

Indigenous Identity.

I'm not going to stand in front of you and claim myself as a woman of color - I'm aware that my skin is lighter than my brown mother and brother, and for that, I have privilege. But when I look at myself in the mirror, I can point out distinct features that come from my Indigenous lineage - my slightly lazy eye that mirrors my ancestor Ward Coachman, my nose that I have learned to love from the side, my olive undertone that never fully allows me to call myself "pale." I can confidently stand in front of you and claim myself as an Indigenous woman, a citizen of the Mvskoke Nation.

With that being said, I was sixteen when I had my Indigenous identity erased for the first time. A classmate of mine, someone who I had grown up with and who had even gone to my tenth birthday party, asked me about my blood quantum. For context, my dad is white, and my mom is Mvskoke. I went to a small High School, and it was pretty well known that me and my siblings, plus one other family, were the only other Native students that went to school there. But, because of the fact that my dad was white, I oftentimes would be faced with borderline problematic comments about my ethnicity. This was before those comments started surfacing in conversations, so I naively answered the boy with the blood fraction that was written on my Tribal citizenship card. I'll forever remember the response that was so casually spoken: "Oh. You're not even a *real* Indian." Then, he continued our conversation like that response didn't make my throat tighten, my cheeks burn out of embarrassment.

I remember silently praying to God not to let me cry in front of the boy who had just erased something that I was so proud to claim. He did more than just hurt me at the moment. Whenever receiving my blood percentage, something I no longer tell people because of this experience, he opened the door for other students to consistently make comments on my Indigenous identity. It allowed students in my class to make comments to me during the Tomahawk Chop at pep rallies, snicker, and make racist comments in history courses, and, worst of all, dismiss me as Native because I wasn't a "full-blooded Indian."

I don't tell that story to say the boy had some malicious intent and was a part of some elaborate scheme to erase Indigenous people from society. He was just a product of it. He probably didn't know that the Indian blood laws were put into place by the United States Federal Government onto tribal nations to limit their citizenships. That these fractions on tribal cards will not only prevent my children from being legally Native but will eventually erase Native culture in the United States.

Blood quantum is a complicated matter that has a history long before any of us in this room today. It has loopholes, broken treaties, and confusing language. It, shockingly, was put into place in Indigenous tribal nations by white settlers. In 1705, the Colony of Virginia was the first colony to adopt the Indian Blood Law. The premise of the law was to limit the civil rights of Native Americans and people who had more than half Native ancestry. It was a way to determine whether someone was "Indian enough" to receive land, goods, services, etc., from the United States government. The government hoped that by enforcing this blood quantum law, that eventually after two generations of intermarriages, the amount of "Indian blood" would eventually disappear.

Blood quantum is a way to enforce cultural genocide. It is a way to limit the rights of Indigenous people, limiting who gets benefits, limiting the amount of land we get to keep, and ultimately limiting the number of generations that legally get to claim Indigenous identity.

Limiting is a word that is all too familiar in the tragic history of Indigenous people.

My great-grandmother on my Mother's side was "placed" into a residential school when she was younger. "Placed" is the government's nice way of saying stolen, kidnapped, removed forcefully from her people. I don't know the gritty details of what happened inside of those walls, but from the accounts of other great-grandmothers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, grandpas, mothers, fathers, I can assure you it was abuse. It

probably involved stripping off her Native clothes that held significant meaning, cutting her thick dark hair that held stories of culture, beating her whenever she spoke in her Native tongue.

I don't know the details, but I feel the effects of those secrets inside those walls. I know that whatever they did to her inside hell disguised as a school, where they "killed the Indian" and "saved the child," that my culture is buried in an unmarked grave on those grounds. She swore off the use of our native tongue, and whenever she stepped back into the Indigenous community, she never spoke in Mvskoke again.

Halloween - every ethnic person's nightmare. Kidding. Partially. Someone I knew suggested our friend group go as Disney princesses - alluding to me being Disney's version of Pocahontas; since I was the only Native person in my friend group, it made sense. They expected me to put on some seductive costume of an Indigenous woman who risked everything for a white man. I partially blame Disney for taking her story and twisting it into a story of romance instead of what it really was - one of the first documented cases of MMIW (Missing, Murdered Indigenous Women).

Like Pocahontas, Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirits are being taken and murdered in alarming rates. As of 2021, the FBI's National Crime Information Center reported 5,203 missing Indigenous women and girls, though the US Department of Justice federal missing person database (NamUS) only reported 116. But, Indigenous women are going missing at such an alarming rate with visibly no coverage, it is nearly impossible to truly calculate how many of our women are missing. Our murder rate is ten times higher than all other ethnicities, with murder being our third leading cause of death. More than 4 out of 5 have experienced violence, more than half of Indigenous women experience sexual violence, and around 48% have reported being stalked in their lifetime. Urban Indian Health reported that the youngest MMIW victim was a baby less than a year old, and the oldest was an 83-year-old victim — just being an Indigenous woman in America is a safety hazard.

Our women are left out of conversations of violence — we are the forgotten majority. Murder and true crime podcasts cover women who are ten times more likely to be killed than our stories are being left in the shadows of society. We stand with red-painted hands over our mouths because our women's voices are not heard. Our voices scream 'No More Stolen Sisters,' but they fall onto the deaf ears of media and law enforcement. We are in a crisis, mothers are living without daughters, daughters are without mothers, and sisters are without sisters.

I'll be vulnerable, and I think I can speak for a majority of Indigenous people - it can be extremely emotionally draining to be Indigenous. With Canada unearthing unmarked graves in residential schools and finding up to 1,762 unmarked graves of children as of May, major universities like Harvard, the University of North Dakota, and the University of Alabama keeping Indigenous remains and not returning them to their tribal nations, and now the Indian Child Welfare Act at risk of being overturned - it's hard to see the positives.

Intergenerational trauma is defined by Duke university as the transmission of the oppressive or traumatic effects of a historical event. Unfortunately for Indigenous people, these historical events are far and wide - forced relocation, loss of land, culture, spiritual practices, and language. The sad truth is that descendants of survivors of these traumas inflicted onto Indigenous communities are more likely to experience the risk of self-harm, addiction, suicide, heart and liver diseases, and their risk of cancer increases. These traumatic events that the government inflicted on Indigenous communities affect far beyond the land that we stand on - it affects the way that we live our everyday lives.

So, where do we go from here? How do we help a whole group of people who have been countlessly betrayed, stolen, murdered, and wiped out? I wish I had a solid solution that could help heal generations of trauma and stop the cultural genocide that is occurring on our land. Knowledge is power. Awareness is power. Talk about Native American issues, bring light awareness to the issues that I talked about today -

blood quantum, the trauma surrounding the truth of residential schools, missing murdered Indigenous women. I promise you, every Indigenous person you will ever meet will probably be affected by at least one of these things.

But, despite the hundreds of factors against us, we are still here. We live among you, sit beside you in classrooms, diners, movie theaters. We live in cities, rural areas, and reservations. We exist past the 1800s, I promise you, despite what history books have taught you in school. Native people have been here for hundreds of years before the settlers came on our land, and we will be here for hundreds of years after.

Mvto. Thank you.