**Holism and Identity in Science: How my research helped me overcome cultural imposter syndrome**

**By: Peyton Cavnar**

~~The minority experience is something that is difficult for me to articulate. It’s never one thing, a constant with a simple definition you can share with others who are curious. It’s something that changes based on who you are, gender identity, race, cultural background, etc. I identify as tri-racial. Part of this identity that I hold extremely dear is my Indigenous heritage. Having Apache and Comanche heritage was always a part of my “minority experience”~~ ***~~until~~*** ~~I moved to Oklahoma to complete my undergraduate degree.~~

~~Oklahoma is widely considered a “flyover state”. Of course, after living there for three years, I am opposed to that label. However, outside of personal bias, there is one major reason Oklahoma should not be perceived as so: Indigenous cultural prominence. Living in Oklahoma was the first time I didn’t feel like a minority. Indigenous student groups boasted large memberships and organized campus pow-wows. Tribal art lined the walls of the library. Tribal leaders would frequently come to speak to students at cultural and political seminars.~~

^ Pretty set on deleting this chunk.

During my second semester, I took an undergraduate research assistantship with a professor in my degree department. The majority of my co-workers had official Tribal citizenship. I was absolutely amazed! I felt surrounded by “my people”. It was nothing but wonderful until I realized that I was out of the loop when included in discussions about work, voting, recent court rulings, and even…God. None of this was my co-workers’ fault. They were eager to learn about me and my background. I felt automatically “accepted” within their social circle due in part to my heritage. But, my co-workers were able to vote for leaders in their Tribe, received news and media specially sent to citizens, and attended Tribal churches on their reservations. These are things that I cannot do, as I do not have federal Tribal registry.

Before living in Oklahoma, being an official registered Tribal citizen was something that I thought about and wished for. However, not having it never made me question my Indigenous identity. Once I was in a place surrounded by people who had this extra connection between them, I began to feel “less Indigenous”. I began to feel… inauthentic. I started to take extra notice of how, at Tribal students in STEM meetings, everyone was introducing themselves first by name and then by official Tribal affiliation. I began to wonder if they were taking notice of this lack of the latter piece of information coming from me. Once, when speaking with a coworker about my concerns over the cost of attending graduate school, they looked at me and asked confusedly, “Won’t your Tribe pay for you to go to grad school?”. This is when I realized that I was in a position that when I spoke about my heritage, people were automatically assuming I had citizenship like them.

You may be asking ***why*** I don’t have citizenship in the Tribes of my heritage. This is the same question that I was met with everytime I corrected someone who assumed my registration status. Obtaining official Tribal registration is a complicated process ***if*** you do not have a living relative who also has registration with the same Tribe you are seeking to join. You can trace Tribal membership back to deceased relatives to prove affiliation with the Tribe, but this requires having official documents from said deceased relatives. The majority of Indigenous people with Tribal heritage living in the Great Plains are able to trace their ancestry back to someone who signed the original Dawes Rolls: documents that the federal government used in the 1800’s to divide up communal Tribal land into individual shares. This significantly reduced the amount of accessible land to Indigenous communities. Some Tribes were excluded from the Dawes Rolls altogether because of their reputation as being “uncivilized”. According to my grandfather, who learned this story from his grandfather, our ancestors did not sign the Dawes Rolls and instead fled north in an attempt to escape being documented by the government trying to erase our culture.

Explaining my family’s history to everyone that questioned me about my citizenship was exhausting. I felt the need to justify why I wasn’t raised traditionally (on a reservation surrounded by our language, culture, and people) in an effort to authenticate myself as someone who doesn’t blindly claim connections to Native American culture. Even now, explaining my family’s story here in this article partly is a product of the fear I have of you, as the reader, judging me as someone unworthy of claiming an Indigenous identity. My critical inner voice eroded my confidence insidiously. How true and accurate was my grandfather’s story? Maybe it was my fault that my family doesn’t have citizenship? Could I have been more diligent about searching government documents and tracing my lineage?

In the midst of this, I was assigned to spearhead fieldwork for a project investigating Indiegnous climate change adaptation solutions. I was really excited to be able to interact with Tribal environmental professionals from different nations. However, I also ruminated on if I would be accepted by the people I was interviewing. Would they ask me if I had citizenship? And if so, would they treat me differently after I told them the truth?

My answer came to me while taking a tour of a Tribal cultural center in Oklahoma for my project. I was being driven around by a Tribal environmental professional who then proceeded to ask me about my heritage and citizenship. I replied truthfully, and something about her approachable demeanor enticed me to briefly open up about my identity frustrations. At the conclusion of my family’s story, she looked over to me and expressed that I had nothing to be frustrated or insecure about. I have no control over my ancestors’ decisions. I can choose how much to believe in my family story. And, most importantly, that my lack of citizenship did not equate to exclusion from a greater inter-Tribal cultural community. The matter-of-fact delivery put my cultural imposter syndrome back in its place. To be validated by someone I admired, someone who was so connected to and involved in her Tribal community, was liberating. **Expand on this more, maybe, space permitted, add more description here/weight to this moment or talk about other moments from fieldwork that were formative. Tie back to the importance of putting yourself into your science/identity in science.**

Still mulling over how to wrap up without it sounding like a “fairytale ending”.