.

Leah Kelly

And did the did the Christianity stay with your people?

Elizabeth Solomon

With some, with some. I'm not personally Christian. I was brought up in a, in a Christian church, in a congregational church, which is the legacy of the, of the churches of the Puritans. But I, I no longer consider myself a Christian. I'm not sure I ever did.

Leah Kelly

And I'm wondering, do you consider yourself an Indigenous person on a daily basis? Because I know some people, I mean, it's preferable to consider yourself like Massachusett, or, you know, something more specific to your nation. I'm just wondering, to what extent you also find sort of a connection with all Indigenous people?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes, I find a connection with all Indigenous people. I think, so I mean, I think you can also look at me, I'm, you know, when, when people ask me, when they invariably do, where I'm from, depending on my mood, I will either say, “I'm from here...” and then they just keep going back, and I'm like, like, “I was from here before anybody, you know, was from here.” But, but honestly, I mean, my legacy is such or my ancestry is such that in terms of ancestry from the Neponset Band of the Massachusett Tribe, or Massachusett Nation. I am also the descendant of enslaved Africans; I'm also the descendant of those same people who came to colonize the land. So I can directly trace my ancestry back to some of the people who came from England in the Great Migration in the 1630s and 40s. So in a way, I kind of call myself a true American, from every single one. [Laughs] Now, yeah, if I, if I came out and said, “You know, I identify as white,” I mean, that would be problematic in so many ways, and no one would accept it anyway. So I mean, I think it's really kind of, so I self-identify as Native American and Black.

Leah Kelly

Okay. So you prefer the term Native American over Indigenous?

Elizabeth Solomon



I don't really care. It's kind of, well, you've heard me say Indian, you've heard me say Native American, you'll probably hear me say Indigenous. It's really all of these names or names that other people have given us. So honestly, I, you know, I mean, if I were going to say, you know, I would say, you know, if I had a preference, in terms of my Indigenous half heritage, I would say Massachusetts, because that's a Native word.

Leah Kelly

Right. So in terms of in terms of your tribal nation, I understand it's state recognized, but not federally recognized.

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes. And what is state recognized is Ponkapoag, the specific praying town that my ancestors came from.

Leah Kelly

So you've been given claim to that land?

Elizabeth Solomon

No, no, no land is involved. [Laughs] Oh, no, it's just that the state recognizes that we are descendants of the people who lived in Ponkapoag and everybody who's in the Massachusetts Tribe at Ponkapoag can trace their ancestry back to the Earl Report of the 1800s to an ancestor on that report in Ponkapoag. So that's, that's, that's how the how we kind of develop or have our tribal roles. That's, that's how you have are eligible for membership in the tribe.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so I'm more familiar with federal recognition than state recognition. I'm just wondering if the recognition of, you know, your, ancestral lands, at least, having been Ponkapoag, then what else comes with state recognition?

Elizabeth Solomon

The only thing honestly, that comes with the state recognition, is free tuition to state colleges. [Laughs] And we do own about, I don't know, 15, 20 acres of the original Ponkapoag plantation. The original Ponkapoag plantation that was set aside was 6000 acres. We currently hold sole title to maybe 15 or 20 acres. And that came after a 10 year very protracted and ugly legal fight, not with the state, with a person who had been systematically over a number of like 20 or 30 years, getting quick claim deeds from folks that, you know, were on their deathbeds, or sick, whatever. And so, we had to go to land court. And fortunately, we had a pro bono law firm that was working with us, otherwise we never would have prevailed, because they probably provided about \$2 million worth of free legal work. But even after all of that time, we have that land. But we had to sign basically a conservation restriction on it, saying that we would not build anything on it, even though the person who we were fighting with about it then subsequently went along and sold her part of the land to developers. So we split some, you know, we kind of split the land.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I was going to ask you if there's been any past or present struggles over land. Has your tribe attempted to get federal recognition?

Elizabeth Solomon

We have not. I think for one thing, first of all, the tribal membership has not decided that that's something that we don't want to do. It's something that comes up regularly, and we talk about, but it's also, like, it takes a lot of money, and a lot of time, and a lot of work. And, and I'm speaking for myself now, and just so you know, like, when I'm talking like, if, if I wanted to represent the tribe, I would have talked to the tribe, and so this is this is me talking, as me as an individual. So personally, I feel like federal recognition has more drawbacks than it has advantages. Simply because the federal government has oversight of everything that you're doing. And your land, you don't actually even own your land. It's held in trust by the federal government. And I resent the idea that my people should have to get recognition from a government, from an entity, that actually tried to destroy us.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I'm definitely going to come back to that because I want to go into much more depth. As you know, I'm focusing on sovereignty. Before I do, though, could you go into a little more detail about your role in the tribe? I saw on the website that you're the treasurer, and what that consists of and the kinds of things that you've done. And also at Harvard, what you've done.

Elizabeth Solomon

Okay. So I'm on the board of directors. So we have tribal membership that I think at this point is around 200, something like that. We probably have, and of course, these are members who are both here in Massachusetts, there are some that are, you know, as far away as California. Naturally we have, we have some folks that are actually living in Europe, we have like at least one tribal member who lives in Sweden. So we're, like many people we're like, you know, all over the place. I personally have pretty much lived most of my life, not exclusively, but pretty much lived most of my life here in Massachusett. And here, see I say, Massachusett, because I'm so used to saying Massachusett instead of Massachusetts, but, um, I've lived most of my life here and most of my life in the traditional territory. And so I've been an officer for probably going on 20 years. I'm trying to think how long I've been treasurer, I don't know, can't remember. And really, at this point, it really means, you know, basically managing the money. Not that there's a lot. And, and then as, as the board of directors, we are incorporated as a 501(c)(3) corporation with the federal government, which allows us, you know, to have nonprofit status. And so I serve as the treasurer on that, you know, so really, the board of directors is really for the nonprofit organization, because we have to have one. So but we do, our decisions are made by consensus, after much deliberation. The board of directors does make decisions regarding legal issues. So if we were going to go into, have a contract, or in terms of, the board of directors signed, you know, the decision that happened in terms of the land, what's it called, partition. And so, but in terms of the day-to-day functioning of the tribe, it really is tribal council. It's, the tribal council meetings are open to anybody who is a tribal member. Not nearly everybody comes, and I think that's true of, of any place, there's probably, you know, a number of us who go every month; we meet monthly, every month for anywhere from two to four hours. And, and then we discuss just general issues at that time, and, and really develop our decisions by consensus after extensive discussion.

Oh, you asked about Harvard. Harvard is interesting. So I have been affiliated with Harvard for many, many years. I started there, and so giving my age, I started there as an undergraduate in 1975. I went to college on the 11-year plan, so I did not graduate until 1986. And a lot of that is

because I just didn't feel comfortable there. And it was really difficult place to to be for me at that period of time. After I graduated, I actually ended up working for Harvard for about, I don't know, maybe three years, and then I left and I lived in New York City for a while doing AIDS education, AIDS prevention education. That was in the late 80s, early 90s. And then I was kind of hauled back to Harvard. Not hauled back, but really kind of the people that I'd worked with before asked me to come back and I did, and I've been there ever since. So, I've worked at Harvard now for, including all of the service, about 30 years. And I recently in March graduated from a museum studies program there. So I'm an alum of two degree programs at Harvard. And I'm also an employee. So I've been affiliated with Harvard for many years. Recently, I've started getting more involved with HUNAP, which is the Harvard University Native American Program. But honestly, I work at the School of Public Health, which, it doesn't really matter right now, but during, before COVID when everybody is working at home, the majority of what happens at Harvard happens at the main campus, which is in Cambridge. And where I work is actually in the medical area of Boston. And so it's physically removed from where most things are happening in Boston. So it really kind of takes a lot to kind of get involved in those things, because I'm not there. But I have started getting more involved. And the tribe has started having, representatives from the tribe have started having some conversations with the faculty directors of the Harvard University Native American Program, to kind of see, to really start developing relationships. But that's the first time that's really happened. And all the time that I've been involved at Harvard, there's really been very little attention paid to the local, to the tribe on whose land the university actually sits.

Leah Kelly

So I'm wondering specifically, then, what the program does do or what you've done with it.

Elizabeth Solomon

So the program really is, they're just, they're just celebrating their 50 years. The founding of 50 years. It originally started at the School of Education with a number of Indigenous students who started, I guess it, I don't know, if it was called HUNAP then or not, it kind of expanded to the college I think in, I don't know, it maybe was in the 80, or the 90s. And really, it's really concentrated on, at least now, it's really sort of concentrated on supporting, first Native American, but then all Indigenous students, regardless of where they're from, whether they're Native American or not, you know, who are students at Harvard. So that's really, and it does have a very strong focus on undergraduates. There's also a graduate, what's it called, like, a, like, sort of a scholars group that, you know, kind of gets together and talks about...but it's very much it's very, very much so very, very internally focused, and very much focused on the student experience, as opposed to the experience of the community as a whole. Until recently, there were no really, there were no Indigenous faculty members. They do, they have in the past couple of years, hired, I think it's three. And I am one, I believe, of four or five Native American staff members across the entire university. So there are few, there aren't... And at the School of Public Health where I work, I think there are that I know of, there are two Native American students. Myself, I'm the only staff member that I know of, and there's one research scientist who's Native American. No faculty, so it's very, it's kind of a very lonely, I mean, forget, like, even, you know, local tribes, it's very sparse, even in terms of, you know, across the country.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I think we can move on. I feel like of the interviews I've done so far, it's, my thesis has kind of become, or the exploration has kind of become a focus on like, current important terms, I guess. So I think the first one is indigeneity, or Indigenous identity. And so I just want to ask, first of all, what does that mean to you?

Elizabeth Solomon

To me, for me, it really grounds me in this place. And not just in terms of place, but also in terms of ancestry. I feel like I am of this place, that nothing can take me away from that. And it's a very, very strong feeling. It's like, you know, I don't care that Harvard thinks they own the land. [Laughs] So I really don't, and honestly, it took me a long time to get there. Because it's, it's not...like when I was a kid, like, you know, what I would say, you know, I was, you know, Native American, or at the time we said Indian. And, and people would go like, "Yeah right, ha-ha." So, it's like, so I mean, it was a very, even though I was living on my homelands. People didn't recognize that. And really it, it becomes a source of strength for me, from the standpoint of that I am so connected to this place in a way that very few other people are. And that makes me feel whole in a way that, I don't know, I really don't know how to explain that. It's just that I belong here. And nobody can take that away from me, no matter what they say, no matter what they do. I belong here.

Leah Kelly

And do you feel like that's a sentiment shared by most Indigenous peoples?

Elizabeth Solomon

The ones that I speak to, yes. Yes. I mean, I think it's, it's this sense of that we are connected to this place in a way that other, that particularly people from a European country culture, cannot understand and do not understand.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. And so I think what I've been hearing is land is very intertwined with your identity.

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes, yes.

Leah Kelly

And so that's more of I guess on an individual person level. Do you think that there's also a collective identity? In terms of maybe on a tribal level?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes. Yes, yes. Because I think we, I think, because we all trace our ancestry to this place, we all trace our ancestry to a group of people who live together and made lives together. And we also share, it's not just the land, it's also like, even though...the way I explain it in terms of my growing up as an Indigenous person, I've known as long as I can remember that, you know, I am Ponkapoag, my ancestors are from Ponkapoag. And, although we did not grow up in a quote, "tribal community," there are certain values that I have, that I have taken from what I learned from my mother and my grandmother and my other relatives, that I didn't even realize that I was bringing in Indigenous values, until I started kind of going out into the world and going like, "Oh, people aren't thinking the same way I am." There's that the sense of, of communal responsibility, that it's

not just, I'm not just responsible for me or I don't have to just take care of me, I'm responsible for my community. I'm responsible to the land. I can't only think of myself. The idea of having integrity around my word, things like that. Those are things that, and I'm not saying that they're totally, that other people don't have those same things, but those are things that I realize now, that came out of Indigenous thinking, and that those values were imparted to me, without them necessarily being said, "Well, this is what's coming from x, y, and z."

Leah Kelly

The group identity in a sense has informed your own identity. And as a sociology major, I've been very interested in the construction of identity, not just specifically Indigenous identity. But now that I am exploring that, to me, hearing you talk, I'm thinking in a way that the Indigenous identity of today, I mean, to be Indigenous, it seems, is fundamentally intertwined with colonization. Because if there hadn't been colonization, then you wouldn't need to call yourself Indigenous. So I'm wondering, you know, if you could maybe talk about the ways that you think colonization, settler-colonial society, have maybe shaped indigeneity or what it means to be Indigenous.

Elizabeth Solomon

Well, first of all, I will say that, and you know, pretty much everybody that is in the tribe will always say, like, we are all assimilated to a certain extent. It's like, you cannot live in today's society and not be assimilated into the dominant society to a certain extent. So I think in terms of that identity, there's definitely this push and pull between, you know, what the, the expectations and values and ideas of the dominant society are, versus what I am seeing as the values and ideas and beliefs of the Indigenous society that I'm from, or the Indigenous folks that I'm a descendant of, and that there's this constant pull, because I can't be in either one completely. I can't be in an Indigenous world because an Indigenous world no longer exists, at least not in the United States, and in very few places in the world, actually. Thanks to European colonization. And then then, then, neither do I feel comfortable completely being in the dominant society, because there's things about the dominant society that I think are incredibly harmful. And so there's this, so the way that probably affects my sense of identity and community is like, sort of always straddling, you know, kind of, you know, where do I kind of fit, and what self do I bring to any individual interaction? And then it's also, there's also stuff that happens there in terms of also being a descendant of enslaved Africans, and that, you know, also being a part of the African American community. So there's, there's all of these little things, these things that come together, that are, are very, very interesting. But I think the thing that that is really interesting, and I've done some stuff in terms of diversity, you know, diversity work, or whatever, and there's one thing where, you know, you can kind of put yourself on the spectrum of certain things. And even though I know that I have white ancestry, I would never, I do not self-identify as white. Completely like, I do not self-identify as white. And I don't know how much of that has to do with the effects of racism, or how much of that has to do with, I think a lot of it has to do with racism, because, you know, that's not something I could credibly say to anybody, unless I kind of went okay, here's my ancestry. This is why I can claim this, but, but whiteness also isn't, it isn't like about your ancestry, it's about how other people categorize you. And I will never be categorized.

Leah Kelly

Right. Well, that's what I think is just so interesting. I mean, sometimes in a bad way. How much other people's views of a person have become ingrained in their own views of themselves. And

what you said about being Black and Indigenous, that to me is also leads into another question I had, because, you know, Black is definitely a race but then Indigenous is not necessarily a race. And I think that since the U.S. government has stopped pursuing the path of just total assimilation, and has sort of evolved from there, a lot of well-meaning people want to categorize Indigenous peoples or Native Americans as one minority race in order to treat them the same way they treat other minority races. And I'm just wondering what you think of the racialization?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, I, I actually, I think so one thing I will say is like, race is a social construct. First of all, it's like that the whole idea is like, it's like saying, like, okay, people who have blond hair are totally different race than somebody who has brown hair. It's like, it really has it, it's a, it's totally a social construct. So therefore, I think the issue is really more whiteness than it is around anything else. And it's about the dominant society here for so long being predominant, being basically being majority white, and wanting to kind of keep that, that idea of superiority. And I think some of that came, I think that history has a lot to say about that. Because first, you know, the colonists came and they wanted Indigenous land, so then we were different. We were savages, we were not really human. And then the same thing with African slaves. It's like, you know, how do you how do you treat another human being like that, if you really think that they are human being. So really, I think a lot of that has to do with the social constructs that come from domination and colonization, and that those things have really been ingrained and continue to be ingrained in our society. And most of us don't, most people, particularly most white people, aren't even aware of it. So I think that, that, you know, I'm...I think, I want to kind of go back to in terms of what you said, in terms of colonization, if there had been a difference in terms of how the Europeans came here, had interacted with the people who were here, and the people that they brought here, then we probably wouldn't be having this conversation, because we would have evolved as a society very differently. So we wouldn't have to be talking about indigeneity, we would be talking about what does it mean to be, you know, a member of the United States. Ad really kind of like, what is it like to be in this society, but we have a very fractured society in so many ways. And so we have to talk about, you know, how this worked. If the British colonists had come here and said, "Let's share the land, let's kind of learn from each other," I mean, it could have been a very different place.

Leah Kelly

That's so interesting. I don't think I've heard anyone talk about that, how if they had come and not wanted to conquer, but just lived there too, maybe like the way immigrants do now, that's not colonization. [Right.] So that's an interesting way to think about it. So we talked a little bit about the effects of colonizer society on Indigenous peoples, on what it means to be Indigenous. Do you think that since sort of the period of assimilation kind of receded once there was the resurgence and the civil rights movement in the 60s and everything, do you think...I don't want to say that Indigenous identity went away, but have you seen any kind of resurgence or maybe like reclaiming identity? And how so? Is it through cultural practices or...?

Elizabeth Solomon

I think a lot of it is through cultural practices, in terms of, and then also actually being willing to stand up and claim it. So my mother, from whom I, you know, I trace my Indigenous ancestry, was born—she had me late, so I'm, you know, I'm an older person, but I'm not really as old as you might think by saying my mother was born in 1918—so, she basically, she did not, she didn't look,

she didn't look Black. She did look Native, but her mother and her mother's sister were both taken away and put in foster care in New Hampshire and trained to be domestics. And they, they eventually moved back, but they were brought up by white families. And at the time, not just because of that, but also because of the society at the time, you know, nobody would admit to being Native. People just, you just didn't, because I mean, even when I was growing up. I was born in the late 50s, and grew up in the 60s and 70s. And even when I was growing up, it was like, you know, the idea of having somebody who was Indigenous from New England was like, people would laugh at you. And so my mother had, when I knew her, she had darker hair, and eventually got gray like mine. But she was born with blond hair and blue eyes. And she had to decide whether she was going to self-identify, in basically the culture that she was going to move into, whether it was going to be white or Black. And she chose to be Black. And I think the reason she chose that is that it had more of a, there were more similarities to where she was coming from as an Indigenous person than it did in white society. Now she's passed, so I can't ask her that, and I'm sure it wasn't even conscious, like I'm not sure she was kind of going like, "Oh, well..." I think that's where she felt most comfortable.

Leah Kelly

Interesting. Okay, so the second part of my thesis, as you know, is on sovereignty. And that's the other hot topic. So, before I go into sort of my perspective of it, I was wondering if you could just answer, what does sovereignty mean to you in general? And also just, I don't know if you use the word sovereignty, or if that's too much of a colonizer term?

Elizabeth Solomon

I look at it more as... I mean, I understand what you mean by sovereignty. I mean, I think that that, the way that... So let me go back, let me back up. I look at it more as the right to self-determination. The right to kind of say, "This is who I am. These are my values, this is the land that you stole, the land that you stole from one set of the ancestors and the lives you stole from another set of ancestors." And that I have the right to determine, and those of us who come together have a right to determine, how we are going to define ourselves and how we're going to live. In terms of sovereignty, the issue that I have with sovereignty, and it's the same issue that I have with federal recognition, is there is no true sovereignty for Native Americans in the United States. There is not. It's not possible, not the way things are constructed now, no, it's not possible. So, you know, and I have the same issue with decolonization in that, unless all the descendants of all the people who weren't here before pack up and leave and go someplace else, this place will not be decolonized. The other way to decolonize is for the dominant society to kind of step back and go, "Okay, so what do we need to do in terms of moving back towards Indigenous relationships and Indigenous values?" That would be a way of actually decolonizing and having sovereignty at this point in time. Do I see that possibly happening in my lifetime? And in what would be my children's lifetime and my grandchildren's lifetime? No, maybe it's something that will happen, but I don't believe in the world that we live in here in the United States, I do not believe there's such a thing possible as Indigenous sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

That's funny, you touched on two terms that I was going to get to later, self-determination and decolonization. We'll get to those later. But I was very intrigued by the way you said first that sovereignty is the right to self-determination. So that's not the same thing as self-determination.

But it's sort of the way to bring it about, like the medium sort of? [Yep.] And also because I think in a lot of ways self-determination is more of the goal than just sovereignty, because it's hard to know what sovereignty means. [Yeah.] But I'm just wondering, do you see sovereignty as needing to be in a legal framework, like giving rights back? Or could it be done in other ways?

Elizabeth Solomon

So first of all, I do think, sovereignty, as you asked before, like, you know, is sovereignty too much of a settler colonial term? And I would say yes, because “sovereign” is the ruler, so that's where that comes from. So the idea of sovereignty is power over. And that at least what I'm looking for is not for power over. It's really for, really kind of a more collaborative, reciprocal way of living that first of all does not kind of put certain people over others, but also doesn't put people over the other things that we are living with here on this planet. So part of the problem that I see with the European values place system is it takes us out, takes us away, from our, our natural interactions with the place that we live. It makes us feel like we're separate from it. And so, and I think that's a lot of the things that as we've become assimilated have really kind of, those are some of the big things that we've lost, and that we are trying, as you said, like trying to, to kind of reengage with that. And this didn't happen here, but one of the best examples, I think of that, are you familiar with Hokule'a? [No, I'm not.] So, Hokule'a is a double hulled canoe that comes out of Hawaii. Basically, as you know, what happened here, happened in Hawaii, you know, what, 200 years later. And, and basically, they also kind of became assimilated and you know, started losing their culture. And what happened, but, have you heard about the travels that the folks from the Pacific have made around and through the Pacific Islands? [No.] Okay, so basically, they navigated between thousands of miles of these little islands, on these double hulled canoes, using the stars, the waves, the animals to navigate. And what Hokule'a did, back in the 70s, there were a group of men, these were all men at the time, who wanted to recapture this, and basically went to a Melanesia where there was this one man named Mao, who was a traditional, they call themselves navigators or traditional navigators, and started learning how to navigate from this person. They lost it in Hawaii, Hokule'a. Ad they finished it up not this past summer, but the summer before. They circumnavigated the globe, in a double hulled canoe using using no modern instruments. So that's a sense of reclamation, and really saying, “Okay, this is something,” and you know, people, I'm sure that, you know, in the 70s people were like, “Nah, nobody did that. It's not possible.” And they did it. They, they basically they, they visited Boston. So, so look up Hokule'a. Sorry to kind of digress on that.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, no, I mean, that's really what I was talking about, which is, I suppose, there's the legal sovereignty and the way most people think of it at first, but then there's cultural sovereignty, I guess, spiritual sovereignty, and...

Elizabeth Solomon

I think we need to find another word besides sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, there's some kind of other word, I suppose. And that's something that I'm really grappling with in my thesis; I'm starting from the premise of the word sovereignty, because it's so much in use nowadays, when you're talking about federal recognition and everything, but I also think it's



such a vague term, that I'm not really sure exactly what the alternative is, um, but it's an interesting term to explore. And in terms of like, what you're saying, reclaiming one's own agency by for instance canoeing around the world, that in a way, it seems individual because it's individuals doing it, but I'm wondering...

Elizabeth Solomon

But it isn't, because it's a group. It's a group of people. And it did start out as individual men, but actually what happened is that rekindled a lot of stuff in Hawaii around cultural reclamation. So the fact that they were able to go and learn from this one person, and there were very few people left that could do it. If they had waited another 20 years, they probably would have had to reinvent it all over again. But that actually like set up a sense of as you say, agency, within the system, within the Indigenous community itself and Hawaii, to kind of go like, "Oh, my God, we can pull this back together in a way that that that is totally amazing." So yes, it's individual, but it wasn't done for the individual. It was done for the community.

Leah Kelly

Yep, that's exactly what I was thinking, is how does that translate to something bigger and some bigger movement and bigger feeling of we can reclaim this?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah. And they do a lot in terms of education. They are training more and more people to do this. So I mean, it's like it's become a whole movement. And I definitely think it might be worthwhile, just in terms of kind of what you're thinking about in terms of cultural reclamation to kind of look that up because it's pretty amazing.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. Mm hmm. I guess, do you have maybe a word that you would use instead of sovereignty? Or is that hard to sort of...

Elizabeth Solomon

It's hard. I think I mean, even self-determination, that goes back to self. Again, we kind of, because the words we use—and for my tribe, our language is lost—and even if we reclaim it, I'm not sure because the way you speak, the words you have, really kind of, that's how you're kind of thinking and it's how you're expressing yourself. So it's very hard to think about what another word would be, because I'm, you know, I'm really enmeshed in the dominant society, and I know what I feel inside, I know what the connections I have are, but I don't necessarily have the words. Because the words, the words that I want, probably may not even exist, because even self-determination is not...because again, it's about self. And, and really, I think the biggest difference is the difference between self and community.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Maybe "community determination"?

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, yeah.

Leah Kelly

So it is a problem when I'm trying to, I'm not sure what word to use, but you get the sense of the idea. [Yeah.] But I'm wondering if you could tell me how much of that agency/sovereignty/self-determination you feel that you have both us as an Indigenous person, and that your tribe has.

Elizabeth Solomon

So some of it is a way of thinking. And in that, I, and the tribe, has a lot of it. So, so, so that, that is all, that is internal to me in terms of the way I kind of go through life. And it's also true in terms of how we interact as a community. So, within myself and within the community, there's a lot. If you talk about, again but then we all live in this, this, this other society that has very different values, and very different norms, and very different ideas. So, within that, that is very limited, because there's not the room to move in the way that maybe we would like to move, because there are things that just aren't, that are either illegal, or are threatening, or, you know, people see it as not a value that they hold. So within that, so I mean, I think that, and I think the other thing is because of the land, that, you know, if we had, you know, a bigger piece of land that we could say was ours, and that that kind of goes back to the sovereignty, I mean, like, you know, you have multiple Indigenous tribes in the United State, who do have land (granted, it's held in trust), but that still does not bring them sovereignty about what they can do on that land and how they will live on that land. And whether they decide, okay, they want to pay income taxes (because they have to, if they make enough money), I mean, these are the things, we're so enmeshed in the dominant society, that the idea of having anything other than, really, cultural sovereignty, is very difficult to imagine.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. And that's not enough, right. You need that. I'm wondering how much your idea of what that looks like is connected to liberation? Like is that a total breaking away of any authority?

Elizabeth Solomon

Actually you know what I think? I think we need to bring them to our side.

Leah Kelly

Okay, explain a little more.

Elizabeth Solomon

So instead of us, because it's, I think, I think maybe the way to deal with this is to really start thinking about how we can shift the dominant society closer to Indigenous values, ideals, ideas, beliefs. And, and then there's more space to do it, there's more space for those of us who really kind of want to move more in that direction to do that. And honestly, I think it would be good for the rest of the world.

Leah Kelly

That's a great way to think of it. You know, I think in a lot of ways, we often tend to think it's one or the other. It's like, one society prevails, or the other one does, but in a way, I mean, it seems like you're more in favor of integration, and teaching and learning.

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, because I mean, I'm sorry, these folks aren't going anywhere. First of all, there's no place for them to go. Can't go back to Europe. Like we are here, for better or worse. We are all here in this same place. And we need to figure out a way that we can be here together in a way that works for everybody. And so you know, so I guess maybe I'm talking about more like assimilation in the other direction.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, exactly. I know from talking to a few other Indigenous people, it seems like there is a lot of variety, even among Indigenous people, about their views on what sovereignty looks like. And I'm just wondering if you can, I don't want to make you answer a really difficult question, but do you have any ideas of why different people might have different conceptions, because I think for some Indigenous people they really do believe, "Oh, federal recognition gives us all of these things that we need to feel more self-determined," or anything, and then for some it's, "We don't need that; we can do things on our own." So yeah, I'm just wondering what you think about that variety of ideas.

Elizabeth Solomon

I mean, I mean, I think I kind of go back to like, I was an anthro major, and like, you're a sociology major, so maybe kind of going back to, you know, what you experience. And, you know, so for some folks, they have lived on a reservation. So they do have some level of sovereignty. For us, we have like, it's been literally 400 years. So for me, it may be much more difficult to imagine, then it might be for, say, someone, even say, in Hawaii, where, you know, that happened in the 1860s I think. So that's, you know, that's a lot different than the 1620s. So I'm wondering how much of it has to do with the ability to maintain that cultural sovereignty, or that cultural self-determination, for a longer period of time, so that you can maybe imagine that, even though, honestly, I still believe there is no such thing as Indigenous sovereignty in the United States. But there may be folks whose experience in terms of how they have come up within their culture may make them have an imagination that's different than what I have. Maybe, I don't know.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, that makes sense. What you just said is, I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that. So on the one hand, you're saying, you can't have Indigenous sovereignty in the U.S. as it is now, but then on the other, you were also saying that by doing like that "reverse assimilation," that maybe that could solve a lot of problems. But do you think that that would still never achieve full sovereignty?

Elizabeth Solomon

Okay, so I guess, I guess we have to go back to defining sovereignty. [Yeah.] So if what you mean by sovereignty is that there's sovereignty of Mexico and there's sovereignty of the United States, do I think it's possible for there to be that type of sovereignty between what is now the United States and an Indigenous nation within the United States? No. So I guess it sort of depends on what you think of in terms of being sovereign. Because no Native tribe in the United States has the same level of sovereignty as another country. And I don't see the United States ever granting that.

Leah Kelly

And that's also a very European concept that you're talking about, of the nation-state and what that is, and it's kind of a new concept that was brought here, so...

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, and that's why I'm saying by "assimilation the other way"—then you're not thinking about power over. You're not thinking about, "Okay, you know, I have control over you," you know, and I don't know if we can go back there. I don't know if we can, but that I think would be a way of reimagining how we are existing in this place. That, that could incorporate all of us that are here, but it means that instead of us thinking a different way, the dominant society needs to think a different way.

Leah Kelly

So now going more in depth on the topic of decolonization, it's definitely...so, you know, the consensus among Indigenous people is you can't fully achieve it in settler society, but I guess, can you still see it as maybe an ideal goal that you can work towards, even if you can't ever truly achieve it? Or is it something that you should just throw out entirely?

Elizabeth Solomon

I still like the idea of reverse assimilation.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so that's a better way. Yeah. In a way that could be decolonization, a form of decolonization, a category. So I was going to ask you, what does it look like to you? But I guess you already answered that, I suppose...

Elizabeth Solomon

And it would still be a hybrid, I mean, it's honestly, it's, it's always going to have to be a hybrid, because I think if we can kind of get to the point where we can...and I have a certain amount of sense of responsibility around that, because what's happening to the Earth in terms of climate change, and extractive technology, and everything else is that, honestly, if we are going to survive as a species, we're going to have to start thinking differently. So I actually think that there are some opportunities to do that. Because we cannot go forward using the Earth as something that we continue to exploit and expect to continue living. Or not the way we are. I mean, first of all, there's too many people. I mean, it just that we're headed down a road that's not sustainable. So something has to change.

Leah Kelly

And, in a way, I feel like that's kind of maybe more like decolonization of the mind.

Elizabeth Solomon

Yes, yes.

Leah Kelly

Not an action, but just the way people view, you know, all of what you just said. I guess I'm wondering, I mean, you were saying that it's always going to be a hybrid, but to what extent do

you think that Indigenous people in the U.S. need to sort of focus on ways of thinking apart from settler-colonial society, that need to break away from that?

Elizabeth Solomon

I think the fact that we have managed to do that at all is the one thing that gives us hope. So that that we have managed to not totally assimilate. That we have managed to say, “Okay, these are the things that I cannot accept, or will not accept about the society that I'm that I am forced to live in.” So, yes, I think that, that both can happen at the same time, but I think that, that if we go completely apart and let the rest of the world go the way it's going, it's not going to end well for us either.

Leah Kelly

Alright. Yeah, I hear what you're saying. I wrote down a few questions earlier that are a little bit going back to the very beginning of our conversation, but I am interested in learning more about the difference between state and federal recognition. I think it sounded like you said that you thought federal recognition was not the way to go for your tribe.

Elizabeth Solomon

We made a decision probably when, back when, God, I can't remember his name...we were approached about 20 years ago by a lobbyist who was willing to help us get federal recognition. And, you know, he brought up issues of casinos. And we said, “Well, we're not really interested in a casino.” And he also said, “Well, it doesn't have to be that, it could be like, you know, as Indigenous tribes that have federal recognition, you know, you're not subject to, say, certain environmental laws.” And we just said, “Get out of here, you know, go away, we don't want to do all of that.” So, and I forgot where it was going, Oh, state versus federal recognition. So for us, the cost was too high. The cost was too high at that time. Now, we made that decision at that point in time. It's an ongoing conversation. And there are people that think we should do it, and there are people that think we shouldn't, and it's a continuing conversation that's been going on for 20 years. And right now we're coming down on, “No.” And, and like, that's why I said, my personal opinion is that it just sticks in my craw that I should have to ask a society that basically stole my land, or stole my ancestors' land, tried to kill off all of my ancestors, deny my existence, and then I should ask them for recognition? That just like, it's like, “No, I'm not gonna do that.” But that's me. That's me. And if the tribe decided they wanted to do that, then I would, you know, I would say, like, “Okay, this is what everybody's deciding is best for the tribe,” then that would.... So that's, that's my personal opinion. It's like, I'm just like, that just is ludicrous. We should be recognizing you.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. Right.

Elizabeth Solomon

Now, are there benefits? I mean, I think, and I wonder—and granted, I have not talked to enough people in federally recognized tribes, who have been federally recognized for a period of time, because the New England tribes haven't been federally recognized for an extended period of time—you know, what they see as the benefits. From the outside looking in, I'm like, I kind of feel like it almost puts more restrictions on you.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so I live in Connecticut. And we have, like, the two biggest casinos in the country that are run by tribes. And someone I was talking to the other day, actually, you know, was saying like, the Mashantucket Pequots, they use their immense revenue to send all of their children to college and fund all of these programs, and just for them it is a very economic decision. So I am intrigued by like, how you weigh the cost-benefits. But it probably really depends on the unique situation of the tribe.

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, I mean, 20 or 30 years from now, who knows what things are going to look like? Who knows, I don't know. I won't, you know, 30 years from now, I may still be here, but.... But you know, all I can talk about is where we are now and where I am personally now. And, you know, and you look in in terms of what has happened with the last administration, and how much stuff has happened there, despite the fact that you have, you know, supposed sovereignty and supposedly, you know, sacred land, and that's totally not respected. So, yeah. I don't know. I don't trust the U.S. government to do the right thing. They never have. They never have.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, and I'm sort of what made me want to explore the connection between identity and sovereignty was the federal acknowledgement process and how, in a lot of ways, tribes that wanted to be recognized would have to perform identity in the way that it was expected of them in order to be seen as legitimate. And someone else deciding whether your identity is legitimate is just part of the fundamental problem, I see, and how that just could have affected tribes' views of themselves. Yeah, I don't, that's not really a question, but...

Elizabeth Solomon

Yeah, no, no, I totally agree. That's saying in a different way what I was trying to say earlier, is that, who is anybody to tell us whether we're legitimate or not? That's bullshit. Forgive my profanity.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah. I really think I just have one more question, which is, I suppose if anyone in the colonizer society ends up reading my thesis, I was just wondering if you wanted to say anything about what non-Indigenous people can do to help move forward the Indigenous movement for reclaiming...

Elizabeth Solomon

I like what you said, "decolonize your mind." Decolonize your mind. Because it is all in, it is, that's where, that's, and you know...decolonize your mind, but also don't think that everything you need to know is in in your head, or that everything that is valid can be validated by the dominant society. In other words, that, I think, only things are real that the dominant society says are real. And so I'll kind of give you an example. And it's from when I was in college, and I was taking an anthropology class. And I majored in, in archaeology, and I was taking a social anthro course. And the professor was up there kind of talking about an Indigenous community. And these were folks that lived in houses that were lifted off the ground. And it was also a place where there were insects like termites that would chew away at, you know, the foundations, the wooden foundations. And what he said was that they understood—and it was very patronizing—they understood that the

structural integrity was undermined by termite activity, but if something actually fell, it was because of witchcraft. And I said, and I said, “Well, how do you know it's not?” Like, how do you know it's not? I mean, I mean, yes, there's physics, and, but you know, you don't know anything. Would you say that about a Christian, praying for someone? And that, you would not come up in the front of this class and make fun of somebody praying. Which, he didn't really make fun of it, but he like, you know, kind of talked about it as if it was absolutely ludicrous. So, so, really kind of getting past like that the only things that are valid are the things that your culture says is valid.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

Elizabeth Solomon

No. This was very interesting. I'm happy that we did this. I'm looking forward to reading your thesis.

### *Interview with Lorén Spears*

Mon, 2/8 3:14PM • 1:30:26

Leah Kelly

Okay, great. So, to begin, would you like to introduce yourself, state your name, the name of your tribal nation, your pronouns? And then anything else you want to say about your role, or your position, with the Narragansett and at the Tomaquag Museum? I guess you can just start with whatever is simplest.

Lorén Spears

[In Narragansett] Asco Weequasin, Nutusoese Mukhasunee Pashau ut Nahahiganseck. Nutusoese Lorén Spears ut Englishut. Neen Nahahiganseck, Neyhentic. Kunoopam ut ahkee ut Nahahiganseck. [Switches to English translation] So hello. My traditional name is Mukhasunee Pashau but most call me Lorén Spears and I am Narragansett Niantic. Welcome to the homelands of the Narragansett people. I'm the Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum, which is an independent nonprofit organization. It's a Native-led organization and was founded in 1958. So it's not a tribal museum, because those are fairly new. And my role is varied. The Executive Director title is the big title, but I do a lot of things. My degrees are in education. So I focus, I do a lot of frontline education work within the museum and develop the programs of education as well as virtually every program that's here at the museum. We have a growing staff, we're now at seven, with two additional college, actually three now, college-aged interns. And it's been an interesting year this year. So there's not as many interns in the building as there normally is because we usually have high school and college interns, paid and unpaid, that are doing work here at the museum as well as other volunteers. So that's a quick synopsis, I guess, of what we do. I grant-write and develop programs, do our future strategic planning, and in our case, new facility work that we're doing, so create partnerships and collaborations with other nonprofits, other museums, other entities, colleges, universities, other institutions. So a lot of different kinds of things.

Leah Kelly

Great. And are you still a councilwoman on the Narragansett Tribal Council?

Lorén Spears

No, I'm not. I did serve two terms. But I haven't been on Tribal Council for a while. I've been very focused on the education through this museum and building the structure of this museum, which was originally kind of a grassroots, volunteer-run organization, and I became the first permanent staff person here. It's not to say that we never had someone for a period of time, but they were usually grant-dependent. And so then, when the grant was over, then the staff or position was gone, like artists-in-residency or an archival project. They were project-based. And so I was our first official staff person, meant to be permanent staff, and then continued to grow it so that we have additional permanent staff. And I do a lot of work for the Native community through the work that we do here at the museum in general, creating voice and visibility of Indigenous people and Indigenous stories and Indigenous ways of knowing, but also through our Indigenous Empowerment Network, which I created in 2016. It is work that we really did before 2016, but we created it into a formal program in 2016, which is around empowering the Indigenous community through small business development, educational opportunities, internships, apprenticeships, artists-in-residencies, entrepreneurship, leadership training and development, advocacy, so advocating on behalf of Indigenous communities on different issues. And so we do a variety of things under that umbrella to support Indigenous communities and create access to Indigenous people to, you know, whether that's partnering with organizations to create their first-ever Native American art show, which we've done that many times over now, or uplifting a newer Native organization, like we're partnered with We Are the Seeds right now on an Indigenous art project. They are in Philadelphia, we're here in Rhode Island, and we're collaborating. Or it's hiring Native artists and culture bearers to teach. So elevating them to teaching artists, but also to teach the Native community or to demonstrate, or teach the public, depending on what the art form is. There's some that we keep specifically to the Native community, and then there are others that other people can participate in.

Leah Kelly

So it sounds like it's a lot about focusing on contemporary art by Indigenous peoples, and trying to showcase the communities that are still living around the museum, more than just teaching the public about Native history?

Lorén Spears

Well, I don't think it's "more than." I think it's, there's an equivalent amount of work that's done specifically for the Native community and to engage them. But in some cases, how we're giving them opportunity is also giving the public an opportunity. If I have an artist that becomes an artist-in-residence, they get to, you know, uplift their art and their artwork and show it in different kinds of ways. But at the same time, the public gets to have a new exhibit that's showing contemporary Indigenous artists and their reflection and relationship between our history, our culture, and our life ways, and their work today. So I think that there's a mixture of those things that's happening. You know, we've had Native artists that have come in and been the curator of an exhibit or that had their own exhibition and show and then demonstrated or taught a class or gave a lecture or talk or something like that. So it's ways to create visibility for them and their artwork, but at the same time, create educational opportunities for the public.



So our series, Quarantine Creatives, that we did all fall, had Indigenous artists and it was an opportunity for us to spotlight their artwork during COVID-19, where it was a lot harder to get people access to their art. We flipped our gift shop to online to help support Native artists in the sales of their work. And we did the Quarantine Creatives, where you could learn about them as an artist and their work, but you also learned about their family, their community, how the knowledge came in, was passed down to them, and to generationally, how, you know, their work is impactful on the social justice issues of the day, whether that's the Black Lives Matter, the Census, you know, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the right to vote, just to name a few of the topics that were going on just in 2020. The pandemic, you know, all of these things and how their art and their work is reflective of that, but it's also educational to the public that is participating in these online offerings, because they are learning about, you know, some people had never heard of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and the campaigns around protecting Indigenous women and their rights. They didn't understand that it came from this place of white supremacy and racial bias and hate that is victimizing people today in the 21st century. So there's all these layers of things and where it's really important for us to share that knowledge to start to heal, you know. These opportunities to educate are means of creating healing in our community, from the intergenerational trauma, or historical trauma that took place and maybe continues to take place. And that that's really important.

So a lot of these opportunities, it's a chance to share your identity, your cultural knowledge, your perspective on the world, and we do this through the exhibits, all our educators, by our policy, our Indigenous, you can't get a first person perspective if they're not. And so that means each educator is sharing their perspective. When someone's curating an exhibit, they're sharing their perspective. When someone is doing an art program, they're sharing their perspectives. I mean, your life is woven into the work that you're doing. For me, I'm the Executive Director, but this is what I do, it's connected to who I am. You hear about my children, you hear about my grandson, you hear about my family, my husband is a Narragansett artist and environmental officer. People, when they're listening to me in a presentation, they're hearing these true things about my family and my community. And it's important because one, it makes it real, you know, they're not just talking about fictional Indigenous people, you're talking about, "Oh, her family, you know, they're gathering wild mushrooms, they're foraging for edibles, they're processing materials for art," what we call it today, basket making, or weaving, or beading, or whatever. You know, those are all things that you're connecting to directly from our families. And that's true for all of our educators. You know, we're living our identity, you know, it's who we are. And so part of that is the culture is woven throughout what we do, whether that's what we are eating, the cultural ceremonies and gatherings and community that we have in our tribal community, meaning the Narragansett tribal community, but also beyond that, to, you know, that's my nation that I'm a citizen of, but if you go with community, it's all of those people really in southern New England. I mean we go from tribal nation to tribal nation, you know, in a non-COVID year you would go over to Mohegan, you'd go to, you know, you'd go to Pequot over at Mashantucket to one of their powwows or their socials or to their museum, and to their gatherings. And you'd go to Mashpee and you'd go to Aquinnah, the two Wampanoag nations that are federally recognized, you might go to the Rhode Island Indian Council, which is a you know, an urban Indian center, to one of their powwow or their gatherings. And you might go up to Nipmuc, to Chaubunagungamaug, and you might go there. I mean, I remember going there as a kid as well, you know, so you're relating and connecting with people within your whole network and beyond southern New England, and to northern New England and into the Mid-Atlantic states. You're having these relationships. And so the network in the 21st

century, there's people that are from those farther away places that are living in your territory, and vice versa, and that you're sharing, you know, social relationships with.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, you're touching on a lot of things I want to get back to, to do with identity and culture, and which are big parts of my thesis. Let me just start with kind of a personal question aimed at you, in terms of your identity. How do you prefer to refer to yourself, in context of whether you consider it your nationhood or your ethnicity or your culture? Yeah, I'm just gonna leave it open ended like that.

Lorén Spears

I think of myself as Narragansett. When you ask me sort of “what,” I say I'm Narragansett Niantic because I have those lineages. And I, but I'm a citizen of the Narragansett Nation. And, you know, there's other things within me that, like I have some Portuguese and things like that, but that's not really where my identity comes from. I'm from a matrilineal society. My mother was my main influence, you know, and her parents, so my cultural knowledge all comes from that through my matrilineal side of my family. And that's, like, and my lineage goes all the way straight back on my matrilineal side, to here, you know, as a Narragansett person, Narragansett Niantic because we also go back to Ninigret. So, I think that's really important. That's how I think of myself. When I got married, I married someone Narragansett, I have Narragansett children, and grandchildren, of course, my grandson, he's Narragansett. That's it. You know, I always tell my kids we're Narragansett Niantic, which we are, but the nation that we're part of is the Narragansett nation. But my grandson is also Paiute Shoshone, which, my son met [his wife] out at Standing Rock being water protectors and you know, now I have a few years later, I have a two-and-a-half-year-old grandson. And so but you know, there's this indigeneity that's very much part of my identity as being Indigenous. Specifically being Narragansett, Narragansett Niantic. You know, when I think of who I am, it's from that lens.

You know, I think of our, I mean, growing up, my grandparents owned and operated Dovecrest Indian Restaurant, and we learned a lot about our culture through Indigenous foods and Indigenous food ways. This museum that I'm now the Executive Director of, I grew up around, it was very grassroots in those days. But you know, my grandparents, Princess Red Wing, my parents, you know, my aunts and uncles, cousins, distant tribal members that like you grow up with in this world—none of them are that distant; we all know each other in one way or another. You know, we were having the ceremonies, and we were sharing culture with the public. But it was about asserting our identity as people. It was asserting our knowledge and our cultural, you know, this is kind of an educator way of saying it, our cultural competencies. But you know, people like my grandparents and Princess Red Wing, that generation—Princess Red Wing was born in 1896, and my grandparents were born in 1916 and 1918, I believe; my grandmother was definitely 1918, but I think my grandfather was 1916, but I'm not 100% sure of that—but when you think about that, like they lived that whole 20th century basically, right. And they, you know, their parents and grandparents were living when the Narragansett Tribe was de-tribalized in the 1880s. They were, you know, adapting to the trauma of land dispossession, land displacement, and, you know, having had people within their history that had been enslaved or indentured, and just the subjugation of that, that you were going to then, even if you were getting paid, that you were going to be working less-than jobs, and things of that nature and what that was like. But at the same time as they were balancing, you know, Western ways of living in this world, they were also doing

traditional things: hunting, fishing, gathering, doing medicinals, going to ceremonies, you know, continuing and pushing language forward into the 19th century, and then into the 20th century, and into the 21st century, you know, those things were being pushed forward.

And so when I think of like my grandparents' generation, and the things that they saw, and the things that they lived through, and you know, and then their parents', my great grandparents, what they lived through, you know, from the latter part of the 1800s going forward, is remarkable to think about. But yet, it's because of them that we have the knowledge that we have. It's because of them that we have the traditional ecological knowledge that we have. It's because of them that ceremonies and culture continued. It's because of them that we have rights that we have today. It's because of them that we still pull forth as Narragansett people and have an identity as a Narragansett. It's because of them, that pushed that forward, our Elders, our ancestors, that ensured that we're still here, and that we still have that identity as an Indigenous person. And not just a vague identity, but as a Narragansett person, it's really important. And, you know, my children and my grandchildren, you know, those that haven't arrived here yet—I only have one at the moment—but, you know, my children are all over 20 and into, you know, are married and have, you know, families if you will. It's really important for them to understand who they are and understand their culture and their knowledge.

And, you know, the world changes. Whether conquests happened, all communities would have evolved in different kinds of ways, languages would have evolved in different kinds of ways. But we had interruptions because of conquest and colonization and forced assimilative practices and things of that nature. But that makes it all the more important for us to really ensure our understanding of our identity and our cultural knowledge, you know. Understanding that we're Eastern Woodland coastal people, understanding our connection to this place that we may call Rhode Island today as a state, but that's literally our homeland. And that we still live in—you know, we come from this place, and everything about us historically, as well as in our contemporary lives, is connected to this place. Our ancestors are in this land, our stories are in this land, our identity is in this place. And so when we think about that, it's really important, you know, when you think about our ancestors as ocean-going people, we're still ocean-going people. You know, maybe we're not hunting whales the way our ancestors did, because of the decimation of the whale population, on the East Coast in particular. But, you know, it's still part of our history, and it's still part of our identity. The learning that we know about this place, the life ways that we've developed, you know, whether that's agriculture, or, you know, foraging is a funny word, but you know, I like the word gathering, but you know, going out and gathering medicinals and edibles and useful plant life to weave a bag or a sack or a basket, you know. Those are all things that today, we might call ourselves artists when we do that, but it's still part of our traditional life ways. And those are critical things. And our community, you know, is all interwoven in that knowledge. I always like to say, if you could take every Narragansett person, right, and put us all in a complete circle, right, and if we were all touching hands, if we could pass that knowledge between each other all the time, we have all that knowledge. It's just that each individual one of us doesn't have all the knowledge that our ancestors passed down, because different families have different focus.

You know, just like everybody, we have expertise, and some people are experts at medicinals, and others are experts at weaving, and others are experts at processing clay and creating pottery, and others are experts on cooking, and others are experts on building. And the list goes on, like, in our community, you know, those expertise overlap. And that's one of the blessings of working at this place, Tomaquag Museum, is we can bring those experts in cultural

knowledge into this sphere. And we can say to the expert, “Hey, are you willing to teach a class to the community and through our Indigenous Empowerment Network?” You know, before COVID happened, we had an Elder who was teaching pine needle basket making, we had a tribal artist who was teaching porcupine quill embroidery, and quill wrapping. And then you know, so each year we were bringing different culture bearers in that had expertise. And you know, sometimes they're in contemporary arts, and we bring artists in, and they're doing painting. And they have a unique style in which they do but it's still culturally relevant because it's telling our story through that painting. You know, Dawn Spears, for example, who is married to my brother-in-law, she is the artist-in-residence right now at the New Bedford Art Museum. That's part of, one of our collaborations that we created under the Indigenous Empowerment Network. And we gave a long list of potential artists that could be one of their artists-in-residency, and they selected, their team selected Dawn Spears. And so that's an example of our work, elevating and giving an opportunity to Native artists. But it's also the collaboration between organizations that that's not a Native-run organization, but they wanted in their DEI work, they wanted to incorporate different diverse voices in that program. So how do they do that? They partner with other places that have access to these artists, where they can get a list of artists, and then vet them and look them up and find out who they would like to start with. And she was their very first artist of their very first artists-in-residency program. And I think that this is the kind of work that we like to do.

But it's all about identity. The artists are a perfect example of that because each one of us, we share who we are through the art that we're doing. And as culture bearers, if you will, as people that are learning from a cultural lens, rather than an academic, scholarly art lens, you're utilizing the things that you've learned over a lifetime from your Elders, from your community members, from your family, to express yourself. You know, the earrings that I have on are by a Narragansett artist, Quaiapen. And she's named after a female sachem, from, you know, the 1600s. The quilt behind us is from a community quilt project, our arts and wellness project, and in 2008 we made the community quilt that happens to be hanging here in my office. And, you know, each one got to make their own lap quilt to take home. So they learned quilting, we elevated the artist who was a quilter to an artist quilter teacher, each person got to learn how to do the quilting, as well as to be part of literally a piece of art that can be around for a long time that can express a story about the community at that time and what does it mean to be well. And actually, in this particular quilt, it was actually talking about identity because each person was picking, designing the square to represent themselves in some kind of way. [Gestures to quilt on wall behind her.] And you know, I think of like, Red Moon, that's literally her traditional name. In mine, this is my square. And that's my traditional name, Mukhasunee Pashau, the moccasin flower, the lady slipper. And that's what I depicted.

So I think that like, that's the kind of thing that's happening all the time, that our communities are representing ourselves through music, and dance, and storytelling, and writing, and literature, in exhibitions, in art shows, you know, the whole exhibits, they're telling our stories. We always talk about decolonizing museums, we talk about the words like “artifact” and “object,” which really isolate and make the thing a thing all by itself. And we call it “cultural belongings,” because that quote-unquote “thing” belonged to somebody, someone made it, someone used it. And it's connected to them in some kind of way. And so cultural belongings makes that connection. And that means that it has a story, so everything has a story. So when you go into our collections area, and you select a basket, for example, that basket has a story. Do we know it? Maybe, maybe not. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have a story. It's just our job to recover that story. And I think that that's a really important thing to recognize. And, you know, we might not recover it today, we

might not recover that story tomorrow, we might not recover that story for ten years, but it just takes the right person in the right place at the right time to have that story dovetail back. And that's one of the beauties of the work that we do here, is that we're looking for those stories. We're trying to find those histories about our people, our place, our life ways. And they're all here. It's just recovering that or uncovering them.

Leah Kelly

Well, I have a lot of questions coming from what you just said. But I kind of want to keep them brief. Going back to your family growing up, you said you were very immersed in the Narragansett people's culture. Could you just talk a little bit more about how that is structured, today? Do the community, do a lot of the enrolled members of the tribe live in the same area, and how does that connect to your reservation land?

Lorén Spears

So the answer to that is no, because in in the 1880s, in 1882, there was the detribalization rolls where the state of Rhode Island—it took 101 years to prove that this was an illegal action—but it was an illegal action and they detribalized the tribe. And that meant they could then sell off our land. So the remaining lands at that time were many more acres than we have today; it was probably what you would consider like what people call “South County” today, is probably the majority of the land that we're talking about at that time period. And so we're scattered all over the place. There's a large population of Narragansett people living in urban environments. Why? Because they grew up in those places. And they, as they got more and more urban, they were still there in those places. My own grandmother grew up in East Providence, but when she grew up in East Providence, it wasn't “city” the way it is city today. You know, but it was way more city than down here was, you know. So this whole area was our territory, so people were living all over it. And when colonization is happening, and land dispossession and displacement is happening, we're all over the state. And when the biggest act of land—well, maybe I'll restate that—the last big act of land dispossession with the land sale in the 1880s and detribalization, really pushed us all over the place. And that means that we're all over the place in the state and beyond, even.

However, you know, I grew up literally right here in Exeter, where my grandparents had Dovecrest Indian Restaurant. My grandparents, before they lived here, they lived in Charlestown and my grandfather grew up in Charlestown and Westerly areas depending on the time frame. And of course, Westerly had a lot of Indigenous people all over this area, Westerly, Hopkinton, Charlestown, you know, and beyond, had historically lots of Indigenous people and we still do. So our reservation lands were returned to us in 1978 during the Land Claims Settlement Act. We received 1800 acres back. I believe today we have around 3000 acres with a mixture of trust land and fee land. However, back to growing up, I mean, my grandparents owned and operated Dovecrest Restaurant. Tomaquag Museum, my whole childhood, was right either on the property of my grandparents or next door to the property of my grandparents. We went down to Charlestown to the reservation for meetings at the longhouse and gatherings at the longhouse. Like I tell my kids I remember going there, and we'd have rabbit dinners, and we'd have socials down in the longhouse. We have another community center now, that they have their memories of mostly. The longhouse has been repaired, and the historic preservation offices are there now, and they do have some functions in that building.

So they have a little bit of memory. But my childhood memory was always in the longhouse with the Elders back there cooking chowder and succotash and Johnny cakes and having, you

know, rabbit dinners and other kinds of dinners and seafood and fish dinners and things like that. And we still have those things. They're just done in a different way today than they were then. Then it was people sort of volunteering, and there was just all this, the Elders and the women and the men around, doing all these different things. And there's still that, but you know, we have programs; there's a meal site, so that the Elders have an Elder meal site. Believe it or not, next year, I'm going to be 55, or this year, I'm going to be 55, so I'm going to qualify for the Elder meal site program. It's like, oh my goodness, time is flying. And but you know, people go there for lunch. I mean, now I can still go there for lunch, but I have to pay five dollars; it's five dollars and you get this huge meal. So it's great. But you know, there's someone that's the chef, my sister-in-law, Pearl Brown, is the chef. And she, you know, cooks the meals Monday through Friday on a non-COVID year for people and they come in and you know, they socialize and the Elders have meetings; they have the language committee meeting or they have meetings about what other things they're going to do and cultural things and they have their Elders Council and they do different things like that.

So it's really important, it's a place to gather; you know, the community as a whole, we gather for tribal meetings, we gather for socials, we gather for different kinds of Elders Day, for you know, our different traditional Thanksgivings and ceremonies. You know, they're happening there. And you know, our community center, you know, has a daycare today. Well, when I was a kid, they didn't have a daycare. They have a daycare, and we have the Elder senior site and we have the meal site. Those are things that weren't there when I was a child but are there since we got federal recognition. There's a police department. There's the natural resources department, which my husband is an environmental police officer for the tribe. You know, we have a help center and, you know, the whole administration, there's the governmental offices and things for the tribal council meetings, and there's a police department and, you know, there's the social services department to help families and community through, you know, to support different needs. That you know, there's all of these kinds of, we have, you know, a playground, there's a beach area out at Schoolhouse Pond. You know, just two weekends ago when we had that little cold snap, people were out there ice fishing on Schoolhouse Pond. My husband went out with my grandson and a couple other cousins of his to check it out, just to see how it was coming. And, you know, those are things that I remember growing up doing, like, I remember my mom and my grandparents taking me down to Schoolhouse Pond. All the cousins, you know, everybody in the tribe, all the cousins, you know, would all be down there, you know, ice fishing, and you know, the people that were really caring about ice fishing were, you know, setting the tilts and doing the things. And us kids were just racing and running, or skating, or doing whatever. And that just passed down. My kids, you know, all go ice fishing, and all have been out there. And my daughter, I can remember when she was just little, she wasn't even, like, big enough to stand up on her own, and we had her out there on the pond, you know, and the moms like me, we were cooking soups and stews on the open fire and, and you know, hot chocolate and tea and whatever else that people brought. It would be like a community thing; everybody just would bring stuff. And you know, some of it's modern-day stuff and kids would cook a hot dog on a stick. And other things are very traditional things like a venison stew, but it was whatever you had in your household, and people would bring it in, and we'd all kind of eat it like potluck.

And, you know, this COVID year has been really rough on our community; we're used to getting together like that, we're used to having lots of family gatherings, we're used to, when there's losses in the community, getting together for long, extended periods of time. It's been very difficult because of that. And so, you know, we're used to coming together, we're used to, you know, coming

together at Tomaquag, coming together with the Mashantucket vocational rehabilitation program where they have all kinds of things. Now we're all adapting and doing things virtually. I was on one of theirs, they were doing, like a meditative thing one time I went on, and the [unintelligible], who's a tribal member to our tribe, but was doing yoga for everybody. And so we're intertribally doing these things. It's not always just, "Oh, it's my tribe, and you can't do it." It's like, "Okay, I'm doing this program, but it's open to anyone in this region that can want to participate." And that's really important for our health and wellness. And so I think, you know, that's part of the identity, too. It's part of the community. You know, yes, we have our individual tribal nation, but there's also that kinship relationships and you know, just relationships between communities in a social way, you know, that was, in some cases historically there as part of alliances and in some cases, maybe they weren't part of our alliance, historically, but are part of, but are today, obviously.

Leah Kelly

Yeah. You touched on a bunch of things I was actually going to get to, which is, you know, the community. I will get back to that in a second. You've been talking a lot about the reservation, which is also what I wanted to ask about, and how that brings you all together. How important is it to you to have that space?

Lorén Spears

Well, it's critically important. I mean, frankly, we should have more, but we have what we have. And that's important to us. I mean, those are lands that our ancestors walked on, as is many of the lands that are now Rhode Island, but some of the lands that are now Rhode Island are underneath urban centers that you can't have as close of access to those resources. You know, we talk about food sovereignty and food rights and food ways, access, rights to hunt and fish and gather our traditional foods are really important. And one thing that we can do is on our reservation lands, we have better access to those things. That ability to hunt, fish, and gather, where on, you know, maybe your own personal property or just state or broader land, you don't always have the access that you should have. One thing that's certain is we should have better access to the ocean, which we don't, in my opinion. We should have better access than the average American and someday we will rectify that problem. There are ceremonies that we do and have historically done that are directly related to the ocean as I mentioned; we're ocean-going people, and why we have no land that is directly abutting the ocean, I'll never know. But, you know, hopefully there will come a day where we can correct that wrong.

But that's part of our identity as Eastern Woodland coastal people, you know; that's where clamming and quahogging come in and having rights to access that land and that space to do that work and to continue that cultural knowledge, the harvesting of fish and shellfish and clambake, you know. And I mean traditional clambake, in-the-ground clambake; those are things that I grew up with. My husband's family, I can even remember them before, obviously, before he was my husband's family, but them coming to my grandparents' restaurant, Dovecrest, and doing the clambake for the Green Bean thanksgiving that we were doing with Tomaquag in collaboration with Dovecrest, and having those traditional in-the-ground clambakes. And that's something that our community does. I mean, I've done interviews with Elders, and I've had them telling stories about when their family was doing clambake and you know, when my sister-in-law got married, you know, the wedding, that was what it was, she wanted it to be a clambake and so that's what we had. You know, lobsters and crabs and steamers and quahogs and chowder and, you know, potatoes and other vegetables and things that go with, that's part of the culture and part of the

community. You know, at our reservation, sometimes we have a gathering that'll be a clambake and we all go there and we're having a clambake and you know, we have our different Thanksgivings and our green corn harvest and our fall harvest and all of those different things and that's part of who we are. You know, there's food sovereignty programs; my brother-in-law Cassius and his wife Dawn, they founded the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative. And you know, they're growing Narragansett flint corn, like historic, heirloom, whatever word you want to use—there's another word that's eluding me at the moment. But our historic corn is being grown communally again. It's not that no one was growing it; it just wasn't being grown as the whole community. And it was beautiful that the whole community was going there, and they were learning about it, and they were helping plant and they were helping tend and they were helping harvest. And that was, that's a wonderful thing, and we reflect that in our food ways exhibit. You know, it's spotlighting Dovecrest as an entrepreneurial pursuit and it's spotlighting food sovereignty, but it's also spotlighting just our food and our food systems and our traditional ways of knowing food, and how that connects. And you know, we talk about how, you know, corn isn't just corn; it's edible, it's medicinal, it's spiritual, and it's useful. Like it has all the components there. And so we talk about that, like, that's why people, in our community anyhow, say food is medicine, because all food is medicine. Some may have even a higher degree of that medicine in it. But medicine can be spiritual, and medicine can be medicinal, and medicine can be edible. And then I suppose even medicine can be useful, depending on how you want to look at it.

Leah Kelly

Okay, you have been talking a lot about identity already, but I want to go more into my questions that I was going to ask about identity, I guess. I was wondering, what does indigeneity mean to you? What does it mean to be Indigenous? And do you think that there's a collective Indigenous identity? You're saying you feel the solidarity where you connect with the other tribal nations around you. Is there something that you can pinpoint or specify about what that is?

Lorén Spears

So for me, being Indigenous means being the original people of a certain place. And I think when you use that—so like, you can talk about it literally here, what we now call Rhode Island as Indigenous Narragansett Niantic people, originally indigenous to this place, or you can talk about it as Indigenous people, indigenous to this place we now call North America or now call the United States. And so I think that's where the indigeneity comes into our relationship between Indigenous peoples. I think that when you think of the historical trauma that has taken place in the conquest and colonization, that rippled across this continent, and really the North and South American continents; we didn't make the lines, we didn't make the delineation, sort of taking away the indigeneity sometimes of peoples in Central and South America. So I think that it's really important that I think, you know, there's an indigeneity to this place that we think of as the Americas. And there's a similarity in the conquest and colonization that took place. And so therefore, there's some relational circumstance because of that, whether that's being displaced and going to boarding schools and having the horrors that took place in those places. Whether that's the federal system, or the Canadian system, or the ones that weren't called the federal system that were, you know, industrial schools and religious schools that were doing the same thing before the systemic system was put into place, but they were doing it in each individual place. And once they perfected that, they created this whole system to indoctrinate and assimilate in forcible violent ways. And I think that that creates the threads that weaves us together as Indigenous people across this continent.



And we know ourselves that we're all individual nations, and we have different life ways, and different cultures, based on our ecosystem, based on our history, based on the life ways of our people. But across that, there's also this similarity in the indigeneity of our people.

And so that's really important. I prefer "Indigenous" to "Native American," "American Indian," of course, "Indian," "First Nations," "First Peoples," "Aboriginal," there's lots of terms that mean the generic category, if you will. But I like "Indigenous" personally, because it means that people have a particular place, and we're talking about this place. We're talking about my identity as a Narragansett that puts us in this place. And I think that, you know, "Native American" and "American Indian" give way too much credit to the country that became, you know, we're talking less, I think it's like 244 years since the Declaration of Independence. So it's such a little country, just a short amount of time, as opposed to tens of thousands of years that Indigenous people have been on these lands. And every time scientists learn more, it just seems to go backwards in time. And as my Elders have always said, we've been here since time immemorial. So when you think of that, even if you go with 10,000 years versus 244 years, and think of the indigeneity of this place that we now call the United States, it's really important for us to really reflect on that identity of who we are as Indigenous people, and the longevity and the sustainability that we've had to maintain who we are over thousands of years, but then also through, you know, three, four hundred 400 years of conquests, to ensure that we're still here, and that we still know who we are, and that we can still pass down culture, cultural knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, our language, our mores, to our next generations that come that's really important.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so as a sociology major, I'm very interested in the way that identity changes or is even constructed over time, and in a lot of ways, it's actually constructed by outside forces. For example, when you say Indigenous identity, the way it's been created, it's almost contingent upon the fact that these other these colonizers came and took the land and colonized. So you mentioned a little bit your grandparents growing up in the era of assimilation. Do you think that things like that—the government policies, the ways that Indigenous people have been brutally treated over the centuries—do you think that that has affected the identity of what it means to be Indigenous? And have you ever felt or witnessed the need to kind of perform identity in the way that you might have your own identity and the way you see yourself, but then there's a way that other people expect you to be, that is almost a dual identity? One is sometimes outward appearance versus inward...

Lorén Spears

I think there's been a time in our history where there's been adaptations in order to be recognized, but you have to understand there was such a vast amount of erasure of indigeneity in our country as a whole, but particularly here in the Northeast quarter that's had, you know, two hundred more years of this oppression. I think that there have been times in our history that there's maybe a more outward representation in order to kind of prove your indigeneity. I think that we push against that today, you know, like, things like, "I'm not your mascot," you know. I don't have to dress up and be Indigenous on the outside to change the indigeneity of me on the inside, you know. You're Indigenous regardless, you know, no matter whether you're wearing contemporary clothes, or your traditional clothes. You know, as Indigenous people, we have traditional clothes, but we're not wearing them twenty-four hours a day, because it's 2021. And just as other people in this country that have other ethnicities and cultural ways, they're not wearing the clothes of their ancestors from four hundred years ago, they're not speaking like their ancestors from four hundred years ago.

They're not living the life ways of their ancestors from four hundred years ago. And that's even true for the colonists, if you will, the colonizing factor. If you want to go with Britain, you know, none of the Americans that are of English descent look like, speak like, eat like, work like, their ancestors from four hundred years ago, but no one tries to negate their lineage or their Britishness or their Englishness. If they say they're English, nobody questions that.

But with Indigenous people, there's always a questioning of their indigeneity. We're the only people that have to pull out a card to prove who we are, we're the only ones that have to kind of fight our way to be Indigenous. And there is so much difficulty in that and it's such a complex issue around federal recognition, state recognition, non-recognized tribal nations, that that doesn't, you know...to me, you are who you are as your identity. And it's really not up to someone external to say who you are. However, that makes such the complexity of it. You know, I know people who are on federally recognized rolls, that they're accepted. I know people who are on state recognized rolls; well, they're usually accepted as well. But then there's people that, for whatever reason, are not on either or their tribal nation just didn't stay organized enough to be able to succeed through the federal recognition process. Early on, you know, a lot of people joined into another nation, and now they want to kind of pull themselves back out and be separate, and that's a difficulty. There's people that are Indigenous on all sides, but they're multiple tribes, like they might be six or seven different tribes. And in a pre-contact time period, if they were a matrilineal people, it went by the mother, so if they were, you know, Narragansett or Paiute or whatever, they would go by whichever line, if they were matrilineal or patrilineal, they'd go by that line and that would be the tribal nation that they're from. But in the 21st century, that's not how it goes with federal recognition. With federal recognition, you have to be able to tie into a federally recognized tribe, and every tribal nation has different rules that were constructed in the process of federal recognition. Some are by blood quantum, which is a federal government construct to begin with. But that sort of was part of the strategy for erasure because it was the idea that if one parent was Narragansett and one was Wampanoag, you're only 50% of either one of those, but you can only be on one federally recognized roll. So then if the next generation, if they're Narragansett, Wampanoag, Pequot, and Mohegan, now all of a sudden, you're a quarter, a quarter, a quarter, but you only can be on one federally recognized roll. So if it becomes the rule that you have to be 50% of something, all of a sudden, you're not 50% of anything, because you're all of those different things. This is the complexity, and it gets even more and more complicated when people are marrying out. Some tribes, you have to be, you know, if it's matrilineal, it has to be through mother; if the mother is not the one that's Native, then you're no longer on the rolls. You know, others, it's by quote-unquote "blood quantum"; others, it's by descendancy.

So every tribal nation has different rules and regulations around that. And it kind of gets created when they go through the federal recognition process. But I kind of liken it to going to buy your first car. You know, you go to buy your first car, your first brand new car, you go in the dealership, you know, you get led around by your nose. And if you weren't really good about doing your research, you get really excited about the red car. And you buy it and you spend the most money because you didn't do your due diligence, you bought all the extra add-ons, because you didn't know better that you really didn't want any of that foolishness. But the second time you go buy a car, you cut all that out, you do all the right things, and you get the best deal for the best price for the best car that you can for the money that you've budgeted. And you don't get tangled up in any of the foolishness because now you know the process. The problem is with federal recognition, you only get one shot. And so when you get tangled up in the web that they've created

on the federal level through that process, sometimes you make rules that you don't realize are going to hurt you in the end.

And I'll give a for-example: for example, in the federal recognition process, you have to say what county you serve. Sounds like a simple thing. Right? Okay. I serve a county. Okay. I have to serve a county. Okay, so I'm going to pick a county. Well, the county in Rhode Island, South County—well, technically it's Washington County—but Washington County is selected. Well, that means anyone that lives in Newport County or Providence County or Kent County or whatever—I think there's one more which I can't think of—Bristol County, are not listed. Like for direct services for certain programs you have to live in Washington County. But the absurdity of it is that someone who lived in Texas, a tribe in Texas, let's say the Tejon: Texas is huge. So when you pick a county, the county is bigger than Rhode Island to begin with. Right? So that's what I mean by like these little weird nuances that affect us in the long run. So it kind of, they're all meant to divide and conquer, in my opinion; they're all strategies to divide and conquer. Federal recognition divides us up too. It divides us up so we're different nations again, which is a good thing, but it's also a bad thing, because we're all like, not working as conjoined as we once were. Things like what county you live in affects people. And when it affects people, it hurts people. Some people are getting services and other people are not unless they can get themselves in this space. But you got to keep in mind, in Rhode Island, Washington County spaces are extremely expensive. So unless you have families that have been living there for generations, it's more and more difficult to buy property in those spaces that are by the ocean. You know, we're ocean-going people, but for capitalism, ocean-going spaces get more and more expensive. So I look at my own children, and I'm like, I don't know how they afford to buy property in Charlestown, for example, when property just keeps going up and up and up.

But, you know, my generation might be one of the last that can truly afford without getting the kind of education that you really need, which there's disparities in the educational system for success for Indigenous people. You know, there's disparities, you know, disproportionate number of, not just Narragansett, but Indigenous people, not graduating from high school, not getting accepted into college, and if they can get into those things, not having the resources they need in order to maintain that and be able to go to college. Not having the economics. You know, there's disparities around the number of Indigenous people that are, you know, forced into the school-to-jail pipeline. A lot of things that are similar to other communities of color, that there's, you know, that fall into the traps of systemic racism, and biases, around to access to jobs, access to education, access to resources. All of those things are true, which is partly why we started the Indigenous Empowerment Network to kind of use, leverage the relationships of the museum as an entity creates in order to create opportunity for the Native community. You know, we get outreach by people all the time, we're always posting on our Native Friends of Tomaquag Museum Facebook page, and emailing out directly to our listserv of Native people, you know, job opportunities, educational opportunities, you know, all kinds of things, whatever comes up, you know, art shows, what have you. You know, one of the artists that we work with, she got Best in Show about a year ago for the...I've forgotten what it was called, but it was about the 19th Amendment and women's right to vote. And she got Best in Show. And she said that she got the information about the show through our listserv that we were shooting out. And that's the kind of thing that we like to see; we like to see the opportunity, and then also the success of people through these opportunities.

Leah Kelly

So speaking of, you mentioned federal recognition. Coming from a federally recognized tribe yourself, I was wondering, how much of a good thing you think that is. How important it is to be federally recognized? And do you think that there are other downsides that might outweigh the good sides? Do you think it's something that every tribal nation should strive for?

Lorén Spears

Well, it's definitely complex, and something more than I can say in a soundbite. But in the short version of that, I would say that, obviously, there's some benefits to be federally recognized. You can, you know, have access to resources that can help develop your government and your administrative systems and create resources for education and job training and social services and environmental services and child care and the daycare, and all of those kinds of things come from that federal recognition. And, of course, you know, whether we like it or not, there is an acceptance of, you know, federally recognized tribal nations having access to things, you know. Individual tribal people that are not on a federally recognized roll, they have a harder time to access those resources that are directly for Native people. Whether that's, you know, going to Indian health services, for example. I was younger, quite a bit younger than I am now, probably thirty years younger, and I was down in Mississippi on the Mississippi Band of Choctaw reservation, and I got sick, the long and short of it. I ended up in the emergency room, their hospital, and because I was on a federally recognized roll, I was instantly helped. Like they knew that they would get their funding, you know, might take a bit, but they'd get it because I'm federally recognized. It gets harder if you're not.

You know, there's other resources that you don't have access to if you're not federally recognized. There's also identity around arts and artists and you know, the laws around, you know, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. I don't know if I'm saying the title of that exactly. Right, but basically, it's trying to prove who's Indigenous, right. And so if you're federally recognized, that's easy; if you're state recognized, then that's good. But if you're not, then that gets much harder. And I do think that there's some disservice to that. You know, am I glad that I'm part of a federally recognized tribe? In a lot of ways, yes, because there's some advantages. There's other things that are disadvantages, but one of the things that I would say is that being in a federally recognized tribe doesn't make you Indigenous singularly. There are plenty of Indigenous people that are not on federally recognized or state recognized rolls and that have been Indigenous and have come down through many family lines. There's a lot of complexity to what makes someone Indigenous on a federally recognized roll. I know there are Narragansett people that are Narragansett that are not on a federally recognized roll for a lot of different reasons. And that's true for other tribal nations; sometimes it's, you know, the rules of their own tribal nation as to when they need to get on, and if they, for whatever reason, missed that window, sometimes it's a difficulty to get on later. Sometimes the father is, you know, the Indigenous person, and the mother is not, and she ends up having the baby elsewhere. And there's not that connection; for whatever reason, the relationship was severed, and that child is still Indigenous, you know, but now they don't have the direct connect, so they're not on any roll. And, you know, their father, you know, could be an enrolled member. And they could, if their rules were the same, they could be an enrolled member, but they're not because the mother was not a member of that particular tribe, and they're off somewhere else. That's another thing that happens.

The other thing is in our history, you have to understand, the whole point was to eradicate us, and when they couldn't kill us all, then they started erasing us in different ways. And that's changing documentation. You know, there were times in our history where they would only write

that you were “colored” or you were white. And so then that was like erasing your Indigenous identity. In the research that was done with the book *From Slaves to Soldiers*, Robert Geake was the main researcher and author, and I did some work with him. So the book is “with Lorén Spears,” and I was focused a little more on just Indigenous perspective and ideological thinking. But one of the stories that he uncovered there, you know, a Native man, he went into the military in the first Rhode Island regimen as a Narragansett, as Indigenous, and he came out as “colored.” And that's just a paper genocide, you know. And so what happens is, people sometimes, you know, when it comes to federal recognition, now you're looking for documents that prove that you're Indigenous, like trying to tie back—in our case, we have to tie back to the 1880 rolls. Well, in the 1880 rolls, we've got two hundred years of chaos that's taken place. You know, some people have gone north, some people have gone out west to Brothertown, some people have just gone and, you know, maybe married into other local communities, tribal communities, and you know, all these different things are happening, a lot of chaos is happening, and people are just trying to survive. And when the detribalization rolls happened, some families boycotted and refused to sign, even though it was sort of being forced upon us. Some people sent children to go sign. Well, if for whatever reason, no one in your direct line signed, then you're not Narragansett on the federally recognized rolls. And so these are complex, I mean, that's a simple example. But these are complexities that go clear across the nation, regarding Indigenous people and federal recognition. So just not being federally recognized doesn't make you not Indigenous, is my point. And these are external constructs that are trying to prove your identity, you know. So identity is complex. And you know, we have more complexities because we have people that are not Indigenous at all, that just think it's cool and woke up one day and decided they would just take on that identity. You know, if I had a dollar for every person that said, “You know, I just feel it in my bones. I just know I must be Indigenous, because...” You know, it's usually because they have some environmental touchy-feely perspective on the world. And it's okay to have an affinity toward that, but it's the morphing-into that happens sometimes that's a problem. So, you know, identity and federal recognition is really complex. There's a really good podcast, it's called “All My Relations,” and they have a really good couple of episodes on federal recognition and blood quantum that you might like to listen to, if you haven't.

Leah Kelly

Okay, thanks. Yeah, I want to get into sovereignty. So sovereignty is a very important but complex term right now, I feel like. And even though it's a main part of my thesis, I haven't really yet determined one definition for it. So I was wondering what you think it is, sovereignty, what it looks like to you, as well as kind of what it encompasses. And how important is it? It's important legally in terms of stating that as a sovereign nation, you have the power to do this on a legal basis. But is it also worth using it in other discourse, like you said, food sovereignty? How does it work in that sphere versus the traditional way of thinking of it?

Lorén Spears

Yeah. So I think of sovereignty as economic and political sovereignty, the right to self-determination, as a nation, you know, no different than any other nation in the world, with the exception of that word, “domestic sovereign,” under the umbrella of the United States of America. And so we can't bear arms against the United States, in other words. So that's it in a nutshell, that you have the right to care for govern, create policy, law for your people. And it's no different than if you think of like, a state is a sovereign, like it's a domestic sovereign underneath the United

States government. And Rhode Island doesn't tell Massachusetts what to do and Massachusetts doesn't tell Connecticut what to do. Each one has their own right to decide on their governmental structure, their economic policy, their laws, their rules and regulations that run their state, their government, their sovereign. That's true for the five hundred and I think seventy-six—or is it seventy-seven—I don't know, something like that, federally recognized tribal nations. They have the right to self-determination and self-governance and political and economic sovereignty. However, you know, that word is used a lot, and there's a lot of action around this country to usurp our sovereignty, and to create inequitable systems that create barriers to full inclusion of that sovereignty as a domestic sovereign for every tribal nation, and the Narragansett is no different. The Chafee Rider was an infringement on Narragansett sovereignty: we didn't create the laws of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act; however, one of our state leaders put a rider on a federal appropriations bill—John Chafee—and created a block so that the Narragansett could not do gaming under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which is federal legislation, not our legislation. We didn't make this up, someone else did. You know, then there's things around, you know, *Carcieri v. Salazar*, taking the Department of the Interior to court around putting lands into trust and, you know, the smoke shop raid, and a myriad of other things. So sovereignty is a very complex issue, and, you know, there's areas where we have sovereignty, and then there's areas where really, it's been usurped by the state of Rhode Island, by inappropriate means truly.

And so, but if you look at sovereignty in a broader sense, there's food sovereignty, there's cultural sovereignty, and there's those ideas around your rights as a nation to ensure that your people have access to traditional foods and traditional food ways. That means hunting, fishing, gathering, agriculture, and also has access to traditional cultural knowledge, through passing it down generationally, but not being usurped and blocked through the educational system, through other means that are put in the way to block the access to that knowledge. And so, you know, sovereignty is really all of those things. There's the political, there's the economic, there's the cultural, which food could really go under cultural as well. But it's good to spell it out. Those are all parts of sovereignty. And that's really the, it's also the sovereignty of your mind, if you will. And sometimes you have to protect the sovereignty of your mind, even from people within your own community. Like, there are times that other individuals might want, I don't know, control your intellectual knowledge around your own culture, and your own family, and your own community, your own clan, and things like that. So you, you know, we call that, you know, “colonizing yourselves,” when you take on colonizer mentality.

And then, you know, an example of that is someone telling another person that's trying to speak their traditional language, to say, “Oh, well, you're saying it wrong. And so therefore, you shouldn't say anything.” And it's one of those things that is tricky, because if people don't speak the language, then the language is lost. But if you keep speaking the language, you start to realize that people are going to say things differently. And that's like, just in the United States, if you're speaking English, and you're in Mississippi, it sounds one way. And if you're in Minnesota, it sounds another, and if you're in Texas, it sounds another. Like we all have these colloquial ways in which we say a word that's not exactly the same; we might accent it different. You know, my kids tease me, they're always saying, “You have such a Rhode Island accent,” which is really a Narragansett accent, you know, in dropping the Rs, for example. Because we don't really have Rs in our language, so especially if a word has an R towards the end, I tend to drop it. And so, but it's like, you know, we have those differences, but it's not.... If I say, I don't know, I can't even think of a word, my brain is blank on a word that I say kind of funny. But whatever that word is, if you drop the R on the end, people still understood what I was saying. Like “lobster,” like in

Rhode Island, everybody says that, they say “lobstah” instead of “lobster.” You know, and, but you still knew what the word was, and you still understood what it meant. But sometimes when we have languages that are endangered or fractured in some kind of way, sometimes we get really possessive of them. And then we’ll be like, “Well, you didn’t say it right,” so that encourages people not to say anything, versus there’s a difference between saying to someone, “You didn’t say it right,” and encouraging someone to speak, and then maybe saying, “Oh, I thought, you know, there’s a nice way and a negative way of saying that.” And I think that that’s what I mean by “sovereignty of your own mind,” too, is like not letting oppression happen, where people stop you from practicing your own culture, your own religion, your own language. Because of the historical and lateral trauma that people have felt, that maybe brings fear into their own heart to use the language or to participate in these things that sometimes can cause us to hurt our own selves and our own community by doing so.

I love that technology is really creating much more avenue for people to have access to language than, you know, I grew up, you know, when my grandparents were going to language classes. Cecil Addison was teaching classes and then Ella Sekatau was teaching classes and then my mother was teaching classes and, you know, classes mean, you go to a space and you sit in a class and there could be five people, there could be 20 people there but it’s still insular. Where when you do technology, it becomes something that people can have access no matter where they’re at, if they want to utilize it to learn language. And language is fluid and its living, and when it’s been interrupted and you reassert your right to speak that language—none of us sound like our ancestors from four hundred years ago. Even living languages today, if you went to Navajo speakers of today and went back four hundred years ago, they undoubtedly do not sound exactly the same, because people that speak English don’t sound like their ancestors from four hundred years ago in the way in which they speak English. And so language evolves, and when interruptions happen, there’s going to be gaps in that as well. But there’s pronunciation errors all the time, because we are influenced by the English lettering and what those sounds make. But sometimes those same representations mean something else.

[Brief interruption as she speaks to someone else in the room]

Lorén Spears

Any other questions?

Leah Kelly

Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t sure if you were done. I was just wondering, is the word sovereignty itself, does that hold a specific meaning? Or is there a different word you would use for, I guess, maybe a collective goal that you think Indigenous peoples might be striving for, or even just your own tribal nation, or even just individual Indigenous people? Because I’m not sure, if you were to ask someone like, “Oh, what do you want for your people?” if sovereignty would be the first thing that would come to mind. What would you say if you were asked that?

Lorén Spears

Yeah, when I think about that in context of my grandchild, I don’t know if sovereignty would be the word that would come to my mind. But it would be the continuation of that cultural knowledge being passed down from one generation to the other. I would love to see, you know, my grandchildren in the future, being fluent in our language; if not fully fluent, at least an increase on

the fluency that we currently have. I would love to, you know, continue our cultural knowledge and ensure that he, you know, thinking of my grand young grandson that's two and a half, we brought him, for example, cranberry picking, for a reason, because that's something that we're passing down, you're going cranberry picking, you're picking cranberries at a place that our ancestors undoubtedly picked cranberries. And passing that down, whether that's cranberry picking, or other kinds of berry picking or getting medicinals or what have you, all of those things are, are parts of that knowledge that we're trying to do, so.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, and I mean, that passing down, also—

Lorén Spears

Can you hold for just one second? [Brief interruption as she speaks to someone else again] Okay.

Leah Kelly

Sorry. And that passing down of traditions, would you consider that a form of sovereignty?

Lorén Spears

Yeah, in a sense it is, because we're maintaining and continuing our traditional life ways and are passing on our cultural knowledge. So yeah, I would; I mean, that's what I would put under cultural sovereignty, is all of that. You know, it's your language, it's your ceremonies. It's your cultural knowledge. It's your traditional ecological knowledge. It's your food systems and food system knowledge. It's, you know, things that, you know, if you're talking to a five-year-old, and they're telling you about their culture, they don't know what to say. Like, they don't have words for it yet, because they don't really know that they're different yet. But when they're ten, and you ask them about it, they're like, "Oh, well, I eat these foods in our house, we hunt these animals. And you know, my dad, my mom, my grandmother, my grandfather, my auntie, my uncle, they do this, this and this." You know, that's one of the fun things about the museum, is we help people find their voice in that. Young people that come in as high school interns, and they're working in the museum, at first they don't have language to express themselves as fully as you might think, but it's because they haven't been trained to be museum educators yet. But a year or two in, and all of a sudden they have all this voice to express themselves and express their cultural knowledge. You know, these are things that they grew up doing. They just didn't grow up expressing it this way because they went to, you know, mainstream schools where that's not the topic of conversation, that's not what's acceptable, that's not what you get to write your report about, that's not what's valued. And so they often just don't talk about it. But yet they're doing it; they're going to ceremony with their parents and grandparents, they're going to powwow, they're going to cultural gatherings, they're eating traditional foods, they're harvesting and hunting, fishing and gathering, they're learning songs. You know, maybe everybody isn't doing every single one of those things, [but] even if someone's living in an urban environment, they're having things that are being passed down to them, they're going to cultural gatherings, and they're, you know, maybe they're making their traditional clothes, or they're doing beadwork, or they're weaving, or they're doing this, that or the other thing. Those are all cultural competencies that they're passing on from one generation to the other.

You know, when I grew up, you know, my grandparents, they not only owned and operated Dovecrest, but my grandfather was the War Chief, which is the person that is the, like, the



Secretary of State, if you will, always looking for diplomacy and trying to negotiate. And, you know, you learned things about what that was from him and from others around him; you know, we learned about foods and food systems from my grandmother. And we learned, you know, all these different things. They took us to all different powwows all across the region. You know, I stumbled on pictures not too long ago that were from down in like, Delaware, and our archivist, he's like, "I found pictures of you from something," and I looked right at them; I knew right where they were from. I remembered them, I was like, you know, a tween. And, you know, we're going all around on the powwow trail, but there's people that you know from there, and so when I'm seeing pictures in the archive, some of these people have passed on now. And I can remember them, I'm like, "Oh, that's so-and-so from Shinnecock powwow, it's this," and then you tell a story about when you were at Shinnecock powwow and what you were doing there, and how that person taught you such and such. The gentleman I'm thinking of, in my mind, right now, like I can remember, all the kids wanted to be around him, he always made you feel good, like, he always gave you compliments, like on your dance moves, and he'd always teach you some new dance move. So that you would gain your confidence, you know, as a dancer, and especially in competition, you know, there's a difference between social dancing and competition dancing; you're a little bit more on the spot in that competition-type dancing, that's more modern today.

But those are all important parts, you know, it's important to pass on those traditions, and museums have a role in that, helping to continue that cultural knowledge. You know, when you hear songs that are recorded from long ago that are, you know, of blanket dances from, you know, fifty years ago, or seventy years ago, what that looks like, compared to what it is today. But I always remind people, it's gonna evolve, because guess what, you know, if you look at the Boston Red Sox from 1900, and the outfits that they're wearing, and then you look at it, you know, in the 1950s, and the 1980s, and today, they look very different, right. And that's true for Native culture, as well. You know, we live in the 21st century, so things are very, like if you're a fancy shawl dancer, or whatever. you know, it's very, very vibrant. When I was a kid, and I'm going to be like, I told you, I'm 54—when I was a kid, fancy shawl for us meant you put on a fancy shawl and you dance fancy, but you still had your traditional clothes on. It was kind of when I was in college, that the wave kind of came across the country from everywhere, and now fancy shawl had to be fabric, you know, and you had to have very, you know...and now today, it's rhinestones and headbands, and, you know, bling, you know, if you will, it's very bright colors and very fluorescent and very shiny and fancy, you know. And so it evolves, cultures evolve, living, breathing, people evolve. And so those mores, it doesn't change our indigeneity because it evolves. Everybody evolves: things happen and change things, you're introduced to new things and new people. That doesn't make it less than. And sometimes Western ways of thinking, they try to make it less than, but it's not less than. It's just different than before. But that doesn't change the knowledge that we have. And that continues to be passed on to our community and to our next generation, and that pride and respect for our culture and our cultural knowledge.

Leah Kelly

Well, I think we're out of time. Thank you so much for this and is there anything else you want to say?

Lorén Spears

No, I think I gave you quite a lot there. So I'm sure there's always something else I can say but I think that was a good amount.

Leah Kelly

It definitely was. Thank you so much. I'll be in touch about the recording and everything.

*Interview with Cedric Woods*

Fri, 11/27 4:24PM • 56:20

Leah Kelly

Okay, so just to begin with some more logistical questions, do you want to state your name, your pronouns, anything else about yourself? The name of your tribe?

Cedric Woods

Yep. My name is Cedric Woods. He, him, and his are my pronouns. And I'm a citizen of the Lumbee Indian Tribe of North Carolina. I currently reside in Boston, Massachusetts, and I am the Director for the Institute for New England Native American Studies.

Leah Kelly

Great, thank you. I understand you're from North Carolina, and my study is supposed to be focused on New England a little bit. But I know that you did work for many years with the Mashantucket Pequot, right. So if you could talk about maybe, as we go through this, if you could maybe focus a little bit more on like, what you've done in New England, that would be great. But you can always like incorporate your own experiences, you know, growing up with the Lumbee. And also, I want to make sure, I ask all of my participants this, when I'm writing my thesis, how you prefer to refer yourself, refer to yourself as an Indigenous person, if the word Indigenous is okay, or, because I know that often, people want to identify with their nation. And that makes a lot of sense. But I'm, when I'm sort of talking about Indigenous peoples in general, I'm just wondering what terminology you prefer.

Cedric Woods

Indigenous is fine. You know, frankly, though, in terms of the historic and political legal context, American Indian is what's most accurate in terms of describing things like federal recognition, or the Indian arts and crafts act, NAGPRA, IQUA, all those things have real particular legal framings tied to those terms.

Leah Kelly

And then I suppose, do you want to talk a little bit more about now about your history with the Indigenous community, your role in, tribal affairs, or your role in education?

Cedric Woods

Sure, happy to do that. I'll give you my elevator speech. So I'm the founding Director for the Institute for New England Native American Studies at UMass Boston. The origins of the Institute are tied to a desire from the Mass Commission on Indian Affairs to figure out a way to better connect tribes in Massachusetts and the broader New England region, with the advances in

education research, other things happening at the higher education level. They knew a lot was happening; they would frequently be engaged with consultants, researchers, professors, but not in any kind of consistent, coherent effort. They approached the Kellogg Foundation, and working with legislative allies were able to secure a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to start the Institute, and the state committed three additional years of funding to get it going. So that's the origins of this Institute for New England Native American Studies. That was probably 14 years ago now. So they got the money. They got a process set up. They paid and contracted for some initial demographic, environmental scan studies focus groups to prioritize what was of most interest in significance to Native communities in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. And so those studies were very important because they did use census data, American community survey data, to paint this demographic picture, as well as qualitative research data to understand what Native communities hoped this Institute can do for them.

Leah Kelly

Okay, so you participated in this research?

Cedric Woods

I was still in the Mashantucket Pequot tribal nation while all this was happening. So they did this initial research, and were trying to do various projects without having any staff. And that became very hard to do and to coordinate. And so they decided that they wanted to house this Institute at UMass Boston and hire someone. And that's where I came into the picture. I'd been working for the Mashantucket Pequot tribal nation for 12 and a half years, and I had five different jobs while I was there. But some of the positions I held, I ran their career development program, which was basically workforce development and placement for tribal members, as well as funding their higher education program for their college students, served as tribal government spokesperson, policy analyst and lobbyist in the Hartford office (which is why I was very interested when you mentioned that you were in West Hartford, an area I'm very familiar with), and also worked as Deputy Chief Operating Officer, which is an administrative role overseeing about a third of the tribal government. The entities that were part of my oversight were about \$30 million budget for that part of the government at that point in time. So that's what I was doing. And while I was working there, I also completed my PhD at the University of Connecticut in Cultural Anthropology, focusing specifically on the evolution of tribal governance structures, a comparative case study looking at the Mashantucket Pequot tribal nation, and the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian tribe of Massachusetts. And I finished that in 2007 and became the interim director and then later the fulltime permanent director for the Institute in 2011. So but yeah, I've been running the Institute since 2009, to now, so 11 years.

Leah Kelly

Okay. And is part of the Institute teaching or is it all just research?

Cedric Woods

Well, it's actually developing community collaborations, which includes research. And we also have a minor here, which we got going after I started in Native American Indigenous Studies. So I teach courses in that minor, I teach Native peoples of North America, I have taught Native peoples of New England. And I also run a graduate program, a master's program in Critical Ethnic and Community studies, which is under the College of Liberal Arts.

Leah Kelly

Okay. Cool. Yeah, I think later, I would love to get back to your work studying tribal government, because that's really interesting. But first, I would like to move into sort of the identity aspect of my study, and, you know, my research question, which might change, but as of now is related to comparing conceptions of Indigenous identity on the one hand, and sovereignty on the other, and then I'm exploring how they might be interrelated. So guess my first question is what does indigeneity or Indigenous identity mean to you? And how do you view yourself with that identity?

Cedric Woods

Mm-hm. So Indigenous identity, I see very much from a cultural framework versus a political-legal one, and in terms of Indigenous at its core as being rooted and tied to a particular place, in homelands and home waters and being of a particular place. And so that has a very particular meaning for me, tying me to my ancestral connections in eastern North Carolina, central North Carolina, and southeastern Virginia, where my folks or have been, were, for millennia, before sustained European contact, but also reflective of who we are today as a contemporary Indigenous community. So that is, when you mention or use that term, that's immediately what I think of, and the relationships we have with human and nonhuman relatives in those spaces. And it also contextualizes how I approach other Indigenous communities locally, and understanding that I am a guest, albeit a long-term guest, I've lived up here 25 years now, in other Indigenous peoples' territory.

Leah Kelly

Oh, okay. How do you think other Indigenous peoples' view of Indigenous identity might...do you think it's all very similar to what you said or do you think it differs? And I'm kind of wondering like how individual it is, versus maybe collective or tribal.

Cedric Woods

I'd say variable, I mean, you have some Indigenous communities that are still essentially in the same place where their families have been for millennia, and others have been forcibly removed, or others who removed to stay one step ahead of a slave auction block. Or for other reasons, and so I'd say it's highly complex and highly variable, depending upon the community you're talking to or about. And even with my own nieces and nephews who were relatives of mine, obviously, for them, it may mean a very different thing, because they did not grow up in their homelands. So they don't have the same kind of relationship with place, and with extended family that I do, and so their own construction of identity as an Indigenous person might be quite different than mine.

Leah Kelly

And along the lines of differing conceptions, do you think that conceptions of what it means to be Indigenous have changed over time?

Cedric Woods

Ah, I don't know that the conceptions have changed, as much as how we describe it has changed, and the kinds of language we use to describe it. And a lot of that's got to do with transitions from Indigenous language to English or languages of colonizers. I'm sure, I know that there are concepts that we can't vocalize in my own community as simply as my ancestors could, because there was

a particular Algonquin or Suwan word to use to describe a particular relationship and we've lost that part of our culture at this point in time. Some communities are able to reclaim that, but ours is not one. I think that who knows, maybe in my life journey, I may try to reclaim some of that with one of our sister nations who has had an effective language reclamation project in South Carolina, and they've been willing to share that with us and I've had some cousins who've taken those classes. So maybe I'll start that at some point in time and see how it fits. And what I'm really curious about too, is even where we're at in relation to where our sister nations are at, they are different places, they are not the same and so I'm sure my ancestors would have had additional or different framings and language to describe places well, even though we're very closely connected.

Leah Kelly

And I'm also wondering how you think, colonizers' perceptions of Indigenous peoples, has that changed?

Cedric Woods

I mean, it's an ongoing evolution. And frankly, the biggest perception and need they have is for us not to exist, because that's the core of a settler-colonial state, is to replace the Indigenous population. That's its prime mode in terms of interacting with Indigenous peoples and on occasion, we see recognition that, oh, Indigenous peoples are still here and still have a right to exist. But again, a lot of that I think you look at it in terms of how the U.S. initially rejected outright the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, then with a change of administration, acknowledged it but described it as an aspirational document, meaning it's not legally binding to U.S. policy. So I'd say that's something that you have to pay close attention to as well.

Leah Kelly

I'm interested in if you think the general public's vision of an Indigenous person in this country, like specifically Native American, if that has been constructed in a way, and it sounds like you think maybe it is, it's been constructed in a way to make it seem like they don't exist, or they were just in the past.

Cedric Woods

Yes. It's constructed in a way to emphasize Indigenous erasure. To emphasize and challenge the legitimacy of contemporary Indigenous communities, all of those things have happened. Because again, at its root, the settler-colonial narrative is one of a zero-sum game. You can't have Indigenous peoples and settler states, one's got to give. So for them to, in their mind and cognitive approaches, if we clearly recognize Indigenous presence, that means we're delegitimizing and deconstructing our own societies. Indigenous peoples don't believe in that approach or zero-sum games. But it's how they frame it. And so therefore, we are perpetually perceived as a as an existential threat to settler states.

Leah Kelly

And do you think the centuries of oppression, do you think that that has had an effect on Indigenous peoples in their need for survival? Do you think that that has affected how they act or portray themselves, or has that forced them to need to assimilate in order to survive?

Cedric Woods

Well, the centuries of oppression are the roots of historical trauma. I mean, there's a reason that we have high rates of substance abuse. It's driven not by biological imperative or need but by historical oppression. Yeah, absolutely, oppression has led to us being essentially at the lowest end of economic indicators, or educational attainment, choose the measure. We're going to come up on the lowest end as a result of centuries of active political, economic, and military oppression. And we've had to adapt and make some choices that were not great choices, but the only one that ancestors thought at different points in times that would allow them to survive. Because that is exactly how real the threat was.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I'm just thinking of an example of that. And this is kind of, partly what caused me to really be interested in exploring the question of identity and sovereignty, like how they're connected. I read a lot about the court battles over gaining federal recognition in like the 90s. And how many tribes were sort of forced to create this false identity that aligned with settlers' preexisting notions of what Indigenous peoples looked like, in order to gain that recognition and everything that comes with it, like, you know, wearing their very traditional-looking ceremonial garments to the court hearing or that kind of thing, or like showing their dances and things that are very kind of stuck in the past in terms of thinking that that's only what they're like now, and that they aren't just also modern, you know.

Cedric Woods

Yeah, Natives, we're not stupid. We recognize when there needs to be performative piece and aspect, to your point, to convey what government officials view as being legitimate. And at times being able to manipulate that to our advantage, and other times not. All depending upon the frame, the colonial gaze, if you will; what they expect to see, what they think they need to see, to convey legitimacy.

Leah Kelly

What, do you think about sort of, I don't know if it's more recent, I think it is, this more recent perception of, I guess, Native Americans in this country, as one racial group or one minority group? Because in a lot of, in some ways, that has is being used to say, "Okay, we should help them and advocate for them as a minority." But in other ways, it's completely denying the very unique tribal nations that exist, you know, within that.

Cedric Woods

I mean, as a category it's a legal fiction, it's a demographic fiction. The treaties are signed between individual polities, tribal polities, Indigenous polities, various colonies, crowns, heads of state, nation-states, U.S., Canada, Mexico, and so we are a multiplicity of peoples and have our own national identities. The characterization in the, you know, federal Indian law, it's a legal construct to make things easier for the colonizers to understand and articulate. You belong to this particular legal category so therefore all this applies to you. So we don't have to have 500 or 1000 different iterations of that. But if a treaty is in the mix, it is a different relationship governed by that bilateral document. So that's how I view that. And I know a lot of Native people really push back hard that we're not ethnic minorities, we're all citizens of individual nations and have to be treated as such at all points in times. I've got a much more nuanced view of that. I mean, I don't live in my

homeland. So I'm an Indigenous person, but I live in somebody else's homeland. So in the city of Boston, I am an ethnic minority. I'm an Indigenous person, but I don't have rights to this place as an Indigenous person. I don't have the same treaty rights, hunting, fishing, rights, as Wampanoag, Massachusetts, or Nipmuc people. Any rights like that that I have are in North Carolina, Virginia, not here. So I think it's, we have to be careful that we're not overly reductionist ourselves in terms of how we characterize or think about indigeneity, political status, at any particular point place in time.

Leah Kelly

So yeah, you're saying it's nuanced. I'm just wondering, specifically, which has a more positive outcome? Potentially finding the solidarity among Indigenous peoples, but risking being generalized, or exerting your individuality as tribes?

Cedric Woods

I don't ever see it as either-or. Particularly given with 70% of Native people in what's now the United States do not live in their homelands anymore. That's a demographic reality. So most Native people like my wife and I, she's Turtle Mountain Chippewa from North Dakota. I'm Lumbee from North Carolina, we live in Mattapan. Before living here, we lived in Salem, Connecticut, in Mohegan/Pequot territory. So that is the majority of who Native people are. So for us to say we're only going to represent or advocate for our own tribal specific needs really ignores where and how most of us live, whether we want to or not, this is how things are. So I would be foolish to not look to connect and support other tribal peoples in whose territory I reside. And it's also why there's a proliferation of urban Native organizations, because there are so many urban Natives.

Leah Kelly

Okay, I think it'd be great to move into the sovereignty part of my study. I was wondering, first of all, I mean, I struggle to understand the word sovereignty, because in a lot of ways, it's a colonizer term. But then in other ways, it's something that tribal nations are striving for. So I'm wondering, what does sovereignty mean to you in general?

Cedric Woods

So I mean, it's very much as a legal framing, legal understanding. I pull away from it, because it creates so much confusion. And so I'll usually recategorize it as, it's about control, and about agency, self-determination, I think, frankly, is a much better term, in most cases. But if you're talking about criminal or civil jurisdiction, it means there has to be a border, a boundary. And within that boundary, you exercise these powers of self-governance. That's how I think about it, how I conceptualize it. Of course, there are all different kinds of varying degrees of sovereignty or self-governance, depending upon a tribe's legal and political status. But there are other things, I mean, Vine Deloria Jr. conceptualizes decades ago, that it's not just the political-legal sovereignty; there's cultural sovereignty, there's spiritual sovereignty, there's economic sovereignty, over which we can have much greater degrees of control, regardless of what states or the federal government has to say. And so as an Indigenous person, I very much take a much longer-term, holistic approach and understanding of that word.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, I'm interested in what you're saying about the different types of sovereignty, you know, it doesn't just have to relate to legal recognition. Do you think that sort of, like you were saying, like cultural sovereignty, do you think that those are goals that tribal nations should be striving for?

Cedric Woods

Absolutely. I think those things are critically important. And frequently, one can support the other. It's pretty clear, most people get that political legal sovereignty, and there's been tons of research about this, that the better governance structures and the more political authority tribes have, they're able to be more economically self-sufficient or demonstrate economic sovereignty. I would argue that the more spiritual and cultural sovereignty tribes have in terms of access to sacred spaces, preservation, reclamation of language, food ways, makes us healthier human beings. There are positive benefits of those things as well. So just pursuing one, necessary but not sufficient. And frequently you are you will be blocked by various settler states from pursuing some avenues, which will then mean, potentially, you need to focus on other things. For example, in Mexico, Indigenous communities there, if you think of it in terms of scales, they may rank very high in terms of spiritual sovereignty, cultural sovereignty, but rank relatively low in terms of this political legal definition because they don't have clearly defined political statuses under the Mexican constitutional framework, as we do either here in the U.S. or Canada. Doesn't make them any less Indigenous, but it means that their indigeneity is more visibly articulated and understood under these other aspects of sovereignty.

Leah Kelly

Yeah, so the Mashantucket Pequots, are I would say, probably one of the tribal nations with maybe the most economic sovereignty just by being federally recognized and being able to operate a casino. From your role working with them, I'm wondering, how important do you think that federal acknowledgement, legal recognition, land rights, how important do you think that is to tribal nation? Do you think that's something that really would benefit everyone? Or do you think there are other avenues?

Cedric Woods

There are certainly are other avenues of preserving community. But federal recognition, to be clear, brings with it protections of things, like the Indian Child Welfare Act, highest degrees of protections under NAGPRA, that you will not get as a non-federally recognized tribe. It will be much more difficult for you to protect sacred spaces, ancestral burial grounds, getting these things repatriated to you as a non-federally recognized tribe. It's not impossible, but it is extremely difficult. So those kinds of things are why so many tribes bother with the aggravation and heartache to try to get federal recognition. It's to protect these things that are most sacred and precious to them.

Leah Kelly

And do you think there are any downsides to the recognition, such as maybe a loss of autonomy just because you are subject to these governmental strings?

Cedric Woods

Well whether you are recognized or not, you're subject to somebody, would be the way the state or the feds say it. The question is what your relationships are with those entities. In some cases,



getting federal recognition provides protections to tribes from intrusion by state agencies. In other cases where there may be a great relationship between the state and the tribe, the feds may be a new hindrance to exercising aspects of self-governance or self-determination, or cultural practices. I mean, tribes can be victimized and preyed on by either or both state or federal governments at any point in time. If you think of potential downsides of federal recognition, it could lead to increased competition internally for resources or influence. I mean, that is a possibility. It's not a foregone conclusion, but it's something that I could see occurring. Well, I guess that's probably the biggest thing, just increased tensions, competition over resources, which didn't exist before because the resources didn't exist. Or access to the potential of resources.

Leah Kelly

So going into your work studying tribal government, with the Pequots, could you go into some detail about maybe what you found or a conclusion you have about the way tribal government is established? How much of it is really under control or self-determined by the tribe versus having the federal government making the rules? Or anything else you want to say about it?

Cedric Woods

I mean, so it was a comparative work, my dissertation. And at the end of the day, the biggest takeaway from it is, both tribes changed their governmental structure based on what they thought would best work given the political lay of the land at different points in time. I mean, the Mashpee decided to go along with this construction of a praying town because they thought that that was the best way to protect their land base. Because following the virgin soil epidemics and the demographic collapse that happened in their communities, they needed new allies, and they were watching their relatives, Native relatives who were not in praying towns, suffer large amounts of land loss from encroachment by English colonists. But here's this minister saying if you agree to do this, we're going to survey your land and we're going to keep these English colonists out. Yeah, sign me up. It's an adaptive strategy demonstrating Native agency. Did they necessarily want to give up their traditional belief systems? No, and I'd argue they didn't. They syncretized and they took Christianity, but also maintained these traditional belief systems and created something new from it. I'd say their governmental structure is same thing. Also the same among the Pequot, the Pequot were devastated during the Pequot War. And even the language, the name itself, was declared illegal in the English-speaking colonies. But they were resilient, they didn't disappear. Robin Cassacinamona, a man who was an indentured servant to the Winthrops, used his relationship there and his relationship with them to negotiate marriages for Pequot women with Uncas to give Uncas legitimate claim to Pequot lands. He also used that relationship to leverage him being able to reestablish Nameaug, a Pequot settlement in New London, and then later, Mashantucket. So all those things are examples of change and evolution driven by Native people in the face of new circumstances. And that continues, I mean, those tribal government structures are still evolving, they haven't stopped. Both of them work within very broad parameters that the federal government has, but generally doesn't get involved with at all. I mean, the biggest thing with the Feds in terms of tribal constitutions, particularly after the passage of the Indian Civil Rights Act, 1968 I believe, is, are you treating your members fairly? And is there a method of dispute resolution to assess if that is or isn't happening? As long as those things are happening, they generally don't get involved, or minimally involved. Unless you have a constitution that states that any changes have to go to the Secretary for approval. In some tribes you'll have those, [but] neither of these tribes.

Leah Kelly

Speaking of changes and adaptations, the rise of the casino business amongst tribes in the past few decades, could you discuss maybe how that has affected or changed tribal life, tribal culture, ways of thinking? Or has it at all?

Cedric Woods

Yeah, so mainly, what it has changed is how people look at and think about tribes, meaning that every town lawyers-up as soon as they think a tribe may be pursuing federal recognition, because they assume there's going to be a casino. And it also puts tribes in the situation in terms of putting together petitions for federal recognition, you need a venture capitalist to fund it because you're going to have to fight a series of lawsuits to get recognition. So the very thing the towns say they're hoping to prevent, they're encouraging tribes to enter into these relationships, because of the litigation that's going to result. And tribes who are applying for federal recognition by definition have little to no resources. A successful petition is going to cost at a minimum 5 million bucks. So where are they going to get the money from? You don't get it from grants, your neighboring towns aren't going to get it, they're going to spend that much in attorneys fighting your recognition. So it pushes tribes into relationships with developers if they are going to have any real chance of federal recognition under the current political and economic environment. In terms of how gaming shapes tribes, I mean, it's like any other form of economic development. It's all in how you use it. I worked for a tribe that used it to fund hundreds of their tribal members to get college degrees when I ran their career development department, and higher ed for a brief while as well. We paid for tuition, we paid for fees, we paid a living stipend, we paid for all the books, so they were able to focus, and tutoring and educational support. So a type of provision of wraparound services for education, we also had a child development center, elder care programs, to support and sustain and rapidly increase the human capital development, if you will, of their community. Other tribes may not have chosen to spend the money the same way. So it's highly variable. You do see where there, you know, I'd mentioned earlier, the flip side of federal recognition or potential increased resources may lead to increased conflict in turn. That's happened as well. I wouldn't say it's happened with these two particular tribes that I did my doctoral work with. But it has certainly led to fractures and splits in tribal governments elsewhere. And I'd say is part of what's labeled the "disenrollment crisis" now in Indian country. And there's a lot written in Indian country today. And there's actually a decent amount of scholarly work out there now about that.

Leah Kelly

You kind of touched on this, but I'm wondering how important or how intertwined is sovereignty with land, and having land?

Cedric Woods

Well, under the legal framework—and if you're looking at just that legal jurisdictional piece and definition of sovereignty—minus land, there is no sovereignty. You have to have a territory over which to exercise civil or criminal authority. So without one, the other doesn't exist.

Leah Kelly

So moving on from sovereignty, you were saying that for you, perhaps a better word for what the goal or the, I don't know how to describe it, but you were thinking a word that you like to use is

self-determination. Could you explain maybe what that means to you and how that's different from sovereignty?

Cedric Woods

Sure, self-determination is making decisions for your community by your community, period. Regardless of what entity says you can or can't do it, you do it anyway. It's a pure assertion of the power inherent to a community. I mean, if you want to talk about inherent sovereignty, that's what it is. And in it is sometimes it may run contrary to what the various states or nation-states want to see happen. But that's not your driver; your driver is your own internal accomplices and Indigenous community, based on your original instructions, that tell you how to live in a particular place, and in particular homelands, and the relationships you're supposed to have with your human and nonhuman relatives.

Leah Kelly

So looking to the future, what specifically does full self-determination look like for a tribal nation? Would you need to sort of completely get rid of colonizer society? Or is it possible to be self-determined in an internal colony or...?

Cedric Woods

I think it's possible to be self-determined. But you know, we're all interconnected. I mean, that's just our contemporary reality. And even before colonizers showed up, we still had Native neighbors. And we certainly had interactions, connections with them, conflicts with them. We're humans, we're not perfect societies that lived conflict-free. That wasn't true; I'm not going to try to convince anybody it was. But I mean, I think we can be self-determined to the degree that it's healthy to be self-determined. And I'm not advocating isolationism, either. But self-determined in the sense that we're making informed choices that are in the best interest of our community. And sometimes we'll get it wrong, because we're human. We won't always make the right decision. But to be in a place where we have the ability and agency and willingness to do so is what I think is most important.

Leah Kelly

And is the ability to make choices for your community, I'm wondering is that stifled or promoted by having the federal government giving you tribal status, authority?

Cedric Woods

I mean, sometimes it is enhanced, because it gives you access to additional resources to implement your goals. And that's one of the things too, like with federal recognition, you'll say "Oh, federal recognition will bring all this stuff." Federal recognition creates the potential for things and programs, it doesn't guarantee it. It means you have the ability to access it, but you may choose not to. And so there are no givens with that. It just creates the potential to do things. And whether or not the tribe should do it should be based on a tribal deliberative process that this is something that the tribe should do and will benefit from. I mean, there's some programs that for some tribes doesn't make any sense for them to do, so they shouldn't do it. Not have what you do driven by the program, but have your choice of programs driven by what's going to be in the best interest of the community. So I don't see tribal federal recognition automatically inhibiting or aiding that process. It's just another one of those things that you have to figure out how to navigate around.

Leah Kelly

Right. I have one more sort of key term I kind of want to discuss with you, which is decolonization. And how that connects to sovereignty, what that looks like to you. Can non-Indigenous people participate in that?

Cedric Woods

This is a term that people use all the time. And the first question I ask is, what do you mean by it? As to whether or not it has any validity based on whatever particular program, project, or community we're talking about. I mean, at its most radical, decolonization, nobody's leaving, nobody's going anywhere. So nothing's getting decolonized. So then where do you go from there having set that as a framework, or a baseline understanding? Is it a decentering of colonial thought processes and structures in terms of how Indigenous peoples see themselves or govern themselves? Maybe, I don't know. Is it a change in terms of the hierarchical relationships that have been established after 400 years of sustained contacts? Maybe, but I don't have any good answer to that because it is so abstract to me. It's hard to grapple with. I mean, like a decolonial education: all right, if that means bringing in more perspectives from diverse scholars in terms of gender and sexuality, and hierarchical status, social status, ethnic origins, national origins, that's a great thing, if that's what you mean when you say decolonial education? Does it also mean an educational system where there are no grades? I don't know. You've got some universities that do that, but may be very colonial as far as other things are concerned. It's one of those terms that, as you can tell from my response, I continually push back against to try to make sure I even have an understanding of why it's been operationalized as and what the end goal is really.

Leah Kelly

So you don't think that that should be like the ideal end goal.

Cedric Woods

Yeah because I don't know what it is. I mean I can't say it's a goal if I don't know what it looks like, or if I can't conceptualize this is what it would be like when we got there.

Leah Kelly

It's interesting, because I'm supposed to use a certain methodology of my choosing for my thesis. And for me it made the most sense to look at a text by, I don't know if you've heard of Linda Tuwahi Smith.

Cedric Woods

Yeah. I've got it on my bookshelf right there.

Leah Kelly

Oh, yeah. So her *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I was thinking, is a lens that I could use. But I guess for her, she's mostly talking about research. And I mean, that's what I'm doing. I'm doing research. So I'm trying to figure out or sort of grapple with the idea of, how can I decolonize? But obviously, you can't really decolonize in a settler-colonial society, but just through my work, or my exploration, you know, how do I use that decolonial lens to come out with the most beneficial

result for the participants in the Indigenous community and the people who I'm trying to understand?

Cedric Woods

Yeah, I mean, one, I'm really glad you brought that up, because that helps me to better respond. So Linda's work is really clearly looking at decentering who research benefits. The colonial process, it benefits the researchers, the academic institutions and the nation-states, which the researchers and the academic institutions are designed to protect, perpetuate, and legitimate. Decolonizing research is research that is for the benefit of Maori communities, Indigenous communities and peoples. So decolonizing from that perspective, I'm all in. I mean, it's what I do. If I rather glibly say, if the tribes aren't interested in it, then I've got no business doing it. But that is exactly my approach. My research agenda is driven by tribal priorities. I work a lot with tribal communities in the state around substance abuse prevention, in support of recovery, because the tribes have identified it as a crisis in their communities. I work with tribes, training Native teachers to be early childhood education teachers, because they all have facilities, because early childhood education is important to them. So that's how I have...and I don't use the term decolonial, but frankly, it's an Indigenous approach to research and scholarship, and living my values as an Indigenous person in the university context. So then for you, then the question is, how do you use this material to advance positive perceptions, positionings, relationships between Indigenous peoples and others who may read your work?

Leah Kelly

Right. Yeah, that's exactly it. I was gonna ask you, maybe for anyone who does read the result who's from like settler colonial society, is there anything that you would maybe want to say to them in terms of like, what can non-Indigenous people do to be allies, to be followers?

Cedric Woods

The biggest thing, listen to Indigenous people, ask and then listen and take it seriously when they respond. I mean, and that's at the heart of the mascot thing, right, that your mom was involved in. There are lots of Indigenous people saying, "We don't like this. We're not honored by this." And lots of non-Indigenous people saying, "No, no, but you don't understand. We mean this so you should be okay with it. Have to be okay with it, because we're not going to change it."

Leah Kelly

Yeah, definitely. I think we're almost getting to the end but I'm wondering, is there anything else you want to add that's related to anything we talked about or even unrelated?

Cedric Woods

Not really, I think we've explored those topics pretty thoroughly.

Leah Kelly

Okay, good. And I can share with you what I come up with. Probably won't be until April. But if you think of anything later you want to follow up with or if you decide there was something you said that maybe you want to strike from the record, you can always email me. And if I have any follow up questions, not sure I will, but if I do, I might email you back. But thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me.