

Elizabeth Warren's Teachable Moment: Truth and Reconciliation

By Randy Kritkauskay, Citizen Potawatomi Nation enrolled tribal member

Senator Elizabeth Warren has a high profile in the 2020 presidential election. This profile will provide her with a teachable moment.

Her claim of Indian ancestry, combined with Donald Trump's misogynist and racist name calling referring to her as "Pocahontas", provide a unique and timely opportunity to address questions that hang over the entire nation. These questions are not unique to Warren's ancestral and political status. They are much larger and more significant questions that swirled around her, and were left unresolved to the detriment of her image and as a loss to the nation. These questions make headlines on a daily basis. How are we assigned to racial categories? How and why does the color of our skin determine who we are allowed to be? What does it mean to be "an American"? How has our colonial history marginalized non-white peoples? What is the significance of non-white peoples finding common ground in Black and Indigenous Lives Matter protests in the USA and Canada? What can be done to heal the wounds and correct the legacy of historical injustice?

If Warren attempts to put her own family history and Indian ancestral claims behind her, instead of front and center, she will be missing an opportunity to lead our nation in an exploration of these questions. At this moment there is desperate hunger for clarity and leadership on these matters. Warren can use her own family history to demonstrate how American Indians, and by extension Black Americans and other people of color, were legally and socially marginalized by a colonial history steeped in a dangerous notion of White European supremacy. A short history lesson on this matter is long overdue. An articulate former Harvard professor is the perfect person to deliver it.

Warren could begin by enlightening us about the Doctrine of Discovery, a papal declaration of 1493 that declared the western hemisphere to be populated by non-peoples who had no legal or moral claim to their land. Consequently when settlers colonized the lands of indigenous people, the natives were "allowed" to stay, but only at the sufferance and permission of their conquerors, who could withdraw that permission at any time, and did, as hundreds of treaties were ignored as Indians were removed, often by force. Such was the experience for Elizabeth Warren's Cherokee ancestors, and my Potawatomi ancestors.

She could then point out how the enslavement of Africans came to be. When Indians proved to be difficult to enslave and were not productive working on colonial plantations, Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas. Africans and Indians often found common ground. Many enslaved Africans escaped to Indian communities where they were accepted and often intermarried. Whites sexually exploited slaves and had mixed race offspring, Thomas Jefferson being one famous example. Other white settlers, such as my great great grandfather, a French Canadian *voyageur*, or fur trader, married into Native American communities. The first non-Indigenous settler of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Du Sable, a man of mixed racial and partial African background, married a member of my tribe and became one of Chicago's founders. This is my family's mixed race story. It is how so many of us became multi-racial and why the concept of white racial "purity" as somehow being associated with "being American" is not only repugnant, it is silly and inapplicable in the context of our nation.

Millions of Americans have similar stories. Their mixed racial legacy is, like Elizabeth Warren's, often buried or lost in a history of family silence, and for understandable reasons. For centuries, being partly Indian or Black stigmatized an individual. In my home state of Vermont, Native American ancestry was enough to allow civil authorities to condemn women into a program of forced sterilization well into the 20th century. Families, like Elizabeth Warren's, destroyed records linking them to non-white ancestry. Consequently, oral histories, often whispered, became the only link to complicated pasts. No one should be condemned for not having "proof" of Native American ancestry. No one should hesitate to, or apologize for, proudly making Native American ancestral claims based on family lore. No one should be judged because they do or do not look like some racial stereotype. I am a legally enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. My hair and skin color are such that I might pass as one of Senator Warren's family. Our critical difference in having or not having unchallengeable claims to Native American ancestry is that my family maintained tribal enrollment status. Sadly, it resulted in my grandfather spending his childhood years in three "Indian Schools" far from his family, where Indian children were systematically stripped of their identity. Their hair was cut. Their Indian names replaced with European names. Their language prohibited. Punishment was brutal. Disease was rampant. Countless children died of disease and malnourishment. Can we fault Senator Warren's ancestors for wanting to avoid this experience?

Many Native Americans have difficulty, to this day, proving their ancestral connections. Whole tribes, such as the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe in Senator Warren's home state of Massachusetts, have struggled to be officially recognized and maintain their tribal lands. When other tribes in New England sought federal recognition so that they could open casinos and access needed revenue, one competing casino operator testified before the US Congress in 1993 complaining that Indians have special (treaty) privileges and "they don't even look like Indians". That racist statement was made by Donald Trump, then a major casino owner. His "Pocahontas" insult and ignorance have deep roots, just as does our nation's racism.

This raises the question about challenges to Senator Warren's claim of Indian ancestry by the Cherokee Nation. News reports suggesting that they were widespread and an official reaction of the Cherokee have long since been debunked, if poorly publicized. In fact, the controversy sheds light on how racialized and fraught claims of Native American ancestry have become. The Cherokee, who were a large tribe in the southern United States before being forcibly marched to Oklahoma on the infamous Trail of Tears, have a long history of cultural and social connections with African Americans. Intermarriage was quite common. And so was the practice of slavery by wealthy plantation-owning Cherokee. The Emancipation Proclamation freed Cherokee Black slaves after the Civil war. They then became tribal members, "Cherokee Freedmen". This status became problematic in the late 20th century and early years of the 21st century when Cherokee courts ruled that Cherokee Freedmen had to document continual tribal enrollment status dating back to the late 19th century. The controversy arose in part from economic considerations. There were concerns about including thousands of Cherokee Freedmen in the process of distributing, dividing, and ultimately diluting shares of lucrative Cherokee Casino earnings, and the cost of Freedmen's access to tribal benefits supported partly by casino earnings. My own Potawatomi Nation suffered from a similar internecine struggle in the 1970's when treaty claims settlements resulted in significant payments to the tribe. Who was a "real" Potawatomi raised a painful old matter of blood quantum.

In the case of the Cherokee and Freedmen, financial interests were also complicated by racial prejudice. Like so many other Americans, many Cherokee bought into the notion that being "an American" meant

being white. While the Cherokee did not want to actually become white, they had learned that there are problems being thought of as non-white. Some in the tribe wanted to be associated with mainstream white society and to distinguish themselves from other non-whites. In such instances, Indian identity had been colonized by internalizing unchallenged notions of white superiority. I have seen how this plays out, insidiously, in my own family and tribal history.

Elizabeth Warren unwittingly stepped into this hornet's nest. She claimed her Cherokee ancestry at the very moment the Cherokee were dramatically reducing the number of tribal members and raising the bar for who could make claims to Cherokee ancestry. The matter of Cherokee Freedmen was ultimately resolved in favor of the Freedmen. But the Massachusetts senator was caught in the crossfire.

This leaves one remaining piece of awkward history for Senator Warren, her attempt to lay the controversy to rest with a DNA test. By doing so, she stepped into a morass of blood quantum controversy that has plagued Native Americans since the 19th century when the federal government was searching for a strategy to reduce and eventually eliminate its treaty and financial obligations to the small number of surviving Native Americans. It attempted to link percentage of Indian blood to legal status as a Native American. The government hoped that intermarriage would eventually dilute blood lines and that "real" Indians would disappear like pixels deleted one by one in a digital image until it disappears. Many tribes subscribed to blood quantum requirements. Mine did not. Citizen Potawatomi Nation members today simply need proof of continued tribal enrollment.

Senator Warren was rightly chastised for attempting to reduce Native American identity to genetics, and some arbitrary percentage of genetic inheritance. She has admitted the mistake. Indian leaders have made peace with her and she with them.

Senator Warren's detailed and clearly articulated program for Native Americans, "Honoring and Empowering Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples", is eloquent testimony to her commitment to a perspective known in Canada as "Truth and Reconciliation". It also, perhaps not coincidentally, happens to reflect Native American core values about equitably sharing the resources that Mother Earth provides. Such values are evidence that Warren's family remained faithful to their Indian legacy by passing along indigenous values, even as the family's mixed racial and social status was hidden.

This same commitment to economic justice, and the profound care in designing social programs that will actually work, has also earned Warren high marks in the nation's Black community. Opinion polls show her at the top of the list of potential vice presidential running mate favorites among African Americans. It seems that they know the importance of what is in one's heart and spirit, and also the importance of actions and honoring promises. It matters more than skin color or blood quantum.

Senator Warren does not have an image problem associated with her claims of Native American ancestry. She has an image opportunity. Her family history can be a mirror reflecting our nation's racial diversity as depicted in the poster below. Senator Warren, the nation needs you to courageously lead on this issue.

RED, BLACK, WHITE, YELLOW
WE ALL HAVE THE SAME ANCESTRAL ROOTS
IN MOTHER EARTH



Our skin colors are similar to those found in a Native American medicine wheel. Sweetgrass, one of the sacred herbs found within a medicine wheel garden, is colored here to represent human racial diversity, and is braided to represent our common ancestry and shared future.



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