

Commentary...

One drop of blood – questions of cultural identity

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

The recent kerfuffle over politician Elizabeth Warren's DNA test proving that she has Native American blood (a degree denoting a likely ancestor dating back from the early 19th century) is a fine illustration of the continuity and persistence of the American fixation on race.

We can leave it to others to parse the implications of the unseemly politics of this matter. But it's a fascinating cultural window and mirror.

There's an element of magical thinking in the belief that our "blood" somehow defines us. Having "the blood" is not enough in itself to impart cultural identity. Which the Cherokee Nation rather bluntly pointed out:

The Cherokee Nation described Warren's DNA test as "useless." The statement pointed out that there are legal requirements for tribal citizenship.

"Using a DNA test to lay claim to any connection to the Cherokee Nation or any tribal nation, even vaguely, is inappropriate and wrong," Cherokee Nation Secretary of State Chuck Hoskin, Jr., said, "It makes a mockery out of DNA tests and its legitimate uses while also dishonoring legitimate tribal governments and their citizens, whose ancestors are well documented and whose heritage is proven. Senator Warren is undermining tribal interests with her continued claims of tribal heritage."

Columnist Nick Estes touched the matter with a needle:

"Indianness isn't defined by DNA. It's a legal, social, cultural, and historical construct, where indigenous nations self-define the parameters of belonging. Put simply, it's not about who you claim, it's about who claims you."

We've always been weird about "blood." In the case of those of African descent,

racial heritage — and its cultural baggage, both positive and negative — was for centuries determined by the "one drop of blood" rule. If you had one drop of "black blood," you were black — no matter how "white" you looked. That single drop of blood was, in the eyes of white supremacist antebellum Southern society in particular, a stain. For plantation society, there was great anxiety about black blood tainting the family tree and a "Negro" "passing" as a white man or woman was a threat.

This anxiety over purity did not reflect reality on the ground, where miscegenation was rife.

Thomas Jefferson's teenage concubine Sally Hemings was very likely three-quarters European in descent and the half-sister of Jefferson's dead wife, Martha. She remained a slave.

This is only shocking if you don't know — or won't see — the nature of planter society in the antebellum South. The brilliant diarist Mary Chestnut, who was of that social strata, saw clearly:

"Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children — and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think."

The question of identity has been a fraught one for the entire history of the Euro-American project. By the middle part of the 18th century, there were a great many people of mixed blood and blended or ambiguous cultural identity operating in the wilderness borderlands between the Appalachian mountain chain and the

Mississippi River — men and women who were not just both white and Indian, but something distinctive (yet undefined) unto themselves. They often acted as mediators in trade and politics.

Andrew Montour, French/Oneida Metis, is a classic example of the Man of the Middle Ground. He acted as an interpreter and mediator for agents of colonial Pennsylvania in dealings with the First Nations people of the Ohio Valley in the 1740s and '50s. Though he was widely respected, he was also not white enough for the whites and not Indian enough for the Indians, not simply because of his blood but because he was truly a man of both cultures — and neither. His mixed identity was reflected in a colorful, swashbuckling mix of European and native clothing that early commentators frequently made note of.

His efforts to nail down a place in the world for his kind did not serve the powerful interests of the Iroquois League nor colonial Pennsylvania. He ended up an alcoholic, murdered by a Seneca drinking buddy in 1772.

In his magisterial book "The First Frontier," Scott Weidensaul notes:

"In ways that would haunt him all his life, Andrew Montour was the living embodiment of the patchwork human frontier, a shadow of the physical borderlands. And when he tried to create a place where he could find peace — a place for all the other in-betweens and castoffs, half-bloods and immigrants, refugees and wanderers — both of Montour's worlds, the Indian and the European, conspired to crush his dream. No wonder he drank a lot."

His son, John Montour, was equally culturally ambiguous. He was a remarkable frontier scout and ranger, but he switched sides multiple times during the American Revolution. It wasn't because he was fickle or opportunistic — he just didn't know where to be. He made a whole bunch of enemies and was ultimately murdered in 1788 by Delaware hunters.

We may never resolve the tangled relationships between heritage, ethnicity, culture; our sense of belonging to a group or tribe and our individual standing as

citizens before the Law. The American ideal is, of course, Liberty and Justice For All — and while we have struggled from the very first to live up to that ideal, we have moved in fits and starts toward its fulfillment. Identity politics, where ethnicity and group identity is given primacy over our individual relationship with the promise of the nation, can be nothing but an impediment to a movement toward a day when each of us is judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character.

It's probably best to understand the most recent fixation on "one drop of blood" as just another episode in the ongoing reality TV farce our politics has become. It sure doesn't feel like progress.

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