6. Staking Claims

How can it be that anyone *belongs* anywhere, or to anyone? It fixes people in place, polices movement, tells us where to be, and permits expulsions. All nationalisms lean heavily on the idea that the world-made-right requires people to return/be returned to their rightful places, the places where they belong, for everyone to go home. Every border checkpoint, every passport, rests on the notion that certain people belong on certain lands, and maintenance requires the constant enforcement of that catalogue.

But if decolonization is to have material, non-metaphorical force, resistance to occupation starts with reclaiming land and asserting who can and cannot lay claim to it. Indigenous people across the globe demand the return of stolen lands, and the agency to determine who does and does not have access. Post-coloniality has always rested on the return of land to its previous inhabitants: without land, Indigenous peoples cease to exist, and any desire for inessentialism has to chart a route that simultaneously abhors and embraces borders. Invocations of community can never be disembedded from four hundred years of colonialism and abstracted notions of being-in-common are always subject to imperial hunger.

Colonial genocide, occupation and domination surround us all, and how we think of being-together always breathes that air. It might be that strategic, or corrective, essentialism is the only route to inessentialism, but that seems dismissive or patronizing to intersectional politics. Nationalism is always toxic, except when it is not. Belonging and membership is never an argument for being-together, except when it is.

The weight of colonial depravities requires constant resistance even (especially) from people who name themselves 'allies' or people who claim to belong. Take US Senator Elizabeth Warren, for example. For decades she has very effectively muddied the waters around her background: implying, stating, suggesting that she is Cherokee, has Cherokee heritage, is Indigenous, or something like that. For decades Warren was very careful publicly with her claims, and always left a few obfuscatory routes of escape open, but if it seemed worth it, she happily just lied. When she was faculty at Harvard, she listed herself as a 'minority law professor' and when she registered for the Texas State Bar, she identified her race as 'American Indian'.

When confronted about these claims, Warren always rope-a-doped, saying she knew she was Cherokee because her grandma always said they had a relative, or that it was a family story that she had no reason to question. As her run for the Democratic presidential nomination gathered steam through 2018 however, scrutiny and sneering accumulated from both sides of the aisle. Far more importantly, Cherokee scholars and leaders demanded she come clean. She kept retreating, fighting rearguard battles, avoiding real confrontation, until – disastrously – she took a DNA test, and then trumpeted the results that 'strongly supported' the existence of an Indigenous ancestor six-to-ten generations back.

She was quickly – and very publicly – informed of her mistake, and then privately reached out to the Cherokee Nation to express regret for 'causing confusion', but still did not seem to grasp just how wrongheaded her attempt to appropriate identity was. Warren continued to spin the situation, and in 2020 more than 200 Cherokee and Indigenous signees wrote an open letter demanding she 'fully retract' all her previous claims, work to dispel the myths she helped spread and ameliorate the damage done. They noted the massive theft of public funds by white people feigning Indigenous identities:

> Claiming Native identity without citizenship, kinship ties, or recognition from Native communities undermines Indigenous self-determination. As the most public example of this behavior, you need to

> clearly state that Native people are the sole authority on who is – and who is not – Native.[1]

Warren responded promptly, returning a twelve-page letter that retreated a few more steps, acknowledging that she is white, and offering: "I was wrong to have identified as a Native American, and, without qualification or excuse, I apologize."

She then immediately qualified and excused herself, claiming she "never benefited financially or professionally" (which is another lie) and then didn't miss the opportunity to carefully detail her campaign's policy platform that she said would be good for Indian Country.

Ok, fine. So what if a politician is a little loosey-goosey with the truth, and indulges in little play-acting here and there, especially when she is apparently a good, progressive person? The problem of course, is that this line of analysis centres precisely the wrong things and people. As Cherokee artist and writer Rebecca Nagle says, the real issue is colonial occupation and Indigenous survival:

> The center of this controversy is not Warren's political career, it is Cherokee sovereignty and self-determination. The monster I am trying to wrestle to the ground is not one white woman who claimed to be Cherokee. It is the hundreds of thousands of white people claiming to be Cherokee and the broad social acceptance that emboldens them. It threatens the future of my tribe. Warren is just the most public example.[2]

It is important here that perhaps the key fulcrum in this story was Warren's reversion to a DNA test to 'prove' her claim of ancestry. It is a very common tactic, and one that seemingly should settle things: science and genetics to the rescue, bearing objective truth to answer questions of who *belongs* where and to whom, and permitting oneself passage.

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1 'An Open Letter to Elizabeth Warren', Medium, February 26th, 2020.

2 Rebecca Nagle, 'Elizabeth Warren Has Spent Her Adult Life Repeating A Lie. I Want Her To Tell The Truth.', HuffPost, 2019.

Joseph Boyden tried this too. Boyden is a best-selling Canadian writer, who like Warren, is a powerful, highly accomplished public intellectual who has cut a prominent figure supporting progressive causes, particularly around Indigenous issues. In familiarly slippery ways, Boyden has claimed all kinds of ancestry, from Mi'kmaq to Nipmuc, Metis to Anishnabe, Ojibway to Huron-Wendat, strategically landing on the phrase (after many years of questions) that he is a white kid with native roots' and that "a small part of me is Indigenous, but it is a huge part of who I am."

Although there had long been whispers about his identity, Boyden's case drew increasing scrutiny as his profile grew, and by 2016 he was being forced to openly defend himself. Unlike Warren, who has a long and varied career, Boyden has staked all his writing and legitimacy on nonsensical and shifting claims to Indigeneity, and so has fought back hard, despite his record of dubious claims and outright lying. One of the key pillars of his argument was the DNA test he took showing some (unclear how much) Indigenous ancestry:

> If I am accepted by people in Indigenous communities, if I have been traditionally adopted by a number of people in Indigenous communities, if my DNA test shows I have Indigenous blood, if I have engaged my whole career in publicly defending Indigenous rights as well as using my public recognition as an author to shine light on Indigenous issues, am I not, in some way, Indigenous?[3]

It's now broadly accepted that Boyden is a charlatan who built a lucrative career playing Indian and got away with it for a long time, like so many Grey Owls before and since. But he remains strategically-adept and the title of his major in-defense-of-himself essay was '*Being Indigenous isn't all about DNA. It's about who you claim, and who claims you*' – ironically-enough given that one of the central claims of that essay was his DNA test.

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3 Joseph Boyden, 'My name is Joseph Boyden'. Macleans Magazine, August 2nd, 2017.

There are a surprising number of other high-profile examples of these deceptions and surely will be many more to come. It's a little hard to see how it's possible for people to pull these deceptions off given the extraordinary levels of public access to information, but people like Rachel Dolezal have taught us that identity falsifications are hardly limited to Indigenous facades. There are so many versions of the same basic move, from adopting a 'Black' accent, to inventing a gangster past, to writing best-selling autobiographies feigning being a Holocaust survivor. The motivations are sometimes obvious (receiving awards and grants) other times seem to be ineffable, flailing attempts at authenticity (or something?) – say some D-list celebrity faking a Spanish accent despite being raised in Boston.

No matter whether the implications are profound or inconsequential, there is always power in play. If the two of us writing this book decided to claim to be Irish all of a sudden, no one would really care all that much, frankly. It's just not true, and it would be kind of weird if either of us were to make that claim. One of us has something of a better argument to make, but honestly it would pass with little notice and it would barely move any needles for anyone. It is however really important to talk about who gets to claim Indigeneity with material consequences, such that some prominent Canadian Indigenous people are now calling for fines and/or jail sentences for Pretendian misrepresentation. There is precedent: the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 makes it illegal to falsely claim that any item was 'Indian-produced' and even a first-time violator is subject to a $250,000 fine and/or up to five years imprisonment.

In many communities and settings it is customary to introduce yourself by speaking of your parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, acknowledging your ancestors and where you, and they, are from. It is a way to root yourself, for others to understand who you claim and who claims you, and who your families are. It is a practise that is echoed and emulated in many different ways and circumstances. It tends to have a subtly flustering effect on settlers when they are asked who their people are. White people never think they have to account for themselves, they

think they are from everywhere, and deserve to be anywhere and everywhere.

Colonial apparatuses have tried to steal not just land and offspring, but the capacity to adjudicate who is and is not Indigenous, and decolonization demands that Indigenous people are able to define membership using whatever criteria they decide on. But even that gets fraught, because colonialism has stripped many Indigenous people of membership and connection to their families through deliberately genocidal policies. Undoing the rubble of colonial deprivations keeps revealing layers of devilish complexity, but it is certain that there is no route past nationalism without foundational assertions of Indigenous identity.

It is not enough to be able to claim Indigenous or other heritage, someone has to claim you too. People unilaterally claiming Indigeneity are always embarrassing disasters because no one has claimed them back – they are living in a solipsistic fantasy. Friendship echoes this kind of reciprocity: friends have to claim one another as such, each party has to consent, and each has to have a substantive concern for the other. That seems like the foundation for any good relationships.

Kim TallBear, maybe the most prominent researcher in North America of scientific attempts to establish Indigenous heritage and author of *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*, often frames questions in terms of good relations. Speaking of Elizabeth Warren, she said:

> To be a relative, you have to actually spend time with people and have good relations with them and be invested with them [...] Warren is not a good relative. If she were, she would have said, 'It's a priority that I meet with the Cherokee Nation and find out what I did wrong'[...] As scholars of race have shown, it is one of the privileges of whiteness to control everyone else's identity.[4]

4 Geoff McMaster, 'Indigenous DNA no proof of Indigenous identity, says Native studies scholar', University of Alberta, Folio, November 5th, 2018.

TallBear is very clear that there is no such thing as a DNA test that can 'prove' Indigenous ancestry, but that does not mean that DNA tests are totally useless, and many tribal councils do employ them. But it is only in the last few decades when that status has come to mean anything material. TallBear traces the rise of DNA testing to the 1970s and 80s in the United States when tribes started building bingo halls and casinos and bringing in significant revenues for their members. All of a sudden American Indians started showing up everywhere, claiming ancestry and wanting a piece of that pie.

In recent years, decolonial efforts have forced universities, governments and funding agencies to prioritize Indigenous hiring and support. Now, who is and who is not Indigenous matters in a very real, very material and very painful way. It is a zero-sum calculation in many cases: if a faux-Indigenous person gets a job or a grant, it means a person with legitimate Indigenous heritage and family does not. Playing Indian is not just an embarrassing affectation, it is stealing. Not just identity, but money and power. Tallbear speaks about that power in terms of political authority:

> I want to be careful with the argument that it's culture versus biology; it's also political authority versus biology. We have debates amongst ourselves about whether being Native American is about being a citizen of your tribe – a political designation – or about culture and traditional practice. I tend to come down on the side of political citizenship. It's true that it's about much more than blood – culture matters. But our political autonomy matters too, and that helps produce a space in which our cultural traditions can thrive.[5]

This is the route back to thinking about community. We remain curious and optimistic about the promise of a non-processual and especially non-teleological view of history, but let's not get precious about it. In the wake of ongoing colonial devastation, our ideas about community and

5 Linda Geddes, 'There is no DNA test to prove you're Native American' in New-Scientist, Feb 5, 2014.

togetherness have to remain constantly unfixed. Good relations should never be stable, but porosity in the service of erasure can never be abided by.

There are questions that remain: how can unfixity land down in everyday, non-anthropocentric ways of being in the world? How can it be that friendship – of claiming one another – surpasses borders – not metaphorically but physically? Is friendship actually a vehicle for resistance to nationalism and coloniality?