

Introduction

The Chief Who Never Was

“The first thing in my life that I can remember is the exciting aftermath of an Indian fight in northern Montana. My mother was crying and running about with me in my moss bag-carrier on her back. . . . Women and horses were everywhere. . . . My mother’s hand was bleeding. . . . She handed me to my aunt and jumped on a pony and rode away.”¹ These lines introduce the life story of Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance as he himself told it. Earlier in his writing career, Long Lance, whom his recent biographer Donald B. Smith calls “one of the most famous North American Indians of his day,” had penned popular newspaper and magazine articles about Indian issues and events.² But it was clearly his autobiography that catapulted the man to celebrity in the late 1920s. In it, Long Lance described growing up on the Great Plains as the son of a Blackfoot chief. Long Lance’s explanation for his mother’s bloody hand in the opening scene was that his mother had just mutilated herself in a ritual of mourning for a brother killed in battle. This exotic vignette was only the first of many. Long Lance went on to relate how he had joined the other small boys in listening outside the tents of the medicine men; how he had seen the hunters return with their gory trophies from the great buffalo chases; how he had trod the circle around a flickering fire beside his father in many war dances, his body daubed with red paint.

American readers embraced the book and its author with equal fervor. In short order, the new literary hero also became a silent film star and a social sensation on both coasts. Men admired his athletic prowess, his

roguish humor, his powerful storytelling talents, his ability to deliver a bloodcurdling war cry on request. Women clearly felt they cut a fetching figure dangling from his bronzed and well-muscled arm. The movie magazine *Screenland* reported that “Long Lance, one of the few real one-hundred-percent Americans, has had New York right in his pocket.”³

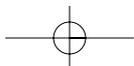
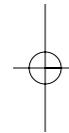
But something about Long Lance did not appear quite right. From time to time, observers voiced uncertainties that caused ripples in the high society that had extended its indulgences to him. Could it be that the line of his lower lip was a little *too* full? Was he, perhaps, a trifle *too* swarthy for an Indian? There were rumors about his relatives. Surely that was not a *black* man peeping out from behind Long Lance’s carefully groomed presentation of a buckskinned and beaded warrior?

Eventually, such intimations demanded satisfaction. Investigators were dispatched to dig up the roots of Long Lance’s family tree — one by the film company that was preparing to release a picture starring the new celebrity, another by a wealthy paramour, both of whom had heard gossip that distressed them. Unfortunately for Long Lance, he *did* have something to hide. In fact, one is hard pressed to know where to begin an enumeration of the things this astonishing man had to conceal.

The Truth about Long Lance

To begin with, his surname was not Long Lance; he had invented this fanciful alternative to his family name, Long. His given name was not Buffalo Child, but — Sylvester. And while his “autobiography” described him as the son of an illustrious Blackfoot chief who roamed the Great Plains, a more accurate job description for Sylvester’s father, Joe, was school janitor in Winston, North Carolina.⁴ Most damning of all in the eyes of the high society in which he had come to live, at least some of his childhood neighbors and townsmen testified to a belief that his familial bloodlines included African elements.

Once they had this kind of information, most of Long Lance’s friends and admirers had little difficulty in determining his “true” racial identity. They were shocked and furious that they had consorted with such a person almost as an equal. “To think that we had him here in this house,” the famous short story writer Irvin S. Cobb is said to have expostulated. “We’re so ashamed! We entertained a nigger!”⁵ The erstwhile paramour was so consumed with bitterness that she had been tricked into a romantic dalliance with a black man that she invented stories that Long had



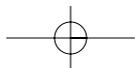
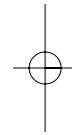
used makeup and chemicals to alter the color of his skin and the texture of his hair and so disguise his African features.

More recent commentators have troubled themselves little more than Sylvester Long's contemporaries did over the question of which racial pigeonhole they should stuff him into. Smith, for instance, subtitles his biography of Long "the true story of an impostor" and writes of how Long, starting from a young age, "*passed* as an Indian, capitalizing on his high cheek bones, straight, jet black hair, and coppery skin."⁶ Fellow historian James A. Clifton asserts that Sylvester Long "assumed the identity of an Indian"; that he "became a sham to escape the socially imposed limits and handicaps of being a southern Black boy"; that "his was an adopted ethnic identity pure and simple."⁷

But is Sylvester Long really categorized and disposed of so easily? Certain aspects of his biography complicate the picture at least a little. For one thing, it appears that Long *was* Indian, at least by partial, biological descent — although not Blackfoot, as he had claimed. Biographer Smith describes evidence for Long's being white and Croatan Indian on his mother's side, white and Cherokee on his father's side.⁸ He may or may not have possessed black ancestry.

In addition, certain aspects of Long Lance's lived experiences clearly overlapped with those of many unquestionably Indian people of his day. Like men from many tribes, including the famous Hunkpapa Lakota chief Sitting Bull, he traveled in his boyhood as an Indian performer in a Wild West show. Later, he applied to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, overcoming officials' doubts about his proper race largely by virtue of his demonstrated ability to speak at least some of the language proper to the tribe he claimed at the time (which was Cherokee). He shared the experiences at Carlisle with a vast company of other Indian young people, including the sons of some of the great Indian chiefs, such as Robert Geronimo. In one of Sylvester Long's actually truthful anecdotes he described himself as the good friend and training partner of the world-renowned Indian athlete Jim Thorpe, who was a Carlisle schoolmate.⁹

Some of Long's personal commitments, too, suggest what can be interpreted as strong feelings of connection to Native communities. As a journalist he spent some years traveling about Canada visiting Indian reserves, and his articles in a number of major magazines and newspapers exposed abuses and defended the rights of Indian peoples. In recognition of such efforts, the Blood Indians, a member tribe within the Blackfoot Confederacy, adopted him and invested him with a ceremonial name,



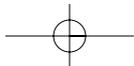
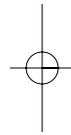
one that had been carried before him by an honored warrior. It was the name he always used thereafter: Buffalo Child. Later, Long willed all his assets at his death to the St. Paul's School on the Blood Reserve, where the money provided scholarships for Indian students for many years.¹⁰

Long Lance and Contemporary Questions of Indian Identity

My intent here is neither to defend nor to vilify a particular historical person or to “prove” his racial identity one way or the other. Whether we choose to arrange the facts of Sylvester Long’s life so that they show him as an Indian or as a racial impostor who took advantage of public credulity, his provocative story points to larger issues. How should we think about American Indian identity and its intersections with other racial identities? What assumptions should inform our debates and policies on and off the reservation? This book sets forth the many competing assumptions about Indian identity. Further, it asks why they matter — to Indians, to scholars, to Indian scholars, to individuals involved with Indian communities, and to those who merely observe those communities from afar.

The question of “real Indianness” has more force today than it did even in Long Lance’s day — and for a discernible reason. Since the 1960s, a significant subset of the American population has become interested in their own American Indian ancestry. This subset comprises not only some individuals who, like Sylvester Long, were formerly identified as black but also many others formerly identified (by themselves and others) as white, Hispanic, or some other race or ethnicity. The subset embraces two general categories. Some are people whose recent genealogical researches have led them to discover one or more Indian ancestors of whom they were previously unaware. Others have always known that they possessed tribal ancestry but have suppressed or ignored this information to one degree or another. In both of these categories, individuals have often dissociated themselves from the ongoing life of tribal communities; others have moved in and out of them or around their margins.¹¹

In recent decades, however, significant numbers of individuals of both descriptions have begun declaring their connections to Indian communities, pressing both tribes and the larger society to respond to them in some way. Many have revised their former racial classification on formal legal documents so as to reflect an Indian identity.¹² Some such indi-



viduals have banded together with others like themselves to petition the U.S. government to recognize them as Indian tribes. A few have succeeded.¹³

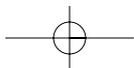
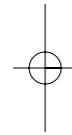
Such trends have drawn considerable — and often highly charged — attention from a variety of sources. An example is provided by Boston law student Jeff Benedict's recent book, *Without Reservation: The Making of America's Most Powerful Indian Tribe and Foxwoods, the World's Largest Casino*, which examines the legitimacy of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe of Connecticut. The Mashantuckets were formally acknowledged as an Indian tribe by an act of Congress in 1983, and they made use of their new status to establish a fabulously profitable (and tax-exempt) gambling operation on their reservation. The book expresses the author's conviction that the Mashantucket tribe is a band of white Americans who audaciously reinvented themselves as Indians when it became profitable to do so, trampling the rights of their neighbors in the process. Benedict argues that, by his genealogical reckoning, the tribal members share not a scrap of Pequot ancestry and should not be considered real Indians — certainly not for the purpose of enjoying the legal rights reserved for federally recognized tribes. He urges Congress to remember that what it has done it can undo: he hopes to see the Mashantucket's tribal status revoked, along with the attendant privileges. The book has enjoyed tremendous sales, especially in towns near the reservation, where anxiety runs high that the tribe may attempt to expand its current land base.¹⁴

Benedict's book reads like a novel and is written for a general audience. But debates about Indian identity are equally intense in scholarly contexts, where the material considerations at stake are far less obvious. Clifton, for instance, applies the same straightforward reasoning by which he stigmatized Sylvester Long's identity to many other individuals who assert an Indian identity in our own time. He argues in two recent books (provocatively titled *Being and Becoming Indian* and *The Invented Indian*) that modern America is beset by an epidemic of false claims to Indian identity. These claims emanate, he says, from "hundreds of thousands of . . . [people] with obscure antecedents who, in the past twenty years, have swapped their ethnic identities for Indian." Such individuals seek only "the stamp of federal approval on and specially privileged political economic support of their resuscitated or contrived identities."¹⁵ In this understanding of racial identification, claims to Indian identity function as (to use Clifton's colorful wording) "a sturdy crowbar . . . to gain leverage in the play of interest-group politics."¹⁶

Ethnohistorian William Quinn, Jr., agrees with his colleague Clifton. He has penned a series of journal articles on what he calls the “Southeast Syndrome,” an affliction that he asserts rages throughout a good portion of the American population. It causes its sufferers, some of whom actually possess a modest degree of Indian ancestry but who are (Quinn asserts) by any reasonable standard white, to begin claiming that they are Indians. Quinn argues that these individuals are illegitimately attempting to exchange their true racial identity for what they construe as a more romantic one — and one that may also be more economically profitable in our age of affirmative action.¹⁷

Nor is it only non-Indians who have become intensely invested in Indian identity claims. The actions of organizations administered by and for Indian people show that Indians, too, have begun taking the issue of racial identity with great seriousness. The Association of American Indian and Alaska Native Professors (AAIANP), the Native American Scholarship Fund, and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education have all recently registered official warnings about university students who dishonestly assert an Indian identity in hopes of gaining access to minority education funding.¹⁸ Even tribes are rethinking the requirements they impose upon petitioners for tribal citizenship. A number of them have been sifting through their membership records and adjusting — sometimes repeatedly — the requirements for citizenship. Some have made their citizenship criteria more stringent, and some have made them less so. Some have closed their rolls altogether so that no new tribal citizens are accepted. Some have even disenrolled, or revoked the membership of, significant numbers of former tribal citizens, charging that they do not meet necessary criteria. The bitterness and anger associated with these decisions frequently reach alarming proportions.

What all these disputes about real Indianness demonstrate is that it is one thing to claim identity as an Indian person, and it is quite another for that claim to be received by others as legitimate. It is my goal in this book to explore the identity-making process among American Indians. This book examines the competing definitions of Indian identity — of which there turn out to be many. It also explores both the ways people move within the available definitions and negotiate (or fail to negotiate) identities to which others consent and the consequences of success or failure in establishing an identity. And it records how people experience and communicate about the issues raised by each definition of identity for themselves and their tribal communities.



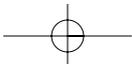
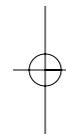
America's Shifting Norms of Racialization

What does it profit us to seek a portrait of real Indianness? Why should anyone care about the complexities of racial identification among American Indians in particular? One reason is that Indian people themselves have defined this as an important issue that affects the well-being (perhaps even the survival) of their communities. No one can truly understand the life of those communities without understanding issues related to identity. Another reason is that understanding the controversies about Indian identity can help illuminate important changes in the way American society conceptualizes much broader issues related to race. It offers us a case study in America's dynamic interactions with what sociologists call "norms of racialization."

It is true that Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance belonged to another era in American history. But his existence gave notice of an America that was, even then, coming into being. In the complexity of his racial ancestry Sylvester Long was a living advertisement of a process that America has widely acknowledged only in the past two decades. Interracial unions and their progeny became a reality in the New World with the arrival of Columbus, and estimates suggest that the majority of American Indians — and a very large number of people currently classified as African Americans — possess multiracial ancestry, along with virtually all Latinos, Filipinos, and a large proportion of whites.¹⁹

Whereas the America of the 1930s knew with great certainty what to do with Sylvester Long once the possibility of African ancestry was revealed, the America of today has less conceptual self-assurance. Certainly strong norms regarding racial boundaries remain in place. But the old, unquestioned confidence that individuals can be classified into one, and only one, racial category is eroding. This new American racial consciousness began to show itself in the 1980s as grassroots organizations sprang up around the country, followed by two powerful lobbying groups, the Association for Multi-Ethnic Americans and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally). All of these defend the rights and interests of people who claim more than one racial identity.

In the 1990s, state after state bowed to the efforts of such groups and changed the official categories of race by adding a "multiracial" option to government forms. Finally, the spearhead of the American demographic enterprise, the U.S. decennial census, also gave formal, governmental recognition to racial hybridity. In the year 2000, for the first time ever, the census allowed people to choose more than one race to describe



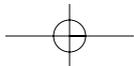
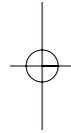
themselves. By 2003, the new method for classifying race will be required for all federal forms.²⁰ As the editors of the excellent anthology *The Social Construction of Race in the United States* note, “All this attention to the meaning of race suggests that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift.”²¹

The changes in racial categorization lead to issues of much urgency. American civil rights laws and related legislation were created under the assumption that all people can be assigned to a single racial category. The same is true of the formal and informal policies that govern recruitment, hiring, and admissions decisions at universities; the provision of certain educational enrichment opportunities to minority young people in public schools; the distribution of scholarships by private foundations; and the like. Now that a growing number of Americans are choosing, in a variety of contexts, to explicitly claim their multiracial heritage, how will social institutions and practices adjust?

Bureaucratic challenges loom. Federal agencies examine the census statistics to discover and address systematic discrimination against minorities in hiring, housing, banking, or voting practices, as well as racial segregation in public schools.²² Given the new rules for enumerating racial groups, employers may be required to resurvey their workforce to show compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which guarantees that citizens of all races have equal employment opportunities. Schools may be required to implement new methods for reporting the race of students to show compliance with Title VI of the same act. And — although a government publication predicts that changes will not be “substantial” — some voting districts may have to be redrawn to conform to the requirements of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and recent Supreme Court decisions.²³

All of these possibilities are destined to create extremely contentious societal debates. Americans whose lives are affected in material ways by the new norms of racialization will ask whether employers who were in compliance with Title VII under the old classification system can rightly be accused of discriminatory hiring if the new ways produce a different racial count. They will ask whether mixed-race students should properly be treated as minority students for the purpose of assessing school segregation. They will ask whether their city truly requires another majority black ward. They will ask, above all, for assurance that particular groups are not manipulating racial data in self-serving ways.

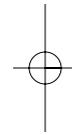
At bottom, all these demands center on a particular question: Now that people can formally classify themselves in more than one group — can proclaim themselves, for instance, as both black *and* white — who are



the “real” minorities? Who are the members of those racial groups for whose protection civil rights laws, and other practices and regulations, were enacted? Who, in short, has a legitimate claim on specific racial identities?²⁴

In March 2000, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced a new policy that attempted to formulate a limited answer to the preceding question. It declared that for the purposes of civil rights monitoring and enforcement, any census respondent who says that he or she belongs to the white race and to a minority race must be considered a minority.²⁵ This decision, however, presently applies *only* to the federal government’s handling of civil rights issues. Other institutions (including state and local governments) and other contexts are not bound by it.

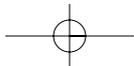
More importantly, it is impossible to predict the degree to which Americans confronted with the real consequences of such a policy will deem the policy acceptable. It may well come under fire for overstating the number of minorities, and it may not be adopted for purposes other than civil rights monitoring.²⁶ Each of the many different strategies that have been proposed for identifying racial groups leads to different enumerations of racial minorities, and therefore to different distributions of opportunities and social resources. It seems likely that American courts and other institutional bodies will soon be asking how we should think about the growing number of individuals who have fought for the right to claim more than one racial identity.²⁷



The Example of Indian Identity

American Indians provide a fabulously rich example for considering the implications of the increasingly ambiguous system of racial classification in the United States. They are a group about which the question of racial identification and classification — its legal, social, economic, political, biological, and other dimensions — has been carefully contemplated by a variety of institutions for hundreds of years. Today, as in the past, different definitions of identity are applied to this group in different contexts and with different and profound consequences.

Accordingly, the example of Indian identity provides an instructive study for anyone attempting to think through the issues and consequences associated with various ways of defining racial groups. Examining Indian identity may help us understand how racial identity is asserted and recognized in groups where the possibility of multiple

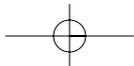
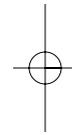


affiliations — and multiple possible bases for affiliation — is explicitly and formally acknowledged. More importantly, it may allow us to assess the consequences of various choices for those most directly affected by them.

The value of the present study for social scientists, who have devoted a great deal of attention to processes of identity, is obvious.²⁸ But what does it do for Indian people and Indian communities? Older social scientific approaches to studying Indian (and other minority) communities have been strongly challenged in recent years, as those communities began to protest that they were tired of being perennial objects of scientific inquiries from which they seldom benefited. The academy has responded with new philosophies of research, especially “participatory research,” which requires scholars to pursue work which grows out of the expressed concerns of communities and furthers their self-defined goals.²⁹ But I argue that if scholars hope to participate meaningfully in the discussion of such issues as the identity concerns of American Indian communities, an entirely new scholarly perspective is required. I attempt to formulate such an approach and to show how it may offer something to both Indian communities and to the academy — and indeed, to all those who are interested in learning about different ways of encountering the world.

An essential part of my analysis is to flesh out the emerging theoretical perspective that I call “Radical Indigenism” by applying it to issues of racial identification. Stated very simply, Radical Indigenism assumes that scholars can take philosophies of knowledge carried by indigenous peoples seriously. They can consider those philosophies and their assumptions, values, and goals not simply as interesting objects of study (claims that some people *believe* to be true) but as intellectual orientations that map out ways of discovering things about the world (claims that, to one degree or another, *reflect* or *engage* the true).

By applying Radical Indigenism to the study of American Indian identity, I intend to refine our understanding of the perspective itself. I use this perspective to consider how indigenous philosophies of identity and community allow us to reframe the questions we ask about Indianness and to guide our inquiries in different directions. I argue, moreover, that this approach can lead us to new fundamental understandings of what it means to do scholarship — about racial identity or anything else. And I argue that this new perspective opens up dramatically different ways for American Indian people to interact with the academy and to accomplish goals they define for their own communities.



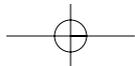
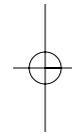
Road Map for the Journey

The plan of this book is straightforward. I begin by exploring, in some detail, four definitions of American Indian identity that are used in various contemporary contexts. Each one assigns divergent meanings to the label “Indian,” and each one sets a framework of rules within which the legitimacy of specific “identity claims” may be determined. In chapter 1, I examine legal definitions of Indianness, while in chapters 2, 3, and 4, I turn to biological, cultural, and personal definitions, respectively.

Significant questions for these chapters include: How does each definition establish and delimit Indian identity? How does each definition offer both opportunities for and constraints upon identification? Why do the “Indians” and “non-Indians” who emerge from these definitions sometimes look surprisingly unlike what most of us expect? What happens to those who can establish a legitimate identity within each definition and to those who cannot? Finally, what issues do each of these definitions raise for the individuals and communities who adopt them, or are the object of them? What benefits does each definition confer and what hazards does each entail, from the perspective of those most intimately affected by it?

These four chapters, in short, provide detailed portraits of the many ways that meanings about Indian identity are made. I have drawn these portraits by listening to the voices of people who identify themselves as Indian. I have found these voices in published sources — journal articles, autobiographies, works of fiction, and newspaper articles. And I have found them, as well, in unpublished sources — particularly the personal interviews I conducted with people who are part of one or another of the Indian communities with which I personally identify. Data from a published source is presented according to customary stylistic conventions. In most cases, data from my own interviews is presented with the speaker’s given name and the first initial of the surname. Interviews with public officials are an exception to this rule; given that readers may recognize the respondents’ full names in such cases, I have attached the full name to their comments. Readers who desire more information about each interview respondent may look up these names in the appendix, which includes two sections with short biographies of each speaker.

Chapter 5 takes up a different sort of question. It acknowledges the devastating consequences that many Indian communities suffer because of conflict over identity issues and asks if there is a way for them to move beyond those conflicts. In particular, it explores the question of whether



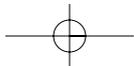
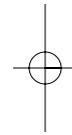
scholars can properly have any part in that movement. I begin to sketch out the perspective of Radical Indigenism and to argue that it provides possibilities for addressing questions of identity — or anything else — in ways that open up new possibilities for the academy and for Indian communities.

In chapter 6, I apply the perspective of Radical Indigenism to a specific issue, exploring how it can help American Indian communities think about what new definitions of identity might look like and how they would function. And I consider what it might mean for the academy to accept such perspectives as “genuine scholarship” — a distinctively American Indian scholarship.

In the conclusion I examine what the issue of Indian identity, when viewed from the perspective of Radical Indigenism, can tell us about broader issues of race in America. And I offer some final thoughts on the implications of Radical Indigenism, as I have attempted to develop it, for the academy and for Indian people.

A number of the issues raised in connection with the matter of identity take us to some of the most contested terrain both in the academy and in Indian country — racial identity, “ethnic switching,” “ethnic fraud,” the relationship of Americans of remote Indian ancestry to Indian communities, the essential nature of the scholarly endeavor, and so on. If the ride through these issues sometimes turns bumpy and uncomfortable, perhaps readers will wish to think of their efforts to endure its rigors as a small tribute to the unfortunate Buffalo Child Long Lance, the chief who never was. His story, whatever one makes of it, cannot fail to compel. He was no doubt a devious character, yet I imagine him also as a soul genuinely tormented about his racial identity. His concern and confusion, and his efforts to resolve these, make him closer kin to many people today than the dramatic elements of his autobiography first suggest. If the America of his day was too steeped in racial stereotypes to see the complexity of American Indian identity and the complexity of the ways meaningful identities come into being, perhaps we modern observers can use his example more profitably.

I hope that my exploration of Long Lance’s story and the many other stories in the subsequent chapters suggests to Indian communities new ways to respond to identity issues with the seriousness they merit yet without being destroyed by the increasingly acrimonious arguments that surround them. I hope that it also helps individuals who are considering reestablishing their own lapsed ties with Indian communities to formulate a clearer understanding of the costs and consequences, for



themselves and for others. I hope that it suggests to the academy a new vision of scholarship that extends the horizon of intellectual possibility beyond what it has imagined before. And I hope that this book assists members of all racial groups to participate in more sophisticated ways in the unfolding process through which our nation is rethinking old ideas about racial identity and creating new norms of racialization. With these goals in mind, let us turn to consideration of the various definitions within which today's candidates for real Indianness must negotiate their identities.

