

# coming together is the beginning

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in pokanoket thought, coming together is the beginning. it's a powerful statement, and it's been the guiding principle as i penned this article attempting to nail down the complexities and calamities of my experience. it's most powerful because it implies a previous separation. and that you can't begin until you're whole.

i suppose you could say this is my humble attempt at becoming whole, as my auntie (a tribal elder) phrases it. both communities i represent have been embroiled in a constant struggle with the white supremacist struggle for visibility since the dawn of american history. so to insist on being whole, on coming together and on beginning, is inherently political. thus, the question i am charged with is: how do i create space for *me*?

i suppose the first step is to out myself publicly. this is big. for almost the last decade, i would have died before i told you i'm black pokanoket wampanoag—or, if we're being totally reductionist, black indian. never mind the fact that i was born and raised in providence, rhode island, one of the first colonial settlements in america where native american and black people have been in community since the seventeenth century; that i and my family are born of, and in constant contention with, this history.

so it's ironic for me to write about visibility because, as a new englander, i'm coming from the fringes of both indian country and black america, the very intentionally invisible meridian between the projects and the rez. white people have taken great pains to whitewash new england, so black

america and indian country alike often call into question the respective cultural legitimacies of black and native people here. in other words (as i've heard and have been told), there aren't "real" black folks or "real" indians where i come from. perhaps that is where the irony really lies because, in the linear narrative of american history we tell ourselves, it was in new england that the old and new worlds first collided. here they exploded in a racially ambiguous, colored/brown/"what are you, anyway?" supernova: the afterlife of colonization, genocide, and chattel slavery in the all-consuming contexts of white supremacy and anti-blackness.

inhabiting this cultural and literal (physical) space is as odd, surprising, and disconcerting as it sounds. miraculously, though, i grew up with some exposure to my indigenous heritage thanks to my grandparents. but when they died within a year of each other, the task of explaining myself and my ontology became overwhelming. this was the end of 2007. i was fifteen and a sophomore at a snobby private school in providence. in the days and weeks after thanksgiving and into the new year, i pressed the flowers from my grandparents' funerals in my bible; turned sixteen a week before the first inauguration of barack obama, which i watched starry-eyed and hopeful with the rest of black america; and i decided once and for all i could no longer be pokanoket wampanoag.

it's a hell of a thing to be fifteen and struggling to be acknowledged. it seemed that no matter who i encountered, i was often mistaken for biracial (as in, black and white), cape verdean,

dominican, or puerto rican. i was never “black enough” in terms of my phenotype and my mannerisms—and, of course, the dominant narrative is that native americans don’t exist anymore. at school, my white teachers and peers policed my identity on a daily basis. while my classmates worried about prom dates and asking their crush out to pizza after school, i confronted and struggled with the american obsession with racial pigeonholing. every day, i was charged with explaining the whole of my complex history—of justifying my very being.

thus, i learned that the thing about the black indian thing is that it’s contentious at best. my heritage and my experience as a brown-skinned new england girl implicates everyone—and i do mean *everyone*—in this country. regardless of one’s positionality, the black indian identity inevitably opens up questions of race vis-à-vis blackness and native-ness (e.g., what does it mean to be black? what does it mean to be native?). it is a pandora’s box of our misconceptions about, and obsessions with, race, the romanticizing of native americans, blood quantum, the one-drop rule. ultimately, its real controversy lies in that it requires us to confront histories of oppression that the white establishment has deemed inconvenient.

america has complicated the act of existing for me which, where i came from, went unquestioned and undiscussed. in my family, there were never any useless fractions or percentages assigned to either ethnicity, nor any mythical, full-blooded cherokee princesses floating around my family tree. the very real people who do populate my family tree are *powwas* and preachers, black panthers and tribal elders, activists in both communities; schoolteachers, nurses, veterans, catholics, red sox fans—my parents, grandparents,

aunts, uncles, and cousins. some of my family “look” black, live their lives exclusively as black people, and are very involved in the black community; others “look” native, live their lives exclusively as native people, and are very involved in the tribe, native community of new england, and indian country writ large. we didn’t necessarily talk about our duality all the time, but we surely lived it. so i tried to assert both sides of my heritage authentically. eventually, though, i just accepted that anti-blackness (in the form of desiring to be anything but black) is the lens through which most people would perceive my pokanoket heritage. i also didn’t like how in that paradigm, being native does not exist as a viable and relevant cultural identity, but it functions only as an object, and one whose sole function is to abet anti-blackness.

for about the last eight years, i’ve been constructing an exclusively black american identity. in college, i soaked up every bit of black history, literature and culture i came across. the more i learned about black experiences in this country and the world, the more i critiqued and deconstructed the idea of blackness as a monolith. consequently, the once-potent accusation of not being “black enough” lost its sting. i felt more than sufficiently black, and proud of it. as i started to become more radical in my thinking, however, i felt convicted that i had all but abandoned my wampanoag heritage. how could i be a conscious person of color if i was consciously editing my history to exclude another disempowered group? the short answer: not very.

that’s how i got here, negotiating the decidedly rebellious act of insisting on a black and pokanoket duality. in the last eight years, the flowers from my grandparents’ funerals have all but disintegrated in the thin pages of paul’s epistles; the myth of post-racial america has been

stained by the blood of trayvon martin, sara lee circle bear, freddie gray, paul castaway, sandra bland, laquan mcdonald, and countless other black and native victims of systemic, racialized american violence. barack obama is leaving the white house soon, and the whole of (non-white) america watches anxiously to see which of the odd assortment of candidates will be his predecessor. most importantly, in the last eight years, i graduated high school and went to college, where i learned definitively that while i don't have many of the answers i want, i'd better start asking the right questions. and i realized it is impossible for me to not be pokanoket.

existing in and between two oppressed groups is not easy. it challenges me to scrutinize and confront myself but i don't always do this well. sometimes i fall into the colonality of it all: on any given day i might wonder if my hair is too curly, if my skin is too light, if i look black enough, wampanoag enough. i push back ideologically against the insidious "enough" in both communities, but there are times i yet fall victim to it interpersonally, offering explanations for my being to black and native people, attempting to justify my inbetweenness in a way that isn't steeped in colonial bs. to that end, i find that i am extremely self-aware in native american spaces. as someone who doesn't fit the narrow american idea of what native people look like, my phenotype gives me the option to pass. i don't know if it's a privilege or an advantage, but it is a *thing*, and one of which i am cognizant at any given time.

another issue i deal with, particularly with family members who identify exclusively as black, is the idea that ultimately, how we identify ourselves doesn't matter because the white establishment sees and treats us as black anyways.

this is true, but it's also rooted in some extremely colonial and racist thinking. the connotation is that black people are black only because white people told us so; that by othering us, *white people* define blackness and give us our identity. i can't speak for anyone else, but my blackness is not a default identity i'm reluctant to accept. i'm black because of my history and heritage, not because white america told me that's what i have to be.

my second issue is that this theory is premised on the old "white is right" racial hierarchy that places black people at the bottom. the corollary is that natives are higher up on the racial food chain and, consequently, better off than black folks in america. this isn't true no matter which way you slice it. native communities are plagued by the same systems of oppression that breed all sorts of problems (poverty, mental illness, addiction). native americans are also the racial group in america most likely to be killed by law enforcement—a reality with which blacks are all too familiar, given the slave patrol history of the modern police force and the string of highly publicized and extremely brutal deaths of black men, women, and children within the last few years. my point is that the oppression is rooted in the same historical power structures that would prefer we don't recognize the connections.

but the biggest point of contention is how i find space as a modern new england pokanoket black girl. where i come from, we've been doing the black indian thing for a while, but perhaps it's time we rethink some approaches. perhaps my upbringing, connection to my tribe, and experience navigating this duality my whole life make me a little less inclined to follow the paradigm. as i reclaim this identity i once turned away from, i find

i'm not interested in validating my existence to the white power structure's liking. our obsession over blood quantum (an imposed, euro-american construct) is a convenient distraction from all that's killing us— police, poverty, drugs, alcohol, among other vestiges of colonialism and chattel slavery.

so in finding my space, i want to challenge my communities to imagine ourselves outside of the paradigms imposed on us. i want us to interrogate blood quantum on a structural level, examining our obsession with skin color and hair texture as it relates to the proverbial “enough.” i want us new englanders to insist on our history, how we grew up, and how we are related in building and maintaining community. to that end, i want us to re-evaluate who *we* are, as new england indians, and not define ourselves in reaction to our brothers and sisters from the plains and southwest. i want phenotypically white european people who often frequent native american spaces to critique themselves; to understand what we mean when we say they're playing indian; to think about the privilege with which they move in america and what that means for *them* to bring *that* into our spaces.

it suffices to say i have a wish list (so to speak), but really, what do i know? i am simply your run-of-the-mill rhode island problem minority espousing some unpopular, stigmatized

histories; a black girl in indian country and a pokanoket girl in black america who wants more from this rebellious act of being. i can neither un-complicate nor abridge the histories and experiences of my people. i'm just trying to come together, get my sh\*t together, and stop apologizing for myself. in the context of colonization, genocide and slavery, i'm learning to embrace that I, in my pokanoket/black body, defy the narrative of the disappearing native. i celebrate my blackness and contest the colonality of power intrinsic to the one-drop rule, insisting on the duality that speaks not only to my whole history, but to the centuries-old solidarity between two of the most disempowered groups in this country.

in a lot of ways, i suppose this is less of a new approach to a hotly contested racial/cultural american identity and more of a confession from a black pokanoket historian with lots of hope and love for her people everywhere they exist despite all odds. we're coming together, and we are rising. from the reservations of south dakota, arizona, montana, new mexico, to the ghettos of chicago, los angeles, new orleans, new york, providence, we are standing up, the prophesied seventh generation: denied necessarily american millennials stepping into big, impossible dreams.

i don't have all the answers. just a lot of faith.