

**Dissertation Abstract: *“Hattak Vpi Homma” yvt Miha Nanta Fehnah? What Does “Native” Really Mean?***

There is no single definition of “Native [American]” or “[American] Indian” that accurately captures all and only the people it should and usefully describes the sort of relationship they are bound by. In part, this is because “Native” and similar terms refer to overlapping but distinguishable social categories. In the U.S., the legal status quo definition of Nativeness is enrollment in a federally recognized tribe, while the most common “folk” understanding is of a racial or ethnic category. While these understandings are important, they are highly incomplete, and often confused in ways that harm or erase Native people and further entrench settler colonialism. This dissertation describes Nativeness as enrollment status, as tribal ethnic kinship, racialization as Native in settler colonial society, intertribal Indian panethnicity, and as Indigenous nationhood, and argues that each of these aspects of Nativeness is influenced by each of the others.

**1. “One Two Hundred and Fifty-Sixth Part Choctaw by Blood: Enrollment in a Recognized Tribe”**

I am an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the third largest of nearly 600 federally recognized Indian tribes or Alaska Native villages in the U.S. This defines me as legally Native, despite my miniscule “blood quantum” (1/256), living outside the Choctaw homelands, and never experiencing settler colonial antinative racism. While the power to determine their own membership criteria is a crucial expression of tribal sovereignty, enrollment/recognition status is currently tied to Western social ontological views and subject to settler governments’ authority. As such, it should not be miscast as a necessary or sufficient condition for being Native.

**2. “Here, We Are: A Native Social Ontology of Kinship with the Land”**

Native social ontologies are fundamentally relational, conceiving of persons as constitutively interconnected by kinship across generations (including ancestors and descendants), and kinship with the land (including nonhuman animals, as well as plants, landforms, ecosystems, and urban landscapes). Kinship relationships are defined by particular reciprocal responsibilities; each community has its own norms and practices for relating responsibly to their own lands, neighbors, and members. The aspects of Nativeness in subsequent chapters are expressions of Native social ontologies, responses to the suppression of Native ways of life, or a combination thereof.

**3. “Faith, Family, Culture: Nativeness as Tribal Ethnicities”**

Native tribes are not exclusively political or institutional entities: they can additionally be seen as intergenerational ethnic families. For instance, Choctaws are not united today or over time by a single nation, homeland, or set of cultural practices. Nevertheless we are all related to each other and to past and future generations by our shared Choctaw kinship distinct from enrollment/recognition, racialization, and even nationhood, though it is influenced by and influences these aspects as well.

**4. “Elimination and Resistance: Nativeness as a Race in Settler Colonial Society”**

While ethnic identities are specific to particular tribes, Natives of all ethnicities have had a shared racial identity thrust upon them by settler colonialism. Racist views of Natives were shaped by the settler project of land acquisition and have in turn shaped settler ideologies that justify continuing invasion by presenting Natives as “savage” and “vanishing.” Native race in settler contexts has little to

do with either phenotype or genetics, but rather turns on vulnerability to and resistance against antinative racism.

**5. “Surviving Boarding Schools and Driving ‘NDN Kars’: Nativeness as Indian Panethnicity”**

Panethnicity is a response to racialized, intertribal experiences of both suffering (including the boarding school system and mass urban relocations) and activism (particularly the Red Power movement). Sharing struggles as Natives has produced shared kinship and cultural expressions (like powwows, music, arts, cuisine, film, and television that are unmistakably Indian, but that do not originate with any single tribe. Panethnic identity does not replace specific tribal ethnic or national identities with a homogenized Indianness, but instead arises from them and influences them.

**6. “Sovereignty with the Land: Nativeness as Tribal Citizenship and Indigenous Nationhood”**

Decolonization does not end with enrollment/recognition, ethnic cultural resilience, antiracism, or panethnic Indian solidarity—it requires sovereignty with the land through Indigenous nationhood. This can be understood in two ways: first, as tribal citizenship: supporting the sovereignty of existing Indigenous nations, particularly their efforts to regain Native lands. Secondly, Indigenous nationhood means exercising sovereignty in accordance with the kinship responsibilities of nations to all our relatives, with past and future generations, and with the land. Decolonization does not aim at sovereignty as power over lands or citizens, but sovereignty as power to shape an Indigenous future in which peoples and lands are free to fulfil their responsibilities to each other.