



“All My Relations”: Aunties, Cousins, and Indigenous Methods of Recognition

BY SMOKII SUMAC

“Hey, did you see that post from Jack? The one about Jessica* that says she’s not actually Indigenous?”*

I’ve just read a Facebook post involving two new acquaintances that throws me into the Hades-like depths of Indigenous identity politics, and I’m reaching out to a relation who I know is close to Jessica to discuss how to respond, and/or if a response is necessary.

I am stepping off the stage of an event I am hosting, having just quoted a scholar and relation of mine, let’s call them Mary, when a person I barely know beckons me over. “That woman you just quoted. She’s another Joseph Boyden. Zero blood at all. Just thought you should know.”*

I do some quick rewriting of my notes in order to quote Mary on stage again before the night is over, stating my close relationship to her while I look in the accuser’s direction. I text a close mutual friend to discuss whether or not to tell Mary, and we decide it’s best to leave it for now — these kinds of questions can be hurtful and, again, I barely know the accuser or what kind of power they hold, but I hear nothing more of this falsehood in the coming months.

“I, umm, well, I... I just learned about my Indigenous ancestry, I’m sorry, I don’t know much.”

A new student in my classroom apologizes for the effects of 500 years of colonization on their family. Apologizes for not knowing, their fear as palpable as their desperation to know, to claim, to be claimed.

Kisukyukyit! My name is Smokii Sumac and I am a member of the Ktunaxa Nation. If we were in my community or, if you asked because you knew some Ktunaxa people, I’d tell you I’m from Akisqnuuk and Shūswap. I’d tell you I’m the oldest child of Anna (Sam) Hudson, my birthmother, and the youngest child of Barb Cote, who raised me. If you didn’t know them (though that’s unlikely now that Barb is Chief), I’d tell you my grandma was Sabina Cote, and it’s almost a guarantee you’d remember her and tell me you miss her bringing you huckleberries. I’d laugh and say, I miss her, too.

If maybe we were meeting at a conference and you were from another nation in BC, I’d say Sophie Pierre is from where I’m from, and that she was the Chief Commissioner of the BC Treaty Commission for many years. If you didn’t know any Ktunaxa people and, say, you were an Anishinaabe scholar, I’d tell you

about my ceremony dad who’s Anishinaabe. If I saw you and knew that you knew my A’aninin/Dena’ina Athabaskan/Alutiiq mom because she shared your poetry, I’d go up and tell you how I am connected and we’d hug and exchange numbers; family already through the connection.

I have the privilege of knowing where I come from. As of this year, I carry a name from that place. I know my grandmothers. I know the names of their fathers. I have the privilege of multiple families, from the Ktunaxa ones I was born and adopted into, to the Blackfeet, Choctaw, Potawatami, and other nations I’ve been welcomed into ceremony with, to the Lakota and Cherokee uncles, Shashone and “NDN-Creole” sisters, Métis cousins, and even the non-Indigenous Quaker auntie who have all become my relations. These are my families through the work we do, walking together in the Indigenous literary studies field.

I am surrounded by an intricate and ever-growing web of relations. So much so, that one time when I was crossing the Canada/United States border, I actually laughed at the border guard when they asked “How do you have family down there?”

I have family everywhere.

I know that this is a privilege because it wasn’t always this way. I was once, not long ago, that student apologizing for my lack of knowledge. I took on the burden of shame that can only come with carrying a status card but not knowing how to properly say the name of my nation. Shame that can only come through the weight of blood quantum and some strange numbering system of 6(r)s and 6(2)s that I still have trouble teaching in my class because it’s so complex. Shame that can only come with, as one of my former students explained it, the pressure to find a “brown teddy bear” to have children with (her grandmother had explained Indigenous rights and status with brown and white teddy bears when she was very young). Shame that can only come with the alienation of hearing that story and not having a grandmother that taught you because she denied any and all connection to Indigeneity until she was on her deathbed. Shame that can only

come with being the survivors of attempted genocide in a world that is still, despite any conversations of reconciliation, actively trying to get rid of you.

That shame is perhaps one of the strongest things that bind us together as Indigenous people. When I see it in my students, I recognize it immediately as deeply as my own. I think it's why so many Indigenous folks rushed to defend Boyden so quickly; if they take him down, will they come for me? And not all of us can give you the connections I was able to give. Heck, I couldn't have done that myself until recently.

So what am I saying? You have to be connected to be Indigenous? Or, you have to feel shame, and that's what makes you Indigenous? I sure hope the latter isn't true. That's a really awful future to work towards.

To be honest, I'm tired of identity politics. I'm not interested in policing folks. When I wrote to my friends about Jessica and Mary, I did it out of love. When my relation confirmed that Jessica's connections to community might, in fact, be tenuous, I didn't immediately share the original Facebook post. I didn't call Jessica out. I barely told anyone, except those who are close to me, and only then to talk about how I was processing this information.

Of course, my relation isn't the authority on Jessica's Indigenous identity. Because, and let me emphasize this: there is no authority on Indigenous identity. Not Indian Affairs, not the band council, not the Chief (even if she is my mom), not our scholars, not #nativetwitter, not the American Indian Movement, not the university, certainly not Joseph Boyden, not your professors, not your medicine people. Not Chris Andersen, not me! There is nobody out there who can grant the yes or no answer that seem so highly sought after when it comes to these questions.

There are ways of talking about blood and enrolment, of course, and ways of talking about ancestry. There are ways of recognizing relationships, roles, and responsibilities. There are families, communities, and nations that claim us and there are places and people and knowledges that we claim as our own. But there's no universal standard. There's no badge we can wear (and that would be a little too reminiscent of another Holocaust, wouldn't it?). There's no box we can check, there's not even a card we can carry (though that card brings up a whole other mess of complexities)

that will satisfy a simple yes or no answer to the question "Are you Indigenous?"

What I can tell you is I'm more likely to believe the student who is apologizing, and to encourage them not to apologize anymore because they are not alone; their story of not knowing is where most of us start. I'm less likely to believe a person in power who has gained that power from their claims (and from being a good-looking male, but that's a whole other essay on Indigenous celebrity and "acceptable" Indians).

I can also tell you not to worry about us. We have our ways of figuring out who you are. I can tell you that we'll text or Facebook each other when you walk away if we think you aren't telling the truth, and then we'll just continue asking those questions and passing information amongst ourselves until one day one of us gets fed up and does the research and proves you're lying because you've met your threshold for the damage we'll let you do in our communities.

And maybe if you're *suyapi*ⁱ, and you haven't had much "contact" with Indigenous people (see what I did there?), then you don't understand or connect with much of what I've said here (or maybe especially, if you do). Perhaps then, the next time you want to write a story about us, and you ask yourself, "Am I the best person to tell this story?" the answer will simply be, "No."

*Taxa*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Thank you to my Métis cousin, Cherie Dimaline, for your support of my words.

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* Names have been changed for obvious reasons.

ⁱ Greeting (Ktunaxa)

ⁱⁱ Non-Indigenous (Ktunaxa)

ⁱⁱⁱ That is all (Ktunaxa)