

## THE ITCH



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A curious phenomenon that Native scholars in the United States have long noted and regarded as pathological is the tendency for European immigrants to take off their ancestral heritage as if it were no more than a sweater and assume the new identity “American.” If English was already their native language, so much the easier. If it was not, many an immigrant family made a conscious choice to refrain from speaking their own language at home thereby forcing their children to become English-speakers. Aside from the obvious practicality of knowing the language in the country in which one lives, there is another force at work. First, English, of course, is not the native language of this land; it merely represents the language of conquest and, of course, it is not the only one. In some regions of the United States the prevailing language of conquest was Dutch, French or Spanish. In any case, there are hundreds of native languages that today are forever lost and a handful that continue to be spoken fluently and are the first language learned by the Native American children from such nations. There is also an energetic resurgence in the teaching of Native languages here although language learned in a classroom is unlikely to recover the richness of the original language as it was spoken by its original speakers. Second, it seems as if only Europeans had the odd notion that it was even possible to transform themselves and that, once transformed, they would represent the “typical” American. They did not become “white” people until they had remolded their identities against a measuring stick of non-white Native people first in the Americas and later in the global structures of European colonialism.

The great tragedy that American Indian scholars see has several aspects to it. First, the immigrants who denied their ancestral heritage and language to their children performed a cultural castration. Few Americans of European descent can trace their ancestry beyond the generation of their grandparents. Even those who have actively done genealogical research are often content to stop when they have discovered the ancestor who actually emigrated from home and made the voyage as if their family had simply been created on that boat and had no prior history. My

nonscientific observation is quite simple but I truly believe it. People leave home because they are unhappy and they believe that they will be happier somewhere else. They develop an “itch.” It has become part of American folk knowledge that human beings have some kind of instinctual impulse to expand and to penetrate into the unknown. They see this as part of their biological heritage because it lets them off the hook. Instead of acknowledging that individuals had choices and made decisions of a certain kind that resulted in the devastation of other nations, they can simply believe that there really was no choice. This kind of social Darwinism is very much part of the Euro-American belief system and it may, particularly, derive from the period of Britain’s most active colonial expansion. After all, if the highest mountain in the world must be climbed simply because it is there, then clearly other nations (especially those with rich natural resources) must be dominated because, simply, they are there and the resources belong to someone else when they obviously should belong to oneself (since it is oneself that wants them so badly). It has been my personal observation that those Euro-Americans who have actively studied their ancestral heritage(s) and enjoy expressing something of their ancestors’ cultural heritage (as in Highland Games, Oktoberfest, etc.), are the least likely to be racist or ethnocentric toward people of other groups. Similarly, it appears to be a feature of the race-based hate groups in the United States, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations, that members have little or no accurate knowledge about their ancestral heritage. Having this heritage-vacuum, such groups fill the void with propaganda designed to make alienated people feel good about themselves at the expense of others. It has become important to many American Indian scholars to help Euro-Americans rediscover who they are. In American Indian Studies classes that I teach, for example, it is common for young Euro-Americans to express a feeling of shame about being “white”. They need to know that an ethnic group like the Germans (to pick just one example) may be capable of developing such concepts as Nazism, but that from that same ethnic group came such individuals as Beethoven. Another aspect to the pathology of cultural self-castration is the legacy of alienation that is so dangerously pervasive in modern America. The alienated teenager finds a “heritage” among gangs, skinheads, religious cults, and other groups. Having nowhere to expand, like Alexander the Great, the Euro-American laments a profound loss of purpose and is unable to see an unbroken chain leading backwards or forwards from the self. Finally, not content to do these terrible things to themselves, they did them to others. People were torn from their African, Native American, South Pacific, and other cultures by force and, with great intent, separated from family

members and anyone who could speak their native language. As African families, in particular, were forced apart, few were able to maintain the knowledge of tribe and clan. The rarity of such works as Alex Haley's *Roots* speaks to the violence done to heritage as well as to person. In the United States, from 1879 until the 1970s, government-run boarding schools taught American Indian children to be ashamed of their heritage and then forced the rather inadequate "heritage" of "American" on them.

As a person of mixed ancestry, Native American and European (my father's people are Hopi from Arizona and my mother is mixed-blood Miwok), I became fascinated with the "itch." Why did Europeans leave home rather than fix what was wrong in their own societies? Why did they force those without the "itch" to go through a similar transformation? What had so wounded the Europeans that they arrived in the Americas, at the end of the fifteenth century, unable to live as ordinary creatures of the earth? Woundedness was, perhaps, the most obvious impression that the early European explorers made on Native Americans. Account after account describes the unhappiness and childish impulses of the Europeans as they arrived. American Indian societies have always placed a great value on the virtues of hospitality and generosity. In virtually every instance, Europeans arrived on American shores with severe nutritional deficiencies and a variety of other ailments; many had died at sea. The Native people fed them, gave them medicines, bathed them, provided clothing for them, helped them salvage their belongings from shipwrecks, provided land for them to build their villages, and taught them the particular techniques for hunting, fishing and agriculture that are best suited to this land. The Native people always noted that the Europeans had been so greatly abused in some way that this hospitality and these gifts were viewed with suspicion.