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Abstract
In the United States of America today, what Eastern Woodlands nations call Turtle Island, who is permitted to identify as Indigenous is politically and emotionally-charged and often hostilely enforced—by Native and non-Native Americans. This lingering quagmire of colonization carries with it the psychospiritual baggage of unresolved, intergenerational trauma that continues to shape every facet of American society ever more strongly, as culture-shapers push harder and harder to keep the colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples out of educational curricula and the American imagination of who we are as a people. The more Native American history is hidden, the easier it is for factions to invent and enforce colonial ways of conceptualizing Indigenous identity. In addition to this, fighting among Indigenous peoples about identity stains weekly headlines of Indian Country Today, the largest international online newspaper about happenings in Native nations and communities. Terms like “full-blood” and “mixed-blood/part Indian” can be found in most articles, as blood-quantum has become the means by which Native people are expected to define themselves. Online websites staffed by Indigenous people touting lists of “real Indians” and “fake Indians” abound on the Internet. The topic of Government-Issued Indians with Red Cards who have Fed-Wreck (federal recognition) is a colonial process that harms Native peoples and communities, and many traditional Native people speak out against it. What some Traditionals argue is that treaty rights and Indigenous sovereignty can be honored without the need to vet individual Native Americans on blood quantum. Primary among these voices are those Indigenous writers who are re-shaping the colonial narrative of what it means to be mixed-blood in their poetry, autobiographical essays, and fiction writing. (excerpt)

Keywords
Turtle Island, Native Americans, colonization, intergenerational trauma, indigenous sovereignty

Disciplines
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“CONFLUENCES AND CROSSBLOODS ON TURTLE ISLAND” BY STEPHANIE A. SELLERS

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In the United States of America today, what Eastern Woodlands nations call Turtle Island, who is permitted to identify as Indigenous is politically and emotionally-charged and often hostilely enforced—by Native and non-Native Americans. This lingering quagmire of colonization carries with it the psychospiritual baggage of unresolved, intergenerational trauma that continues to shape every facet of American society ever more strongly, as culture-shapers push harder and harder to keep the colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples out of educational curricula and the American imagination of who we are as a people. The more Native American history is hidden, the easier it is for factions to invent and enforce colonial ways of conceptualizing Indigenous identity. In addition to this, fighting among Indigenous peoples about identity stains weekly headlines of Indian Country Today, the largest international online newspaper about happenings in Native nations and communities. Terms like “full-blood” and “mixed-blood/part Indian” can be found in most articles, as blood-quantum has become the means by which Native people are expected to define themselves. Online websites staffed by indigenous people touting lists of “real Indians” and “fake Indians” abound on the Internet. The topic of Government-Issued Indians with Red Cards who have Fed-Wreck (federal recognition) is a colonial process that harms Native peoples and communities, and many traditional Native people speak out against it. What some Traditionalists argue is that treaty rights and Indigenous sovereignty can be honored without the need to vet individual Native Americans on blood quantum. Primary among these voices are those Indigenous writers who are re-shaping the colonial narrative of what it means to be mixed-blood in their poetry, autobiographical essays, and fiction writing.

Before the European settlers arrived on the shores of the Eastern Woodlands (the eastern seaboard), human identity was understood primarily in relation to who one's mother was: her clan and her nation. After the European settlers arrived on Turtle Island and Indigenous peoples began marrying and having children with them, a process of biological and cultural blending began. Offspring from these unions are now referred to as having a Mixed-Blood identity—a combination of European, Indigenous, and/or African biological and cultural heritages. After a centuries-long dark legacy of warfare, removal, eventually blood-quantum laws, and federal recognition of Indian “tribes” and people, identity is the newest colonial war Native people are waging—and they do so upon each other. A mixed-blood identity carries a heavy stigma in America, but Indigenous writers of the Native American literary renaissance have responded to the challenges inherent in this
identity. Unfortunately, both public and private conversations in Indian Country today (that is, anywhere in America where there are Native people and communities) are often tense at their best and explosively cruel at their worst. To counter those unproductive, untraditional narratives, Native scholars and literary artists like the late Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) and Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe) have provided new ways for us to conceptualize and name the complex and rich identities that so many Indigenous peoples carry today—and do so with pride. The extent to which Allen and Vizenor have defined and affirmed mixed-blood Indians’ identity since their literary careers took-off in the 1970s can be measured by their four-decades long international recognition as Indigenous literary giants. Though Allen’s and Vizenor’s conceptualizations of contemporary Indigenous identity brim with rich re-imaginings, new terminology, and complex descriptions that initially appear to be brand new inventions, they are just the opposite. Allen’s “confluence” of mixed-blood identity and Vizenor’s “crossblood” concept could not be more traditional within the broad context of Indigenous cultures that functions from an ethic of community and kinship ties.

IDENTITY ON TURTLE ISLAND BEFORE 1492

Using the Indigenous methodological practice of first discussing the roots of the matter in order to understand an issue, I will now turn to an examination of pre-colonial definitions of identity specifically from Twinned or gender complementary nations. In the Eastern Woodlands nations (they are Indigenous nations that are east of the Mississippi River and run from Canada to Florida), human life began with First Woman, their Divine Creatrix. Sky Woman, as she is called by the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) League, was pregnant with a daughter when she fell to Earth, landed on the back of Grandmother Turtle, and worked with the Animals to begin life here. The ethic this creation story founded and continues to promulgate is that life begins from Woman and is carried through Her lineage. The daughter Sky Woman births comes to name the entire pharmacopoeia of Earth. Hence, it is Haudenosaunee women who carry the names of their clans, and all property and chief lineages spring from them. All children belong to their mother’s clan and husbands leave their mothers to live with their wife’s clan when they marry. An Haudenosaunee person identifies her/himself by first identifying their clan and then their nation. For example, they might say “I am Heron Clan of the Seneca Nation of the Haudenosaunee League.” What that means is, her/his mother is Heron Clan, which is a clan within the Seneca Nation, which has voting rights and a seat on the council of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The important piece for this interrogation is that it is the mother’s lineage and clan that determines the individual’s identity, and, in fact, the “individual” identifies through her nation, as a member of a community, and is not really “individual” at all. Individual identity is grounded in the collective identity.

When Indigenous people from an outside nation were adopted, for any variety of reasons, they became part of a new Clan. Hence, they may have formerly been Snipe Clan of the Penobscot Nation, but under their new status they are now Beaver Clan of the Mohawk Nation. This means they are no longer Snipe Clan and they are no longer Penobscot. Their new identity comes from the new Clan and they will now say “I am Mohawk of the Beaver Clan.” For example, Indigenous scholar, Barbara Alice Mann (Bear Clan Seneca), notes the identity of famed anthropologist Gawaso Wanneh (Arthur Parker, 1855—1955) who is still referred to by historians as one-eighth Indian through his father’s lineage (Mann 99). Mann points out that this is a patently incorrect, colonial interpretation. Gawaso Wanneh/Parker was not Seneca at all because of the blood from his paternal lineage (99). It was not until Seneca Grandmothers of the Bear Clan adopted him that he became one hundred percent Seneca, which he was (99). This is how identity worked during the early colonial era and still works, albeit under duress in Indian country and academic scholarship, today. Biology and constructions of race do not entirely apply; kinship traditions and belonging to a clan and nation are more important.

The Indigenous identity practices applied to European settlers as well. When Eastern Woodlands Indigenous clan mothers adopted Europeans into their nation, the European settler became Indigenous—by whatever clan and nation adopted them. After the adoption, they were Mohawk or Shawnee or Cherokee; they were no longer Irish or Scot or German. Mohawk or Shawnee or Cherokee was their new identity—a collective-based identity. During the early colonial period, when Indigenous peoples converted to Christianity and became American citizens, their identity was no longer based in Indigenous collective identity (though this is no longer the case). “Christian” became their clan and “American” became their nation. This is how strongly clan identity was situated in the Eastern Woodlands and how the collective identity was determined. However, Indigenous nations across Turtle Island each had their own way of understanding tribal belonging and of determining identity; some of those ways included matrilineal descent.

In pre-colonial Indian Country of the Eastern Woodlands, and certainly in many matrilineal Indigenous nations today, you are who your mother and her people are as determined by Clan Mothers/Grandmothers—that is your identity. Elders determine identity, not genealogists, blood quantum, or the presence of one’s name on a colonial ledger. Of course, after 500 years of colonization, there are now many problems and varying practices of determining identity across the hundreds of Native nations in the U.S. that no longer solely follow the older traditional ways. Absurdities such as a Native grandmother who is determined to not be Indian enough (due to blood quantum levels) to be enrolled in her federally-recognized nation, but her grandchildren are because their Native blood quantum is higher, is a common, and divisive, situation among the nations today.
Before the European settlers arrived, skin color, religious beliefs, and so on, were not criteria for Indigenous national identity. Instead, spiritual and matrilineal bonds through kinship networks (the clan systems) determined identity. This is because most all Indigenous nations function on a moral ethic of community; the notion that we are all relatives with one another. We are bonded, responsible for, and in relationship with one another and this is not predicated on biology or racial similarity. As Christopher Columbus wrote in his journal about first contact with Indigenous peoples:

Nor have I been able to learn whether they held personal property, for it seemed to me that whatever one had, they all took shares...no one would believe it who has not seen it; of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no; on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it. (Allen 215)

This is the practice of communal ethics, and Indigenous identity was formed and expressed from that ethic, which is a value of belonging and kinship, not a divisive category based in biological race. This cultural practice alone renders the contemporary term "mixed-blood" as a colonized counter-narrative to everything Indigenous peoples were, and what Traditions today continue to be. However, Allen and Vizenor both use the concept of mixed blood identity to reinforce traditional Indigenous concepts and communal values. Indeed, by doing so in their literary writings, they assert the fundamental precept of what is traditional in and of itself. That is, tradition is something that, while growing and changing over time to serve the people, still maintains the essential values of the people, which are communal, connected to the ancient stories of the nation, and life-affirming.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COLONIAL INTRUSIONS ON INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

When the takeover of Turtle Island began by the Europeans, more and more blood quantum, and not Clan or matrilineal origins, determined identity. Indigenous traditions that determined identity were primarily ignored by the nascent American country, and mixed-blood offspring were used as political wedges to split-apart Indigenous nations (Lobo and Talbot 39). Indeed, by 1817, United States' policies concerning mixed-blood people were formally added to diplomatic relations between the new republic and Indigenous nations (39). Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1803 that Indigenous peoples and European settlers “meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people...[i]ncorporating themselves with us as citizens of the United States...will be better to promote than retard” (37). Jefferson's hope was that the Indigenous gene pool would be subsumed by an Anglo one (37) and thus create Indigenous cultural erasure, but genetic makeup alone does not determine cultural identity. Phillip Wears writes that “Stripping someone of his or her name and identity, then redefining them in your own terms, is the first step towards dehumanizing people” (18).

After 1871, the U.S. largely went from a position of military engagement with Native Americans and moved to a policy of assimilation (40). What this meant was that the American government shifted from an official policy of outright killing Indigenous peoples in acts of war (though of course they continued to do so after 1871), and, instead, enacted a policy of ethnic cleansing of Native children through Indian Boarding schools, destruction of clan systems to upset Native social and governing structures, among other strategies. The new policy was also carried out by Congress passing laws that gave Native lands held by the community to individual Native people based on blood quantum through the General Allotment Act of 1887 (40). Under this new law, full-blood Indigenous peoples who were enrolled on government ledgers determining identity had their land controlled by the U.S. government; whereas, mixed-bloods on the ledgers controlled their own land and accounts (41). In this way, the United States undermined Native cultures in a strategy to genetically annihilate full-blood Natives by socioeconomically privileging those individuals who were mixed-blood hoping these measures would eventually erase Native cultures. African-Americans need but one-drop to prove Afro-descent, while Natives have to prove sufficient drops of blood, are opposite strategies with the same reason: profit. The difference in these U.S. policies is how to best exploit a diaspora versus a sovereign, landed people. Legal policies like these stemmed from a belief that culture is racialized and thus genetically subsuming Indigenous people meant, in America’s rationale and hope, that this would lead to cultural obliteration.

In addition to these external intrusions, after the European settlers arrived with their focus on skin color to determine identity and their socially-constructed, hierarchical notions of race, many Indigenous peoples were internally drawn into their way of thinking as a means of survival. From allowing Cherokee young men to be taken to England in the early 1800s to be re-educated in western cultural values (patrarchy, private ownership of land, Christianity, white-supremacy, among others) (Allen 37), to building and attending churches on Native lands for cultural survival (Fawcett 53—8), to Indigenous children being coerced or forcibly taken to Indian Boarding schools, over the centuries what it meant to be Native began to change considerably inside the communities. More and more, who could identify as Indian meant something racialized, not cultural or community based. Eventually, the Cherokee nation would utterly disenfranchise Cherokee women [the people who determine identity] by writing them out of their constitution (Allen 38) and practice the enslavement of African peoples on Cherokee plantations. Of course, acting like the conquerors did not preserve their Indigenous identities or stave off military action to remove Indigenous nations from their lands.

Another key player in Indigenous identity formation is a federally funded lobbying organization called the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs that was founded in 1970 and comprised of 146 federally-recognized Indian “tribes.” The NTCA “launched an aggressive campaign
to...recast the definition of “Indian” in the public consciousness—and, they made it clear, in law—this time as being only those ‘enrolled in a federally recognized tribe’” (Lobo and Talbot 44). Ultimately, the U.S. federal government would appoint itself as the judge of who is an individual Indian, and later, would expect Indigenous nations to seek the government’s recognition and legitimization of them as an actual Native American “tribe.” In other words, you aren’t an Indian unless the government of the people who conquered you recognizes you as a Native nation and then that Native nation declares you are an individual Indian. For these nations, individuals must prove a certain blood-quantum in order to be enrolled as a citizen of that nation and each Native nation has different requirements. These laws have wreaked havoc among the Indigenous nations, causing competition for federal funds, in-fighting about who is “more Indian” than the others, and internal tensions that make working together quite difficult. In sum, to a great extent traditional practices in determining Indigenous identity, and in matrilineal nations that means the word of the Clan Mothers, have been written out of the equation in the federal-recognition policy that Native nations have espoused and practiced for millennia.

In her 2001 seminal article “Indigenous Identity: What is it, and Who Really Has it?” from American Indian Quarterly, Hilary N. Weaver writes that

> While we as Indigenous people were busy guarding against cultural appropriation, we may have missed a much bigger threat to Indigenous continuity. Indeed, there are some nonnatives who pose as Natives and some Natives who sell traditions and spirituality for profit, but the self-appointed “identity-police” who divide communities and accuse others of not being “Indian” enough... should also be an issue of concern...Through internalized oppression/colonization, we have become our own worst enemy. (Lobo, Talbot, and Morris 35)

In January 2014, John Kane, a Mohawk activist and national commentator on Native issues who openly rejects enrollment and federal recognition, was a featured speaker at the “Who Decides You’re Real? Fixing the Federal Recognition Process,” a two-day conference at Arizona State University in Tempe. At the University conference he stated

> Our sovereignty — our right to life and our freedom — is a product of Creation. When we do an opening [Ohenton Kariwakehwen] in my homeland, in the territory of Haudenosaukee, we do a whole acknowledgement about relationships. We start by acknowledging the people, everybody who is here. We acknowledge the ground to the stars. We talk about relationships. The problem with the federal recognition process is it’s all about ONE relationship between a specific Native people... (https://faraheight.wordpress.com/2014/01/25/john-kane-on-inherent-sovereignty-who-decides-who-is-indian/)

In this statement, Kane is referring to traditional definitions of identity. As he says, it is about relationships—the whole community of life—and federal recognition disrupts those traditions and ways of conceptualizing relationships here on Earth as connected and reciprocal, not singular and one directional, bowing to an external authority.

Last, Barbara Mann points out that “quantum counting actually derives from colonial Slavery” (Mann 93). From there she thoroughly takes apart the 1896 Dawes Commission that “began assigning quantums based...on heritage” (93) and notes that today the “Dawes-era eugenics in carding Indians” not only continues, but is popular (93). She then asks readers to entertain the unthinkable proposition of asking former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to state her “Negro Quanums” (93). Obviously, Negro quantums are not going to be associated with land sovereignty, but the issue is the inherent dehumanizing violence in expecting any people to state their blood quantums in proof of their identity. No other American citizens are expected to produce a card to prove their racial identity—and doing so chillingly reflects the policies of totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany of the last century. Though Indigenous nations have sovereign rights that no other groups have within American soil, traditional routes of determining identity need not be abandoned for colonial measures that racialize, when racialization was not present before the European settlers arrived.

This is the colonial state of claiming identity for Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island today. But the settler-version of history does not have the final word, and the effects of colonization on Native peoples cannot claim a fait accompli either. Federal recognition has an extremely important socioeconomic role in the survival of many Indigenous nations, but it also comes at a high price in terms of identity and belonging. Native American writers are reclaiming the conversation, re-mapping the territory of identity, and using the power of words to re-name what has been mis-labeled and used to denigrate Native peoples. Their words point to what has only taken the nations farther and farther away from their tradition of communal ethics. Native writers like Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Mary TallMountain, to name but a few, shape the conversation about Indigenous identity in their literary works. But Paula Gunn Allen and Gerald Vizenor especially make imaginative and rich contributions to the conversation about Indigenous identities, and, in doing so, steal back the thunder.

**NEW MIXED-BLOODS: CONFLUENCE AND CROSSBLOOD IDENTITIES**

What it meant historically to belong to an Indigenous nation, before the colonizing structures began infringing upon long-held traditions that vary widely from Native nation to nation, was typically founded in elaborate kinship networks that centralized belonging. Over the centuries, ways of belonging to an Indigenous community or nation have transformed, but the value of belonging itself has not changed. Understanding Indigenous identity in terms of belonging to one's
Indigenous community is beautifully expressed in the works of Paula Gunn Allen and Gerald Vizenor. Both of these authors originate from indigenous nations that are based on a Twinned (gender complementary) social structure and function from a strong ethic of community that understands the created world as interactive and reciprocal among the whole of life. The focus of their works is not on division, but on connection; not on loss, but what continues to define Native peoples on their own traditional terms, even while using new terminologies for Native identity, like confluence and crossblood. Allen’s and Vizenor’s literary compositions also draw from the practice of oral tradition so deeply valued in indigenous cultures, and doing so builds a stonework of connections linking them to their ancestors like pathways around a great mountain range.

In her 1987 essay “Autobiography of a Confluence,” the late Laguna Pueblo scholar and writer Paula Gunn Allen (1939—2008) states early in the piece that her mother never told her “Remember you’re part Indian”, but, instead, continually reinforced in Allen “Never forget that you’re Indian” (Swann and Krupat 144). Her mother’s simple statement carries complex assertions about the politics of identity, which she casually took-apart in a straightforward teaching to her daughter. Her child Paula was whole: wholly Indian, wholly Lebanese, and thus wholly human. Allen writes that the triculture state of New Mexico "works itself out in my life" and then goes on to list her many heritages, some of which include Lebanese-American, German-Jewish, Italian-Catholic, German-Lutheran, and so on (145). “The land, the family, the road” form her identity, and she demonstrates throughout the essay that these three influences are beyond definition, constantly in flux because they are living landscapes, and are profound riches to her (145). Allen’s voice is direct and clear; the multiple heritages do not create fog for her but are moveable treasures she mined throughout her lifetime.

At the core of the conversation about mixed-blood identity are these suppositions: Are human beings a collection of parts of identities or are we whole beings? Are we mixed like breeds of dogs (half shepherd half collie) or are we indivisible entities who hold within us a spiritual marriage of ancestral lineages making us greater than the sum of our parts? The Ojibwe scholar, Gerald Vizenor, addresses these conceptualizations directly in a 1994 interview for the Humanities and Social Sciences Film Group and in a 1987 essay titled “Crows Written on the Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies.” Though Vizenor states explicitly that he is a mixed-blood in the 1987 essay, by the 1994 interview, he is using the term “crossblood”, the title of his second autobiographical monograph, to describe himself instead. From “mixed” to “cross” as self-definitions demonstrates a journey of healing, of inhabiting a greater imagining of the multi-racial self that transcends limitations and pedestrian conceptualizations of human being-ness. This new imagining of self as belonging and whole is strongly in keeping with many indigenous nations’ cultural values and trumps colonial narratives centralizing identity criteria for federal recognition based on blood quantum.

The conversation about mixed-blood Indians always carries with it a divisive hidden twin that remains in the shadows asserting the person is lacking, is damaged, and is a marginalized Other doomed to existential confusion for the rest of her/his life. Its foundational premise is that sameness/homogeneity manifests stability, that human beings function best when we have fewer choices laid before us to explore, and that we will surely falter in perpetual crisis under the yoke of multiple identities, equating our lives to the pathology-inducing act of trying to fit the evening stars into a bowl from which we must drink. Conversely, it must therefore mean that human beings who come from racially and ethnically similar parents are more whole, more psychologically balanced, and will live clearly-focused lives knowing resoundingly who they are based in their monolithic upbringing. Sameness/Safety fuels the lizard-brain discourse around mixed-bloods, and is certainly the bedrock premise undergirding every argument meant to legitimize xenophobia.

Fearing and denigrating mixed-blood identity and perceiving human beings as ethnic and racial parts is a failure of human imagination, as Vizenor has suggested. But added to this is the specific American need to reinforce a version of history that declares there are no more Indians remaining, and those who do remain are culturally flawed because they are not biologically “pure,” but are mixed-bloods. Without so-called biologically pure Indians, the necessity of the United States government taking Indigenous people’s demands for justice seriously seems legitimate. This is the hidden message behind blood quantum measures for belonging and inclusion in federally-recognized Indigenous nations. The numbers of Indigenous peoples with federal recognition, meaning “pure Indians,” are considerably less than those mixed-blood Indians without Red Cards who are considered fakes or flawed Indians. This line of thinking culminates in what has been dubbed statistical genocide and is an example of a warped definition of what cultural tradition actually means, i.e., only biologically pure indigenous peoples can be truly traditional Indians. Allen and Vizenor not only point to the failures of this argument, but also offer a greater vision of mixed-blood identity that mocks the “arithmetic division of identity” as elementary, even barbaric (Film Group). Further, their concepts of indigenous identity strongly reflect the original beliefs and practices of many Indigenous nations before colonization.

Allen writes “My life is the pause. The space between. The not this, not that, not the other. The place that the others go around. Or around about. It’s more a Mobius strip than a line” (Swann and Krupat 151). A Mobius strip has no ending and no beginning; it is eternal, fluid, and complete, as Allen envisioned herself. She is the space between the words that clearly define and is the indefinable pause, the silence that makes the words heard, that allows meaning to rise and be known. Like Two-Spirits (LGBTQ people) who are understood in many indigenous nations to hold the community together because they are neither woman or man, noon or
midnight, winter or summer, but none of them and all of them at once, Allen understands her mixed-blood ancestry to be a position of privilege that holds all her ancestries together. She is the binding agent, the crossroads where the lost take refuge in seeing all the roads at once. Like the Two-Spirit, she is what is in-between and holds the liminal place of mystery and transition: fall and spring, dusk and dawn. Her identity presents the possibilities of all that might be for humanity by being a vessel that holds aloft and witnesses many identities, yet is all her own, simultaneously.

Vizenor writes in his 1987 autobiographical essay "mixedbloods loosen the seams in the shrouds of identities" (101) and "[s]urvival is imagination, a verbal noun, a transitive word in mixedblood autobiographies; genealogies, the measured lines in time, place, and dioramas, are never the same in personal memories" (103). So it is life, then, the presence of human breath, that makes words and language contain life, which prevents words from becoming fixed symbols on a silent page (or birch bark). Like the Two-Spirit, this is what the mixedblood is: life-giving essence. Mixedbloods as life-giving essences, as the space between words that make the words themselves visible and audible, are unquantifiable. This definition of mixedblood cannot be drawn out of the body and measured; it can neither be seen nor understood as anything singular nor as being in relationship to itself, but can only be grasped as it exists within the fluid, ever-evolving space of community. Mixedblood existence can never be noted on a graph; it is that unnamable state of being that holds multiple identities at once while simultaneously creating something wholly new.

Allen goes on to write that some "of us" are denied the sureness "about who we are" and

[we live on the road that the dead walk down. We ride it out of town and back. By its meanders we discover what is there, what is not. By its power we are drawn into a confluence of minds, of beings, of perceptions, of styles. (153)

From her description, it seems that mixedbloods are the very people who walk where others are unable to go, that they have access to the unknown and can discover in the power of merging like great rivers joining, what it means to be something beyond ordinarily human, to be extraordinarily alive. Inhabiting ulcer spaces, like philosophers, artists, and Two-Spirits, mixedbloods have access to interdimensional being, yet it is also as ordinary, and sacred, as Earth herself. Being mixedblood is as normal and common a human thing as sunlight, yet all life depends on its presence. Throughout Allen’s essay she offers great detail of the geographical road of her homeland and all it contains: foods, languages, human gossip and histories. She sees her life as this road, claiming:

It is a singularly powerful place, the road that runs across the middle of the lands, the roads that run, everywhere, that connects us to it and them to us...that road that is the center of my life. (154)

In her concluding paragraph, Allen writes that “my life, like my work, is a journey-in-between, a road” (154) and she sees this road—her mixedblood identity—leading to every road in the world, physically and spiritually. She inhabits a perpetual state of belonging to the whole by the very fact that she is a mixed-blood.

The Clan Mothers of the matrilineal Eastern Woodlands nations know this and thus understood that the place to look for human belonging is in spirit, not blood. They knew since the beginning of time that identity is formed in the ineffable (air, spirit, sky) and must be brought into meaning through human action (earth, blood, law). This is what kinship ties are: ritually demonstrated spiritual bonds. To Indigenous peoples, to the great philosophers of the Americas, imagination is not something to be taken out and used like a compass when one is lost. Instead, it is a way of living, and this is where identity is forged—in the place of spirit, the place of imagination. In this place, “mixedblood” as blood-quantum is a strange concept indeed: banal, reductive, and spiritually corrosive. In the hands of traditional Indians like Allen and Vizenor, the word and idea of mixedblood is spun back into life.

"The mixedblood is a new metaphor...a transitive contradancer between communal tribal cultures and those material and urban pretensions that counter conservative traditions," Vizenor writes (101). A mixedblood, then, reveals hidden meanings, relates and connects unrelated entities to one another, and, as Allen suggests, serves as a binding agent among cultures, which is ancient in origin and highly traditional in practice. What Vizenor is revealing by casting mixedbloods in this way exposes the very reason why mixedbloods themselves are living counter-narratives to the colonial definition of Indigenous identity and are marginalized. Like the Two-Spirit, mixedblood identities cannot be quantified and they, in many ways, are more traditional than the colonial full-blood Indian gold-standard of what it means to be culturally authentic. Being full-blooded has no fundamental correlation or necessary meaning to cultural identity: a genetically full-blood Indigenous person may utterly reject her/his culture and entirely assimilate into Eurosettler-American culture. By blood they are Indian; by culture they are EuroAmerican. Yet, this person can be tribally enrolled and have federal recognition as being a real and true Indian—while rejecting (even deriding) Indigenous cultural knowledge and withdrawing from Indigenous community engagement. This is surely the fulfillment of the early colonizers' agenda.

Mixedbloods are living emblems of an Indigenous tradition that rejects biology-based definitions of belonging. Mixedbloods are the pause, the dawn, the
crossroads, the very essence that colonizers cannot put on paper. These are the Indigenous people so often attacked and rejected by Native Americans and non-Natives for not possessing government-approved identity. Vizenor continues sculpting the image of mixedbloods for readers with “those mixedbloods at the treelines...are wild world hunters with new metaphors on separation” (106). Metaphors reveal hidden meanings and similarities between ideas birthing something altogether new, like the mixedblood who reinvents what it means to be Indian while retaining the most fundamental essence of tradition: cultural ideologies, practices, kinship and belonging.

In the closing sentence of Vizenor’s autobiographical essay, he writes “mixedbloods must hold back some secrets from the alien speakers in the academies” (109), which reminds me of the silence of dusk and how only those who listen closely and meet the releasing of day to the onset of night can learn their secrets. Perhaps Vizenor is telling us that mixedbloods have won those secrets from the need of acute listening in order to survive, the academy at this time is not capable of hearing their wisdom, and mixedbloods should carefully guard the sacred learning of inhabiting the in-between places of identity. How well the academy has listened to Native Americans up to this point may be the best indication of how ready it is to hear the secrets of mixedbloods. More obviously, of course, academies are colonial institutions that reinforce subjugation of Indigenous peoples, but they are also places of engagement that can obliterate the colonial mindset. One careful step at a time can tell us when to reveal more. The first step America could take would be actually including Indigenous peoples in every aspect of American culture, from historical narratives in public school curricula to what is happening in Indian Country in the national weekly news headlines. Doing so would be a signal of respect to Native people that perhaps would make the “alien speakers in the academies” less so.

Beyond Indigenous identities, being mixedblood is the condition of most of humanity and is unfortunately a contemporary source of fear and nationalism. As I stated previously, mixedbloods are perceived as being in a perpetual state of identity crisis, torn between or among cultures, rather than being perceived as a rich culmination of ancestries that can all be celebrated within that person’s human life. The problem with mixedblood people is that none of us are exactly the same combination of lineages, geographies, histories, and languages and this slipperiness reinforces the indefinable existence that, in a colonial nation, means people outside categories cannot be controlled. Therefore, the system creates ways that those who are accepted (federally recognized) can police those who are rejected (mixedbloods). This was never the state of the hundreds of Indigenous nations on Turtle Island that already had clearly defined means to determine identity before the settlers arrived that now, too often, have been forgotten or trumped by blood quantum politics.

EATING FROM ONE BOWL

In a 2004 article in Wicazo Sa Review, Tom Holm wrote a graphic depiction of Indigenous identity showing four complex categories called the Peoplehood Matrix, affirming that “[n]o single factor is more important than the others and all necessarily support each other as well as a particular group’s larger sense of identity” (Lobo, Taibol, and Morris 36). The Peoplehood Matrix is comprised of these categories: Language, Sacred History, Place/Territory, and Ceremonial Cycle (35), and between these categories are arrows pointing to and from them symbolizing an interconnected, ever flowing system of identity expressions. Within this Matrix is where the mixedblood is at home and from where Indigenous nations culturally functioned before colonization. She may not need to merely inhabit Vizenor’s “treeline” working hard to bind and connect in a constant “contradance” among identities, but be at home within the fluid place of traditional community where time is eternal, nonlinear, and all-encompassing. Surely Allen would agree, as she writes about “the road” that draws the whole of life into itself and is simultaneously that river of life “where Iatiku waits, where the four rivers meet, where I am going, where I am from” (Swann and Krupat 154).

Ultimately, the place of affirmation for mixedbloods, and the testament to Indigenous cultural survival for all the nations, lies within mixedblood existence and acceptance. Blood quantum and notions of biological purity were brought to Turtle island by the colonizers in order to divide and conquer the Natives. Indians today must stop engaging in a similar colonial warfare against each other by not participating in the divisive attacks on other Indian people. Native American writers are talking back to these colonial practices by using the power held in words to unite in wholeness, not divide and harm communities. Weaver asserts that the “hateful accusations that are hurled at some [Indians] serve to hurt our communities” (Lobo, Taibol, and Morris 35).

Returning traditions to the national conversation about identity, and distancing blood-quantum measurements, is a sure way to strengthen Indigenous communities in the Americas. Allen, Vizenor, John Kane, and a nation of scholars and traditional people are changing the conversation from a colonial narrative to a Native one. As Barbara Mann points out:

the whole point of Native adoption, one of the most ancient and widespread Native American laws, was precisely to undercut the impulse to hostile exclusion by making the Other, the Self. The minute we all “eat from one bowl” using “one spoon,” as the Northeastern metaphor goes, we are relatives, forbidden to make war upon one another. (88)

Making relatives is the Indian way. Bringing mixedblood people into community and honoring them is embracing the reality before us and welcoming inclusivity
that will serve indigenous communities in the original way they were created by First Woman; as relatives.

WORKS CITED