

“We’re Still Here”

Overview

“We’re Still Here” focuses on two communities often overlooked in discussions about race: Native Americans and Native Hawaiians. Because of their history, both groups have signed treaties with the US government that guarantee their rights to their land and culture even though members of these groups are US citizens. On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, three generations of Lakotas consider the ways their past affects the present and shapes their future. On the islands of Hawaii, Native Hawaiians reflect on a series of lawsuits that have challenged federal programs designed to redress past injustices. The stories told in both places raise important questions about the right of individuals and groups to define their own identity and preserve their culture. Like the other films in the series, it also challenges the way we think about the legacies of race and racism.



The Bordaues live on the Pine Ridge Reservation. They and their children share views on race, membership, and identity.
Credit: Bordaue family

Curriculum Connections

“We’re Still Here” examines how the cultures of two indigenous peoples have been affected by “race.” The film may be used in US history, anthropology, sociology, and ethnic studies courses to elicit discussion of culture, assimilation, legacy, and memory. It also may be used in literature courses to explore themes related to culture, assimilation, memory, and legacy. If the film cannot be shown in a single class period, it may be divided into three parts to allow time for discussion and reflection at the beginning and the end of each class period.

Central Question: How do race and racism complicate the efforts of indigenous peoples to preserve their sovereignty and maintain their cultural identity?



Mary Bordeaux and son
Credit: Bordeaux family

In “Race Is/Race Ain’t,” author Jane Lazarre speaks of the importance of stories: “By telling one’s own story honestly and deeply and with all of the contradictions included, you begin to tell the story of a culture, and even many cultures within a nation.” How do the stories told by three generations in a Lakota family explain the title of the documentary? What do they reveal about the relationship between past and present, history and culture?

Eva Witt declares, “We are who are and we should be who we are.” In an essay written for the American Indian Policy Center, Nora Livesay places Witt’s Lakota identity in a larger perspective:

Ask who is Indian, and you will get divergent responses depending on who’s answering. The US Census Bureau, state governments, various federal government programs and agencies, and tribal governments all have different definitions. The criteria vary from a specific amount of blood quantum [degree of blood] and descendency to residency and self-identification.

But, the answers don’t really tell you who is Indian. They tell you who can receive health care from the Indian Health Service (IHS), ...who qualifies for educational assistance or who can vote in tribal elections. These artificial definitions don’t come close to describing how it feels to sit with one’s own people sharing a joke or a ceremony. They don’t describe the cultural and historical bonds that guide one’s life. Identity reaches into the intangible parts of ourselves. The rest are definitions with an agenda.¹⁴

What do the stories of Eva Witt, her grandson Nate Bordeaux, and other members of their family suggest about the way “identity reaches into the intangible parts of ourselves”? What do those stories suggest about the dangers of the definitions others impose on us? Why does Livesay call them “definitions with an agenda”? What is that agenda?



Alani Apio, a poet and playwright, says of himself and other Native Hawaiians:

No one lynches us. No citizenry chain us up and drag us from the backs of pickup trucks. Just a thousand little cuts to our self-esteem, self identity. Rather than obliterating the people, simply obliterate the glue that binds them: culture.

What are the “thousand little cuts” to which Apio refers? How are similar cuts reflected in the stories the Bordeaux family tells? What does Apio mean when he describes culture as the “glue” that binds people? In what sense does he view culture as “glue”?



Larry Swalley is a Lakota. His wife is of Spanish, Apache, and Navajo descent. He fears that their daughter will not be considered a Lakota because her Lakota “blood quantum” “falls below a certain fraction.” “Blood quantum” is the percentage of “Indian blood” an individual has. In many tribes, including the Lakota, it determines who is considered a member of the tribe and who is not. Nora Livesay explains how the system evolved:

[In the 1800s] federal officials began deciding on a person-by-person basis who qualified as a member of the tribe and therefore, qualified for treaty benefits. Eventually the federal government settled on the idea of blood quantum, similar to what was used to determine which African Americans could be enslaved.

In 1887, under the General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act), Congress adopted the blood quantum standard of one-half or more Indian blood. This meant that if an Indian could document that he (women were excluded) was one-half or more Indian blood, then he could receive 160 acres of tribal land. All other Indians were excluded regardless of their standing within the tribe. After all the “blooded” Indians were parceled out land, the rest of tribal lands were declared “surplus” and opened up for non-Indian settlement.

Limiting the allotted land to 160 acres per qualified person ensured that there weren't enough Indians meeting the genetic requirements to retain the original land base of the tribe; land that was rightfully theirs by aboriginal occupancy and recognized as such by treaties with the US Government. In this way, the aggregate Indian land base was “legally” reduced from 138 million acres to 48 million acres in less than 50 years. ...From then on, the federal government began imposing various blood quantum eligibility requirements on Indians for commodity rations, education, annuity payments and health services.¹⁵

Today the federal government no longer requires that tribes use “blood quantum” to determine their membership, but some programs still require a specific percentage of “Indian blood.” Therefore a number of tribes, including the Lakota, still require that members have as little as one-sixteenth or as much as one-half “Indian blood.” Such requirements are controversial. Livesay explains:

Tribal enrollment raises thorny issues in Indian communities, not the least of which is identity. Should federally-imposed blood quantum requirements be thrown out? If they are, how does one ensure that only “real” Indians are enrolled? If they aren't thrown out, how can Indians avoid fulfilling the federal government's original objective of defining themselves out of existence?

What about future generations of Indians? How can tribes ensure that Indian children being adopted outside of the Indian community are not lost? How can tribes address the issues of fractional heritage and the continuing trend toward intermarriage with non-Indians?¹⁶

How do the Lakota seem to answer the questions Livesay raises? Why do those answers trouble Larry Swalley and others on the Pine Ridge Reservation?

Journalist Clarence Page once wrote, “It is not biology that determines race. It is bureaucrats.” How does the history of blood quantum support that view? How does it shape and misshape life on the Pine Ridge Reservation? How is it reflected in the ways other Americans view Indians?



Blood quantum relies on race to determine membership. According to Haunani-Kay Trask, “Hawaiian people identify each other according to their genealogy. Genealogy simply means a line of descent. Most Hawaiians know their genealogy, we know who are parents were, who their grandparents were, who their great-great grandparents were and that's how we determined who is Hawaiian. The federal government does not accept genealogy. They only accept their own classification by blood quantum.” Hawaiians who meet federal standards have had access to federal programs that seek to address problems that resulted from the American takeover of the islands. Now some Americans in Hawaii are challenging those classifications as “reverse discrimination, even “racist.” Trask agrees, “Of course they are, we agreed with them. We didn't create the original classification, but now those classifications enable some of our people to have access to some of our resources.” What is the dilemma he describes? How is it similar to the one the Lakota face? What differences seem most striking?

Native Americans and Native Hawaiians are U.S. citizens. They pay federal taxes and obey federal laws. They serve in the US armed forces—in fact, one out of every four Native Americans is a veteran. Yet, according to treaties between various Native American tribes and the US government, the Lakota have sovereignty. What does the word mean? How do the Lakota seem to define the word? How do Native Hawaiians define it? How is the sovereignty of a nation linked to power? To land? To culture? How does sovereignty shape the relationship of both groups to their neighbors and to the nation as a whole? How does the idea of sovereign peoples within the United States complicate what it means to be an American?



Most Americans view land as something that can be bought and sold. A white American interviewed in the documentary describes his own attachment to the Black Hills. He says, “I’ve grown up here, this is part of my land. Indians feel exactly the same way, and why shouldn’t they?” How would you answer his question? How do the Lakotas interviewed in the film view their attachment to the land? How is their connection to the land similar to his? What differences seem most striking? What might the white American learn if he were to discuss the Black Hills with Larry Swalley or Larry’s cousin, Nate Bordeaux?

“To be considered a nation,” Aaron says, “you’ve got to have a language. You’ve got to have spirituality, a way to pray. You’ve got to have resources. To us, it is land. And you’ve got to have ...a [younger] generation.” According to Aaron, how did the federal government try to destroy all four of those things even though it officially viewed the Lakota and other tribes as nations? Today the Lakota are no longer sent to boarding schools. They educate their children in their own schools. What do the interviews with young Lakota students suggest about what learn in those schools? What do they suggest about why the right to teach their children has been so important to the Lakota and other Native Americans? How do Native Hawaiians view education? How does the importance both groups place on education relate to the title of the documentary—“We’re Still Here”?

¹⁴ “Understanding the History of Tribal Enrollment” by Nora Livesay. Copyright 2002, American Indian Policy Center. All Rights Reserved. Airpi@cpinternet.com

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.