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The Bloodline Divided: Colonial Laws and the Erasure of Black-Indigenous Kinship

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Colonial Laws and the Erasure of Black-Indigenous Kinship

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Abstract

The legal classification of identity in the Americas has long served as a tool of division. In the centuries following European colonization, various laws, censuses, and tribal rolls were implemented not only to categorize populations but to fracture ancestral unity between African-descended peoples and Indigenous nations. This paper examines how blood quantum laws, the Dawes Rolls, and institutionalized racial binaries severed organic kinship lines between Black and Native communities. By exposing the mechanics of legal erasure and identity reduction, this work seeks to restore the broader narrative of blended lineage and the right to self-definition.

Introduction: Kinship Interrupted

Throughout the colonial and early American periods, survival often meant forming alliances. African peoples—enslaved, escaped, or free—found refuge and relationship with Indigenous nations. These unions were not incidental; they were expressions of shared cosmology, resistance, and humanity.

However, as colonizers expanded their control, they recognized the power of solidarity between Black and Native peoples. Legal systems were designed to fracture that unity—reclassifying, erasing, and dividing the people who threatened the colonial order simply by standing together.

This paper unpacks the tools of that division¹.

¹ See Barbara Krauthamer's *Black Slaves, Indian Masters*, Tiya Miles' *Ties That Bind*, and the work of Angela Gonzales and Circe Sturm for critical examinations of racial reclassification and identity politics in Native American and African American intersections. These scholars illuminate the political motivations and lasting consequences of separating communities that once stood in shared defense of sovereignty and belonging.

Section I: The Dawes Rolls and the Politics of Recognition

Between 1898 and 1914, the Dawes Act sought to register members of the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory. While promoted as a means of formalizing land ownership and citizenship, it instead functioned as a gatekeeping document—determining "official" identity by bureaucratic standards.

Thousands of individuals of African and mixed descent—many of whom had lived, married, and contributed to tribal life for generations—were placed on separate "Freedmen Rolls," regardless of cultural ties. This institutional separation has had long-lasting effects:

- Denial of tribal citizenship and benefits to Freedmen descendants
- Legal battles for recognition that continue into the present day
- Internal community tensions and trauma over who is "Native enough"

Section II: Blood Quantum and the Science of Erasure

The introduction of blood quantum laws reduced identity to fractional mathematics. A system with no basis in traditional Indigenous thought, blood quantum policies imposed colonial logic onto ancestral memory.

Key implications include:

- Gradual statistical elimination of Indigenous identity over generations
- Disenfranchisement of people with African heritage, even when tribally raised
- Creation of a racial caste system within tribal communities

Rather than honoring kinship, culture, or community ties, blood quantum became a weapon of disappearance. It replaced living culture with bureaucratic calculation. Entire generations were excluded from their heritage based on arbitrary thresholds. This policy served settler interests by shrinking the legal number of "Indians" eligible for land, sovereignty, or resources. The ultimate effect was cultural dismemberment masked as administrative precision.²

² For deeper analysis, see Jack Forbes' *Africans and Native Americans*, David Wilkins' *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, and the archival research of the

Section III: One Drop and the Racial Binary

Simultaneously, African Americans were subjected to the "one drop rule"—a policy wherein any known African ancestry rendered a person legally Black. This rule starkly contrasted with the eroding fractions of blood quantum used in Native classification.

Together, these two legal fictions created a trap:

- One drop made you too Black to be Native
- A fraction too low made you not Native enough

This was not coincidence—it was design. These dual classifications served colonial interests by creating mutually exclusive identities, undermining shared claims to land, treaty rights, and ancestral legacy. They transformed blood—once sacred into a legal weapon.

National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) regarding the effects of blood quantum policies on tribal cohesion and population decline.

Contemporary scholars and cultural historians, such as Dane Calloway, have highlighted how these tools of identity governance were part of a larger campaign to rewrite the origin story of African-descended peoples in America. Calloway's work often challenges the mainstream transatlantic slave narrative, arguing that many Black Americans have Indigenous roots that were systematically obscured by colonial record-keeping and legal manipulation.³

Section IV: The Legacy of Division

The long-term result of these systems is a fractured collective memory. Many Black families with Native ancestry were taught to hide it. Others were excluded from community life by shifting tribal laws influenced by federal policy. Still others carried both heritages in silence, lacking the legal recognition to name them publicly.

But why was this buried so deeply? Only a very powerful Being—one whose memory carried the potential to disrupt an entire system—would require such a frequency prison. These laws were not just administrative—they were spiritual shackles. Designed to suppress encoded memory, they disrupted not only lineage but light.

Through the imposed binary, colonial systems did not simply divide—they severed pathways of sacred knowing. The unity of Black and Native identity posed a threat: not because of genetics, but because of governance. These were people who remembered freedom without permission, ceremony without buildings, and land as living mother. That kind of memory could topple empires.

But the resurgence is happening. More people are reclaiming their blended lineage, their oral histories, their land, their names. And with that reclamation comes healing. It is not about going back. It is about returning whole.

³ Dane Calloway, *It Was Told In Reverse: The Untold Truth About The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, and associated digital content (YouTube, ImJustHereToMakeYouThink.com) explore the overlap of legal erasure, misclassification, and Indigenous identity among Black Americans. While controversial in some academic circles, his work represents a significant cultural perspective within the broader discussion of historical memory and identity reclamation.

Conclusion: We Were Never Meant to Be Divided

This paper does not seek to blame tribes or uplift one identity over another. It seeks to expose how colonial systems of classification worked to disempower both Black and Indigenous peoples by setting them at odds with one another.

Reclaiming our connections is not just a matter of ancestry—it is a matter of sovereignty. Of remembering the laws that governed the heart before the policies that regulated the blood. It is the return of relational governance—where kinship precedes paperwork and where the soul is sovereign.

This is not simply history. It is prophecy remembering itself.

Suggested Readings

- Angela Walton-Raji, *Black Indian Genealogy Research*
- Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family*
- Barbara Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters*
- Arica L. Coleman, *That the Blood Stay Pure*
- Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*

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