Running for a Nation: The Remarkable Story of Ellison "Tarzan" Brown

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Abstract. On 20 April 1936, the Narragansett runner Ellison "Tarzan" Brown collapsed as he crossed the finish line winning the fortieth annual Boston Marathon. But for the runner and the indigenous community from which he hailed, the marathon meant much more than a race and victory and fame. Success in this renowned contest portended a pathway out of obscurity for a people who had, for more than fifty years, sought to proclaim the continuance of their collective indigenous identity in the wake of a forced detribalization by the state of Rhode Island. This article illuminates what Brown's victory meant to and did for a small and mostly forgotten indigenous community. More specifically, it is about how Brown and other Narragansett parlayed the runner's physical accomplishments into meaningful, community-wide social, economic, and political advancements.

Keywords. Narragansett, detribalization, Ellison "Tarzan" Brown, Rhode Island, Boston Marathon

Ellison "Tarzan" Brown's effort to this point in the Boston Marathon appeared almost superhuman as he bounded past checkpoints in world-record fashion (Martin and Gynn 1979: 123). In fact, Brown pulled away from the pack of other runners so quickly that when members of the press crew arrived at the first checkpoint, they were shocked to learn that they had mistakenly spent the last five miles following a second group of runners (Hopkins 2014). At about the seventeen-mile mark, Brown's lead in the famed race remained unchallenged when he entered Woodland Park and met a delegation of Narragansett Indians, Brown's tribal affiliation, some of whom were dressed in full ceremonial regalia and playing drums.[1] A few in

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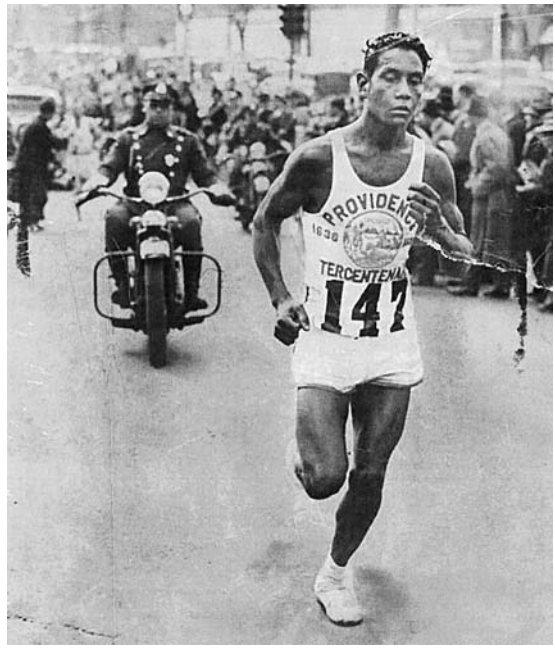

Figure 1. Ellison Brown on his way to winning the Boston Marathon in 1936. Photograph printed in the *Boston Globe*, 14 April 1996.

the entourage even ran along Brown's side blowing kisses and shouting encouragements (Ward 2006: 65). It is no wonder then that when he exited the park, Brown was on pace to shatter the course record (fig. 1; Ward 2006: 66).

However, three miles farther along in the race, fatigue slowed Brown's pace and as John Kelly—the runner who had won the race the year before and remained a perennial favorite—caught up to the tiring Brown he patted the runner on the back, as if to say "nice try," and then proceeded to pass him (Derderian 1994: 153). What happened next has become part of race folklore and may have resulted in the naming of the marathon's most famous stretch (Hopkins 2014). Brown, refusing to bow out, battled Kelly over the hilly expanse from Woodland Park to Lake Street. Brown retook the lead—for good this time—as he charged down the hills leaving Kelly behind (Martin and Gynn 1979: 123). This section of the course thereafter became known as the "heartbreak hills," the place where Brown broke Kelly's heart (Derderian 1994: 153).

Some eighty years later Brown's athletic accomplishments remain impressive.[2] However, this article is not about the runner's physical feats. Instead, this work focuses on what these victories meant to and did for a small and mostly forgotten indigenous community. More specifically, it is about how Brown and other Narragansett parlayed the runner's physical accomplishments into meaningful, community-wide social, economic, and political advancements. Victory helped to make Brown—and the community from which he hailed—visible to a populace that had for years both lamented and professed the tribe's supposed demise. The Narragansett made use of this brief moment of celebration and inclusion to prod the state of Rhode Island to recognize the continued existence of their community. The Native Americans who cheered Ellison on in his sprint through Woodland Park did not attend the spectacle simply to revel in Brown's fleeting fame and participate in the celebration customarily bestowed on the winner of the race. Instead, the Indians made their way from Rhode Island to Boston in the midst of a spirit-crushing economic depression so that they could publicly play their drums, don their western-Native-style headdresses, and let the world know—or at least the three-quarters of a million spectators in attendance—that, in the words of the tribe's chief sachem Phillip H. Peckham, "The Indian still lives" (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:4).

Just eight years before Brown's awe-inspiring sprint, another Narragansett runner—Horatius "Bunk" Stanton—had traveled to Maine and attempted to register for a race. Upon hearing the athlete declare that he was a Narragansett Indian, an official asked Stanton to sit and wait to be registered. After all of the other contestants were certified, the official held out his hand and said, "Well Chief you're the first Narragansett I've heard of since King Philip's War [1675–78]. Any more where you come from?" The registrar continued to explain that he "thought they [the Narragansett] were all wiped out" (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 1: 1). It is not surprising that a race official in Maine had been unaware of the continued existence of the two hundred Natives living in the secluded forest and swamps of southern Rhode Island. Indeed, in the aftermath of what has come to be known as King Phillip's War, the prevailing social narrative led many to erroneously believe that the Narragansett no longer existed. This misconception was not only perpetuated in folklore but also was corroborated by scholars who relied too heavily on dubious accounts and partial records. For example, just one year prior to Stanton's trip to Maine and nine years before Brown's triumph in Boston, Alice Collins Gleeson wrote in *Colonial Rhode Island* that "after this defeat [King Philip's War], the Rhode Island Indians had no independent life . . . their strength had gone and they passed away."[3] The author's assertion simply reiterated and affirmed what many

people in Rhode Island and others throughout New England believed, "that the Narragansett had vanished" (Ruberton 2001: 61). This construct of the "vanishing Indian" was not limited to the Narragansett. Instead, it was used to explain what appeared to be the general disappearance of indigenous communities throughout North America. For centuries colonists, and later Americans, sought to subjugate, marginalize, and segregate Native peoples. And the belief systems they created not only reflected these desires but also, over time, helped to affirm them. Historian Philip J. Deloria (2004: 9) explains that ideologies are not necessarily true "but, as things that structure real belief and action in a real world, they might as well be." By the early twentieth century, the fact that few Americans interacted with—or recognized when they did interact with—indigenous peoples seemed to confirm the ideal of the vanishing Indian. Ideology "is a lived experience," writes Deloria (2004: 9), "something we see and perform on a daily basis." The registrar's sincere amazement at meeting Stanton attested to both the efficacy and pervasiveness of an ideal that purported the demise of indigenous communities.

However, postulations about the death of the Narragansett were not solely derived from—and perpetuated by—the misinformed. In linking the tribe's expiration to King Phillip's War, European colonists and their descendants intentionally reframed what was a complex struggle into a binary of winners and losers. Such narratives obscure the high level of tightly interwoven and intercultural alliances forged between Natives and colonizers. Instead, the story gets reduced to a confrontation between a supposedly antiquated group of Indians and modern European settlers. Or, as the historian Jill Lepore (1998: xvi) observes, King Phillip's War was ultimately "a contest for meaning—and the colonists won." Indeed, the European victory made possible a historical interpretation in which the triumph of the colonists and the supposed degeneration of the Indians appeared benign, natural, or even providential. This is not to say that Native peoples did not suffer during this war—indeed they suffered tremendous loss and relocations. Victory for the Europeans provided a greater sense of security as many of their indigenous adversaries perished in battle, fled the area, or were forcibly removed from the region. The shift in demographics was especially dramatic for the Narragansett because the tribe was reduced to just a few hundred survivors from a prewar population that numbered somewhere around ten thousand (Schultz and Tougias 1999: 11).

Long before the arrival of the first Europeans, Native American societies sometimes collapsed and disappeared. Indigenous communities also merged and emerged anew having reformed and reshaped themselves in a

process now referred to as ethnogenesis or coalescence (Rzeczkowski 2012: 5). With the remaking of the region's demographic, social, political, and physical landscapes, Indians sought to strengthen the bonds within their communities and to bolster and reinterpret ties with other indigenous groups. For example, before the outbreak of hostilities, the English sometimes differentiated the Niantic and the Narragansett as two distinct and separate groups. However, sometime shortly after 1676, the two tribes along with other Native peoples in the region coalesced into one—almost indistinguishable—group (Fisher and Silverman 2014: 139). The historian Linford D. Fisher (2014: 153) explains, "Tribal boundaries were often overlapping . . . and could be amended, altered, or even obliterated by cultural processes such as adoption, intermarriage, alliance-building, and the ritual submission of defeated enemies." The merger of indigenous polities after the war can be understood not only as the continuation of a diplomatic tradition that preceded colonial settlement but also as a strategic and political exercise. "By pooling agricultural, trade, and spiritual resources," explains Fisher (2014: 154), "communities were redefined, strengthened, and better able to respond to the most devastating consequences of colonialism." However they reconfigured themselves, Natives continued to assert and celebrate their distinctiveness as indigenous peoples even after the devastation and dislocation they experienced. Over the next century, the Narragansett continued to reimagine and reassert themselves as they faced the challenges and demands associated with English colonialism, navigating, and helping to fashion, evolving conditions throughout the region.

In the aftermath of King Phillip's War, the Narragansett sachem Ninigret II, in 1709, agreed to relinquish the tribe's claim to four-fifths of its territory in a move that was widely interpreted at the time as part of a natural progression in which Native peoples yielded to the superiority of settler society. However, the decision of the tribe to abandon its claim to what had been ancestral lands was emblematic of emerging conditions and not a tacit capitulation by the Indians. In reality, the Narragansett could no longer patrol and enforce their territorial boundaries and non-Indians regularly encroached on their land (Fisher and Silverman 2014: 154). By relinquishing these lands, the Narragansett hoped to retain and preserve some form of autonomy in the circumscribed sixty-four-square-mile expanse—an area that still provided everything they needed. The land that the Narragansett continued to claim contained natural springs, freshwater ponds, parcels of dense forest and swamplands, tidewater areas, and a significant stretch of the region's coastline. Thus, the acreage the Indians reserved for themselves allowed continued access to significant forms of

sustenance. It is also conceivable, that with the tribe's diminished population, the preserve was adequate for their needs (Simmons 1989: 54).

Still, by mid-century nearly all of the forty-one thousand acres Ninigret II claimed had been lost to squatters and debtors (Simmons 1989: 56–7). No longer able to use the land to meet the bulk of their needs, many Narragansett became "poor rural folk who struggled to make a living around the edges of the white plantation economy" (56). While some of the Indians turned to selling venison, furs, feathers, baskets, and woven mats, others searched for employment beyond the confines of the diminishing reservation (Silverman 2010: 26). Women tended to find jobs locally, working in the homes of their white neighbors. However, the employment opportunities available to many men—laborers, soldiers, and sailors—required that they leave their families and communities for months or years at a time (Cipolla 2013: 4). Many of the Narragansett who remained in southern Rhode Island struggled to provide for themselves and their families. "Some Indians signed indenture contracts," explains the historian David Silverman (2010: 26), "as the only way to feed and clothe their children." Exorbitant fees, disproportionately high fines, and frivolous lawsuits often forced other Narragansett into bondage. In 1703 Rhode Islanders had codified slavery and limited the practice to include only African and indigenous persons (Clark-Pujara 2016: 272).

Forced to contend with the threat of enslavement and facing the loss of almost all of their ancestral lands, some Narragansett found refuge in a religious revivalism that challenged traditional hierarchies and advocated for the democratization of spiritual authority. By the middle of the eighteenth century, this Great Awakening—as it has come to be known—held tremendous significance for the Narragansett because it helped to inspire and empower individual tribal members who employed the rhetoric of equality to openly challenge emerging social and economic conditions. Some of the newly converted Narragansett even concluded that "they would be more free from the contaminating influence, and evil example . . . of their white brethren" if they left the region and resettled in "a sanctuary far away from whites where they and their offspring could finally live in peace and prosperity" (Silverman 2010: 2–3). In what has come to be known as the Brothertown movement, various individuals from indigenous communities throughout southern New England sought not only liturgical autonomy from their non-Indian neighbors but also social, cultural, territorial, and even racial separation. This coalescence of tribes—now known as the Brothertown Indians—first moved to New York and settled on territory granted to the group by the Oneida in the 1770s (Cipolla 2013: 40). Later, due to the continued expansion of the nonindigenous populace, the

Brothertown Indians faced renewed territorial, social, and economic pressures. Again, the Indians fled west, this time to territory controlled by the Winnebago in what is now known as Brothertown, Wisconsin (Cipolla 2013: 5). Linford Fisher (2014: 168) explains that at its base, the "motivation for migration seems to have been long-term resentment and frustration." The Brothertown movement emerged out of a shared experience because it was not just the Narragansett—but all Indians of New England—who had been reassigned to the lowest caste. Still, the frustration and resentment to which Fisher referred must have been especially acute in Rhode Island because Narragansett comprised the majority of those Indians who left for Albany. In all, the movement claimed close to twenty percent of the tribe's overall population (Cipolla 2013: 40). Some of the Indians who remained in southern New England looked to intermarriage to bolster their dwindling communities.

Belying its relatively small size as both a colony and a state, Rhode Island played a central role in the trade that brought African slaves to American shores. Local merchants transported more than 60 percent of all enslaved persons destined for North America. "And by 1750 Rhode Islanders held the highest proportion of [African] slaves in New England," with one in ten residents being an African or Indian enslaved person (Clark-Pujara 2016: 144). The maintenance and perpetuation of this racial hierarchy meant that both Africans and Natives were legally separated from whites as "people of color" and, as such, often segregated into "the same taverns, jobs, and city neighborhoods" (Mandell 1998: 467). Moreover, as enslaved persons, "Africans and Indians in Rhode Island labored side by side" (Melish 2007: 20). Such social and physical proximity inevitably led to intimacies and intermarriages between Africans and Indians.

Native peoples have long used intermarriage to incorporate nonmembers into existing social, political, and cultural frameworks. For the Narragansett, unions between Indians and Africans helped to bolster the tribe's depleted population and were a means to bring "new skills, social and political connections, and other forms of power into the community" (Mandell 1998: 469). The demands for indigenous men to prosecute colonial wars and to serve as crew for far-flung excursions meant that even before the outbreak of the American Revolution, Indian women outnumbered Indian men in Rhode Island by a ratio of almost two to one (470). Faced with this demographic reality, Indian women oftentimes found partners among the African slaves. For some Narragansett women, finding an African partner also gained them access to the labor they needed "to improve their lives and better provide for their children" (470). For example, Narragansett William Brown recounted that sometime around

1770 his grandmother purchased and married an enslaved African man "in order to change her mode of living" because the union portended to enable her to live "after the manner of white people" (470). For black men, these unions also connoted an opportunity to improve one's station in life. By marrying into the tribe, people of African descent not only gained use of reservation lands but also ostensibly ensured that their descendants would be born-free persons. Thus, intermarriage not only portended the possibility of improving one's own lot but also was emblematic of a long-held practice used by indigenous peoples to incorporate others into their community. But as historian Mikaela Adams (2016: 2) observes, "Indian tribes have not always been free to decide who belongs." Indeed, while the Narragansett endeavored to reconstitute, reimage, and reassert their collective identity through intermarriage, their nonindigenous neighbors sought to redefine the parameters of indigeneity and deemed the offspring of interracial unions as less authentic.

In 1784—inspired by the rhetoric of freedom and equality espoused in the years leading up to the American Revolution—Rhode Island state officials passed a gradual emancipation act (Melish 1998: 183). By 1820, and despite a considerable population of Africans and Indians, leaders throughout the region espoused an apocryphal narrative of a homogeneous all-white and all-"free New England" (222). This bogus narrative, coupled with the economic hardships of the postwar era, worked to harden social demarcations and "further 'racialized' both black and white identity in New England" (224–25). Unwelcome in the all-white society envisioned by Euro-Americans, many people of African descent "went native," living in Charlestown, RI, on tribal land "after the manner of the Indians" (Melish 2007: 23). One should also remember that the Narragansett were matrilineal and therefore considered any children by a Narragansett woman, regardless of the race or tribal affiliation of the father, as Narragansett and entitled to full citizenship in the Narragansett tribe. The historian Joanne Pope Melish (2007: 23) observes that although those of mixed African and Indian descent and the African migrants identified socially as Indian, many in the dominant society continued to see anyone of African descent—regardless of admixture—as innately inferior mongrels. Melish (1998: 469) explains that "although the efforts by southern New England Indians to survive by incorporating blacks worked, that very success posed new threats." In particular, the Narragansett and other Native groups now ran the risk of white citizens categorizing them as black and not as Indian.

Questions about racial authenticity constituted the heart of the challenges now faced by those Indians—mixed or not—who continued to claim Narragansett lineage. Many Rhode Islanders—motivated by a desire

to collapse social differences into a binary of black and white—began to challenge the indigeneity of the Narragansett (Melish 2007: 29). Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau (1997: 437) argue that between 1750 and 1800, town clerks throughout Rhode Island stopped referring to indigenous persons as Indian and instead substituted the term *mustee* and later Negro or black in a deliberate effort to commit what the authors called "documentary genocide." According to Herndon and Sekatau (1997: 453), the re-classification of Indians also had material motives and that "by writing Indians out of the record, local leaders helped ensure that Native people would not regain land in their towns." Thus, many local whites held a vested interest in abetting the disappearance of Rhode Island's indigenous population, if not in reality then at least on paper where it appeared to matter most.

Moreover, the historian Jean M. O'Brien (2010: 55) demonstrates that throughout the nineteenth century, writers in New England produced "replacement narratives" to negate "previous Indian history as a 'dead end' (literally)." Writers who endeavored to erase or diminish the historical significance and continued presence of the Narragansett celebrated what they deemed to be a "glorious New England history of just relations and property transactions . . . that legitimated their claims to the land" (55). O'Brien (55) explains that such narratives enabled writers and their readers to "rationalize their history of settler colonialism" and claim "New England as their own." These histories not only perpetuated and bolstered the trope of the vanishing Indian but also informed cross-cultural interactions in Rhode Island. Accounts of the tribe's demise worked to further marginalize the Narragansett because these narratives allowed writers, readers, and leaders to claim that—through no fault of their own—the Narragansett no longer existed and thus it was the Puritans and their posterity who could claim rightful ownership of the region.

In 1880, and in accordance with the prevailing interpretation that Rhode Island's indigenous community no longer existed, state administrators formally detribalized the Narragansett, proclaiming "the name of the Narragansett tribe now passes from the statute books" (Boissevain 1956: 11). The detribalization, however, was not as complete as the declaration portended because the Narragansett retained possession of their church and its two acres. And almost twenty years later state leaders continued to struggle with lingering questions about the legality of their actions.[4] In 1898, in a lengthy eighty-five-page decision, the State Supreme Court aggressively affirmed the authority of Rhode Island lawmakers to disband the Indians. The court explained, "the so-called tribe existed in little more than name, and had for years been in a practically moribund

condition, being but a slender band of Negroes with a slight infusion of Indian blood."[5] The perception that intermarriage diluted one's indigeneity combined with the changes in documentation observed by Herndon and Sekatau convinced many Rhode Islanders that the Indians had indeed expired. Hence, those continuing to proclaim the survival of the Narragansett were seen by white Rhode Islanders as inauthentic imposters who hoped to appropriate the name and entitlements of a bygone people.

Erroneous accounts of the tribe's demise were also reinforced and propagated by the popular media. For example, between 1900 and 1920, the *Providence Journal*—Rhode Island's leading newspaper—printed a total of eight articles about the Narragansett. Six of these stories discussed the waning of the tribe or the passing of individual members, including a story published in April 1907 about the death of R. Smith, whom the paper labeled "A true Narragansett" (*Providence Journal* 1907: S4, 8). Likewise, another article printed in June 1908 covered the passing of Benjamin Noka, whom the *Providence Journal* declared to be the "last of [the] Narragansett Indians" (*Providence Journal* 1908: 1). Ultimately, this trope bemoaning a vanishing people helped to erase "white acts of dispossession and generously mourned the fact that Indians were disappearing naturally" (Deloria 2004: 50). The scholar Siobhan Senier (2014: 2) observes that this myth "exercises special force east of the Mississippi" and "takes particular shape in New England" where "Yankees like to believe that Native people 'died off' (or 'lost') early on and that those who didn't die were 'assimilated' or have 'very little real Indian blood.'"

However, the narrative of disappearance or becoming black juxtaposed a reality in which many Narragansett professed the continuance of their community. Consequently, some Rhode Islanders turned away from lamentations about the death of Native peoples to openly challenging the validity of those who claimed Narragansett heritage. In an article titled "Narragansett Indians Again Seek Return of Lands," the *Providence Journal* cited a nineteenth-century report that claimed, "extinction by nature of the diluted Narragansett blood was imminent." Also quoted in the story was one Rhode Island town clerk who explained that the Indians "have not, so far as I can judge, anything tangible upon which to base their [land] claim" (*Providence Journal* 1921: 5). Through the course of publicly mourning the imagined demise of the Indians and challenging the authenticity of their remaining descendants, many Rhode Islanders propagated an enduring narrative that proclaimed nothing less than the extinction of the Narragansett tribe.

Faced with detribalization and legal erasure, in the early decades of the twentieth century Native communities across New England sought to

achieve public and legal recognition. Individuals within the Narragansett community, too, attempted to restore the tribe's public identity and implored local and federal authorities for redress.[6] In 1921, having been stymied by the courts in Rhode Island, the Narragansett leader Chief William I. Bent appealed to Washington and inquired how the federal government might recognize the tribe. In its response to Bent, the Department of the Interior explained that "the Narragansett tribe of Indians long ago became extinct" and that the federal government had no jurisdiction or control over their descendants.[7] Unwilling to acquiesce in the legal erasure of their collective identity, beginning in the early 1920s the Narragansett introduced a powwow as a component of their Annual August Meeting.[8] The well-advertised spectacle was intended to help elevate the tribe's public profile through cultural exhibition and social exchange. In fact, promoting and attending local powwows constituted the heart of the efforts of organizations such as the Indian Council of New England to increase the visibility of Native peoples throughout the region (McMullen 1996: 61). By the 1920s, Native peoples throughout New England became visible advocates calling for greater recognition of the continued presence of their communities; hence the Narragansett were primed to capitalize on Brown's athletic successes. However, despite the continued advocacy of intertribal organizations and individual tribal members, a decade later, little had changed in Rhode Island. This reality was evidenced by a territorial dispute raised in 1931 by the Narragansett elder and Councilman Reverand Daniel Sekater. Sekater's land claim, based on his tribal affiliation as a Narragansett, suffered a fate that was reminiscent of the dismissiveness that had frustrated Bent's inquiry. This was because Sekater's appeal—and in essence, the Narragansett themselves—were again dismissed as illegitimate (*Westerly Sun* 1932). Even so, lawsuits such as these kept the Narragansett question in play—were they or were they not an extinct people? It is likely Sekater understood that his challenge would be summarily dismissed but his effort was a measure of the desperation experienced by many living in the region during the 1930s.

Even before the stock market crashed in 1929, Rhode Island's economy was in rapid decline because the state's aging textile mills could not compete with the low wages and cheap fabrics of the industrialized New South (McLoughlin 1986: 195). The Great Depression only intensified a collapse that by 1932 placed more than 115,000 able-bodied Rhode Islanders on financial relief (Kellner and Lemons 1982: 122). The Narragansett suffered disproportionately in the region's hardships because—now mostly classified by white America as African Americans—they were relegated to the bottom of a racialized hierarchy. The marathon chronicler

Tom Derderian (1994: 151) communicated the unique social and economic conditions faced by many Narragansett when he wrote, "The economy in these depression times provided little for most Americans and nothing for Indians. They were a conquered people living on the margin, living on the meager scraps tossed out from an impoverished marketplace."

Despite the multiple and severe difficulties of being a colonized and marginalized people, the Narragansett remained, for the most part, a tight-knit community.[9] The realities of discrimination, isolation, and economic hardship over the past two hundred years had only abetted the tribe's coming together because the Indians often derived strength, acceptance, and even sustenance from one another (Senier 2014: 450–51). The early twentieth century proved no different for rural Narragansett. For example, when Charles Babcock—a prominent member of the tribe—was hospitalized in 1936, close to one hundred Narragansett attended a supper and fundraiser held for his benefit. The event was indicative of the tribe's communal nature because there were scarcely more than one hundred Narragansett still residing in the area.[10] The claim of Reverend Sekater is another case in point. When Sekater introduced his claim in 1931, the *Providence Journal* avowed that it was "only with the thought of justice for the remaining 118 Narragansett that he [Sekater] plans to ask for redress" (*Providence Journal* 1931: 2). At the age of seventy-eight, Sekater held little hope that this case might result in his own material betterment or that of his kin because the reverend had no direct decedents, which suggests that the Narragansett elder was more concerned with communal advancement than with personal gain.[11]

Although the Narragansett were hardly a conquered people, throughout the 1930s many tribal members certainly lived on the margin and Ellison Brown was no exception. Growing up in what one writer described as "intense poverty," Ellison Brown dropped out of school by the eighth grade in search of work as a day laborer. "My uncle grew up very poor," explained Brian Lightfoot Brown, "he lived in a shack . . . in Charlestown" (Brown n. d.). Coming of age in these circumstances, Brown may have, as Derderian claimed, seen racing as his only escape (Ward 2006: 5). The Indian runner would often walk up to forty miles to compete in races with the hope of winning some type of monetary reward (21). In fact, because Brown sometimes found that the wristwatch awarded to the second-place finisher was of greater value than the trophy presented to whoever came in first, the runner could at times be seen looking over the slate of prizes awarded to the top competitors and planning his performance accordingly (Hopkins 2014).

Brown's increasing reputation as an athlete elevated the public profile of the entire Narragansett community. In fact, Brown was often joined by

various tribal members on his long walks to the starting line. For example, in anticipation of Brown's arrival at a race in 1935, the *Boston Globe* stated that the runner would be accompanied "by seven sturdy braves and three haughty chiefs" (*Boston Globe* 1935: 30). Those Indians who escorted Brown did not simply intend to profit from the proceeds of a timepiece or a trophy. Instead, they were participants in region-wide Native revival efforts that swept through New England Native communities in the 1920s and 1930s and in which Native communities sought, among other things, public acknowledgment, economic opportunities, and relevancy.

Rhode Islanders continued to marvel at the exploits of Ellison Brown, whom they hoped to claim as one of their own. Hence, as Brown raced along the pathways of New England, he ran down more than just his athletic rivals, and on 24 April 1936, just four days after the Narragansett's victory in Boston, the Rhode Island General Assembly approved an act "providing for the observance of a special holiday, known as Indian day."[12] The *Providence Journal* left little ambiguity about what had spurred lawmakers when it declared, "R.I. Indian Day Set Aside in Honor to Marathon Victor" (*Providence Journal* 1936b: 13). Although the Narragansett had some previous mentions in state records, if only to assert their demise, this action of the General Assembly constituted the state's first official acknowledgment of the Narragansett as Indians since the justices handed down their seemingly definitive decision in 1898. Hence, Brown's athleticism and the acclaim it accrued provided the Narragansett with a new opportunity to profess the continuance of their community and to assert their Narragansett identity. And while Rhode Islanders reveled in Brown's victories, the Narragansett seized on the adulation of their neighbors to challenge more than a half century of systematic neglect. It was in this way that Brown's celebrity became the tribe's success.

After having shown the Indians nothing but disregard for so long, it might seem inconceivable that Rhode Island's leaders would celebrate Brown's athleticism and openly acknowledge the runner's indigeneity. However, if one recalls how Americans marveled at and championed the physical achievements of earlier indigenous athletes such as James Francis Thorpe and Andrew Sockalexis, or if we consider how whites contemporaneously embraced the athletic successes of other traditionally marginalized persons such as Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, it is easier to comprehend Rhode Island's remarkable reversal.

For one, when athletes of color competed on a world stage, white Americans temporarily suspended their prejudices. When James "Jim" Thorpe (Sac and Fox), Andrew Sockalexis (Penobscot), and Louis Tewanima (Hopi), for example, represented the United States in 1912 at the fifth

Olympiad in Stockholm, they did so in a volatile international situation but also to cheers of support that, according to one historian, "resonated among people across the nation" (Gilbert 2010: 93). Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert (93) explains that because national pride permeated athletics in the United States, white Americans could root unreservedly for a Native American when he or she competed against athletes from around the world. Therefore, as the author observes, "When Native runners stepped on to the track field and took their mark at the starting line, their brown skin and 'uncivilized' heritage momentarily held little significance for white spectators and those in the media." Like they had been in 1912, international tensions were heightened in the years before Brown's win in Boston. By 1936, with Berlin holding what promised to be the most politically charged Olympic Games in modern history, Americans searched far and wide for their athletic redeemers. National sentiment was aptly captured by a Rhode Island newspaper when—in anticipation of the upcoming Olympic qualifier in Boston—it concluded, "It's a miracle man the Olympic committee is looking for, not a runner" (*Westerly Sun* 1936a: 1). The nation would find some of its miracle men in those persons who had previously been relegated to the fringes of American society.

When Brown won the Boston Marathon in 1936—defeating a field of athletes that included some of the greatest distance runners in American history—he became the nation's top competitor in the event. Some Narragansett envisioned in Brown an ambassador who could dispel the fallacy of the tribe's demise and prove the continued relevance of the Narragansett people. Therefore, Brown carried with him not only the hopes and adulation of his country but also the aspirations of his fellow tribal members. Hence, by virtue of his impressive showing in Boston, the twenty-two-year-old Brown became not only his nation's best hope for victory in Berlin but also his people's best hope for redemption in Rhode Island. In a speech delivered at the tribe's Annual August Meeting and powwow just three months after Brown's victory, Chief Peckham articulated the hopes held by many. The sachem declared to all in attendance that "The Narragansett have been in the background heretofore but as the last shall be first, so we are now at the dawn of great recognition" (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:4). Peckham was referring anxiously to Brown's upcoming effort in Berlin. The chief continued, "What could be more fitting than to have one of our very own tribesmen win this race?" Peckham told his listeners that Brown deserved "all of the honor and praise he will receive" but that the fruits of this acclaim would accrue to the entire tribe. Because as others recognized and celebrated the Narragansett runner, they were also forced to admit that "the Indian still lives!" (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:4).

Brown's success brought exposure to a community that had been largely forgotten and dismissed by mainstream America. For example, between 1851 and 1940, the *New York Times* printed a total of twenty-six articles that related to the Narragansett Indians. Of these stories, five covered the deaths of individual members or the waning of the tribe as a whole, whereas sixteen of the stories recounted Brown's athletic exploits. This pattern also held true for regional dailies. Before Brown burst on the scene, the *Westerly Sun* — the principle newspaper of southern Rhode Island—ran a total of fifteen stories concerning the Narragansett between 1930 and 1934. However, during the next four years—a period of time over which Brown's athletic prowess was proven—the *Sun* printed forty-six articles about the Narragansett including fourteen that pertained exclusively to the Indian runner. It is clear that—just as Peckham promised—Brown's celebrity led to greater publicity for the tribe. And as newspaper reporters recounted the athletic accomplishments of the Indian runner, they also increased the general public's awareness about the survival and continuation of the Narragansett Indian community.

Brown and his Indian supporters were keenly aware that high profile competition held the promise of greater recognition, and the Narragansett intentionally turned the runner's indigeneity into a spectacle, making it impossible to separate Brown from his heritage. For example, in 1935, just days after the death of his mother, and escorted by close to twenty Narragansett, a grieving Brown arrived in Boston to compete in the marathon. The *Dawn* reported that it was Grace Babcock Brown's dying wish that her son run the race (Senier 2014: 509). Those who accompanied Brown were there to support their grieving tribesman, but they were also concerned with professing the tribe's continued existence because the Indians arrived in full regalia for all to see. The runner even competed in an outfit stitched together from his late mother's ceremonial dress (Ward 2006: 28). The next year, as Brown raced his way into Woodland Park in 1936, it was Narragansett runner Bunk Stanton who sprinted to his side blowing kisses and encouraging Brown along (*Boston Globe* 1936: 25). Stanton, himself a veteran runner, understood that the publicity and pageantry associated with a victory in the world's premier running event would elevate not only Brown's personal profile but also that of the entire Narragansett Indian community. Thus, Stanton made the trip to Boston not just to encourage his protégé, but also to support his people.[13] Stanton's appearance drove home the point because as he matched Brown stride for stride through Woodland Park, Stanton did so in full regalia, complete with a headdress. Although the press corps snickered and derided the Indians as they cheered Brown through the park, there was no denying that he was their man. The runner about to win

the venerated marathon was a Narragansett. Brown's victory and the Indians who publicly celebrated their champion—while dressed in their ceremonial regalia—made it abundantly clear to all observers that the tribe did not simply pass away as the state of Rhode Island had claimed.

Brown's success signaled to the world the Narragansett's undeniable presence in Rhode Island, and the whole community invested in him. Despite the fact that many of the Indians were impoverished, tribal members established a fund to help pay for Brown's racing expenses (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:1). Moreover, Brown understood his triumph in 1936 to be more than just a personal victory: as he broke the tape at the end of the Boston Marathon, the exhausted runner cried out "we done it" (2:2). Maybe Brown was thinking of Stanton and the other Narragansett who had helped stiffen his determination as he sprinted through Woodland Park. Or the runner might have been recalling the financial support he received from untold others within the tribal community. Perhaps Brown was thinking of his indigenous supporters who had accompanied him on his long walks to the starting line. Still, it may have been his mother or all of the Narragansett that the runner had in mind when he made this exclamation. Whoever it was that Brown was thinking of when he crossed the finish line, it was clear that he believed his success was shared. It can be proposed that the next day when Brown told reporters that "maybe now the white man will take me seriously," he was including the same "we" who had helped him win the race (Ward 2006: 2). Because of his victory in Boston, the white man did indeed take notice of Brown and the indigenous community from which he hailed. Brown's athletic success provided the Narragansett with a modicum of social relevancy and the Indians seized this opportunity to reassert publicly their presence and proclaim their heritage.

Although Brown's athleticism and the acclaim it garnered were essential in capturing the attention of the general public, what non-Indians saw when they finally did gaze upon the Natives, was in many ways, just as important. As discussed, white Rhode Islanders had based their analysis and dismissal of the Narragansett almost exclusively on appearance, arguing that all of the real Indians must have died out because what remained of the tribe was a "cluster of negroes or dusky complexioned persons" who did not resemble "real Indians."[14] In order to be accepted by the white majority, after having had their ethnic and racial authenticity challenged for so long, the Narragansett, like many Indians across the nation at the time, portrayed what their white observers believed to be the genuine traits of indigenous peoples.[15] That is why tribal members attended Brown's races in regalia fashioned in the western Native style, donned headdresses, and played their drums. However, this is not to suggest that

the Narragansett sought validation from the white majority, but instead that conformity on the part of the Indians was strategic because, if the past half century had taught them anything, it was that perception mattered. Brown certainly looked the part because the Narragansett champion appeared to be the very embodiment of a Hollywood stereotype, save the long braided hair. Indeed, with his bronze colored skin, straight black hair, high cheekbones, and thin lips, Brown resembled what many whites had envisioned an Indian to look like (see fig. 1). It was his appearance that rivaled the runner's athleticism for coverage in the press as reporters sought to describe the Indian, or what one writer called "the ethnological mystery man," to their readers (*Boston Herald* 1936: 33). Jack Barnwell of the *Boston Post* referred to Brown as a "full-blooded Indian" and a "mahogany-hued . . . dark-skinned warrior." Ruth C. Bodwell, also writing for the *Post*, described the Indian as "brown-skinned and as smooth-cheeked as a girl." Will Cloney of the *Boston Herald* called Brown a "penniless redskin" (Derderian 1994: 152). In essence, what the reporters were telling their audiences was that this man looked Native. Albeit offensive in many respects, the descriptions employed by the newspaper reporters helped to certify the Indian's authenticity, because it was these reporters who first described Brown as "full-blooded" when the last of the Narragansett had supposedly died off decades earlier. For a people trying to assert publicly their ethnic and racial authenticity, Brown's appearance and the ink it generated looked to be a godsend (fig. 2).

After the marathon, the US Olympic committee chose Brown to run in the track and field events in Berlin later that year, and anticipation of the Indian runner's world debut was high. The excitement was especially palpable in Rhode Island because the Olympic Games coincided with the state's tercentennial celebration of its first white settlement. In a region where whites were originally only allowed to settle because of the generosity of the Narragansett, it appeared serendipitous that a descendant of this tribe would bring international glory and honor to the progeny of the Puritans as they celebrated their three hundredth year on the continent. It was the Providence Tercentennial Committee that sponsored Brown's trip to Boston and funded the latter part of his training. But, as Americans—and in particular Rhode Islanders—prepared to celebrate the athleticism of their native son, they were also forced to acknowledge that this son was indeed Native. It is revealing that the arguments and assumptions made by state officials during the era of detribalization and reiterated by detractors for more than fifty years were forgotten or dismissed once Brown's athletic prowess was proven. For example, the day after the runner's victory in Boston, a headline in the *Sun* stated "Tarzan Brown, Full Blooded

Figure 2. As seen in this 1939 *PIC* magazine cover, Brown's athleticism helped to highlight his heritage. Photograph by Sam Andre.

Narragansett Indian Wins BAA Marathon." The questions about authenticity and blood quantum that had long dogged the Narragansett suddenly disappeared as Rhode Islanders eagerly accepted the Indian runner as one of their own.

After the Boston Marathon, Rhode Islanders hailed Brown as nothing less than a conquering hero. There were at least three official state- and locally sponsored receptions in his honor. At the festivities held in Providence—Rhode Island's capital—Mayor James Dunne and a host of other city officials lined up to congratulate the Indian. While shaking Brown's hand, Dunne revealed what had precipitated all of the pomp and excitement when he remarked, "I hope that there is absolutely no question of your participation in the Olympics" (*Providence Journal* 1936a: 9) The mayor and many other Rhode Islanders were aware that by virtue of his victory in Boston, the Indian's Olympic aspirations had increased exponentially. Dunne had made it clear that Rhode Islanders were eager to ride the runner's coattails all the way to Berlin. Similarly, as Lieutenant Governor Robert Quinn congratulated

Brown, he stated, "I'm going to shake again and wish you the best of luck in Berlin" (9). Before exiting the governor's office, Brown donned a headdress and sat for pictures with local dignitaries. The event not only allowed the champion to affirm his Indian identity but also provided Brown the opportunity to symbolically, dramatically, and publicly embrace the indigenous community from which he hailed. Upon leaving the office, Brown was whisked to the state assembly, where he witnessed the oration of a joint resolution that read in part, "Whereas, this strong-hearted son of enduring spirit, the very embodiment of all those qualities which have made these Indian runners of the trails and hills an heroic part of our glamorous history, deserves the friendliest of greetings from this general assembly for thus bringing to Rhode Island . . . this high honor, with its placing at the assembly of the nations at the next Olympics."[16]

With the conclusion of the reading, lawmakers stood and—according to one reporter—"paid the new Marathon champion one of the finest ovations ever tendered a visitor" (9). The extent to which Rhode Islanders celebrated their Olympic hopeful perplexed some observers; an astonished writer for the *Boston Traveler* exclaimed, "The state of Rhode Island has gone completely daffy over its new . . . champion, Ellison 'Tarzan' Brown, the Narragansett Indian" (*Boston Traveler* 1936: 14). For their part, the Narragansett were certainly pleased that the same officials they had spent the last fifty years haranguing for recognition, inclusion, and the return of land, were suddenly "daffy" about one of their own. Just days after Brown's reception, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the Indian Day legislation and allowed the date for the ceremony to be determined by the Narragansett. This dramatic reversal in official policy appeared to validate the promise that some tribal members had located in Brown, and as Chief Peckham explained, the tribe decided to hold the celebration on the third Monday in April because "Tarzan had won the marathon on that day" (*Westerly Sun* 1936b: 13). And when Princess Red Wing—a social, political, and cultural leader among the Narragansett—addressed the crowd at the first Indian Day celebration, she reminded her listeners that the Indians had "cheered Ellison Brown on his upward path to victory in the marathon races when the world knew him not" (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:4). Hence, it appeared—for the moment at least—that although it was Brown who had endured to win the twenty-six-mile grind, it was the Narragansett who had truly persevered as the tribe finally won public recognition.

However, the holiday was not the only redresses earned by way of the athleticism of the Indian runner and the obstinacy of his indigenous supporters, because Rhode Island lawmakers contemporaneously debated a bill finally granting the Narragansett clear title to the two-acre plot of their

historic Indian church and tribal burial ground. Similarly, just two months after Brown's victory, a replica of a traditional Indian village was opened in Rhode Island's Goddard Park to much acclaim. Governor Theodore Francis Green declared that the village "would represent a bond between the red man and the white man as long as it stands, and I think it will stand for a long time" (*Providence Journal* 1936d: 3). The exhibit, along with the church bill and state holiday, helped to relocate the Narragansett—however briefly—from obscurity to a place of social, political, and economic relevance.

This advancement, though, was only possible because the celebration of Brown by white citizens did not upset well-established social and racial boundaries or enduring ideologies, as the success of indigenous athletes could be understood as the by-product of a primitive physicality and evidence of Indian difference (Deloria 2004: 122). For example, in choosing to refer to the Narragansett runner as Tarzan instead of Ellison or Deerfoot—his Indian name—Brown's competitors and chroniclers simultaneously marveled, rationalized, and minimized the runner's accomplishments. The historian Gail Bederman (1995: 221) shows that during the early twentieth century, Edgar Rice Burrough's fictional character of the same name stood as the embodiment of a primitive and savage masculinity. By 1934 Burrough's book had sold more than 750,000 copies and the name Tarzan was well known within the popular culture (219). Thus, the exploits of this Indian Tarzan could be interpreted as animalistic, the same way audiences understood the fictional Tarzan's prowess in the jungle.[17] Many white spectators merely embraced Brown as a caricature of an indigenous past, a wild man who emerged from the woods with a natural and raw talent, or as Derderian (1994: 152) observes, "It was expected that he [Brown] could run—he was an Indian . . . if he succeeded it was because he did what his handlers prepared him to do, like a thoroughbred stallion." Hence, the runner's accomplishments were framed as natural and primitive and in no way emblematic of the continued relevance of indigenous persons or a challenge to the privileged and seemingly natural superiority of white Rhode Islander's and their "verifiable" claims to the region.

Moreover, public acknowledgment of the tribe appeared to be of little consequence to many whites because the Narragansett, who were relatively small in number, did not receive any monetary recompense. In fact, the Indians seemed to gain nothing tangible from public awareness, save a two-acre plot that was already under the tribe's control. Therefore, when Arthur Duffy, the state's commissioner of the Amateur Athletic Union, advocated that "the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island get behind this boy" because, "when he wins the marathon it will mean not only a great

victory for Uncle Sam, but for Rhode Island," he expressed the promise that many of the state's white citizens had envisioned in Brown as they exhorted the Indian runner without questioning the veracity of their own exclusionary policies (*Providence Journal* 1936c: 25).

The praise, acknowledgment, and attention, however, was fleeting. Brown's performance at the Olympics was disappointing—he had to withdraw from competition because of injuries and severe leg cramps—and the enthusiasm that had carried the Indian runner across the ocean quickly dissipated (Dowdell 2008). And when the spectacle of the tercentennial and the excitement of the Olympics faded, Rhode Islanders quickly returned to the customary policy of neglecting and marginalizing the state's indigenous population. However, a precedent had been set, and the recognition and property exacted by tribal members in 1935 and 1936, would figure prominently in the forceful demands made by future generations of Narragansett leaders.[18] In what would prove to be the paper's final issue, the editors of the *Dawn* (Redwing and Hazard 2006, 2:5) reflected on what the past year had meant to the Narragansett: "In the many programs of the year, only a pleasant, bright and cheerful side of the Narragansett have been portrayed. Always the Indian is giving up to the paleface. . . . We have given what we had to give in the past. In the present we gave of our members for entertainment. . . . Our reward is—Rhode Island knows now—THE NARRAGANSETT TRIBE STILL EXISTS!" Indeed, by publicly celebrating Brown's success and participating in the pageantry of the tercentennial, tribal members' efforts not only affirmed the persistence of their community but also helped to fashion a future in which the Indians and their posterity could demand redress as the regions original and rightful inhabitants.

In 2014, the Narragansett journalist John Christian Hopkins eloquently recounted Brown's achievements in a poem when he stated, "A man climbed Heartbreak Hill, a legend descended the other side" (Senier 2014: 533). However, modern interpretations of that legend merit some revision because Brown's accomplishments not only contributed to Narragansett lore but also helped to make public acknowledgment of the tribe's communal identity a reality. Thus, while it was a man who climbed Heartbreak Hill, it was an Indian nation that descended the other side.

The headline for a short two paragraph story found in the *New York Times* on 24 August 1975 read "Ellison (Tarzan) Brown, 61, Marathon Runner, Is Dead." Although the headline appeared to communicate all of the pertinent information, it was the article's first line that revealed Ellison Brown's real legacy: after reporting the name and hometown of the deceased and before listing the runner's athletic accomplishments, the paper

identified Brown—foremost—as a Narragansett Indian. During the same year that Brown passed away, the community his athleticism helped to preserve once again sued the state of Rhode Island for the return of ancestral lands. But now—primarily due to the recognition afforded to Brown and the Narragansett in 1936—lawmakers could no longer claim that the Indians had been disbanded in 1880. In fact, although the Narragansett officially obtained the land on which the now federally recognized tribe has built its community longhouse, administration offices, health center, police and environmental enforcement offices, church, and powwow grounds in a settlement with state officials in 1978, this land and the recognition it portended was really won in 1936, on a hill in Boston.

Notes

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1 Throughout this article, I use the terms *Indian*, *Native*, *Native American*, *indigenous*, and *tribe* interchangeably. Scholars mostly agree that the terms *Native*, *Native American*, and *indigenous* are appropriate, and when the Narragansett reincorporated in 1935, they referred to themselves as the Narragansett Indian Tribe.
2 In 1939, Brown once again won the Boston Marathon, setting a new world record in the process.
3 Gleeson (Alice Collins) papers, MS.1U.G4, John Hay Library Special Collections, Brown University.
4 Rhode Island officials may not have had the authority to detribalize the Narragansett, because according to the Non-Intercourse Act, only the US Congress could regulate tribes.
5 Rhode Island Supreme Court (1898), "Opinion of the Justices of the Supreme Court, Relative to Chapter 800 of the Public Laws (The Narragansett Indians) Given to the Senate, at the January Session, 1898, Prepared by Justice Rogers," 71.catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100471757 (accessed 20 March 2015).
6 Rhode Island General Assembly, "House Resolution (H 530)," 7 January 1932, Rhode Island State Archives.
7 E. B. Meritt, 9455-1921 file no. 211, Indian Office Files: National Archives.
8 US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Federal Acknowledgment, 29 July 1982. www.bia.gov/cs/groups/xofa/documents/text/idc-001511.pdf (accessed 26 January 2015).
9 This is not to suggest that there were not, at times, significant divisions and infighting within the tribe. For example, the *Narragansett Dawn*, a local

newsletter, was somewhat controversial because it was produced and championed by a younger contingent who advocated for a more public tribal presence. Divisions also arose between the Narragansett who remained in southern Rhode Island and those who left the area in search of economic opportunity and greater religious autonomy. However, when presented with challenges from outside the community, the Narragansett tended to close ranks.

10 A tribal census conducted in 1935 counted 259 Narragansett. However, some of this number did not reside close to the tribe's ancestral land in southern Rhode Island. And although the *Providence Journal's* count of 118 Narragansett in 1931 was almost certainly low, the number most likely represented a majority of those who still lived in the area.

11 As an elderly man with no successors, Sekater may not have feared reprisals from the white majority as much as some of his fellow tribesmen would, and it is possible that the elder was simply the named litigant representing a larger contingent of Narragansett.

12 Rhode Island General Assembly (1936), "Chapter 2331," Rhode Island State Archives.

13 Stanton served as Brown's inspiration. One story recounts how, at the age of twelve, Brown followed Stanton on a twenty-mile run, keeping pace with Stanton despite the fact that Brown was running barefoot. After that, Stanton committed to help train Brown, even connecting the young runner with his manager. See Dowdell 2008.

14 Rhode Island Supreme Court (1898), "Opinion of the Justices of the Supreme Court, Relative to Chapter 800 of the Public Laws" (the Narragansett Indians): Given to the Senate at the January Session, 1898, 71.catalog.hathitrust.org /Record/100471757.

15 This also was a reality experienced by tribes existing in the Jim Crow South. See Adams 2016: 2.

16 Rhode Island General Assembly, "Joint Resolution 126 (H-979)," Rhode Island State Archives.

17 According to tribal lore, Ellison Brown was given the nickname Tarzan because he could move through the woods and swamps of southern Rhode Island as deftly as Tarzan could move through the jungle. However, some authors posit that the name was given to Brown by competitors who marveled at the runner's seemingly natural, almost animalistic prowess.

18 In 1975, the Narragansett sued the state of Rhode Island for the return of land that the Indians claimed had been taken illegally. Because state leaders openly acknowledged the existence of the tribe in the 1930s, it could no longer be claimed that the Narragansett ceased to exist following detribalization. A settlement was reached in 1978 that saw the return of twelve hundred acres to the tribe.

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