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COLORING: AN INVESTIGATION OF RACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS WITHIN THE BLACK INDIAN COMMUNITY

by

CHARLENE JEANETTE GRAHAM

Under the Direction of Denise Ann Donnelly, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Historical interconnections between Native Americans and many people of African descent in America created a group of Black Indians whose lineage continues today. Though largely unrecognized, they remain an important racially mixed group. Through analysis using qualitative feminist methodologies, this thesis examines the history and analyzes the narratives of African-Native American females regarding their racial identity and political claims of tribal citizenship. Their socialization, which includes kin keeping, extended families and the sharing of family stories, allows them to claim native ancestry because of the information usually passed down to them from mothers, grandmothers, aunts and other family members. Their culture and identity revealed that Black Indian women have particular attitudes regarding their racial identity. I conclude my investigation with the suggestion that Native and African American studies can be instrumental as an alternative method of studying American race relations and the ways race intersects with gender in the formation of identity politics.

INDEX WORDS: Black Indians, African American Indians, Racial identity politics, Black identity.

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

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2007

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December 2007

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my children

From whom I have received much love and encouragement

Michelle

Sampson

Michael

and to

My Mother, Helen Stewart (1915-1968), who told me

“Never forget that you are part Cherokee”

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I wish to especially thank my other committee members, Dr. Joe Perry and Dr. Elisabeth Burgess, whose critiques, challenging discussions, comments and encouraging suggestions, also enabled me to focus on strengthening and clarifying the subject matter. Very special kudos to Dr. Lita Hooper-Simanga and Dr. Gertrude James Gonzalez de Allen, who are wonderful teachers, and in whose classes I experienced transforming possibilities because of their scholarly assistance, academic traditions and standards, moral support and encouragement. I should also like to thank Dr. Cora Presley for her astute critiques while bringing to my attention a much clearer and finite description of the thesis I had in mind.

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especially knowledge that would counter misinformation and the belief of African inferiority – to know that Africa is the source of a vibrant culture.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	11
3. THEORY.....	26
4. METHODS	48
5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS	58
6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	74
References	82
Further Reading	88
Famous People with African and Native Ancestry	89
Appendices	90

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Definition of the Research Problem

The goal of this study was to examine culturally relative similarities and differences among African American women who claim Native American ancestry. In this chapter, I present the research questions, discuss the different labels or names used for Native Americans and Black Indians, and introduce the reading audience to the concept of Black Indian women and the significance of this research. Using racial identity politics and feminist methodologies, I explored their heritage in the following areas:

- History – during their common experiences as enslaved laborers, African and Indian slaves dwelled together on plantations of White settlers and later, African slaves on plantations of Native Americans. Some Africans and Indians married while others cohabitated, and together they produced a racial group known as Black Indians.
- Identity – the racialization of their identity as African and Native American women created a different group of women. Some dwelled in Native American communities and some dwelled as Black Indians in African American communities.
- Socialization – the ways in which contemporary Black female Indians learned to racially identify themselves. Their socialization, which includes kin keeping, extended families and the sharing of family stories, allows them to claim native ancestry because of the information passed down to them from mothers, grandmothers, aunts and other family members.
- Privilege – the benefits gained (if any) as women of color with Native American ancestry.

This paper includes narratives of contemporary African-Native American females, their discussions about racial identity, and the legislative and social political affairs surrounding their cultural identity. Racial identity politics affect the social and economic status of people of color in this society. The significance of my study is that it suggests that some Black women with American Indian heritage are perceived to be African American because of their similar appearance to other Black women. It was my goal to explain that while these women share many similarities within their existential experiences as African American women, their experiences also include subtle and noticeable cultural elements that set them apart from other Black women. Similarly, different groups of Black women—Black women from the Caribbean—Jamaican women, Bajan (Barbados) women, Black Latinas and women from African countries, are all seemingly alike in their appearance, but their socialization and culture can be quite different—even though they are all Black women of African descent. As Patricia Hill Collins noted “Despite the similarity of concerns, Black women in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Canada, and other places experience these concerns differently and, as a result, organize in response to them differently” (Collins 2000, 239).

Another goal of this research was to allow not only academic scholars, but also the general public to become aware of this small Black group of women who (along with many Black Indian men) claim native heritage. There is a legal battle presently going on in which Black Indians are fighting to keep their Native American citizenship. Their Black and Red heritage entitles them, and more importantly, their future descendants, to social benefits received by all other non-full blood Native Americans who claim native heritage.

The research makes contributions to feminist studies, Native American and Black history studies, as it specifically focuses on the lives of African American women with Native American ancestry. For this study, I investigated the social worlds of the women in various areas:

- Where did African American women who claim Native ancestry get information or knowledge about their heritage? How do they know they are of mixed heritage?
- How do African American Indian females feel about their racial mixture? Are Black Indian women's identities attached to biological and sociocultural criteria, or is there also a political and national dimension that shapes their identity?
- How does African Indian heritage affect perceptions about social and economic opportunities?

The answers to these questions blended the different components of racial politics, racialized identity and socialization. Based on theoretical discussions, this paper critically analyzes the concepts and impact of race, gender and color among Black Indian women. Respondents' interviews and their personal racial identity as Native African women also play an important role in that discussion. It was crucial to analyze racial identity so that readers understand the concept of race and color within the African and Native American settings. For Black Indian women, having a bifurcated identity suggests unique socio-cultural qualities coming from both African *and* Native American cultures (Forbes 1993; Hunter 2005; Phillips 2002).

Although assumed to be African American, Black Indian women's identities are unique in history and culture. Through the voices of contemporary Black Indian females who reside in and around Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma (formerly Indian Territory in the

1800s), I examined their perceptions of the effects of their racial mixture. Their unique life perspectives regarding the interconnectedness and the sameness and differences of African American Native women are captured in this report. A feminist perspective emphasizes that women's lives are significant and essential to the personal, local, national and global human experience. Consistent with this perspective, my research broadens the knowledge base, and enhances, strengthens, and empowers women so that they will make a difference in the world in which they live.

Significance of the Research

This study is significant to feminist studies, history, and Black and Native American studies because its methodologies allow the voices of the writer and the researched, and the interactions between them to be recognized and heard. The focus on social characteristics, cultural significance, and socialization of Black Indian women suggests that this type of study is well suited to feminist research. Feminist research includes ethnography, oral history, discourse analysis, and grounded theory strategies, all which are used to construct qualitative research within feminist methodologies. I use feminist methodologies because feminist research "has no absolutes" in its methods (Reinharz 1992, 4). Within feminist methodologies' parameters, this type of research about women's racial identity allows the research about Black Indian women *to become significant*. Within feminist methodologies, there is more freedom for the researcher, and more interaction with the researched, allowing the topic of Black Indian women to be at the forefront of a research project, while the researcher remains in the background.

This study is significant because it permits Black Indian women with little to no voice to express their most passionate concerns about the world in which they live—their culture

and racial identity (Reinharz 1992; Shopes 2002). There also has been an ongoing political effort to maintain recognition of citizenship, which has been threatened with revocation by certain tribes. This research also brings to the forefront that all-too-familiar struggle against “isms” (classism, sexism, racism, etc.). American civil and constitutional rights were gained through legal and persistent efforts against all types of oppressive “isms.” Oppression is any unjust situation where systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity (among others) constitute major forms of oppression in the United States (Collins 2000). The experiences of Black Indian women may be a bit removed from the every day oppressive lives of African American women—or Black women who are not politically motivated. At this time, the relevance of Black Indian women’s experiences is their contribution to the overall collective experience of Black women throughout the African Diaspora.

My research is especially significant for women’s studies and Black and Native American studies, because it investigates the views of a group of Black women who claim native heritage and who are under-represented within Eurocentric disciplines or mainstream Black or Native studies. The history of Black and Native Indian women in the United States has been neglected and should be included in the general movement towards revisionist history. The putative idea that Black Indian women’s experiences are the same as African American females’ experiences because of their shared phenotype, makes this report a significant investigation of racial identity. The research allowed me to explore different perspectives about Black Indian women’s culture and existence (Reinharz 1992). The collective significance of the study of racial identity among Black Indian women is

powerfully connected to the rich and often compelling history of race relations in this country.

Definitions of Labels

Indian(s) / Indigenous People:

Throughout this paper different labels are used when referring to the descendents of America's first inhabitants who are often called Indians. The term "Indian" is derived from a Spanish word "Indios" (to God). It was used by European colonial imperialists—first Spain and then other European countries (Portugal, France, Great Britain) who sought to colonize the newly discovered western hemisphere. Indian is also the term used for natives of the south Asian sub-continent (India proper) or south Asians who have emigrated to African nations. Although I may run the risk of reaffirming racist labels of White hegemonic masculinity, in this research study, the label is used interchangeably with Native American and American Indian. I have found within my research that the term "Indian" has been used in several instances but mostly connected to other words – Indian Nations or American Indians. It is also used by some tribes to identify themselves—the Cherokee Indians, Apache Indians, and Seminole Indians. The words "Indigenous people" is used interchangeably with the name "Indian" especially for statements referring to the earliest histories of America.

Tribe(s):

The word tribe or nation is the basic political and social unit for Indian people, and there are hundreds of tribes. Some tribes act as a united political unit with a common leader while others are loose confederations with common cultural traditions, customs and values (Hurtado and Iverson 1994). Most tribes consist of people with a common language, culture, and ancestors with history predating European imperialism. Some tribes were created out of

other tribes—becoming new tribes from remnants of others. When I use the term “tribe(s),” I usually mean a group of Indians. The word tribe may also be attached to easily recognized tribal names—the Cherokee tribe for example and is often used by different tribes to refer to themselves. Also for the purposes of this report, the Cherokee nation is the main tribe that I investigated.

Freedmen:

In this report, Freedmen (a historically correct, though sexist phrase) is a terminology used in reference to former slaves who were freed or emancipated before, during or just after the American Civil War. Freedmen were also former slaves of Native Americans. Hence, Cherokee Freedmen are those persons that were freed from their Cherokee Native American masters but who also retained their Black and Native identities. The terms freedpeople or freedperson(s) are used interchangeably with Freedmen as a preferred gender-neutral alternative.

Black Indian / African Native / African Cherokees:

As Tiya Miles stated, the most commonly used term in contemporary public scholarship and discussions to describe people of African and Native descent is *Black Indian* (2005, 214). William Loren Katz popularized this label—Black Indian—in his book by the same title (Katz 1997). Black Indian, along with African Native and African Cherokees, are all interchangeable labels or terms referring to the same group. They are people who are descendents with mixed heritages of African, African American, and Native American. The references are much like the labels “Black”, “African American” or “African-descended Americans” which refers to those descendents of Africa who were and are a part of the American population. The label Black Indian is very general since being Black and Cherokee

is a far cry from being Black and Seminole or Black and Lakota. Miles suggests that tribally specific terms—Black Cherokee or Afro Cherokee represents a more accurate picture of the mixture (Miles 2005, 214). For my purposes, however, I used Black Indians, or African Cherokees to describe people who are mixed with African and Cherokee.

My thesis reflects the history and identity of Black Indians. In Chapter 2, I discuss relevant literature that show how Africans, Native Americans and African Americans were exposed to each other. Their interactions ultimately developed into relationships that resulted in the group known as Black Indians. The story of Black African-Native American relations has revealed the social and cultural history within a broad spectrum of intersectionalities involving colonialism, slavery and racism. This research corresponds with that history and other well-known works about Black and Red interrelations.

Chapter 3 examines arguments about the disparities of internal racism and racial politics. The chapter suggests that there are conflicts within Black and Native American communities that reflect the reality of colorism, which plays a crucial part in racial identity politics. Colorism has to do with the many ways in which Black identity is regularly subjected to skin color rules—an activity perpetuated by Black people and to their detriment. This chapter defines and discusses racial identity politics, the theoretical foundation of my thesis. I also discuss intersectionality, its relationship to the theory of racial identity politics and why I chose one over the other.

The focus of Chapter 4 is the discussion of feminist methodologies used in my study. This section discloses the development of themes taken into account during the research process, the procedures used for selecting samples, and how and why I chose this particular group of women. Through the focus group session, feminist methodologies allowed me to

discuss and later analyze the four points of interest: history, identity, socialization and privilege. The sample was comprised of female descendents of Freedmen who belong to an African-Native American organization known as *The Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association*. Other participants in the sample were not members but were meeting at the Black Indian Conference at the same time I would be conducting a focus group session. The procedures involved mailing to the sample group packets of information that included a questionnaire survey, information about the research and a contact sheet with my contact information. Some of the participants in the sample were emailed this information. The methods chapter concludes with discussions about the final process of the data analysis.

Chapter 5 assesses the findings of the research and presents some personal stories of the Black Indian women who participated in this project. Through quoted narratives we learn that many of the women learned about their Native ancestors from the story tellers of their families—the mothers and grandmothers who passed ancestral information down to them. This is a legacy of kinship and extended families—the oral tradition of the women in African American (and Native) families that pass down family history to their descendents. Black and Indian identity are reviewed in this chapter which ends with discussions about the lived experiences of these women.

Chapter 6 shows the relevance of my research to today's news by highlighting radio broadcast reports about Black Indians and outlining their political agenda to maintain their citizenship within the Cherokee Nation. This chapter talks about how the Cherokee Nation is fighting legal battles to displace descendents of Freedmen from their tribe by revoking their citizenship. They are doing this because they believe that African Americans who claim

Native ancestry should have a certain percentage of blood quantum and be able to prove that they are direct descendants from Indians listed on the Dawes census rolls. Their actions are in direct opposition to the treaty that has been upheld since 1866 in which it is stated that all Freedmen of Cherokee Indians and their descendants were to be treated as Cherokee citizens. As a final point, I make suggestions about the need to study historical and contemporary Black and Red relationships, as their history is a pertinent part of America's race relations and American history.

This research paper about the cultural history of Black women who claim Native ancestry will discuss mixed Native and African American identity. This identity was determined by certain factors set aside along time ago by European imperialists, their agencies, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and by the development of America's racial hierarchy that exists today. Black Indian women's lived experiences allow their narration to be a contributing factor to accounts that were clearly absent in the making of America's history. The literary sources reviewed in the next chapter are evidences of their history.

Chapter 2 –Literature Review

History

How do African Americans know they are descendents of Native Americans? In his study of the 1980 census, Jack Forbes estimated in 1988 that “30% to 70%” of African-Americans have some Indian ancestry (Miheuah 1996, 106). bell hooks states that, “For Native Americans, especially those who are Black, and for African Americans, it is a gesture of resistance to the dominant culture’s ways of thinking about history, identity, and community, for us to decolonize our minds and reclaim the word that is our history *as it was told to us by our ancestors*, not as it has been interpreted by the colonizer” (Miles 2005, xvi). [Emphasis mine throughout]. In order to understand the present stance of Black Indian women, especially their strong desire to acknowledge their racial identity and claims of Native ancestry, it is important to look at their history. This history usually came down through families from stories told by their ancestors. Various written scholastic and historical works focus on the connections, interactions, and relationships of Native Americans and Africans that created the mixture of Black Indian identity.

Public historian William Loren Katz and historian Jack Forbes both have written extensively about these historical relationships. They both noted the ways in which newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves indicated not only the routes that slaves took to find their freedom *but also the intermarriages between Blacks and Indians in colonial and early national periods* -- these were Africans who ran off with their Indian wives.

Miles 2005, 29

Black and Red history is dated from the earliest references of pre-Columbus (15th and 16th centuries) on through to the 21st century. Forbes (1993), Katz (1992) and other historians indicated that Africans and Native Americans have been interacting in a variety of settings for over “five hundred years” (Davis 2001; Forbes 1993, 63; Katz 1997). Their association

came through early Spanish explorers in the Americas. Spanish settlements in Mexico, Florida, the Caribbean and South America, had large numbers of Indian slaves that populated these areas during the 1500's. They were eventually replaced with the more adaptable and agreeable to hard labor African slaves (McDonald 2002; Miles 2005; Perdue 1979). But in South and North Carolina, and Georgia, English plantations kept many Indian slaves, including "Cherokee slaves who worked alongside African slaves" until the mid 1700s (Miles 2005, 29). The mixture of Native and African Americans and the complex language that prescribed racial terminologies like "mulatto, mestizos, and negros," developed from Spanish and European imperialism. These influences had an impact on colonial perceptions of American Indigenous people and African slaves. Some of the same language is still used today (Forbes 1993, 182-3; Malcomson 2000, 53).

Slavery certainly affected Native Americans. Cherokee slaveholders began to understand the value of slave labor which made a great impact on community life. This grand money making machine (Black slavery) began to shape Cherokee Natives' development as assimilated citizens of the United States. They altered their lifestyle from hunting and fishing to cultivating huge plantations with Black slave labor and this resulted in radical economic and cultural changes for them. Historical records suggest that interactions between slaves and Native American masters were somewhat more humane than the relationships experienced with White slave owners. Old narratives of Freedmen and other written materials by scholars and contemporary Cherokees assert that more often than not, African slaves on Cherokee plantations received better treatment than those on White plantations (Katz 1997; Minges 2004; Perdue 1979; Saunt 2005; Sturm 2002). Sympathetic treatment of African slaves by Cherokee Indians also contributed to Freedmen returning to Indian Territory and

“establishing themselves firmly on Cherokee soil” (Littlefield 1978, 49). Other indications clearly point to the racial disparity of the Cherokee nation. Shortly after the Civil War when many former slaves were emancipated and returned to Indian territory, some Cherokee tribes did not allow “amalgamation of the [two] races” and wanted Freedmen removed from their nation (Littlefield 1978, 17, 21, 75). There were however, some Native American plantation owners who had slaves and probably did treat them better since they certainly remembered their own enslavement and their struggle against a common enemy (Ferrante and Browne 2001, Miles 2002). “On the whole, Cherokees who owned slaves were more merciful than White slaveholders. The recorded words of Freedmen and women who testified to the relative kindness of Native American slave owners are significant...” (Miles 2005, 41, 43). Another proof that slaves may have been treated kindly by their Native masters was the absence of advertisements for runaways in their local Native newspapers of the 1800s in and around Cherokee townships (Perdue 1979).

Ultimately, Freedpersons who were emancipated in early January 1863 later became citizens of the Cherokee Nation through the provisions of the 1866 Treaty.¹ Many Cherokees married slaves or free Blacks and allowed them to be a part of their kinship circles (Littlefield 1978; Miles 2005). Since they had similar cultural traits, beliefs and practices often shared when they intermarried, their relationships sometimes resulted in complex identities for many members of Indian and Black communities (Lawrence 2004, Miles 2005). Although Native American societies were matrilineal, the mixture of Black and Red almost immediately became American social constructions of racial difference and “the reproduction

¹ The US 1866 Treaty with the Cherokee Nation stated in Articles 4, 5, 9 and 10 that the Cherokee Nation forever abolished slavery, and were to provide 160 acres per free slave wishing to reside in their territory; and that Freedmen *and their descendants* shall have all the rights of Native Cherokees (www.african-nativeamerican.com/treatycher.htm).

of racial hierarchy” (Sturm 2002, 145). As slaveholders, Cherokees replicated the way White Americans used slave labor and they also recognized the construction of racial hierarchy (that of White – Red – then Black). Through this [re]construction of racial hierarchy, the racial identity of Cherokee Freedmen caused this group to be “one of the most marginalized groups in Native North America” (Sturm 2002, 169).

Since White people insisted tenaciously that civilization was built on White racial dominance, race as White Americans came to understand it had very little to do with the original Cherokee social system (Bederman 1995; Perdue 1979). But inevitably Freedmen were beginning to be excluded from Native American communities because of their Red and Black mixture. They were “treated in both discourse and practice in qualitatively different ways than multiracial individuals with Cherokee *and* White ancestry” (Sturm 2002, 170). Racial restrictions and distinctions dealing with blood quantum² and language used to describe and classify the mixture of Africans and Indians started a new system of racial identities. These racial identities were based on the perceptions of White Americans who saw mixtures in the appearance of other individuals who looked differently than themselves (Forbes 1993, Mihesuah 1996). Those perceptions assigned color terms or caste terms to

² Blood quantum, was a measurement basis for racially identifying Native Americans and distinguishing them from the national body, and was crucial in the implementation of the Dawes Act which was designed to break up Native American land by allotting parcels of acreage to individual Indians and control access to other economic resources (Sturm 2002, 78). Critics of blood quantum laws say they have been used to discriminate against Blacks and other Native Americans to deny them civil rights as well as pre-empt the right of tribes to determine themselves who is and who is not a member. Blood quantum within an individual can never increase from generation to generation but can only stay the same or decrease, the eventual result could be the extinction of American Indian peoples as legally-defined groups. In effect, some critics argue that blood quantum laws are intended to effect the disappearance of Native Americans as a race. Groups such as the Cherokee Freedmen and others claim they are denied tribal rights based on blood quantum laws. The base rolls [Dawes rolls] recorded Blacks simply as Blacks despite the fact that they had been made members of the tribe and may have had some degree of Indian blood (Mihesuah 1996, 105; Sturm 2002, 75).

individuals “based on self-description, or public officials—a census-taker, police officer or notary *describing* [for instance] a runaway slave” (Forbes 1993, 105). The racially descriptive language that developed during the early 1500s shows how society sought to place mixed individuals into different categories of race.

Although Cherokees identified Africans with servitude long before their need of slave labor, the social history and intimate encounters between Natives and Africans occurred and developed directly as a result of their communally forced enslavement (Perdue 1979). Once freed from White masters, elite Cherokees became slaveholders, determining that African slave labor would be beneficial to amassing economic power and “accumulating evidence of civilization” (Perdue 1979, 50, 54). Because of their matrilineal society, the roles of Cherokee women changed when many of them became slaveholders. On those Native plantations where slavery existed, slaves now took on the traditional female roles within Native American agrarian society (McDonald 2002, Perdue 1979, Sturm 2002). With the growing population of these two groups, the existing demographics allowed African men to gain freedom when they married Indian women. These unions also allowed their children to be born free (Forbes 1993, McDonald 2002). The idea that Black men and Cherokee women could produce Cherokee children is “persistent with cultural beliefs in matrilineality and the notion that *Cherokee women* create Cherokee children” (Miles 2005, 109).

Colonial policies prohibited mixed marriages or mingling between the two groups but African-Indian intermarriages proliferated. During their enslavement, Indians and Africans simply married because of the proportion of African male slaves to female slaves—a ratio of three to one (McDonald 2002, Miles 2005). There were more African males and Native females than there were African females and Native men. Part of this sex ratio problem was

largely due to many African slave females who were unable to withstand the grueling tasks of working in the field and delivering babies. Many pregnant African slaves died at the hands of their masters who thought they were either lazy or just refused to work. Indian women suffered losses of mates and potential husbands when many of their men were killed off in wars or died from diseases (Littlefield 1978, Miles 2005).

Cherokee Native elites were the largest slaveholders of Africans of any of the Native Americans (Littlefield 1978, Miles 2005, Perdue 1979). They were called elites because they assimilated quickly into American society and began amassing economic power more so than other tribes. They were a “minority of wealthy Cherokees” who owned slaves on large plantations in the Southeast and were usually mixed blood of Native and White (Miles 2005, 215). Just as African-descended Native Americans were not accepted into White society, neither were they totally accepted into Native society (Sturm 2002a). While Cherokee leaders in the early 1800s modeled their nations after that of the United States—with a police force, a supreme court, an elective system of representation and a written constitution—race eventually became a cornerstone of national identity (Sturm 2002). Two competing definitions of race shaped Cherokee racial politics: (1) race as a nation with racial metaphors of blood relation and kinship, and (2) race as blood quantum—a measurement of degrees or percentages of blood through biological racial admixture (Mihsuah 1996, Miles 2002, Sturm 2002). In order to gain Cherokee citizenship, tribal councils insisted that those who claimed native ancestry prove their relationship through blood quantum and kinship.

Racial ideologies are particularly problematic for Native-American communities, of which the Cherokees are one prominent example. For instance, the federal government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) continues to use blood quantum as both a metaphor and measure of “Indian” identity to manage tribal enrollments and determine eligibility for social services. ...Indian Blood quantum continues to be the most common criterion of membership.

Sturm 2002, 2, 86.

History and the ultimate consequences of the different contacts and connections between Indians and those of African descent allowed destinies to be developed in North America that would intersect race, class and sex (gender). The Black Indian identity has a recorded history in which census takers counted their numbers and categorized their Indian identity through Indian rolls. The fate of these two groups was thrown together through circumstance, institutional racist design, and/or personal choice (McDonald 2002). Enslavement of both groups in the old South and in Indian Territory (Oklahoma) resulted in Black Indian identity within the African American community. Their histories have jointly and independently affected the course of American history.

The Importance of the Dawes Commission of 1896 (Indian Rolls)

The Dawes Commission is very significant for descendants of Freedmen and African Americans with Native ancestry, since the information contained on the census rolls of that commission can provide “proof” of biological claims of Native ancestry (Littlefield 1978; Miles 2005). Henry Dawes, a senator from Massachusetts during the 1880s was federally commissioned to “civilize” or recognize Cherokees and other tribes by systematically enrolling the Indians by blood quantum to determine who would get land allotments (40 acres). There were “many impostors, mainly White settlers claiming Cherokee roots in order

to get land allotments” (Littlefield 1978, 222; Hurtado & Iverson 1994, 206, 559; Malcomson 2000, 12). The Dawes Commission forced Native Americans to become American citizens—an element Indians did not understand since they felt they were already citizens of the land (Hurtado and Iverson 1994; Malcomson 2000). There were three lists on the rolls—actual Cherokee Indians, Freedmen and rejected applicants. The Cherokee Freedmen roll listed African descendents as either free “colored,” slaves of Cherokee citizens, or descendants who were residents of the Cherokee Nation (Littlefield 1978, 237; Miles 2005, 194-5). Many Black Indians today can prove their citizenship within a Native nation by using the historical information collected from Dawes Indian rolls. The Dawes Act and the commissioners who recorded the census enrollment were not aware of the unforeseen social and legal implications at the time of its inception and the census ended in 1902.

Racializing Identity (The One-Drop and Hypodescent Rules; Colorism)

The history of skin color in America plays an important role in racial identity politics. Before the Civil War, decisions about race were usually linked with questions of status as slave or free. In the early 1800s, race cases in North Carolina courts (as well as Arkansas and other southern states) centered more on the documentation of a person’s reputation, inherited status and lineage or heredity, and less on physical evidence or racial identity. Many earlier circumstances of these cases brought to court regarded the issue of race not as a question of Black or White, *but as one of Black or Indian* (Ferrante and Browne 2001). The concept of racial classification became a cultural construction within the United States and is based on skin color and other physical characteristics mostly, and then social and cultural aspects. In the United States, a person's socioeconomic status does not change a person’s race and for African Americans, their status can be impacted by their Blackness (Anderson 1994; Sturm

2002a). American Indians adopted similar racial classifications in which tribal citizenship is determined by race—biological appearance, or blood quantum (percentage) of a person's relationship to Native relatives (Miheuah 1996; Miles 2002).

Bi-racial identity in the U.S. usually refers to a racial mixture of Black and White or other racial mixtures in which one part is White (Hunter 2005). Hypodescent determines that descendents of interracial couples are automatically assigned *into the less privileged group*, thus racializing their identity (Brunsma 2006; Miles 2002; Rohrl 2001). This practice also operates within Native communities in which persons who are part Black and part Native are relegated to the racial identity of Black (Welburn 2002). However, when hypodescent occurs, interracial marriages provide racial minority spouses and their multiracial children an opportunity to adopt racial perspectives of the more dominant group and to recognize both groups. Such is the case with Black Indian women—they have lived mostly as African American but they also have American Indian perspectives about their lives, and choose to identify both heritages through their own racial standpoints (Brunsma 2006).

The BIA and other agencies or Indian nations used percentage of Native blood (blood quantum), skin color and racial politics to racialize Black and Indian identity (Malcomson 2000). The one-drop³ of African blood rule allows anyone in America to be a member of the African American community if they have one drop of Black blood. In many instances, mixed persons usually struggle to belong to the more privileged group, therefore, if they could pass for White, they would, due to the negative legacy of Black history. Considering

³ The one drop rule determines that one drop of Black blood decides ones racial identity as belonging to descendents of Africa. In the U.S., this meant that one drop of Black blood determined one to be Black or African American. This ideology comes from a background of widely held deep-seated fear of social and racial mixing within southern White communities (Collins 2000, 133; Davis 2001, 134-7).

the prolonged history of racial mixing in America, using the one drop rule would result in significant numbers of supposedly “White” people who could be re-classified as Black.

Blood quantum permits one to be a member of a Native American community (Malcomson 2000). Indians who are three-quarters White are considered Indian, while Indians who are one-quarter Black *are determined as* Black (Forbes 1993; Welburn 2002). The one-drop rule classification ensured that there would be more Black laborers for slavery’s human machine, while the blood quantum ratio ensured that there would be more available (confiscated Native American) land (Miles 2002). In spite of this, depending on how a person looks, when the hypodescent rule is applied—the rule assigns racially mixed persons to the status of the subordinate group (Davis 2001; Miles 2002; Page 1996; Saunt 2005). Eventually, many Black, red and White people throughout the U.S. accepted the rule. In the early 1900s, South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, all had miscegenation laws outlawing interracial marriages and defined African Americans as having one-eighth or more Black ancestry (Davis 2001). This produced groups of people who “passed” for White and others who were very light in their complexion and considered Black.

Colorism has historically influenced socioeconomic status, quality of life and social relationships within the African American community. Colorism can be defined as light skinned persons being preferred over darker skinned ones with a preoccupation with skin color and hair (Bowman et al 2004). Preferences toward lighter complexioned Blacks occurred not only in private family settings, but also in the workplace, schools, the media, employment, and elsewhere. Internal racism (biases within one’s own ethnic group) can be attributed to the one-drop rule that resulted in a mixture of two or more races (Davis 2001).

Discussions of colorism usually takes place in the confines of private hush-hush light hearted exchanges or conversely in heated debates. This type of segregation among African Americans also contributes to the erosion of Black pride. Multiracial identity may at times be an embarrassing topic, but it is also an important issue to discuss. In America, preferential treatment is given to persons who are closer in complexion and facial features of the society's beauty standards. Highly invasive media tactics through television commercials, magazine advertisements, and the fashion industry have contributed to heavily promoting American beauty standards. This has led to many African descended people choosing to bleach their skin and surgically thin their noses and lips. Many Black women chemically straighten their hair so that their hair looks like White women's hair. Other groups also have opted to change their looks to accommodate American beauty standards, such as Asian women [and some men] who surgically change their eye lids to look less slanted and more rounded like American women.

Black people at different times throughout history were proud to show their African heritage – their Black beauty – tight curly or nappy hair, huge Afros and broad features. However, with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement and other political events of the 1960s, many African Americans started promoting not only their ethnic pride, but it also became acceptable and even popular “to claim an[other] distinctive ethnic heritage” (Malcomson 2000, 111). Other than just being Black – we now wanted to claim our Asian heritage or Italian heritage or our American Indian heritage. But some Indian scholars argue that those who desired to be Indians and proclaimed that they were part Indian do so without assuming any of the real social, economic, or political struggles that so-called real Indians endure on a daily basis (Mihsuah 1996). Needless to say – the “real Indians” may not be

aware of contemporary Black Indian women who have struggled with legal battles to maintain their citizenship as Cherokee Freedpersons. Their political efforts have always remained on the forefront in both the African American and Native American camps.

Black Indian women along with other groups of Black women—(West Indian Black women in the Garvey Movement, the National Association of Colored Women, and the Black Women’s Club Movement, to name a few), participated as strong advocates in the fight for racial equality. They initiated social and political reform while confronting White society *and* Black opposition, and were often viewed as the objectified ‘other’ (Collins 2000, 70; Giddings 1985, 212). In many instances opposition came in the form of being judged, literally, by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Other Blacks were critical of radical Black movements for going against the (dominant) social system. This type of opposition especially occurred within the confines of Black racial attitudes known as “colorism” or “color struck” (Bowman, 2004; Hunter 2005; Malcomson 2000). Lighter complexioned Black women were awarded more privilege within society than their darker female counterparts or even their male counterparts, seemingly because they were seen as “less threatening” (Guy-Sheftall and Cole 2003, 83; Hunter 2005, 6). In fact, several participants for this research project commented on their experiences with colorism which included preferential treatment, perceived privilege, and socio-economic advantages. Families in the past as well as today, experienced preferential treatment because of their bi-racial phenotype qualities.

Claudio Saunt describes this in his book, *Black, White and Indian*, (2005) which focuses on the activities of the Grayson Family. They survived in the face of overwhelmingly negative racial politics and came to terms with American obsession around race. During the

early 1800s (1819-1823), Katy Grayson and her brother William (Creek Indian) had children with companions who were of African descent. However, after a short-lived relationship, Katy deserted her Black partner and children and married a Scottish-Creek man. Approving of slavery, she became a slaveholder, which elevated her status within American society. Her brother William, on the other hand, did not leave his Black wife or children, and eventually released them from slavery. Similar occurrences of Black and Red marriages or connubial relationships like the Graysons are peppered throughout early American history. In 1907, when Creek Indians became U.S. citizens along with all of the other recognized tribes, the laws of Oklahoma allowed some of the Graysons to be defined as White, while other family members were defined as Black (Saunt 2005, 7).

Racial identity politics and the role of blood quantum play an important part in the cultural connection of the descendants of Cherokee Freedpersons. Historian authors discuss in great detail, social and racial terms—blood, blood quantum, kinship, half blood and other identities for African Americans with Native ancestry. These terminologies and racial identities determine social and race classifications for tribal citizenship and Native status (Malcomson 2000; Sturm 2002). Although the socially constructed term “citizenship” is an identity of belonging to the Indian Nation and being considered a “real” Indian, racial identity becomes quite complex and problematic depending on who is being asked and within what context (Malcomson 2000; Sturm 2002). For instance, applying for a certificate of degree of Indian blood card (CDIB) can be somewhat overwhelming when trying to prove that your Native identity is authentic—that you are a direct descendent of Freedpersons who were once part of Native American society. But earlier in their history, Native slaves and freedpersons living in Indian Territory (Oklahoma) created their own communities as they

interacted on various levels and in many different ways. Unlike other Black people who relocated to Oklahoma just after Emancipation, Freedmen were born and raised in Indian Territory. “The extent of their cultural interactions, which at times created hostilities between them due to their blood relations, established a group of persons of African descent whose strong cultural connection and social ties were with the Native Americans with whom they were in contact with on a regular basis” (Naylor-Ojurongbe 2002, 182).

Interviews of Freedmen and ex-slaves were recorded by the Works Progress Administrations (WPA) government programs of the 1930s. The Federal Writers’ Project was a part of this work program in which they employed writers to obtain life histories of living ex-slaves. Statements regarding *positive relationships* between Native families and Freedpersons were recorded (Miles 2002; Naylor-Ojurongbe 2002). Many ex-slaves of combined African and Native American descent portrayed their mixed-blood racial identity as a way of emphasizing their cultural connection to Native Americans. But not only did they want to identify and connect culturally to Native Americans, at times it was important to switch into this ‘other’ racial identity to avoid discrimination, racial violence, terror, and death by lynching. By invoking Native ancestral identity during the late 1800s through to the 1970s in America, many Black Indians avoided the repressive control of slavery which was revived in the rigid southern Jim Crow racism and designed to disenfranchise Black people and other people of color. During this time, racial oppression was still a dominant force throughout America (Davis 2001; Lovett 2002). During the “Jim-Crow era African Americans found that claims to Indian ancestry proved a useful foil against racial stereotyping” (Brooks 2002, 11). Historically, many who may have looked Black assumed more of their Native heritage than their African heritage since “all people with Black skin

and African phenotype [were]/are subject to potential White supremacist abuse” (West 1994, 39). Escape from the brutality of White hate groups was achieved by invoking Native ancestry through specific cultural markers—adopting Native dress, hairstyle, food preparation, and spirituality. If their biological appearance seemed more African, texture and length of hair racially identified them more closely to Native American (Naylor-Ojurongbe 2002). In whatever way they identified themselves, African American Cherokees and Freedmen embodied a rich heritage and culture borne through their Native American and African ancestors.

WPA records provide authenticity to the overall historical admixture of Native and African Americans. These historical records speak to the doubts and questions concerning interactions between African-descended Americans and Native Americans. In their WPA interviews, ex-slaves highlighted several layers of connections between themselves and Native Americans in 19th century Indian Territory. Black Indian women who are descendents of those ex-slaves embrace their mixed racial culture and Black Indian identities because they were born and raised among Native Americans. Some have bi-lingual abilities, are able to prepare Native herbal medicines, still abide by traditional customs, and their Indianness is a reflection of their reality (Naylor-Ojurongbe 2002). For the Black Indian women who participated in this research study, their racial identity proudly encompasses, acknowledges and accepts both heritages. For some, their ancestral heritage is shaped by their biological identity as having Black and Red mixture. But for all of them, their Native ancestral identity is also their historical and political identity—with which they choose to actively involve themselves in order to maintain their citizenship within the Cherokee nation.

Chapter 3 – Theory – Racial Identity Politics

Identifying Racial Identity Politics

In this chapter, I define and discuss racial identity politics, the theoretical foundation of my thesis. Kenneth Mostern (1999) stated that there is a structural relationship between identities and politics. Mostern points out that our identities “cannot be disconnected from our politics” and that critics often look at Black speech, for instance, as a “rhetorical situation as being from an identity-position” (Mostern 1999, 5). Racial identity politics for African Americans has to do with our overall Black identity. This identity includes culture, aesthetics, all and any oppressive experiences and any other experiences related to Black life. As those experiences are expressed through language or culture, it requires being from, and is often looked upon as, a Black identity standpoint. Patricia Hill-Collins also recognized that as an oppressed group, Black identity and all that it encompasses is not acknowledged unless “we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group” (Collins 2000, vii). The political aspects of racial identity politics are the discriminatory racist forces and activities that surround the racial experience and are reinforced by an oppressive White culture. That racial experience is also part of a racial identity.

The identity of groups involves shared interests and agendas as well as more general activities—that is to “live and live well, to be treated fairly, to see [our children] live and prosper”(Outlaw 1996, 9). Therefore, identity is associated with the activity of thinking about and doing those things that allow us to flourish and live well. However, the political aspect also involves *how* one gets to the point of fulfilling their ideas, dreams, viewpoints and living well. Marginalized groups formed movements and sought fair treatment from the establishment so that they could live well and in response to those movements (after some

time) was the underlying American “commitment to equality and social justice” (Omi and Winant 1994, 11)

There are groups that voluntarily come together who share particular interests such as a neighborhood watch association, MADD (mothers against drunk driving) or the PTA (parents-teachers-association). These groups represent and seek to advance their interests, and do not have a racial or political identity attached to them. Identity politics however, involves the political activity of various social movements such as the Women’s movement or the Black Liberation Movement. These groups represent and seek to advance their interests and were thrown together because American society made no room for them. The concept of identity politics was not well known previously and “widely maligned” during the period that supposedly typified it, that of the social movements era from 1956-1980 (Mostern 1999, 4). Identity politics became a more acceptable ideology as a broader category with a “variety of writers of both popular and academic work” (Mostern 1994, 4). It became popularized through social groups that at the time were going against the norm – marginalized groups that were demanding civil rights and equality.

Different social positions are grouped together by their political identity label—“nationalists, feminists, or multiculturalists, with the use of further adjectives that modify their specific modes—economic nationalists or liberal feminists” (Mostern 1999, 3). The social political movements in America during the latter half of the 20th Century included the Civil Rights movement, Second Wave Feminism, American Indian movement, and Gay and Lesbian liberation movement. Their political activities allowed them to address injustices directed at their particular group because their differences were not socially recognized.

When The Racial Becomes Political

Members of social groups became political activists when they went public to address their issues—out in the streets, with protests and marches. They wrote magazine and newspaper articles about their situations, and were invited on campuses to speak about the injustices they experienced. Womanist ideologies and Black feminist thoughts—many of which were generated from those initial political activities, center more around intersectionalities of gender, race, class and sexuality, and not just race alone. Although the argument can be made that womanism⁴ *is* about race—focusing on the oppressions of racism—there is but a slight difference between Black feminism and womanism. Some who relate to womanistic views such as Alice Walker (who actually coined the label “womanist”), or Barbara Smith, (Black feminist who co-founded The Combahee River Collective Statement⁵), may be critical of the concept of racial identity politics since their views are more broad and do not consider just race by itself. Although some of their ideologies are aligned with my theory of racial identity politics (“racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in [Black women’s] lives...”) their ideologies center mostly on sexism, classism and racism (“sexual politics is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as class and race”) (Smith 2000, 264).

The Civil Rights movement which sought to abolish racial discrimination against African American citizens in employment practices, public accommodations, voting rights,

⁴ The words “womanism and womanist” were coined in 1983 by African American novelist, poet, essayist, and activist Alice Walker, in her collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (taken from www.ou.edu/womensoc/feminismwomanism.htm).

⁵ The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist group in Boston from 1974 to 1980, named for the guerrilla action conceived and led by Harriet Tubman in 1863 in South Carolina. The action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in U.S. history planned and led by a woman (Smith 2000).

and housing, centered its ideologies around race and oppressive conditions. Those political movements and their viewpoints drew attention to their *identities* and their sense of self, as well as brought to the forefront of American consciousness their experiences of oppression. Oppressions and experiences of exclusionary or discriminatory practices in which African Americans had the most immediate concerns were education, housing, employment, securing land and credit. Other societal means of oppression also included racial exploitation, marginalization and violence from police, disproportionate sentencing of minority groups in law courts and other public institutions (Page 1996). From this perspective, it is important to note that the “identity” of identity politics is usually the whole experience of the subject, especially experiences of oppression against marginalized people. It does not matter if the oppression is racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism or ageism—any of these groups can be identified as a minority and can voice their protests against, and mobilize around their own individual group. “To the extent that identity politics urges mobilization around a single axis, it will put pressure on participants to identify that axis as their defining feature” (Heyes 2002, 2). Identity persuades group members to stay true to the characteristics, the authenticity and the personal identity of the marginalized social group. This racialization process persistently places African Americans in the position of speaking from personal experience in dialogues that discuss political meanings of Blackness and at the same time sets in motion group solidarity (Collins 2000).

It is important to make the distinction between racial identity politics and intersectionality, and why I chose racial identity politics since these two theories may be seen as competing viewpoints. Historically, Black women’s experiences have largely been ignored by social movements for justice (Collins 2000). Early feminist movements led by White

women who advocated social changes focused on oppressions based on sexism and disregarded oppressions based on racism and classism (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984). The Black women's movement (commonly called the womanist or womanism movement) produced ideology that argued that their oppression was three-fold—racism, sexism (or sexuality) and classism (being black, a woman or Lesbian and poor). This was nothing new to the Black community. Angela Davis paraphrases Elizabeth Flynn's account in the 1930s that "Black women were generally caught in a threefold bond of oppression...suffered to an even greater degree than their White sisters" (Davis 1981, 165). The womanist standpoint viewed African American women's oppressive experiences of being black, female and poor, as more intense than that of White women or Black men (Collins 2000; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984).

Other movements such as the Civil Rights Movement practiced sexism when it placed Black women in the background of the movement. This was mainly because the realities of the 1950s excluded women from public leadership roles. Although women (such as Fannie Lou Hamer who was "sharp minded, had strong force of spirit and a special blend of Black folk speech", and Ella Baker, "a woman of tremendous ability"), often spearheaded many campaigns to end segregation and racial injustices, their efforts were later taken up by prominent leaders such as Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers, who were both ultimately assassinated (Young 1996, 137, 150).

Critics of racial identity politics suggest that there are more ways in which racial identity politics work; that what must also be included within the textures of race and identity are the intersectionalities of class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 2000; Davis 1981). Intersectionality theory "refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example,

intersections of race and gender...” (Collins 2000, 18). Intersectionality and womanism views usually consider all of the most immediate characteristics—race, class, gender, age and culture, and takes the position that they do not stand alone—that they all intersect with one another in different circumstances. Black feminism or womanism brings a racialized and often social or economic experience to the gendered experience suggested by feminism. Womanism also points to the link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture, and a kinship with other women, especially women of color.

The characteristics of intersectionality – race, class, gender, age, and culture are in and of themselves political, in that the activities of each segment constitutes some form of reaction to the oppression attached to them. The foundation of my argument rests on at least two of the characteristics of intersectionality – race and gender; however, this discussion is basically about racial identity, which has to do more so with race than gender. Although the racial identity as Black and female are intersections of race and gender, I used racial identity politics as a theoretical framework because Black Indian women (along with many Black Indian men) galvanized to form coalitions that addressed the issue of race within a Native American and Black crisis. Their identity as Black Indians urged a mobilization around a single axis of race (their racial identity). This also led them to define their identity more accurately. They, themselves choose to self-identify as Black Indians and their self-identity may not be recognized by outsiders. Racial identity politics has to do with race, identity, and the relationships of oppressive activities (the political) that surround race and identity. There is racism leveled against Black Indians in the context of their political fight to maintain their Freedmen’s citizenship, simply because the threat of citizenship revocation has not been forced on those who are part Indian and part White. Therefore, the difference between

intersectionality and racial identity politics (for the purposes of this thesis) is the fact that the Black Indian women who participated in this research project are not mobilizing around all of the characteristics of intersectionalities for their problem, but are specifically mobilizing around race—their racial identity—Black Indian. They are saying that they are Black (their identity) and they are also Indian (also their identity). It is the mobilization around the single axis of race that has caused Black Indians' reaction to racist attitudes of the Cherokee Nation who are trying to remove them from the tribe (Heyes 2002).

The connection between identity and politics also has to do with the recognition of the identity that leads to shared experiences (of oppression) and the participation of those experiences in daily African American and Native American life. I argue that the “identity” leads to the “experience” and that identity politics can include recognizing the oppressive experiences of any particular group. But not only does recognized experience such as racial oppression come into play as a part of Black people's identity politics, there is also that connection the group has even if they were not a part of any social movement. Black people's identities are subjected to different and many black connections because of their race—the identification with the identified even *without* the personal experience can become political. An example of this is Mostern's discussion about Ida B. Wells Barnett and anti-lynching politics. Ms. Wells-Barnett did not have the experience of the lynched but had the identity-connection to those who were. Both she and those that died by hanging had the same Black identity: “Ida B. Wells Barnett and Walter White would write retrospective autobiographies whose narratives of identification were built around *identification with the lynched*, not the lynchers” (Mostern 1999, 92). When those social experiences include a struggle against oppression, the struggle then becomes political (Heyes 2002, 2). For Black

Indian women who are trying to prove their Native American authenticity (the social struggle) through political means, the notions of sameness (Indian identity) and difference (African American identity) are used to justify their racial and political identity.

Racial Theories and the Political

Racial theories shaped by early 20th century social scientists from the Chicago school of thought surmised that the most important aspects of racism and racial thought are the “attitudes and prejudices” of the American public (Omi and Winant 1994, 10). A definition of racism can be that whenever rights, privileges, powers, rewards, punishment, immunities, and responsibilities are allocated or distributed in a social context on the bases of biological determinants such as skin color, facial features, facial and nasal structures, anatomical criteria, hair structure, then racism does exist and operate (James 2006). Black identity has been socially constructed on color, facial features and hair type. These descriptions and other racial terminologies subscribe to racial identities (Forbes 1993; Malcomson 2000). When people see an African American – the visual automatically identifies or labels the person as belonging to the group of people who have African ancestry. The political aspect recognizes these ethnic identities or distinctions in a sometimes conflicting and dominating approach. I speak of dominating in the sense of colonialism and imperialism—governing powers that pre-empted the identities that once existed among indigenous people before European settlers invaded North America and became a permanent presence, and also before racial labels. However, many people of color have taken ownership of their racial identity or have exercised their political and racial liberation by transforming their experiences, their personal identity, their own sense of self and community often through opposing the “Other” and through “consciousness-raising” (Heyes 2002, 2).

Race *is* a category of identity and for people of color, the political happens during activities of racism or whenever the group's identity has to be held up against American standards. Racism can also be understood as sets of beliefs, images, and practices that are infused with "negative valuation and employed as modes of exclusion, inferiorization, subordination, and exploitation in order to deny targeted racial or ethnic groups full participation in the social, political, economic and cultural life of any community" (Outlaw 1996, 8). American principles are usually committed to serving the continual interests that are conditioned by and relative to the interests of White America (Miles 2005; Heyes 2002). Racial identity politics as a casualty of American principles can carelessly become a racist factor especially if the *racism* attempts to reduce members of social groups to just their racial features and stereotypes. I have observed an example of this in some banks as I looked down the tellers' line and noticed that they were seemingly hired not only for their skills but also because of their looks—as if they were chosen out of a beauty pageant.

Racial identity politics, which is socially constructed, is associated with *social practices* including institutionalized racism (that which is customarily accepted by American society in forms such as police profiling), and then results in the *real effects* of racist ideology (police brutality) and oppression (Outlaw 1996, 8). But what racial identity politics also translates into is a set of social meanings such as the one-drop rule, which vacillates in meaning depending on the group (ex: bi-racial or Black Indian) and the social setting of one's racialized identity or racial designation. Racial identity politics have also been employed by groups and organizations in order to advance their own racist interests. An example of this is how the Cherokee Nation is trying to force out descendents of Cherokee Freedmen from their tribe. The Cherokees claim that citizens of their tribes should be

connected through blood relations and not just because they are descendents of former slaves of Cherokee Elites or Cherokee southern planters. The descendents argue that they are entitled to citizenship based on the 1866 Treaty which states that the Cherokees abolished slavery and that all Cherokee Freedmen were entitled to the same rights as Native Cherokees.

As previously mentioned, before the Civil Rights Movement, racial identity politics was not as important within the African American community because of segregation. As a separate group, African Americans did not have to prove their identity. Integration became the antithesis of group racial identity and togetherness. "Integration fragments Blacks into even smaller groups and scattered them among the majority White society. This scattering has destroyed the cohesion of Black communities" (Anderson 1994, 92). With the advent of integration and flourishing intermarriages and miscegenation, it was necessary to maintain a cultural and ethnic identity for African American descendents, *as well as make distinctions of their mixture*; this too is at the core of racial identity politics. One of the more recent famous examples of this type of racial identity politics is the story of a famous golfer and his refusal to acknowledge only his Blackness. "He was not ashamed to be Black, but it was not all that he was proud of" (Page 1996, 285). Integration into American society dispersed African Americans as a people, but still the most defining identity for Black people in the U.S. has always remained racial. Therefore, at the core of the matter of the identity of Black Indians is that they are proudly descendents of Africa, "but it [is] not all that [they are] proud of" (Page 1996, 285). They are also proud Black American Indians.

According to Linda Alcoff's article "Cultural Feminism" (1988), identity politics is described as "taking one's identity as a political point of departure, a motivation for action and a delineation of one's politics" (Alcoff 1988, 431-2). This discussion of identity and

politics is especially significant for those African American women who claim Native American heritage and who have taken part in this research. They have used their identity as a political point of departure from their central identity as Black women to maintain their tribal citizenship and recognition, and to bring awareness to communities around them about the positive history of African Americans, Freedmen and their association with Native Americans.

For so long, negative Black issues were emphasized through media and sensationalized news events, and did not promote positive cultural history about American Indians or their African descendents. This too is a central element of racial identity politics—the fact that the media plays an on-going role in perpetuating negative aspects of people of color. The African Indian women whom I interviewed wholly embrace their Black *and* Indian identities—their heritage—in the realm of racial identity and politics, and have utilized their identity as a political motivator. Their political actions within their specific nations of the “five federally recognized tribes”—Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole—are clearly demonstrated as they continue the struggle to maintain their rightful tribal citizenship, federal recognition, and federal social services owed to thousands of Black Indians who are descendants of Freedmen and Native Americans (Saunt 2005, 215).

A society as diverse ethnically, racially and culturally as the American society is often challenged by racial politics. Using race (or playing the “race card”) for one’s own benefit and to the detriment of others (the political) often deteriorates the development of social and political values which can support combined efforts of those groups who are serious about realizing social peace and harmony, and justice (for all) (Outlaw 1996, 8). Racial identity politics can polarize groups and the differences between groups or ideas can

harden the opposition between them causing a more severe divide. Yet it is understandable why particular groups desire to hold onto their racial identity—making distinctions within themselves if they are bi-racial or happen to acknowledge parts of other races within their being—as those women who identify as Black Indians have done.

The Complexity of Racism and Racial Identity

Is racism present within African American communities? Absolutely, since internal racial attitudes among African Americans are a complex matter, and are in many instances based on skin tone which elevates lighter skinned women who more closely resemble White women (Forbes 1993; Hunter 2005). Class and socially constructed standards of American beauty engendered by White patriarchy and racism only serve the interests of dominant social groups (Bowman 2004; Hunter 2005). One such identity within African American communities is described as “color struck” or “colorism” (Hunter 2005, 1; Zack 1998, 15). In this type of individual racialized identity, African Americans are particular about skin tone and have preferences toward lighter skin color. This has caused psychological harm to women of the lightest and darkest complexions (Hunter 2005, 11, 104-5; McMullen 2002, 280). It is also a type of self-hatred and self-contempt that has, for centuries, permeated Black American communities. Many Americans of African descent refuse to love their own Black bodies, “especially their Black noses, hips, lips and hair” (West 1994, 122). Lighter-skinned African American women (who have features very close to White women—thin lips, sharp noses and straighter hair) are rewarded with more resources and more status than darker-skinned women (Hunter 2005, 12, 101). These influences are socially constructed, and these Eurocentric concepts are an important part of the discourse on racial identity.

Because of racially biased coloristic discourses and influences, Black Indian women, as well as other African American women who are racially mixed, may find that they are more appealing to society in general and men in particular, because of their lighter complexion and texture and length of hair. In some circles, they have a higher status than females of darker skin tones (Hunter 2005; Malcomson 2000). Skin color and biracial qualities of Black Indian women can affect their lives in very important ways because women are so often evaluated, devalued or valued by their physical attractiveness, and it is a crucial aspect of their appraisals of self (Herring et al 2004; Hunter 2005). A woman's beauty—as defined by American beauty standards—can open up more opportunities to life's resources including jobs, education, or even potential spouses (Bowman 2004; Herring 2004; Hunter 2005). On the other hand, there are times when women are confronted by their community about their type of physical attractiveness.

Nineteenth century America identified many Native and Black people as Black or Mulatto—based on skin color. This employed racial politics in which better treatment for lighter complexioned Black Indian women or those perceived as bi-racial or mixed, was a common practice. Even though their racial mixture gave them privileges, Mulatto Indians were still disenfranchised since they were not allowed access to federal resources or opportunities available to Native Americans who were full blood (Miles 2002; Malcomson 2000; Saunt 2005). “Persons may *look* African and have Native American ancestry, or *look* Indian and have African ancestry” (Forbes 270, 1993). Many Black Indians tend to resist any singular definition of racial identity. Lovett gives an account of a family who defined themselves as “White by nature, Black by law, African and Cherokee by choice;” they reconstructed for themselves racial categories assigned them by law during the segregated

south, and resisted other simplistic legal terms of themselves—“colored” or “Negro” (Lovett 2002, 194).

Is racism present within Native American communities? Absolutely. When European settlers and their slaves started populating Indian areas in the Southeast, Cherokees may have looked upon African slaves as “co-intruders with the Europeans they accompanied” (Miles 2005, 30). Cherokees noticed the fixed and inferior position of the slaves, a position increasingly connected to race or Blackness in the minds and laws of colonial society, and made the association of dark skin with low status. These early assessments led to gradual self-segregation from Black people (Miles 2005). The Cherokee constitution “defines Blackness as a racial category and excludes and controls Black and mixed-race Afro-Cherokee people” (Miles 2005, 108, 214). The Cherokee Nation has resisted the incorporation of Freedpersons into their nation by narrowing their definition of Cherokee identity, arguing in different litigations that the only legitimate class of Cherokee Freedmen were those listed on the Dawes Commission rolls (Sturm 2002).

Racial attitudes denying the existence of Black and Red relationships have been somewhat disheartening. But there are justified reasons why certain Indian nations are continuing campaigns against Cherokee Freedmen—to dispossess them from their tribes. Documenting the intermarriages of Black and Indian people would give the U.S. government reason to disperse Native American Nations, since the government is still trying to take lands and Native Americans are “about taking back their reservations” (Moran 2007). The U.S. Government may seize any remaining lands and destroy whatever is left of their political autonomy. These campaigns against descendants of Freedmen who are trying to maintain their citizenship could also give the government reason to infringe upon Native Americans’

economy, since the source of major income for many Native American nations is the casino business. “Many American Indian tribes count on money-losing casino gamblers to generate most of the income for their members” (Moran 2007, 1). African Americans would not be interested in focusing on Red and Black relations either, because this would remove the attention from racial injustices and struggles going on today. It would also eliminate the memory of a shared past in which both groups endured slavery and the enslavement of one group by the other. Black Indian couples and singles who claim citizenship are threatened with being removed from certain tribes so that they will not have access to a piece of the pie—the social benefits enjoyed by so many non-full blood Natives or Natives who are part Indian and part White.

The Federal District Court in Washington D.C. with Judge Henry H. Kennedy presiding, recently handed down a ruling in the case of *Vann v. Kempthorne*, 03-01711, which denied the Cherokee Nation's motion to dismiss an action filed by a number of Cherokee Freedmen citizens against United States Officials for breaching its fiduciary duty by failing to enforce the Treaty of 1866. Ultimately, the Cherokee council's decision was successful in that Cherokee Freedmen's citizenship has been removed from the Cherokee Nations in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Indian Times, January 2007). Both sides continue with litigations concerning Cherokee Freedmen's rights to citizenship.

Prejudices among Cherokee Native peoples towards Freedmen are a part of the modern context of racial identity politics. Indians are keenly aware of the problematic nature of their appearance to non-Indians especially where recognition as Indian is complicated by phenotype and the discrimination that is aligned with skin color (Lawrence 2004; McMullen 2002; Sturm 2002). Since racial classifications are determined primarily on physical

appearances, Native Americans even within their own culture, prefer to operate in a realm of symbols—something in which they can have control over or manipulate, hence, blood quantum, culture, language proficiency and history – are more important to establishing identity (McMullen 2002; Sturm 2002). Indian people do not wish to be thought of as racist, although some have been known to exhibit racial attitudes and tend to exploit or work the system that maintains quantum blood laws to their own advantage (McMullen 2002; Sturm 2002a).

Black Beauty—Racial Identity Politics and Skin Color

As a teenager, looks became so important, for looking beautiful meant looking White, and looking White meant straight hair... finally I had straight hair to match my light skin. Finally, I looked beautiful. Finally, I really looked White.
Trent 1995, 52

The racial mixture and biological appearance of many Black Indian women often encouraged discrimination and colorism within their own communities. Early on in their contact history, the Native American matrilineal system (in which the Cherokee Mother's identity took precedence over all other family members) produced Black Indians. Therefore, Black men and Cherokee women created Cherokee children (McDonald 2002; Miles 2005; Sturm 2002). In fact, many Black Indians were freed because of their "Native mother's status" (McDonald 2002, 25). Many Black Indians appear to be African American because of skin color, however the Native heritage may be apparent in the texture and length of hair, high cheekbones and other Native facial features. But this is not always the case. Black Indian women's identity may shift by phenotype in which they may have tight textured hair and darker skin tone, and you would not know they were identifying themselves as Black Indian.

There are secretly held notions about the distinct differences among African Americans within the group itself. These serious disparities in values and experiences based on skin tone and opinions on social views are at the core of why contemporary descendents of Africans in America may not practice unity as well as other ethnic groups. But like Black women, Black Indian women in the U.S. are exposed to “certain common experiences” and have several mutual identity experiences, even though their existence within a White supremacist society “problematizes and makes complex the overall issue of Black female identity” (hooks 2003, 215). Black Indian women’s experiences mean that they like other “American Black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not Black and female” (Collins 2000, 23).

One of the most common experiences of Black women is existing in a world in which you are readily recognized as a Black person. The experience encompasses an appearance that is somewhat similar with varying degrees of whitish/brown/Black shades of skin color (Giddings 1984; Hunter 2005). Skin color is also the single most important factor preventing many African-descended Americans from truly assimilating into society because it defines them almost immediately within the realm of their status, and roles, and limits their access to resources (Anderson 1994). While skin color and the emphasis on appearance and physical characteristics closer to that of Whites, the high visibility and phenotype of Black Indian women and other African American women make them a suitable target for the dominating White group. As other ethnic groups assimilate into White society, Black Indian women’s skin color does not allow them to blend in (Anderson 1994; Hunter 2005). It would be a great thing if people of color did not participate in social practices along the lines of exclusionary

racialized rules which contributes to racial identity politics and erosion of racial pride (Anderson 1994; Fraser 1994; Hall 1996; Hunter 2005).

The desire to be seen as an authentic and legitimate member of one's community is very strong, but for many people of color, "the privileges of having light skin are even stronger" (Hunter 2005, 103). Having privileges because of one's skin color is also a part of identity politics played out among Black and Indian groups. The one drop rule, blood quantum defining lineage, and other definitions that determine ancestry and race seem to be applied only to Black Americans since they cannot hide their skin color (Anderson 1994; Fraser 1994; Saunt 2005). Attached to color for the Black community are the different "grades" of hair, which run the gamut from so-called "good" to "bad" (Hunter 2005, 77). Good hair with a wavier, straighter quality to it, is thought of in some circles as the best type of hair to have since it is very close to White people's hair. Not all Black women succumbed, however, to the brainwashing of American beauty standards that operates through media. Tight kinky hair is worn by those who wish to acknowledge their African heritage and is therefore "good" hair too (Hunter 2005; Gross 2001; Phillips 2002). Other physical characteristics of African Americans include the all-too-familiar stereotypical large facial features—broad noses and wide thick lips along with wide hips (West 1994). However, African American women have deeper commonalities than just the phenotypes immediately acknowledged by all of society. I mention these stereotypical identities so that readers understand the discussions of difference and identity among Black Indian women.

The political aspects of racial identity politics include activities that lead to living well, and therefore it is important to remember both the political activism of Black women and the reasons why Black Indian women have been politically motivated to protest against

the Cherokee Nation. Historically and politically, Black women have been the backbone of the family, extended families, and critical institutions such as the Black church (Collins 2000; Betsch-Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). They have also led campaigns in political struggles and were staunch activists in gaining racial equality, forming clubs and anti-lynching movements, even though they were sometimes in the background of these activities (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; Giddings 1984). Collectively, all Black women suffered immense oppression, racism, sexually objectified degradation, isolation, and are “constantly racially conscious about ethnic identity” – more so than other people of color in the U.S. (Collins 2000, 98). For many decades, racial identity politics was used to segregate different segments of American society, but Indians in Oklahoma exercised their civil rights especially during the 1960s. “Indians would drink at the White fountain [in Oklahoma], sit in the White seats at the cinema, attend White schools, have lunch at the White counter, and vote as full-fledged White people” (Malcomson 2000, 106). This was not always the case since in 1719, South Carolina law, for instance, decided who would be an Indian for tax purposes (another form of politicizing for the interests of wealthy Americans’ advancement). For the most part, civil liberties were not in full effect until Native Americans received full American citizenship June 2, 1924 (unless they were enrolled on the Dawes census-like rolls, which allowed American citizenship in the 1880s). Native American slaves were taxed at a lesser rate than African slaves, but the new law stated that since it was getting to the point where they couldn’t tell who was what, “all such slaves as are not entirely Indian shall be accounted as Negro” (Forbes 1993, 196).

African Indian women suffered the same fate as African American women – and some, when insisting that they were Indian as well as Black, suffered hostilities by Black people in the community:

Growing up in Chicago, I learned to live in fear. Black youth seldom saw me for who or what I was. Instead, they saw me through the White man's eyes, deciding during the height of the Black is Beautiful era that all that mattered was my relatively light skin and "good" hair, both of which made me a target, a substitute for the White man they never dared to touch. My initial insistence that I was Indian as well as Black lapsed into silence for many years in the face of that hostility. Looks mattered, especially in the war zones of Chicago.

Phillips 2002, 371

The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, and White standards required of Black people, deprived Africans and their descendents of pride in their bodies. Their culture—which involved their "customs, and the sources on which they were based were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that [African descendents] did not know and that [the dominating society] imposed itself on" (Fanon 1967, 110). Whatever identity Black Indian women were assigned by the dominant culture, together with their African American sisters, they assumed the nurturing roles of "othermothers," political activists, and social leaders. These are very significant within the traditional Black family, and within institutions such as churches, mosques, schools, fraternities and sororities. Cultural aesthetics distinguish the African American Community from other communities (Collins 2000, 189; West 1994, 123). Black Indian women who sat at the back of the bus along with their African American sisters subscribed to many of the ideologies initiated in the women's movement of the 1960s. They had practiced such values as working outside of the home side by side with their Black men long before and throughout the struggle, to

emancipate the Black race from oppression (Mathis 2002; Betsch-Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003).

As Sojourner Truth's message implied, Black women had already proven their inherent strengths—both physical and psychological. They had undergone a baptism of fire and emerged intact. Therefore, their convictions concerning the rights of women were deeply rooted in experience as well as theory. Giddings 1984, 55

Feminist ideologies did not represent the reality of 1960's African American women and their political stance because they did not understand how racial identity was so significantly involved and connected to one's activities. The political stance of the women's rights movement, was for some, primarily a means of "releasing [White women's] suppressed political energies" (Giddings 1984, 54). Initially "led by suburban White women whose only problem was boredom, genteel repression, and dishpan hands," their idea of having all women stand together was somewhat self-defeating until they recognized the differences among women in terms of race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity and nationality (Guy-Sheftall and Cole 2003, 84). This meant that social movements had to be "true to a commitment to the welfare of *all* women" (Hirschmann 1999,27).

The 1960s social political movements sought to address truer identities through political activism, which in turn identified the connection of identity politics. Political activists have shown that the connection of politics and identity is often related to the recognition of oppressive experiences. Black Indian women continue to deal with oppressive experiences that often define a part of their reality in today's world, especially as they struggle for civil rights for Cherokee Freedpersons. Descendents of Cherokee Freedmen have been denied their civil rights to vote in council elections or maintain their tribal citizenship. Other Indians who are only part Indian (and usually part White) are allowed to vote and

remain as citizens. This denial/discrimination is due to Cherokee Freedmen's racial identity and the Cherokee Nation's political racist stance.

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodologies used in my research and explain why feminist methodologies were the best approach for this thesis. I give details on how I met the participants of this project, the procedures used, the data analysis, and the overall themes that emerged from the interview schedule.

Chapter 4 – Methods

Research Overview and Design

Through the analyses of history, identity, socialization, and privilege, this work contains discourses about cultural and racial identities experienced by African American women who claim Native ancestry. Initially, my research was intended to include African American women *without* Native ancestry, to show differences between the two groups. Time constraints, however, did not allow me to get in touch with this particular group. Therefore, using only the group that claimed Native ancestry, I employed feminist methodologies as the method used to analyze themes that emerged during the focus group session and responses to mailed surveys. The purpose of the focus group was to gain first hand, face-to-face knowledge, have personal discussions about the specific topic, and to understand the social and historical impact it made on the participants. Surveys were used to reach those Black Indian women who were not a part of the focus group but who desired to participate in this research study.

The Use of Feminist Methodologies

Feminist methodologies typically explore the unknown or unheard voices of powerless groups such as Black Indian women. Their histories lack the attention specifically given to other groups of women—Jewish women, Latino women, Black women in the Civil Rights Movement, or Islamic women. This type of methodology is a vehicle that draws different groups of women out of obscurity, and provides opportunities for readers and writers to identify with the subject. There is also a connection of sisterhood with women of the past when women talk about their ancestors (Reinharz 1992, 127). By listening directly to the voices and stories of Black Indian women, for instance, the reader gets a sense of their

culture, as well as information about Black women's collective present day experiences (Collins 2000, 41). This paper represents a collaborative effort shaped by responses from focus group participants and email and mail respondent interviewees.

Feminist research has a liberal effect and challenges "male-hegemonic" ideology and standardized methods within academia. Feminist methodologies encourage freedom from masculine cultural narratives, "which write(s) all women as other" and reject the intimidation of academic models that were formed by patriarchal methods which restrict the capacity of the researched to be heard (Armitage 2000, 51; Gwin 1988, 22; Reinharz 1992, 12, 131, 141). However, to stay within academic and acceptable boundaries, feminist methodology must include canonized influences and reputable sources so that research value cannot be refuted. Feminist methodologies allow personal experiences of Black Indian women to be heard and readers to become acquainted with their cultural landscape.

This research project about African American women with Native ancestry was motivated by my own personal ancestral claims of Native heritage. To some extent, feminist methodologies allows the inclusion of autobiographical material because there are instances in which researchers use self-disclosure as a research method by offering "accounts of personal experience" during an interview process (Reinharz 1992, 258). The only self-disclosure I used was to exclaim that my family is part Cherokee. What is significant in feminist methodologies is the freedom of use, the freedom of expression, and the ability to dig as deep as one can go, for data collected from participants during the interviewing process.

Sample

My sample came from a group I am affiliated with—the African American organization known as *The Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association*. This group made available a consortium of Black Indian women to contact for the study. Founded by Ms. Marilyn Vann, “who bears one of the more famous surnames in the Cherokee Nation,” the Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes holds annual Black Indian conferences in Oklahoma (Saunt 2005, 64). The Five Tribes consists of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, Choctaw and Creek Nations. The Freedmen Association assists members in utilizing genealogy techniques to gain access to the names of ancestors listed on the Dawes Freedmen Enrollment list (“the rolls”). The association’s endeavors include educating the general public about discriminatory practices and racial injustices against descendents of slaves who were owned by, or intermarried with, citizens of any of the Five Tribes. The association uses federal legislation, legal decisions and treaties to inform the tribes about injustices against descendents of Freedmen. The organization also uses history, culture and political rights “to assist in and promote, collect, restore and preserve the rights of descendents of the Five Civilized Tribes” as well as to gain and maintain tribal citizenship (see www.Freedmen5tribes.com).

The *Five Civilized Tribes* – or a better interpretation would be the *Five Recognized Tribes* (to avoid the racist suggestion that other tribes such as the Navajo and Apache, are savages or uncivilized) the Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw and Cherokee Nations, are recognized by the federal government because of their early adoption of forced European assimilation (Katz 1997; Sturm 2002). Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Five Tribes were expelled from their traditional homelands in the southeastern part of the United

States and forced to settle in Indian Territory—which is now present day eastern Oklahoma (Miles 2005). Many within the five tribes eagerly absorbed cultural characteristics of their White neighbors, including implementing farm equipment for agriculture use, they built their homes modeled after White settlers, dressed in European styles, as well as enslaved Africans (who became Freedmen after the civil war and emancipation). The Cherokee Nation assimilated more thoroughly into American society and had more slaves than any other Native group. Descendents of Cherokee slaves and Freedmen took part in the focus group session and responded via email.

A small sampling of nine African American women with Native ancestry varying in ages from 34 to 66 and residing in and around Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma, participated in the focus group. I used four other cases, which were emails or letters with attached questionnaire surveys that came from Oklahoma, Missouri and Atlanta. The women were selected based on their claim of Native American heritage in their family lineage. There are many African American men who also claim Native heritage, (there were many at the Black Indian conference), however, I chose women only so that the research would remain simple and in the same vein or concentration of Women's Studies. The focus group interview involved women who responded to mailed out packets or emails, and who attended the Black Indian conference.

Procedures

I put together 35 packets for mailing or handing out to prospective participants. The packets contained an interview schedule (Appendix A), an Institution Review Board (IRB) approved informed consent form (Appendix B), and a contact sheet, which included all of my information—my name, email address, home address and telephone numbers, along with a

self-addressed stamped envelope for return of all items. The selection process initially involved contacts provided by members of *The Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association*. I got in touch with one of the officers of the association, briefly told her about what I wanted to do and asked for contact names, telephone numbers or email addresses of people who might be interested. A couple of women in the association immediately called me and said they would be interested in the focus group session because they would be attending the Black Indian conference which was held the day before I conducted the focus group. I called or emailed about 20 prospective participants to ask if they would be interested in my research project. I mailed interview packets to those who were interested in becoming involved. I received back six or seven completely filled out questionnaire surveys. A couple of the surveys had attached letters or notes giving more information about their Native ancestors and also giving other names, addresses and telephone numbers of people to contact. However, due to time constraints, I worked with four of those who initially responded (two by email and two by letters).

The Black Indian Conference afforded the opportunity to meet and network with many African-Native women. During the conference, after the panel's question and answer segment, I was introduced to the audience by one of the Association's organizers. I immediately took this opportunity to address my research project and asked that if anyone was staying over the weekend, to please see me afterwards about participating in the focus group session being held the next day. I handed out about 15 packets to several women attending the Black Indian Conference which was held in Oklahoma on Saturday, June 3, 2006.

The focus group session took place on Sunday, June 4, 2006 from 1:30 PM until 2:45 PM, in a local hotel conference room in Norman, Oklahoma near Oklahoma University. At first, with only two women sitting in the room, I thought I had failed in getting the attention of enough women to participate. But a total of nine women eventually showed up. The women were told of the purpose of the research—that it was an investigation of Black and Native identity and culture and socialization among Black women who claim Native American ancestry. A local videographer was contracted to film the focus group session in its entirety and the film was also professionally transcribed. This ensured that elicited responses were accurately recorded and available for future reference and for generating the direction of any subsequent interviews.

Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire survey. This survey was handed out and filled out by all focus group participants, email and postal mail respondents. The interview questions on the survey were developed from a specifically Black feminist frame of reference or standpoint that involved questioning respondents about their Black and Native heritage. It encouraged responses from all participants in the research project about their racial identities (Reinharz 1992). The interview schedule contained detailed questions about history, socialization, identity and privilege. Although this strategy may seem to have supported anticipated answers, all participants (focus group, emails and regular mail) answered the survey questions according to their own lived experiences.

Focus Group – In an interactive context such as a focus group, the participants' response can sometimes shape the interviewer's subsequent questions that may or may not be on the schedule. For this project, data gathering methods included semi-structured questions,

and the use of “thinking out loud” strategy for asking questions and invoking discussions (Lofland 1995). This provided an avenue by which I could work and rework themes and ideas which developed during the session. The open-ended questions invited discussions and encouraged participants of the focus group to remember particular details and think about what their contributions or assessments of their culture meant in the past and what it means for them now.

I started off the focus group proceedings by asking participants questions regarding the origin of their African American and Native ancestry. However, in order to stay on course, the interview schedule (Appendix A) was handed out at the beginning of the focus group session. This was used as a guide to discuss history, individual and social differences, and specifics in relation to the participants’ own views of self-identity. As expected, different forms of information emerged, which revealed different ethnic socialization of Black Indian women. The first form of information involved talking about how their Native identity was revealed to them. One of the Black Indian women displayed a picture of relatives to show an extraordinary similar facial appearance to Native Americans. There were many shared exchanges about discovering ancestors on census rolls. There were strong inferences about appearances and skin tone⁶. Employing the talk-out-loud strategy offered a combination of feminists methodologies’ usage which allowed creativity and liberal exchanges within the focus group session. The omission of conventional formats formerly prescribed by masculine academia, frees the researcher “in the realm of [the] research” to make discoveries and include them in the process of the research (Reinharz 1992, 239). The focus of these

⁶ This is why there is a section about skin tones and colorism—a form of internal racism within the African American community.

women's narratives addressed my research questions, the race identity analysis, and their claims of Native ancestry. Perceptions about social and economic opportunities, and the socio-political aspects that politicize their quests for tribal citizenship were also covered.

The Questionnaire – The questionnaire was not rigid in its structure or standards, in that the questions were semi-structured, and were used to assist participants and email respondents to reflect on their lives as Black Indian women (Reinharz 1992). The interview questions were developed from a Black feminist standpoint and involved questioning respondents about their Native and Black racial identity. The Interview Schedule appears in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Categories and different sub-topics emerged throughout my investigation. However, it was not until I viewed and reviewed the video and started sorting and categorizing, that I realized certain themes emerged more regularly than others. After looking at the transcript of the video recording of the focus group and checking the emails and mailed in surveys, I found that responses mainly centered around the following: socialization, racial identity, culture, and maintaining tribal citizenship through political involvement and litigations. What also was very common was that although many of the respondents were told early in life that they were part Indian, they had not started searching their genealogy to corroborate their family history until they were older adults. Their genealogy search and subsequent documentations (such as being listed on the Dawes Commission enrollments and checking archived census) led them to their quest for tribal citizenship and true recognition as Native Americans.

This research involved a qualitative study which does not depend on statistical analysis. The subject matter of this thesis is not amenable to quantitative analysis, and my objective was to generate theory about racial identity among Black Indian women. My work is not generalizable and is based on a very small group of Black Indian women. The research used a convenience sample that provided an in-depth and rich description of the data. Themes emerged around socialization, racial identity, political issues and culture/cultural relativity. It is important to look at several aspects of Black Indian women who claim Native ancestry and connect them to the themes that emerged during the research.

I analyzed the data by sifting through written and categorized themes I had collected while watching the video of the focus group. The video was professionally transcribed. This resulted in a hard copy of the transcript and a CD-Rom version as well. I pored over the transcript several times, marking off sections that referred to the four themes that were talked about: history, identity, socialization and privilege. I viewed the video again to see what themes emerged from the discussions. I looked for similar and constant themes and the linkages between them. An overall theory was formulated and suggested that through historical and socialization events, many Black Indian women as well as their Native American Freedmen ancestors, (1) typically look like other Black women but have some different life experiences because of their socialization and racial identity, (2) experienced some privilege because of their outward appearance, (3) Black Indian women's history of Red and Black mixture is typically similar to the amalgamation of past histories of Black with White slave masters, and (4) Black Indian women have been denied legal rights to their inheritance of land, affordable housing, free college education, and access to other social benefits that tribal citizenship would grant access to; these things have been denied them

because of their racialized identity. For Black Indian women (and men) who seek to maintain their tribal citizenship, their voices can now be heard – as to whether they will be listened to or not is an on-going debate. The next chapter includes narratives of Black Indian women as they express how they learned of their Native heritage.

Chapter 5 – Findings and Discussions

There are several important lived experiences that surround the identity of Native Black women. In this chapter, I discuss how these women who came to be known as Black Indians, their socialization, their racial identity and the privileges attached to their identity. In the broadest perspective, Black Indian women's socialization in America was parallel to that of African American women. However, attaching Native identity to their Black identity can be a sensitive issue at times, since the status of Blackness and Indianness is embedded negatively within the fabric and systems of the American social structure. Discussions of Native and Black mixture seemed more particularly sensitive to those who are more connected to their Indian communities. This was exhibited by the negative responses in the emails I received from some Black Indian women. Native concerns about identity with mixed and full blood determinations stem from attitudes and ideas fostered by a dominant culture that emphasizes whiteness (Lawrence 2004). One of the tactics of the White majority is to create dissension among the oppressed so that they never question the White social system and power structure. This would also keep those marginal societies from galvanizing against White oppression (Collins 2000; Davis 1981; Gross 2001; Lorde 1984).

Racial disparities are common within Black and Indian communities. Because of their racial mixture, Black Indian women experienced negativity from both groups. What is arguably a significant opinion of some is the claim that many Black people used the separate racial category of Native American to challenge the inferior place assigned to Black people in American society (Lovett 2002). Slavery has shaped America's economy, its political landscape, its culture and its fundamental principles, and whether known or unknown, the

history of Black Indians is indelibly embedded in American history resulting from the slavery of Africans and American Indigenous people.

Their History – Claiming Native Identity

So, where did African American women who claim Native ancestry get information or knowledge about their heritage? How did my participants learn of their Indian and African racial mixture? Many of the respondents received information passed down to them through generations of family members. This is typical cultural communication for African Americans, and was transferred over from western Africa. It only has recently been accepted by others outside of Black cultural communities (Hale 1998; Lott 2002). In West Africa, written history is something new. African history was written in European languages during the colonial era, and has been around in Arabic languages for centuries. But societies in the Savanna regions of West Africa have long kept their own history, in their own languages, orally (Lott 2002). In many parts of West Africa, this job is carried out by the griot (male) or griottes (female) who are professional oral historians, genealogists, and story tellers (Hale 1998).

The oral tradition for African Americans and Native Americans is followed not so much by a professional griot but by story tellers within families. When we look at some of the ways in which members of the focus group learned of their mixed Native and African heritage, we find that many decided to research their ancestors on line and/or through genealogy archives. A Cherokee descendent said she received her African Indian information through census and genealogy research. “Our heritage comes from my grandmother. And we have traced--for the last three years, we have been tracing our [ancestors]—our genealogy

heritage. And we have just completed it. We only needed one piece of the document and we're going to (Tamaqua), Oklahoma to get this information.” (TB-Black Cherokee Indian). Her lineage is through her maternal grandmother and great grandparents. Her grandparents and great grandparents are listed in the National Archives in Indian books (the rolls). Another woman of Shawnee descent told us that her knowledge about her Native ancestry came from all three sources – census, private genealogy research and as told to her by her mother and grandparents.

A member of the Natchez Nation from rural Oklahoma said that her paternal grandmother was full-blood Muscogee. She grew up in Tulsa, OK in a Black segregated community of people who had Indian heritage. Her family often spoke of the old Indian ways—talked about the Trail of Tears⁷ before it was popular. “During the 1950s and 60s, there were a lot of people who had mixed heritage, but they lived in the Black community. They did not live in Indian communities because of segregation. (GJ-Natchez Indian) Miss GJ also shared the following story:

My cousin – her mother was Indian and Black, as well as her father. She was raised Black and attended Black schools, along with her sisters and brothers. Her cousins were raised white, her uncles having married white. The families did not socialize or even speak because the “secret” had to be kept. These cousins would chant “useys ain’t Black, see our straight hair!

Many email respondents also learned about their Native ancestry through their families, but especially from the females in their family—grandmothers and aunts.

My great grandmother, her sister and their mom were all Cherokee Freedmen who lived up into my teenage years. They all lived in Bartlesville, OK. There were other family members who were African American members of the

⁷ The Trail of Tears refers to the forced removal and doomed march of Native Americans from northwest Georgia 1000 miles to Indian Territory in 1838-9. Over 4000 Cherokees lost their lives. (<http://ngeorgia.com/history/nghisttt.html>)

Cherokee Nation. My mother's sister remembers hearing Cherokee spoken by an older acquaintance of the family. I was always told *privately* (the secret) by my older relatives in Bartlesville that they were *the* [Dawes] *rolls*, that they were Cherokee Freedmen and that I was part Cherokee. My relatives considered themselves to be Cherokee Freedmen—both Cherokee and Black.
(JK-Cherokee)

This discussion of African and Native American interrelations was not merely a matter of defiance against demeaning racial codes that imposed their own system of oppression, but also a matter of *reclaiming* one's identity (Lovett 2002). Many of the Black Indian women who participated in this research project not only received information about their Native identity through other family members, but were also able to trace their ancestry back (through census and archives)—just a generation or two – to a grandparent who actually was Native American. Others found out through their own personal genealogy research. Most of them are Cherokee and some do not know what tribe they are from. Most of the email respondents and focus group participants were told at an early age that they were part Indian, but did not seek citizenship until they were older. All of the participants at the focus group session noted that they will always distinguish their Native ancestry on applications, censuses and any place where the question is asked about their race.

The Black Indian group *The Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association* was founded by Black Cherokee Marilyn Vann in 2002. They have petitioned through legal and legislative efforts to keep their tribal citizenship which was promised to them in the 1866⁸ treaty (Ferrante and Browne 200, 335; Miles 2005, 30; Saunt 2005, 64). Citizenship allows descendents of Freedpersons voting rights and social benefits within the

⁸ The U.S. Government made land allotment treaties with the Five "Civilized" Tribes through an enactment of the Congressional Dawes Commission Act in 1887 that included provisions for 160 acres for the Indians and their families and declared Native Americans citizenship. This treaty also included provisions for former slaves to be forever free from slavery as well as have access to land ownership.

Cherokee Nation. However, there are Cherokee Indians who wish to rescind tribal membership for descendents of Freedmen. Marilyn Vann, the President of *The Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribe Association* is a lead plaintiff, along with other Black Indian women [and men] in on-going litigations to maintain Cherokee citizenship. “For individual Indians, such as Marilyn Vann and the other Plaintiffs, her rights preserved today are significant. It should be a basic right in any democracy that a citizen can stand up for her rights when her elected officials trample her constitutional rights to vote or threaten to remove her from her Tribe.” Marilyn Vann stated that she was “pleased that the honorable judge has held that the Cherokee Nation, a federally recognized tribe is required to follow the laws of the U.S. Constitution and to follow the Treaty of 1866 as prior leaders swore to do more than 140 years ago when they wished to reestablish government-to-government relationships with the United States.” (*Oklahoma Indian Times*, Jan 5, 2007)

The court ruling is one of many litigations that *The Descendents of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association* have gone through. The members of this group are fighting for land and social benefits that were granted to their ancestors who were former slaves of Cherokees—Cherokee Freedmen. As history informs us, White settlers planted their first successful colonies in Jamestown, Virginia in 1609 and enslaved Indians and Africans to increase their labor pool (McDonald 2002; Miles 2005). As enslaved members of society simultaneously, and under identical oppressive conditions, African Americans and Native Americans worked together in fields and lived together in communal living quarters, which allowed mutual social existence and cohabitation as well (Forbes 1993; Galloway 1999; Katz 1997; McDonald 2002).

Today, ancestry requires kinship, blood quantum, and proof that your ancestors were on the Dawes Commission census “rolls” in order to determine social and racial classifications for tribal citizenship (McMullen 2002, 276; Sturm 2002, 108). One reason Cherokees were resistant to immediate adoption of former slaves was the fact that the Dawes Commission allowed land grants to African-descended Americans also known as State Blacks. State Blacks were former slaves who relocated *from other areas* of the country to settle on low-cost land available in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). In order to qualify as tribal members, Black Indians were required to distinguish themselves from “state Blacks” (Dramer 1997, 50). However, qualifying as a member of the Cherokee tribe became rather difficult after the government established the Dawes Commission in 1898, which officially instituted qualifications that determined tribal membership (Dramer 1997). The Dawes Commission was actually formed March 3, 1893, *not* for the purpose of enrolling former slaves, as many believe, but as a first step to disenfranchise Native Americans from their land rights with the intentions of offering those lands to White settlers. However, this congressional act also forced all groups—Black Indians, White Indians and Full Blood Indians—to racialize their identities in order to qualify for land rights. Herein lies the crux of the matter – land rights which were typically passed down through and enriched generations of White families, escaped Black families. To qualify for land rights, you had to have tribal citizenship. This was a particular concern of one Black Indian woman – that the benefit of her Native citizenship would allow her future descendants to occupy land that was rightfully theirs: “Well to me I found out about the census rolls and that the roll numbers [were] for the land. The numbers were given in order to receive land but then I found out later that some of

my people didn't get (enrolled) that should have received property. Whatever [rightly] belongs to my family then we need to receive that" (LR—Chickasaw).

Socialization

As previously discussed, racially mixed Black Indian women may experience preferential treatment but often justified this treatment by their socialization. Although some looked like ordinary African American women, for some socialization embodied cultural continuity visible through links with the land, traditional foods, their church, pow-wows, oral traditions and other Native American ethnic symbols. "I follow traditional Muscogee and Cherokee ways, but that is because this is my home and these are the people that I live with. All that I know I acquire on a daily basis. You get it from living it" (AV-Muscogee). These outward ethnic codes also encouraged ambition as discussed by Black Indian females who talked about the advantages or disadvantages of their racial identity. I received an email from a Black Cherokee/Blackfoot Indian woman who talked about trying to connect to African Americans. She stated:

When my family relocated to Connecticut, Black people thought we were Latin (Spanish/Hispanic). Girls pulled my hair thinking it was a wig. It was hard to mix with Blacks because of my blood mixture and appearance. I compare my appearance to Trinidadian or Puerto Rican women and embraced the West Indian community because of their mixture and their acceptance of my appearance. (PF-Cherokee/Blackfoot)

Another woman in the focus group talked about opportunities that opened up for her because of her appearance. She was promoted to training instructor in a large corporation. Even the interviewer mentioned that she was pre-selected for the job. "I heard from the [job] interviewer and from some of the ladies that were interviewed, that the fox⁹ got the job. But I

⁹ Fox in colloquial terms also means beautiful female.

took it as a compliment because of the way I carried myself. In growing up, we were trained and taught from others in our family how to carry ourselves” (TB-Cherokee).

Another young lady—a Black Cherokee in the focus group—mentions that she found out from her parents and grandparents but it was kept as a secret:

Like you know they tell us that we’re Native American. They may have told you the tribe. But they didn’t leave any information and it was like they were keeping it from us. Why? I mean what was the secretive part. And like what GJ was saying, there are things that this side wouldn’t want this side to know or you know you just didn’t speak about it. I don’t understand that. But for me being a younger generation finding out about it and coming here this weekend, [it was] so overwhelming. I cried last night. It was just an eye-opening experience for me. So it was really good for me.

(AS-Cherokee)

Black Identity

For hundreds of years, the concept of Blackness has held “intense meanings” for White people (Anderson 1994, 94). Blackness usually dominates in the racial mixture and because of this, racial classification systems based on miscegenation intensified fundamental principles about racial categorizing. Values of culture, race dominance, blood lines and genetic purity are embedded in American consciousness and are threatened by Blackness (Anderson 1994; Bowman 2004). White society’s fear of Blackness, Black power, and potency necessitated legal definitions that tracked the flow of Black blood (Anderson 1994). The fear of Blackness, which could dominate Whiteness and determine a person’s race to be Black (according to the one-drop rule), made it important that society rigorously defined who and what was Black. Once this was done, (through Black-code laws, anti-miscegenation laws/anti-mixed marriage laws, social segregation) African Americans were not permitted to assimilate into mainstream society because their Black identity prohibited their absorption (Anderson 1994; Forbes 1993).

The women discussed their black identity as an integral part of their lived experiences since they grew up racially identified as African American. “As far as the appearances, I feel that we’ve always known our heritage... we have never denied that” (TB-Cherokee). Due to lack of evidence, such as the exclusion of ancestors’ names from the “rolls” (the Dawes Commission Enrollment for land allotments), the criteria for determining one’s Indianness sometimes undermined the political and economic autonomy of Black Indians when they sought to prove their ancestral claims. However, the racial identity of kinship within the Cherokee Nation mattered more, even as racial designations became law; for “to be kin [or family] meant being human, and to be human meant being free” (Miles 2005, 142). This ideology of kinship may have been important generations ago or maybe it just applies to *real Indians*. Insisting that Freedpersons discontinue their citizenship in tribes proves that the Cherokee Nation is no longer concerned about kinship or family.

Freedom is not the only commonality of Black and Native people. There are strong parallels between African Americans and Native Americans that becomes a shared racial identity among Black Indians. Their rich history includes the connection both groups shared in almost identical experiences within their culture and within past events. These experiences included forced removal – Blacks were forcefully removed from the continent of Africa, and Indians were separated from American lands during the Indian Removal Act of 1830.¹⁰ The Indians experienced social disorder, colonialism and removal for more than five hundred years, while Blacks had endured this for more than four hundred years. Both groups were called savages. Both groups had strong oral traditions for record keeping purposes, family

⁶The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was a US government congressional policy which provided for an exchange of lands with Indians residing in any states or territories desired for White settlement, and for their removal to west of the Mississippi River.

ancestry, and for instructional purposes. Their storytelling traditions entertained and informed family and tribal units. Moreover, customs were shared. Both Red and Black cultures include medicine men and use of natural medicinal herbs. Slaves transferred their medical skills into home-remedies based on North American plants and herbs. Both groups have strong spiritual traditions, with rituals and ceremonies that are an integral part of daily life. Indians believe in the Great Spirit as a spiritual theme. The holy men, the Shaman, have positions of highest esteem within the tribe. Blacks' survival of slavery was based around the church which is the link between the people and the spirits (Tucker 2000).

Music is a strong component in both groups' ceremonies as well as for personal enjoyment in which the pain of oppression can be removed. When the drum was taken away from Black slaves because European Americans wanted to obliterate any remaining African customs, slaves started tapping out their messages, and hence, developed tap dancing. Dance was also a major part of the ceremonies and cultural expression in both groups, and was a strong tradition among enslaved Africans as well as among the indigenous people.

Both groups were often educated together. At the Hampton¹¹ Institute in Virginia, between 1883 and 1902, over 1388 Indians from 55 different tribes attended the Black school in Hampton, Virginia as well as in other communities.

Indian Identity (Traditionalists and Non-Traditionalists)

Indigenous and African American communities throughout America have a wealth of culture that includes music and other aesthetics. What has been most often reflected in literature and other media, however, are the misfortunes of slavery, the struggles with

¹¹ "I have often wondered if there was a White institution in this country whose students would have welcomed the incoming of more than a hundred companions of another race in the cordial way that these Black students at Hampton welcomed the red ones" ~Booker T. Washington (Lovett 2002:205)

alcoholism, health/mental issues, poverty, welfare, and crime (Collins 2000; Fraser 1994). Black Indian women are proud of positive legacies of rich African and Native cultures celebrating customs and practices as traditionalists and non-traditionalists. This is important because many African-descended Americans have been conditioned to believe that their culture and history started at slavery in America, omitting the rich legacy of pre-enslavement Africa (Jackson and Rashidi 2001).

Traditional Native American communities are reaching back towards the old ways. They are developing, promoting and speaking their Native languages, encouraging economic self-sufficiency, and implementing educational services and other resources that maintain tribal traditions and cultural identity. They usually have little to do with non-Indians and progressive members of their own tribe (Mihesuah 1996). For Native Americans, the culturally relative aspects of their traditions serve as a source of strength and protection that contributes to their health and mental wellness (Lawrence 2004). Other specific cultural markers include dress, spiritual viewpoints, foods, social functions and the use of herbal remedies (Saunt 2005). Although their biological appearance is similar to African American women, some Black Indian women actually identify more closely with Native American roots (Naylor-Ojurongbe 2002). Traditional Native Americans want to hold onto culture by keeping old customs. They tend to stay close to, or live directly within Native American communities and they utilize the social benefits or programs they are entitled to because of the treaty rights promised to them in 1866 (Mihesuah 1996). An email I received from a Muscogee Creek woman stated that “some of us of mixed ancestry keep ties to our tribal communities. Those of us who have are going to be [seen as] different. Those who have not, will just be African American from a cultural perspective.” (AV-Muscogee)

As traditionalists, non-mixed Native Americans can be somewhat unreceptive to African Americans who claim Native ancestry. Indigenous peoples within the United States and African Americans have exacerbated neo-colonialism by continuing to internalize and imitate White American ways of seeing things in so many aspects of their lives. Today, this blindness is at the heart of the discords that exists between African Americans on whose backs this country was founded, and Indians whose lands were confiscated (Phillips 2002).

Non-traditionalists, sometimes called Progressives, are often urbanized, educated Christians who know little or nothing about their tribal history or culture. Most Black Indians are non-traditionalists, living outside Native American communities, typically in large cities. They are busy assimilating into the dominant society around them. Many non-traditionalists are also fighting the battle of retaining their citizenship within tribal communities through federal legislation and tribal council litigations. Non-traditionalists may not need social programs such as free education and health benefits offered to descendants of Freedmen who can prove their claim of Native kinship, but choose to use federally funded grants and financial aid for college education and housing. One of the women in the focus group stated that “For me, it’s not for gain, because I have been blessed. I have a good job. I’m a single woman and I’m able to take care of myself and do the things that I need to do for me. It’s not about the benefits. It’s about telling the world who I am, telling them about our rich culture and it is a great culture.” (RG-Creek) Non-traditionalist Black Indian women who want to receive such benefits as health care, housing, and food commodities must meet certain biological conditions—usually one-quarter or more Indian blood, and must obtain a certificate of degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) card approved by their tribe and the BIA (Sturm 2002).

Black Indian women in the focus group session talked about their mixture and the difficulty they have proving their Native identity. A successful Black Indian woman of Creek descent said that she often spoke about her Native ancestry to other people because she was proud of it.

Well I often speak about my background and my history and my culture because I'm very proud of it. And I just--if I meet someone on the street or perhaps family members or friends, whomever, and I may mention the fact that I'm a member of the Descents of Freedmen Association, that we are an African Native American organization and you know we fight for the political rights of a denied people. (RG-Creek)

She mentioned that her people came from Oklahoma when there were "no White people here." Another woman proudly displayed her grandmother's picture in which you could see that "she clearly had Indian blood in her—you can see where she used to wear those long braids. As a matter of fact my grandmother didn't speak very much, because she couldn't speak English very well." (AC-Black Indian) A boastful Muscogee woman wrote in her email that many Indians with Black ancestry "are living in their prospective native communities and are participating members of their native culture." She said she was "Native by culture, blood, through official documents and community involvement." (AV-Muscogee)

Social Identity and Preferential Treatment

Several of the women that were interviewed for this research project revealed that they were preferentially treated in school and employment, and while dating or considering marriage. A Black Cherokee woman stated that because of her looks, wavy hair and light brown skin complexion, she was often teased or confronted with "oh, you think you're cute, you think you're better than us." She stated that "Clearly when we were growing up, we looked different, the hair, the complexion. Not only in high school but even today." (AS-

Cherokee) Another Cherokee woman felt that her appearance as a light skinned African American provided job opportunities and higher paying positions throughout her working career within different high tech corporations. A Shawnee Black Indian felt that her status as a United States Army veteran, and not race, allowed her to have preferential treatment when it came to job opportunities and housing. Growing up in a bi-racial home she stated that she “was raised by a Black-in-color grandmother, and a White-in-color grandfather.” (BS-Shawnee) She experienced racism or discrimination from both races – African Americans and European Americans.

Various answers were given when asked “what race were you considered by others as you grew up?” Several stated that they were often mistaken for being Spanish or Latina, Mulatto or Colored. This meant that they probably appeared to be bi-racial with Black and another mixture. The identifiers were usually length of hair and hair texture, skin color (light to light brown) with sharper facial features (nose, high cheek bones, slant or thinner eyes). One respondent remembered that her grandmother described them as “mulattos” on late 1800’s century census. In almost every instance in which there was a definite Native appearance, there was also discrimination from both Whites *and* Blacks. The only exceptions to being thought of as mixed, were those African Native women who had a complete appearance of being African American (very brown skin, prominent nose, thicker lips, kinky hair, etc.). Therefore, most of these women self-identified as African American, although some have embraced their tribal communities and have been accepted by their tribal nations. This allowed empowerment on their part, which encouraged their participation in Native community affairs. Others maintain their mostly African American identities and continue to

live in African American or mixed communities. As PF stated – she is often confused with Caribbean women and chose to embrace that community since she looks Puerto Rican.

These findings suggest that regardless of blood ancestry, all of the Black Indian women in the focus group and those who emailed their surveys self-identified as Native American citizens simply because of their adoption provided by the 1866 Treaty, and their family connections as descendents of Native American Freedmen. Tribal citizenship means social and political opportunities and economic security for Native American Freedmen and their future descendents. After enduring the legal battle and challenges for so long, and because of the lack of success, citizenship for Black Indian Cherokees is still threatened. The older generation who are descendents of original enrollees fear losing their citizenship and the rights that belong to their younger generation, since many of them are dying out. Soon the history will be lost and people will have vague memories about their Indianness and little knowledge of their historical rights to Cherokee citizenship and the benefits that rightfully belong to them. In the next chapter, we look at what is being done to recognize the relationships of Black Indians as descendents of Cherokee Freedmen.

In summary, the findings are that African American women with Native ancestry typically had the same lived experiences as Black women in America simply because they were often recognized as African American. The difference is that many of the Black Indian women that I interviewed learned early on of their mixture as part Indian. They sought to be recognized as part Indian, especially when they were able to prove through genealogy, archival censuses and the Dawes rolls, that they were in fact part Cherokee. At times, some were treated differently because of their mixture, being preferred over others for jobs or

potential companions, while others were [mis]treated differently because some people resented their looks and the way they carried themselves.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

At times, I felt that the struggle for Black Indian women may not be relevant, given today's focus on wars and economics. But on March 6, 2007 the National Public Radio station (NPR) in Atlanta, Georgia, on their "News and Notes" segment, had a discussion on the recent news that the Cherokee Nation had just "ousted" all of the slave descendents (Black Indians) who claim to be Freedmen descendants and who initially had tribal citizenship (NPR 2007). Of course, this decision will be appealed. The NPR radio panel came to one of several conclusions—mainly that the Cherokee Nation is discriminating against Black Indians, and that contemporary tribal councils do not want to share their [casino/gambling] wealth with African Americans.

In another broadcast on NPR's "News and Notes" segment aired on Friday, June 22, 2007, commentator Tony Cox moderated discussions entitled "Cherokee Nation Faces New Battle. In this segment, Tony Cox interviewed Congresswoman Diane Watson, member of the United States House of Representatives since 2001, representing the 33rd District of California. Congresswoman Diane Watson introduced a bill in the House on June 21, 2007 that would sever all federal ties to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Representative Watson stated that what the Cherokees are trying to do is "purify the[ir] race when they originally agreed through the Department of Interior that they would include in their Nation all their former slaves and their descendents. And since that time, slaves have married Cherokees and their children and grandchildren and so on, were considered as Cherokees" (Watson 2007). Ms. Watson drafted a bill stating that "the United States is to sever all relationships, including financial and otherwise, until the Cherokee Nation is in full compliance with all the treaty obligations and other statutes" (Watson 2007).

According to Ms. Watson, the Department of Interior annually gives around \$300 million to the Cherokee Nation from taxpayers' monies. Ms. Watson as well as a small group appointed by the Congressional Black Caucus¹² wants the Cherokee Nation to not receive these funds if they continue to discriminate against descendants of Freedmen. Ms. Watson went on to say that "the Freedman's rights as members remain severely restricted and they cannot run for office. Registration of Freedman still remains suspended" (Watson 2007). Tony Cox asked a final question: "Because you are a congressperson from Los Angeles, California, there are a lot of Indians here in California, but I don't know that there are any Cherokee Nations here. How did you get to be the person carrying this legislation?" And Congresswoman Watson's reply: "Because I have Indian blood" (Watson 2007).

The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation held a special forum September 28, 2007 in Washington, DC entitled: "Pursuit of Justice for the Cherokee Freedmen." This forum was attended by Congresswoman Diane Watson (CA), Congressman John Conyers, (MI), Former Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma Joe Byrd, and Marilyn Vann, President, Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes Association. The results of this forum are not yet known as of this writing, but Cherokee Freedmen did vote 2,800 of its citizens out of their tribe March 2007. In *USA Today* Hatton (2007) reported that "A group of Americans who are not fully Black or fully Indian are fighting for the survival of their

¹² The Congressional Black Caucus was formed in 1969 when the 13 black members of the U.S. House of Representatives joined together to strengthen their efforts to address the legislative concerns of black and minority citizens. African-American representatives had increased in number from six in 1966 to nine, following the 1969 elections. Those members believed that a black caucus in Congress, speaking with a single voice, would provide political influence and visibility far beyond their numbers. (www.congressionalblackcaucus.net).

identity, culture, history and economic future. Life for these Black Indians can be difficult, no matter their tribal affiliation” (Hatton 2007). Ms. Hatton tells Lynn Hart’s story that as a Black Yankton Sioux, she regularly experiences racism – “When I go to the reservation, people see me as Black. When I walk among Blacks, they see me as Indian” (Hatton 2007).

We must remember that during the slave era the Cherokee Nation and many of their mixed-blood population (who were mostly Indians mixed with Whites), were slaveholders, while full-blood citizens were opposed to slavery (Minges 2004). But Indians who mixed with African Americans and their descendents who claim Native heritage today have evolved through a complicated history of Native and African Americans, in which there was a great deal of intermarriage and cohabitation. This took place especially within coalitions between the two groups that occurred before and during slavery, and just after emancipation. It is also necessary to remember that the connections mostly came through slavery and that Black Native Americans are descendents of slaves of Indians as well as from voluntary cohabitation. Historically, society accepted tribal people when there was miscegenation with White people, but acceptance becomes a difficult reality when Black mixture enters the picture.

American society in the 21st century continues to avoid an honest discussion of racism. There is a lot of rhetoric about equality and tolerance, but attempts to dismantle racism are stalled. Because of racism and racialized identity, many Black Indian women are at a disadvantage as they try to document their Indian blood, while tribal councils and the federal government deliberately remove African Americans from tribes “regardless of how much Indian blood they actually possessed” (Phillips 2002, 276).

The Political Quest

One of the recurring issues that emerged from my research was racism and discrimination within the Indian Nations as well as in their dispensations of social programs to those who are part Indian and part other than Black. The Cherokee Nation's racism delays the legal process for maintaining citizenship for descendents of Freedmen. The benefits guaranteed to enrollees of the Dawes Commission are being revoked or withheld from Cherokee Freedmen. African American Indian women (and men) who are descendents of Native American Freedmen suffer discrimination and are denied legal rights to inheritance of land, affordable housing, and access to other social benefits such as free college education and health care. These benefits have been denied them because of their racialized identity. As one respondent suggested to writer Circe Sturm,

It is ridiculous to allow White people to take advantage of Indian programs because they have blood [relatives] on a tribal roll 100 years ago, when a Black person who suffers infinitely more discrimination and needs the aid more, is denied it because his Indian ancestry is overshadowed by his African ancestry.

(Sturm 2002a, 223)

It is in fact a truism that racial identity politics, particularly for Freedmen ancestors, is “socially and politically constructed around hegemonic notions of blood, color, race and culture” within the Cherokee Indian Nation and is in its entirety racist (Sturm 2002, 223).

In discussions about self-identity, all of the women in the focus group session stated that, when opportunity arises, they will identify themselves as African American *and* Native American (on applications, censuses, etc.). One of the women said that she identified herself as both Black and Indian on the 2000 census. When asked why – why do you wish to identify

as a Black Indian woman – all of the women emphatically stated “because it’s a part of our heritage”— “rather than having society at large telling us who we are.”

Many in the African American community believed the incorrect information that there was no rich cultural history for Black Americans before slavery. The rich culture of Africa is being researched and taught in academic institutions through such courses as African American history and African history, as well as Native American studies. This will educate the public about pre-slave and Native-Black slave history. Black-Indian studies should be developed in academia without historical works of scholars focusing essentially on European expansion and colonialism. Native and African Americans are an identifying aspect of the American fabric. Since pre-colonial times, neither of these groups has been missing from the national landscape. They came into being as part of the American experience, and their social development over the centuries is much of what makes America unique. This is why I chose to write about their history and experiences. Without many Americans realizing it, African Americans and Native Americans are crucial to our collective destinies and without either of them, we would not have a nation. My contribution, therefore, is very important in that it adds back the collective histories of Black and Native peoples. The absence of Black Indian women’s voices speaks loudly to racial identity politics. Black Indian women should have a voice, a platform to speak from—so that their significance, their existence as Cherokee women can be heard and kept alive. As Indian women, they are entitled to their piece of the pie. These rights included entitlement to land—at least 160 acres for each Freedman. The discussion about entitlement rights was one of the strongest themes that emerged from conversations, interviews and the focus group session I conducted. Since racial identity politics plays a premium role in the ways that Cherokees have neglected to

allow Freedmen descendants to receive social benefits, Black Indian women continue to challenge Cherokees with litigations, protests and other means of awareness to bring about equality and establish entitlement.

In summary, African American women who claim Native ancestry received most of their information about their Native ancestry from other family members—their grandmothers who remembered receiving payments awarded to Freedmen whose ancestors were on the rolls—their aunts who spoke the language and concocted herbal medicines. Others like myself were told about their Native heritage at a young age by mothers and then sought more information through genealogical methods and census reports when they were older. Many of the Black women that were interviewed often experienced internal racism because of their racial mixture. They were teased, taunted or intensely disliked because of their light complexion, thin Indian facial features and wavy hair. Their biological identities are part of a socio-cultural experience with political dimensions attached to them since many are fighting to keep their tribal citizenship or have it reinstated. Because of their mixture, some Black Indian women have experienced better opportunities in employment and are selected as preferred social mates or spouses.

Future Directions

I intend to continue to write about racial identity politics and common experiences among African Native Americans who self-identify as Black Indians. As part of the larger on-going effort of other activists, writers and scholars, I want to bring awareness to the public the plight of the descendants of Freedmen and African-descended Americans who claim Native ancestry. They are experiencing discrimination and exploitation while seeking to retain their citizenship which will allow them to obtain tribal social benefits that are

rightfully theirs. Some Native Americans and African Americans think of African Americans who claim Native ancestry as incidental or insignificant. But, the rhetorical claim that “we are part Cherokee” has as much to do with the emotional and psychological satisfaction that is provided to those Black Indian women as with being Black in America. Black Indian women endeavor to cultivate their racial identities as part Black and part Red simply because they have the information that they are Black and Red. This ancestral claim has been passed down to them from generations of family members. It is very important to know who we are. For people of color, it is very necessary to know our beginnings. It is a continual struggle against racialized domination and hegemonic supremacy. Black Indians must continue to fight against the discrimination and racism that prohibits many Freedmen from receiving their CDIB (certificate of degree of Indian Blood) card, which acknowledges tribal citizenship. For the Black Indian women who participated in this research project, it is not enough just to know that they are African American and that they have Black women’s experiences, but that they are also Indian. Black Indian women will continue to be on the forefront of the lines of legislative conflicts not only for themselves, but also for their children, who as descendents of Freedpersons can obtain the benefits that’s rightfully theirs. It is crucial to continue the fight against oppressors and oppression in all forms.

The ideals of freedom and equality which are so central to historical social rights, are also historically important to women who have been “systematically denied equality under the law and the freedom to control their lives, make choices, and act as agents in the world” (Hekman 1999, 31). As one woman stated in Circe Sturm’s essay (2002a), she “just wants to have the same rights” and some acknowledgment of “who she is.” She self-identifies as a Black Indian (Sturm 2002a). Black Indian women continue to hold on to their identity, which

expresses more than just the one-self (African self), but also answers an inner voice that explains who they really are – a way of being true to oneself by claiming Native identity. Although Black Indian women have very similar lived experiences as African American women, in that they have lived their lives as Black women, they choose to live as Black *Indian* women or at least acknowledge that part of their heritage as well. Many African Americans and Indians expect Black Indians to adopt the identity of one or the other while Whites respect neither and discriminate against both. This was proven when a famed golfer of African American and Asian descent tried to claim both Black and Asian as his heritage. For Black Indian women, it is a continual struggle along with their proud and rich history that will ultimately bring about judicial justice for Cherokee Freedpersons and their descendents. It is necessary for these disenfranchised Black Indian women to use whatever (re)sources are available to them in order to enhance and strengthen the empowering qualities that will enable them to make a difference in the world in which they live.

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Small Sample of Famous People With African and Native Ancestry

Alice Walker, Writer, Poet, Essayist, Activist
 Paul Robeson, Singer, Activist, Actor, Writer, Orator
 Langston Hughes, Poet and Writer
 Frederick Douglass, Slave, Historian, Writer, Activist
 Jesse Jackson, Activist, Politician
 Lena Horne, Jazz Songstress, Actress
 Tina Turner, Rock N Roll Songstress
 Pearl Bailey, Blues and Jazz Songstress, Actress
 L.L. Cool J, Rap Artist and Actor
 Salli Richardson, Actress
 Michael Jackson / Janet Jackson Music Artists
 Ashanti, Songstress
 Aliyah, Songstress
 Sisters, Phylicia Rashad and Debbie Allen, Actresses/Dancers
 Della Reese, Songstress/Actress
 James Earl Jones (Black Cherokee), Actor

Sources:

Black Indians.com; Dramer, Kim 1997, 89; Katz & Franklin 1993, 75-78; Mihesuah, Devon A. 1996, 100

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A -- Interview Schedule

Questions for focus group meeting held in Oklahoma June 2006.

How do you know that you are mixed with Native heritage? Where did you get your information or knowledge about their heritage from? (Census, private genealogy research, told by parents/grandparents?)

From which family member did you receive your Native American heritage?

Paternal Grandmother	Paternal Grandfather	GreatGrands
Maternal Grandmother	Maternal Grandfather	

From which family member did you receive your African heritage?

Paternal Grandmother	Paternal Grandfather	GreatGrands
Maternal Grandmother	Maternal Grandfather	

What socialization characteristics were prominent in your home?

What traditions do you draw on within your households, your culture, and your views on the world around you?

What cultural features are prominent—do you attend pow-wows?

Do you think there are any prejudices – colorism ideology—within the Black Indian community? African American community?

Do African Indian females feel that their racial mixture provides better opportunities?

Can we talk about some of the similarities of Black women and Black Indian women?

Why do you identify as Native American?

Is there any way that you show your Native American culture outwardly? How do you identify as Native American?

What race would you identify yourself as on various questioning forms or applications?

Please discuss from which tribe is your Native American heritage?

Please talk about which family member discusses which family heritage. Was it your mother, your father, your grandmother – who told you about your ancestry? And what did they tell you? Did they talk more about your Native ancestors or your African ancestors? What were the specific stories you heard about your Native ancestors?

What region or area did your ancestors live in?

What area did you grow up in?

What race were you considered by others as you grew up?

Did you experience any racial prejudices?

Please talk about what traditions or customs you identify as Native/African American? For instance—are there any similarities in foods, dress, and spiritual issues? Do you go to Pow-Wows?

Please discuss what important aspects you care to share about your racial make-up as a Native/African American.

Discuss the latest efforts toward gaining treaty rights or access to social programs.

What is the social status of African Indian women within the Black Community?

One of the shared ideologies of Women's studies and feminism is the well-being of all women. As Black Indian women, what specific areas will you gain from treaty rights?

Discuss family directions or values

Discuss whether or not the main point of reference for your culture is from African American culture – consider music, socialization.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

**Georgia State University
Women Studies Institute
Informed Consent**

Title:

Coloring: An Investigation of Racial Identity Politics Within the Black Indian Community.

Principal Investigators:

Dr. Denise Donnelly -- Faculty Advisor
Charlene Graham -- M.A. Student

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study that will ultimately result in my Master's Thesis. The purpose of the research is to investigate cultural similarities and dissimilarities between Black female Indians who have Native American identity. The research study will investigate (1) how African Indian women find out about their racial identity, (2) their family background, (3) their lived experiences, (4) the differences between African American identity and Black Indian identity within their own community or family surroundings, and (5) whether or not racial mixture provides more opportunities for African Indian women.

You are invited to participate because you are mixed race female with African and Native ancestry. A total of six to ten female participants will be recruited for this study. Participation in this research study about African American Indian women, will require two to three hours of your time in June 2006 at an evening time convenient for everyone. Refreshments will be served during this time.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a preliminary confidential questionnaire, which will ask for your contact information and other pertinent information used solely for the purpose of the research study. A separate question sheet will be provided as a guide for discussions. Those that are recruited for the study will meet as a focus group on or nearby the campus of the University of Oklahoma, Nielson Hall, 400 W. Brooks, Norman, OK, to discuss different cultural aspects of their lives regarding their Native or African American background. You are asked to participate fully in the discussion and you may discontinue participation at any time. At a later date you may be contacted to take part in a separate telephone interview to further the investigation.

III. Risks:

There is a small likelihood that women will be uncomfortable talking; some issues may cause minor discomfort.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may benefit you personally and help you in understanding your racial heritage more fully.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to not be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use a study number code, your initials or some other means of anonymity rather than your name on study records. Only the Chairperson of the Thesis Committee will have access to the information you provide. Your information and any video or audiotapes will be stored under lock and key at Georgia State University for a period of one year. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally, however, during the focus group sessions, information that you provide will not be guaranteed confidential.

Your participation in the focus group study will be videotaped. If you express a desire to have a copy of the video and you are not concerned about publicizing the contents, Georgia State University or Charlene Graham will not be held liable for contents exposed to the public once you receive a copy of the videotape or DVD. Your receipt of a copy of the videotape expunges guarantees of confidentiality.

Copies of the video will be made available to participants if each consents that the distribution of the video is agreed upon.

VII. Contact Persons:

Please call Georgia State University and speak with Dr. Denise Donnelly at 404-651-1852 if you have questions about this study. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-463-0674 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

Participant

Date

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX C

Confidentiality Agreement

Due to the sensitive nature of the video project, this agreement between Charlene Graham, residing at 4538 Persian Court, Snellville, GA 30039, and Dallas Bodin of Prime Visual Media Group, 205 South Lahoma Street, Norman, OK 73069, is necessary to keep the confidentiality of those involved.

1. All information disclosed during the video project focus group session presented by Charlene Graham and held on Sunday, June 4, 2006 at the Holiday Inn located at 1000 N. Interstate Drive, Norman, OK, shall remain the exclusive property of Charlene Graham and shall only be used for the research purpose of the focus session.
2. Confidential information shall constitute all information disclosed by those individuals in attendance at the focus group session. Any recordings before, on and after the date of June 4, 2006 and this agreement, regardless of the manner in which it is furnished includes, without limitation any:
 - a. performance, sales, financial, contractual, personnel, marketing information, ideas, technical data and concepts, and
 - b. any formulas, pattern, program, method, technique, process, design, business plan, business opportunity, customer or personnel list or financial statement

which results in any independent economic value or commercial advantage, actual or potential, for not being generally known to the public or to other persons who can obtain economic value from its disclosure and use, is subject to efforts that are reasonable under the circumstances to maintain confidentiality.

3. Except as specifically authorized, Prime Visual Media Group and Mr. Dallas Bodin or any of his assistances, subsidiaries or franchises shall not reproduce, use, distribute, disclose or otherwise disseminate the Confidential Information and shall not take any action causing, or fail to take any action necessary to prevent any Confidential Information disclosed to Mr. Bodin and his company, Prime Visual Media Group, before, during and after the video project.
4. It is the sole responsibility of Mr. Dallas Bodin and his company, Prime Visual Media Group to keep the confidentiality of this video project conducted by Ms. Charlene Graham and that access to confidential information is only available to Ms. Graham and her particular party(ies), since she is the owner of said video once the project is completed.

5. This agreement cannot be assigned or transferred to other parties even in the event that Mr. Dallas Bodin or his company changes its corporate name or merges with another corporation.
6. This agreement is effective as of Wednesday, May 31, 2006 and the project has been quoted a flat fee of \$175.00 by Mr. Dallas Bodin and in so doing is binding with half as deposit (\$87.50) as required and which was collected via telephone and credit card.

Mr. Dallas Bodin Date
Of Prime Visual Media Group

Ms. Charlene Graham Date