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Stereotypes And Judgments About American Indian Peoples: Results From An Experimental Study

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Stereotypes and Judgments About American Indian Peoples:

Results From an Experimental Study

Background and Synopsis

Tribes face considerable barriers to exercising their inherent sovereignty. Not only do tribes encounter intensive legal scrutiny from federal and state governments, but they also face a powerful obstacle in the form of stereotypes that non-Natives hold about what constitutes an “authentic” Native person (Mihesuah, 1996).¹ These stereotypes take many forms but often involve a fixed image of Natives with exceptionally narrow parameters (Deloria, 2004; Wilson, 1992; Wolfe, 2006). For example, many non-Natives expect Natives to embody in resemblance and behavior the images presented in old oil paintings from the 19th century or western films from the 1950s. When Native peoples fall outside of these narrowly constructed images, they commonly endure comments such as, “You don’t look like an Indian” or “Do your people still live in teepees?”

Similar stereotypes also extend to tribes and tribal activities and are often based on assumptions surrounding the accumulation of economic wealth, tribes’ relationship with the natural world, as well as attitudes towards technology adoption. For example, “authentic” tribes, who are commonly assumed to be in tune with the natural world, are expected to refrain from utilizing minerals on their lands and to avoid the use of information technology as this can be seen by outsiders as a corrosion of “authentic” Native identity. A particularly illustrative, and absurd,

¹ By “authentic” or “real” we do not intend to endorse or proscribe any set image or stereotype. As Garrouette (2003) has noted, the act of defining what might be a “real Indian” is unclear and includes biological, political and sociological definitions. Rather, we are interested in exploring participants’ pre-existing beliefs through this experimental study.

example is that of the Makah Nation in Washington State, who was criticized as lacking Native authenticity due to having tennis courts on their reservation, and therefore argued as ineligible to exercise their treaty rights (Martello, 2004).

These and other cases are reflected in growing interest in psychological research to understand how racial and ethnic stereotypes evolve and disadvantage certain groups. Understanding stereotypes is important but also difficult to research as people are not always forthcoming about their biases (Holroyd et al., 2017). To overcome these challenges, scholars increasingly use experiments involving the manipulation of subtle racial cues. One prominent example is a study involving the manipulation of information on job applicants' resumes in order to understand human resource managers' discrimination practices in hiring decisions. Researchers sent out equally qualified resumes to a job posting with one set of resumes having typically "white" first names, such as such as "Brandon," and another batch displaying the name "Jamal," typically a black American name. Results revealed a significant amount of discrimination in hiring decisions by showing that resumes with "white" names were significantly more likely to progress to the next hiring stage (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). As such studies show, pervasive discrimination exists, but creative approaches to research are required in exposing it.

We borrow from previous experimental approaches in psychology, political science and sociology to explore racial bias (Butler & Broockman, 2011; Mendelberg, 2001). Though significant efforts have been made to understand the complexity of bias against other ethnic and racial groups, such as Black Americans (Gilens, 2008) or Hispanic Americans (Fox, 2004), research using experimental methods is surprisingly sparse on Native Americans despite deception-based methods being central to certain tribes' knowledge production (Orr & Orr, 2022). One of the few studies that use experimental methods has shown that people's opinions are altered

by reading about tribal sovereignty and treaties compared to groups who have not recently been exposed to the concepts (Conner et al., 2017). Following this work is Orr et al. (2019) that identifies information as shifting opinion toward tribes. These works derive from earlier work in the Canadian context by Wells and Berry (1992) that explored how information influenced attitudes about Aboriginal self-government. Furthermore, Harell et al. (2014) found that racial cues, including those of Indigenous populations, influenced Canadian attitudes towards welfare distribution.

In this study we drew on the lens of Settler Colonial Theory to support our claims that colonization seeks the elimination of Native lifeways through biological and organizational means, including genocide and replacing traditional forms of governance with those resembling the settler state. As Deloria (1998) concludes in *Playing Indians*, “in order to control the landscape [settler populations] had to destroy the original inhabitants” (5). This notion of “elimination” is often associated with the work of Wolfe (2006) but has generated a proliferation of studies on how settlers create boundaries around Native status to invalidate the existence of Native peoples. For example, Schmidt (2011) describes how blood quantum, a convention not commonly endorsed by Natives, has been used to define Native peoples and to divide or remove land during 19th century allotments (Biolsi, 1995).

Our findings in an experimental study show that individuals penalize Native peoples when Natives and tribes depart from narrow and stereotypical expectations. Published in [citation and journal redacted for anonymity in review], our study shows that one of the ways in which tribes are penalized is through a diminution of their “authenticity,” as perceived by those outside the tribe. A second form of penalization experienced by tribes is a decrease in support for their autonomy and provision of resources. This shows a link between assessments of authenticity and

the willingness to support tribes. More positive findings from the study suggest that certain images of Natives, such as tribes who are actively engaged in their own governance, increase support for tribes even among those who hold more hostile racial views. This study contains important findings for tribes, as it provides evidence that stereotypes lead to discrimination and that the antiquated and narrowly defined depiction of tribes has real-world impacts. It goes beyond providing information on the presence of stereotypes by also offering a method that verifies the existence of these biases *and their consequences* for Native peoples in a way that is difficult for western-based science to discount.

Method

For this study we asked approximately 1450 people to read a short fictitious story (about 500 words) about an American Indian tribe. To recruit participants, we utilized Amazon MTurk, a double-sided, online platform that has been used for participant recruitment in multiple studies on political and social attitudes (Kennedy et al., 2020). We provided participants with a story resembling a short newspaper article, which is a common convention in experimental methods (Martin et al., 2020).

There were 11 different versions of the story, which revolved around a federally recognized tribe that was exercising its autonomy. Approximately 120 participants were allocated to each version with each participant assigned to read only one version. Variations of the story were for the most part identical with the exception of a sentence that in each version described the tribe differently according to their racial phenotype, socio-economic circumstance, location, or other characteristics. This sentence varied according to our anticipations of how tribal appearance, economic status, and behavior would either confirm or violate readers' expectations regarding tribal "authenticity." For instance, in one version, tribal members were described as being

wealthier than the nearby non-Native population, which we believed violated expectations of Natives living in poor communities. A further manipulation was based on language, with one version of the story describing tribal members as speaking their indigenous language and a contrasting version portraying them as speaking English (see Table 1 for list of versions used).

Version	Description	N
	Control (no information given about tribe)	118
Racial		
Red	Members look phenotypically “red”	120
White	Members display European ancestry	118
Black	Members display Black ancestry	119
Economic		
Poor	Members poorer than nearby communities	121
Affluent	Members wealthier than nearby communities	120
Activity / Status		
Dysfunctional	Crime and disorder are present on reservation	119
Traditional spiritual	Practices Native religion & uses Native language	121
High funding	Tribe is funded by federal government	122
Modern	Members use appliances and speak English	122
Historical loss	Tribe described as having experienced genocide	123
Enterprising	Tribe is engaged in self-government & economic	119
	Total	1,442

Table 1

Description of tribes in stories

After reading only one version of the story, each participant was asked to indicate their level of agreement to statements that measured their attitudes about the described tribe. These questions used a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). These statements were: “The tribe should be granted greater control”; “The tribe’s members seem like authentic Native Americans”; “This tribe is a good role model”; and “The tribe should receive greater resources.” By grouping participants by the version of the story they had been assigned and controlling for other factors such as racial attitudes, education or gender, this approach allowed us to understand

how the slight manipulation of information in each version could result in different opinions about the tribe.

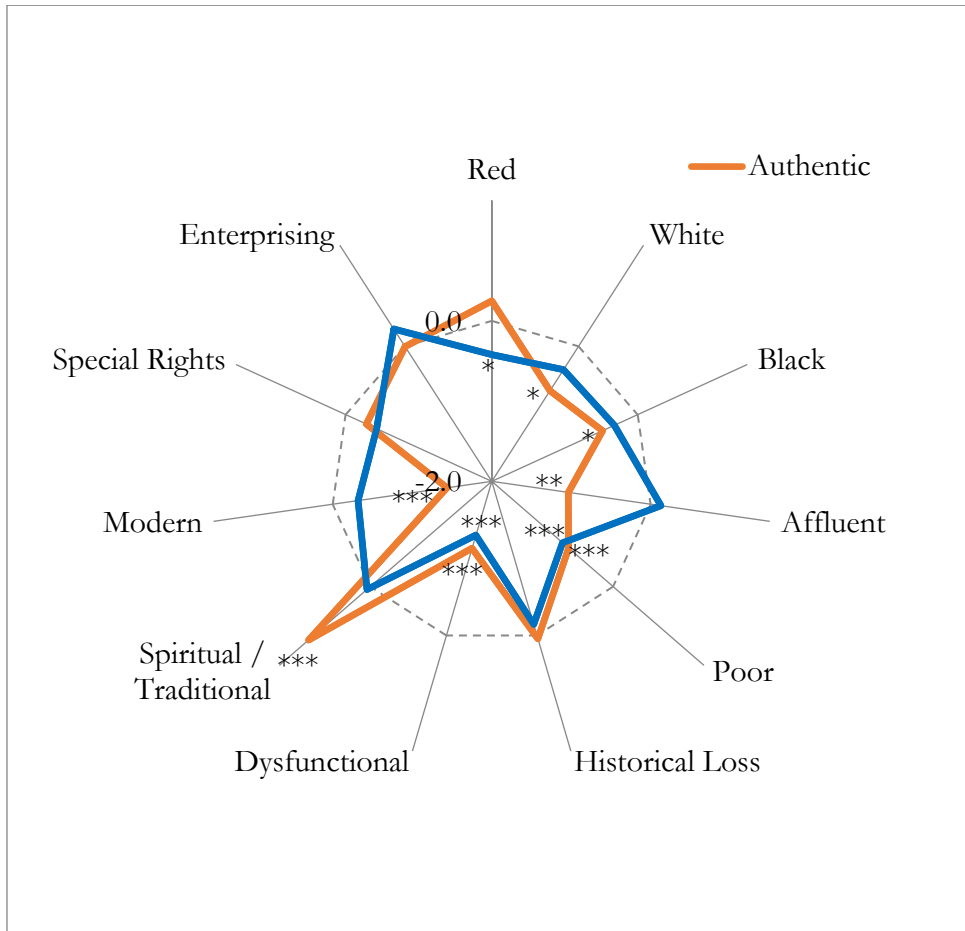


Figure 1. A.

*Levels of Agreement to Statements “Tribe Seems Authentic” and “Tribe Would Manage Control” Along 7-Point Scale Against Control (0.0) Is Represented by “----” (Significance = $\hat{p} \leq 0.10$ * $p \leq 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ *** $p \leq 0.001$)*

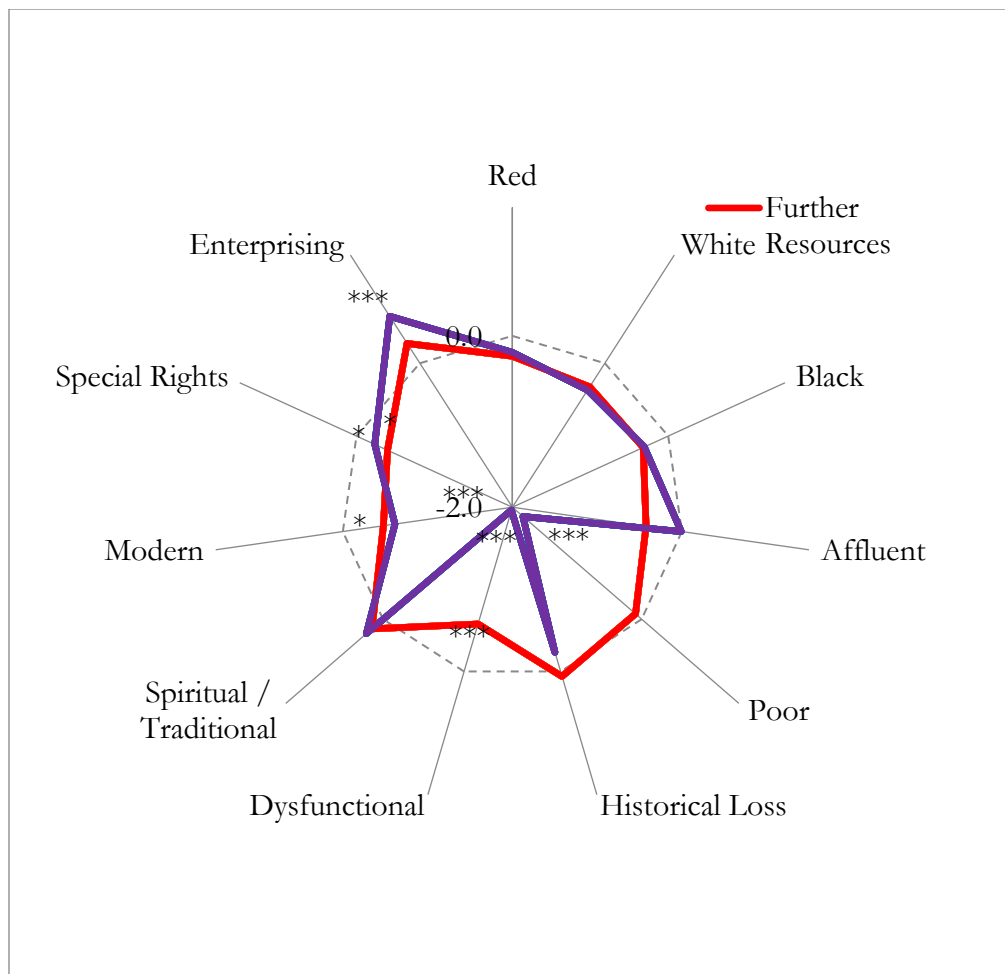


Figure 1. B.

*Levels of Agreement to Statements “Tribe Seems Authentic” and “Tribe Would Manage Control” Along 7-Point Scale Against Control (0.0) Is Represented By “----”. (Significance = $\wedge p \leq 0.10$ * $p \leq 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ *** $p \leq 0.001$)*

Results

Our findings showed that most of the story’s variations resulted in changed attitudes about the tribe compared to the control group that received no information about the tribe (see Figure 1.A). In the version describing tribal groups’ physical appearance, participants considered the tribe as less authentic when tribal members were described as having European or African ancestors than when they were portrayed as phenotypically red (see Figure 1.A). Participants also

were more likely to describe the tribe as less authentic if tribal members spoke English or used modern appliances.

However, not all versions reduced support for all questions. Participants who read about a tribe described as affluent, rated the tribe as less authentic yet more capable of self-governance (see Figure 1.B). Certain depictions also differed along complexity of attitudes. For instance, poverty can impact “good role model,” “manages control,” and “authenticity,” but not “further resources.” Whereas a depiction that centers on historical land loss has little effect on any of the four beliefs we measured. A positive finding was that support increased for the tribe described as being actively engaged in its own projects and governance. This is an important finding, as it emphasizes the significance of enterprising activities in creating allies in tribal governance.

Discussion and Implication for Tribes

There are undoubtedly numerous driving factors behind participants’ responses. This highlights one of the limitations of the method that we used. While experiments such as this are suitable for determining the existence of underlying bias or stereotypes, they do not allow for the generation of a thick or rich description explaining why participants are making specific assessments.

One theory that can help us to understand why Native status is so narrowly defined by settler societies is an argument that describes the presence of a deep desire for Native peoples to disappear and vanish, from the perspective of settler societies such as the United States. Support for this argument is seen in the continued attempts of settler societies to extinguish Native populations. Settler societies have not only tried to exterminate Native peoples biologically but continue in their attempts to make Native status so difficult to achieve that it causes them to vanish politically and socially. A salient example can be seen in the historical differences in defining

Native status versus that of Black Americans. While black status was broadly framed as an inclusive identity (e.g. the “one drop rule”), which enabled the exploitation of their labor, Native status was exclusively drawn and made difficult to achieve as well as easy to discount. This exclusive classification for Native status can be understood as a way in which to deny the obligations of settler states in regards to Natives and to justify the expropriation of Native lands.

Expanding upon attitudes about Native tribes through the use of a controlled experiment is of critical importance for native peoples, as an experimental study reveals conclusions that are difficult to refute. We designed the study to provide greater certainty to the existence of and processes behind the stereotypes that produce considerable impact on Native peoples. Through providing unambiguous evidence regarding outside assessments of Native peoples, this research suggests that tribes should continue to be concerned about how they are depicted. Our hope is that tribes might be armed with knowledge about the stereotypes, biases, and perceptions that affect them.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Components of Support for American Indians Post Experimental Categories.

	Prompt	Response
Item 1	“This tribe seems authentic”	7-point level of agreement: Strongly Disagree to Strongly agree
Item 2	“This tribe would manage greater control”	7-point level of agreement: Strongly Disagree to Strongly agree
Item 3	“This tribe is a good role model”	7-point level of agreement: Strongly Disagree to Strongly agree
Item 4	“This tribe should receive greater resources”	7-point level of agreement: Strongly Disagree to Strongly agree
	Mean Positive Support for Tribe	Mean of Items 1-4

Appendix B.

Key: Q= Question; A: Answers (possible); S= Statement; T= Treatment

Background Characteristics

Q: What is your gender?

A: 1) female; 2) male

Q. How old are you?

A: (age in years) Categorized responses into two groups: ‘40 and over’ and ‘under 40’.

Q: What race or ethnicity do you consider yourself? (select all that apply)

A: Black / African American

Asian or Asian American

Native American / American Indian

Hispanic / Latino

White / Caucasian

Other _____

Q: What is the highest level of formal education you completed?

A: Primary or grammar school

Some high school

High school graduate

Some college

College graduate

Masters

Doctorate

Other

Refuse

Political Affiliation:

Q: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

A: Democratic

Republican

Independent / Decline to state

Refuse

Political Orientation:

Q: Generally speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal or very liberal? (Annenberg)

A: Very conservative,

Conservative

Moderate

Liberal

Very liberal

General Prejudice:

S: Consider this statement: 'Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.'

A: Do you

Agree Strongly

Agree Somewhat

Neither Agree Nor Disagree

Disagree Somewhat

Disagree Strongly

Role of government:

Q Which of the two statements comes closer to your view?

A: The less government, the better.

There are more things that government should be doing

Contact with Natives:

Q: Do you regularly (more than once a week) have contact with Native Americans/American Indians?

A: Yes

No

Appendix C.

Prompt for Fictions Story

In the next section you will be asked to read a short excerpt from a story about a Native American tribe that ran in a regional newspaper. Please pay attention to the article, as you will later be asked questions about the content.

Early last year, a Native American tribe in Oklahoma contacted local and federal governments in an effort to gather more control of their own affairs. (Since their petition is still under-review, I have decided to not identify the tribe.) Native tribes can ask for further control and to gain input into how decisions are made on their “reservations” – a term used to describe the places where land has been set aside for Native American communities. This greater control might mean tribes appointing representatives to local boards or providing input to state government for changes in policy. In an effort to determine whether greater self-government is a good idea for this tribe, a group of government officials were gathered to gain more information about the community and to then make a recommendation about giving the tribe more control over its affairs. I accompanied the officials to the Oklahoma reservation.

[Treatments inserted here]

Manipulation / Treatment Phase

Control treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation.

Affluent Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “Well, they do really well for themselves. They have larger homes compared to their non-native neighbors.” This

seemed true; the homes I saw had well kept lawns, some with flower gardens. There were homes that had three car garages, and some of those garages had imported luxury vehicles.

Poor Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “Well, they’re pretty poor. There’s a lot of unemployment and joblessness compared to their non-native neighbors.” This seemed true; the homes I saw seemed small and rundown compared to nearby communities. The reservation homes looked in need of repair with some having boarded up windows and all having paint chipped away. The cars were parked in gravel and dirt driveways. These cars were older and rusted and some clearly wouldn’t run.

Traditional Language Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “Well, they’re really traditional. They practice their traditional ceremonies that date back centuries and have continued unchanged for generations. They sing Indian prayers, go to sweat lodges, and still perform traditional dances in costume.” This seemed true. I noticed that when members of the community were talking to each other, their traditional language was still used.

Modern Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “They aren’t really any different than surrounding non-native communities. They enjoy the same sports and activities that nearby communities do. They don’t practice any traditional Indian religious ceremonies—that’s in the past. They use blenders and ovens...just like you people.” This seemed true. I noticed

that when members of the community were talking to each other, English was used, rather than a traditional language.

Looking 'Red' Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation and into the communal meeting house, a place where the community gathers and functions take place. Displayed upon one wall were photographs of important members in the community. Aaron explained who some of these individuals in the photos were. He pointed to a photo of a group of tribal members. Those in the photos looked tan and a lot like the Native Americans in books and TV. As he pointed out various individuals in the photograph, he explained that these are important people because each one represents the major families that are still active in the community.

Looking 'White' Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation and into the communal meeting house, a place where the community gathers and functions take place. Displayed upon one wall were photographs of important members in the community. Aaron explained who some of these individuals in the photos were. He pointed to a photo of a group of tribal members. Those in the photos looked European or white and not like the Native Americans in books and TV. As he pointed out various individuals in the photograph, he explained that these are important people because each one represents the major families that are still active in the community.

Looking Black Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation and into the communal meeting house, a place where the community gathers and

functions take place. Displayed upon one wall were photographs of important members in the community. Aaron explained who some of these individuals in the photos were. He pointed to a photo of a group of tribal members. Those in the photos looked African or black and not like the Native Americans in books and TV. As he pointed out various individuals in the photograph, he explained that these are important people because each one represents the major families that are still active in the community.

Dysfunctional Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “There are some major problems with violence in the community. They have twice the assault rate of nearby communities. A lot of the adults have spent time in prison. It can be a dangerous place. You don’t know when there can be violence or where.” I noticed a group of cop cars parked in front of one of the houses on the reservation. “Despite the police being there,” Aaron stated, pointing at the house, “probably nothing will happen to him.”

Urban Treatment: We drove into the city to meet with the members of the community and arrived at the neighborhood where a lot of the tribal members live in apartment blocks. We were greeted by our host, Aaron, a county employee who has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this American Indian community?” He told me, “They blend into the neighborhood really well. You know, only a few of the older people remember growing up on reservations, and many of the others have never been to their ancestral lands.” In the absence of a community center, the tribal members meet to discuss matters in the nearby park or in various members’ apartments.

Geographically Primordial Treatment: We drove a long way out into a rural area to meet with the members of the community. We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this American Indian community?” Aaron told me, “They’ve been here forever...even before Columbus. They’ve had deep connections to this land for many centuries.” As he showed us parts of the reservation we saw an old burial ground. Aaron explained that the tribe’s ancestors were buried on this land. The importance of their connection with the land has remained unchanged, and there is an ongoing commitment to keeping this connection.

Enterprising Tribe Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “These Indians are engaged in a lot of community projects and have a really active government. They’re trying new things all the time. They’re really enterprising that way.” As we drove through the reservation, Aaron pointed out various projects, including a factory that the tribe started in order to increase employment, as well as a small hospital that takes care of sick community members. There was a center that the tribe built recently which is dedicated to elders. We also drove past a tribal court building and police station that the tribe operates.

Special Rights Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, “Can you tell us about this Native community?” Aaron told me, “Well, 150 years ago, they signed a treaty with the government. This gives them special rights that other

people don't have and that is guaranteed within this treaty. That's what makes them different to other Americans."

Historical Loss Treatment: We arrived at the reservation and were greeted by our host, Aaron who is a county employee that has regular contact with the tribe. Aaron showed us around the reservation. I asked him, "Can you tell us about this Native community?" Aaron told me, "Well, 150 years ago these people's ancestors were massacred, and people took all of their land. That they lost so much is a big part of their past."