

How Red Should Natives Be, and How Should We Maintain This Redness?

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Due to the history of colonization and the colonizer's continued agenda of eliminating the "Indian problem" through less overt assimilation and Indian termination efforts, identity politics is particularly thick in Native communities. Some Native peoples, and rightly so, are concerned that we are going to self-terminate if we do not begin to employ rigid standards of identity to protect who we are. For example, it seems as if Native peoples are continually judging one another based on their hair, eye and skin colour. And further, in an attempt to maintain who we are as Native peoples some communities are even being so bold as to use or suggest blood-quantum quotas in their self-determination efforts, whereas other First Nation continue to use Indian Act status registration with the Department of Indian Affairs as a requirement for band membership. Hopefully this article begins to remedy some of the negative dynamics and practices that many Native peoples continue to be faced with.

People think, see, perceive and talk through particular symbolic worldviews. We are taught these symbolic worldviews within significant relationships with others. Given this, all societies have symbolic representations for their languages as well as their political and spiritual systems. For example, the Anishinabe clan system of governance employs symbols that are particular to the symbolic worldview of the Anishinabe. In articulating this understanding it is important that people appreciate that when it is said that something is "symbolic" it is not to dismiss it as trivial and non-significant. Rather, symbolic representations are critical vehicles that humans think through. Given the significance of symbolic systems in directing who we are, they are vulnerable to systems of oppression such as colonization and they are thus subject to change over time.

Although today it is appreciated that there is no genetic basis for differentiating people based on race, physical appearance continues to pervade social discourses and practices of identity and culture. And further, although Indigenous nations did not historically rely on physical appearance to determine who was a member of a society, today, due to systems of colonization, we have different dynamics and pressures placed on us that cannot be denied. For example, the use of physical appearance and blood-quantum, used in earlier versions of the Indian Act to determine who was and who was not an Indian as well as the epistemological power of the media and Hollywood, have very much invaded all our mindsets and therefore shape how we perceive who is and is not an Indian. Given these dynamics of colonization, today "redness", or rather physical appearance, also known as phenotype physiology, blood-quantum and status registration are common practices used to determine who is a "real" Native and who is not.

If Native peoples wish to encourage their children to marry and have children within their own cultural group in a manner that allows the redness to remain this is their prerogative. This is similar to other cultural groups that encourage their children to marry within their own cultures. By suggesting this, it may be perceived as being racist or promoting racism. Rather, it is embracing the symbolism that many Native and for that matter non-

Native people use today in defining who is Native as today a particular phenotype physiology is a symbolic marker of who is Native. It would be misleading to say redness did not matter to us.

Having said this, there is another component of redness that requires discussion that is not red at all, at least not in terms of phenotype physiology. Alternatively, employing a person's outward physical appearance is not without limitations when establishing who is and who is not Native. Being a Native person also includes a particular value system and associated underlying philosophy, which must be appreciated in determining who is Native. These values are also taught within significant relationships and it is important that we continue to teach them to our children. For example, some Native values include sharing, respect and the need to honour one's relationship with the land. Otherwise, we will have red people in appearance only. Given this, and worthy of restating, it is not enough to employ mere redness to determine who we are; we must appreciate the value system and associated underlying philosophy and ensure that they too remain intact.

Further, we must appreciate that an individual who does not look red, may in fact be red and we must appreciate that a person who is red may in fact be guided by a non-Native value system. It is for these reasons that we must challenge and discourage rigid discourses and practices of both redness and blood-quantum, and for that matter registration as a status Indian with the Department of Indian Affairs, in determining who is and who is not a Native person. For example, the use of a 50% or 25% blood-quantum to determine band membership or citizenship is especially problematic. Moreover, we must appreciate the reality that Native people have been "marrying out" for several generations and that as a result many Native peoples do not fulfill the stereotypical appearance of redness and have a very minimal blood-quantum. These people must not be discriminated against merely because they do not look red or have less than let us say for example 25% blood-quantum.

This too applies to status registration. Given the assimilation policy encoded, both past and present, in the Indian Act not all Native peoples have status and thus status also should not be the determining factor of who is Native and who is not, just as redness and blood-quantum should not. For example, someone may be as red as red can be and 100 % in terms of blood-quantum, be registered as status, and yet allow non-Native values to guide who they are and how they act. Once again, in this way, redness does not stop with physical appearance, with being 100% Native by blood or with being a status Indian.

Further to this discussion, when the Indian Act was amended in 1985, the federal government codified an enfranchisement process known as the second-generation cut-off rule. It is estimated that with the number of Native people who are marrying out within 75 years there will no longer be any Native children born who are entitled to status registration. And because section six of the Indian Act is more complicated than the old patrilineal system, it confuses people. They are therefore unable to manipulate the rules in their favour. It is really quite simple though. Today there are two classes of Indians: 6(1) and 6(2). A 6(1) Indian can marry whoever he or she wants and produce status children. This means they can marry and have children with a non-status Native person or

even a non-Native person and their children will be registered as 6(2) Indians in accordance with the Indian Act. If they marry and have children with a 6(1) Indian or a 6(2) Indian their children will be registered as 6(1), whereas a 6(2) Indian must marry and have children with another 6(1) or 6(2) if they want their children to have status. These children will be registered as 6(1) Indians.

Whether you want to play the game (to some life is a game of power) of redness, blood-quantum or status registration you get to decide, after all it is your life. But keep in mind that a 100% red Native who also has status and yet does not allow a Native worldview to guide them could easily be dismissed as a non-Native person. Here it is important to stress that in articulating the potential for the practice of what is known as “cultural racism” this is not an endorsement of the practice. Rather, we must embrace the adopted Native peoples who have been raised in non-Native homes when they return to our communities in their efforts to learn who they are as Native peoples in terms of values and philosophies.

In summary, this topic is highly evocative and abstract for people to read, think and talk about. Yet, it is a topic that is in the forefront of many Native peoples’ minds in our attempts to avoid self-termination through the federal government’s assimilation policies. Today, redness may be important in terms of being a symbolic marker of who we are and we may want to encourage our children to marry within our cultural groups for this reason. The need to hold on to a Native phenotype, more commonly known as redness is understandable, as it has come to symbolize who we are as Native peoples and our worldviews. We need to do it, though, in a non-racist way, meaning we must not exclude Native people from our communities who do not look stereotypically Native, who have a minimal blood-quantum or who do not have status registration as these systems of identity will always be inadequate in determining who we are as Native people. For any society to survive particular cultural values are essential. Finally, for Native peoples cultural survival does not have to involve racist practices of exclusion.

Biographical Note:

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