

Settlers on the Red Road

A Conversation on Indigeneity, Belonging, and Responsibility

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This zine is not going to be comfortable for some people to read. It is likely to personally challenge a few of you out there who may yourself be dipping a toe in the pond of indigeneity, trying it out to see how it feels. This zine is not going to beat around the bush, because the bush has been thoroughly beaten around.

This is the start of a larger discussion on indigeneity, belonging, and responsibility in our anarchist community. But there is something here for everyone, even if you don't call yourself an anarchist. At the time of it's writing, it is already long overdue. In the past two years in southern Ontario, there have been multiple incidents of settlers claiming indigeneity within our intersecting anarchist circles, incidents which caused great harm to relationship and undermined solidarity with Indigenous communities. In Quebec, the rise of the "Eastern Métis" threatens to bleed over into radical spaces. In this era of state-sponsored reconciliation, the line between settlers and Indians is being purposefully blurred by Canada in an attempt to gently complete the assimilation initiated long ago and, try as anarchists might to keep ourselves separate, the dominant culture has a way of creeping in.

This is not a defense of identity. In fact, it will be a critique of identity in many ways, particularly of the way we drape identities over ourselves to give us a purpose for fighting injustice. A rail against the culture of identity that breaks people into hard categories and fuels each of our dark indulgent desires to join the ranks of the oppressed instead of being satisfied to fight for the dignity of all living things from wherever we happen to stand. But it will also be a critique of individuals and their choices, and it will urge each one of you to think not only about your potential complicity in trying on indigeneity but in allowing your friends and comrades to do so as well.

Taking Scope of the Problem

I long for a world in which the difference between settler and Indigenous communities is one of custom and not of power. But we do not live in that world and all alive today are unlikely to see it. Our reality consists of a colonial occupying state, armed with extraordinary force, urging a reconciliatory way forward while it simultaneously invades the last shreds of semi-autonomous Indigenous territory within it's borders at gunpoint. It is still important to distinguish between oppressed and oppressor; it is still important to know to who wields violence in self-defense.

It matters when settlers decide that a distant Indigenous ancestor, or a DNA test, or affinity, or a "feeling" makes them Indigenous. I argue that race-shifting is a vehicle ripe for manipulation and an incredible opportunity to erode the legitimacy of Indigenous claims to land and liberation. And it is important to understand that this *IS* happening. It is possible that within your circles, you will find at least one person who is actively developing the confidence to start claiming indigeneity, publicly or privately. And around that person you will find a circle of settlers who feel too uncomfortable to challenge their "Indigenous" friend about their race-shifting identity.

They have good reason to be afraid. It is possible that if they refuse to support their comrade in their indigeneity, they will be accused of using blood quantum to discredit their "Indigenous" friend, placing them in a long line of colonizers who have tried to erase Indians by simply claiming they no longer exist. And more likely, they won't understand how to argue back that point because they don't actually have a deep understanding of the concepts of blood quantum or kinship or indigeneity. This is a problem in an of itself. This is why I am writing this zine. Settlers

generally, and anarchists specifically, need to be more comfortable talking about these things amongst themselves. In the absence of a competent shared knowledge, it is time and time again left up to Indigenous communities – mostly women and Two-Spirits – to process these conflicts as they arise and to educate the settlers around them.

We need to talk about what is happening. We need to develop our own critique against this Native homeopathy bullshit or risk losing the very real bonds of solidarity forged between anarchists and Indigenous resisters across Turtle Island over the last decades. This is not to say that anarchists have not fucked things up and lost relationships in other ways: by swooping in and ditching early, by not repping their own politics, by breathing way too much air, or simply not knowing much about the history of this land. They definitely have. But having to add “letting their friends play Indian” to that list feels like a real shame. Of all the settlers here on Turtle Island, anarchists have the most to offer Indigenous struggle and the closest shared vision of a decolonial future. I say this as both a Michif halfbreed and an anarchist.

Why They Do It: Settler Redemption Stories

Settlers claiming Indigenous identity is not a new thing. Nor is the critique of it, which has been written about by others before me. There are settlers with no blood lineage or connection to Indigenous communities who simply say they “feel Indigenous” psychically or metaphysically or some nonsense. There are settlers who feel like they have spent so much time in Indigenous communities that they “become” Indigenous or claim adoption into those communities (these are the Joseph Boydens of the world). There are those who claim a distant and unknown ancestor through DNA testing or shoddy genealogy work (the Elizabeth Warrens and Michelle Latimers). There are those with a family story about a Indigenous ancestor. So common is this phenomenon that there has long been a term for it: the Indian grandmother complex. And there are also those who have a bit more information about their family history. Maybe they have a known Indigenous ancestor three or four generations back, giving them the false confidence to assume the identity of that ancestor and centralize it in their life while deprioritizing their much more real and tangible connections to their settler community. There are even settlers who slowly take on the symbols of indigeneity, eventually arriving to a place where most people they meet simply assume they are Native and they choose not to correct them, coming to exist in a personal mythology around their pretend indianness. In the last year, I have come face-to-face with almost every one of these variations. These settlers are most often white people, though not always. Though each of these claims differ from the others, they exist in the same continuum of violence.

That continuum has been best defined in Eve Tuck & Yang’s pivotal text *Decolonization is Not A Metaphor*. I’m not going to expand on their points here, look it up. The important note to hit is that these actions by non-Natives all represent a “settler move to innocence”. I don’t believe that I am on the same page, politically, with Tuck & Yang, but the basic premise of their piece is something I accept.

For settlers actively engaged in struggle, who share a vision of the future that best aligns with Indigenous thought and runs counter to the settler ideologies of their parents, the idea that they can escape settlerism is very appealing. It feels uncomfortable to want to fight for the land and water where you live, while also having to acknowledge that it is not yours at all. The opportunity to stand on the frontlines with your native comrades, not as a supporter, but as an equal part of

the resistance feels deeply affirming. And being a white settler in solidarity sometimes means humbling yourself, decentering your opinions, and holding the colonial rage of your Indigenous comrades with grace. This is difficult and often produces hard and complicated feelings for people. The opportunity to cast that responsibility aside provides a tempting relief from settlerism and whiteness. But –

By telling yourself that you are Indigenous, you are giving yourself the right to feel entitled to this land. You are letting yourself alleviate some of the guilt you carry for your family's participation in colonization. By telling Indigenous people that you are Indigenous, you are relieving yourself of some of the accountability you have to them. By telling other settlers that you are Indigenous, you are relieving yourself of some of the work you share with them.

I also understand that indigeneity holds the promise of a spirituality lost to white settlers nearly a thousand years ago during some of the earliest rounds of colonization that were between European societies. I think the devastation of that ancestrally is very real. And I believe that, as humans, we have a need to feel deeply connected to the world around us. Since settlers now live here on this land, it makes sense that some of them would crave a deeper connection to it. I personally feel like part of each settler's decolonial work is to truly build their own relationship with this land and shatter their own ancestral alienation. But that connection needs to be hard won and honest and novel, and it can't come from appropriating the traditions and identities of Indigenous people.

On Ancestry

I believe connecting with our ancestors can be grounding and healing, and it can break down the individualist indoctrination most all of us have gone through by situating us in a long lineage of those who came before and those who come after. Each of our own family histories tell us about the reasons things are the way they are now. Instead of just relying on the stories of a few dead white men, we can decentralize the stories of our communities. Knowing where we come from provides us with an anchor in this very complicated and scary world and it helps us to identify our responsibilities. It may be that you come from a long line of freedom fighters and that proud legacy keeps your fires stoked in this protracted social war. Or it might be that you come from a long line of fascists and colonizers and you are bestowed with the opportunity to be the generation that branches off towards a life of liberation.

The process of meeting our ancestors makes us each historians who have an opportunity to interpret the information we find and weave a story based on birth certificates and travel documents and funerals. This responsibility needs to be taken seriously and it takes a great deal of humility and honesty. It is up to us to contextualize race and class and gender in a way that positions us accurately and fairly in the world today, because identities are extremely loaded and come with advantages that can – in the right context – grant us material benefit, rights, access, and privilege. Especially when those identities are not written on our skin and are things that we can step in and out of with ease. In many other communities, being Indigenous does not come with social advantage. This is why generations of Indigenous people, including my family, sometimes made the choice to pass themselves off as settlers. But in our anarchist/leftist communities, being Indigenous often grants you a certain honour and respect. This, coupled with the growing

(tokenistic) appreciation of Indigenous culture in Canadian society at large, presents a tempting set of reasons for people to try to claim Indigenous ancestry.

When settlers find Indigenous ancestry in their family, it is a very respectful thing to do to honour the story of that person and consider it a responsibility to stand in solidarity with their struggle. But if that ancestor is not connected to your family in any way other than blood, it is not okay to assume their identity as your own. It does nothing to uplift the struggle of that person and it undermines Indigenous sovereignty in a way that perpetuates colonial violence today.

Adopting yourself into an Indigenous community that you have only a blood connection with but no kinship ties to serves the blood quantum goals of the state. It says, blood (the way the state defines membership in a community) is enough and kinship (the way Indigenous people define membership) doesn't matter.

It dissolves the lines that Indigenous people draw to define their communities, which makes it harder for them to fight for land and reparations based on who has been wronged and who carries the burden to right the wrong. In another time and place where there wasn't a massive imbalance of power and a grave injustice to be righted, it might not be so harmful to let the boundaries around community waver, but right now it is.

The Pseudoscience of Blood Quantum

Make no mistake about it, blood quantum is a tool of state violence. It has been used to disenfranchise First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people for hundreds of years. In the US, Natives have status cards that list their percentage of Indigenous blood. Vicious and self-serving state structures govern who no longer counts as Indigenous because their blood is no longer pure. But these constructs of mathematical genetics are imaginary. Contrary to what eugenics-hungry rationalists might believe, genetics do not pass down in easy fractions and race is not biological. Nor is there any truly accurate way to map your racial genetics from a swab of your cheek, leading some scientists to issue warnings to unwitting customers of DNA tests that the practice can amount to little more than “genetic astrology”.

The one-drop rule is the racist theory behind the pseudoscience of blood quantum. When used against Black people in the colonies, the one-drop rule served to govern that even “one drop” of Black blood in a white person made them Black. The colonial mentality ruled that Black people were so animal, so depraved, that any amount of Blackness in a person made them less than human. Plus, they needed more slaves so there was a benefit to counting as many people as possible as Black. In regards to Indians, the rule was generally reversed. To take the land, settlers needed to erase Indigenous title, and an easy way to do that was to say that only “true Indians” had a valid claim. If you can say there are no more Natives left, then you rightfully own the land. Essentially, whichever way white supremacy needs the one-drop rule to work is how it works.

Governments invented “status” because they needed a way to quantify and control Indigenous people based on these ideas. Colonial legislation serves the purpose of creating the categories of Indian and Canadian and then slowly assimilating the Indians into the Canadians until they can complete the colonization of the Americas. The Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 was the first such document and it allowed for Indigenous peoples to voluntarily give up status to receive private land or to vote. Only one Native ever partook. So the Indian Act was created in 1876 with

mechanisms to take their status from them against their will. To this day, it remains a vital tool in the domination of Indigenous people in Canada. Native people here have lost status because they were children of even just two generations of mixed-race unions. The “double mother” rule said that if your mother and grandmother did not qualify for status, then you lost yours on your 21st birthday. Yet there were many reasons that Indigenous folks, women in particular, lost status that weren’t attached to blood quantum at all. Up until 1961, Indigenous people who graduated from university had to give up status. Indigenous women who married settlers, or who married a status man but became a widow, lost their status automatically. The gendered discrimination over status was “revoked” in 1985 but much of the damage had already been done.

It has been obvious from the beginning that people didn’t become Indians when they gained status and they didn’t stop being Indians when they lost it. It is an unfortunate truth that some of this logic has been internalized by Indigenous nations and some here in Canada and in the US will kick out their own members for falling under “25% Native”. But for as long as status and the pseudoscience of blood quantum have existed there have been those fighting against it. Arguments made by Indigenous people against blood quantum were meant to keep close Indigenous relatives who were cut out of community by the state. So that grandchildren of the “double mother rule” were still part of their Native community if they lived there in the culture and shared kinship relations. It is a beautiful resistance. To deny the state’s ability to determine for your community who belongs and who doesn’t is an act of decolonization.

However, it’s not as simple as saying that it’s wrong to disallow the families of settler-Indigenous marriages to live on the reservation. The gradual inclusion of white spouses over time could lead to a situation where settler spouses make up a large part of the population. Does that mean they have the right to be represented on Council? What about the shortage of land? Indian reserves only make up 0.02% of “Canadian” territory. This continues to be a real problem. With the shifting political landscape of Canada, we are now needing to defend ourselves against a new intrusion.

The original theories on blood quantum were established at a time when being anything but white was shameful. Canada is currently undergoing a complete paradigm shift in terms of their national story. State-led reconciliation is attempting to erase the past injustices of colonialism and is urging Canadians to see the Natives of this land as a proud, noble people that are part of Canadian multiculturalism. There have always been summer camps where white kids play Indian and there have always been colonial tales of frontiersmen who dance with wolves, but we are witnessing a wave of indigenous romanticization unseen in history. Our peers are growing up as the first or second generation where settlers are becoming proud to claim “Indian heritage”. And as such – because it now suits settlers – the rules of blood quantum are being reversed. It seems now settlers agree that one drop of Native blood makes you an Indian.

From a Native perspective, however, the argument remains simple: Indigenous people never willingly judged membership in our nations based on blood, but by kinship, and only we have the legitimacy to decide who belongs to us and who doesn’t.

A Case Study: Métis ≠ Mixed

Placeless and often unwanted, the children of French fur traders and Native women called themselves the Bois-Brûlés (later adopting the name, Métis). A strong bond led them to form their own

communities with their own language, governance, and custom, with a motherland in the Red River region of current-day Manitoba. They had complex kinship, political, and trade relations with the Cree, the Saulteaux, the Assiniboine, and at times the Iroquois. Yet, the government opportunistically denied them status, reservation land, or basic human dignity for not being “Indian enough.” It is likely this denial of land and recognition was a punishment by the Canadian state for their armed resistance in 1885, given that Chris Andersen – in his book *Métis* – has demonstrated that other federally-recognized Native nations along the fur routes were of comparably mixed descent. They fought for years alongside other non-status Indians for recognition. Métis Nation organizations – formed to advocate for rights from the state – first opened up for membership in the 60s. Immediately, they were flooded with a barrage of people claiming citizenship from all over. Some people who applied for citizenship were Natives who lost status from their own communities for any number of Indian Act reasons and were trying to regain state legitimacy. A lot of people were settlers who had one or more Indigenous ancestors.

This occurred because a great majority of people saw (and continue to see) Métis identity as one of mixed blood, instead of a political community of Indigenous people who were born, lived, fought, and died together in kinship on the Prairies. Métis organizations have spent the last 40 years grappling with this issue and trying to determine who is Métis and who is not. They’ve done a generally dismal job and, while I am a member of one such organization, it is my belief that their existence does more harm than good. They cater to the Canadian government when it needs token Native support; they sign pipeline deals through lands they have no claim to; and they perpetuate forms of democracy, nationalism, and statehood that I feel are counter to the aim of dismantling colonial-capitalism.

Métis Nation formation led to a huge backlash by First Nations people who saw Métis identity as a backdoor for settlers to flood into indigeneity. While some of the criticism was akin to lateral violence, it was also really legitimate. Because the Canadian appetite leaves us fighting for scraps. Because many, many white settlers call themselves Métis illegitimately. And because Indigenous people have never governed belonging and membership based on blood alone.

The fact of the matter is, if all settlers who had a blood connection to an Indigenous person were considered Indigenous, it would make the category meaningless. Settlers and Native folks have been intermarrying for as long as settlers have been here. Some studies show that up to 40% of francophones in Quebec have an Indigenous ancestor. What would happen to Indigenous claim to land if all of those settlers began demanding to be included as Native people?

A Case Study Inside a Case Study?: The “Eastern Métis”

Ah! But we don’t need to imagine it, because it’s already happening. There is a sizable movement in QC of white settlers who have formed their own “Métis” organizations to claim Indigenous heritage in order to gain rights from the state. A lot of those people base their indigeneity on ancestors from the 1700s, but quite a few of them have a relation in the last five generations of their family. I’m not going to get into the absolute fuckery of what those people are doing and why (go read Darryl Leroux’s many critiques if you need to know more) but their selfish actions have severely undermined both the real title Métis people have to indigeneity, and in turn, the concept of indigeneity entirely. While this is a fairly extreme example of Native appropriation, it is important to look directly at it. The phenomenon of settlers trying to edge their way into

indigeneity based on distant ancestry has had real and lasting impacts on historic Métis communities, further robbing them of the recognition they deserve as a real people on the losing end of colonialism.

And I don't mean that the appropriation by settlers is going to sabotage their process of recognition by the state, because FUCK recognition by the state. As anarchists, we need to realize that white folks claiming Native casts doubt on the indigeneity of Métis and other mixed-blood Native people, which creates chasms between them and First Nations on the front lines of struggle.

Kinship is the Backbone of Our Nations

So if blood alone doesn't make you Native, then what does? What came out of the very messy and public dialogues on the Indian Act and status and Métis community were well defined arguments explaining that identity is multifaceted and that blood connection is but one of many markers that determine membership in a community. More important than how much "Indian blood" you have running through your veins is your connection to a community to which you are accountable. This means that your family has a history with a community and relationships that are meaningful and reciprocal. It is important because there are folks who are adopted into communities and have no blood relation but are nonetheless considered a full and welcome member. Accountability in that relationship means you are openly claiming your community and allow the other members the opportunity to hold your actions and words up to the values of that community.

The notion of accountability is tied to the more controversial idea that your community needs to claim you. This standard gets complicated for a lot of folks because some people are kicked out of their communities, some people lose connection to their communities through state removal, and a variety of other factors (like drug addiction) could mean that people in that community don't have relationships with you anymore. This is a hard reality for some to accept, but it doesn't make it less meaningful. When you lose ties to a community over your lifetime or over many generations, you do lose membership in that community in a real way. It's possible to rebuild those connections, but it's also important to step back and evaluate whether or not it is appropriate for you to do so. Our communities often reveal themselves to us if we take a minute to look at our existing strong and reciprocal relationships.

These webs of relationships are what Indigenous people call kinship. And they have been more important to our understanding of community than blood ever has been.

In addition to the main questions of:

"Who are you accountable to?" and

"Does the community you claim also claim you?"

It is important to explore the questions of:

"Do you have meaningful relationships with people in that community?"

"Do you have a family history interwoven with the families of that community?"

"Do you share a connection to a common land base?"

"Were you raised with or close to the traditions of that community?"

"Do you, or people in your family, speak the language of that community?"

"Do you have shared experiences with the members of that community?"

"Do you share struggle with that community?"

All of the answers to these questions together organically form a larger and more nuanced picture than blood quantum. Which is why in the last few decades, Indigenous activists have been fighting to diminish the worth of blood alone in claiming a connection to a community or identity. The rise of genetic testing and sites like ancestry.com have led to a large number of settlers “realizing” they are actually part Indigenous, some who then feel as though they should be included in a community they have never really been a part of.

If a child with Indigenous parents is stolen by CAS and raised with white people, it might seem as though the strong blood connection to indigeneity is all they have. Yet, that wouldn't really be true. Because already they share a personal story of race-based state oppression, plus the histories of their immediate family (which are part of their story) are connected to stories of other Indigenous people and place. Blood might be a part of their claim to community, and so it's not completely irrelevant, but it's the complicated interplay of a variety of factors – blood, kinship, language, experience – that come together to create an identity and belonging in a community.

When you tell another Indigenous person that you're Native, often the first question out of their mouth is “from where?” Maybe even “who are your parents? Or “lemme guess, Sturgeon Clan?” This is a pretty widely accepted line of questioning and it's not considered rude, because kinship and ties to land are a huge part of how we know each other and build relationships. Complex systems of kinship existed in all Native communities on Turtle Island. Family lineages combined to form clan systems which combined to form nations and the governance systems depended on these interconnected forms of communication and accountability. Were colonization not so successful, settlers touting indigeneity just wouldn't be a problem, because it would be easy to trace the kinship ties of that person and weed out false claims. The power of the state, however, relies on concentrating authority and breeding loyalty to an institutionalized political body, and it is in its best interest to undermine and destroy allegiance to any decentralized systems. The state has tried to destroy clan governance from the first days of colonization. Inventing the racist ideology of blood quantum and insisting Indians be defined by their DNA instead of their kinship ties is another tactic to disrupt the autonomy of Indigenous people.

Identity Politics & Liberation

It is a very uncomfortable position to be at once an anarchist, a freedom fighter, and also part of an oppressor class. On the internet, identity is a simple category, black and white (so to speak). But in real life, identity is nuanced and slippery. It makes it so that we are often disadvantaged and privileged at the same time. We owe it to ourselves and our community to act with integrity, to represent ourselves accurately and honestly, and to not try to jostle for position with our friends.

Anarchists look to the roots. It's not enough to say the problem lies in individuals who make ego-driven choices. This is not only about individuals doing independently shitty things, it's also an issue of politics. The adoption of a politics of identity helped to put words to the centuries of degradation and devaluation faced by women, queers, BIPOC, and disabled folks. Oppression that often felt invisible. Yet, it was too easily co-opted by the state and capital and too easily divorced from the material struggle for a radically different world. It is now wholly possible for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to be called a “revolutionary” for being a Latinx woman, trailblazing

a path for other women of colour to become agents of the state. This is not a critique of all forms of radical thought that center around identity. I am a woman, an Indigenous person, and a queer and I find power in organizing around those identities. But there are many, many other times where I find my strength in the affinity of ideas, running into dark alleys with whichever comrade feels up to the task.

It is always important to remember that no identity marker can bind together the disparate experiences of all people who match it. There is no united womanhood, or Indigenous experience, or proletariat. The binaries used to conveniently speak about identity are just as fake as blood quantum. Unfortunately, the climate change and land defense movements have romanticized Native peoples so that they take on an almost mythical quality as earth guardians, with many anarchists buying into it just as much as liberals.

Western society pushes us away from true community and towards an individual, atomized existence. This transcends physical space to infect the realm of ideas and stories, which we are encouraged to see as accessible for anyone to use and change. It is common practice in identitarian circles for people to depend on self-identification as acceptable validation of an identity marker, and this has become rampant in the issue of settlers claiming indigeneity. It is not enough to simply proclaim that you now identify as Indigenous and it is playing into settler psychology to do so. Using a wider lens, there are many situations where it is appropriate to challenge someone's claim to an identity based solely on self-identification and I hope that as critiques of identity politics mature, these questions can be responsibly visited.

It is important to not let the logic of liberal identity politics dominate relationships between anarchists, or between anarchists and Native folks. This paves the other false path to settler redemption: the white-guilt-ridden settler who sees self-sacrifice as the way to cleanse their ancestors crimes. Co-creating a culture of obedience to Indigenous people is a losing strategy, fostering not rebellious solidarity but an environment of scarcity. Not only does it put too much pressure on Indigenous people to make decisions for you, it robs us of one of our most important protections against repression – decentralized action. It prevents settler anarchists from questioning sketchy claims to indigeneity touted by their comrades for fear of being accused of racism, and creates a situation where settlers feel the only way to be a true defender of the land is to become Indigenous.

I blame this binary between spiritually-rich Indigenous folks and deadened, alienated white people for a part of the race-shifting phenomenon of settlers trying to claim indigeneity, at least within the “Left.” However, this is not a problem for Native folks to solve. There are many steps that anarchists (and everyone) can take to practice real solidarity and break away from the traps of allyship. Adopt your own reasons for defending the land or attacking the state, separate from your practice of support. Learn the real, unromantic history of colonization, complete with occasional Native complicity. Understand who you are and what your responsibilities are to the next generations. Gain confidence in communicating your own politics of anarchism to Native comrades. Don't allow your crew to adopt a politic that makes it valiant to be a victim, the kind that leads people to want to stack up oppressed identities in order to gain social power. And, *most importantly*, practice the self-assurance necessary to stop yearning for the approval of Indigenous land defenders. Understand yourself well enough to catch validation-seeking behaviours and be able to interrupt them and ground yourself in your own reasons for acting.

Solidarity isn't about going along with someone else's project, it's about seeing a mutual and parallel cause between you and another community/crew and acting together towards a common

goal. Most often that means you go your separate ways afterwards. Which is what the intention should be if you are a settler doing solidarity work. Because if you are showing up to the struggle in hopes of leaving settlerism behind and being accepted into Indigenous community, then turn around and go home.

How To Have the Conversation

Maybe you picked up this text because you were interested, or maybe you have someone close to you whose evolving indigeneity is making you uncomfortable. Maybe you picked it up because you have been exploring the possibility of an Indigenous connection in your own life. I hope that, by this point in the text, you are seriously mulling over your actions and assessing whether or not you are engaged in any of this bullshit. This section will mostly be about holding our friends accountable but you can follow along for yourself as well.

You may think that your friend assuming an Indigenous identity is not harmful so long as they are not accessing monetary resources, land, or jobs meant for Indigenous people. However, this analysis is short-sighted and could also be an excuse you are using to get out of an uncomfortable conversation. If your friend is not accessing these things now, it doesn't mean they won't later, especially if their claims to indigeneity go unchallenged and they grow in confidence. Outside of financial benefit, they still gain access to space and power, often resulting in the displacement of Indigenous people. They could take up a seat in a car going to ceremony, they could speak at a demonstration meant to uplift Native voices, or they could gain support for their initiatives based on misplaced solidarity. It is important to widen our gaze when assessing impact.

It is important, as a settler, to hold your settler comrades/friends/family responsible for their choice to inappropriately assume an Indigenous identity. This is a delicate task, but – really – holding our friends accountable is part of an honest and healthy friendship. It would really suck if you accused a friend of playing Indian and they had a legitimate claim they were just stepping into for the first time. This zine is not talking about Native folks who have been cut out of their communities by the state or for those reconnecting to their kinship ties, this is for (mostly white) settlers who are attempting to “rekindle” a Native identity based on ancestor connection or a feeling. Luckily, the difference can be ascertained quite easily.

First, ask a lot of questions. Your friend just confided in you that they have “discovered” an Indigenous ancestor in their family and it's really “bringing up a lot” for them. Look for the words “discovered” or “found” in their language. If they have kinship relations and ties to a community, it is not likely they are discovering it as an adult (unless they have just found out they were adopted). “Discovering” an Indigenous identity usually means digging up old documents or looking over a family tree, which demonstrates blood connection and not kinship relation. It's common practice to ask a lot of questions about kinship between Native folks and it is only Western “politeness” that stops us from “prying” into our friend's story. Be curious. In some of the worst incidents of a settler manipulating people around them by pretending to be Indigenous, the biggest regret people had afterwards was not asking more questions. If they are making you feel rude for asking, if they are evading your questions, if they insist their ancestry is a private matter, this is a bad sign. It is important to suss out exactly how they are connected to indigeneity and it is possible they will speak in vague terms or try to exaggerate their situation. Get specific.

Second, encourage them to seek out more information. If they don't know the answers to your questions, urge them to go find out before they start telling people they're Native. That means before telling people they're even a "little bit" Native, and it also means before privately telling people while publicly identifying as a settler. Ask them to prioritize the search for kinship. If kinship ties exist, it won't be hard to find out a good deal of information. And if they don't find anything, then there's nothing to find and that's really all there is to say about the matter. They shouldn't identify as Indigenous.

Third, if they do find some information about their ancestral ties or relatives from a family line, press them to go through the questions outlined in the section on kinship. Maybe give them this zine in advance of the conversation and ask them to sit down with you to talk about it. Remember that, as their comrade, you have a right to ask them to reconsider political choices you disagree with and you have the ability to walk away from them if they refuse. It is not apolitical to tell people in activist communities in Canada that you are Indigenous. There is a huge amount of reverence paid to Indigenous land defenders and a great deal of criticism that they evade from settler accomplices. Claiming indigeneity falsely is a way of manipulating power in your organizing community. If they are embedded in a community of anarchists or organizers, but long to join an Indigenous community, ask them and yourself why they are attempting to do so and why they aren't fulfilled amongst those who are most obviously their kin. If they have no kinship ties to Native folks, it is okay to question or reject their claim to indigeneity. Try to steer them towards an accurate interpretation of their ancestry, maybe one that names them as a settler with a distant Indigenous ancestor that they try to honour in struggle. Draw a hard line if it is revealed that they are acting on an old family story, a feeling, or perhaps nothing at all.

Fourth, ask them to interrogate their own desires to identify as Indigenous. What do they feel is pulling them in that direction? Do they feel a hole in their life that they think could be filled by ceremony? Get them to dig honestly into their own narratives about what delineates Indigenous people from settlers. Have them entertain the thought experiment of switching out their Native ancestor with another racial identity. If they found out they were from a lineage of white settlers but discovered that one of their great-grandparents was Korean, would they then feel entitled to start calling themselves Korean? Would they learn Korean and start attending cultural services and get involved in organizing projects for North Korean liberation? If not, what is the difference?

Prepare yourself for backlash. They may accuse you of discriminating against their claim because they are white or "light-skinned". But this isn't about color. There are plenty of white Natives, and Black natives too. In fact, the insistence of indigeneity to be defined by culture and kinship instead of physical racial markers carves a wide doorway that (mostly white) settlers take advantage of when they let themselves in. Proving yourself as Native when you present Black is a far more difficult burden and those individuals face far more lateral violence than white skinned Indians ever will.

Your friend may accuse you of violence for forcing them to talk about something "deeply personal" without their consent, or criticize you for making something personal into something political. Identity is as much a political issue as it is personal though, and it is important for us to know the politics of our comrades, the way they see themselves in relation to you and to others, and their reasons for acting. Additionally, just because something is personal, does not mean it cannot be challenged. There are many beliefs and stories that are entrenched and

meaning-making to a person that must be confronted and dismantled, even if it should be done with care.

They may accuse you of weaponizing blood quantum against them to disqualify their native-ness, of maintaining racist settler colonial institutions that took Indians away from their community. This is settler entitlement and it's a gross ignorance of both history and of the kinship systems of the community they are trying gain access to. The idea of entitlement/disentitlement based on racial blood percentage has always been used according to the needs of those in power at the time.

Settlers who convince themselves that a distant ancestor (or a story) make them Indigenous are reversing the historic ways blood quantum has been used against Native people for their own benefit. They are the ones using blood quantum arguments to force themselves into a community they have never really been a part of. They are the ones perpetuating settler colonialism for their own benefit.

These are very hard conversations to have. I can't guarantee you won't lose a friend. But it is important to hold your ground and stay committed to your principles. Letting people continue on a path of self-deception and entitlement is likely to end with a massive rupture of conflict as Indigenous people who aren't afraid to ask questions eventually get smart to the ruse. You may find yourself answering for your comrade's behaviour. You may lose relationships with Indigenous friends or comrades. The best thing that could happen is for settlers to hold each other in community and stop this process before it gets out of hand.

In Conclusion

This whole thing honestly sucks. I hate that I felt compelled to write about it. But I almost left my anarchist community over an incident of this very kind in the last few years. It was exposed to me that no one really understood the issue and fewer people knew how to talk about it. While I wish this was an endeavour taken on by settlers for settlers, we don't live in a perfect world. I want the people I organize with to act from a place of strength. I want to know I can trust my comrades to make good decisions. I want to know that my co-conspirators understand their place in Indigenous struggle.

I believe that we push harder when we fight for our own freedom and existence. I believe we try harder to build community and relationship when we feel rooted in place. I believe that being motivated by a personal connection to and love for the land makes us better anarchists, and gives us the best possibility to create a new world less shitty than the old. I want all of my friends in struggle to find those things, on their own terms, from their own tradition (historic or invented). Let us not forget that all tradition, ceremony, and ritual is created by us to make meaning of the world around us and of our relationships to each other!

I don't need to be seen as only an Indian, I'm okay with my strange halfbreed mutt identity. My indigeneity is grounded in blood, kinship, and a fairly disjointed human experience. I walk my road trying to be open and honest, and never overstepping my place. I demand no less integrity from those around me because I honour and respect the beautiful kinship relations that have built and sustained Indigenous community on Turtle Island for tens of thousands of years. You should too.

Further Reading

“Decolonization is Not A Metaphor” by Eve Tuck and K. Yang (essay)

Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigeneity authored by Darryl Leroux (book)

Métis authored by Chris Andersen (book)

“Wiisaakodewiniwag ga-nanaakonaawaad: Jiibe-Giizhikwe, Racial Homeopathy, and “Eastern Métis” Identity Claims” authored by Darren O’Toole (essay)

“Old Myths, New Peoples: The “Eastern Métis” and Indigenous Erasure” by Sabordage Distro (zine) <https://enoughisenough14.org/2020/11/01/old-myths-new-peoples-the-eastern-metis-and-indigenous-erasure-a-zine-from-sabordage-distro/>

“Statement on Michelle Latimer” by Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs (Twitter post)

<https://twitter.com/kdeveryjacobs/status/1339960923218391040>

Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science by Kim TallBear

Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity by Pam Palmater

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Tawinikay
Settlers on the Red Road
A Conversation on Indigeneity, Belonging, and Responsibility
April 12, 2021 Author

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