

# The Price of Becoming Invisible: Family and Connection

As I put pen to paper or rather fingers to keys, I am reminded of the time, when on this land everyone was Indigenous, and everyone else who came to this land was an immigrant. Particularly, those people whose skin was white, fleeing a land where they were rejected, dismissed, excommunicated, or sailing across the sea with the assignment to conquer, pillage, and kill.

Here is the point, there is something very special about being of this land called Rhode Island and the reinforcement of that bond — discussed and embodied in everything that you become as a person. That is my story and the relationship my family has with this particular place. It is not extraordinary. Humans are all from places where our ancestors have deep connectivity to the land. I think the disconnect rises when people forget that relationship and become consumed with the “invisible” and use it as a weapon to seek power. Ideas like imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and white supremacy — basically all of the “isms”. These ideas do not serve humanity and if we are not careful, they will kill us and we will all become invisible permanently!

A few weeks ago, I went to lunch with my mother and our cousins at the Sly Fox Den Too. (hear me when I say you must go because the food is simply wonderful!) Here is what was great about that day. I walked through the door and I saw people to whom I am related. I do not know how, because I do not personally know the owner of the restaurant or her family, but I do know that I can look into the faces of certain people here in Rhode Island and know immediately if you are my “cousin”. My mom walked in behind me, and she knew two people; my cousin walked in and she knew at least five, and everyone knew my cousin’s mom, who is 98 years old. And here is the key: all these folks are my family. It is this particular experience that I love about being a Rhode Islander and what is most important about being Indigenous to this land. My family is here and has been here for 15 generations!

After we ordered our food, I asked my family, “do you feel like your Indigeneity is invisible?” Let me first say, the women to whom I am related are whip smart, wise-cracking, have low tolerance of foolishness, and can be extraordinarily contrary! (We will need another article to get into that!)

-I cannot be invisible because I am here, said my 79-year old mother, and you see me right?

(Lord, I knew this conversation was gonna be a journey.) I responded, incredulously, “Yes, ma’am.”

My cousin Rachel (I am changing the names of folks to protect the guilty) said, -I understand your question, and began to tell a story:

When she was in college, (a prestigious university here in Providence) one of her classmates had the audacity (hear caucacity) to say to her face - “I thought all of the Indians in this country were dead.” Rachel’s response was similar to my mother’s - Can you see me? Then clearly, I am not dead. She added, you are not very smart, are you? Suffice to say, that person avoided my cousin for the rest of their tenure at school. (We pity the foolish and pray for them). Rachel continued saying, “In the family we knew who we were and it did not matter what anyone outside the family thought — it was not relevant.”

My other cousin, Wanda (not her name) had a similar experience in a local school system with a fellow administrator. They were discussing the peculiarity of the name of a student, and how it was odd, and very difficult to pronounce. Wanda informed her coworker that the name was Narragansett, and had a very specific meaning in the culture. The woman expressed that the child did not “look” Narragansett. (Oh, why did she say that to my cousin?)

My cousin Wanda said, -Well you do not look Italian but you are, are you not? (I will end the story here because it does not end well for this woman. And you would just feel sorry for her and the tongue-lashing she received).

Last to speak was the eldest cousin at the luncheon, Wanda’s mother, Liza (also not her name). She said we all have a time when we feel invisible. It is a very human feeling. Wanda began to tell a story I remembered from my childhood story, about the sun and the moon. Here is the abridged version:

*The Great Creator decided that the nothingness (the in-between time) needed light in order to see. The Great Creator blinked, and the sun came out for the very first time and daylight manifested. The Sun shined for a great many days as that was what she was created to do.*

*One day the Sun became lonely and cried out to the Great Creator, she cried so hard that dark spots began to form on her face.*

*The Great Creator asked the sun why do you have spots on your face?*

*The Sun responded, I am lonely, and it is painful.*

*The Great Creator could not abide by this and reached out and pulled down a piece of the nothingness and asked the Sun to shine upon it. She did as she was instructed, the spots began to disappear and her sister the Moon was formed.*

*The Moon and the Sun became great friends. In fact, they played together two times a day, at dawn and again at dusk; the time when it is still.*

*The Moon was most powerful at night, the time before the nothingness. The Moon shined differently than the Sun: her light was a reflection of the Sun’s, and her light depended on how many times the Sun spun around the Moon.*

*One time, before the nothingness appeared the Moon called out to her sister, because she wanted to play. The Sun did not respond. The Moon became hurt and very angry because she thought her sister was ignoring her.*

*In fact, the Sun was sleeping. The Moon called out to the Great Creator, I do not want to play with my sister any more. She does not love me.*

*The Moon began to cry, and deep scars began to form on her face. The Great Creator listened as the moon continued, She does not come when I call her!*

*The Great Creator explained to the Moon that when she is shining the Sun is asleep, and that when the Sun is out the Moon becomes a part of the nothingness, which is like sleeping. The Great Creator further explained that they had a specific time to play and see each other - which was dusk and dawn - the time when it is still.*

*This calmed the Moon, and she eagerly awaited the dawn, because she knew that she would see her sister, the Sun and they would play.*

Now I am not sure if this story explains my point about invisibility, but let me try...

Another word for visible is self-evident. Or self-aware.

If you can see yourself for who you are and understand yourself for who you see, then it does not matter what anyone else sees or understands. That is our individual life journey — to have the ability to see who you are, name it, claim it, and tell it.

But if we understand ourselves in the reverse e.g. “I can only see myself through someone else’s eyes and claim that as the truth,” then surely that is madness.

I am aware that this is a VERY simplified way of understanding the concept of Indigeneity or self-evident, but can I tell you, I do not care. This is how I understand it and really that is all that matters. Besides I am contrary — like the women I am related to, who are much smarter than me and very much aware of who they are and how they see the world.