Brown missteps in way he questions Warren on heritage

September 26, 2012

As a black man who is also of Cherokee descent, I know that Native Americans come in many different complexions. Like many people of color, a history of colonization, rape, and interracial unions has resulted in Native Americans ranging in hue, from as dark as I am to as light as Elizabeth Warren. Therefore, in last Thursday’s debate I found Senator Scott Brown’s assertion that Warren “clearly is not” an American Indian to be both ridiculous and offensive. Just exactly how does one identify an American Indian?

Second, Brown’s insinuation that being a person of color is “an advantage” flies in the face of social-science data. Native Americans are particularly disadvantaged in the United States.

Warren’s experience is similar to that of many Americans. Their familial accounts of history — in this case, that Warren is of Cherokee descent — not only become internal narrative, they become identity. While some of us can “document” that history, many Americans go through life wearing an ethnic identity that has been passed on to them through family narrative.

Brown presents himself as an everyman, one of “us.” In order for that to ring true, he should learn who “we” are.

C. Shawn McGuffey
Jamaica Plain

The writer is an associate professor of sociology and African and African diaspora studies at Boston College.