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## Book Review: *Blood Will Tell: Native Americans and Assimilation Policy* by Katherine Ellinghaus

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## Book Review

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*Blood Will Tell: Native Americans and Assimilation Policy.* By Katherine Ellinghaus. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2017. xxxii + 202 pp.)

During the allotment process (1887–1934), the United States established commissions and agencies nationwide to categorize Native American individuals as “full blood,” “mixed-blood,” or of any fractional part of African American ancestry, and determine who was (in)eligible for tribal enrollment and allotment. In *Blood Will Tell*, Katherine Ellinghaus sees this process as “troubling” and places its uneven practices at the core of the American settler colonial project (xv). Although the discourse of blood was almost never explicitly propounded as a deliberate and clear policy of the U.S. government, explains Ellinghaus, its implications diminished the number of Indigenous peoples, revoked official recognition, nullified tribal land rights, and made their lands more accessible for settlers. The ways government employees used blood quantum in the records, Ellinghaus contends, had little to do with Indigenous ideas of identity, kinship, and tribal membership. Drawn from extensive archival resources, university libraries, and government records, Ellinghaus takes on the colonial tropes of Indian “authenticity” and disempowers a much larger and insidious technique in the U.S. settler colonial story. It is precisely this goal that *Blood Will Tell* intends to render hypervisible by bringing forth a nuanced reading of the archives to explain this deleterious feature of settler colonialism.

Ellinghaus uses a broadly chronological organization in connecting the critical implications of “competency commissions” and government programs on diverse and multiple Native American communities. From the Anishinaabeg peoples at White Earth Indian Reservation and the Five Tribes in Indian Territory to those of the Cheyenne-Arapaho in the Great Plains and Virginia Indians, *Blood Will Tell* offers a nuanced national picture of the appropriation of blood as a powerful instrument against mixed-blood peoples to hold on to their lands. Within each chapter the narrative tacks back and forth in time to historicize

the conditions under which government officials set in motion policies and commissions to reduce Indian-held lands. The first three chapters examine how government agents used the discourse of blood to distinguish between “real” Indians, “competent” Indians, and “other unrecognized” Indians. Chapter 4 offers a well-crafted and nuanced analysis of the failure of the Indian New Deal to bring justice to the unrecognized Native Americans of mixed descent. Her final chapter takes us into a more racially obsessed state where the “one-drop rule” of African American ancestry was all it took to de-authenticate Virginia Indians of their Indianness. For the sake of contrast, the author concludes her book with a brief discussion about the eastern Cherokees’ use of blood quantum rhetoric to reclaim their Indian authenticity and sovereignty in North Carolina.

Some readers will find Ellinghaus’s arguments very satisfying; others will question the portability of the book’s methods and the lack of balance between different case studies. Individual cases, for example, are given thorough analysis, while state Indians such as the Seminole in Oklahoma and the Rappahannocks, Pamunkeys, Monacans, and Mattaponis in Virginia, are often dealt with in generalizations that lack detail. Notwithstanding, these shortcomings do not detract from the avid novelty of Ellinghaus’s arguments and the way that she vividly brings forth a nuanced reading of the archives to unpack the intricate colonial dynamics between the blood quantum narrative, the assimilation policy, and the settler colonial polyvalent mobility. *Blood Will Tell* makes a brilliant and original contribution to historical scholarship on Indians, race, and settler colonialism in western American history and merits a wide readership.