**Acta Ethnographica Hungarica** 67 (2022) 2, 305–351
DOI: 10.1556/022.2023.00004

AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

# Powwow Regalia in Identity Performance and Authentication

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Received: December 16, 2022 • Accepted: February 9, 2023

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**ABSTRACT**

Through personal narratives of powwow involvement and motivation for dancing, this essay examines the ways in which regional and personal identities are being formed, adjusted, negotiated, and expressed through dance regalia at powwows in the Midwestern United States. Dancers use clothes as an explicit marker of their Native identity and powwows as a justifying context for their ideologies of authenticity. Powwow involvement is also used to consolidate, reclaim, craft, revive, and create an identity that authenticates one's place in the powwow community in which internal and external roles and rules reinforce each other. Giving voice to different constituents at Midwestern powwows, from Natives to non-Native enthusiasts, the study explores the factors that influence the bases and strategies of such authentication, as well as the rhetoric by which these ideologies are expressed.

**KEYWORDS**

ethnic identity, authenticity, American Indian, Native American, hobbyist, historical re-enactor, powwow, dance regalia

## INTRODUCTION

According to some theories, what makes us who we are is determined by what we *believe* in, how we *act*, and what we *practice*. If one is to be happy, one must be true to oneself and practice what comes from within, despite pressures from the outside to conform or assimilate. In existential

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The present study is an abridged and revised version of the author's dissertation (Cselényi 2011).

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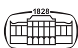
philosophy, authenticity is defined as the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character. In psychology, it refers to the attempt to live one's life according to the needs of one's inner being – one's values and beliefs – rather than the demands of society (Wood et al. 2008). Another description of authenticity is "the unimpeded operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise" (Kernis – Goldman 2005:32). Lack of authenticity is often experienced as a sense of emptiness or a loss of engagement in some aspects of one's life. Authenticity is furthermore interrelated and interdependent with sincerity: one must be certain of who one is before one is able to manifest oneself sincerely. Tracing one's family tree is one way of finding out who one really is, and such a quest for authenticity – both personal and cultural – has led to a rise in cultural tourism as well as the pursuit of spirituality as an alternative to institutionalized religion (Lindholm 2008).

Maintaining ethnic or cultural identity in the face of pressures like acculturation, assimilation, hybridization, or globalization is a great challenge, and there are various ways in which such identity expressions can be authenticated. American Indians,[1] having faced various social and cultural challenges from the earliest times of European contact, have developed numerous strategies for cultural survival and managed to carry on their unique cultures – languages, traditions, religions, kinship systems, and material culture – for generations. One of these cultural expressions is the powwow: a gathering that allows people to socialize, dance, sing, and honor their Native culture. Every weekend somewhere in North America, Native people gather for a powwow – be it traditional, social, or contest – to celebrate a rich cultural heritage and practice a living, evolving, dynamic way of life.[2]

Powwows, however, have also become an arena for identity politics, especially in regions where Native populations are sparse and/or invisible. Powwows are meaningful because they allow for the internal authentication of one's Native identity, provide a social venue for such authenticating actions, and raise the political visibility of Native communities. The underlying meanings, spiritual connections, and social interactions within powwows are an alternative to mainstream culture which does not necessarily support a sustained peaceful coexistence like the powwow does. Powwows, however, do not make one Native. Most powwow-goers agree that having Native blood is not the same as being Native. This is nowhere more palpable than in the Midwestern region of the United States, where powwows are generally one of the only ways to practice Native traditions. These powwows differ from tribal powwows on the Great Plains and in Oklahoma in many ways, but most conspicuously in their constituents and their visual aesthetic, especially as expressed through dance clothes (also called powwow regalia). Participants of these Midwestern powwows may include Native Americans (full-blood and

[1]Indians, American Indians, Amerindians, Native Americans, Indigenous Americans, and First Nations Peoples have all been used interchangeably to refer to the aboriginal populations of the Americas—there is no one word that is universally embraced by all. Even within Native communities, there is dissent about the terminology. It is generally agreed that, whenever possible, individual tribal names should be the precise term used. Michael Yellow Bird (Sahnish/Arikara), however, makes a case for the use of more generalized terms: "The terms 'Indigenous' and 'First Nations Peoples' still generalize the identity of the more than 500 indigenous groups in the lower 48 [states] and Alaska. However, I believe they are empowering 'generalized' descriptors because they accurately describe the political, cultural, and geographical identities and struggles of all aboriginal peoples in the United States" (Yellow Bird 1999:1). For the purposes of this study, I use "American Indian" and "Native American," but most of my consultants tended to use "Indian" for the sake of simplicity, which, given the context, was neither confusing nor controversial at the time.

[2]For more on powwows, see: https://www.powwows.com/what-is-a-pow-wow/ (accessed February 23, 2022)



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mixed-blood, members of tribes with federal or state recognition[3]), non-Native hobbyists (collectors of Native American artifacts committed to historically accurate and authentic reproductions of Native American material culture), historical re-enactors (enthusiasts devoted to historically accurate representations of Native American life in specific time periods before the present), and various other individuals who are either of undocumented Native American heritage or of non-Native heritage (often referred to as 'Indian Hearts,' 'AlterNatives,' 'wannabes,' and a slew of other appellations), all of whom are drawn to the powwow for various – sometimes very specific – reasons. A study of Midwestern powwows would not be complete without considering all of the non-Native constituents, however, for they make up the bulk of the powwow-goers in this region.

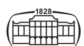
This study is based on a multi-sited participant observation fieldwork, as well as personal interviews with powwow-goers.[4] Consultants were selected in two ways: either for the immediate visual impact of their regalia, or because they were referred by other consultants. They were asked about their personal background (such as ethnic heritage), their involvement in powwows and motivations for dancing, their concept of a powwow and its functions, their understanding of the differences between Native Americans, hobbyists, re-enactors, and other constituents of Midwestern powwows, and finally about their dance clothes and the forces behind their aesthetic choices in putting together an outfit. Their responses provided the rationale for this study: is powwow regalia – and the visual rhetoric it conveys – a good indicator of the wearer's sense of identity, and does it contribute to the perceptible prejudice against certain constituents within the powwow arena?

## THE ENDURING APPEAL OF POWWOWS

Let us first define what a powwow is—both from the scholarly perspective and through the interpretations of individual powwow-goers. In its most general sense, a powwow is a popular form of contemporary Native American culture, a celebration of Native culture through music and dance, and a showcase for dance regalia. Some scholars see the contemporary powwow as an expression of ongoing cultural adaptations, while others approach it more as re-enactments of past cultures. On the one hand, "[t]he powwow's very contemporaneity, its dynamism and rapid spread in recent years, and its participants' unhesitating use of modern designs and colors run so contrary to White stereotypes and assumptions about the Vanishing American and are so opposed to the way non-Natives think Natives ought to behave that some people see the powwow as a cheap mishmash of leftover ideas no longer taken seriously in the Native American world" (Toelken 2003:86). On the other hand, powwows have also been characterized as the

[3]Federal/state recognition means that the government recognizes the right of an American Indian nation/tribe to exist as a sovereign entity and be self-governing. There are 574 federally recognized Indian Nations (tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities, native villages) in the United States. Additionally, there are tribes that are recognized only by their respective state governments. For more, see https://www.ncai.org/about-tribes (accessed February 23, 2023)

[4]Fieldwork took place between 2003 and 2006 at 21 powwows (contest and traditional) in the Midwestern United States (Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio), including 32 interviews (formal and informal, structured and spontaneous) with powwow attendees (dancers, singers, vendors, announcers, spectators). All quotes from powwow participants are from these personal interviews (in compliance with IRB requirements and signed informed consent forms). Tribal affiliation, where disclosed, is noted. Some respondents chose to remain anonymous.



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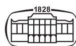
"symbolic enactment of [powwow people's] will to be, and to sustain their identity as, American Indians. (…) The dance area is a stage on which (…) the drama of ethnic identity is performed and thereby reified" (Weibel-Orlando 1999:138). Most scholars understand that powwow participants sing and dance to serve contemporary needs, albeit building upon historical traditions. Combining old traditions with newer styles and repertoires makes the powwow a living, dynamic event that serves multiple purposes. But rather than reinforcing a culturally homogenized pan-Indian identity, intertribal powwows "have a larger, underlying tribal or regional framework, and by either merging with or deviating from it, participants reinforce personal tribal affiliations" (Browner 2002:2–4).

Powwows can serve various ceremonial, cultural, social, and political purposes, determined by the given community's needs. Individual purposes for powwowing can range from honoring the past to expressing an identity, from healing an illness to the simple enjoyment of the dance. In its social function, "the powwow provides a living context for young people to learn older patterns and experience a tremendous range of expressions based on worldview assumptions that remain important to Native people. It takes place in concentric circles of family, tribe, and nature, the artistic representation of which provides not only an idealized model of cultural and ethnic stability and enactment of community for American Indians but also a dramatic way to find and experience a personal place in the Native family" (Toelken 2003:107).

On the community level, powwows – having become a significant cultural icon of American Indianness – are being used by Native communities to gain visibility and political power, to affirm in concrete and tribally specific terms Native people's status as Native people, and to advance their campaigns for political recognition by state and federal agencies (Ellis et al. 2005:x–xii). Leonard Malatare (Salish/Kootenai), powwow emcee and one of the main organizers of the Native American Education Services college powwow in Chicago (Fig. 1), points

**Fig. 1.** **Dancers at the Native American Education Services (NAES) college powwow in Chicago, IL, June 2004 (Photo by author)**



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out the powwow's role as a community organizer: "This powwow, although it's a small event, it's a good event for the Indian community, and that's all it was ever meant to be—to get the Indian community together. (…) It also builds the awareness of the non-Indian community that we're alive, we're strong, we're doing well, we've got culture, we've got traditions."[5]

Clyde Ellis, a history professor who has published extensively on powwows and various issues in contemporary Native communities (and sometimes participates in powwows as a dancer), holds that powwows east of the Plains tend to take on some universal qualities that build upon generalized notions of Native identity: "People who aren't strongly anchored in their identity are going to appeal to images and styles that telegraph 'Indianness' to spectators. There are numerous Northern Traditional dancers, for example, who come from southeastern tribes who *never* dressed like that or had warrior society dances. When you ask why they wear those clothes, they say things like, 'My people were warriors, too,' and they feel some sort of connection to those values. It's no contest when it comes to the image that appeals most strongly."[6]

Even though most powwows follow a common structure, they are all framed by local customs and traditions. Community-specific senses of identity are strengthened through the practice of distinctive, tribally specific traditions, and they are expressed through clothing and symbols that affirm tribal identity (Kavanagh 1982). However, it varies from individual to individual how a dancer expresses this sense of identity, and which parts of that identity get expressed is also determined by the individual's personal experiences and hierarchies of value. To those who dance for competition, for instance, conforming to the pan-Indian regulations of powwow regalia style for a given dance category takes precedence over conforming to historic clothing traditions of their tribe, and thus tribal identity gets expressed in the *decorative details* rather than the *overall outfit*. A clear example of this is the Northern Traditional outfit worn by Frank Figueroa (Oneida), who indicates his specific tribal affiliation with colors (white and purple standing for Iroquois) and symbolic designs (Hiawatha's Belt representing the Iroquois Confederacy and the double cross representing the dragonfly, an Iroquois symbol of water and renewal). The central positioning of the turtle also identifies him as belonging to the Turtle clan, while the beaded military insignia indicates his status as a veteran (Fig. 2).

In most of the Midwestern states where powwows are organized, they have become a particularly viable means of creating awareness about the continued existence of Native cultures in the area. In their generalized aspects, these powwows draw the general, non-Native public's attention to the fact that Native people still live here. For many Natives, powwows have become a lifestyle *choice*, providing an outlet for artistic creativity and skill, as well as a means of livelihood through prize monies and vending. But for many others, it is not a significant part of their life. As Ellis points out: "To most non-Indian participants, powwowing is the ultimate way of being Indian, whereas to Indians, it is just one of many. Generally speaking, Indians [in Indiana] are not nearly as anchored in their identity as most Indians in Oklahoma, so they appeal to so-called 'pan-Indian' images and styles that are immediately apparent for their Indianness and commonly understood and appreciated as Indian by both Indians and non-Indians. However, no one ever goes to a powwow to confirm their identity as a pan-Indian.

[5]Leonard Malatare, personal interview, Chicago, IL, June 19, 2004.

[6]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Ellis are derived from this interview and subsequent electronic correspondence.

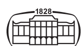

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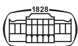
**Fig. 2.** Frank Figueroa at the American Indian Center powwow in Chicago, IL, November 2003. (Photo by author)

They might wear clothing that signals a generalized sense of Indianness to spectators, but in almost every case it is attached to a tribally specific sense of identity. [These] powwows, for a lot of people, aren't really about learning about Indians beyond crafts and material culture. There's a sort of fine line that many of these [dancers] won't cross—they won't go and visit Indian country and stay with Indians and really know about Indians beyond this powwow culture. Powwow people, even in Oklahoma, are distinctly a minority. There's a perception that [the powwow] is really Indian. Well, it's one way. But when you go to other Indian communities, you find out that expressing that identity/ethnicity comes in lots of different forms. And powwow is only one, and in many places it's not even the most important one. It's something to do that's fun, but it doesn't rank with some other political, social, and religious expressions."[7]

[7]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.



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Powwows do not satisfy everyone's idea of what it means to be Native, and even within the powwow world, there are disagreements about what powwows are and what they mean (Ellis 2003:163–164). To some of my consultants, like Phillip Stucker (Cherokee), the powwow is a vehicle through which Native American culture can be instilled and old traditions integrated into the modern world: "It is a gathering of a community with shared cultural interests and spiritual values. It is a family affair and a learning environment. To some it is church, to others it is social connection and a place for news. For contest dancers, it is a place to show their skill and regalia. For many, it is a time to remember those that have crossed over."[8]

To others, like Ramona Foye (Comanche/Sac and Fox), an enrolled member of the Comanche tribe who grew up in Oklahoma fully immersed in tribal traditions and way of life, powwows are nothing more than a place for fun and dancing—a social gathering, not a sacred tribal ceremony. In her hierarchy of values, tribal sacred ceremonies are clearly separated from intertribal social gatherings. She stresses that making and understanding that distinction can prevent many misconceptions about powwows: "A powwow is different from tribal war dances—those have specific rules and traditions. Contest powwows are like rodeos, with categories, entrance fees, and prizes. Traditional or regular powwows (also called benefit powwows if they raise money for a cause) are only for dancing, not for contesting. Hobbyist powwows are part of this. And there are also various tribal powwows where the host tribe's rules apply."[9]

Still others, like Barbara and John Dreher, who adopted a Crow identity when John found out in college that his maternal grandfather was Crow and his grandmother Osage/Miami ("but we stick with Crow because that was the closest link"), gained a new perspective on the powwow world by going to Montana in 1994 to attend Crow Fair.[10] "Midwestern powwows are much smaller, friendlier than Crow Fair, but I did feel welcome by the Crows, and I learned from a Crow woman. And we stayed with our identity—we only do Crow stuff," says Barbara, who has no Native blood but was formally adopted by a Crow woman in 1979. She identifies with hobbyists largely because that was how she came to powwowing, and consequently, powwows have a different meaning in her life: "To us, powwows are a celebration of being alive. It is a family reunion (whether related or not, my powwow friends are closer to me than some of my own family). It is a religious experience. It resembles an old-time encampment. We are not very involved in other aspects of Indian culture—it's hard here, not many branches of the Native American Church, no Indian centers where we live. It's only the powwow culture for us. But our powwow friendships are important. Powwow is a big part of our lives."[11]

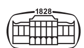
Another function powwows fulfill in general is the fact that they offer people a chance to change. As political scientist Mark Mattern (1999) argues, powwows both foster unity and

[8]Phillip (Quiligi) Stucker, personal interview, Danville, IL, July 13, 2005. He is a member of the Northern Cherokee Nation of the Old Louisiana Territory of Missouri (an organization whose tribal status is contested by the federally recognized Cherokee Nation), and Chairman of the Four Winds Intertribal Society, Inc. of Killeen/Fort Hood, TX.

[9]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

[10]Crow Fair, held in Montana since 1904, is one of the largest Native gatherings on the Northern Plains. For more, see: http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.sr.012 (accessed February 23, 2023)

[11]Barbara Dreher, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.



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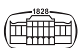
enable disagreement, and these dual roles are complementary, contributing "to the resiliency and flexibility of Native communities by helping manage the tension between unity and diversity. Disagreement and conflict are inevitable among diverse peoples. The significance of the powwow is partly understood in the terms (…) of providing a public, communicative forum where differences can be expressed and potentially negotiated. (…) Powwow practices provide a means of finding sufficient unity for survival and partial prosperity in part because they enable and even foster healthy disagreement and discussion over differences that divide Indians" (Mattern 1999:141).

For many dancers, the powwow was the event that either prompted or supported important personal life and identity changes. Identity transformations can take form in spiritual awakenings brought on by powwow involvement, as it did for Lynn Young, for instance, whose mother was full-blooded Lakota, but because she was adopted as an infant, she never had any knowledge of her Lakota heritage, and neither did Lynn until she started researching her heritage after her mother's passing. She found enough information to be certain of her blood, but not enough to document it to the point of being able to enroll in the tribe. Nonetheless, reconnecting to that part of her heritage also gave her a spiritual connection that she felt was missing from her life: "The important aspect to me is the knowing. I do not require validation from any external body, be it government agency or tribal committee. But there does exist a disconnect. I do not have the opportunity to learn from and pay honor to my blood elders or partake in the rich cultural tradition in the Lakota context. While I am involved with cultural traditions through Native arts, being involved with the powwow circuit enables me to partake in the cultural traditions of music and dance. Music and dance are vital aspects of Indianness, tied to rich oral traditions of all Native people. Spiritually, I now feel connected. Becoming involved with different Native groups – I attend ceremonies with a group of Pokagon women in their longhouse – has given me an incredible connectedness. My beliefs inform who I am, how I act and interact—every step I take down this Red Road."[12]

Opportunities for cultural involvement and expressions of ethnicity often lead some powwow dancers to get involved in cultural revitalization efforts. Bonita Bent-Nelson, for example, who is a powwow dancer and a historical re-enactor, also teaches Great Lakes-style quillworking at different venues in Indiana: "I was taught the old, traditional way of quillworking by a Cherokee elder. As a tradition bearer, I feel that I should be able to show and talk about the ancient artwork that I have been taught so that others can learn about it as well."[13] The identity-forming aspect of powwows is also supported by folklore scholar Barre Toelken (1991), who finds that powwows "function to preserve cultural values even under the most trying of circumstances" (Toelken 1991:155), as they are "a decodable kinetic statement about the realities of life for ethnically aware Native Americans, as well as a tableau scene of intense cultural meaning within hostile surroundings" (Toelken 1991:138).

[12]Lynn (Linda) Young, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005.

[13]Bonita "Quillwoman" Bent-Nelson, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005. She is not an enrolled tribal member, but has both Eastern Cherokee and Southern Cheyenne ancestors, and is an adopted Odawa. A book artist and print maker, her Native artwork has appeared in Native People's Magazine and as cover art for Studies in American Indian Literatures (https://nebraskapressjournals.unl.edu/journal/studies-in-american-indian-literatures/) (accessed February 23, 2023).



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## POWWOW REGALIA IN IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

The kind of identity performance that is presented at the powwow is not just a performance based on a shared identity among those who recognize and understand the inherent meanings of powwow performance, but also on a differential identity (Bauman 1971). The performance is a visual communication of an identity that is interpreted in one way by people who share the same identity and in another way by people of a different identity, both of which, nonetheless, rely upon a shared aesthetic vocabulary of dance clothes.

One of the primary expressive modes at powwows, besides dancing, singing, and drumming, is the unique costume known as 'regalia.' Regalia is usually made by the dancers and/or their family and friends and is typically based on personality and inspiration. In powwow regalia, various tribal influences and traditional outfits have been blended into a more general style, influenced mostly by Plains traditions. As Leonard Malatare notes, "in pre-reservation times, most tribes had their own distinctive style of clothing, and tribal affiliations could be known by what a person wore and how these clothes were decorated."[14]

Each regalia style also developed as a direct reflection of the dance it corresponds to and has specific markers that identify it. Specific dances have specific, distinctive patterns, so all dancers are identifiable by their regalia. Men's Traditional dancers, for example, are often veterans and carry items that symbolize their status as warriors: shields, weapons, honor staffs, medicine wheels. Jingle dancers are identified by the hundreds of characteristic metal jingles sewn onto their dress, while Grass dancers by the long, flowing yarns attached to their outfit.[15]

Within the given structure of powwow regalia, there is space for individual expression. Most dancers share the view that there are some basic styles, basic designs for all tribes, but there are also individual designs (e.g., spirit animals) that can be incorporated. "We can't make assumptions about anyone," says Susan Joy (Shawnee/Chickasaw). "Nonetheless, regalia communicates one's own identity, at least when it comes to one's family or personal traditions. Regalia reflects who the person wearing it is. Who her people were. Where she came from. We are all getting more and more 'intertribal,' and this is reflected in our regalia. But for the most part, regalia is based on our own tribal backgrounds and personal tastes."

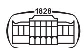
When it comes to dance outfits, the basic style is usually determined by the type of powwow one will wear it to. As Ramona Foye explains: "There are usually two kinds of outfits at powwows: contest and traditional. In traditional ones, one usually follows tribal traditions – patterns, designs, colors, shapes, and so on – but in contest ones anything goes because the emphasis is on the glitz and glamour—you need to attract the judges' attention." Foye, for example, has an outfit for every tribe in her lineage: Comanche, Pawnee, Otoe, Sac and Fox, and Potawatomi. Because she was also adopted into the Cree tribe, she has a Cree outfit, too; and a Kickapoo outfit because one of her grandfathers was part Kickapoo: "It's all part of who I am, and that's why I have all these outfits," she adds.[16]

Powwow dress might be characteristic, but not all are the same. Each dancer's regalia is unique—patterns, colors, materials, and designs allow for variation, individual expression, and

[14]Leonard Malatare, personal interview, Chicago, IL, June 19, 2004.

[15]For more on powwow regalia, see https://powwow-power.com/powwow-dancing/ (accessed February 23, 2023)

[16]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.



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creativity. The outfits provide an occasion for the material and oral articulation and transmission of traditional values (Toelken 1991:147). Educator and artist Robin McBride Scott corroborates the notion of identity performance through dance clothes: "Dancers can express their identity through the choice of colors, materials, and style in which the item is made, while still doing the traditional style of clothing. The use of beadwork, ribbonwork, and quillwork gives each person a chance to express his or her individuality. The way in which a person dances – their dance style – provides another mode of expression. A dancer's tribal affiliation used to be signaled by their moccasins, for example, but not anymore. Connections in this region are not so continuous like with other tribes, such as the Chippewa, for example."[17]

What complicates the study of identity performance at Midwestern powwows is that one can see Native outfits at events other than Native powwows, among them hobbyist powwows, non-Native powwows, or historical re-enactments, all of which are abundant in this region. Since the conditions at these events differ greatly from Native powwows, so do the interpretive guidelines of authenticity of identity: "Most of the people [at these dances] have Native blood and honor their Native heritage; some are 'card-carrying,'[18] others are not. Mixed-blood Natives often do not have the stereotypical Indian 'look,' but we *are* Indian. Certainly, there are some hobbyists among us, which is fine. To my Native friends and myself, it is more important what is in your *heart* and how you walk the Red Road than how much blood you may or may not have."[19]

Because visual communication through clothing choices says much about one's culture, gender, socio-economic class, religion, and family in general, and people everywhere communicate through their appearance (Shukla 2005), at powwows, dancers commonly use the visual clues dance clothes present to assess other dancers' affiliations. Ramona Foye explains: "One used to be able to tell one's identity (tribe, clan, band, status) by colors or patterns, but nowadays anything goes, so it's hard to tell. For example, my first-born's color is black, but my second-born wears white or red. They used to do that so that during war parties the first-born would go in one direction, the second-born in another, that way the risk of both getting killed was smaller. If you're into tribal heritage and know these things, you can tell by looking at a dancer, but if you're not, you just won't be able to."[20] Crista Round Head (Brulé Lakota) adds: "Most of the time, looking at someone's regalia can give you an idea of their heritage. If I see a tear dress, I'm going to assume that person was from a Southern tribe. Similarly, capes, dragonflies, and floral beadwork indicate Woodlands cultures to me. Northern Woodlands tribes use lots of vines and appliqués. And if I see bold florals in pink, light blue, black, and navy blue, I know I'm looking at a Crow. The black-red-yellow-white Four Winds pattern on my moccasin is a Brulé pattern, and it also stands for the Badlands at sunset; and the yellow mustang on my shawl is a Brulé symbol, but it also represents my family's ranching background."[21]

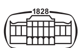
[17]Robin McBride Scott, personal (electronic) communication, August 25, 2005. Scott is an educator, artist, illustrator, and presenter of performing arts and Native visual arts whose heritage includes Cherokee ancestry. She is not an enrolled tribal member, but her expertise on Eastern and Southern Woodlands Native art forms have been publicly recognized. She is a recipient of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian Visiting Artist fellowship.

[18]"Card-carrying" refers to the CDIB, or Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood, the official document issued to federally recognized tribes.

[19]Lynn Young, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005.

[20]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

[21]Crista Round Head, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005.



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One will never see two outfits that are exactly alike because powwow regalia is a very personal and artistic expression of the dancer's life, feelings, interests, and spiritual path. An outfit evolves and changes as the dancer evolves and changes in life. Changes are made each season depending on the fashion of the time or a personal change in taste, and one's dance outfit is never 'finished.' When a dancer wants to get a new outfit, he or she may gift the old outfit to a younger dancer who is just starting out in the powwow circuit.

Individual consistency is yet another factor that helps in the identification process. For Susan Jennys, it is a small accessory that is her personal identifier: "I always wear white pony beads—either as a necklace, or on my wrist, or on a belt. From this came my given Native name: White Pony Woman."[22] For Susan Joy (Shawnee), it is her exotic macaw-feather dance fan that people immediately associate with her: "There are many people at powwows who may not know me, but they know my fan."[23] According to Jerry Perdasofpy (Comanche), being consistent in one's regalia is highly important: "They know you by your outfit, so I always wear the same colors and designs. My outfit is Comanche, and the designs are all mine. I have two or three other shirts, but all for the one outfit—I only wear the one."[24] (Fig. 3)

What most typically characterizes traditional Native dance clothes is unity of composition: all elements have formal cohesion, make sense in a tribal or cultural context, and complement each other to communicate something specific about the dancer (e.g., tribal, clan, or family affiliation). The degree of this unity or cohesion is often seen as an indicator of the dancer's knowledge of the powwow 'language,' which includes rules and practices, too. Ray Kappmeyer (Fig. 4) agrees that without the appropriate knowledge, one's assessment of someone else's identity may be flawed: "We meet a lot of people who believe in the culture. When it comes to clothing, though, we must use some discretion. You can't tell who's who just based on their clothing; they like this, they like that, so they put it all together. They don't take the time to research the meanings. They're not studying the purposes of the clothing. To do things right – to respect the culture – you need to take the time to research it. A lot of hobbyists are afraid of not doing things right, but it's really just common sense. If you ask the wrong people, you perpetuate the wrong things. And there is a huge difference between powwow clothing today and historically traditional Indian clothing. *Indians see the people—we see the clothes*. And among the reasons for less than well-made outfits are the lack of knowledge, not doing your research, or not having the financial resources."[25]

Thus, even if an outfit is visually correct, without social interaction, there is no authentication, situational or otherwise. Powwow regalia only gains meaning as an indicator of the wearer's place on the 'continuum of Indian identity'[26] within the powwow arena, in the context of a relative comparison to other regalia. Its function as identity indicator is not absolute either—it is sited/situated within the personal and collective value system of the community that views it (Fig. 5).

[22]Susan Jennys, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 22, 2006.

[23]Susan Joy, personal interview, Columbia City, IN, August 14, 2004.

[24]Jerry Perdasofpy, personal interview, Anderson, IN, September 10, 2005.

[25]Ray Kappmeyer, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004. He is a non-Native collector of American Indian art, the primary organizer of the Tecumseh Lodge Powwow, and advisory board member of the National Powwow (both hobbyist events).

[26]The least White-oriented, full-blood, traditional Indians are on one end of the continuum, while the most White-oriented, mixed-blood, progressive Indians on the other end; see Fowler 1987:4.

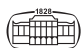

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**Fig. 3.** Jerry (and son PK) Perdasofpy at the Andersontown Powwow and Indian Market in Anderson, IN, September 2005 (Photo by author)

When it comes to authentication based on aesthetic values (within the framework of the powwow), some tend to be more rigid in their acceptance of non-conforming regalia, while others are more forgiving. As Ramona Foye observes: "You can use polyester, but you have to do the outfit right; it doesn't matter what material it's from, as long as it *looks* right. There's a faux suede that looks and hangs just like buckskin, but it is cheaper—Indian women are starting to use it now. (…) These people, they may have some Indian in them, but they were not raised traditional; they may have learned a little bit, but they don't want to admit that they don't know anything else. There are a lot of Indians out there like that, who don't know, but they're not going to admit that they don't know. They won't swallow their pride and admit that they don't know. Because, to them, saying that they don't know would be like saying that they're not Indian. Or maybe from their point of view they know all they need to know."[27]

[27]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

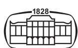

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**Fig. 4.** Ray Kappmeyer in a Southern Traditional (Straight Dance) outfit at National Powwow XIII in Danville, IL, July 2005 (Photo by author)

One explanation for the persistent presence of less than well-made outfits at Midwestern powwows may be the frequency of 'newcomers' who have bought into the idealized, generalized notion of Indianness and dance clothes that in some cases have no relation to what is worn now in the powwow community, or whose standards have not yet been forged by the sited authenticating strategies of the powwow crowd. Clyde Ellis, having attended numerous powwows all around the country and conducted in-depth research on powwows, has a broader perspective than most: "When one goes to enough powwows, one starts to understand what constitutes a well-made outfit, what the core elements are. At hobbyist dances, one will see many people who are 'weekenders,' who do not make an effort to craft fine clothes. The better clothes are almost universally seen on people who have a long-standing interest and connections with Indians. An equally interesting question, aside from quality, is *what* they wear. There's an interesting emphasis on 'old-time' Sioux outfits, say, from the turn of the century—it's a style that you haven't seen on the Northern Plains since the 1910s, since the last of the Wild West Shows

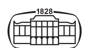

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**Fig. 5.** Dancers at the Mihsihkinaahkwa Powwow in Columbia City, IN, August 2005 (Photo by author)

(Fig. 6). Yet it remains a really popular style, and it's curious how it's perceived by a lot of people as 'more Indian': very old, traditional, authentic. (…) You can see very clearly this cleavage between the *superhobs* – the elite who have clearly moved beyond local and regional powwows and become very proficient craftsmen, with significant exposure to Indian dances and communities – versus a clear element who have never been to an Indian dance, and probably never will. (…) In some ways, what they're doing is divorced from Indians. This is a subculture, a culture on its own that has nothing to do with Indian people—it has to do with their (idealized) construction of Indianness. That helps to explain some of these practices – clothes, traditions – that are different from what you see on the Plains."[28]

Details that may make an otherwise fine outfit seem 'amiss' include out-of-place/anachronistic elements, such as a handkerchief around the neck, which is a Southern Plains trend, on a Northern Plains dress, or outdated styles, such as a Fancy Dance outfit from the 1960s with its shorter hemline and hackle feather-tipped bustle style (Fig. 7).

Nonetheless, most dancers agree that voicing one's disapproval within the powwow arena is usually not condoned. Says Susan Joy: "When I am at powwows, it's very rare that I will hear someone say something negative about someone else's regalia. Everyone respects each other's regalia. We all understand the importance of regalia. We also understand that not everyone can afford fine buckskins. If I see someone wearing something that looks a little 'cheesy' to me, I will

[28]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

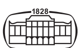

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**Fig. 6.** Dancers at the Tecumseh Lodge Powwow in Tipton, IN, September 2004 (Photo by author)

not say anything negative to them. That would be rude and mean-spirited of me. We understand that everyone is different, and the important thing is that they came to powwow and are trying to do the best they can. Just because somebody is poor and can't afford expensive dance clothes, we can't blame them for trying to walk the good road."[29]

## HOBBYIST POWWOWS

Because hobbyist events occupy a considerable position on the Midwestern powwow circuit, they cannot be excluded from consideration when examining the visual manifestations of identity performance at powwows. The term 'hobbyist' is one of the most misinterpreted terms in the powwow world. Real hobbyists do not consider it a derogatory term and openly admit to being hobbyists. Some consider the term – in its reference to other leisure activities – belittling of the deep commitment that is invested in their activities, and thus prefer 'American Indianist,' although the term is rarely used in everyday conversations. The majority of powwow-goers, however, use *hobbyist* interchangeably with *wannabe*, thus transferring the general sense of prejudice against 'wannabes' and 'New Agers' onto hobbyists as well, leading to further misunderstandings about hobbyist powwows.

[29]Susan Joy, personal interview, Columbia City, IN, August 14, 2004.

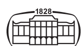

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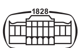
**Fig. 7.** Mike Tompkins in a 1960s style Fancy Feather outfit at the Tecumseh Lodge Powwow in Tipton, IN, September 2004 (Photo by author)

Today, the main focus of Indian hobbyist[30] groups is on music, dance, and material culture, with special emphasis on *authenticity*. Most Indian hobbyists got their start in the Boy Scouts, and many of them develop expertise in a certain field of Native American culture, some of them to the extent that they become lecturers, researchers, writers, even academics. Powwows are an important activity in hobbyist circles because they allow for the display of costume-making, craftwork, dancing, or singing, and more importantly, for the exchange of ideas and materials.

[30]Indian hobbyism refers to the imitation and study of Native American cultures by non-Natives outside the formal scholarly domains of museums and higher education. It grew out of the Indian Lore Movement of the late 19th century, when American Indians were romanticized as a people on the brink of extinction and Whites saw it as their duty to preserve Native cultures. The Native lifestyle was seen as the antidote to the chaotic industrial lifestyle, and Native Americans as the incarnation of freedom and bravery: they represented a form of primordial integrity—an alternative to modernity and consumerism. For more on hobbyism, see: Powers 1988.



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Interests and fields of expertise may vary, but a somewhat romanticized view of Native life is prevalent. The group is dominated by middle-class White male individuals, although most often the whole family is involved. The long-term commitment to this lifestyle is further reinforced by a meticulous research methodology, as well as political, social, and economic support to Native American causes and communities (Taylor 1988).

Hobbyists have acquired a special knowledge of Native traditions and practices through many years of involvement and progressing through several stages of 'evolution.' Most are master craftsmen, creating elaborate outfits with materials and techniques that are authentically Native. The quality of their clothes reflects their current stage in the learning process: from the poorly made, unidentifiable clothes of those just starting out, to the finest, most elaborate outfits of those who have mastered their craft. However, as powwow scholar Clyde Ellis sees it, "the quintessential problem with hobbyism is that hobbyists tend to approach Native American culture as a living museum, preserving their own version of it and thus trapping Indians in the 19th century, ignoring the fact that Indian people are fully modern and do not need anyone else to speak for them. This often contributes to the stereotypes that exist today."[31]

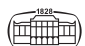
Victoria Sanchez, a scholar of American Indian folklife, agrees that "hobbyists tend to be all form and no substance, doing extensive research and spending lots of money on elaborate costumes, yet having no real, culturally based understanding," and feels that this "unauthorized cultural appropriation" is highly offensive and often damaging to American Indian people, especially those who are engaged in fighting stereotypes and institutional racism which have made American Indians a virtually invisible race. "There are plenty of books and tip-sheets out there for the hobbyist or crafter, and one would hope that they would know that there is a difference between a weekend hobby and a racial/cultural/ethnic way of life."[32]

Hobbyists come in a couple of varieties. Within hobbyist communities, a distinction is made between *authentic* and *interpretative* hobbyists, the former referring to those who prefer to duplicate actual Native artifacts and learn dances from Natives, while the latter referring to those who fabricate their own interpretations of Native dances (Powers 1988:559). Within those two general categories, there are three levels. There are hobbyists who never go to Native events, never see Native people, and never experience powwows outside of their own world of crafts and dancing. Then there is a second level of people who transcend that all-White environment and spend some time with Native people but who are primarily engaged in White-dominated events. And finally, there are the *superhobbyists*, people who bridge both worlds more completely. As Ellis explains: "The vast majority of non-Indians who go to powwows can safely be called hobs. More importantly, the fact that they are non-Indians doesn't mean that the Indians don't like them, or that they're exploiting Indian ways. Some do, there's no doubt. And New Agers are probably prone to more of an exploitive take. The term hobbyist really is a red flag for some people. It carries a pretty negative connotation, and lots of people use it to infer some stereotypes that aren't always accurate. A more neutral term might help to broaden the conversation."[33]

[31]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

[32]Victoria Sanchez, personal (electronic) communication, August 10, 2005. See also: Sanchez 1995, 2001.

[33]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.



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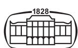
Barbara Dreher, a self-identifying hobbyist, has several Crow outfits, but her favorite is the traditional elk tooth dress (Fig. 8). As she explains: “The floral work that I wear is an older style that was very popular in the 1920s and ‘30s. Originally, the elk tooth dress was a mark of pride and wealth. A woman who could cover a dress with elk teeth (keeping in mind that only the lower incisors are used—there are only two of those per animal!) had a husband who was a very good provider and probably contributed greatly to the community as well with the extra meat he brought in. My elk tooth dress has 500 ceramic (i.e., imitation) elk teeth on it, sewn on piece by piece, in concentric circles from the V-neck opening. It’s navy-blue wool with a red trim. The ermine pelt on the back, pinned to the dress with a vintage brooch, is a signature Crow marker. It’s called the ‘rat pin.’ I researched it because I’ve seen good and bad outfits at powwows—it took me a long time to figure out why. Took a lot of pictures at Crow Fair and compared them with pictures of old dresses in books.”[34]

In John Dreher’s 1950s modern Crow outfit (Fig. 9), the cuffs-and-apron set is the only thing, besides the roach, that they purchased; everything else they made themselves. As John clarified: “It’s not a weekend thing for us. My moccasins were bought on the Crow reservation;

**Figs 8 and 9.** Barbara and John Dreher in Crow outfits at the Gathering of the People powwow in Terre Haute, Ind., September 2004 (Photo by author)

[34]Barbara Dreher, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.



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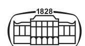
it has a Crow design. The Crows favor pastel colors, baby colors like pink and blue, especially for backgrounds. Satin brocades are used for men's aprons; they're referred to as 'sissy suits.' The dentalium shells are 200 years old, traditional Crow, and the breastplate is also old-style. The whole outfit is pure Crow. West of Ohio, almost all dancers will have roaches, but only Crows push theirs flatter with a larger spreader. Mine has mock eagle feathers on top and mock hawk feathers on the side. And the white sport socks are part of the original outfit, not laziness on my part!" [*Laughs.*][35]

Tim Monaghan, a non-Native master beadworker (Figs 10 and 11) known on the hobbyist powwow circuit for his meticulously executed reservation-period Northern Plains, especially

**Figs 10 and 11.** Tim Monaghan in a reservation period Crow outfit at the Tecumseh Lodge powwow in Tipton, IN, September 2004; and in an 1800s style Sioux outfit at National Powwow XIII in Danville, IL, July 2005 (R) (Photos by author)

[35]John Dreher, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.



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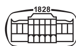
Crow, outfits, started out in the Boy Scouts, and twenty-one years later, when he was stationed at an Air Force base in Urbana, Illinois, he met a man who taught him beadworking and set him on a lifelong path: "I was at Crow Fair once, and most people didn't know that I wasn't Crow, judging from my outfits. I also have a 1950s Crow outfit, the so-called *modern Crow* outfit, which evolved when the kids wanted to move away from the reservation and needed 'lighter' outfits. They incorporated tennis shoes with white socks with a stripe on the band. (…) We hobbyists hang out with people on our level of craftsmanship, not with wannabes. They become a family. And there are moral expectations also. Hobs never say to others what they should or should not wear; they just chuckle to themselves if they see something that is bad or inappropriate. I mostly go to hobbyist powwows because those are for fun, I can enjoy the activities, while most Indian powwows nowadays are for competition, since it's the main livelihood for many Indians. But for me it's *just* a hobby—I don't spend *all* of my free time on it."[36]

As Native scholar Phillip Deloria (Dakota) put it, most hobbyists "play Indian" (Deloria 1998) for the enjoyment of the craftsmanship that goes along with being a dancer, or, alternatively, they dance to showcase their craftsmanship. Their commitment to proper representation through their clothes usually results in outfits that are well-made and geographically and historically accurate but often anachronistic in terms of modern powwow standards, since 'old-time' (i.e., pre-1930) outfits are generally preferred over 'modern' (i.e., post-1930) outfits by most hobbyists. In fact, one of the ways to recognize a hobbyist at a powwow is a 'too perfect,' extravagantly expensive but outdated outfit. As Ellis explains: "Hobbyist powwows come in a couple of different shapes and sizes, and most have minimal Indian participation. They exist apart from the larger powwow world, outside of the Indian communities. (…) Their dances still have a lot of meaning, and this community they've built among themselves is still a very important one to its members, and they're very committed to these practices. It is very much an idealized vision of behavior and relationships with each other. It has deep meaning, but it's also bounded by this interesting attention to rules and protocol and behavior. My sense is that, in Indian communities, things are a bit more fluid, more dynamic, and the role it plays is very different. It's not to say that these dances don't have an important role, because they do, people here are immensely devoted to these associations, but it plays a different kind of role for non-Indians as it does for Indian people, where it's just woven more subtly and more dynamically into all kinds of other relationships and institutions and associations. They take it with them, away from the powwow world—those relationships are reflected in other ways in the community, and powwows are just one expression for them. I'm not sure that happens here."[37]

The cultural contexts for powwows are different on either side of the Mississippi river. The further east one goes, the more public and performative powwow culture becomes, very much about showing non-Natives what Natives are, what defines them. They claim to be 'sharing' their culture through the powwow, but in reality, it is much more about 'demonstration.' Powwow has become a new public voice for Native communities that allows them to define the space and the message they are putting out there. As meaningful as these powwows are to the communities, they are also "borrowed in ways that are adapted and attached to other practices, and they

[36]Tim Monaghan, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

[37]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.



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are dynamic but frustrating adaptations because they depart from what Indians from out west think of as traditional or standard powwow ways," adds Ellis.[38]

## NON-NATIVE POWWOWS

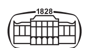
Even if hobbyist powwows are in many ways a departure from traditional powwow practices, they do, nonetheless, enforce protocol and aesthetic standards. Non-Indian powwows, on the other hand, have no such rigid requirements, and they tend to reflect more of a mishmash aesthetic with no basis in any actual Native regalia style. These are the events whose participants mostly comprise of what some refer to as *Indian Hearts*, *AlterNatives*, *Heinz 57 Indians*, *Outtalucks*, *New Agers*, and *Wannabes,*[39] all referring to individuals who claim to have a Native heritage, indulge in Native spirituality, but in fact have very limited knowledge of the tribal culture they claim to belong to. Such 'Indian sympathizers' idealize Natives and imitate their lifestyles at these gatherings. Most of them are so-called *New Agers*, who are particularly obsessed with Native religions, relying in their knowledge on books written by non-Natives claiming to be Native for the sake of profit. They tend to appropriate various tribal rituals and create a mishmash ceremony devoid of all original and intended meaning (Mihesuah 2005:15).

Distorted images of Natives do not usually come from contact with real Natives—most non-Natives learn about Natives from movies (Mihesuah 1996:9), but most Hollywood movies tend to either denigrate or elevate Natives, both of which rely on images that the public easily recognizes, instead of realistic depictions. These inaccuracies are not limited to movies—they abound in books, cartoons, and even textbooks. Negative or positive, stereotypes about Natives are still holding strong in the American imagination. In the past, Americans saw Natives as both 'savage' and 'noble' and proclaimed them subhuman while at the same time investing them with a higher moral or spiritual stature (Mihesuah 1996:13). Today, despite understanding the atrocities committed against Natives in the past, most Americans are still convinced that Natives enjoy benefits not available to others, that they are lazy, and live on welfare. And despite these negative ideas, images of Natives are often used for profit by non-Natives. Native religions were among the first victims of this profiteering. Kellie Neighbors, a historical re-enactor, attributes this spiritual quest to a universal need to belong: "Ethnic people have very specific groups that they 'belong' to. Inner city children, for example, do not generally feel like they belong to a 'hometown,' they don't get involved in their ethnicity, as their families are generally solely consumed with survival. That is why the children join gangs, to 'belong' to some group. Generally speaking, White Americans, being from so very diverse background mixtures, do not feel like they 'belong' with any group, unless they are very religious and find acceptance within a church group. In many areas, however, the only accepted religion is Christianity (in its varied forms). And for those Whites who do not find the presence of God or the acceptance of other people inside the framework of a Christian religion, they look for other people who share their spiritual beliefs, usually Native Americans for their nature-based religions, only to find that they are not accepted by the Native people either."[40]

[38]Clyde Ellis, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

[39]All terms used in this study have been gleaned from the personal vocabulary of my consultants.

[40]Kellie Neighbors, personal interview, Solsberry, IN, April 9, 2005.



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Living in an ever-increasing spiritual vacuum, these individuals will start looking for something 'real.' Their interest in Native religions is fueled by a hunger for a spiritual connection. According to Navajo anthropologist Wesley Thomas: "For Native people, religion is a community thing, unlike for Whites; they need a specific spiritual fulfillment. There's some elasticity to it—boundaries break under changes from within and without. The holding pattern is that religious rituals are now being recontextualized into social events, such as the powwow. For people who still have their traditional religious rituals, powwow is entertainment, but for those who no longer have traditions, it became *the* ritual, replacing older ones. Religion is either expanding or contracting, but never static. And most tribal religions are contracting, while pan-Indianism is expanding. We are all headed for acculturation or assimilation, but everyone is at a different stage on the continuum. We have to be persistent in who we are as Native people."[41]

The general powwow community is acutely aware – and understanding – of people who are looking for their roots. But there is a difference between someone who is just trying to learn about their ancestry and a 'wannabe.' Dancers at Midwestern powwows have various notions about who is considered a 'wannabe.' As Ramona Foye explains it: "A wannabe is someone who acts like they know more than they do to show how 'Indian' they are when they really have no clue as to what being a Native person is all about. They buy into all the popular culture and the media's ideas of how Indian people act. Many of these folks are 'New Agers' who feel a connection to Indian culture and spiritual beliefs and profess to have some 'Indian' spiritual guide or that they were an Indian in a former life. To me, it is how they act and conduct themselves that determines what category they might fall into. Wannabes are more about their ego than about their connection to the culture, community, and spirituality. They want everyone to know 'how much' they know about everything. I define them based on how they act, not on their claim of Indian ancestry."[42]

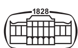
Most non-Native dancers claim to have some Native blood but have no documented basis for that claim other than their narratives based on dubious family oral histories, and many have no traditional Native knowledge and not much interest in a deeper understanding of the consequences attached to their assumed identity. They approach powwows strictly from a spiritual perspective, which is reflected in their clothes. Foye adds: "The first impression when you look at people like these [New Agers and wannabes] is that they saw a bunch of stuff, thought it looked good, and threw it together. They've seen one too many old Indian movies. These are Hollywood Indian clothes. They obviously didn't do their research. (…) We were always told, if you can't tell me what it means and why you're wearing it, then don't wear it. I've instilled that in my kids, too—if you don't know where it came from, what it means, you have no business putting it on. These [wannabes] see some pictures, then they go and make it. But you have to earn what you wear!"[43]

By selecting regalia components according to their own needs and likes instead of existing standards, such dancers pose a threat of misuse, misinterpretation, and adulteration of Native

[41]Wesley Thomas in his presentation at "Reinventing Traditions: Native Spirituality and the New Age Religious Movement" conference, IUPUI, January 26, 2006.

[42]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

[43]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.



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traditions—an example of consumption without responsibility or accountability. Unfortunately, their perceptions of Indianness and appeals to authenticity are mostly based on stereotypes learned from movies and books, and for them, their powwow clothes are the only marker of their identity, which they try to create through their dance clothes, using them to legitimize their Indianness. Having no anchor in any specific Native culture or tradition and being at different stages of their quest for their Native heritage – real or imagined – their outfits often reflect what some call the 'Heinz 57' approach: take anything that looks Native (leather, beads, feathers), mix it with anything that comes from nature and can be instilled with spiritual meaning (bones, stones, herbs), and you have created a so-called 'OMG outfit.'

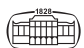
## HISTORICAL RE-ENACTMENTS

Another common sight at Midwestern powwows are attendees in clearly historical garb, whose visual aesthetic diverges radically from other powwow dancers. By definition, historical re-enactors, sometimes also called living historians, commemorate events that happened at a specific historical site by recreating it. They serve as walking, talking history museums for the people in attendance. Many re-enactments in the Midwest revolve around wars, such as Feast of the Hunter's Moon in Lafayette (IN), commemorating and re-enacting the significant battles from Fort Ouiatenon's history, including those from 1761 (part of the French and Indian War) and 1763 (part of Pontiac's Rebellion). Others, like *School of the Native* at Piankeshaw Trails Educational Park (Solsberry, IN), are based more on cultural aspects and revolve around the everyday lifeways of different Woodlands tribes that occupied the region.

'Playing Indian' at such events is a wholly different genre than dancing at a powwow. As anthropologist and historian Laura Peers aptly conveys: "Historic reconstructions are sites with the potential for great social change. (…) Having Native people and voices is critical for challenging dominant-culture narratives. Native interpreters make it personal – they feel that they are 'playing themselves' – real individuals with real connections to historical sites, representatives of their ancestors. They use this experience to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions visitors bring. The goal: a fuller understanding of Native life—in the past and today. Notwithstanding, it is still an idealized and recreated version of Native life. Visitors' ignorance and regurgitation of stereotypes of Native life serve as teachable moments in which to provide opportunities to rethink expectations of the past and the implications of those assumptions for the present. How we think about the past influences how we live in the present" (Peers 2007:53, 139).

Historical reconstruction sites also employ historical interpreters, people who do not necessarily dress up in historical garb but instead interpret the actions of historical re-enactors for the public. Jessica Deemer, one of the organizers of *School of the Native*, is such an interpreter. "School of the Native is aimed at spreading awareness of historical crafts and Native American culture. So many times, the only way people are exposed to Native American history is through romanticized or brutalized ideas, omitting everyday ways of life. School of the Native exposes people to history by letting them participate in activities such as hide tanning, and providing a living, breathing interpretation of history."[44]

[44]Jessica Deemer, personal interview, Solsberry, IN, April 9, 2005.



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Historical re-enacting, then, is acting out a historical event or acting as someone (a type of person) from a particular historical context for educational purposes. Most re-enactors put a great deal of time into researching their costumes and practicing the crafts that were practiced by the historical figures or culture they are emulating. There are many different approaches to re-enacting and there is no correct or incorrect way of re-enacting, only different approaches. One of the biggest differences in approach lies in the method of costume construction. Some re-enactors take the approach of trying to create a realistic look to their costumes and are less concerned with the materials they use, while others are very particular and will only use materials that have been historically documented in the area.

Historical re-enactors can be buckskinners, mountain men, muzzleloaders, and trekkers, all of whom re-enact different aspects of the past.[45] To them, re-enacting is reliving history, as opposed to a powwow, which is 'just cutting loose' or a 'spiritual adventure.' Most re-enactors only attend re-enactment events, but some do attend powwows. Many of them are more hardcore than hobbyists: they will shave their head and tattoo and pierce themselves according to the fashions of the time period their persona is from. Since they portray a specific persona from a specific geographic location in a specific moment in time, they can only wear clothes and use materials that would have been realistically available to their persona in terms of time, location, and social status. Their clothes tend to be replicas of outfits found in history books and museums, although not necessarily of the same quality workmanship. Their main concern is representing history authentically. They believe that when they put on their historical garb and present themselves to their peers and the public, they must be *telling the truth visually*. They are attracted to this hobby out of a love for history and a fascination with the lives of those before us, and feel that they owe those very same people the minimum respect of not lying about them, visually or verbally. Kellie Neighbors, who usually represents a historical Piankeshaw woman (Fig. 12) at *School of the Native*, explains: "It used to be that everyone around here re-enacted a western Native, because of the movies. But as people learned more and more, they realized there were Natives here, too, and they weren't Lakota. I have a Piankeshaw persona, because they were here, and I thought it'd be easier to find information, but it's actually not. I portray a 'mystic' woman, a medicine woman – not an herbalist, a mystic – so I try to study the different spiritual interests that the different tribes had. (…) Wannabes at powwows trivialize this spirituality with their overly public 'performance' – waving a fan stick, for example – to just show the crowds. Real Natives do it for the sake of the spirits and themselves, not for show. In re-enactments, we try to correctly portray certain people at certain very specific time periods. (…) Many people who avidly re-enact Native American history will not participate in Native style pantheist rituals for fear of incurring the wrath of the real Native people."[46]

Most people who dress as Native Americans at re-enactment events do not have Native heritage, and conversely, Native American re-enactors might adopt a French or English historical persona. Sidney Bolam, who has been re-enacting since she was a teenager and was a paid participant in the historical Indian Village at the 2004 Mihsihkinaahkwa Powwow in Columbia

[45]Buckskinning is a branch of historical re-enactment concentrating on the fur trade with different areas in the period of the Old West, roughly 1800–1840. Participants may choose to portray mountain men, American Indians, traders, missionaries, trappers, explorers, or anybody else who might have been in the Rocky Mountains in this time period. For more, see: http://www.buckskinning.org (accessed February 23, 2003)

[46]Kellie Neighbors, personal interview, Solsberry, IN, April 9, 2005.

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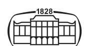
**Fig. 12.** Kellie Neighbors in a historical Piankeshaw outfit at the School of the Native at Piankeshaw Trails Educational Park in Solsberry, IN, April 2005 (Photo by author)

City (Ind.), has two personae: a Native American from the Wea tribe (Fig. 13), and a French woman from the 18th century (Fig. 14). As she explains: "I wanted to portray somebody who would have likely lived in [this] area, so I chose a Wea woman; no one special, not a princess, just an everyday person. My second persona started because I was interested in the White counterpart of my Native persona. And you really get a feel for people when you are in their clothes. (…) Native re-enactors know that we have nothing but the best intentions and only want to educate. But no matter how historically accurately you dress, some things will never be historically accurate. What we do is really *fun*. This in itself is inaccurate because you know you can't have a period camp without disease, war, violence, brothels… It's a game for us, but when you are talking with the visitors, you always have to include the downside so that they don't idealize the past."[47]

[47]Sidney Bolam, personal interview, Bloomington, IN, February 19, 2005.



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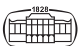
**Figs. 13 and 14.** Sidney Bolam in a historical Wea outfit at the Mihsihkinaahkwa Powwow in Columbia City, IN, August 2004; and in a French Colonial outfit in her home in Bloomington, IN, February 2005 (Photos by author)

Bonita Bent-Nelson, who grew up never talking about her Native heritage at home, is a re-enactor who also powwows. In her perception, there is nothing inherently contradictory in doing both: "I feel that it is vitally important to show what life was like here, both before contact and after. Someone must give voice to the people who were here before the Europeans came. The relationship was not all bad either. For many years under French rule, the Great Lakes was a place of symbiotic relationship between the French and their Algonquian allies. It was with the coming of the English and eventual American occupation that the life of the Indians was vastly changed for the worse."[48]

As for the authenticity of clothing seen at powwows and re-enactments, she attests that the prejudice also exists among some re-enactors toward 'powwow Indians.' "There is this belief that powwow dancers are portraying history, but if this were so, they would be dressed all wrong. This is a misconception. Much of the design of the regalia is based on what type of a dancer one is. It is usually 'dreamt' by the wearer. Sometimes it is very historically accurate and traditional, as mine is, or it can be totally outlandish and colorful, as in the contemporary contest outfits.

[48]Bonita Bent-Nelson, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005.



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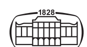
But you have to be careful with the term 'traditional' because, technically speaking, anything carried on for several generations can become a tradition. Therefore, beaded tennis shoes are now a 'traditional' item in some regalia because they have been popular since the 1960s. (…) I am noticing that there are more people crossing over between re-enacting and powwow dancing. It is a way to honor the history of our people as well as taking care of our own spiritual needs. There are many people who dance who have little or no Native American heritage, but they do so because they feel a connection with the people or just because they enjoy it."

In re-enactments, Bent-Nelson does not portray a specific individual, just a generalized character. She is very conscious, however, about incorporating elements in her dance outfits that are either regionally or tribally meaningful (Fig. 15). "When interpreting a Native American persona, I portray a *marginal*, or half-breed, usually of Potawatomi heritage. My own ancestry is Cherokee, but because I am re-enacting in the Great Lakes region, I interpret the people of the area. It is also an area that I have intensively studied. I speak some Potawatomi and have learned

**Fig. 15.** Bonita Bent-Nelson in a late 1700s style historical outfit at the American Indian Council Spring Powwow in Lebanon, IN, April 2005 (Photo by author)



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many of their traditions because the longhouse which I am a member of is primarily Potawatomi teachings. (…) One of my bags has floral quillwork in red and blue flowers and a heart on top—it is the Cherokee symbol for strawberry, which stands for renewal. My Great Lakes style bag has a quillwork elk on it, and these beads are trade beads, Vaseline, and wound beads from Michigan, 1690 Great Lakes style. All beads are old, around 300 years, and were traded for."

Lynn Young is also an historical re-enactor and powwow dancer with some, albeit undocumented, Native heritage. The knowledge of who she is has influenced her life in many ways. She became involved in re-enactments after visiting the Trail of Courage living history festival in Rochester (Ind.), and her involvement in powwows grew out of these activities and relationships: "Being involved in rendezvous,[49] I also became involved in powwows, as some of my re-enacting friends are also involved in the powwow scene. Dancing at powwows has fulfilled a deep spiritual and emotional need for me. To me, dancing is a prayer to the beat of the drum." Young wears Woodlands regalia (Fig. 16) most of the time because the group she usually dances with is comprised of Woodlands Indians, and Indiana is in the Woodlands cultural area: "I am of Plains heritage, and I do have that style of regalia as well, but there are Plains influences in my Woodlands regalia, too."[50]

In her private life, Young is an educator and travels to local schools to talk about Native American history and culture as a way of fighting stereotypes and helping young people to have a healthy and accurate view of Native people past and present: "All of these activities, re-enactments, powwows, and teaching are ways to be more involved with my own Indianness. To me, being Indian influences everything: how I conduct myself each day, how I interact with people, how I treat our Mother Earth, how I educate my grandchildren. Being involved with powwows is a very grounding experience for me; it helps me stay connected—physically, emotionally, and spiritually."

All in all, for most historical re-enactors, the major draw of this hobby is the sense of community they gain. As Sidney Bolam asserts, "You travel all over the country, attend different rendezvous, but you end up seeing a lot of the same people, and you start getting this feeling of an extended family, complete with your 'protective brothers' and 'dear grandparents,' and even your 'black sheep'."[51]

## IDEOLOGIES OF AUTHENTICITY AND STRATEGIES OF AUTHENTICATION

Participating authentically in traditional culture involves a commitment to willful acts of creation intended to express cultural or social connection (Glassie 1995:400–401). Throughout time and space, cultures change and adapt. Powwow dancers represented in this work understand that culture is a dynamic process. They understand that 'being Indian' is a matter of worldview and actions—how one looks at the world and how one acts in it. "To me, being Indian is not so much about blood percentage but more about living the life, walking the Red Road. It is a way of thinking. A way of conducting your life in the right way. How you treat Mother Earth and all our relations. I have seen a lot of 'full bloods' who are not 'Indian' at all…"[52]

[49]Another term for historical re-enactments.

[50]Lynn Young, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, April 24, 2005.

[51]Sidney Bolam, personal interview, Bloomington, IN, February 19, 2005.

[52]Powwow dancer of mixed heritage who requested to remain anonymous, Columbia City, IN, August 14, 2004.

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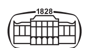
**Fig. 16.** Lynn Young in a historical Woodlands style outfit at the American Indian Council Spring Powwow in Lebanon, IN, April 2005 (Photo by author)

Symbols and their associated meanings change over time and according to various outside and inside influences, "providing the dynamic that keeps human groups in constant flux" (DeMallie 1988:2). Such fluidity of culture is universal and natural. In this fluid and dynamic culture, 'authentic' refers to moments of creativity or interpretation "when individual



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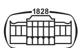
commitment brings social association" (Glassie 1995:401). So long as one acts freely, with desire to connect to the 'traditional' within a society (i.e., the work and ideas of other society members, which are also willful, creative, and consciously connected to values or ideals of a social group), the creations, expressions, or interpretations that result are authentic. Tradition as a symbolic process both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. Social identity is always formulated in interaction with others and depends upon evolving distinctions between categories that are symbolically constituted (Handler – Linnekin 1984). Whether social or personal, identity is based on recognition of shared characteristics but exists only through difference in relationship with others (Weaver 2001:242). It is a combination of self-identification and the perceptions of others. Thus, identity construction is an ongoing process, and it is shaped by recognition, non-recognition, or misrecognition by others. Different contexts warrant different levels of identity assertion, but when self-identification and external perceptions are at odds, feelings of *inauthenticity* occur. Some people who assert a Native identity may not look Native, may not be tribally enrolled, and may not have been born on a reservation, yet they have Native heritage and, more importantly, cultural knowledge. Others may be enrolled but know very little about their culture because of lack of interest, teachers, or willingness to pursue a Native identity due to other factors, such as racism and negative stereotypes (Weaver 2001:244). This study features several individuals with such experiences.

Debates over Native identity abound in both scholarly and non-scholarly contexts. Some scholars argue that the epidemic of false claims to Native identity derives from people with obscure antecedents who have swapped their ethnic identities for Native only to use it as leverage in the play of interest-group politics (Clifton 1989:16). Others feel that sometimes even individuals who possess a modest degree of Native ancestry but look White attempt to illegitimately exchange their racial identity for a more romantic – and sometimes more economically profitable – one (Quinn 1990). Such disputes have begun to wreak havoc in Native communities. Tribes are rethinking and adjusting their requirements for tribal citizenship, and many have closed their rolls or revoked memberships, causing a lot of bitterness among their own people. It is one thing to claim a Native identity, and it is quite another thing for that claim to be accepted by others as legitimate. Good examples of this are the multitudes of organizations whose tribal legitimacy is being contested by the federal government and federally recognized tribal nations. The question of 'real Indianness' has been gaining force since the 1960s, when many Americans had become interested in their American Indian ancestry. This group comprises two kinds of individuals: ones who were formerly identified (by themselves and others) as Black, and ones who were identified as White, Hispanic, or some other race or ethnicity. Even within this group, however, two general categories can be distinguished: those whose genealogical research led them to discover a Native ancestor in their lineage, and those who have always known about their tribal ancestry but have suppressed or ignored this information and have either disassociated themselves from tribal communities or have moved in and out or around their margins.[53]

As Ramona Foye sees it, not everyone who is Native by blood is necessarily considered a Native by tribal and social standards: "Lots of Indians, in the 1950s and '60s, came to cities like

[53]For the historical and social elements that helped produce the surge of interest in American Indian heritage and ethnicity, see: Nagel 1996.



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Chicago and chose not to follow their traditional lifeways, and their kids and grandkids are what we consider 'Apples'—red on the outside, white on the inside. They don't have their culture, they don't know their traditional ways on how to conduct themselves, how to dress, how to do beadwork, what their beliefs are. Their parents or grandparents only told them a little bit, what they thought they needed to know, and to them, that's all they know, but they're not going to admit that they don't know anything else. Or maybe they don't realize that there's more out there for them to learn. Traditional is being able to adapt. Survival and necessity dictated what became traditional. And if you want to learn, you have to *ask* an Indian to tell you things; they won't volunteer you any information, but if you ask right, they'll tell you whatever you want to know."[54]

Phillip Stucker looks at the issue from another perspective and believes that asserting one's Native identity is not always a question of personal choice. "I am an enrolled tribal member of the Northern Cherokee Nation of the Old Louisiana Territory of Missouri. Soon after statehood, Missouri passed legislation, in 1838, which in effect outlawed Native Americans from living in the state. Rather than be forced to an Oklahoma reservation, many of our people chose to dress and behave like the Whites in order to conceal their identity. Those who continued to reside in Missouri had to maintain their Cherokee affairs and heritage in secret. But even though the Cherokee were very adaptive to other cultures, they always managed to keep their own unique and rich culture. Even today, that is representative in the modern adornments worn by some descendants."[55] (Fig. 17)

Native identity can be viewed from several different perspectives, and thus four definitions of American Indian identity exist, each with a different meaning for the label 'American Indian,' and each with a different framework for determining the legitimacy of such identity claims: biological, cultural, legal, and personal definitions. Appearance is the most visible aspect of blood identity, and therefore biological definitions of identity take a central position in one's genetic relationship to other tribal members, in which the degree of closeness is also important. Many tribes have made blood quantum one of the criteria for tribal membership, creating barriers to tribal cultural participation for a lot of 'nosebleed Indians,' i.e., people whose Native blood has been diluted to a degree that their physical appearance warrants social disapproval. Additionally, this biological definition of identity essentially suggests that full-blood Natives are more authentic, more integral, and have more of a right to respect (Garroutte 2003). However, 'having Native American blood' and 'being Native American' are two different things.

So, who is considered Native American then? Mixed-bloods and full-bloods, conservatives and progressives, moderns and old-timers—these are all manifestations of the basic blood dichotomy. In reference to mixed-bloods, however, the mathematical consideration of Native blood degree is usually trumped by the more important factor of Native appearance. As Phillip Stucker sees it: "An Indian can be defined by aboriginal blood, but not all have that. Many Cherokee populations are termed White Indian, and there are also Black Indians. Most Indians will tell you that you are not to say you are a Black Indian or White Indian because you are

[54]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

[55]Phillip Stucker, personal (electronic) communication, August 19, 2005.

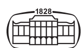

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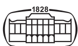
**Fig. 17.** Phillip Stucker in a Cherokee style Straight Dance outfit at National Powwow XIII in Danville, IL, July 2005 (Photo by author)

either Indian or you are not, and only you know that answer. It is how you live, think, pray, and feel in your heart. The Indian lives the culture, has grown up in it so understands it, and knows that the learning never stops. He doesn't run around preaching his culture and he doesn't



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respect those that do."[56] Kellie Brown Eagle (Ho-Chunk) claims: "I always knew I was Indian. My mother never talked about it when I was growing up, but I was always taunted and teased because everybody *saw* that I was Indian, because I always *acted* Indian. It was in me. Even though I didn't 'know' I was Native American, *in my heart*, I knew."[57] Robin McBride Scott echoes the same: "It doesn't matter that I don't look Indian, I know who I am. We mixed in the old days, too. It's not a new thing. Most Native people look down on the folks who are non-status Indians searching for the connection to their ancestors' culture and ways. Everyone is on a different level of learning and knowledge, even the tribally enrolled Indian people. I try to look at folks' hearts and motivations, not just their outward appearance and actions. How can we be expected to know what we are supposed to do or how we are expected to act if we have not been taught these things? It isn't something we know instinctively or have been graced with because we carry the genetic coding of our Native ancestors…"[58] Kellie Neighbors adds: "Many full-blooded Native people consider people that are half one tribe and half another tribe not full-blooded. And so the division begins at that level and trickles all the way down to the fully White wannabes. One friend of mine that lived amongst the Native people of South Dakota was told by a full-blooded Lakota that being Indian is measured like the rings in a pond when you throw a stone into it. If you are full-blooded, you are the first ring, if you are half, you are the second ring, and so on (Fig. 18). That man said of the wannabes that they should not pretend to

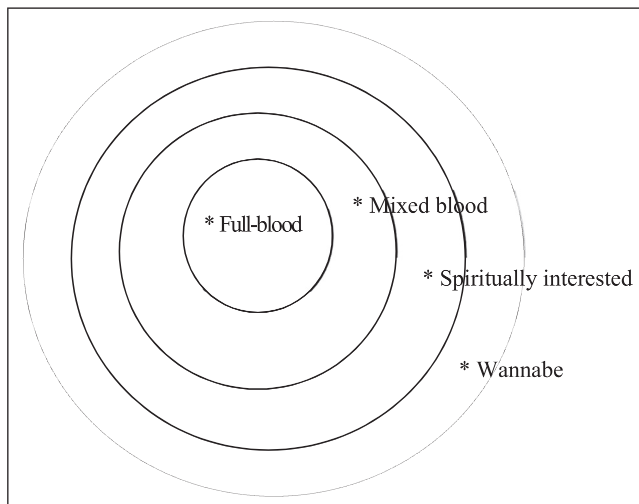
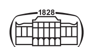



**Fig. 18.** The 'big pond' of Native American identity, as relayed by Kellie Neighbors

[56]Phillip Stucker, personal (electronic) communication, August 19, 2005.

[57]Kellie Brown Eagle, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.

[58]Robin McBride Scott, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, August 20, 2005.



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be Indian if they are not Indian; however, they are *accepted* by the 'real' Indians if they take the attitude that 'I am White but I respect your ways more than the White ways.'"[59]

The rhetoric of authenticity that is visually expressed by dancers through their clothes and orally expressed in their narratives about their personal background and motivations for powwowing are reflective of the varied ideologies, i.e., the beliefs and value systems they employ in their explanations of the strategies for determining the authenticity or inauthenticity of other dancers. Their definitions of authenticity are just as varied, and as their narratives reveal, there are numerous internal and external factors that influence one's interpretation of authenticity. The bases of authenticity are frequently signaled by external, visual symbols, such as those incorporated into dance clothes, but more often they are signaled by an internal belief system that is expressed in action and attitude rather than material articulation. They also range from the obvious – such as heritage, language, or formal coherence based on an institutionalized set of rules – to the complicated, such as following what is in one's heart, i.e., 'feeling' or 'knowing' what is 'right.'

Appeals to authenticity are most often based on heritage, i.e., having Native blood, and this appeal is most often indexed in a dancer's regalia as well as belief system. Ramona Foye, for example, grew up around Shawnee, Oklahoma. Her father was full-blooded Comanche, her maternal grandmother Pawnee and Otoe, and her grandfather Sac and Fox and Prairie Band Potawatomi. Foye's multi-tribal identity – and authenticity – is indexed in her regalia through specific tribal signifiers, and in her ideology through knowledge of specific tribal traditions: "You have to have your Indian name so that after you die, God can recognize who you are. But you need to be able to say it in an Indian language and know what it means. A name usually marks your status, even your clan. (…) A group of elders decides what clans the children will belong to, and mostly it's the mother's clan, but they can also put them in other clans if those are in need of members. They will never put all the children in the same clan, because if you're in need, only other clans can take care of you. So, my two eldest are Chief clan because my grandfather was Chief clan, but the two youngest are Fox clan."[60]

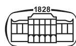
The Sac and Fox outfit (Fig. 19) Foye wears is more of a contemporary contest dress than a traditional one; it seamlessly incorporates traditional tribal designs (specific floral patterns in specific colors) within the larger and more general framework of a Women's Southern Traditional/Cloth dress. "The hummingbirds on the skirt were made to look like beadwork, but it is actually appliqué, which is more contemporary. (…) I first made my outfit, and Mike liked the skirt so much, he wanted a matching outfit for himself. He is wearing a Straight Dancer's outfit. Sometimes he wears bandoliers and sometimes a vest with the outfit. Both elements come from military traditions,"[61] she explains.

The fact that she effortlessly incorporates into her outfit a seemingly out-of-place (i.e., *not* Sac and Fox) Yakima bag, which her husband Mike found at a pawn shop in Washington [state] ("because the beadwork complements the skirt"), is further indication of her being anchored in a strong sense of identity. The white buckskin dress (Fig. 20), also a contest outfit, is more traditional in its use of leather and traditional beadwork design, even while the beadwork

[59]Kellie Neighbors, personal interview, Solsberry, IN, April 9, 2005.

[60]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

[61]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Tipton, IN, September 4, 2004.

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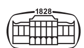
**Figs 19 and 20.** Ramona and Mike Foye in a Sac and Fox Southern Traditional outfit at the Tecumseh Lodge powwow in Tipton, IN, September 2004; and Ramona in a Comanche buckskin dress at the Andersontown Powwow in Anderson, IN, September 2005 (Photos by author)

technique itself is contemporary. Yet it clearly 'reads' Comanche: "The beadwork placement around the neckline is very Comanche, as are the darker periwinkle and rainbow colors. The leggings, too, are typical Comanche, with the fold-over long fringes at the top. I based this dress on my grandmother's old dress, but where in old times they would use beaded strips [on the front and back], we now use beaded rosettes instead. It's more contemporary."[62]

Kellie Brown Eagle (Ho-Chunk), whose Native blood was unknown (or at least unconfirmed) to her until adulthood, uses her understanding of tribal traditions as an authenticator of her identity as a Native American. "I am actually Eagle clan, that's why my last name is Brown Eagle. I don't know how many tribes are like this, but in our tribe, if you're of the Eagle clan, your stature in the tribe is a certain thing; like, we are the accountants, basically. Thunderbird clan, it's usually always someone who takes care of the decision-making; and if you're Bear clan, you're always security. That's the way it was, and that's still the way it is in our tribe. Whatever the clan you're born into, that's the role, the responsibility you follow."[63]

[62]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Anderson, IN, September 10, 2005.

[63]Kellie Brown Eagle, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.



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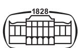
Her strategy for authenticating her identity is also illuminated by her narrative justifications of her regalia elements. Since she did not grow up with powwows, she had to learn it on her own when she first confirmed her Ho-Chunk heritage. "Winnebago is the White name for my people, it means 'people of the stinky water.' Our own name, Ho-Chunk, means 'people of the beautiful language.' And it is a mix of Algonquin and Sioux dialects," she explains. In describing her buckskin regalia (Figs 21 and 22), she emphasizes that this was the first dress she made, which makes it special to her, because it was her initiation into a traditional practice. Her departures from the accepted standards are rationalized, and she is traditionalizing her regalia by attaching historical and tribal/regional meanings to the elements as well as the construction techniques: "I decided to go with gold elk skin because gold doesn't show dirt as much as white. And elk is also larger than buckskin, to fit my frame better. The main reason it's my favorite, though, is that it's pieced together, because they always say Native women should make their first dance regalia by hand. As far as the colors, it's kind of a mixture. My tribe was put on the reservation with the Sioux, so I carry the Woodlands colors because I'm Ho-Chunk, but I also have ancestors that are Sioux. So, I carry strictly the Woodlands colors, some of the Woodlands designs, but mostly I have geometric, to represent both sides. My moccasins are beaded, they have the florals, and that is actually traditional Winnebago. Because we always have some sort of flowers. I have it on my sleeves, and I carry it on my back also. And just to represent my ancestors that live out with

**Figs 21 and 22.** Kellie Brown Eagle in a gold elk skin dress at the Gathering of the People powwow in Terre Haute, IN, September 2004 (Photo by author)



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the Sioux, I carry some of the geometric designs. But I strictly carry the Woodlands colors, which are green, red, yellow, white, and orange. When you have Woodlands designs, you want to do what we call an appliqué stitch; and then this [legging] is a Woodlands design and it's done with a lazy stitch. On my back, those are buffalo nickels on my yoke. I chose the buffalo nickels because buffalo is one of my totems, and I was given a name, *Šémus Tatanka*, which means Sister of the Buffalo. So, I carry the buffalo somewhere on me. My bag is brown leather with beaded fringes on the bottom like on the yoke, and with a floral beading in the center. That's a Woodlands design, too. You gotta carry your background somewhere."[64]

As these narratives reveal, appeals to authenticity are not always and necessarily based on the individual's own definition of Indianness, but the bases of these appeals are quite often indexed in their clothes and in their ideologies. If, for example, one's authenticity cannot be clearly defined by a connection to a discernible tribal value beyond simple generalizations, then another traditionalizing strategy may be employed, such as aligning an outfit to a historical sample in order to make it 'authentic,' accompanied by a narrative that explains the reasons for that alignment. "I tried to make my regalia as close as possible to my grandmother's. The colors I have used are very traditional to the Shawnee people, and they are colors that appeal to me. At this point, my buckskins are a combination of my grandmother's style and additions that are to my own taste (Fig. 23). The symbols that are embroidered onto my dance shawl are in honor of my spirit animal, the White Wolf. There are also small turtles in my regalia in honor of my close association and friendship with so many of the Miami people,"[65] explains Susan Joy.

Historic authenticity is a strategy that is used by hobbyists and re-enactors purposefully, but traditionalization is also employed by other dancers through individual consistency and formal coherence over time. Individuals are recognized by certain elements in their regalia that identify them, but their place in the powwow circle is authenticated by other powwow dancers over time and through social interactions, not through regalia on its own. Some dancers believe that formal coherence is best expressed when one sticks to a certain tribal style in their dance outfits, preferably one that is in their own heritage, and that way it becomes their signature style.

Another strategy of authentication is the socialization of a dancer by an elder of the community, as in the case of Ramona Foye's husband, Mike Foye. Mike and Ramona met at a powwow in Ohio and married in 1982. As Ramona explains, Mike got interested in American Indian dancing as a Boy Scout, and he has been around powwows since he was about eight or nine years old: "His dad was into re-enacting, and his mom just went along and then started doing beadwork. They became members of Tecumseh Lodge when Mike was about fifteen—he's already been dancing for years by then. (…) My family and friends do not consider Mike white or hobbyist—he is one of us, because *he lives like we do*. They didn't really *accept* him, though, until I was pregnant with [my first son]. Then a distant relative – an uncle, we call him – took him under his wings and taught him what he needs to teach his kids—stuff that a mother is not supposed to (or cannot)."[66]

Such socialization by an elder can happen in other ways, too. Most dancers report to have been 'taught' the traditional way of dancing or making regalia by a tribal 'elder.' Robin McBride

[64]Kellie Brown Eagle, personal interview, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.

[65]Susan Joy, personal interview, Columbia City, IN, August 14, 2004.

[66]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.

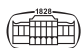

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**Fig. 23.** Susan Joy at the Mihsihkinaahkwa Powwow in Columbia City, IN, August 2004 (Photo by author)

Scott elucidates the story of her outfits: "I have one fancy dance outfit (Fig. 24), two modernized traditional Cherokee outfits, and three regular traditional Cherokee dresses. I also have two traditional Great Lakes Woodland outfits. The reason that I have the Great Lakes traditional outfits is that I have learned many of the traditional ways of the Miami, Delaware, Shawnee, and Potawatomi peoples by meeting many elders from these tribes. I learned to make ribbonwork, moccasins, and clothing from my adopted mother Margaret Ann Bird, who is Osage and Delaware. I have learned ribbonwork and beadwork from Evelyn Bellmeyer, who is a Miami of Oklahoma elder. I also learned ribbonwork and beadwork from several Shawnee and Potawatomi elders. I make and wear the outfits of the other tribes as a way of honoring their people when I am asked to dance at their dances."[67] Phillip Stucker, on the other hand, had a different introduction into powwow culture: "My interest in the culture started with my Grandma Maggie

[67]Robin McBride Scott, personal interview, Lebanon, IN, August 20, 2005.

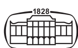

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**Fig. 24.** Robin McBride Scott in a Fancy Shawl outfit at the American Indian Council Traditional Powwow in Lebanon, IN, August 2005 (Photo by author)

June's family stories. I always knew I would end up on the Powwow Trail. Now I am a Southern Straight dancer. I have powwowed since 1972, when I was led into the circle by Sam Sine, a Winnebago elder, who was also called Chief Walks-with-the-Wind. He taught me intertribal powwow dancing."[68]

Among historical re-enactors, one authentication strategy is what Kellie Neighbors calls 'going the whole hog.' "Not a whole lot of re-enactors do the tattooing, but a lot more men will now shave their head (Fig. 25). They're going the whole hog. There was a lot of tattooing done [in those days], and, as a medicine woman, I have a lot of medicinal symbols on me. The four stripes down my chin, that's traditional Eastern Woodlands women's tattooing. The dots around my eyes, it's just decoration, which to me represents insight. These are not real tattoos,

[68]Phillip Stucker, personal (electronic) communication, August 19, 2005.

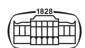

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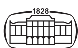
**Fig. 25.** Monty Martin's Shawnee persona in a 1750s style British military waistcoat at the Tecumseh Lodge Powwow in Tipton, IN, September 2005 (Photo by author)

though. You can do this with henna, which is temporary but will last three weeks. I use a black marker, and with oil, it will wash right off. I can't wear these for three weeks at work—that would not be acceptable. So, I just do what I can for the re-enactment."[69]

Walt Penn, who is not an enrolled tribal member but claims Apache ancestry, also uses several different kinds of internal and external authentication strategies when talking about his powwow involvement, from appeals to heredity (Native grandmother), heart (feeling Native), and lifestyle (walking the Red Road), to traditionalizing regalia by aligning it to historical tribal practices. His most significant basis of authentication, however, is the spiritual calling that he is answering by dancing in powwows. "My father's mother told me that the earliest she could recall was when she was about five years old, in Oklahoma, standing in a long line, and there were Indians everywhere. 'Was that a reservation?' I asked. 'No! Don't worry about it!' she yelled. I didn't ask further questions as she was obviously whitewashed as a young child that she should not let it be known that she had Indian blood. (…) I feel I'm Chiricahua Apache. It's more in my

[69]Kellie Neighbors, personal interview, Solsberry, IN, April 9, 2005.



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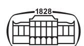
heart, I can't show you on paper where my blood comes from, but for some reason, in my heart, I know I'm Apache. The Native attitude has given me a sense of calmness. I enjoy living a part of my heritage. It is hard to explain, but I have had an interest in Native Americans, I think, for a reason, and now I can 'live' a part of my life with that interest. I don't have the desire to get totally involved, like some do, and march or protest or make a scene; just quietly honor my ancestors and, as Grandfather has allowed, honor the spirits of those who have walked on. (…) My total dress doesn't necessarily communicate clearly to others that I am Chiricahua Apache, but essential elements in it signal this (Figs 26 and 27). I've got the skull cap and the face paint and the moccasins, they're Apache, and the knife's pattern is typical Apache style, but the rest of it is just, you know, good-looking—looks good in the dance arena, and it's more for decoration than anything else. My headdress, an Apache-style leather skullcap, it became a personal signifier—I am now associated with that headdress. My moccasins are Apache-style knee-high moccasins with a turned-up nose. The turned-up moccasins, they were on several Chiricahua Apache photographs. The face paint is also Apache, a white horizontal line on the cheek, just under the eyes. The apron, I made it myself. The design was beaded by an Apache lady [Marilyn Cleveland]. I don't really know what it represents, but it's definitely Apache because of the designs, and because an Apache made it."[70]

**Figs 26 and 27.** Walt Penn at the Gathering of the People Powwow in Terre Haute, IN, September 2004; and at the American Indian Council Spring Powwow in Lebanon, IN, April 2004 (Photos by author)

[70]Walt Penn, personal interview, Bedford, IN, May 18, 2003.



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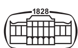
Explaining the spiritual aspects he enjoys in a powwow, and the origins of his assumed middle name, 'Spirit Dancer,' Penn relates the story of finding his name at a powwow trader's booth one day: "There it was, this T-shirt that said 'Spirit Dancer'—it was a lone man dancing around a fire, as I have been dancing alone around a fire. I was not *seeking* a name, but the Great Spirit had led me to a name, for the work I have done for the spirits of others. I am Spirit Dancer. I dance for the spirits of my ancestors, and I dance for people that can't dance due to illness or handicap. I honor the spirits of those who have passed on."[71]

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The people represented in this study are involved in a kind of quest for authenticity (ethnic and/or cultural)—some for personal fulfillment, others for a collective purpose. But there are numerous ways to represent Native identity and even more ways to authenticate it; this study considers only one: the visual rhetoric of (cultural) authenticity found at powwows. In constructing a powwow outfit, dancers strive to achieve a genuine and accurate representation of who they *believe* they are, and this outfit in turn communicates their inner truth to others. They may have to *consolidate* their Native American identity with their mainstream American identity (like many 'status Indians'); they may have to *reclaim* a Native heritage that was lost to them due to external forces (like some 'apples'); they may *craft* a weekends-only enthusiast identity to admire the exotic (like hobbyists); they may try to *revive* a historical identity to teach about the past (like re-enactors); or they may *create* a new identity that aligns better with their spiritual needs (like 'Indian Hearts'). Their personal narratives reveal the motivations that compel them to attend powwows, the ideologies of authenticity that are realized through their dance clothes (from construction to assembly to display), as well as the different rhetorics they use to express these strategies in the powwow arena. These strategies of authentication are based on various factors, from internal (heredity, lifestyle, spirituality) to external (language, aesthetics, social standards). Their appeals to and definitions of authenticity reveal their hierarchies of value (such as formal coherence or individual consistency versus looking or feeling good).

The study was not intended to represent a single truth, only a perspective. It is simply an introspective view from multiple perspectives: how people see themselves, authenticate themselves (and each other), and build their powwow regalia. It was intended to shed light on several distinct constituents of Midwestern powwows, and to show the dynamics of their individual identities and the ways they are manifested in dance clothes. Powwows and powwow regalia are a tool for group expression and self-identification, but also a teaching tool for making an educated assessment. Powwow-goers agree that there is value in teaching 'outsiders' how to understand the meaning of powwow regalia and the acts associated with a powwow, and there are many things people can learn through their powwow involvement. As one dancer expressed: "I would like to see folks who were not raised in their Native ways try to learn from more reliable sources the traditions of their people instead of relying on the media and pop culture for their identity. I would also like to see Native people become more tolerant of those of Native ancestry who have not had the advantages of knowing or learning their culture. Many Native people are intolerant of the folks who are searching for knowledge about the 'real' ways of their ancestors,

[71]Walt Penn, personal (electronic) communication, February 12, 2005.



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and they refuse to help them while criticizing these same people for not knowing the 'real' ways. Education is very important in passing on the traditions of our people to descendants and the public. This needs to be done in an open, respectful, and honest way. In doing so, mainstream society's perceptions and opinions of Native peoples might be corrected, misconceptions and stereotypes lessened—and perhaps even eliminated."[72]

At first sight, powwow regalia seems to be a good indicator of identity because it is rich in symbolism, and with the proper tools and education, that symbolism can be interpreted. But interpretation is always subjective. On the one hand, non-Native dancers at powwows muddy the impressions spectators take away about Natives, because one cannot define a living culture through historical clothes. On the other hand, powwow clothes are not about historical tribal traditions. As Ramona Foye emphasized: "We base our clothes on old styles, get inspired by traditional clothes, but we re-interpret them into our own lives. And being able to discern tribal differences comes with experience—when you go to enough powwows, you see enough dancers, you start seeing familiar patterns."[73] Therefore, if the goal is to try to identify American Indianness through clothes, powwows have significant limitations.

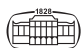
Nonetheless, once one understands regalia and visual acts on a deeper level, one realizes that simply getting dressed up for a powwow is not the same as being Native. Native Americans are not defining themselves through clothes. Clothes are a tool, a component, but appearance is momentary. To some, regalia is an indispensable part of their persona in the powwow, but to others it is just a fun, non-essential part. Not dressing up for the powwow and still attending is still meaningful: the visual and auditory aesthetic enjoyment is important ('beautiful costumes, heart-warming music'), but being a community and becoming better individuals because of the moral standards demanded by the powwow ethic are far more important. It is the internal authentication of good people by other good people. It does not matter how Native they are.

When it comes to the visual articulation of one's identity, there are degrees of effort to be discerned. People who are sincere about their quest for authenticity and are only limited by their access to quality resources for the creation of a good outfit are usually aided in their quest by more seasoned dancers by taking them under their wings and guiding them through the whole process. This is the socializing strategy for authentication. Numerous people, however, show up at powwows in clothes that are not only incorrectly interpreted in style but also poorly made. While differences are recognized and often accepted, outfits that show no signs of relation to any recognizable Native tradition are seen as inappropriate (because of their stereotypical and highly romanticized imagery) and thus get no authentication within the powwow community. Moreover, being neutral/flexible/liberal, i.e., accepting any claims of American Indianness, will not bring about changes in the group dynamic/structure, but then again, those who truly care about authenticity simply do not attend events that do not offer authentic experiences. Freedom of choice allows anyone to attend a powwow, and freedom of choice allows anyone who does not like the experience to leave and never return.

Self-identification, however, is fluid. 'Indian Hearts' can in time learn enough about these traditions to become hobbyists or historical re-enactors. Or they can find their Native roots through genealogical research, establish legitimate connections with a Native community, and

[72]Powwow dancer who requested to remain unnamed, Gathering of the People, Terre Haute, IN, September 25, 2004.

[73]Ramona Foye, personal interview, Mooresville, IN, August 29, 2005.



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become ‘Native’ (regardless of political recognition). Even dance clothes themselves are not an unambiguous indicator of Native identity as outfits are in a constant flux, in a never-ending process of improvement. Knowing about the various identity categories and their characteristics may nonetheless help one understand the powwow as a means of public education as well as an arena for individual expressions of identity, creativity, and cultural pride.

Even though powwows may open avenues for dominant-culture people to ‘steal’ Native traditions and turn them into their own profit, they also help Native culture in direct and indirect ways. Directly, they help the socializing process of Natives by bringing back to the culture those who have been cut off by external forces, and this has nothing to do with regalia—visual conditions are secondary to social conditions. Indirectly, they offer an opportunity for a dialogue about the culture, raise political interest and recognition of a country within a country, and put Native crafts in commercial markets. As uncomfortable as it makes some feel, the capitalization of it has helped the culture survive: it provides a market for Native crafts and a means of living for many traders, craftspeople, dancers, and singers.

The perceptible prejudice against non-Native dancers at powwows is rooted in the long-standing history of non-Native appropriations of Native practices for individual gain. But as in most cases, there are two sides to consider. On the one hand, there is the Native peoples’ concern about misrepresentation of their culture and values by people who do not have the right education or understanding of those values. When one puts on Native clothes and enters the dance arena, one is representing a Native cultural practice, and undiscerning spectators could easily assume that what they are seeing is the right (or only) way to be Native. On the other hand, those who are genuinely interested and invested in powwowing do so because they see a real value in preserving these traditions and practices for future generations, and they want to learn from people who can teach them things correctly and without bias. Whether dark-skinned or light-skinned, full-blood or mixed-blood, it is the values according to which one lives everyday life and shares those values with others that give them a sense of who they are. And what better place to share those values than the symbolic circle of the powwow arena, where young and old, Natives and non-Natives can come together in a celebration of traditions that have sustained generations of Native American people through centuries of hardship?

As evidenced by the foregoing narratives, there are many subtle and intricate ways in which the authenticity of one’s identity can be perceived internally and externally, expressed orally and visually, and validated through various social interactions. Susan Joy’s words encapsulate the sentiment many powwow people in the Midwest share: “I see hope for the future of powwows in everyone who is trying to dig through the burnt ruins of their families and trying to find the buried truth as to who they are and where they came from. As long as the people breathe, we will powwow.”[74]

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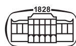
[74]Susan Joy, personal interview, Columbia City, IN, August 14, 2004.



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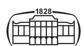

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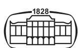


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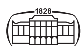


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