

October 2020 Preface

In June of 2015, I was approached by several Indigenous scholars to reflect privately on how one of our professional colleagues was representing herself professionally as “Indigenous,” both erroneously and consciously (in contrast to those that may be simply confused or misguided). Due to confusion about Indigenous ancestry in my own family (see my published essay “A Borderlands Methodology”), and my scholarly investment in Indigenous Studies, I had much to say on the topic. Because the scholar in question had actively silenced my friends and colleagues for not being Indigenous, I took the fraud in this case personally.

At the suggestion of Indigenous scholars who I respect greatly, I penned an essay for Indian Country Today who had reached out to me on this particular issue because of my previous publications with them. I submitted the essay below, which I titled “I’m Not an Indian. It’s okay.”

Indian Country Today published my essay, which they retitled as “Four Words for Andrea Smith: I’m Not an Indian.” I was personally shocked as the new title felt so much more personally an attack rather than a testimony, as I had originally intended. They also revised a few of the sentences that I feel changed the tone of the essay. But these changes are within their editorial rights.

In the weeks following the publication, many more scholars and Indigenous community members would join the debate, including Dr. Andrea Smith herself. Only remnants of that larger debate still exist online, such as [this statement](https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/choke-women-scholars-and-activists-statement-on-andrea-smith-Rrpr-cK1CkKz6LaAZlecgw). (<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/choke-women-scholars-and-activists-statement-on-andrea-smith-Rrpr-cK1CkKz6LaAZlecgw>).

I do not intend, by making the original essay below available, to re-ignite those previous contentions. I only mean to make a document available that people might find useful in their own research.

I remain as conscious as in 2015 about the gendered impact of a man publicly calling out a woman. I am not sure I would write this essay today as I did back then. But I also read this essay and think, “yes, I still believe this to be true,” “this” being that even if you have Indigenous blood; even if you have Indigenous ancestry; even if you have been told by a relative that you are Indigenous; you still have to do the work to actively participate and contribute to a particular community’s acceptance of you as a relative. If you do not do that work and simply self-identify as Indigenous, you may in fact, consciously or unconsciously, be subverting Indigenous authenticity and authority for personal gain.

I'm Not an Indian. It's okay.
Indian Country Today; July 1, 2015
David Shorter

By now many of us have been confronted with the tangled ways to think about identity shifting in light of the Rachel Dolezal affair. Some attention has been rightfully paid to the long history of people "playing Indian" as well, both in the world of politics and entertainment. And as Ward Churchill's tribulations made very clear, the academic world is not immune to those who are either intentionally misleading others or deeply confused about their own identity. As all of these various cases point out, identity is in fact a confusing matter, sometimes designated by blood, other times by language, or heritage, or cultural performances.

Reading many of the blogs and news sources over the last few weeks, both about the African American and American Indian cases of fraud, I can't help but notice a lingering sense that people should not "police" (a truly overwrought word in academic circles) other people's identity. Though, to be sure, that is a particular form of individual-based rights thinking to come to the conclusion, "who am I to tell another person who they are?" My personal story might help us reflect on a parallel case emerging in the blogosphere, that of Professor Andrea Smith.

I was both an undergraduate and graduate student in American Indian Studies, particularly within Religious Studies at Arizona State University. That was the 1990's and identity politics had the type of traction leading to scholarships, financial aid, and preferential hiring. Being both in Religious Studies and Indigenous Studies provided a doubly difficult balancing act: in Religious Studies we struggled to be non-believers simply studying the how people were religious. In Indigenous Studies, we were expected to learn and help a particular community, learning language and culture when invited to do so, essentially to dance along the border of cultural insider and outsider. Many of us were taught that scholarship offered limited practical help to Indigenous communities, but that we could ideally do both, produce research that helped counter the centuries of written misrepresentations *and* collaborate with Native peoples in local ways. Our success in these challenging goals varies across my generation.

Where these two paths crossed were the instances when our value to the academic world was based upon our racial, ethnic, and national identities. Was my work with the Yoeme (Yaqui) people better, more useful, more reliable, etc. if I were to be a Yoeme person? While they were very challenging (more than words can ever convey), those years as a graduate student were incredibly valuable for how they led me to learn how to say something so very simple and powerful: "I'm not an Indian." They are powerful because they enable both the speaker and listener to then determine if a path forward is of interest and of value to everyone involved. In my case, it helped that I was beginning to work with one the most highly Hippified tribes, thanks to Carlos Castaneda. At the age of twenty-two I was practicing Buddhist meditation and showed up to the Yaqui pueblos in northern Mexico

uninterested in converting to or adopting their ways. I was working on my own sense of self-less self. And while I've spent some time in Blessing Ways on the Navajo reservation and NAC meeting across the Southwest, those times were as an invited guest, not seeking to become Indian or appear more Indian. (Okay, I did try to pull off turquoise jewelry for a few years).

Perhaps, coming from a confusing bloodline of not knowing who my biological grandfather was, but being raised in vaguely Hispanic, Mexican, mixed-German immigrant and Catholic cultures, and regularly visiting reservations since childhood (as both tourist and neighbor), you might say that I was prepared in life to find the power in saying "I don't necessarily know what I am." Just going off language and my family's traditions, I always thought of myself as Mexican more than anything else. My family has the pictures and names of Comanche and Cherokee women who ended up in the early New Mexican ranching family either as adopted laborers, wives, and lovers. But I have no relation to those communities, so why would I ever say I'm one of them? I was raised by Delgados, mostly a group of amazing aunts and uncles who spoke to each other in Spanish and fed me copious amounts of Mexican food daily.

I knew I wasn't Indian because I didn't have an indigenous community calling me one of theirs. And I learned that it was important to many leaders and colleagues in my academic fields if I was Indigenous, more so than if I wasn't. All around me I could see scholars prefer to quote, publish, and invite Indigenous academics. Perhaps because of that "missing" grandfather, many people in native communities have said, "you look Indian." But I think those claims helped them justify working with me; or they were meant as compliments. Or at least I took them that way. I could have Indigenous blood in me beyond the Mexican bloodlines and the couple grandmothers so far back that a few "greats" wouldn't get there; but that's not identity for me. I have learned much of Yoeme language, but that doesn't make me Yoeme in even the slightest way. I have been taught much about Indigenous people, been taught ways of being that have changed my life in unbelievably wonderful ways; but I'm still a respectful guest on their land. And while I've spent many years, actually decades, trying to improve Indigenous rights and vitality in mostly academic forms (there are many fronts to this work), I've learned first-hand the danger of trying to speak for Native people rather than simply supporting their being heard. And there lies the difference.

Andrea Smith surely thinks she is Cherokee; or she did at some point. She has been asked repeatedly to either stop claiming Cherokee identity or to either authenticate her claims through a reliable kinship, through ties to a specific family, or through the Cherokee Nation's official process for enrollment. And she's smart enough to know that in many tribal cultures, identity is not who you claim but who claims you. She has done so much incredible theoretical work in the academic field of Indigenous Studies and has even been recognized internationally for her broad and groundbreaking anti-violence coalition building. So, does it matter that she may have done all of that in Red Face?

Yes, it does.

Andy Smith did not just appear out of an egg, as a fully formed “woman of color” advocate, validated as an Indigenous scholar, and a peace prize nominee. She got there by grabbing the microphone, keeping others away from it, and deciding to speak both “as” and “for” a group of people. While writing my ethnographic works, I do sometimes speak “for” Yoemem; I’ve also gone to great lengths to simply translate and when possible, amplify Yoeme people’s claims. But, I’ve never spoken “as” a Yoeme person.

For every scholarship she received as a Native person, for every honorarium she has received as an Indigenous speaker, for her book sales that a publisher sold as coming from a “Cherokee” author, those recognitions came at the expense of some student who wasn’t funded, some speaker who wasn’t invited, or some book by an Indigenous author that wasn’t bought. She spent years cultivating relationships with other powerful women of color to ensure her insider status. And as I personally know, she pushed others out of her way by not only playing an insider, but also playing the gatekeeper. One only needs to visit this Tumblr page (<http://andreamithisnotcherokee.tumblr.com/>) to see her strategic use of “we” when talking about Indigenous experiences and “them” when talking about colonizers. Andy and I both went to the same graduate program, History of Consciousness at UC Santa Cruz, a place that excelled at theorizing the strategies of exactly such representations within social movements.

Lisa Aldred wrote this great scholarly article that methodically shows why people want to be Indian. In “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances,” she demonstrated that non-Indians are unconsciously motivated by “imperialist nostalgia” to become or affiliate as Indigenous because doing so alleviates them of their guilt about colonization. This essay is powerful in the classroom because it shows the sheer power of this motivation, from headdresses, to sweat lodge tourism, to the entire market for anything smacking of Indian spirituality.

I hesitate to give a “why” about Andrea Smith’s fraud. But I have some inclinations based on “imperialist nostalgia” as Aldred, Renato Rosaldo and others have used that term. Having shared space with Andrea (or “Andy”) on multiple occasions, I want to believe she was motivated most by her desire to make the world better for Native people. Has she done a few wrong things, then, for all the right reasons? Perhaps the reasons are not justified if the effects include factionalizing a field of colleagues, diverting resources from intended Indigenous recipients, demonstrating a lack of concern for evidence and honest communication, and worse, showing by example that we must be “of” a group to help that group. That’s not ally building. That’s pretending.

She has secured a comfortably middle-class profession and a position of respect. Moreover, she has gained the support, friendship, and camaraderie of some of the

most intelligent Indigenous scholars and feminist activists that I know. Were those made possible due to her claim of Indigenous identity? If so, then we shouldn't only be pointing fingers at Andrea Smith. The problems lie with the standards of authenticity and authority that rest upon something as shifty, fragile, and falsifiable as identity. The problem also lies with the people who believed Smith's claim in the face of contradictory and reliable evidence. Obviously, my pondering all of this publicly doesn't solve the problem. But the value of the conversation will only emerge if we start first with honesty. That's the power of saying what we know to be true. So those who just don't know if they are Indians, or do not have a group of people claiming them as members of their collective identity, may I suggest that you simply say it: "I'm not Indian." It's okay. We're not so horrible that we can't also do really great work at the same time as being afflicted with this condition of being non-Indian.