Native American Nationalism and Nation Re-building

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In January 1964 Robert Bell, an attorney representing the Hannahville Indian Community and Forest County Potawatomi Community, opened nine days of testimony and oral arguments before the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) in Washington, D.C., with an evocative description of the Potawatomi Nation. He stated, “The history of the Potawatomi nation is a continuous, flowing thing. It was a nation. It wasn’t a group of bands. And it was emphasized . . . that they declared war as a nation. They made peace as a nation.”

Native nations’ struggles before the ICC, the institution created by Congress in 1946 to address tribal nations’ outstanding land claims, were intentionally complex. Authorizing legislation required three steps in the claims adjudication process, each with distinct standards of proof. Further, attorneys representing the Potawatomi not only confronted lawyers from the Department of Justice but also multiple advocates for the “Eastern” and “Western” Potawatomi. Despite this antagonistic milieu, it is striking—and, I argue, telling—to witness Bell’s expression of national dynamism. Framing the Potawatomi Nation as “a continuous, flowing thing” was consistent with a culturally rooted vision of the Potawatomi Nation expressed by Potawatomi people.

During the duration of the ICC’s proceedings—stretching December 1946 with the Canadian Potawatomi filing of their first claim through
September 1978 when the Commission transferred unresolved cases to the federal Court of Claims—the Potawatomi bands were engaged in contentious interactions. While elsewhere I analyze Potawatomi litigation related to the 1833 Treaty of Chicago, the final major land cession in their eastern homelands (Wetzel 2015), here I want to interpret the Indian Claims Commission period in a different light. Extending Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark’s (2010) scholarship on the international valences and implications of treaty-making, I argue that scholars, policymakers, and tribal citizens must see contemporary discussions of treaties, as well as the treaties themselves, as critical sites of Indigenous intranational narratives and identity formation.

The Potawatomi Nation is an important case to consider the role of treaty-related stories for contemporary Native nationhood and revitalization. Before the Indian Removal Act most Potawatomi lived in villages around the southern Great Lakes area but, as a consequence of negotiating nearly two dozen treaties and confronting the prospect of westward removal, citizens increasingly scattered across a region stretching from central Oklahoma to northern Ontario (Clifton 1977; Edmunds 1978). However, over the last three decades, members of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation (headquarters located near Shawnee, Oklahoma), the Forest County Potawatomi Community (Crandon, Wisconsin), the Hannahville Indian Community (Wilson, Michigan), the Match-e-be-nash-she-wish (Gun Lake) Band of Pottawatomi Indians (Dorr, Michigan), the Not-tawaseppi Huron Band of Pottawatomi Indians (Athens, Michigan), the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians (Dowagiac, Michigan), the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation (Mayetta, Kansas), Walpole Island First Nation (in Lake St. Clair north of Windsor, Ontario, Canada), and Wasauksing First Nation (Parry Island, Ontario, Canada) have participated in a range of national events, such as an annual Gathering of the Potawatomi Nation and language revitalization projects. These same communities were, in some shape or form, also engaged with ICC litigation. In many ways, the national narratives articulated and the renewal of relationships during the ICC’s tenure enriched the recent national renaissance.

As a sociologist, my research has long focused on questions related to the distribution and structures of power (the field of political sociology), how groups make and perceive meanings (sociology of culture), and the multiple ways actors come together seeking to effect change (social movements). I came to work with the Potawatomi Nation at least in part because of my professional interest in nation-building projects and events they have created. Moreover, as a non-Indigenous academic, my approach
to research—both in defining questions and deploying methods—is always informed by a commitment to engage in responsive and responsible conversations with communities, modeling the reciprocity that is integral to vibrant research (Alfred 2007; Smith 2012). This chapter, drawn from a larger research project on the dynamics of Potawatomi national revitalization and more than a decade of research with Potawatomi communities in the United States and Canada, is informed by numerous conversations about treaties: in interviews and informal discussions with community members, ethnography in national spaces, observation of how treaties are represented at museums developed by the Potawatomi governments, and at Native American and Indigenous Studies Association annual meetings. I returned to copies of archival documents from the Indian Claims Commission proceedings related to Potawatomi treaties, analyzing dozens of filings, depositions, and exhibits. I adopted a grounded approach to coding that requires not using preexisting categories but instead responding to themes and concepts that emerged from repeated readings and coding (Bryant and Charmaz 2007).

This chapter begins by relating both a general history of the ICC and the Potawatomi Nation’s experiences therein. Next, I describe the state of the literature on Native nationalism to develop a conception of Potawatomi nationhood as rooted in social, cultural, and ceremonial solidarity. In the following section, I look across decades of archival records to analyze three recurring stories about the Potawatomi Nation as a “continuous, flowing thing”: connection of places, connection of families, and connection of culture. Perceptions of the Potawatomi Nation are never completely harmonious, nor do they reflect total unanimity. Yet, these narratives, evidenced in texts produced by communities and collected by the United States government, reflect Potawatomi experiences of larger and persistent relationships. Finally, the conclusion revisits questions about contemporary Potawatomi nationhood.

Reclaiming History at the Commission

Prior to 1946, Native American tribes and individuals were required to file land-related grievances with the federal Court of Claims. The Indian Claims Commission Act, passed by Congress in 1946, was intended as a mechanism to redress long-standing claims about illegal taking of Indian lands by the federal government (Rosenthal 1990). At the Commission’s inception, three appointed commissioners were slated to serve ten-year
terms and adjudicate claims filed between 1946 and 1951.\textsuperscript{4} Over the five years, tribes filed 370 petitions that were eventually divided into more than 600 dockets. Only 17 of the 176 known tribes did not file one or more claims. Accordingly, legislators expanded the ICC to five members and granted a series of extensions allowing it to hear claims for thirty-two years (Rosenthal 1990; U.S. Indian Claims Commission 1979).

All claimants experienced difficulties in resolving cases. Claims required approximately two decades, on average, to proceed from filing to final disposition (Lurie 1985). Dockets that went to trial faced a three-part process of adjudication, each of which had different evidentiary and procedural standards: title, to establish the exclusive territory occupied by a tribe; value-liability, to gauge fair market value at the time the land was taken; and offsets, to reduce any award for “gratuitous expenditures” made by the government to tribes (U.S. Indian Claims Commission 1979). Formal and informal rules at the Indian Claims Commission frequently precluded tribal citizens from providing expert testimony in cases related to their nations (Tanner 2007). Further, while many hoped litigation would restore control of their abrogated lands, the ICC Act allowed only for monetary damages (Deloria 1992). Land values were calculated based on costs at the time of taking, typically in the mid- to late nineteenth century, not when the claim was adjudicated. Further, tribes were precluded from seeking interest on the determined value. Although the ICC ultimately awarded tribes more than $800 million, the benefits of cash settlements were negligible (Lurie 1985; Rosenthal 1990; U.S. ICC 1979). Indeed, many tribes regarded the process as fundamentally corrupt, leading to a resurgence of extra-institutional protests such as land seizures to assert reserved treaty rights (Wetzel 2009).

During the Indian Claims Commission’s existence, the Potawatomi bands filed claims about, and fought over, a number of treaties (Figure 5.1). The Canadian Potawatomi filed the first lawsuit in December 1946, followed by the Prairie Band in December 1947, Forest County and Hannahville bands in May 1948, and the Citizen Band in March 1951. Potawatomi claims were divided into fifty-one dockets: fourteen for the Citizen Band, eighteen for Forest County and Hannahville, and nineteen for the Prairie Band.

Several “hot periods” mark the history of the Potawatomi relationship with the ICC over the four decades of its existence (Schwartz 1982). While still relatively early, two important national moments occurred in May 1948, when groups came together to give depositions related to the Potawatomi Nation’s history and treaties. Seventeen Potawatomi people
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treaty</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Docket Number</th>
<th>Docket Number</th>
<th>Docket Number</th>
<th>Royce Area</th>
<th>Land Ceded</th>
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<tr>
<td>August 3, 1795</td>
<td>Greenville</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>15E</td>
<td>29C</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12 million acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 4, 1805</td>
<td>Ft. Industry</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>15H</td>
<td>29D</td>
<td>53 and 54</td>
<td>1 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 11, 1807</td>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>15G</td>
<td>29E</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>7.8 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 24, 1816</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>15L</td>
<td>29I</td>
<td>77 and 78</td>
<td>1.4 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 29, 1817</td>
<td>Miami Rapids</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>15I</td>
<td>29G</td>
<td>87 and 88</td>
<td>4.8 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2, 1818;</td>
<td>St. Mary's;</td>
<td>306; 311</td>
<td>15D; 15P</td>
<td>29B; 29N</td>
<td>98; 177</td>
<td>2.1 million acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 20, 1832</td>
<td>Tippecanoe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>August 29, 1821</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>15M</td>
<td>29K</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>2.8 million acres</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 16, 1826;</td>
<td>Mississinewa;</td>
<td>128; 309</td>
<td>15N; 15O; 15Q;</td>
<td>29L; 29M; 29O;</td>
<td>132 and 133;</td>
<td>3 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 9, 1828;</td>
<td>St. Joseph;</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>15R</td>
<td>29P</td>
<td>145 and 146;</td>
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<td>October 26, 1832;</td>
<td>Tippecanoe (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>180; 181</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 27, 1832</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 29, 1829</td>
<td>Prairie du Chien</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>15K</td>
<td>29J</td>
<td>147 and 148</td>
<td>3.6 million acres</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(plus mineral deposits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 26–27, 1833</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>15C</td>
<td>29A</td>
<td>187; 188; 189; 190; part of 160</td>
<td>5.2 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846</td>
<td>Council Bluffs;</td>
<td>71A</td>
<td>15J</td>
<td>29-J; Invervene</td>
<td>151 and 265; or 265 (Iowa) and 266 (Kansas)</td>
<td>5 million acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861; 1867</td>
<td></td>
<td>111</td>
<td>15B</td>
<td></td>
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Figure 5.1. Potawatomi Indian Claims Commission Dockets. This table provides a synopsis of the various treaties and lands for which parts of the Potawatomi Nation filed claims.
were deposed in Topeka, Kansas, on May 17 and 18, including Eliza Clay Bear, Ernest Darling, Minnie Evans, Albert Joetah, Patrick Matchie, Curtis Pequano, David Puckee, Pean Shopteze, Ellen Vieux, John Wabnum, and Alice Wahwasuck, Sr. Offering depositions with the aid of an interpreter were Kody Jackson, Patrick Mish-no, Kittas (Josie McKenny), Vina Wezo, Mike Wamego, and Oscar Shohn. Later that same month, on May 28, Bill Daniels, Isaac George, William Keshick, Peter Johnson, Valentine Ritchie, and James Wahmexico were deposed at the Circuit Court House in Crandon, Wisconsin. The next day, Telford Adams, Frank Elie, Robert George, Henry Jackson, Alex Philemon, and Harrison Williams gave statements in Wilson, Michigan.

The years 1949 and 1950 were largely consumed with posturing between Citizen Band’s attorney Howard Moses and Prairie Band’s attorneys O.R. McGuire and Robert Stone as they petitioned the Commission to prevent the other from representing the entire Nation. In December 1951, May Fairchild, Autwin Blaze Pecore, and Dan Nadeau were deposed for the dockets in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Starting in 1953, hearings before the Commission focused on the treaties of 1846, 1861, and 1867 that dealt with lands west of the Mississippi River. Although the “Eastern” Potawatomi—the bands in Michigan, Ontario, and Wisconsin—sought to intervene in these dockets in February 1953, the Commission moved forward by hearing testimony and oral arguments in September 1953, December 1955, and September 1956. Ultimately, the court ruled in favor of the “Western” Potawatomi—the bands in Kansas and Oklahoma—in 1961 and determined that the “Eastern” Potawatomi had no interest in these treaty lands.

By 1963 the Commission turned to the lands related to the treaties up to and including the 1833 Treaty of Chicago. These treaties, dealing with the Potawatomi’s historic homelands in the southern Great Lakes area, were fraught. The “Western” Potawatomi moved to have their “Eastern” kin dismissed in April 1963, starting nearly eight years of intense legal and national debate over the status of the Potawatomi at the time of the eastern land cessions. The Potawatomi Indians of Indiana and Michigan, Inc., the community now known as the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, filed an intervening petition in July 1965. In January 1968, the Commissioners ordered a new, separate proceeding to determine the Potawatomi Nation’s status. Oral arguments in December 1968, January 1969, and March 1970 finally yielded a decision in March 1972. A closely divided commission ruled that the Potawatomi Nation was a single entity prior to 1833. While the “Western” Potawatomi appealed this decision, the
Commission’s remaining years largely focused on resolving the remaining dockets and issuing awards before turning dockets over to the Court of Claims in 1978.

After more than thirty years, thousands of pages of petitions, hundreds of exhibits, and countless hours of testimony, the Potawatomi emerged from this lengthy process with millions of dollars of compensation from the federal government and a complex national future. Yet by carefully reading the archival records one can see recurring narratives of the Nation, expressed by Potawatomi people. Stark insists that to understand the meaning of treaties we must incorporate Native understandings of the relationship. In this way, treaties must be read as a type of Indigenous story that emphasizes respect, responsibility, and renewal. “Treaty making was about making relationships,” Stark contends. “They were not mere agreements that ceded one thing in exchange for another. Treaties bound nations to one another. They carried commitments that did not end with the exchange of land for annuities. These agreements connected people. Treaties were a vision for what a multinational society could entail” (Stark 2010, 157). In fact, not only should treaties be interpreted as Native stories about appropriate relationships and histories between sovereign governments, but contemporary Native accounts of treaties also have a critical intranational dimension. That is, stories about the treaties are critical sites to see the ongoing articulation of contemporary Potawatomi and, by extension, Native nationhood.

**Theorizing Native Nationalism**

Many social scientists regard the nation as a contingent social construct (Calhoun 1994; Gellner 1983; Weber 1978). This line of research tends to ask how, rather than if, nations are imagined. Eclectic processes of shared learning and forgetting forge coherent national memories and unify populations (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1983; Zerubavel 1996). These approaches also tend to focus on the state as the object of national aspirations; that is, the nation is a “community of sentiment which . . . normally tends to produce a state of its own” (Weber 1946, 176). While these valuable works move beyond seeing nations as natural or inevitable, they also present problems for studying Indigenous nationalisms. Colonial categories and assumptions such as a narrow focus on the state as the goal of nationalist movements limit the ability of these theories to adequately capture the “spectrum of assertions” of Indigenous nationalisms (Alfred 1995).
Western, state-centered notions of sovereignty emphasize authority, hierarchy, and territoriality while, by contrast, Indigenous nationalisms rely on equality and customs derived from the Creator (Boldt and Long 1984). Many Native peoples regard the universe as a sacred gift from the Creator that must be respected. As such, their visions of nationhood are “still informed by their own understandings of land, sacred center, autonomy of government, and culture” (Champagne 2008, 1683; Champagne 2005). Unfortunately, these differences are rarely understood by either the federal government or the American general public. These contradictory epistemologies are manifested in numerous ways, such as the weak institutionalization of Indian Reorganization Act constitutional governments among tribal nations in the continental United States (Cornell 1988).

Recognizing that the nation has come to dominate Native political imaginaries, scholars have begun to analyze the production of multiple Native nationalisms (Biolsi 2005; Deloria and Lytle 1998). Works on Blackfoot, Dene, and Seminole nationalisms, to cite a few, acknowledge the distinctive subjects and objectives of Indigenous nationalisms (Cattelino 2008; Ladner 2000; Watkins 1981). For example, scholars of literary nationalisms draw on the pioneering work of Simon J. Ortiz. Noting the “nationalistic impulse” among Indians to make use of foreign rituals, ideas, and material on their own terms throughout Indian Country, Ortiz insists this impulse is part of a larger anticolonial struggle. The creative use of oral and, more recently, written stories “substantiates life, continues it, and creates it” (Ortiz 1981, 11). Literature, in Ortiz’s account, is a persistent call to Indians to liberate themselves by creating their own meanings. Heeding Ortiz’s call, scholars have recently analyzed contemporary Native literatures and recovered the insights of historic Native intellectuals such as William Apess (Ortiz 1997; Warrior 2005; Weaver, Womack, and Warrior 2006; Womack 1999).

My analysis builds on a burgeoning line of research that contemplates the sociocultural dynamics of Native nationalisms. In asserting themselves culturally and politically, Native societies are not attempting to connect with or mimic the values and institutions of the dominant society. Indigenous communities “have various other bases for nationhood, such as religion, kinship, or culture, which contradict the Western framework based on territorial boundaries and the normalization of key Western values” (Alfred 1995, 11). The struggle to restore the integrity of national Native communities relies on the articulation of distinctively Indigenous principles. Taiaike Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005) identify four elements central to the plural, diverse forms that Indigenous nationalisms
take: relationship to the land, a common spiritual bond, language use, and sacred history (Corntassel 2003; Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003).

Consider two illustrations of the specific forms contemporary Native nationalisms can take. First, Audra Simpson analyzes the everyday conversations and debates about band membership that occur within the Kahnawake Mohawk Reserve. Nationhood here is a “cultural articulation,” replete with colonial ironies that respond to the dominant context (Simpson 2000, 117). Although surrounded by government structures and the people of Canada, Kahnawake Mohawk nationalism “is a Herculean gesture away from the enframing efforts of the Canadian state, toward a place and a state of being that is our own” (Simpson 2000, 126). This is reflected in the ways that community members talk with one another, which underscores the complexity of the situation, diversity of opinions, and depth of Indigenous knowledge.

Second, Jessica Cattelino interrogates the process of cultural production for the Florida Seminole Tribe. While the wealth generated by the tribe’s Hard Rock Casinos have created cultural opportunities, such as workshops and seminars at the tribal museum and renewed social gatherings, Cattelino posits that money and wealth are not antithetical to Seminole national culture. Rather, community members are finding new ways to figure relationships through innovative forms. “Values of self-reliance, hard work, . . . are being retooled . . . recast in a new language of economic power” (Cattelino 2008, 94). Generating new revenues has supported the expansion of endeavors such as a language preservation program that facilitates communicating with others, especially Elders, as well as recasting group boundaries. Even ostensibly individual consumption reinforces webs of relations, especially through matrilineal clan obligations.

Much like Simpson and Cattelino, I argue that Potawatomi nationhood emphasizes the social, cultural, and ceremonial ties that unite the communities. Nationhood here is a strategic, creative, and intentional vision of the Potawatomi people. Culture is a critical point for the Potawatomi, like other Indigenous peoples, to express and exercise sovereignty as they articulate collective meanings and community boundaries. The nation-building project being pursued by the Potawatomi does not currently aim toward consolidating gains in the form of a common governing body. Instead, Potawatomi nationalism is a struggle for self-determination that challenges colonial ways of knowing and being. In order to elaborate these general ideas, I analyze three stories of the Potawatomi Nation that were repeatedly expressed during the proceedings of the Indian Claims Commission.
Connecting Places

When talking about the social, cultural, and ceremonial ties that continue to unite the Potawatomi Nation, several elements are evident in the government archives from the Indian Claims Commission. First, narratives from this period illustrate how Potawatomi people connected seemingly disparate places. Many scholars demonstrate the importance of place for Indigenous communities and their collective identities (Basso 1996; Blackhawk 2006; Tsosie 2007). Deloria and Lytle (1998) argued that Indians have long been concerned with the preservation of “the people,” a religious conception shaped by a deep connection to a sacred place given to them by the Creator and the special responsibilities that result from that relationship. James Clifford (2001) noted how land signifies the past in the future and attaches an identity to a place for Indigenous peoples. As a group, these scholars have highlighted how Native peoples succeed in conceptually and practically connecting geographically distant nodes. Through stories about treaties the Potawatomi simultaneously describe their own movements across spaces as well as historic travels across a national landscape.

In the ICC records, people often related stories of their own movements that link sites within a Potawatomi national landscape. For example, during his deposition in Topeka on May 17, 1948, David Puckee related that his father was a member of the Prairie Band, his mother was from the Citizen Band, and that he himself lived on the Prairie Band reservation in Kansas for many years. However, from November 1909 until June 1910, Puckee left Kansas to live in Wisconsin. Frank Wandahsega, Sr., was born to a Potawatomi family in Canada and moved to Menominee County, Michigan, when he was young. When he was deposed in Jackson, Michigan, in April 1953, Wandahsega related that at the age of five or six his family took a trip to Topeka, Kansas, to visit his paternal aunt who lived on Prairie Band reservation. The Wandahsega family spent six months in Kansas before returning to Michigan. Valentine Ritchie's family had similarly wide and deep national roots. His father, Harry, was a federal Indian agent in Wisconsin, while his great-great grandfather, Echepwias, signed the 1833 Treaty of Chicago. In the summer of 1963, Ritchie took attorneys Walter Maloney and Robert Bell, who represented the “Eastern” Potawatomi, on a trip through Wisconsin and Michigan to visit Potawatomi communities. They held meetings in Athens, Dowagiac,
Niles, and Wilson, Michigan, as well as Lake Lucerne, Wisconsin.\textsuperscript{9} When asked whether members of the Forest County Band live away from the reservation in northern Wisconsin, Ritchie replied: “Yes. Of course, you know, people have to make a living, so we have people all over the United States, nearly, all except the South—and we have a few down there. There are a lot of Potawatomis living in Milwaukee, on account of being employed there. But they go home.”\textsuperscript{10}

These stories of connected places, linking Potawatomi sites in Kansas, Oklahoma, Ontario, Michigan, and Wisconsin, are prevalent in the archival record. Although travel was often difficult and distances long, the Potawatomi found ways to remain in touch with their relatives and “go home.” Consider the close connections evidenced in the life of Curtis Pequano. An enrolled member of the Prairie Band, Pequano lived in Arpin, Wisconsin, from 1907 through 1915. Pequano’s exchange with Prairie Band attorney Robert Stone highlights continuous links between Potawatomi places and people:

Q [from Stone]: All I am trying to get at is, is there a distinction between the Prairie Pottawatomies, who lived in and around Clifford, Wisconsin, and Arpin, Wisconsin, and those Indians who are known as the Wisconsin Pottawatomies?

A [by Pequano]: Yes.

Q: Now, what is that distinction?

A: The Prairie Pottawatomies belonged in Kansas.

Q: Yes?

A: We’re enrolled here [in Kansas] but the Wisconsin Pottawatomies probably had their own agency and headquarters.

Q: And the Prairie Pottawatomies who went back up to Wisconsin they just picked up from here and went up there because they liked the country better or something?

A: Yes, and some came back, they had been going back and forth for all these years.\textsuperscript{11}
While Pequano acknowledges the existence of a “distinction” between the Prairie and Wisconsin Potawatomi, he also unproblematically notes that the people “had been going back and forth for all these years.” From David Puckee to Curtis Pequano, Potawatomi people clearly describe the ways in which they regularly moved between spaces in the nation. By mentioning specific places, people also mapped and defined explicitly the Potawatomi Nation’s extent, thus giving shape to and corroborating the idea of a single national entity with recognizable sociogeographic boundaries.

Narratives articulated before the ICC also describe how deponents’ relatives connected places within the Potawatomi Nation in the past. Sixty-three-year-old Henry Jackson lived his entire life on Christian Island in Canada. He recalled how his chief, “Ogema-Waj-Won,” originally led a group of Potawatomi in Wisconsin that left after he refused to sign the 1833 Treaty of Chicago. The group moved to Drummond Island in the Mackinaw Straits of upper Michigan, on to Manitoulin Island in Ontario, and finally to the town of Penetanguishene, Ontario. From there, the Potawatomi were invited by other chiefs to join Ontario-based bands at Sarnia, Walpole Island, Cape Croker, and Saugeen. Jackson said there was a fair amount of movement by Potawatomis back and forth across the international border in the old days. This history parallels stories recounted by people like Dan Nadeau, then Citizen Band Chairman, who talked about Citizen Band people who remained in Kansas instead of moving to Oklahoma after signing the 1861 treaty, and Madeline Maloney, who described how members of her family lived everywhere from Canada to Wisconsin to Michigan to Kansas. Dr. Nancy O. Lurie also testified about a sizeable migration from the Kansas reservation to Michigan and Wisconsin after World War One.

Narratives of historic connections between places are even reflected in moments of tremendous difficulty, such as the signing of the 1833 Treaty of Chicago and the resulting removal, infamously known as the Trail of Death. A petition filed by the “Eastern” Potawatomi in February 1953 made exactly this point. They argued that the Potawatomi who resisted removal were actually the majority of the nation. Of the approximately 6,000 Potawatomi in 1833, 3,543 fled from their reservations; of this group, 1,986 were driven into Canada and 1,557 remained in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana. Their rationale for escaping was clear:

The Indians were subjected to abuse and violence, both by military and civilian authorities; that the removal parties were inadequately organized and equipped for the comfort and
welfare of the Indians. . . . To avoid said violence by both the military and civil authorities many of the Indians fled from their homes and villages to remote parts of Michigan and Wisconsin, some crossing over into what is now part of the Dominion of Canada.¹⁶

Even when confronted with the dislocations of forced removals in the nineteenth century, Potawatomi ancestors drew on their relationships with and across a broad national landscape, “crossing over” to Canada for safety.

Although the nation was diasporized after the 1833 Treaty of Chicago and the Trail of Death, Potawatomi people continued to come together for important meetings. When testifying before the ICC in Washington, D.C., seventy-two-year-old Michael Williams of Hartford, Michigan, described one of the meetings he remembered attending as a young boy in 1887:

Ordinarily, the people will come from the counties of Allegan, Arenao, Barry, Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Fern, Hillsdale, Isabella, Kalamazoo, Kalkaska, Missaukee, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Ottawa, St. Joseph and Wayne, in Michigan; Elkhart and St. Joseph in Indiana, but Potawatomis would also come from other counties and other states; even from Canada. They came from where they were living when notified; or as they heard of any gathering.¹⁷

Even to attend regular community meetings, Potawatomi people traveled from nineteen different counties. But “when notified; or as they heard of any gathering,” people would be drawn from “other counties and other states” or even across the international border in order to participate in critical national assemblies. Across great distances, and despite the cost and difficulties of travel, members of the Potawatomi Nation linked together nodes of the national landscape.

Connecting Families

During the Indian Claims Commission’s proceedings, Potawatomi people also related narratives about the dense linkages between families. Such stories speak of a larger Potawatomi national entity, as well. After conducting depositions in Crandon, Wisconsin, the preceding day, on May
29, 1948, people reconvened about ninety miles to the east at the Potawatomi Community Building in Wilson, Michigan. Alex Philemon, member of Hannahville Indian Community, was the second person deposed that day. He was born in Ford River, a small town just south of Escanaba in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and lived there until he was thirty years old. He then moved a few miles west to Hannahville. Called to share his story at the age of sixty-five, Philemon’s exchange with Jay Hoag, an attorney representing the “Eastern” Potawatomi, related his deep knowledge about the family backgrounds of people living at Hannahville:

Q [from Hoag]: Well, there were older people living around this community when you lived—when you were a boy, I take it.

A [from Philemon]: Oh, yes.

Q: Where did those older people come from, if you know?

A: Well, the most of them from Canada.

Q: Where did the others come from?

A: Well, the others from Kansas, the way I heard it—the Potawatomi.

Q: Some Potawatomi came up from Kansas and others came over from Canada?

A: Yes.

Q: All right, what did the Potawatomi that came up from Kansas say about it, if you heard any talk?

A: Well, you know how the people are, your white people married to Indians—that was the same thing with the Potawatomi from Kansas, they came up here and they got married together. They must have had a big gathering in Chicago, you know, and some Potawatomi from Kansas and some Potawatomi from here, so the young people got married.”

Even in the late nineteenth century, when Philemon was growing up, Hannahville saw a significant mixture and intermarriage of Potawatomi
people from across the nation. Not only did people travel to far northern Michigan from places like Canada and Kansas; eventually, the “young people got married” to one another. When Michael Williams testified in Washington, D.C., in September 1953, his story contained themes similar to Philemon’s, together with examples from specific families. He said:

There can be no escape from the fact that we have relations out west and the westerners have relations east of the Mississippi River. The Neconquets of Kansas are related to the Wawasusks of Michigan. Alice Mooso, daughter of Joe Mooso of the Pokagon group, is married to a member of the Prairie Band and is now living in Kansas. Nicholas Augusta, of the Pokagon group, is related to Wamego family of Kansas. . . . Thus we might go on indefinitely if we just would take the time to trace the genealogies and relationships of the western Potawatomies with those of the east.19

Family connections linked Potawatomi places. The Neconquets and Wawasusks, like the Augustas and Wamegos, were but some of the family connections that bound groups in southwest Michigan and Kansas. Indeed, the problem was not the lack of connections between Potawatomi in the east and west (“we might go on indefinitely if we just would take the time to trace the genealogies and relationships”) but rather the time constraints imposed by the Commission’s process.

While Commissioners and government attorneys were often preoccupied with establishing the legal facts of the case, the broad family relationships across the nation were readily evident to the Potawatomi. When John R. Winchester of the Potawatomi Indians of Indiana and Michigan (now known as the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians) came to Washington, D.C., to testify in the late spring of 1963, the existence of these intranational family relationships was largely unproblematic.20 Attorney Bell asked, “Do you have relatives out west in Kansas or Oklahoma, Mr. Winchester?”; to which Winchester replied, “Yes; I have an uncle, Joseph Topash, the son of my grandfather Tom Topash, in Kansas.” Bell followed up:

Q [from Bell]: Do you know whether there are a lot of other—

A [by Winchester]: Yes.

Q:—inter-family relationships between eastern Potawatomie and Wisconsin—”21
Winchester did not even need to think about the answer, let alone hear Bell’s entire question. While the reality of “inter-family relationships” between Potawatomi in the east and west as well as within the east might have been an open question for non-Indians, this was simply part of the fabric of Potawatomi national life. Winchester went on to elaborate that he continued to visit his family in Kansas and people from there also came back east for visits. Although separated across four states and two countries for more than a century, Potawatomi families continued to connect the Nation.

**Connecting Culture**

Sociologist Ann Swidler noted that culture has both formal elements, such as rituals and ceremonies, and informal ones, such as stories, language, and daily practices. Culture is significant not by mechanically determining peoples’ actions, perspectives, and tastes, but “by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986, 273; quotes in original). Recalling Simpson’s insistence that Indigenous nationalism is a “cultural articulation” rather than a preoccupation with shared political bureaucratic structures (2000), we can see how Potawatomi narratives at the ICC emphasized a distinctive national culture shaped by shared history and common language.

One facet of the common history shared by all Potawatomi people was the colonial machinations of the American government. Howard Moses, attorney for the Citizen Band, related how the government intentionally misled the nation during treaty negotiations and intensified its efforts when its promises failed to compel the nation to cede their traditional homelands. Describing the negotiations at Chicago in 1833, Moses explained how the government promised that the lands in Iowa to which the Potawatomi would be relocated were abundant with game, that money would be spent to improve the land, and that the new land would be a permanent home for the Potawatomi. “The Potawatomi Nation was unwilling to sell its land and move west of the Mississippi River, and so informed the agents of the Defendant [the United States government] during the meeting in Chicago. In order to obtain the desired cession, the Defendant resorted to threats, duress, fraudulent misrepresentation and bribery.”22

Not only were all Potawatomi people past and present affected by the challenges of negotiating land-related treaties with the federal government, so too did the history of forced removals inform conceptions of
the nation. Michael Williams’s June 1961 letter to anthropologist Sol Tax addressed “the sad event of fatal treaty making” and removal’s lasting legacy. “Many of the people who did go west defected; they could not adjust their lives to the treeless terrains out there, so they came back to the scenes of their birth. Besides, there were those who during removal days took to the jungles and wilderness to hide from the caravans waiting to transport them to assigned areas west of the Mississippi River.”

Indeed, attorney Bell noted that while the federal government sought through treaties and removals to bring all of the Potawatomi together in one location in the West, Potawatomi people resisted these efforts. Instead, they came together in their own way and on their own terms. Bell said, “What was not done by formal treaty has happened anyway by reason of the admixture of Indians, interrelationship, intermarriage, traveling, moving around, not only from the Midwest to the East but from the East to the Midwest, and in fact all over the world, since the treaty period.” Both accounts describe how Potawatomi people adapted to common historical circumstances not always of their own making, but did so through “interrelationship, intermarriage, traveling, moving around,” which facilitated their own articulation of the nation.

A shared language, Bodewadmimwen, was also a unifying aspect of Potawatomi national culture. Proficiency in an official language is often a sign of social distinction, and language knowledge and use is particularly salient for the articulation of Indigenous collective identities (Bourdieu 1991; Kepa and Manu’atu 2006; Morgan 2009). A letter from attorney Robert Bell to the Commission specifically invoked shared language as a basis for seeing the whole of the Potawatomi Nation, insisting that the Potawatomi were “the same people by kindred, by feeling, and by language. . .”

During Valentine Ritchie’s testimony before the Claims Commission in January 1969, common language was invoked to address the Potawatomi Nation’s shape. Recall that Ritchie had taken attorneys for the tribe on visits to Potawatomi communities, that Ritchie’s father was an Indian agent in Wisconsin, and that his great-great grandfather signed the 1833 Treaty of Chicago. The discussion of language started with this exchange between attorney Bell and Ritchie:

Q [from Bell]: Can Potawatomies from one area understand Potawatomi as spoken by Potawatomies in other areas?

A [by Ritchie]: That is right. They can understand each other.
Q: Is there any difference between language as spoken?
A: Very little. . . .

Q: Have you talked with Mike Williams?
A: Yes, I have.

Q: Where is he from?
A: Niles, Michigan.

Q: Does he speak as good Potawatomi as you do?
A: Yes, sir.

Q: Is there any different in the type of Potawatomi you talk?
A: No, no difference. 26

Ritchie clearly explained that there was “very little” difference between how Potawatomi people in different areas speak the language such that they can readily “understand each other.” When asked specifically about Michael Williams from southwest Michigan, himself a frequent and vocal participant in ICC testimony, Ritchie agreed that he and Williams were equally proficient in Bodewadmimwen. Later on, Bell posed more questions about language and connections between Potawatomi communities:

Q [from Bell]: Mr. Ritchie, are there Potawatomies who have come from Kansas living in the Forest County area?

A [by Ritchie]: Yes.

Q: Pardon?
A: Yes. There are at least 75 living there right now.

Q: Do they speak Potawatomi?
A: Oh, yes, sir, same language.
Q: Same Potawatomi language you do?

A: Same Potawatomi language. . . .

Q: You have talked to other Potawatomies [in southern Michigan], and they speak the same language?

A: Yes. Not only that—

Commissioner [John T.] Vance: Do all Potawatomies speak the same language?


Commissioner Vance: No matter where they live they speak the same language?

The Witness: Yes. May I do a little pointing?

Commissioner Vance: Please do.

The Witness [pointing at the map]: You cross Port Huron here. I have been into Canada. . . . These are all Potawatomi-talking Indians, every one of them. I even went to a Potawatomi church in Seney, Ontario, . . . where a Potawatomi man preached a sermon in his own language.27

Ritchie is simultaneously testifying and educating. When the commissioner broke into the questioning to probe whether or not all Potawatomi truly speak the same language, Ritchie drew on his travels and knowledge of history to elucidate the widespread use of Bodewadmimwen. From Kansas, to Wisconsin, to far northern Ontario “(t)hese are all Potawatomi-talking Indians.”

Language also served as a vehicle to inject levity into lengthy proceedings. Consider the language lesson imparted by Michael Williams during his May 1963 testimony:

Q [from Bell]: What is the Potawatomi word for village?

A [by Williams]: Odan. . . .
Q: What is the Potawatomi word for tribe?

A: Ezhyawud. . .

Q: What is the Potawatomi word for band?

A: There is no Potawatomi word for band. If you mentioned that word to a Potawatomi, the first thought that would come to him is a bunch of people tooting on shiny horns, harmonizing, mak[ing] music.

Much like Ritchie, Williams illustrates how the language is one element of a unifying Potawatomi national culture. Moreover, he also explicates how the language provides a sense of national meaning. While there are words in Bodewadmimwen for “village” and “tribe,” there is not a term for “band,” save for “people tooting on shiny horns.” His knowledge and use of the language enables Williams to explain a Potawatomi worldview. Invoking shared history and language became a mechanism for the Potawatomi to tell stories about national persistence.

Linking the Past and Present

Heeding Stark’s call for interpreting treaties as ongoing stories (2010), I have illustrated that stories about treaties inform listeners about intranational relationships through a range of overlapping narratives. Recollections of treaties have been integral to the Potawatomi’s recent national revitalization. Although the federal government designed the Indian Claims Commission to be an adversarial process, Potawatomi people still used it to express an on-going vision of the nation. Specifically, national articulations about treaties during these decades emphasize enduring connections. Participants in the ICC spoke about the connections between sites in the Potawatomi Nation, illustrating how people frequently traveled between communities. People also told stories about the extensive relationships between families, describing the frequency of intranational marriages. Finally, the people related information about a shared national culture, specifically focusing on how they were subjected to similar forces and also spoke a common language. Uniting people, places, and culture in stories about their treaties enabled the Potawatomi to articulate their own vision of the nation before the ICC.
More than three decades after the end of the Indian Claims Commission, talk of treaties remains a vital and vibrant element of Potawatomi national discourse. Exhibits at the Citizen Band and Forest County Band museums, for example, describe in vivid detail the actual treaty negotiations and their consequences for the nation. Treaties are invoked in conversations at annual national events such as the language revitalization conference and Gathering of the Potawatomi Nation, which are hosted by different bands at their reservations each summer. Indeed, in many ways, these contemporary national developments are inseparable from the reality of treaties. Consider this account of the Gathering written by Stewart King (2000, 1), an Elder from Wasauksing First Nation and frequent speaker at national events:

It has been a number of years now since we have gathered together annually as the “Bodwewadmi” Nation but the love and the friendship that we all share at this time continues to grow. To fully comprehend the true impact of witnessing this event, it is necessary to take a step back in time to the Treaty of 1833 in Chicago, when the Diaspora of the Potawatomi Nation commenced in earnest. We are told that at this time, the seeds of separation had been sowed and many differences were very much in evidence for our people. . . . The friendships we established in previous years continue to grow and the spirituality that has been recognized determines who we are today. As we proceed along this good red road we must pick up those things that were left along the roadside for us by those ancient ones and use them only in a good way.

King seamlessly weaves together strands of the national past, present, and future. He points to a specific treaty that marked the beginning of the nation’s diasporization. While having confronted “the seeds of separation”—particularly during periods like forced removal in the nineteenth century and the Indian Claims Commission in the twentieth century—the Potawatomi people have responded with “friendship” and “spirituality,” setting out toward a stronger national future.

This analysis underscores how Potawatomi nationalism is organized around and motivated by a sense of social, cultural, and ceremonial solidarity. In telling treaty stories focused on linked places, people, and culture, the Potawatomi articulate a unique vision of their nation based on their own understanding of relationships between people and sacred
places. This work, much like the research of scholars including Alfred, Champagne, Corntassel, Ladner, and Simpson, calls for taking seriously the experiences and epistemologies of Indigenous communities and then using these understandings to reconsider hegemonic theories on nations and nationalism. My analysis also honors the persistence and hard work by generations of Potawatomi to maintain relationships and reenergize shared visions of the nation.

Notes

1. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 279, Docket 28, Box 455, “Transcripts of Oral Arguments, January 20 and 21, 1964,” page 20. Emphasis added. All subsequent references to items from this collection of public documents will be designated as NARA RG 279 and provide the item’s docket number, box number, and item title or description.

2. More generally, January 1964 was a complicated time for the United States government as it contended with anti-American rallies in Panama, transformations in African nation-states, and a coup in South Vietnam. Domestically, a constitutional amendment barring poll taxes was ratified, and President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the so-called “War on Poverty.”

3. Anti-Indian legislators also imagined that resolving tribal land titles would ultimately eliminate Native Americans’ trust status and open new lands to settlers and development.

4. Land claim petitions filed after 1951 would again be referred to the federal Court of Claims.

5. The federal government arbitrarily prevented the Potawatomi bands in southern Michigan from establishing constitutional governments under the terms of the Indian Reorganization Act. Although people from the bands petitioned President Franklin Roosevelt and Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, the officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided the state of Michigan was adequately meeting the Potawatomi’s needs. NARA Record Group 75, Item Number 1011: Records Concerning the Wheeler-Howard Act, Box 5, Folder 4894-1934-066. The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians was recognized by Congressional Act in 1990, the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi was recognized by the BIA in 1994, and the Match-e-be-nash-she-wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians was recognized by the BIA in 1999.

6. Scholars will disagree on this point. David Treuer, for one, questions the metrics used to identify and categorize an authentic genre of Native literature. Noting that he writes in English for a wide audience, Treuer (2008) insists that his writing neither reflects nor can it save Ojibwe culture: “My novels are exercises in art, not cultural revitalization or anthropology” (Treuer 2006).
7. NARA RG 279, Docket 15, Box 85, “Transcripts of witness depositions, May 17 and 18, 1948.”
8. NARA RG 279, Docket 29A, Box 466, “Plaintiffs’ Exhibit #97: Testimony of Frank Wandahsega, Sr. in Jackson, Michigan, April 6, 1953.”
9. NARA RG 279, Docket 254, Box 2345, “Transcripts of Oral Arguments.”
13. For Nadeau see NARA RG 279, Docket 111, Box 1176, “Depositions of witnesses taken in the above styled cause on December 3, 1951 at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, before Edgar E. Witt, Chairman Indian Claims Commission.” For Maloney see NARA RG279, Docket 254, Box 2344, “Transcripts of Oral Arguments.”
15. NARA RG 279, Docket 29H, Box 493, “Petition.”
17. NARA RG 279, Docket 29A, Box 466, “Plaintiffs’ Exhibit #94: Testimony for the Indian Claims Commission, Washington, DC, September 8, 1953.”
18. NARA RG 279, Docket 29A, Box 466, “Plaintiffs’ Exhibit #93: Depositions for Petitioners,” page 68.
20. The transcript of the oral arguments notes that Winchester brought a document given to him by his grandfather. When asked about this item, described as “House of Reps. Misc. Document #5, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session,” Winchester explained: “Grandfather Topash told me that this is a document ‘that you will want to save in years to come.’ It referred to how the Indians were treated and how they were investigated.” NARA RG 279, Docket 254, Box 2344, “Transcripts of oral arguments,” page 329.
23. NARA RG 279, Docket 29D, Box 484, “P-128, Letter from Michael B. Williams, President of the Potawatomi of Indiana and Michigan, Inc., to Sol Tax, coordinator of the American Indian Chicago Conference, June 4, 1961,” page 5.
27. NARA RG 279, Docket 71, Box 846, “Transcript of oral arguments,” page 69.

Public Documents

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
Record Group 75: Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

References


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