

Foreword

*Joseph P. Gone**

As you cast your eyes on this text, you are fortunate to engage a remarkable treasury of Indigenous thought and reflection concerning our psychosocial identities. Many of those of us who identify as Native Americans and are privileged enough to produce knowledge within the broad category of social research commenced our university-based educations with deep consideration of Indigenous cultural identity, asking questions like these: Who are we as Native people in the context of academia and higher education? What ideas and analyses do we have to contribute toward improving, expanding, challenging, and refining our fields of inquiry and domains of concern? One lesson we usually draw early on is an appreciation of the complexities and nuances of American Indian identity (Gone, 2006). In this respect, I offer a personal and professional vignette as a way of opening out to the many broad questions grappled with by the authors featured in this book.

I undertook my very first original research project in the summer of 1994 at home on the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in North Central Montana (Gone, 1996). As a psychology doctoral student and an enrolled member of the *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre tribal nation, I aspired for my master's thesis to investigate Gros Ventre identity in Gros Ventre terms. In an early interaction with an uncle in which I described my project, he casually asserted in response, "There are no Gros Ventres today." Not knowing what to make of this claim, I subsequently identified all of the elders then living on the reservation and approached half of them for study recruitment purposes. Thirteen of them agreed to an interview, but my thesis ultimately took shape as a case study of the interviews with my grandmother, Bertha (Gone) Snow (1918–2016). Interestingly, Grandma Bertha also averred that "Gros Ventre ways are gone," echoing at that time a common claim among *Aaniiih* people of a certain generation and cultural outlook.

Thus, in my earliest formal inquiry into Indigenous psychosocial identity (Gone, 1999; Gone & Alcántara, 2010; Gone et al., 1999), I was forced to contend with a puzzling paradox: culturally identified Gros Ventre people were denying that contemporary Gros Ventre cultural identity was even possible. Four things stood out about this. First, *Aaniiih* disavowals of Gros Ventre identity were, in fact, potent expressions of Gros Ventre identity. As such, the denial was in fact the confirmation of authenticity. Second, the preferred variable analytic methods that dominated my own discipline of psychology were inadequate for capturing and explaining this paradox; rather, interpretive (or qualitatively analyzed) inquiry was necessary. Indeed, in my view, the best scholarly formulation of such paradoxical dynamics in

* For full citation information and other related publications, please see Joseph P. Gone's contributor biography in the back of this text.

Indigenous cultural identity is the “empty center rhetoric” that resulted from ethnographic “thick description” by psychiatric anthropologist Theresa O’Neill (1996).

Third, this empty center rhetoric recognizes that, in the context of long legacies of colonial subjugation, Indigenous peoples valorize the cultural orientations and practices of their own ancestors who were the “real Indians.” Such comparisons cast contemporary Indigeneity in an inferior light, leading to the identity disavowals I encountered. Finally, even as she lauded the cultural identities of her own grandparents (as well as that of her father), Grandma Bertha expressed in our interviews together a depth of *Aaniiih* cultural knowledge that surprised even her. This was especially true with respect to her consideration of our community’s most sacred relics: the Flat and Feathered Pipes. But this was also true in her casual use of numerous terms and phrases that figuratively mapped the landscape of local identities; in our three-hour interview, she employed various identity terms 262 times (which I grouped into six categories).

Based on Grandma’s words, I labeled one category “terms used to identify Indians generically,” which included 105 usages of 17 different phrases, such as “Indian(s)” ($n = 44$ usages), “tribe(s)” ($n = 16$), “Native American(s)” ($n = 15$), and “the Indian people” ($n = 11$). Unsurprisingly, she also employed terms used to identify non-American Indian people, which included 38 usages across 21 different phrases (e.g., “White man(s),” “White people,” and “every nationality”). Additionally, she employed non-tribally specific terms used to classify Indians, with 32 usages across 16 phrases (e.g., “Catholic[s]” and “these modern Indians”), as well as tribally specific terms used to classify other Indians, with 25 usages across 11 phrases (e.g., “Sioux[s]” and “Blackfeet”). Finally, she employed terms used to identify Gros Ventres collectively, with 56 usages across 17 phrases (e.g., “the Gros Ventre people” and “the Gros Ventres of St. Paul’s Mission”), as well as terms used to identify kinds of Gros Ventres, with six usages across three phrases (e.g., “sellout” and “dyed-in-the-wool Gros Ventre”).

In my six-hour follow-up interview with her the following summer, I asked Grandma to elaborate on some of these identity terms and categories. Beyond the sheer number and variety of such terms and categories, noteworthy details emerged about some of these in our discussion. “Full-bloods” were Gros Ventres whose ancestry was entirely tribal. She explained that full-bloods “knew who they were” and were “proud of who they were.” “Half-breeds” were offspring of White fathers and full-blood Gros Ventre mothers, whereas “breeds” referred to “non-ward” French-Chippewa (or Métis) people who settled near the reservation (and sometimes intermarried with tribal members), sending their children to the Mission school alongside Gros Ventre children. There were also “wannabe Indians” in the community who claimed to possess traditional knowledge or practice traditional ceremonies, but whom she believed were at best uninformed and at worst fraudulent.

Perhaps especially interesting were terms like “Blue-Eyed Gros Ventre” or “\$200 Gros Ventre.” The former term referred to “half-breeds” from a certain region of the reservation, who segregated themselves from other Indian people even while taking advantage of scarce benefits for tribal members. The latter term referred to tribal members of mixed Gros Ventre and Assiniboine ancestry who were obliged to choose to which tribe they belonged in the

context of a court-determined treaty payment to the Gros Ventres, which included distribution of \$200 to each tribal member. Those who opted to enroll as *Aaniiih* people were teased by their own relatives through the use of this term for presumably taking advantage of this payment. Overall, of course, Grandma referred to “White people” in general terms, explaining that the defining quality of people classified as such was their propensity to use their facility with the dominant society to exploit, swindle, and otherwise get the best of tribal members in predictable and pervasive fashion.

These terms and categories illuminate and reveal the stakes that American Indians hold in fine-grained cultural identifications. These help to sort out who is friend and who is foe in deep relational fashion within the broader context of long legacies of colonial subjugation and exploitation. Indeed, some of the most evocative referents I have highlighted are terms of recollection and resentment, often with accompanying narratives. An example was a story Grandma told about a Métis father who was billed for his daughter’s stay in a nearby hospital after she fell ill at the Mission school. On arriving at the hospital, he learned he was expected to pay for her care because she had identified herself as French (as she had been taught by her French Chippewa parents to do). In response, her father exclaimed, “French?! Who told you [that] you were French!? You’re nothing but a goddamned Indian!”

“Yes, when it comes to paying the bills,” Grandma quipped.

And so, the psychosocial identities of Indigenous people are complex, in part because they represent crafted and enacted—or lived—responses to decades or even centuries of denigration and discrimination from the broader dominant society, and in part because they represent creative and adaptive responses to the local emergence of elaborate social worlds within our own communities that are not entirely of our own making. In sum, our identities are shot through with power and pain, with complication and contestation, but also with humor and hope. In the end, if just one elder from one Indian reservation in one interview at one point in history can open up such a profusion of cultural identities that so strikingly populates and punctuates her local moral world, then there is more to convey about the richness of Native American psychosocial identity than 10 books can accomplish. Fortunately, this volume goes a long way toward capturing this richness, and I am honored to commend this work to you.

Joseph P. Gone, PhD
Aaniiih-Gros Ventre
Harvard University

Native American Psychosocial Identity

EUGENE HIGHTOWER, EDITOR
University of California, Berkeley

