BECOMING INDIAN

The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century

one
Opening

Often when we are about to leave a place, we find out what really matters, what people care about, what rattles around inside their hearts. So it was for me at the end of fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tahlequah, Oklahoma—the heart of the Cherokee Nation—where I lived in 1995 and 1996 and where I have returned on a regular basis ever since. On the eve of my first departure, a number of Cherokee people, particularly tribal employees, started directing my attention toward an intriguing and at times disturbing phenomenon. This is how in late April 1996 I found myself screening a video with five Cherokee Nation employees, two of whom worked in the executive offices, the others for the *Cherokee Advocate*, the official tribal newspaper.[1] Several of them had insisted that if I was going to write about Cherokee identity politics,[2] I needed to see this particular video. A woman from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina had shot the original footage, having traveled all the way to Portsmouth, Ohio, in July 1987 to record the unusual proceedings. The images she captured were so powerful that tribal employees in Oklahoma and North Carolina were still expressing confusion and resentment almost a decade later.

Though it was in terrible shape from repeated dubbing, the video gripped our attention. Not only had it been shot surreptitiously, with the novice filmmaker and her companion posing as news reporters, but also our version was a copy of a copy of a copy that had been passed hand to hand, like some weird Grateful Dead bootleg,

making its way through Indian country from the eastern seaboard to the lower Midwest. I recall asking myself why these two Cherokee women felt the need to engage in guerilla-style filmmaking and hide their identities as Eastern Band tribal members—and what subject could have so captivated Cherokee audiences around the country and had such staying power that they still found it meaningful, even critically so. The answers were not simple. Sitting on uncomfortable office furniture in the tribal complex, we watched an effort at repatriation that took place in 1987, three years prior to the passage of the Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act in 1990. During this event, the five-thousand-year-old remains of forty-seven Native Americans were handed over for reburial to a group of amateur genealogists who had decided to form a Cherokee Indian tribe.[4]

Who were these people? This was the great mystery of the video. My viewing companions had their own answers: fake Indians, New Age poseurs, "wannabes." Though the terms made me wince, it seemed that everyone in the room expected me to share their perspective and to do something about it—they assumed that I would write some sort of anthropological exposé. Instead, I found myself wondering how we could tell whether these people were really Indian, or Cherokee, or not, and on what basis such decisions should be made.

The prelude to this seemingly bizarre turn of events had taken place only a year before the tape was made. In fall 1986, David Kuhn, a lawyer and an avid amateur archaeologist who was working under the auspices of the Scioto County Board of Commissioners, had unearthed an archaic Indian village in an area near present-day Portsmouth, Ohio. When the news became public, a local man named Oliver Collins began to lobby the commissioners, arguing that the remains were a part of his people's history and needed to be reinterred. Collins was and is a local leader of the Tallige Fire Cherokee Nation, a group of self-identified Cherokees that is not federally recognized but has been acknowledged by the state of Ohio in a state senate proclamation. According to Collins, the Tallige Fire community claimed kinship with the remains, not as direct descendants but as ostensible Cherokees. Because they identified themselves as American Indians, they felt that they had a right not only to possess the remains but also to rebury these in whatever manner they saw fit. Skeptical of these assertions, a Scioto County commissioner said, "I don't know who [the remains] belong to. They don't belong to me and they don't belong to the tribe that's here. I guess, like us, they were children to God and that's where He wanted them, back in the ground" (*Dayton Daily News*, July 20, 1987). In what appeared to be a goodwill gesture toward Native American concerns, the Scioto County Board of Commissioners granted the Tallige Fire community its request. The remains of the forty-seven individuals were handed over for reburial in a large, media-driven spectacle with nearly two hundred people in attendance. This was the event that the two amateur filmmakers documented.

Several things struck me as I sat there watching this video, hearing the groans and laughter of my friends and acquaintances in the Cherokee Nation offices. First were

the very public nature of what would normally be a private event and the way in which the media and crowd eagerly gathered to watch the exotic display. The tape began with what seemed to be a representative clip from the local news, with the reporter describing in reverential tones the four-day ritual reburial, but the images that followed were a little off. I was struck by the odd regalia—hospital smocks for the men and Pocahontas-style, off-the-shoulder dresses for the women—that were worn during the ritual. This uniform style of dress among the forty or so Tallige Fire community members must have been part of a deliberate plan, for they stood in sharp relief to the gathered crowd in cutoff jeans and sleeveless Whisky River T-shirts, trying to beat the midday summer sun. Without the differences in dress, it would have been hard to tell who was who, because all of the participants, including the Tallige Fire Cherokees, appeared at least on the surface to be working-class whites, given their skin color, clothing, and mannerisms and the long line of beat-up Dodge pickups and Pontiac sedans parked at the side of the road.

Although their complicated histories and identities lay far beneath what might be gleaned from an old videotape or a casual observation, it was clear that Tallige Fire community members viewed the repatriation as an opportunity to validate their kinship claims to Indian ancestors. After the initial news clip, the video showed the reburial ceremony in all of its elaborate detail, with step-by-step explanations from Oliver Collins and other Tallige Fire leaders, who wanted the crowd to know what was going on and why it had larger cultural significance. I watched as each of the senior women of the tribe carried a small wooden casket to the edge of a large hole, approximately 15 feet deep and 20 feet in diameter. As they gingerly lowered the caskets to the men, who smudged them with burning sage, cedar, and tobacco and placed them carefully in a circle around a central fire, Oliver Collins would say something cryptic like this: "The ceremony in front of you is very old…lost to history, it's been going on so long."[5] At times he was a bit less mysterious: "We are sanctifying this ground. The sacred fire will burn the entire time we are reinterring the bodies and then be put out, but the coals will remain here forever." Regardless of the specific language he used and his clarity or lack thereof, this seemed to me, and to most of the people watching the video with me, to be some kind of performance in which the Tallige Fire members were "playing Indian" in an effort to authenticate their status as a Native American community and that they did so in a manner that was inconsistent—at times, seeming secure in their identity claims and at others, more tentative.[6]

At one point, when pressed about the origins of the group, Collins told the news media, "These people [gathered here] are of Cherokee descent.… We are in association with the Cherokee Nation. That's the first step. We want to belong, if we can prove our bloodlines. We are amateur genealogists. That's what we are."[7] But only moments later, he said that the group was "bringing [its] forefathers and foremothers back to their home" and that his people needed "to say prayers to [their] deceased." Though I noted the many inconsistencies in his statements, it was clear that Collins held fast to the belief that he and other members of the Tallige Fire community had Cherokee ancestry,

despite not being able to prove it. What had begun as a genealogical association of people interested in documenting their Indian ancestry seemed to be morphing before my eyes into a tribe, or at least into a group of people who wanted to belong to a tribe and who seemed comfortable with performing that moment of desire as Cherokees.

Although these contortions were disorienting to watch and raised many questions, for me what was most striking was the great number of children who were innocently participating in the day's events—babies in their mothers' arms, young children and teenagers, sweltering away in the late July heat, patiently helping to stoke fires and lower tiny caskets, meant only to hold a handful of bones, down ladders. I kept thinking to myself that these children would grow up believing that these were their Indian ways and more specifically their Cherokee ways, though little about the ceremony bore any resemblance to Cherokee funerals or other ceremonies I had attended.[8] Regardless of whether the ritual was "authentically" Cherokee—after all, culture is what people say, think, and do, not some fixed abstraction—I was watching enculturation in process. These children were experiencing a sense of community through ritual and were now part of a distinctive subculture, even if it was one of their own parents' making. Would they develop a growing sense of themselves as Indians, Cherokees, and members of a tribe? It seemed quite possible, at least if the behavior of their parents and community leaders was any indication.

By 1988, only a year after this ceremony took place, Oliver Collins had become much more confident in asserting his community's Cherokee identity. Gone was any ambiguity about who he and the Tallige were. He wrote to his constituents in the *Tallige Cherokee Nation Newsletter,* urging the following:

> I believe we should have a monthly Sweat Bath and I believe we should purify all the Blood in our Nation's citizens to be truly Native American—and Cherokee—and SOON. We must start calling ourselves Cherokees in today's society. It is time to come out of the closet and make our selves known to the dominant society—OUT IN PUBLIC! In 1990 when the next U.S. Census is taken, we must say on the forms that we are Cherokee. We must change our Race on all documents, such as Driver's Licenses, Social Security Numbers, Birth Certificates, etc.[9]

To me, this quote is fascinating because it captures a moment of racial movement in which people who previously had identified as descendants of Indians, but not as Indians or tribal citizens,[10] jumped over some imaginary line toward a new level of Native American identity, one that manifested itself in an overtly public way. Maybe their original public performance, the four-day ritual reburial itself, was somehow responsible for solidifying their sense of identity—like a race renegade's version of the Stonewall riots:[11] We are here. We are Cherokee. But this same public performance filled my viewing companions at the Cherokee Nation with frustration and contempt, for when they looked at the video, what they saw were not distant Cherokee kin but "wannabes"—white people appropriating the Cherokees' name and misrepresenting

Table 1.1 American Indian Population Growth, 1960–2000

Census Year	Population	Increase
1960	551,700	—
1970	827,300	50%
1980	1,420,400	72%
1990	1,959,200	38%
2000 (one race)*	2,476,000	26%
2000 (one or more races)*	4,119,300	110%
2000 (combined total)*	6,595,300	237%

Sources: Passel 1997:11, Thornton 1990:197, and U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000

*The 2000 census was the first to allow the option of choosing more than one racial identity. The combined total includes all American Indian respondents, meaning those identifying as solely American Indian and those identifying as American Indian and at least one other race.

their culture. Though I recognized their concerns and shared some of their frustrations, I did not want to rush to judgment. Emotions were running high on all sides, and many questions still needed to be answered.

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The shifting racial identity expressed by Oliver Collins and the Tallige Fire community is not an aberration in the racial and political landscape of this country but part of a growing demographic trend. According to U.S. census figures taken between 1960 and 2000, the Native American population has grown at a phenomenal rate—from 551,700 to 2,476,000, an increase of 349 percent. If we also include multiracial individuals from the 2000 census, people who identified as American Indian and at least one other race, then the total American Indian population jumps to 4,119,300, representing a startling growth of 647 percent over the same forty-year period (table 1.1).

Demographers say that such rapid growth is impossible without immigration and cannot possibly result from natural processes such as an excess of Native American births over deaths (Gonzales 1998; Nagel 1995:947; Passel 1997:11–12; Thornton 1990:197). Instead, this population increase appears to be dominated by what I term "racial shifters," individuals who have changed their racial self-identification on the U.S. census from non-Indian to Indian in recent years (Gonzales 1998; Nagel 1995; Passel 1997).[12] Although what people report on the census can vary dramatically from their everyday lived experiences, I believe that the census data offer a window onto a much broader process of racial and social transformation, a process that we can more fully understand when we turn to the ethnographic data.

In part because of the sheer numbers of people involved, racial shifting is an extremely diverse phenomenon. Many racial shifters are people who, in the course of

looking for their roots, have only just discovered their Native American ancestry. Others are people who have family stories, oral histories, of an Indian great-great-grandmother or grandfather that they have not been able to document. Still others have long known that they were of Native American descent, including their specific tribal affiliation, and often have some documentation to this effect. For whatever reason they either have ignored or suppressed this fact and are only now becoming interested in reclaiming this aspect of their family history. Despite their differences, these people share a firm belief that they have Indian blood and that this means something significant about who they are and how they should live their lives.

But others have garnered quite a bit of attention in tribal communities and the scholarly literature for professing a Native American identity that seems dubious and instrumental. These include sentimental New Agers who simply feel an affinity with what they imagine to be native culture and who may even go so far as to appropriate a Native American identity as a way of marking their difference from mainstream society (Deloria 1998; Green 1988; Huhndorf 2001). Others commit outright ethnic fraud, asserting a false Native American identity in an effort to gain some symbolic or material advantage.[13] Muddying these waters, some individuals even appear to create an American Indian identity as a cover for criminal activity and have had charges levied against them. Probably the most notorious of these involved the Sovereign Cherokee Nation of Tejas, the brainchild of a retired U.S. Air Force officer. In July 1991, this "tribe" was accused of "a variety of massive business frauds" in a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing (Garroutte 2003:26). Members were accused of selling phony insurance policies to corporations, creating a bogus offshore tax haven, and carrying illegally concealed weapons—the idea being that if they fashioned themselves as an American Indian tribe, they could get away with all of this in the name of tribal sovereignty (Garroutte 2003:26).

This book does not explore these more extreme examples of racial appropriation, fraud, and criminality—all of which have received much attention in the academic literature, particularly among American Indian scholars (Allen 1995; Cook-Lynn 1993, 2001; Gonzales 1998, 2002; Green 1988; Pewewardy 2004). Instead, I explore the deeper social and cultural values that lie behind this racial movement and why so many Americans, from so many different walks of life, are now reinscribing their autobiographies and finding such deep personal and collective meaning in the process of reclaiming Indianness. This is not something people were so willing to do forty years ago, and the fact that they do so now reveals much, I believe, about the shifting politics of race and indigeneity in the United States.

Some useful explanations have been put forth for this racial reinscription and the dramatic shifts in the demographic data that have resulted (Cornell 1988; Nagel 1996; Thornton 1990).[14] Perhaps the most insightful work on this topic is that of Joan Nagel, a sociologist. In her book *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (1996), Nagel suggests that the trend toward reindigenization is the result of broad political forces in the latter decades of the twentieth

century. She, like sociologist Stephen Cornell (1988), argues that federal Indian policies intended to assimilate Native Americans—such as relocation and termination—actually backfired, in that they created a largely urban and somewhat deracinated American Indian population primed for ethnic renewal. When the civil rights movement hit the scene in the early 1960s, it inspired the feminist and Red Power movements that followed shortly thereafter. American Indians were just one of many ethnic groups that responded to this new political atmosphere with increased political consciousness, community pride, and mobilization, often taking the form of pan-tribal organizations. In sum, Nagel suggests that in the wake of this sea change in U.S. racial politics, more and more people found meaning in celebrating their tribal roots and reclaiming their indigenous identities. The motivations were both symbolic and material as Indian identities were given new political and cultural value and as the federal government responded to activist demands with new programs such as affirmative action, educational funding, and increased health care services.

Nagel's work does an excellent job of accounting for ethnic renewal among urban Indians and those whose families had maintained tribal ties until only a generation or two back, but her answers are less satisfying when applied to other "new Indians," such as those whose families have not identified as Native American for several generations or whose tribal ties go back to the nineteenth century. My ethnographic research suggests that many racial shifters readily admit that their siblings and parents do not identify themselves as American Indians and that their last Indian-identified relative may have been a great-great-great-grandparent. In addition, many live in states with relatively small Native American populations and in rural areas and small towns rather than large urban cities. Given this geographic and generational isolation from other Native Americans, it seems that political changes—which are always fundamentally social processes—provide only a partial explanation for the renewed sense of American Indian identity among racial shifters. To fill in the remaining gap, I suggest that we stay attuned to overarching political processes while focusing on the meanings and values that have come to be attached to racial and cultural differences, specifically to indigeneity, in contemporary American society.

Among American Indians, one of the more potent idioms of racial and cultural difference is that of blood. More than just a metaphor for lineage, descent, or kinship, blood is often imagined as a shared biogenetic substance that links all the people of a tribe to one another. Relatives and, by extension, tribal members share common blood in both the past and present, and it is believed that tribal descendents literally have some of the same blood substance as their forebears. Moreover, blood is also commonly described as the bearer of indigenous cultural and racial difference, because race and culture are seen as being carried in the blood. This conflation of blood with race, culture, and kinship is common among American Indians because blood—the stuff of life and death—is a rich part of our human imaginary, but also because blood has been enshrined as a measure of Indian identity for well over a century in the laws and policies of tribal, state, and federal governments (Sturm 2002).

Most racial shifters firmly believe that they have Native American blood. If we take them at their word that they are Indian descendants who have long thought of themselves and their families as non-Indian, then the question remains as to what motivates their shift in self-identification. Although many observers are quick to dismiss race shifters as political and economic opportunists, I suggest that deeper desires are at work. While trying to find a respectful way to explore those desires as something more than greed or self-aggrandizement, I also have questions for those with less plausible connections to indigeneity. Given the sheer numbers of people making these claims, I think we have to consider the possibility that a small percentage of them may be inventing a Native American heritage where none exists, rather than connecting with a previously hidden branch of the family tree. If that is the case, why would someone without indigenous ancestry want to be seen as a Native American? Even for those who can document their indigenous forebears, how does this fact of genealogy get translated into an indigenous identity claim, and why would this sort of kinship claim be privileged as the key to "being Cherokee" over those of self-ascription, social relationship, or even citizenship? What has Indian blood come to mean in the past forty years that would make it so desirable?

A fundamental task for this book is to show how indigenous ancestry and identity have been revalued and what the overall demographic movement that results from this process says about the changing nature of racial politics in this country. Clearly, some of this revaluing took place as a result of political struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. But why did this population explosion continue in the more politically conservative climate of the 1980s and 1990s, with well over four million individuals identifying themselves as American Indian in terms of race on the 2000 census, while an even larger number identified themselves as having American Indian ancestry, even though their primary racial identity was non-Indian? Why have so many people moved from claiming family ties or tribal descent to asserting a more explicitly Native American identity? Is this an intentional adaptation of indigenous identity for economic purposes, as some critics suggest? Or is it a more subtle process, a romanticized longing for spiritual and cultural regeneration, reconnection, and reinvention?

The answers to these questions, I believe, can be found at the intersection of race, culture, and indigeneity, in the meanings and values these terms evoke in our national imagination, and in the power that these different identities have in our social and political landscapes. In the course of this book, using ethnographic and archival data collected over the past fourteen years with racial shifters in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Texas, and Alabama and with federally recognized Cherokees in Oklahoma and North Carolina, I provide some answers to these questions and point to some areas for future consideration and debate. Some of the answers will be found in the power relations embedded in race shifting, which unfold in unexpected ways that challenge our ideas not only about racial "passing"—consciously striving to belong to a different racial category than the one into which one is born—but also about racial, cultural, and political identity more generally. Although some aspects of race privilege may be

maintained within this process, the interplay of racial, cultural, and political identities within race shifting is much more complex than we might initially expect, based on common assumptions about who wields power in our societies and how this intersects with the color of their skin. Some of these assumptions need to be reevaluated in light of this new social movement.

Questions of race, identity, and political power are critical for Indian country, as they are for indigenous peoples around the world.[15] Because Native Americans in the United States are defined not only by federal and tribal policy but also by public and scholarly discourse, competing definitions of indigenous identity spark conflicts between federally recognized, state-recognized, and self-identified Indians. All of these groups are forced to wrestle with controversial questions concerning who is really Indian and who should have the power to decide. These are important concerns for tribal, state, and federal governments and for our society as a whole. By exploring the meaning of racial ideas and practices in this unique but revealing situation, we learn more about the process of racial formation, as well as the dangers in linking racial, cultural, and national identities. These issues affect not only Native American people in the United States but also the citizens of nation-states around the world, where questions of national identity and racial belonging continue to be fiercely debated.

Whiteness and Authenticity

Racial shifters provoke a variety of responses in Indian country, a fact that highlights the social, political, cultural, and even racial diversity of Native American communities. Some Native Americans find this recent surge in Indian self-identification baffling. Others find it amusing or even flattering. Still others fear that it poses a threat to their cultural integrity and political sovereignty and are critical of racial shifters who for whatever reason adopt a Native American identity later in life. However, these different camps are united by one thing: their strongest invective is aimed at white racial shifters.[16] Most Native Americans believe that whites, more than any other ethnic or racial group, want to be Indian. This perception accounts for the ubiquity in Indian communities of the term "wannabe," a derisive term that usually refers to white people fitting this profile.[17] For some Native Americans, however, the term also includes Indian descendants with a racially white physical appearance who do not have community or cultural ties. Federally recognized tribal members are not the only ones who use the term as an insult. Ironically, even racial shifters who might be called "wannabes" themselves use the term to describe those who fail to meet their standards of Indianness. For the purposes of this book, I try to avoid the term "wannabe" because of its derogatory connotations, except when exploring how Indian people use it in everyday discourse as a way of signaling their social and political critiques. Unpacking this racialized discourse is fundamental to the goal of better understanding what Native American identity politics is all about.

The oft-spoken perception that racial shifting is a migration away from whiteness

and toward Indianness seems to be borne out by demographic statistics, again taken from U.S. census data, showing that the vast majority of racial shifters previously identified themselves as white rather than as some other race (Gonzales 1998:202; Passel 1976:397, 403). For me, it is the whiteness of this phenomenon that raises some of the most interesting social and theoretical questions. For instance, why would such a large number of individuals want to move out of whiteness and into Indianness, given that whiteness has long been a privileged racial position within the social structure of this country? In essence, race shifters are trying to reclaim or create something they feel they have lost, and in doing so, they often try to opt out of mainstream white society, a place their multiracial ancestors either chose or were forced to call home. The desire to move from a powerful social position (that of the settler colonial subject) to a seemingly less powerful one (the indigenous subject) is significant because it challenges our theoretical understanding of racial passing as being an effort to move up in the social and political hierarchy. Obviously, race relations and indigenous politics are now much more complicated than this type of simplistic assumption would have us believe.

A second related question is why whites, or at least people who have for generations passed as white, would specifically want to reclaim Indianness and not some other aspect of their identity. If it is true that many Americans have some combination of white, black, and Indian ancestry—as historians and demographers have argued—then why this shift toward Indianness and not, say, blackness (Hollinger 2003; Williamson 1995)? Is the specific allure of Indianness simply its nativist claim, meaning that indigenous people are unique because they have special rights as the original inhabitants of this land, or does Indianness offer something even more?

In general, Native American scholars (both Cherokees and others) have suggested that the impetus for this social movement into Indianness can be easily found at the intersection of race and class (Allen 1995; Gonzales 1998; Green 1988; Pewewardy 2004; Quinn 1990). They argue that race shifters are mostly poor or working-class whites trying to access economic benefits from a federally recognized tribe or a government agency. Such interpretations are also found outside academia, such as among federally recognized Cherokees in Oklahoma and North Carolina. For example, Fergus Beech, an elderly Cherokee man in Oklahoma, explained to me, "Money attracts outside elements just like honey does flies" (January 23, 1996), and Barbara Stevens, a middle-aged Cherokee woman, said, "They're just using that [identity] to make money. Those people aren't Cherokee" (January 29, 1996).[18] Ben Dreadfulwater, another middle-aged Oklahoma Cherokee, was more specific when he said that "a lot of what is motivating these people is fear. With the high cost of health and all, they want to get free services from the IHS [Indian Health Service]—freebies, you know" (January 29, 1996). I heard remarkably similar comments when I visited the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina in fall 2003. Speaking with several tribal employees, I asked them their opinion about what kind of person is typically drawn to race shifting. Melissa Hunter, a woman in her late thirties, answered right away: "Lower- and middle-class Caucasians that are in search of a…self. I don't see any rich white

people coming in. It's the lower and middle class, not even the upper middle class." Betty Baker, her feisty mother, who also worked for the tribe, quickly added, "They don't want to be white trash anymore, so they decide they want to be Cherokee.… That's just the way I look at it" (October 22, 2003).

Though some of the comments may seem harsh, these scholars and Cherokee citizens raise an important point, particularly given the tendency of many people to overgeneralize and assume that the experience of white identity is one of class privilege rather than race privilege.[19] Because white people are differentiated in class terms, economic instrumentalism may motivate some individuals to shift their racial identity to Cherokee or Indian. But this is, I think, only a small part of the story that I have seen unfolding for many years. I say this, in part, because I found quite a bit of class diversity among the many racial shifters interviewed for this project. Certainly, the majority were working class, but there was also a sizeable number of professionals, including teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and even state legislators.[20] If we limit our understanding of the effort to reclaim an indigenous identity to its strictly economic motivations, then we miss the larger picture and the deeper meanings beneath this demographic movement. For instance, how would we account for the large number of celebrity Cherokees—extremely wealthy individuals within the entertainment industry who find value in professing a Cherokee identity to the public? Examples include Cher, Tommy Lee Jones, Rita Coolidge, Willie Nelson, Quentin Tarantino, Elvis Presley, and Johnny Depp, to name but a few, all of whom could pass as white but have chosen to offer a more complex self-identification.[21] Even more telling is that former President Bill Clinton publicly claimed to have a Cherokee grandmother at a time when he was one of the most powerful people on the planet.[22]

Clearly, people from widely divergent class backgrounds, with different access to social power, have claimed an American Indian identity in general and Cherokeeness in particular, even in the face of considerable skepticism from Indians and non-Indians alike. Many race shifters are aware that much of Indian country believes that their reclamations of Cherokee identity are purely instrumental and generally illegitimate. In response to such stinging criticisms, race shifters argue just the opposite, insisting at every turn that money has nothing to do with their quest. For example, in an interview, Principal Chief Joe Perry of the Tsalagi Nvdagi, or Texas Cherokees, said the following: "When people find out what tribe they are, a lot of the federally recognized tribes are really against that in a lot of ways. They don't want these people…and I don't know why. I guess they think we might take some money from them. Hell, we don't want their money! We've been out here working all our lives. We don't need their money" (July 8, 2003). Another man wrote to me and said, "No, I do not receive any benefits from being Native American and never have. If I were offered any, I would probably spit in their eye to show my contempt!" (March 13, 1996).

Seeing Heart Stevens, a sixty-five-year-old man who has retired to Florida but is still the chief of a self-identified Cherokee tribe in Virginia, gave this thoughtful response:

> We probably could get benefits under the Arts and Crafts law and some others, but this is contrary to our purpose and sincerity. Real Indians are fiercely independent, and Indian rights are notoriously unstable. Entitlements are here today, gone tomorrow. The underlying political process really doesn't want to help Indians, because someone with political power is benefiting from all the tax breaks, getting around pollution laws, casinos, grants, etc. In the long run, these hurt Indians more than help them, and Indians should help each other instead of fighting one another. Independence and education have always been the Cherokee way, and it is the reason we have survived for so long. We don't expect others to pay our way.[23] (March 11, 1996)

Brent Stephens, an officer in the Southern Cherokee Nation, made a similar observation: "I keep hearing about ulterior motives. They want this or they want that. But you know, there aren't benefits floating around out there that I'm aware of that just fall on you because you're an Indian. I think it could easily be outweighed by the prejudice that you face, at least when you get outside the Indian territory" (June 25, 2003).

In keeping with these assertions, most race shifters are not able to access any direct financial benefits based on their self-proclaimed Cherokee identity, largely because none of them are federally recognized as Cherokee citizens. Only that small number of people who are members of the fifteen state-recognized Cherokee communities are able to receive federal and state funds on a consistent basis or to legally sell their wares under the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990.[24] To my mind, these facts make it unlikely that money is the key motivation, leading me to look in other directions for answers to questions such as Why claim indigeneity? Why Cherokee? And why now?

To answer these questions, I look beyond mere economic instrumentalism to the deeper meanings and motivations that underlie race shifting. One of my main concerns is with how racial shifters and federally recognized Cherokee citizens assign value, as both a symbolic and material property, to different racial identities. For instance, how do they assign whiteness or Indianness with certain social, cultural, and political valences? And how do these different racial evaluations both reproduce and challenge those of the broader U.S. society? The answers to these questions are numerous and complex, as I have learned in the course of researching this book. In asking these questions, much of what I am trying to understand is the broader "field of opinion"—what is said as much as what is not said but implied—in public discourses about Cherokee identity (Bourdieu 1977:167–168). Of course, both Cherokee and non-Cherokee people participate in and come to subjectively identify themselves within such discourses of racial value. My hope is that, with closer scrutiny, these discourses of Cherokeeness and whiteness will reveal not only their particular histories but also the various stakes for their speakers and that we will then be better able to see and understand how these different racial values are socially and politically constructed, internalized, and challenged by different kinds of people.

To assert that the vast majority of racial shifters are white is not meant to deny their blood ties to Indian ancestors or to question the validity of their desire to reindigenize

themselves. As an increasing number of multiracial celebrities (for example, Mariah Carey, Keanu Reaves, Halle Berry, and Russell Crowe) have made clear, people who are racialized as white can have nonwhite ancestry, just as those who are racialized as black, Hispanic, or Indian can have white ancestry. Instead, emphasizing the whiteness of race shifters is meant to acknowledge the social, historical, and political space of racial privilege that is maintained when one is perceived as being white, even if that perception flies in the face one's own self-identification or genealogical records. Racial identity is not simply a question of ancestry—though this is a critical issue for many people—but of social ascription and, increasingly, achievement. More often than not, we ascribe racial identities to one another based merely on superficial observations of skin color, facial features, hair texture, and overall mannerisms. These initial ascriptions of race may be challenged and reassigned over time as we get to know one another better and learn about one another's life experiences, particularly about kinfolk, communities of origin, and cultural differences. In this way, multiracial people may achieve a form of social recognition that is more in line with their own self-perceptions. At the same time, racial first impressions have power in that they shape the vast majority of our day-to-day lived experiences, including whether the grocery clerk will ask for identification when we write a check, the security guard will tail us through Banana Republic, or the old lady down the street will leave her porch and go inside when we walk by her house, simply because our perceived difference makes her nervous. These things happen. Despite our complicated racial histories and ancestries, we still make snap judgments about who others are and react accordingly.

Despite the everyday significance of physical appearance in assessing Indianness, a book of this nature needs to look beyond the obvious and take seriously the question of ancestry. Doing so sheds light on differences of social position among race shifters. For instance, if a race shifter has known Indian ancestry, then arguably his or her family has been passing as white, maybe even for generations, for reasons often related to racial discrimination. In such cases, we see the legacies of colonization and assimilation, both forced and chosen, in which individuals and families have had to endure the pain of severing their community and kinship ties in order to achieve a higher social status.[25] Here, race shifting would be an effort to reclaim a racial identity that was either forsaken or lost. If they do not have Indian ancestry, then their effort to pass as Indian is often seen as a form of appropriation, an expression of a desire to be something they are not. However, this distinction can also be troubled if we consider the different ways that people reckon ancestry, even within the same community. Because ancestry is socially constructed and subject to contested interpretations, it does not automatically confer racial or indigenous status. Thus, even the racial shifting of those with American Indian ancestors can be subject to accusations of appropriation.

Although questions of ancestry are critical to debates about reclamation and appropriation, I cannot provide definitive answers in the chapters ahead as to whether individual race shifters have indigenous ancestors. In general, most of what we know and learn as cultural anthropologists is limited to what people tell us, and as some

scholars have argued, it is this reliance on human discourse as data that moves our discipline away from the social sciences and closer to the humanities. Even if we can cross-check what people say with what they do, there really is no way that we can verify or authenticate the vast majority of their assertions. Certainly, we can make sure that we got the basic historical facts right, such as when someone held political office, started a war, or wrote a letter. But how would I go about verifying a statement about kinship? To do so would require that I transport myself back in time to see who had sex with whom and what children resulted. Even if I could engage in some ethically absurd form of anthropological time travel, how would I know that a particular act of intercourse led to a particular birth? Even the dry documentation of the paper trail is often deceptive when it comes to racial histories. Let us say that I had been able to find genealogical documentation on fifty individuals. How would I know that the documents I had uncovered were not doctored or manipulated in some way at the time they were created? How would I know that a parent—or a nurse—told the truth (the whole truth) or even was privy to it? If we go down this road, questions regarding truth, authenticity, and even science are endless.

I suggest that we travel in a different direction. I believe that we can learn far more about the social and political construction of Native American identity by asking not whether these claims of kinship are true or false but under what conditions others accept them. When trying to determine whether or not someone is Indian in daily life, most people do not go looking for a literal paper trail. Instead, they measure such claims against their own internalized standards of community belonging, which may or may not put a premium on genealogical verification. Their initial questions are rarely about documentation of blood and ancestry to the exclusion of all else. More common is a line of inquiry that emphasizes social, political, and cultural belonging, such as "Can you name a family member?" or "You know your tribe, but does your tribe know you?"

Although information about ancestry might reveal critical differences of social location, particularly regarding histories of colonial incorporation, it may be less relevant to our overall understanding of contemporary Native American identity politics than the motivations behind race shifting and its many trajectories. Unlike some more skeptical observers, I believe that most racial shifters are operating in good faith on the firm conviction that they have Indian ancestors. For me, then, the point is not whether their ancestors are real or imagined but how these beliefs about ancestry shape and even alter racial self-identification in ways that have profound effects on the broader American Indian population. My own goal is not to wield power as a "scientific" observer to sort out the "wannabes" from the "real" Indians. Anthropologists have tried to do this in the past, often with disastrous political effects.[26] Instead, my goal is to listen to what people have to say and then, in the words of Clifford Geertz (2000:58), "to figure out what the devil they think they are up to." In doing so, I hope to shed light on a world of discourse swirling around and through what it means to be Indian—or not—in this country today.

Cherokee Neotribalism: Questions and Collaborations

My interest in racial shifting originates in my ongoing research collaborations with the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, both headquartered in northeastern Oklahoma, and more recently with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina—all three of which are federally recognized tribes. For Cherokee citizens of these tribes, racial shifters are a particular source of consternation because racial shifters tend to identify themselves as Cherokee more than as any other tribe, making Cherokees the butt of many jokes in Indian country (Nagel 1996:101–105; Thornton 1990:172–175). I have often heard people say things like "Put sixteen Cherokees in a room, what do you get? A full blood"; "If that Cherokee nicks himself shaving, he'll turn into a white man"; "Have you ever seen the Cherokee Barbie doll? Yeah, it's the blonde one that's already on the shelf"; and "My friend just discovered she was an Indian…must be another Cherokee princess."[27] These jokes usually jab at the whiteness, mixedness, and newness that have come to be associated with Cherokee identity. This association is, in part, due to the fact that Cherokee tribes have relatively open enrollment policies, but it also reflects a growing awareness about widespread racial shifting into Cherokeeness and its potential effect on the three tribes with federal recognition.

Racial shifters are laying claim to Cherokeeness at an astonishing rate because, more often than not, racial shifting is a migration not just from whiteness to Indianness, but to a particular tribal identity—the most popular happens to be Cherokee. Racial shifting is about claiming not just racial alterity but also a particular form of indigeneity that is interpreted as being Cherokee. Because of the surge in Cherokee self-identification and reclamation that has taken place over the past thirty years, the overall growth of the Cherokee population has been nothing short of phenomenal. In the 1970 U.S. census, 66,150 individuals identified themselves as Cherokee; only a decade later, the number had grown to 232,344—representing a stunning population growth of 251 percent (Thornton 1990:199). The 1990 census reveals a somewhat slower growth rate of 58 percent for the preceding decade, with 369,035 people identifying as Cherokee. By 2000, however, that number had almost doubled, reaching just under three-quarters of a million people. In the three decades from 1970 to 2000, the Cherokee population increased by more than 1,000 percent, a pace far outstripping that of the broader American Indian population (table 1.2).

The Cherokees were by far and away the largest tribal grouping on the 2000 census, with the Navajos a distant second (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).[28] But of the total Cherokee population, only a little more than one-third (35 percent) are registered members of one of three federally recognized Cherokee tribes, which means that close to half a million individuals claim to be Cherokee despite federal, tribal, and even anthropological definitions to the contrary.[29] And this is only the tip of the iceberg because these figures are limited to individuals who are willing to assert their Cherokee ancestry on U.S. census documents. Many more cases go unrecorded in federal statistics

Table 1.2 Cherokee Population Growth, 1970–2000

Census Year	Population	Increase
1970	66,150	–
1980	232,344	251%
1990	369,035	58%
2000 (one race) *	281,069	-24%
2000 (one or more races)*	448,464	22%
2000 (combined total)*	729,533	98%

Sources: Thornton 1990:197; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000.

*The 2000 census was the first to allow the option of choosing more than one racial identity. The combined total includes all American Indian respondents who specified a Cherokee tribal affiliation, meaning those identifying as solely American Indian by race and also those identifying as American Indian and at least one other race.

yet make an impression around the office water cooler, in the local newspaper, or at a regional powwow.

What accounts for this gravitation toward Cherokeeness and not some other tribal identity, particularly among individuals who previously identified as white? Although this is a question I address at greater length in the next several chapters, I would like to suggest three reasons up front. First, the Cherokee people's long-term reputation for cultural syncretism and for readily adopting white standards of civilization might make being a member of one of the Five Civilized Tribes appealing to many white-Indian descendants. Second, the tendency among Cherokees toward higher rates of exogamy than other Native American tribes means that many Cherokee citizens and descendants have a white appearance (Thornton 1990:173). Finally, the current administrative policies regarding tribal enrollment for the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina have affected the general public's interpretation of what a Cherokee tribal citizen looks like, so they assume that most Cherokees look racially white.[30] In the case of the Eastern Band, tribal enrollment requires 1/16 degree of Cherokee blood that can be traced to an ancestor on the 1924 Baker Roll.[31] For the Cherokee Nation, Cherokee ancestry is determined via the Dawes Roll, but there is no minimum blood-quantum requirement for tribal citizenship. As a result, the Cherokee ancestry of enrolled members varies from full-blood to 1/4096, which "raises questions about the symbolic significance of blood and the degree to which blood connections can be stretched and still carry any sense of legitimacy" (Sturm 2002:3).[32]

The collective implication of these enrollment policies, exogamy rates, and cultural stereotypes is that Cherokees are understood as being potentially white—both in physical appearance and culturally—in ways that set them apart from most other

tribes. Many Native American communities suffered colonialism at a later date and intermarried with whites at a somewhat lower rate than Cherokees. Many of these same tribes have reputations for traditionalism and stricter policies on tribal enrollment. Perhaps as a consequence, they are somehow perceived as more rigidly Indian, their boundaries less pervious to race shifting. This does not mean that no racial shifters claim Lakota, Hopi, or Inupiaq identities—such claims do occur, but less frequently. In making this observation, I do not mean to suggest that all Cherokees are white or that Cherokees are not culturally conservative—far from it—only that being a white, or light-skinned, nontraditional Cherokee falls within the realm of possibility.[33]

Given the impact of race shifting on public perceptions of Cherokeeness, many federally recognized Cherokees are concerned, even alarmed, about this situation. In fact, the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina seem to view this demographic trend as a growing problem. In the early 1980s, both tribes started to collect information, documents, and videos like the one described at the start of this chapter, on what they refer to somewhat ominously as "entities using the Cherokee name."[34] Let me make clear an important point: the tribes are not hostile to newcomers or reluctant to reconnect with long-lost kin. Nor are they particularly concerned about individual claims of Cherokee identity that race shifters might express, with or without genealogical documentation. What concern the tribes are people like Oliver Collins and his friends: race shifters who have coalesced into organized social and political groups, particularly those asserting tribal status and seeking federal or state recognition. For example, in the summer of 2003, Troy Wayne Poteete, a former Cherokee Nation tribal council member then working in the tribe's office of legal affairs, said to me, "Even if they have an ancestor on some roll—join the historical society, chart it all out, study about it, but don't start a damn tribe!" (August 1, 2003). Richard Allen, a policy analyst in the executive branch of the Cherokee Nation, was even more forceful when he told me that groups who suggest they are Cherokee are in it for commercial reasons. He added, "To me, not only is that an insult, but it's also an attack on our sovereignty as Cherokee people, as the Cherokee Nation" (July 31, 2003). Because of such concerns, the Cherokee Nation's tribal registrar had amassed several file drawers on the subject by the time I first arrived in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in summer 1995.[35] It is a remarkable cache of materials, but I hardly had to seek it out. Cherokee Nation employees did not merely provide me with access to these materials; they actively directed me to them, wanting someone with the necessary time and energy to dive into the looming mass of papers and clippings.

What did I encounter? Arranged by state, the files contained a wealth of information on racial shifting. To get a better sense of the size and scope of this phenomenon, I read and collated these materials to create a master list of self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee organizations.[36] I then cross-checked my list with three other lists. One was provided by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina in March 1995. Another was compiled by the Cherokee Nation and presented a few

months later to the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in a hearing concerning proposed changes in the federal recognition process. The third was an overview of Cherokee groups engaged in the federal recognition process, created in 2001 by Virginia DeMarce, a historian working for the Office of Federal Acknowledgment at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. I have also added to these lists, on the basis of extensive Internet searches, a mail survey I conducted in 1996 and ethnographic fieldwork from the past fourteen years. Combining these sources, I have been able to find information on more than 250 self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee tribes scattered throughout the United States. All of these groups and communities are what the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and Cherokee Nation refer to as "entities using the Cherokee name." None of these are federally recognized, yet fifteen of them have acquired some form of state recognition. At least thirty-one have made contact with the Office of Federal Acknowledgment and are seeking federal recognition.

Now, for the first time, we can see the geographic distribution of these organizations. They tend to cluster in the southeastern United States, in and around the original homelands of the Cherokee people.[37] More than mere geographical continuity is at work here. Historically, Native American populations have been decimated or pushed out by state policies in the Southeast, leaving a presumed void of Indianness into which these new groups can assert themselves (Passel 1997:25). For example, Georgia alone has forty-three such groups, three of which are state-recognized, a bitterly ironic fact, given that Georgia is largely responsible for Cherokee removal on the infamous Trail of Tears in 1838. Florida is the runner-up with twenty-three groups, and Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee each have between sixteen and twenty. On the flip side, race shifters tend to avoid states with a large Native American population either historically or at present—such as South Dakota, New Mexico, and Montana. That Cherokee race shifters have not coalesced in these states is not simply due to the fact that they are far removed from Cherokee homelands. In fact, Cherokee-identifying entities appear all over the U.S. map; they are not confined to the Southeast, as some historians and anthropologists have suggested (Brewton 1963; Quinn 1990). Thirty-six states have at least one Cherokee entity within their boundaries, and some states outside the Southeast, such as California, Texas, and Ohio, have as many as thirteen. Racial shifters are everywhere, and the specific migration from whiteness to Indianness to Cherokee neotribalism can be found all across the United States from Alaska to Vermont (figure 1.1), with international echoes in Mexico and Germany.[38]

This explosion in the number of self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee tribes means that for a significant number of racial shifters, claiming indigeneity is not simply about being Indian, being Cherokee, or honoring native roots. It is also about being tribal in a collective sense. The underlying logic of race shifting and neotribalism often goes something like this: if your tribe of origin will not have you, either because you cannot document your Cherokee ancestry or because you fail to meet the standards for citizenship in some other way, then it is better to have a tribe of your

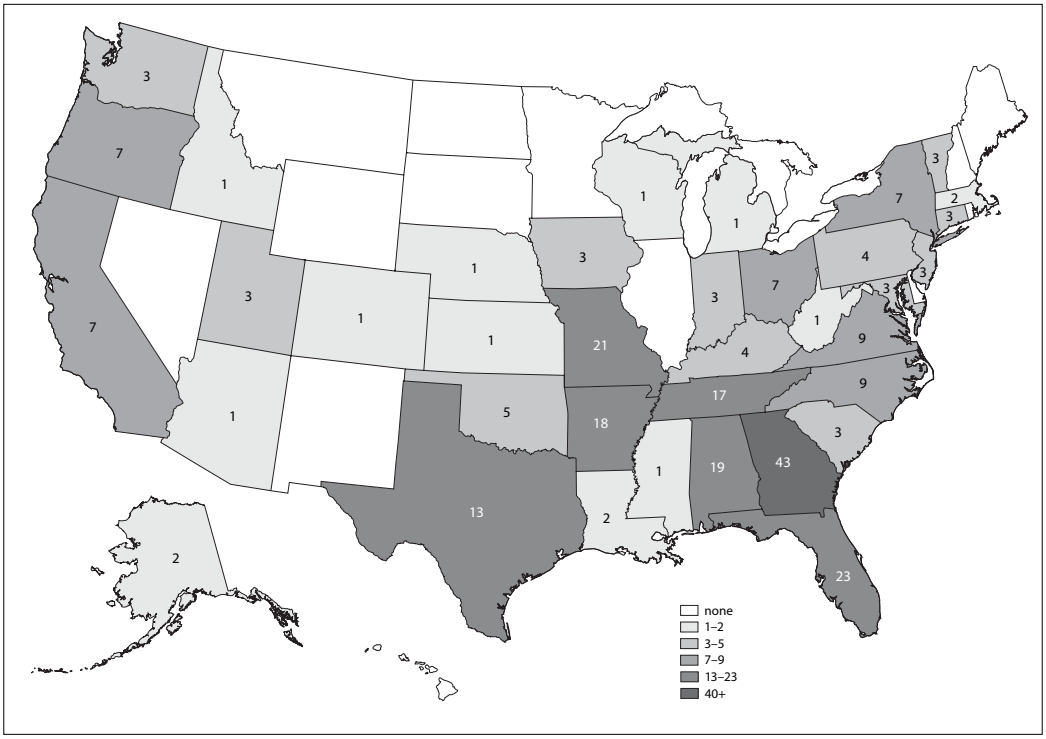

Figure 1.1 Self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee communities by state

own. For most racial shifters involved in this process of collectivizing their identity, the creation of a tribe provides them with a sense of community belonging, including a time and place in which they can simply "be Cherokee." For some, this sense of belonging extends into forms of civic engagement that deeply influence the rhythm of their daily lives. Others organize for explicitly political purposes, such as achieving federal or state recognition as a Native American tribe, usually because they seek the specific legal rights associated with that status or the dignity that such recognition might afford.

For many scholars, as well as for the citizens of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes, these collective expressions of neotribalism raise larger, more pressing questions: What kinds of political rights or sovereign entitlements should these individuals, as Cherokee descendants, be able to access? Should they have the right to organize as separate tribal polities, or did their ancestors give up that right when they left the tribal fold all those years ago? Even if members of these new tribal entities do not seek political recognition and simply want to be left in peace to do their own thing, does their mere existence—given the sheer numbers involved—somehow cloud the issue of what Indian identity and tribal citizenship mean in this country? Or to put it in the starkest of terms, do these new entities somehow pose a threat to federally recognized and even existing state-recognized tribes?

The answers to these questions have profound implications for native North America. In the conversations I have had with Cherokee people around the country, there tend to be two main ways of responding to the issue, one critical and one sympathetic. Either race shifters are white "wannabes" who create tribes in an act of racial, cultural, and political appropriation for dubious ends, or they are Cherokee descendants trying to reclaim their political rights as Indian people.

Although the truth often lies somewhere in between, the tension between these two perspectives surfaces again and again throughout the course of this book. No doubt, there will be people on either side of this debate who will be frustrated that I bothered to listen to what others had to say. My goal is not to come down on either side or to provide some false sense of resolution but instead to provide a more balanced and nuanced view of the social, cultural, and political stakes at hand. I want to let the various arguments unfold in all their complexity so that readers, particularly those who are American Indians, will be in a better position to grapple with these issues in the contexts of their own communities.

On Life and Methods

This book has been more than a decade in the making, and both the amount of time and the variety of sources that have gone into its production deserve a note of explanation. I first started thinking about racial shifting as a research topic in the summer of 1995, just after I moved to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, to begin ethnographic research in the Cherokee Nation. Although I had encountered racial shifters as a graduate student living in Northern California, I did not arrive in Tahlequah with them in mind. Instead, I had come to explore the discourses and policies of Indian blood and to see how these played out among Oklahoma Cherokees, or at least among those who were citizens of the Cherokee Nation, a large and diverse tribe with a reputation for inclusiveness. As I started my fieldwork, I noticed that the issue of racial shifting regularly surfaced in my conversations with Cherokee people. Soon it became apparent that this issue played a central role in local understandings of Cherokee identity and that I needed to address it in a much more systematic way. From that point forward, I began to ask a standard set of questions about the topic in my interviews with citizen Cherokees, as well as race shifters (people who were not enrolled as Cherokee Nation citizens but nonetheless identified themselves as Cherokee). I listened carefully to their stories and asked follow-up questions that would help me understand the complexity of the subject.

Within a few months of my arrival, tribal employees at the Cherokee Nation led me to their small archive of materials concerning self-identified and state-recognized Cherokees. The archive included published sources such as newspaper clippings, tribal newsletters, court documents, and Bureau of Indian Affairs records, as well as unpublished materials such as personal and professional correspondence, tribal records, enrollment cards, tribal histories, genealogies, and photographs. All of the materials

were filed according to state, so if I wanted to know what was happening in Georgia or Louisiana, the relevant materials were located in a single folder. In fall 1995, I spent more than a week reading everything in the files, copying the documents that I thought were particularly significant, and compiling a master list of self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee tribes. Over the years, I continued to add to that list from information that was forwarded to me by contacts throughout Indian country.

Even though I had discovered a wealth of new information about racial shifting in this small archive and through my own research, I wanted to get a broader picture of what was happening around the country and to ask some specific questions that were not addressed in the documents I was reading. So in spring 1996 I conducted a small mail survey of these new self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee tribes. Of the total number I was familiar with at the time, I mailed surveys to one hundred (about half), selecting them based on their geographic location and sociopolitical characteristics. I was particularly curious about tribes located outside the Southeast, because some of the scholarly literature had described Cherokee neotribalism as a strictly southeastern phenomenon. I was also curious about the size of tribal memberships, the longevity of these organizations, their activities, and their perceptions of federally recognized Cherokees.

I addressed the survey to tribal officers, asking that it be freely circulated among their membership as a whole and inviting anyone who was interested in answering the questions to complete the survey and mail it back to me. The survey was ambitious, overly so, with ten questions asking for basic demographic information and another twenty-eight that were open-ended and much more substantial, covering ideas about race, culture, tribalism, spirituality, Indianness, Cherokeeness, and sovereignty. I asked questions such as, What does membership in your tribal organization mean to you? What do you consider to be the characteristics of a Cherokee person? What do you consider to be the basis of tribal sovereignty? Where does it originate? Because the survey was so lengthy and could not be completed in less than an hour, I received only fifteen completed questionnaires (a 15 percent response rate), mostly from people who were past retirement age and who had plenty of time on their hands (their average age was sixty; see appendix 4). Although the surveys are not representative in that they are skewed toward an older demographic, they proved useful in providing a historical perspective on the phenomenon, because many of the respondents had been involved with self-identified Cherokee organizations for several decades.

Originally, I had intended to use the data from the survey, as well as the archival materials, fieldwork, and interviews, to include a chapter on racial shifting in my dissertation on Cherokee identity politics (which would eventually become my first book). When I returned to California in 1966, I made a first attempt at writing up my findings. However, the topic was so variable and complex and so interesting in its own right that I could not do it justice in fifty pages—it demanded book-length treatment. I filed my dissertation without including the material on racial shifting and decided to return to it when I could give it my full attention.

Much to my surprise, that moment of return did not arrive until fall 2002. In the intervening five years, I had moved back to Oklahoma, joined the faculty at the University of Oklahoma, learned how to be a professor, published my first book, gone up for tenure, and had a baby. Although much of my attention was consumed by these activities, I never abandoned the idea that I would return to the subject of racial shifting for my next book. I continued to read anything that seemed relevant to the topic, drawing from scholarly sources outside my own discipline and from popular culture and mainstream literature. I continued to gather data from personal interviews, especially when I did fieldwork in Tahlequah, most notably in summer 1998. I also applied for external grants in the hope of being able to fund extensive ethnographic fieldwork among race-shifter communities. However, I had little luck in securing external research money for this portion of the project, perhaps because external reviewers often look askance at a proposal for multi-sited ethnographic research, especially if it is to be conducted by a single individual. Between 1997 and 2002, I was mostly on my own in terms of figuring out how to do the legwork of gathering data, and much of what I was able to learn came from being in the right place at the right time, from living in Oklahoma and socializing with Indian people, and occasionally from serendipity rather than intention.

Fortunately, the type of knowledge that comes from informal interactions is just as valuable to anthropologists as what we might get from recorded interviews, because it provides qualitatively different insights about what people think, say, and do in everyday settings. For almost a decade and a half, I lived in Oklahoma and was known as someone working on the topic of racial shifting. News of my research interests circulated widely among citizen Cherokees and racial shifters alike, who contacted me when they wanted to ask questions, exchange information, or simply talk about racial shifting. Even as I went about my life, raising my daughter and working, I spent countless hours in phone and e-mail conversations with racial shifters, as well as citizen Cherokees and other American Indians, about the topic of racial shifting. I have also had these conversations at powwows, conferences, meetings, and other American Indian–related events over the years. Like the formal components of the research that I have been doing since 1995, all of these informal exchanges inform my overall understanding of the subject.

In addition to the everyday encounters that happened as a part of living in Oklahoma and traveling in American Indian circles, I conducted fifty-four face-to-face, formal, recorded interviews with fifty individuals, all of whom were citizens of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, or the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (see appendix 6). These interviews all dealt with the topic of racial shifting, in whole or in part, and coincided with three main periods of fieldwork. The first was fourteen months in Tahlequah between summer 1995 and 1996 and was the ethnographic component of my dissertation research; the second, also in Tahlequah, was a three-month stint in summer 1998 when I gathered data needed to revise the dissertation into a book; and the last was in summer and fall 2003, when I

began to do follow-up interviews with citizens of the Cherokee Nation. In October of that same year, I also traveled to Cherokee, North Carolina, the home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, so that I could include Eastern Band perspectives in this project. Although the Eastern Band determined that my research was exempt under their Institutional Review Board guidelines, they asked that I limit my interviews to tribal employees, a request that I honored. However, all of the tribal employees and leaders whom I interviewed specifically stated that the insights they offered were not official tribal positions but rather their own opinions.

Although I was never able to secure external funding for the research component of this project, in fall 2002 I was awarded a substantial research grant from the University of Oklahoma. I used that money to hire a graduate student research assistant named Jessica Walker Blanchard, who had an excellent reputation among my colleagues for her fieldwork skills. In figuring out how to make best use of her time and abilities, I had to make some tough choices in terms of maximizing the breadth of the data without sacrificing its depth or quality. I was already such a familiar face among Oklahoma Cherokees that it made sense for me to continue working with a community where I already had a strong sense of rapport, while relying on my assistant for fieldwork in other locations. In the spring of 2003, she started conducting research in four communities located in Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. I selected these communities for several reasons. The first was a large, state-recognized tribe in Alabama that had a long history and relatively cohesive sense of community. I wanted to see how a large, state-recognized tribe might differ from a self-identified one, and although there were other possibilities to choose from, I chose this one because my assistant was from Alabama and had known some of the members of this tribe in her youth. We both felt that her familiarity with the people and the place would be an asset in the interviewing process.[39]

I chose the second tribe because it was located in Arkansas, a place that has seen a firestorm of race-shifting activity, with numerous Cherokee tribes coming into being, factionalizing, dissolving, and re-forming over the past several decades. All of these groups claim to be descendants of the Old Settlers, the early Cherokee migrants to the West who settled in Arkansas in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Of the many possibilities, I selected a tribe that was fairly well organized and sizable but that was not state-recognized, so that it could serve as a basis for comparison with the one in Alabama. In addition to my usual questions, I wanted to know more about the contested history of these groups in Arkansas and why they had not been able to gain recognition at the state level.

The third group was located in Texas, where, as in Arkansas, bands of Cherokee people had settled in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I had heard from citizen Cherokees in Oklahoma that this particular group had hosted a regular stomp dance, had traveled back and forth between a ceremonial ground in Texas and the ones in Oklahoma, and included some tribal members who spoke enough Cherokee to make basic conversation. These social and cultural connections intrigued me, and I wanted

to see why this group was engaged in practices that even Oklahoma Cherokees recognized as being specifically Cherokee, whereas most race shifter groups were involved in powwow dancing and other pan-Indian activities. I chose the final group because it was located in Oklahoma and was trying to claim the same land base, treaties, and political rights as the two federally recognized Cherokee tribes in the area. This presented a unique opportunity to see how these claims were being challenged at the local level and on what basis.

As I continued working with people, mostly in Oklahoma, my assistant set out with her notebook and tape recorder. In all her interactions with the four groups, she made it clear that she was doing research on my behalf, an arrangement that was reinforced when she obtained informed consent. Between February and July 2003, she conducted twenty-eight formal interviews, almost all of which were tape-recorded (see appendix 5). She asked a standard set of open-ended questions that I provided, a slightly revised version of what I had initially asked in the mail surveys, and then she followed these questions with her own spontaneous ones. We always talked at length before she went to do fieldwork, and I provided her with guidance about the issues that most concerned me. She also wrote extensive descriptive and analytic field notes about people and events and gave these to me shortly after she returned, at which point we talked about her experiences and impressions and I asked follow-up questions as needed. Later, she provided me with transcriptions of all her interviews. However, as I started writing, I also listened to these tapes on my own to double-check the transcriptions and to get a sense of people's affect and tone of voice. The direct quotations I cite from race shifters are taken mostly from my assistant's interviews or the earlier mail surveys and only in a few instances from interviews I conducted. In two places within the book, which are clearly identified, I describe an event that my assistant recorded in her field notes. I wrote these scenes based on her eyewitness accounts of them and then gave them to her to make certain that my interpretations of these events dovetailed with her memories of them.

As should be obvious by now, the topic of racial shifting was far too complex, varied, and geographically dispersed for me to get at it by concentrating my energies on understanding a single community such as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians or the Echota Cherokee of Georgia. Such an approach has value in its own right and certainly would have provided additional insights that are missing here, but I wanted to see the big picture and to learn what people in radically different contexts thought about racial shifting. My assistant's work enabled me to broaden my perspective to multiple field sites and to answer the questions that I first set for myself in my survey. Although she was in the field for only thirty days over a six-month period and I had logged many years with the topic, she was a valued collaborator in that her field notes and our many conversations helped to shape my thoughts on this project. While I want to give her credit for her contributions, I do not want to assign her any of the responsibility for what in the end are my own choices and interpretations.

Because of the way in which the data were gathered, there are certain biases in this

work beyond what anthropologists typically bring to the table. For example, I do not have the same long-term relationship with self-identified and state-recognized Cherokee communities as I do with the Cherokee Nation. Nor do I have as long a relationship with the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians or the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians as I have with the Cherokee Nation, with whom I have worked on an ongoing basis for fourteen years. Because I have a rich history with this community, my formal interviews with Cherokee Nation citizens included good friends and old acquaintances, as well as people I had just met. In contrast, the interviews I conducted with citizens of the United Keetoowah Band and Eastern Band and with occasional race shifters were usually our first and only meeting. These different relationships and histories color the quality of the interview data, but not, I believe, in a way that compromises the fundamental insights of the book.

One other fact affected how people interacted with me in the field: my own status as a Mississippi Choctaw descendant, which was not information I volunteered unless someone asked me directly whether I had tribal ties. In these instances, I identified myself as having primarily Sicilian and German ancestry, but also Mississippi Choctaw ancestry through my father's mother. I was always quick to add that I was not a tribal citizen and had not been raised in Mississippi within the context of a tribal community. Despite these important caveats, I soon realized that I had little control over other people's readings of my ancestry and identity. I felt sort of like a Rorschach test in that people would see in me whatever they wished to see. For example, the race shifters with whom I interacted on an informal basis tended to view me as someone who would be sympathetic to their interests because I, too, had American Indian ancestry and was not formally recognized as a tribal citizen. At the same time, Cherokee Nation citizens saw me as being sympathetic to their interests, not so much because of my ancestry (they tended to put me in the "descendant" category) but rather because they knew me to be a champion of tribal sovereignty and other political goals of the tribe, as well as a long-term friend to a good number of them. I am not sure how citizens of the United Keetoowah Band or Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians viewed me, but I imagine that I benefited from having other Cherokees vouch for me in a way that facilitated the interview process.

In noting these different relationships, histories, and personal details, I am trying to provide readers with additional context that will help them understand, evaluate, and even challenge my own interpretations of the data. I welcome those challenges and hope that people will read against the grain, pushing the analysis in new directions. In this regard, I have also provided additional demographic and contextual information about each of the ninety-five individuals who participated in formal interviews or surveys (appendices 4–6). Someone with a different scholarly orientation than my own could use this information to develop a statistical analysis; others might wonder why I did not put more effort into controlling the variables of the research. The fact of the matter is that, as an interdisciplinary scholar working at the nexus of the social sciences and the humanities, I never intended to carry out that type of definitive project.

My goals have always been more modest: to convey something about what is being said and not being said in public discourses on Cherokee identity and to better understand the political ramifications of that discourse on Cherokee people and their communities. Taken together, I believe that the primary sources I have gathered—the interviews, ethnographic observations, field notes, and archival documents—along with the more standard secondary sources mentioned in the reference list, tell us a great deal about the discursive terrain of racial shifting. My hope is that my work will raise new questions and concerns, spark additional debate, and lay the groundwork for future research.

A final word about proper names and pseudonyms: as I noted in the acknowledgments, I am deeply indebted to the many people in Cherokee country, broadly defined, who offered their time and counsel on the subject of racial shifting. I wish that I could give each and every one of these individuals credit for their contributions, but anthropologists work in a new era of institutional review boards and informed consent and our code of ethics requires that we protect the privacy of individuals with whom we collaborate, whether or not they want their identities protected. The topic of racial shifting is so volatile and politically heated that, although most people agreed to be identified by name when signing their consent forms, I have chosen to protect their anonymity in almost all cases. The few actual names I included belong to individuals who formally consented and repeatedly requested to be named and were either old friends, public figures, or people who had a chance to read an earlier draft of the material. I have also used names that have already appeared in published sources. Quotations taken from interviews and survey responses are followed in the text by complete dates in parentheses.

Because the topic of this book is so controversial and people have such radically different opinions about it, the book is divided into two parts, each of which represents an equally important position within the overall phenomenon. Part 1 focuses on the stories that racial shifters tell about their lives as they rename themselves and their communities as Cherokee, and part 2 focuses on citizen Cherokees and their perspectives on racial shifting. I use the term "citizen Cherokee" to describe people who are citizens of one of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes and to distinguish them from those who are enrolled members of nonrecognized and state-recognized Cherokee tribes. This usage is not meant to make a fetish of federal recognition, nor is it meant to question other forms of indigenous identification. Rather, it is intended to clarify historical, political, and legal differences that are important to interpretations of tribal politics and sovereignty, something that will become increasingly apparent over the course of this book.[40] (Some people will be dismayed that I placed state-recognized tribes in a category alongside nonrecognized tribes, but I did so because states usually have less stringent standards for tribal recognition than the federal government. The differences between these two forms of external recognition is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7).

Part 1 begins by describing and analyzing the most common narrative elements

