What do I know about Indians?

To answer this, I must tell the stories of my Ttáwax̱ t, my family.

My great grandmother, the mother of my grandfather, my Káła, walked on from this earth from a tooth infection because she refused to see the dentists on the Yakama reservation. Mom tells me it’s because the dentists back on the rez don’t care about dirty Indians. My grandfather, my Tíla, was born in 1902. He is the one who passed onto me my Yakama and Clackamas lineage. As a child he spoke three languages: Yakima Sahaptin, Chinook Wawa, and English. He was forced to go to an Indian boarding school at a young age and as the years passed the only language he remembered was not the ones that contained the knowledge of his ancestor’s. Tíla had two wives, one White and one, my grandmother, my other Káła, was Shawnee. The first wife he killed by beating her in the kidneys one too many times, a trait he obtained in St.

Martin’s.

“Kill the Indian, save the man.” Turn him White and he shall thrive. Or beat his wife to death.

He had his first child before Káła was born, in 1917. We never knew the exact year she was born because her birth certificate was lost in a house fire, but we say she was born in 1920. She didn’t know she was Shawnee until later in her life, and even then her mother never admitted it. She was sexually assaulted by her older brother and she only obtained an eighth grade education. My mother, íła, was born in 1954. We just celebrated her 61st birthday. She has six older siblings and I have only met four. My uncle Ron became an alcoholic after serving in WWII. He committed suicide after he left his wife for trying to murder her in his sleep from the nightmares he endured from PTSD that the war made worse. Íła learned she was Native from a book. She saw the correlation between her features and the features of the people in the book at

school. When she confronted Tíla about being Native, he broke down in tears. The only other time she saw him cry was when her older brother Junior, his first child, died in a car wreck.

The Indian must be taught to be civilized. He must be disciplined. Did they know their civilization meant our self-hatred?

How could they not.

My father is, or maybe was, French and German. I suppose he’s still alive. Maybe he thinks about us sometimes. Maybe he wonders what we look like now and where our ambitions are taking us. Maybe he could care less about his halfbreed Native children. He left us at the age before White children begin to remember, though my memories of him still haunt me, like my light skin.

Half-breed is a reality more poisonous than arsenic

Even the word is laced with sorrow A coin tossed in the air –

a history of shame on one side

the outcome of genocide on the other

The coin gets stuck suspended

never landing constantly flipping over and over Confused

the people turn away the conflict

never to be settled

All people don’t look the same, and that fact extends to Natives as well. The images, the stereotypes, are what make us indistinguishable from one another, unless someone like me, and countless others, stick out from the crowd. My character and my heart cannot be known until you

look beyond my appearance. Intentions can’t be communicated through skin color, or by the clothing we use to hide our bodies, or by the physical sexual appeal society tells us we either lack or swell in the head with.

Limitation, negative expectation and genocidal annihilation; all a part of minority history because of human pigmentation. How can that be a justification?

How do you get off telling me who I am and who I’m not when you don’t know who I

am?

How can you tell me I can’t be Native because my skin is pale, while choking me with your stereotypes until I can feel the burn in my lungs from being deprived of the oxygen we are meant to share?

Why do other Natives treat me as their affliction instead of as their sister when the falsified images of Indians were brainwashed into society’s mind to justify inequalities and the murder of tens of thousands of people?

Why must I prove my identity to you when you are the one who is confused, not me?

I am not a body alone

There are multiple parts that make me whole My body serves my mind

I do not thrive on fucking To know me is conversation To embrace me is my flaws

To be intimate with me is a spiritual connection To make love to me is devotion

Aesthetics do not convey intelligence

Character can only be understood if your mind is listening it does not change when your eyes are closed

I do not offer you my body until you appreciate my will until you respect my motives

until you have known the parts of me that can only be felt with the heart until I have decided to want you

and I will not want you

unless my body is the last part of me you desire And this is what I know about Indians.

Anna Hoffer Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde

Sophomore, Ethnic Studies ahoffer@uoregon.edu

Faculty Sponsor

Kirby Brown, Assistant Professor English

kbrown@uoregon.edu