

**Identity and Ancestry:
*Sticks & Stones & Buffalo Bones***

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Introduction

This publication comprises five sections—introduction, narrative, afterword, references, and appendix. The second section is a first-person, autoethnographic narrative. “Afterword: Subjective Interpretation and Theoretical Ground” is a contextualizing discussion that explains the organization and substance of the narrative and grounds it in the literatures of identity.

Providing personal experience before analysis is intended to create an effect akin to seeing the movie before reading the book or reading the book before the review. This approach derives partly from the postmodern idea that colonized people need to be heard in their own language—to say their “own word” (Lee, 2001, p. 60)—before academic or “professional” dissection. By “suspending disbelief”—holding rational predispositions in abeyance—the reader encounters the *person* first. The backdrop of the personal voice predisposes the analysis instead of vice versa.

The narrative is about my progress toward ethnic-identity achievement as a First Nations Mixedblood woman. That process was slow, halting, and fraught with the misgivings and anxieties typical of the forms of identity diffusion—ethnic ambiguity, passing, negative identity, and submersion, which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Cotrell, 1993).

Historical Context

The phenomenon of ethnic identity development exists in the United States because racism is intrinsic to its history. Without racism, the concept of race would not exist, and conflicts based on skin color and culture would be nonexistent. In the case of First Nations, colonial conquest and genocide began with first contact and has persisted for 500 years.

Over the centuries the U.S. government devised a series of “federal-Indian” policies, all of which were concerted attempts to uproot, remove, disband, deculturate, and dispossess First Nations peoples so as to change them culturally into White people or to exterminate them. Despite and because of official policies the “blood” of Whites and Natives intermingled from the outset, through rape, voluntary association, and love. Consequently, a third “race” evolved of Mixedbloods who were variously accepted or rejected by one group or the other. As often as not, they were cast out by both because of the mutual Native–White hostilities that stemmed from White conquest and genocide.

The belief that Mixedbloods represented the worst aspects of both worlds became prevalent in 19th-century White America. They threatened White racial purity and epitomized Native savagism combined with the depraved “dark side” of White “civilization” (Pearce, 1953;

Scheick, 1979). The historian Francis Parkman (1849) called them “half Indian, half White man, and half devil” (Parkman, as cited in Scheick, 1979, p. 18). Among Whites they were commonly and pejoratively termed *half-breed* and *breed*.

The U.S. government instituted the allotment and assimilation policy in conjunction with the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, whereby Native people were classified by “blood quantum,” or degree of Native descent, to reduce U.S. treaty obligations to tribes by dissolving tribal memberships, thus dissolving tribes and reservations and dispossessing them of their lands (Officer, 1971). The United States stands in historical company with Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa as the only western nations to use the racist blood-quantum system to classify Native peoples as a tool of colonization and genocide.

Individual tribal members were allotted reservation lands. Their acceptance of land constituted forfeiture of tribal membership and benefit of U.S. government goods and services theretofore rendered as historical treaty obligations. From 1917 to 1920 a forced fee patent system was established, whereby “competent” individuals were required to accept a land allotment. “Competence” was based peculiarly on the notion that the more “Indian” one was, the less competent she or he was. The “blood quantum” of each tribal member was determined by a confused and inconsistent measure based on anecdotal and presumptive information about an individual’s ancestry. Persons of less than one-half Native blood quantum were deemed to be more competent than those with more than one half; the “competents” were forced to accept fee patents to land allotments and terminate tribal membership (Kinney, 1937, cited in Waddell & Watson, 1971).

The “more-than-one-halves” were carefully investigated; if determined competent, they, too, were forced to accept allotments of a maximum of 40 acres. Students who graduated from government schools (that is, Christian boarding schools) and were deemed competent were awarded land allotments at age 21 (Kinney, 1937, cited in Waddell & Watson, 1971).

The federal government assumed ownership of remaining unallotted reservation lands and opened them to White settlement. Untutored in real estate law and largely lacking the skills, economic resources, and motivation to become farmers, the Native people were defenseless against the connivance and exploitation of real estate purveyors and land-hungry settlers. Between 1887 and 1934, White settlers took more than 91 million acres of Native lands, which declined from 138 million to 47 million acres (Debo, 1970). Whole tribes, clans, and families were broken up and devastated because of the blood-quantum system. Heirship—land allotment eligibility—was commonly awarded to one sibling but not the other because of different parentage—one result of a high Native mortality rate brought on by the intense U.S. colonial

siege from the Civil War until the 1950s. White officials, ignorant of First Nations family systems, frequently misconstrued family relationships, which made a sham of heirship determinations and precipitated disputes and chaos among families and tribes fearful for their survival (Debo, 1970; Kinney, 1937, cited in Waddell & Watson, 1971; Vizenor, 1981, 1985 [personal communication, Spring, 1985]). Native people by the thousands, accustomed to communal life, forfeited tribal membership against their will. This episode was another in the long series of sociological disasters perpetrated against the First Nations by the U.S. government and White populace.

The blood quantum system persisted throughout the tribal reorganization period (1934–1953), the next federal-Indian policy scheme to further reduce tribal numbers and U.S. treaty obligations, requiring each tribe to establish a blood-quantum membership minimum. *One fourth* became the most common criterion to determine whether the government and the tribe would recognize an individual as a “real Indian.” The fact that someone was a Native person, born and raised (how could one be other?) was disregarded. From the Native perspective one was Native because of one’s family, cultural connections, and way of life, which cannot be measured by the harebrained idea of blood quantum. To be “Indian” in the racist White world was highly stigmatic, regardless of blood quantum; Mixedbloods were at high risk for rejection in both milieux. U.S. officials had no interest in the facts and proceeded with their ruinous scheme. Thus, thousands of Native people found themselves in “no-man’s land,” unacceptable to either world.

Thus, in the early 20th century the stage was set for mind-boggling adaptation decisions and identity conflicts for succeeding First Nations generations. This was the situation into which I was born in 1945.

Personal Context

My greatest struggle was against complete submersion, which, paradoxically, might indicate successful identity *achievement* or structural *assimilation* into the dominant Euro-American world, as Gordon (1978) notes. Such “success” would require that my Native heritage had no significance to others or me in my environment. It would have literally disappeared. No emotional conflict would exist, no identity decision would be necessary, and I would not be the object of racial prejudice or discrimination (Gordon, 1978). However, my childhood circumstances dictated otherwise. I experienced marked emotional conflict and observed my father’s similar conflict; in addition, both parents enforced a taboo on the subject inside and outside our home. True to their calculation, I did not feel the sting of racism, as long as I kept quiet about my Native connections. Although others have discussed partial or complete submersion (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1975; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Gordon, 1978; Logan,

1981; Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935; Vizenor, 1985; Westermeyer, 1979), my experience inspired me to enlarge on their explorations. I resonated with Ortiz's view that to be Mestizo or Mixedblood is not an ethnic choice. Rather, an individual born a Mixedblood is likely to be "de-Indianized" at birth by historical events and achieves First Nations identity through recovery of ethnicity—a "re-Indianization" or "recouperation of the Mestizo" (Ortiz, 1984, p. 86).

It finally dawned on me that I had been colonized; that no one in my world recognized this situation; and that if I ceased my identity quest and resigned myself to silence, colonization would be complete. My keen awareness of my Native heritage pushed me forward from a morass of puzzlement and doubt toward affirmation and connection. I could not be at peace with the loss or negation of half my ancestry, cultural deprivation, and identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1980). In late adolescence I felt compelled to choose to be *other*, in defiance of parental constraint and censure.

The Importance of Identity Research and What Remains To Be Done

Exploration of the psychology of First Nations peoples is a relatively new area of academic interest, including the social work/social welfare disciplines. Until the late 20th century most resources had been applied to economic subsistence and community development (AIPRC, 1977), and most social science researchers on First Nations peoples were non-Native anthropologists (Berkhofer, 1978).

From the beginning of the 20th century scholars have recognized that biracial/bicultural or multiracial/multicultural birth in the United States could have troubling consequences for individual identity development, but the few studies of this phenomenon mainly treated children from African American/White backgrounds. Social work research on First Nations had barely begun by 1980 and focused on practice issues. Identity has been rarely studied, least of all the identity issues of First Nations or Euro-American Mixedbloods. This is attributable to the scarcity of First Nations social work/social welfare scholars before the 1980s (Cotrell, 1993).

Furthermore, before First Nations perspectives began to surface in the 1980s, popular and institutional belief systems continued to reflect adherence to the vanishing-race thesis that the indigenous peoples of North America were dead or dying and would shortly disappear altogether (Berkhofer, 1978). Thus, it is no wonder that little interest in Native identity, especially that with First Nations or Euro-American elements, existed among non-Native scholars. However, the few psychology and social work students of Native identity of this period did note consistent themes of racial and ethnic ambivalence and negativity. Such identity conflicts were

found to be significant underlying factors of suicidality, substance abuse, family violence, acculturative stress, social alienation, and related dysfunctional phenomena (Duran & Duran, 1995; French, 1987; French & Hornbuckle, 1980; Gibbs, 1987; Jenkins, 1982; Jones & Korchin, 1982; Kitano, 1982; LaFromboise & Bigfoot, 1988; Lefley, 1976, 1982; Manson, 1990; May, 1981; Root, 1992; Westermeyer, 1979; Wilson, 1992).

In 1982 Beiser and Attneave noted that Native psychology had been little studied and that a complete model of Native mental health had yet to be developed. When I began my doctoral work on the subject in 1984, I found no significant published research on identity issues of First Nations/Euro-American/Mixedblood peoples. A 1986 congressional study noted increasing rates of marriage outside and between tribes among First Nations peoples and projected that by 2080 only 2% would be Full Bloods and more than 50%, or approximately 5 million people, would be one fourth or more Native “blood quantum” (*Indian Health Care*, 1986, p. 81). First Nations heritage is thus enduring. On the other hand, the continuous increase of Mixedbloods suggests the potential for growth in the number of individuals at risk for conflicted identity development.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, wives in 46.6% of First Nations households were White (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In a climate of persistent racism and a general ignorance of First Nations experience, Native people tend to be invisible to non-Natives, even educators and health care professionals. Because of their special circumstances Mixedbloods are even less recognized or understood. Much more research and education is needed on First Nations identity development as it relates to cultural persistence, despite acculturation and assimilation; cultural disruption, trauma, and destruction due to colonization, especially pertaining to the effect of boarding schools and tribal dissolution on the parent–child relationship; and the connection of identity conflict to economic stress, decreased physical health, and sexuality and sexual identity conflict (Cotrell, 1993). Hence, consistent with a postcolonial liberatory perspective, the following first-person narrative and postcolonial analysis of a process involving mixed-heritage identity development contributes a documentary example of this little-studied phenomenon.

Narrative

Part 1

Every closed eye is not shut.

Every goodbye is not gone.

—Anon.

It was confusing.

When I was in grade school, everyone wanted to kill an Indian.

—Red Cotrell

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

—James Joyce

For some of us, as kids, being “part-Indian” was like being in a satire no one bothered to tell us about. All I knew was that I wasn’t supposed to talk about it. Having a half-breed father was unseemly, even in Indian Country. By the time the silence became unbearable, I’d been simmering in the melting pot for 17 years. Maybe it was too late to do anything about it; maybe not.

I’m part-White, really—Half-breed, Metis, Mixedblood, Chippewa-Sioux, Chippewa-Cree, Renegade Cree, and Cherokee—take your pick. I grew up on the Flathead Indian Reservation, home of the Salish-Kootenai Tribes, in western Montana. My mother was White, and my father was Indian. They taught me to act White and be White, and back then no one seemed to know the difference, except in mysterious little ways.

This theme is ancient, like that old wagon tongue out there in the weeds. Long disconnected from the body, it is still. And yet the daily sight of it is a barb on the cloak of forgetting.

I could never forget. I didn’t want to. In fact, I tried to remember—that is, I tried to find someone who did remember; tried and kept on trying to force the silent ones to talk.

* * *

The first time I remember thinking about Indians was in spring 1949 or 1950. I was 4 or 5 years old. We were driving up Mission Canyon to the First Falls for a picnic. It was a sunny day, but as the canyon narrowed, the shadowy forest drew close. I kept my eye on the treetops and worried that the Indians were hiding up there, waiting to attack. After all, Dad took us to town every Saturday night to see the latest movie about cowboys and Indians. By that time I must have seen scores of them; John Wayne, Buffalo Bill, and Cochise were already in my repertoire.

Another time, at age 5 or 6, I was riding with Dad and his cousin Gene in our old Studebaker pickup. We were going up St. Mary's Canyon to get wood at Wheeler's Mill. Gene was part-White, too, but in that era he was a half-breed. He just showed up one day and had been staying with us for a couple of months. Later I learned he'd left Oregon in a hurry and was hiding out at our place because the law was after him for beating his wife.

Dad and Gene would sit and talk for hours, which angered Mom. She couldn't stand to see anyone doing nothing or having too much fun when it was daylight and people were supposed to be working. She always made you feel like you should be doing something—cleaning the cupboards, washing the walls, moving the ash pile. She never had to say a word; you just knew. But she had her beautiful, gentle side, too. I loved her then, and I understood her better when I got older. I wish I could remember what Dad and Gene talked about.

Anyway, we were on our way to Wheeler's Mill. I remember looking out at the shale canyon wall on Dad's side—he was driving—and the river on the other side, and the huge, thick pine trees as far ahead as you could see. Part of me felt like running out into that wildness, but the other part was glad to be safe in the truck. I asked Dad, "Where are the Indians?" I couldn't understand why they looked at each other and laughed.

I felt ridiculed and excruciatingly bewildered. At that point, I was unaware that I was Indian, although it wasn't long before I learned that I was. This was but one in a long series of childhood incidents in which my parents met my questions about Indians and our Native heritage with evasion, embarrassed silence, or a warning against pursuing the subject or bringing it up in the future. At such times, I felt misunderstood, frustrated, very small, and alone. I asked silently, "Why can't I know what tribe I'm from?" "Why can't I know my Native relatives," "Why is it all right to be White but shameful to be Indian?"

* * *

One time my sisters and I were playing by the back porch, and the folks were sitting on the steps. Dad grinned and said proudly, "Look at those little Indians," and Mom grimaced and said, "Red! Don't say things like that!" I couldn't figure it out, but I knew better than to ask.

* * *

For most of the 1950s we didn't have a TV, but we had plenty of things to do, living out in the country, with 140 acres to farm and anywhere from 40 to 100 cows to milk. I always remember Dad saying proudly that we ran a Grade-A dairy. One of his favorite things to do on a Saturday or Sunday, after we finished the morning chores, was to take long drives around the countryside, sometimes as far as 200 miles. He took us to places where he used to live and places he'd hunted or ridden on horseback. He always took us to somewhere we hadn't been before. My sister and I

pretended we were explorers and always looked forward to seeing new territory.

We especially liked to explore the junk piles. It seemed like Dad knew every junk pile in western Montana, and on each trip we'd stop at a new one. He taught us to look for all kinds of gems that people threw away, like old books and magazines, pictures, Sir Walter Raleigh Tobacco cans (handy for fishing worms), ball bearings to use for marbles, shoes, clothes, and horse harness pieces. A junk pile was a treasure trove to Dad, and my sisters and I quickly caught his enthusiasm.

Mom always stayed in the car. We'd come back excited, arms full, and Mom would protest and complain, "We don't need all this junk. Our place looks like a junkyard already!" But in Dad's mind a rusty axle was the promise of a new wagon, and a pile of boards was a bench, a stool, or a set of shelves for the shop. That's the way it was. It seemed that they rarely agreed about anything.

Dad told us that combing the junk piles was a regular thing he and his folks did when he was a kid, because they didn't have much. He told us often that he and his brother, Tommie, used to play with broom straws, the closest thing to a toy that they had.

He took us to places where he and his folks had squatted—that's what he called it—during the Depression, in deserted log cabins with dirt floors. I remember one place, in particular, east of Ronan. We didn't stop to explore it, although I wanted to. I couldn't ask, because Mom had insisted that we keep moving. But I can still see that place—a very old, desolate log house surrounded by tall grass that reached past the paneless dark windows. It looked big enough for only one or two rooms on the ground floor, plus an attic or loft, judging by the small window beneath the point of the roof.

I get the same hollow feeling inside every time I think about that place, the same feeling I got the first time I saw it, at the age of 9 or 10. I felt sad for the little boy who was now my father and puzzled over why he had to live in places like that, with no running water or things to play with.

They had lived all over the state, and Dad knew the country like the back of his hand. He'd be driving along and pointing off in the distance at a hawk, a mountain, or an old farmhouse, and Mom would be saying, "Red! Watch the road!" Or he'd say something like, "That's where Chief Joseph cut up over the Divide and crisscrossed it like a jackrabbit, and the whole goddamned U.S. cavalry couldn't catch up with him!"

Dad was a World War II veteran and read everything he could find on the history of war. He served in the U.S. naval campaign in the South Pacific. I grew up on his sea stories—war stories on the sea. He told cowboy stories, too, since his dad—they called him Pop—was one of the original cowboys and one of the last. Actually, he was an Indian who was also a cowboy, or a cowboy who was an Indian, take your pick. Anyway, Dad was fascinated with military strategy and especially interested in George Armstrong Custer. He read a lot of books about Custer when I was young, and he used to brag about Custer's abilities as a general.

In my grade school years I read everything I could find on the Old West, especially about the so-called Indian Wars. By that time, I was well aware of the fact of my Native heritage, and I was eager to find out details about this subject that no one would speak of. The more I read, the more perplexed I became. I couldn't figure out why Dad admired Custer so much, while at the same time he seemed just as proud of Chief Joseph. I wanted to ask him, but I couldn't find a way to do it. I was afraid he'd get mad at me just for bringing it up.

* * *

Dad liked to sing and tell stories. He'd come in from the barn and sing us to sleep with cowboy songs that he learned from his dad. My favorites were *Little Joe the Wrangler* and *The Streets of Laredo*. Or he would tell us stories about his dad's adventures or his own stories about World War II. He had joined the Navy right after graduating from high school, having no money for college. He served from 1937 until spring 1941, then reenlisted the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed and served in the South Pacific campaign until the end of the war. He could go on for days about that and sometimes did. Maybe that's where I got the knack for listening. Of course, we weren't allowed to interrupt grownups when they talked.

The World War II story that I remember best is the one about the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands in late October 1942. This was early in the war for Americans, and the sea battles with the Japanese were constant and ferocious. Dad, a Fireman First Class, was in charge of the fire crew on the USS *Smith*, a naval destroyer. In the middle of the battle a crippled Japanese plane hit the deck next to the powder magazine, which was full of ammunition for the one-and-a-half-inch antiaircraft guns that could fire 2-pound projectiles 2 miles high. Orders came from the bridge to abandon ship, so men started jumping over the side. Dad was running with them when it struck him that he'd never make it home to his wife and daughter if he jumped. He grabbed the nearest five guys, and they turned around and headed for the magazine. Bodies were all over the deck and hanging off the side, and flames were everywhere. They formed a line, and Dad and another guy picked up the smoking ammunition cases and handed them out, one by one, to be thrown overboard. They emptied the magazine just in time and moved on to extinguish the deck fires. Credited with saving the ship, each received the Navy Cross for heroism.

If Dad had jumped overboard instead of putting out the fire, I would not have been born. In later years, the fact of war as integral to my existence has emerged in my awareness: the conquest of my father's ancestors, the near escapes, the long struggles to survive, and my father's subsequent military service to the country of the conqueror embody a sad irony of human history.

When I was in the fifth grade, Dad taught the seventh-graders in the Methodist Sunday School. His class was very popular, and each Sunday more kids showed up; some even came in

from other classes. I could see them from my classroom, and they seemed to be having more fun than I was. In our class, we had to read this boring book called *In Wisdom and in Stature*, but Dad's class seemed to be either laughing a lot or dead quiet. I did not know what Dad was talking about, but he kept their attention.

One morning Mrs. Sulier, the Sunday School superintendent, checked to see why so many kids were packed in Dad's classroom and spilling out into the hall. When she found out he was telling World War II stories in weekly installments, she gave him hell, so he quit and never returned. I heard him tell Mom about it, and I felt bad for him because I thought Mrs. Sulier hurt his feelings. I didn't like her very much after that.

* * *

Around 1955, when I was about 9 years old, I started reading a whole series of frontier stories. My heroes were Jim Bridger, Tom Fitzpatrick, Sacagawea, Baptiste Charbonneau, Crazy Horse, and Black Hawk. But *Friday, the Arapaho Indian* was my favorite book and my hero of heroes. I read that book over and over and grieved every time when Friday led his people to surrender to the Whites after the long years of struggle during the 1870s and 1880s. I wondered why it hurt so much. The pictures are still in my mind: the people riding into the fort, stricken, starved, defeated. I lived in the Northern Rockies when I was reading these books. I felt the frontier all around me, the landscape of siege. I knew these were our people, even though we weren't supposed to talk about it in 1955.

After reading stories such as *Friday, The Arapaho Indian* and *Fur Trappers of the Old West*, I'd ask Dad about his mother and her people. I always received the same answer. He'd look at the floor, shake his head, and almost whisper,

I dunno. They were Chippewa or Cree or both. My mother used to say we were French-Canadian, some kind of half-breeds. I dunno. It doesn't matter anyway. The White man won, and the Indians have about all died off now. It's just water under the bridge. It's history.

He'd shake his head and stare at the floor. He wouldn't look at me, and then he'd get quiet and seem to go deep into himself, and I'd wander off, confused. I felt like crying. Sometimes I did.

* * *

Mom and Dad just didn't want to talk about it. They'd get angry when I brought it up and explain that my sisters and I were really White, because we were only about a sixty-fourth Cherokee on Pop's my grandfather's side, and no one knew anything about Gramma's family, so that didn't

count. It wasn't until years later that I found out that Gramma was almost a Full Blood. She'd done such a good job of hiding it. They warned me that it wasn't a subject for polite conversation, and I should never mention it in public.

My parents' families had lived in the Flathead Valley since around 1910, and they didn't seem to notice that everybody knew that Dad was a half-breed or part-Indian, as they used to call it. That meant that my sisters and I were Indian, too. But Mom and Dad decided we were White, and they had me convinced for a while. I guess I believed that if I didn't speak of being Indian, I wouldn't be, and in a way I was right.

Dad hadn't kept in touch with his relatives, except for Uncle Tommie and Aunt Alice, his brother and sister. I was in my late teens before I found out that he had hundreds of relatives who lived all around us in Montana and Canada. So, for the most part, the only relatives I knew growing up were Massachusetts Puritans and Minnesota Lutherans originally from Norway. I used to watch them patronize my dad. I didn't know the word *patronize* then, but I knew the feeling.

* * *

Dad didn't talk much about his mother, but he had a lot of stories about his dad. Uncle Tommie was the same way. He could go on and on about Pop's cowboy adventures. One time, I asked him to tell me about Gramma, and he said, "Oh, she was just a squaw." I felt my stomach turn, and I wanted to run away. Until then, I'd pretty much worshiped Uncle Tommie. A few years later I wrote a poem about that incident, and when he read it, he wrote me a special letter to tell me he was sorry. He said he had no idea why he'd said something like that to me, and he really felt bad about it. I understood, and, to this day, he's still my favorite uncle.

I remember a couple of stories Dad used to tell about Gramma. One was about the time, when he was about 5 years old, he picked her a bouquet of mustard weed, and she grabbed it, threw it in the trash and yelled at him for picking weeds. He told that story many times. At first, he would sort of laugh, but I can't forget how he'd get the same sad, faraway look on his face. I can see him looking down, shaking his head. I got the idea that she was often harsh and mistreated him. But I could tell that he really loved her and looked up to her. He would talk about how hard her life was, and he seemed to understand why she wasn't always as loving as she might have been.

Another story he told a lot was something that happened when he was about 4 years old. His mother left home. She just walked off down the road and wouldn't look back or say goodbye. He ran after her, crying and begging her not to leave, but she sent him back and kept on going. He thought she was gone for good.

She and Pop had had a fight about her relatives. She wanted to have them for a visit, but Pop wouldn't let them set foot on the place anymore. He told her they were no-good Indians who ate

them out of house and home every time they showed up. After a few days, Pop went looking for Gramma and brought her back. He found her down by Paradise, staying with her half-sister, Ruby. Dad drove off and left us a couple times, but he always came right back.

* * *

I thought it was strange how Dad would clam up when I'd ask him about his mother and her people. At other times, he'd recall something out of the blue and make it a long story. Every once in a while, he'd bring up the fact that his Uncle Ed St. Germaine, Gramma's half-brother, spent 5 years in Montana State Prison at Deer Lodge for stealing a sheep. It was during the Depression, and his family was going hungry. Dad was a teenager, and Uncle Ed sent presents he had made in prison—pretty beadwork and leather belts—to him and Uncle Tommie. Dad said those were some of the nicest presents he ever got.

He said one of his best memories was the time they piled into an old jalopy and drove way up the Sun River from Choteau, where they lived at the time. They went to visit his mother's people—her mother, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They were living in a teepee village on the river. Dad was pretty small and just remembered a lot of Indian people and teepees, and that he was allowed to eat all the beef jerky he wanted.

Another time they drove from Choteau a long way up into the Cascade Mountains west of Great Falls to visit his mother's grandparents. Dad said they drove all day and finally came to a place way back in the trees, at about 8,000 or 9,000 feet. There was a cabin, a corral, three or four mean-sounding dogs, a couple of horses, and a big woodpile. They sat waiting in the car for a long time. Finally, this great big redheaded half-breed—"just like me," as Dad put it—came out and invited them inside. It was the first and last time Dad ever saw his great-grandfather. He heard years later that the man died up there in those mountains, chopping wood. He was 98 years old.

Aunt Alice told me that this grandfather's name was McPherson and that some of his forebears were Scottish fur traders who had married into Cree and Chippewa tribes in western Canada. I guess that's where Dad got his freckles and bright red hair. He used to say, with a twinkle in his eye, "I'm a throwback"; then he'd throw back his head and laugh like hell. He liked to say, "My mother used to call me 'Tete Rouge de Jab,' which was Cayuse French for Red-headed Devil [*tête rouge diable*]."

Dad didn't know why they were living way up there, but I found out later that they were hiding from the law. They weren't U.S. citizens; they were Canadian First Nations refugees from the last Riel Rebellion of 1885. Hundreds of Cree, Chippewa, and Metis people who fought in the rebellion against the Canadian government fled into Montana and the Dakotas to escape arrest for treason.

They became known as the Landless Indians of Montana and, among the Whites, by other less savory terms such as “renegade British Cree,” “Canadian beggars,” and “lazy halfbreeds” (Ewers, 1974, p. 117). Without land, reservation status, or other resources, they wandered from place to place, looking for food in the towns and living off the land by hunting and fishing. The Montana ranchers often rounded them up and herded them like cattle back to Canada. During the Great Depression the Federal Writers’ Project described the lives of these First Nations peoples in Montana from 1870 until they were awarded their own reservation in 1916:

From deer and elk skins they made moccasins, shirts, and beaded belts, to sell to white men, until stopped by game laws. Then they lived by gathering thousands of tons of buffalo bones scattered over the plains and stacking them in immense piles at the railroad stations. When the bones were gone they gathered the horns, and polished them for souvenirs. When the horns, the buffalo’s last gift to them, were gone, they faced starvation. They built flimsy huts, and made stoves of iron washtubs taken from city dumps to save their scanty fuel. These stoves overheated, and made the air in the huts so foul that sickness followed. Harried by police and ruffians, the Indian women searched garbage cans, gathered offal from slaughterhouses, and even used the flesh of the occasional horse or cow found dead on the plains for food. (1939, p. 350)

It took me a long time to piece together the story of Gramma’s family. She was very secretive about who they were, their tribal connections, and where they came from. She taught her kids to “avoid being Indians” whenever they could—to pass. By the time she got out of the Indian boarding schools run by Catholic nuns at Fort Shaw, St. Peter’s, and St. Ignatius, she hated Indians and herself for being one. She would become furious if anyone ever brought it up.

But as far back as I can remember I was bothered and confused by the tattered recollections, the fragmented story of the family lost to me, and the taboo against speaking of it. I couldn’t figure out what was so bad about being Indian and why I didn’t know most of Dad’s relations. I felt that he was missing something that I couldn’t put into words—a whole big part of himself that he couldn’t talk about—and so I had a piece of myself missing, too. The only thing I was sure of was that I didn’t know who I was.

I couldn’t get these questions out of my mind, and I was determined to find out the whole story, if it was the last thing I did. It wasn’t until I graduated from high school and was away from home that I was able to talk to people about it without getting completely tongue-tied and upset, and

to figure out how to get to the bottom of it all.

Part 2

Gramma was born on the Ides of March, like Dad always said, in 1889, in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Her grandparents were Cree, Chippewa, and Chippewa-Sioux, descended from French and Scottish fur traders. Her name was Anna Marie Youpe (pronounced “you-pee” or “you-pay”). In the following year the Indian Territory was thrown open for White settlement, and the land-crazed homesteaders staked out 2 million acres in one day. That also was the year that the notorious flu, whooping cough, and measles epidemics hit the Sioux people, and the Ghost Dance was catching on strong throughout the West. A couple of months before Gramma’s second birthday, Sitting Bull was murdered, and the U.S. cavalry massacred Big Foot’s people at Wounded Knee.

Gramma was 4 years old when she came to Montana with her mother, Angeline, and three brothers: Frank, Joe, and Louis. They came over in a wagon, probably what they called a half-breed cart. Aunt Alice liked to tell the story of how Gramma remembered riding in the back of the wagon and drinking the baby’s milk because she was so hungry. She told Alice that she felt guilty all her life for drinking that milk.

Gramma’s father died in that wagon somewhere along the way. Aunt Alice, who was a registered nurse, said that the best she could make of her mother’s story was that his kidneys must have stopped working for some reason.

Nobody knows for sure just where he died. Aunt Alice had the idea that he never made it to Montana—that he died somewhere around Swift Current, not far north of Cree Crossing, where the Milk River crosses the Montana border. But, according to another story that Dad told many times, Gramma was evidently convinced that he died in Montana and was buried somewhere in the Flathead Valley. Dad had a vivid memory of a day in the dead of summer, around 1924, when he went with Gramma to look for her father’s grave. She searched all over the Catholic cemetery at the Flathead Mission, but they never found it. I can still see Dad as a little boy, about 5 years old, dragging around in the heat and dust behind his mother. He said that they spent that whole day going around to different cemeteries in the Valley, searching for that grave, and that Gramma was heartsick when she finally gave up.

Gramma’s granddad, Louis Thomas, was killed in the second Riel Rebellion. Dad and his brother and sister had never heard of the rebellion until I came across a book about it, poking around in a library, at the age of 35. I was still looking for our history. Based on things some of the other relatives told me when I looked them up in summer 1980, I think Louis Riel was one of Gramma’s heroes, even though she never spoke about it. She named her kids Thomas Louis, Louis

Thomas, and Alice Relle, which was always kind of a family joke, until I theorized that she was secretly conveying a message.

Pop and Gramma met at the Hysham Ranch in eastern Montana, near Miles City and Custer Battlefield. Gramma worked there as the cook and housekeeper. As I mentioned, she was educated by the nuns at Fort Shaw and the St. Peter's and Flathead Missions and finished the eighth grade, which was a good education for anyone at the turn of the century. Her folks left her and her brothers in the Indian boarding schools because they didn't have a place to live. The adults lived like nomads—fishing and hunting, living off the land. The Flathead was one of their favorite hunting spots, which was why—I figured out eventually—I came to grow up there. Despite having a pretty good education, Gramma could get only maid work because she was an Indian—and a woman. Dad liked to brag that she was musical. He'd say, "She could play the mandolin and piano like nobody's business, and she could sing like a bird!"

* * *

Aunt Alice used to say, "Pop's mama wore blankets," then she'd laugh. Pop was a half-breed, too—Irish and Cherokee. I don't like the term *half-breed*, but that's what they were called in those days. He said he was born in Trinidad, Colorado, but nobody knows for sure. He covered his trail pretty well. No one knows for sure why. The 1910 census recorded that he and his brother, Watson, were born in Minnesota, which never made any sense at all. But who knows? Uncle Tommie thinks Pop was an outlaw for part of his younger years before he met Gramma. It is true that he never sat anywhere with his back to the door. He always said that if he had ever killed a man, it was when he was 21, when he and his partner were rustling cattle in Mexico. They had a shootout with some Mexican riders and were pinned down in a ravine. They had to shoot their horses, and they escaped by sneaking away on foot in the middle of the night.

Pop never wanted to talk much about his past or his people. We don't even know his mother's name, but we think it might be Judith, because Uncle Tommie said that whenever they drove through Judith Gap—over on the other side of the Crazy Mountains, northwest of Billings—Pop would remark that it reminded him of his mother. Uncle Tommie looked through census and birth records in just about all the small towns from Trinidad to Tulsa, trying to track down Pop's family, but he never had any luck.

One thing Pop would talk about was his life as a cowpuncher. He worked on the XIT Ranch, one of the biggest cattle outfits in Texas. When they finally fenced it off they used 1,500 miles of barbed wire. Also, Pop worked for one of Sam Houston's sons for a while. In Old Mexico he worked for a man known as the Cattle King of Chihuahua, Don Luis Terrazas, as Uncle Tommie learned from reading *From the Pecos to the Powder*, the autobiography of an old cowboy named Bob

Kenyon. Terrazas owned 1 million head of cattle, 3,000 horses, and 11 million acres in those years before the Mexican revolution, which “later broke him” (Kenyon, 1965, p. 53). Writing about the last great cattle drives from Texas to Montana, Kenyon says that Tom Cotrell (Pop) was a good friend of his, a good cowhand, and one of the last cowboys:

Taking this job [with Terrazas] was the turning point of my life. I had only been working there a few months when Mr. Broadus and Mr. Hysham, two cowmen from Montana, together with their foreman, Mr. Baker, came down to buy steers.

They bought two thousand Mexican steers from Terrazas, and Baker was to trail them north to Montana. Baker asked Bill Nort and Tom Cotrell, a Terrazas cowhand, myself, and a few others to come along up the trail.... If a fellow had never been up to Montana on a cattle drive, he wasn't considered much of a cowman. I held back, though, until Mr. Broadus agreed to pay me a monthly wage of forty dollars for the trip.... On the whole, ours was a good outfit, agreeable and happy go lucky. Tom Cotrell and I became close friends. We stuck together, and believe me, we helped each other out of many a tough spot during the long drive north. There was also a one-eyed, half-breed Mexican who used to stand guard with me at night. Sometimes he'd sing to us, and he had a fine tenor voice. He knew how to sing to the herd, too, and seemed to have a knack of soothing them.... Bill Nort, Tom Cotrell, and myself stayed in Montana.... We had reached Miles City on July 4, 1897, and I was approaching the end of my twentieth year. (Kenyon, 1965, pp. 54–62)

They arrived in Miles City about a month after Pop's 19th birthday. By that time, he had already put in 6 or 7 years as a cowhand. He stayed on in the Land of the Shining Mountains. That's what they called Montana then, and some people still do.

Pop also broke horses for Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Dad and Uncle Tommie used to laugh about that—how Pop would say they'd rope those wild broncos, one by one, and by the time they rode them a quarter mile into the corral, they were broke. They said Pop used to laugh like hell every time he told that story.

He was born on June 6, 1878, less than a year after Chief Joseph surrendered at the Bear's Paw and 2 years after the Lakota and Cheyenne beat the hell out of Custer at the Little Bighorn. Evidently Pop left home when he was about 12 years old. Uncle Tommie says that Pop's parents were starving and couldn't take care of him. Maybe he ran away from an Indian school or a reservation. He never did want to be what he called a reservation Indian. In 1928, the Flatheads

tried to get him to enroll the whole family, but he ran them off with a shotgun. Mrs. Burgess, a friend of theirs, had told the Tribe about the Cotrells. She knew they were close to starving and could use some help. But Pop didn't want to be ordered around; he could not stomach the idea that he would need a pass every time he went off the reservation. I can't blame him. But that's how I missed my chance to be a Flathead.

Pop went on his first cattle drive from Texas to Montana when he was 13. That would have been around 1891, right after the Wounded Knee Massacre. He rode that whole country from Miles City to Fort Peck to Great Falls. He was a friend of the western painter Charlie Russell, and one time, when Dad wasn't much more than 3 years old, he sat on Russell's lap at the Silver Dollar Bar in Great Falls and recited one of Russell's poems that Pop had taught him. He used to recite it a lot when we were kids, and I learned it by heart. It's called "Here's to the Days of the Open Range":

Here's to the days of the open range
 When the grass God planted was free
 And there wasn't a fence from the Mexican gulf
 North to the Arctic Sea.
 Those good old days are gone, boys,
 The cowman's had his day.
 The farmer's here with his fence and his plow
 And it looks like he's here to stay.

* * *

When Pop met Gramma, she already had Aunt Alice. Alice's dad was a Swedish stagecoach driver by the name of Dale. He deserted Gramma before Alice was born, so she never knew her real father. She was crazy about Pop, but she never got over how he left her for months at a time at the Indian schools at Fort Shaw and St. Ignatius, over several years during the Depression. She said they put her in those schools to save money on food.

Gramma received her naturalization papers when she married Pop, and they each got a 160-acre homestead on the Fairfield Bench near Bolle, outside of Choteau. They had about 300 head of beef cattle, but in the hard winter of 1919, the cattle froze to death, and they lost everything. Dad was born that February. They packed a few things in boxes and got on a train heading northwest toward Glacier Park. Pop worked on a fox farm and split ties for the Great Northern Railway. They lived in the timber for a couple of years. The way Dad tells it, "Pop cut down trees and sawed 'em into lengths, hued 'em with a broad axe, and carried 'em on his shoulder out to the road, where a

sleigh picked 'em up. He did a lot of hard work to make a livin'."

Dad's folks died in 1946. Gramma went first; she was only 57. Pop died 6 months later; he was 68. Dad says Pop missed Gramma so much that he died of a broken heart. Dad was 27 at the time; I wasn't quite a year old.

Part 3

Gramma Brushhorn, sister-in-law of Gramma (Dad's mother), was 93 when I met her in 1980, in Poplar, on the Fort Peck Sioux Reservation in eastern Montana. I'd driven up from Los Angeles by myself to meet the relatives on the eastern side, the ones I had wondered about for all those years.

When I arrived, I stopped at the tribal office to find out where my Uncle Bill (Frank's son) lived. I said to the receptionist, "My name is Gretchen Cotrell, and I'm looking for my Uncle Bill Youpe." She smiled and said, "Hi. My name is Gretchen Youpe. Bill is my father." She offered her hand, and I accepted it.

Gramma Brushhorn attended Fort Shaw Indian School with Gramma, and they were like sisters. Gramma's brother, Frank Youpe, married Gramma Brushhorn and was adopted by the Fort Peck Tribe. Here's what she had to say:

[T]he Chippewa ... the Little Shell Band ... they didn't have a place to go. Poor Annie [Gramma] worked in Culbertson. She was kind of smart. She worked as a clerk and stayed here with us for two or three years. Poor Annie ... she was well-educated. I took care of her, after that guy [Dale] deserted her.... I said, "I'll take care of you. You don't have to pay." She liked Culbertson. She was real nice. I liked her. She tried to pay me. She gave me \$10 but I wouldn't take it....

We lived in the mountains around Great Falls when we were kids. I was called Helen Lester. I didn't have an Indian name. I don't talk Indian that good. People laugh at me....

I like the mountains the best. I like to live up there, you know. We lived by a creek ... a running creek. I don't remember the name. Our house was on top of a hill....The Chippewas and the Crees, they don't have a reservation ... they just live anywhere. My man [her husband, Frank]—his folks lived near Choteau, right across the river. We lived there a couple of years. Annie, she was real nice. I never met Frank's father, never knew him. All my family liked Frank, so they adopted him into the Sioux tribe. All my fathers are kind of chieftains-like. They liked him. We used to go to the Indian dances. Frank danced. He liked it. And then we cooked grub and

took it to the dances. Helped them with the grub. Them chieftains adopted him just like one of us and he can get payments....

We went to school at Fort Shaw. We called the superintendent "Shoe-Pack," "Yellow Leather," and "Um-Zee." We liked him so we went with him to Fort Shaw.

In November they issue. We get shawls, blankets, all kinds of muslin, all kinds of cotton flannel, blankets, goods of all kinds. And you know these skirts with borders—two yards—the folks have to make them themselves. And they issue shoes, two pairs for one year. Stockings—we don't have to buy anything. The government furnishes everything. Gray flannel blankets with a black and navy border. We each get one in the family. My folks make three, four trips.

Tom [Pop]—he was part-Indian, some kind of Indian anyway. He sure was a nice man. All the Indians always hire him for this and for that. He was a nice man. . . . Alice, she became a registered nurse. She was real light. Her brothers told her not to send us money, but she did. One time she said, "I don't like Uncle Frank—he called me a ghost."

Annie stayed with us quite a long time. She was welcome as long as she wanted to stay. Poor Annie. She had a tough time. Her mother, Angeline, lived right across the river from us in Choteau. On the west side, right across the bridge. She wasn't very old, a little over middle age. Annie was a kind-hearted woman. She always baked when she had time. We used to go to Glacier Park to get fish. We Sissetons, we eat fish. I always ride with Frank. Any doings there was, we'd go to it on horseback, before we had children. After we had children, we go in a sleigh or a wagon. At Sun River, Frank's mother . . . always had fresh meat—deer meat, elk meat, bear meat.

Afterword: Subjective Interpretation and Theoretical Ground

Consciousness is the historically concrete production of meaning,
and every historical situation contains ideological ruptures
and offers possibilities for social transformation.

—Madan Sarup (1993, p. 187)

Contemporary feminist scholars have observed that many recent autobiographical writings of *mestiza*, *Mixedblood*, and other mixed-race women embody radical challenges to European or Euro-American views of postcolonial realities. The stark differences between the self-perceptions of the conquered and their descendants and Eurocentric constructions of them constitute one of the most notable and important of these challenges. Corbett's observation that it is "imperative to think about subjectivities as historically and culturally located in formations of gender, race, sexuality, nation, and class" (1995, p. 481) is particularly useful to the project of elucidating mixed-race identity and experience. This catalytic idea inheres in some postmodern, feminist, critical, cultural, and multicultural theories that are prominent among a manifold interdisciplinary literature that has flourished in the past half-century. Prominent in these works are the ideas of modern and postmodern thinkers such as Kant, Nietzsche, Lacan, Foucault, Gramsci, Jakobson, Jameson, and Merleau-Ponty. This literature represents intellectual influences ranging from structuralism/poststructuralism and semiotics to second-generation feminism, post-Marxism, modernity, and postmodernity (Agger, 2006).

Contemporary scholars and writers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences have produced a wealth of related academic and creative works spanning—indeed, enlarging—the genre spectrum. Such works challenge the positivist scientific tradition and long-held Western academic and cultural notions about values and convention, the interpretation of human experience and expression, and ultimately the nature, source, and limits of knowledge (Agger, 2006).

During this period, the concepts of subjective perception and implied multiple realities have become axial in critical and cultural studies such as critical race theory and in the noticeable upsurge of critical perspectives such as social constructionism in the social sciences (Gergen, 1985), including social work/social welfare. Regarding the latter, Greene (1994), Yellow Bird (1999), Jansson (2000), Weick (2000), Witkin (2000), Lee (2001), Saleebey (2001), and Heineman-Pieper, Tyson, & Heineman Pieper (2002) count among the forerunners of what is generally understood as a major paradigm shift in progress (see Forte, 2007; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998).

A key notion of semiotic theory is that the world is composed of *text*, referring to all writing,

architecture, painting, information systems, and forms of attempted representation. In the case of writing, according to literary phenomenology and poststructuralism, meaning is not final, universal, or wholly contained in a given text; rather, it is a temporal process that occurs within the reader in interaction with the text. It changes and develops in the course of that process and depends on both the writer's and reader's unique frames of reference shaped by psychosocial, linguistic, and epistemological constraints—their cultural and historical contexts, personalities, genders, education, and experiences (Ashcroft, 1995; Lechte, 1994; Leitch, 1988). Similarly, unique individual contexts govern intersubjective perception. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1973, p. 83):

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own.

In this vein, reading and interpretation—of actual literary texts as well as the texts of our environments—constitute a relationship process between writer and reader in accord with our general “participation in the world [that] involves the projection of our deepest hopes, fears, and needs onto reality” (McCaffery, 1982, p. 6). The reader of an autobiography, personal narrative, or autoethnography is not exempt from this subjective/intersubjective process.

The autoethnographic narrative presented here engages and challenges Euro-dominant constructs of mixedblood (First Nations-Euro-American) identity, in the spirit of postmodern criticism of Grand Theories and decontextualized “objectivity” of traditional social science (Denzin, 1997; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001). Characterizing this work as *autoethnographic* in form and method calls attention to it as a variant of—or synthesis of—autobiography and ethnography, as explicated by Pratt (1991) and Reed-Danahay (1997).

Pratt (1991) proffers the concept of autoethnography as a particular self-narrative that arises in *contact zones*—those historical and “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). Contact zones are elsewhere termed “planes of contest” (Ashley, 1987, pp. 109–110, as cited in Rosenau, 1992) on which the collision of polities produces inevitably the silencing, dispersal, and consignment of the conquered to the margins.

According to the cultural and literary critic Frederic Jameson (1981), we “discover” reality

through stories or narrative. Or, obversely, reality comes to us in the form of stories, which we, in turn, translate to ourselves through the linguistic meaning grid that we have been given by our first interpreters and teachers, usually parents or parental figures (Sarup, 1993). In the case of conquered peoples, this process requires “decolonization,” if individuals are to understand themselves and their life contexts. Some postmodern, feminist, and multicultural theorists hold that the narratives of the oppressed—the revelations of their own experiences—are essential to the process of recovery and affirmation of authentic indigenous identity. Such “discourses of everyday life” are as important as “elite theoretical discourses” (Derrida, as cited in Agger, 2006, p. 63).

Through autoethnography, a form of self-reflexive self-narrative, the author-subject examines personal experience and perceptions in relation to the hegemonized social world. Through discovery and exploration of his or her colonized consciousness, the individual deconstructs its inherited “knowledge” and “reality,” established by pre-existing power, authority, and institutions (Gramsci, 1971; Kosasa, 2001). Throwing off definitions of self and identity imposed by colonial externalities, the individual is decolonized. Replacing these elements are self-produced new knowledge springing from the recovery, revaluation, and reclamation of indigenous validity as well as new interpretations of experience in multivariate context—the contact zones of history, geography, language, culture, color, gender, and class (Ferber, 2000; Flores, 1990; Irving & Young, 2002; Jameson, 1981; Spry, 2001).

Reflected herein are particular contact zones—First Nations/Euro-American—that take a narrative journey upstream through history; the writer explores, from the present into the past, word-of-mouth ancestral portraits that further illuminate and deepen the developing picture. That is, the narrative segments are conceived as curtains behind curtains or a series of pictorial backdrops—historically, culturally, and geographically located, as well as layered in time. In part 1, the narrator looks back to childhood and her father’s memories and tales; in part 2, she traces her grandparents’ history through recollection of the memories of her father and his siblings; and in part 3, she recounts her grandmother’s life as remembered by her aged great-aunt.

This is a firsthand account of the narrator’s evolving identity in postcolonial context, the aftermath of conquest. It is a story of loss—lost history, lost family, and lost connection with her paternal ancestry. Aware of her entrapment in a history of cultural destruction and the taboo status of *half-breed*, she retrieves the past through imaginative remembrance and reconstructs herself out of silence.

This is a true story of a contemporary First Nations mixedblood woman. It is my story. It is a story still in the making; parts are still missing, still to be discovered in fact and imagined through synthesis. I tell this story from the standpoint of an emergent postcolonial-postmodern individual

becoming ever more informed by experience, observation, reflection, and self-examination, thus ever more self-aware and (self)conscious. I think, I feel, I imagine, I bear witness, in the tradition of Kristeva's "speaking subject" or "subject in process," who works toward an identity achievement that continually develops but is always necessarily incomplete (Rosenau, 1992, pp. 58–59). Only I can discover, make sense of, and tell my story; that process is vital to self-understanding and authentic comprehension of my world (Foner, 2002; Garrett, 1996; Jameson, 1981; Pratt, 1990; Witkin, 2000). I feel a deep resonance with the words of a contemporary Cherokee man:

I think who I am, is that I truly am two people, matter of fact, Doc Amoneeta Sequoyah used to call me "Gagoyoti" in other words, "two people." In Cherokee, that's a way of saying, well, you're this and you're that. For me, a lot of my conflicts in earlier years were because I wasn't sure who I was. Was I Indian, was I white, you know, what was a mixture of a person, where did I belong? I knew deep down inside, I didn't belong with that class of people who felt that they were better than others. And I knew that the people that I came from, the Cherokees, there was something very special. (Garrett, 1996, p. 18)

I considered writing my own story long before I happened on similar writings of Pratt and others or consciously engaged postmodern thought. I began to write disparate notes about vivid childhood memories that I had carried around in my head for so many years—of my own experiences and stories I'd heard about my father and his family. As I pieced them together, I became increasingly aware of their emblematic significance to my sense of self, one that felt painfully confused and helpless to articulate persistent, haunting questions about the facts of my Native origins shrouded in shame and enforced forgetting.

I embarked on my search for completion and self-affirmation long before I knew what feminism was, but my eventual reading of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ntozake Shange, Ai, Tillie Olsen, Leslie Silko, Nikki Giovanni, Wendy Rose, Toni Morrison, Paula Gunn Allen, Adrienne Rich, Hum-ishu-ma, Audre Lourde, Beatrice Culleton, Gloria Anzaldua, and Beth Brant emboldened and enlivened my quest. From these and many other women writers and scholars, I drew strength and courage to persist.

In the main, First Nations women writers have expanded the lost-identity theme to encompass the experience of *Mixedblood* or *half-breed* Native women. Allen has written at length on the subject. In *Spiderwoman's Granddaughters* (1989), she points out four "fundamental facts of life" for Native people: First, that Native people's communal existence with all living things is central to

their lives and basic to their aesthetic stances; second, that conventional belief holds Native people to be extinct or nearly so; third, that Native near-invisibility to dominant American eyes is compounded for First Nations women to the point of virtual nonexistence; and, finally, that First Nations people can never forget their status as occupied or conquered peoples, which forms the backdrop for their “tales of love, death, separation, and continuance” (p. 9).

The upstreaming format of the autoethnographic narrative—from present to past—follows the chronological direction of my quest to understand my world and “who I was.” That is, my evolving experience of the world became an increasingly conscious and deliberate quest to understand myself relative to the facts of my mixed heritage. Pieces of that story are presented roughly in the order of occurrence of key remembered events as I experienced them, and stories and anecdotes as I heard them from the primary figures of my “growing-up” world.

My increasing consciousness of myself as something more than a “little White girl” who happened to be growing up on the Flathead Reservation constituted a progressive accretion of stories in my mind, heart, and very bones. As I moved forward in time from childhood, my self-awareness and self-understanding grew by moving further and further backward into history. Early memories of childhood experiences expanded to curiosities and subsequent gathering of impressions, ideas, information, longings, and grief from the memories of my elders—the stories of my father, grandparents, and great-grandparents about their lives.

Embarrassed or stubborn silences, implied omissions, and discomfited hesitations were sometimes subtle, sometimes glaring, ingredients of those storytelling events, as I listened to my elders, commented, and asked many questions that they were often loathe to answer. Some of my recurrent questions were “What tribe are we from?”, “Where are our Indian relatives?”, and “Why don’t we ever see them?” My father’s typical responses were composed of long silences, downcast eyes, his head shaking slowly side-to-side, and sometimes a muffled “I don’t know ... our mother wouldn’t tell us.” These spoke volumes to me of bottomless sadness, shame, and bewilderment, which I internalized.

I was treading on taboo territory, delving into a subject that my parents decreed must not be discussed outside our home. Clearly, they were extremely uncomfortable even discussing it *in* our home. I received loud and clear the confusing and destructive message that only my Whiteness—my mother’s European heritage—was acceptable, real, and valid. How could I be whole if only half of me was real and valued, the other half associated only with shame, loss, poverty, conquest?

Gradually, in my teens, with painful effort and against their wishes, I began to separate myself from my parents’ confusion, fears, and prohibitions, and more and more vigorously replace them with my own affirmation, my own “yes” to the whole of my self. I resolved to find my other family

and history. At the time I certainly did not understand the full significance of *other*. I sought out my father's brother and sister for more information. I went to eastern Montana to meet many of what I discovered to be hundreds of Chippewa, Cree, and Lakota relatives. I asked questions and listened to the stories of my relatives.

Eventually, through long years of research and writing about the mixedblood experience (see Cotrell, 1993), I discovered that my experience was not unique, but repeated in hundreds of thousands of lives throughout the Americas, in the racist aftermath of centuries of European conquest. I had engaged unknowingly in what Kristeva (1984), Ortiz (1984), Cixous & Clement (1986), Allen (1989), Irigaray (1991), and a host of other writers and scholars, both women and men, had already formulated and described—or were writing about, simultaneously—in narrative and theoretical depth: I had found my own history, my own voice. I had rediscovered and reconstructed my self.

A few years before my father died, he thanked me for opening his eyes. He had been reading the books on Native history that I had been studying for my doctorate and had loaned to him. He said, "It has finally dawned on me that all my life I have admired Custer, the killer of my own people." At that very emotional moment for both of us, I felt that I had reached the resolution of my own identity confusion. My father's clear and affirmative acknowledgment of his Native heritage gave me the affirmation that I had always needed: that my quest for my indigenous history was right; that my indigeneity was true and real, once and for all.

Although this is a story of a Native woman in the aftermath of conquest, it might be that of any woman, anywhere—or *anyone*—who has felt lost, invisible, or irretrievably miscast in a world of constricted roles, truncated possibilities, and alien or conflicting traditions. Perhaps readers may be emboldened to search out the empty chapters of their own stories—to find the missing pieces; to make real and clear the dim, the uncertain, the forgotten. Social work professionals may be reinvigorated to watch and listen for those lost, hidden, troubled interiors where so many individuals dwell silently, accompanying them on their journeys to self-discovery and self-rediscovery as they learn to give voice to the unspoken but essential substance of their lives.

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Appendix: Exercises

1. A decolonization strategy to raise awareness among non-Native students of the potential identity struggles of Mixedblood individuals.

Imagine that you are a child of a mixed marriage: Your mother is White/Euro-American, and your father is a light-skinned Navajo who is prominent in the Navajo community. You are a citizen of the United First Nations of North America (UFNNA), in which 98% of the population is composed of First Nations, Latino, African American, and Asian individuals, and 2% is composed of White/Euro-American individuals. The White minority were conquered and colonized by the First Nations 500 years ago and have suffered from racism ever since.

Your parents seem to love and accept one another, but they avoid discussing the “White side” of the family, and they forbid you to discuss it either at home or with others in the community. Thus, your White heritage is a taboo subject, a source of shame.

Write an essay about this experience, in terms of your thoughts and feelings about your ethnic identity. What questions would you want to ask your parents about your White background? What conflicts or confusions might you experience? Describe your primary values, beliefs, and personality characteristics and try to discern which ones you learned from the influence of each parent.

2. A decolonization strategy for First Nations students to promote emotional and intellectual clarity about their ethnic identity as bicultural (First Nations/dominant culture) individuals.

Describe your cultural heritage and identity in terms of your primary values, beliefs, and personality characteristics. Attempt to classify them according to their Native or dominant (Euro-American) cultural origin.

If you are a Mixedblood, try to connect these characteristics with the different First Nations of your heritage and/or with the Euro-American aspects of your identity, as is appropriate.

Describe how you think and feel about these aspects of yourself. Do you experience emotional conflict or confusion about them? Compare your feelings about the parts of your heritage. Do you feel more positive about your First Nations heritage or White heritage? Is your skin color an issue for you, as a darker-skinned person in a predominantly White society? If you are a light-skinned Mixedblood, how does your skin color affect your sense of self as a Native person? How does it affect you when you are functioning in a dominantly White milieu?