**Name: Date: Period:**

**Aboriginal Perspectives: Senior English**

**“Seeing Red over Myths” by Drew Hayden Taylor**

***Ojibwa playwright, scriptwriter, and journalist Drew Hayden Taylor was born at the Curve Lake Reserve, Ontario, in 1962. Although he has worked in both television and film, he is primarily recognized for the work he has done for stage. In 1989, he won the Chalmers Award for “Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock” and in 1990 he received the Canadian Authors Association Award for “Bootlegger Blues.” Taylor’s most popular work is the play “Someday” (1993), which has been performed across the country.***

***from Elements of Essays: Patterns, Purpose & Perspectives***

A year and a half ago, my Mohawk girlfriend and I (a fellow of proud Ojibway heritage) found ourselves in the history-rich halls of Europe, lecturing on Native issues, the propaganda and the reality, at a university deep in the heart of northeastern Germany. Then one young lady, a student at this former communist university, put up her hand and asked an oddly naïve question, something like, “Do Indian women shave their legs and armpits like other North American women?” (This was not the strangest question I’ve had put to me. I keep a list, which includes, I’m phoning from Edinburgh, Scotland, and am doing research on natives in the 1930’s. Can you send some information?” or “Where can I get my hands on some Inuit throat singers?”).

But unbeknownst to me, the shaving of extremities in Europe is a largely unexplored area of female hygiene; evidently this topic warranted investigation as to its possible Aboriginal origin. But the question presented a rather obvious example of the issue that permeates North America: The myth of pan-Indianism. The young lady had begun her question with “Do Indian women…?” Sometimes the questioner substitutes First Nations/Native/Aboriginal/Indigenous for Indian; however it’s worded, it reveals a persistent belief that we are all one people.

Within the borders of what is now referred to as Canada, there are more than 50 distinct and separate languages and dialects. And each distinct and separate language and dialect has emerged from a distinct and separate culture. I tried to tell the woman that her question couldn’t be answered because technically, there is no “Indian/First Nations/Aboriginal.” To us, there is only the Cree, the Ojibway, the Salish, the Innu, the Shuswap, etc.

I find myself explaining this point with annoying frequency, not just in Europe, but here in Canada, at the Second Cup, Chapters, the bus station. The power of that single myth is incredible. When people ask me, “What do First Nations people want?” how do I answer? Some of the Mi’kmaq want to catch lobster; some of the Cree want to stop the flooding and logging of their territory in Northern Manitoba, Alberta and Quebec; the Mohawk want the right to promote their own language, and I know bingo is in there somewhere.

That’s why every time I see a TV news report talking about the plight of the Aboriginal people, I find myself screaming, “Which ‘People’? Be specific!” That’s why I never watch television in public.

Such is the power of myths. By their very definition, they’re inaccurate or incomplete. Now you know why we as Native people (see, I do it myself) prefer not to use the term “myth” when referring to the stories of our ancestors, as in “The Myths and Legends of Our People.” There is something inherently wrong about starting a traditional story with “This is one of the myths that was passed down from our grandfathers…” Literally translated, it means, “This is a lie that was handed down by our grandfathers…”

The preferred term these days is “teachings” – as in “Our teachings say…” It’s certainly more accurate, because it recognizes the fact that most myths exist for a purpose – that there’s some nugget of metaphor or message within the subtext. And in the Native (there I go again!) way, we like to accentuate the positive. (N.B. The word ‘legend’ can also be used instead of “teachings,” provided you have oral permission from a recognized elder, or written permission from an Aboriginal academic – any Nation will do).

The myth of pan-Indianism is not the only one rooted in the Canadian psyche. A good percentage of Canadians believe that there’s a strong Aboriginal tradition of alcoholism. In Kenora, a decade or so ago, someone told me that in one month alone thee had been almost 300 arrests of Aboriginals for alcohol-related offenses. And Kenora’s not that big a town. The statistic frightened me…until it was explained that rather than confirming the mind-boggling image of 300 drunken Indians running through the Kenora streets, it signified the same dozen people who just got arrested over and over again. It’s all in how you read that statistic.

While acknowledging that certain communities do, indeed, suffer from substance-abuse problems (like many non-Native communities, I might add), I can safely say that neither myself, my girlfriend, my mother, my best friend and most of the other people of Aboriginal descent I consider friends and acquaintances, are alcoholics. Which makes me wonder why this myth is so persuasive.

It’s also believed by a good percentage of Canadians that all Native people are poor. Unfortunately, many communities do suffer from mind-numbing poverty, as do many non-Native communities. But contrary to popular belief, capitalism was not a foreign concept to Canada’s earliest inhabitants. There were levels of wealth and status back then; today, instead of counting their horses, the rich might count their horsepower.

Several weeks ago, a Toronto newspaper attacked a rumour about a coalition of Aboriginal people who had expressed interest in buying the Ottawa Senators. The columnist thought the idea preposterous: “These are the same people who can’t afford to pay tax on a deck of smokes; the same people who are so poor they claim government policy is forcing them to live in neighborhoods where a rusted car with more than one flat tire is considered a lawn ornament.”

The ratio of rusted-car-on-lawn to no-rusted-car-on-lawn is so disproportionate it’s hardly worth mentioning.

Yes, there are some wealthy Native people out there (I wish I knew more of them personally). But their existence is a hard idea to accept when the media only feature First Nations stories on the desperate and the tragic.

So where does this leave us? I was asked to write an essay on the “myths of a common Indian identity.” Which, as I translate it, means that I was asked to comment on lies about something that doesn’t exist. That sounds more like politics to me. But if you’re still curious about whether Indian women shave their legs and armpits…you’ll have to ask one. I’m not telling.

**Think About It:**

**Drew Hayden Taylor tries to answer the question, “Who are First Nations/Native/Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples? What is his response?**

**Do you agree with Taylor’s perspective?**

**Did this essay prompt you in any way to think differently? Explain.**