



4 March 2022

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Joseph Pierce. I am a citizen of Cherokee Nation and Associate Professor at Stony Brook University. I am writing to address the disciplinary procedures that are underway regarding Andrea Smith at UC Riverside and hope to explain in concrete terms how Smith's actions have harmed Indigenous people broadly speaking, and Cherokee people specifically.

The core issue that I wish to address is identity fraud as it concerns both ethical and academic practices. While it may seem that a person who falsely claims to belong to an Indigenous group, like Smith, does not enact material harm to that group, there are several reasons why that is false.

First, Native American studies is a relatively small field. The number of positions available at all ranks is limited. When someone is hired to a position with the understanding that they belong to the same group that they are researching—even if this position is not a targeted hire, or specifically reserved for an Indigenous person—there is a real impact on the lives and livelihoods of already underrepresented Indigenous scholars. This impact takes the form of diverting resources, time, and energy from Indigenous communities to non-Indigenous researchers. What is more, I have been informed first-hand by Indigenous academics who have been derided and/or marginalized by Andrea Smith in professional settings. Smith has prevented Indigenous scholars from occupying leadership positions in the field of Native American studies and critical ethnic studies. When Indigenous scholars began to question Smith's identity, she began to discredit Indigenous scholars. That type of academic gatekeeping is part of an overall trend of seeking to protect her own academic position by subjecting actual Indigenous women to increased scrutiny and intellectual ostracization.

Second, Andrea Smith's work, especially before 2010, was undertaken when she was actively claiming not just to study Indigenous people, but to be an Indigenous person. This means that even if UC Riverside did not have the express desire to hire an Indigenous scholar, the work that Smith had produced to that point was carried out under the assumption that she was in fact a member of the groups she was studying. This has never been true, and it means that her scholarship is premised on a fundamentally unethical position regarding Indigenous people. Smith invited Indigenous informants to express their experiences with sensitive issues such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, and systemic racism. In essence she asked Indigenous women to expose their own stories of violence in order to produce her own academic work, advance her career, and gain employment at academic institutions. This means that Smith claimed to share the experience of being an Indigenous person, to elicit responses from other Indigenous people. This is a serious breach of ethics and of academic practice regarding informed consent with marginalized communities. The people she worked with, even if they did consent to work with her, did so under the assumption that Smith was like them. And like them not in a trivial or unimportant way, but in the sense that they shared the experience of structural and personal marginalization from dominant society. Because Smith is not in fact Indigenous, the consent that she may have elicited was granted under false pretenses, and thus constitutes a violation of the privacy, integrity, and safety of those same Indigenous people. In short, to ask a Native woman to

describe her own history of violence while claiming to share some part of that experience or identity, and for that claim to be false, is to enact real psychic and material harm to those women, and it continues a long history of academic exploitation and extraction of information of and about Indigenous women.

Third, as noted above, Smith claimed to be an Indigenous person, specifically a Cherokee person, to conduct research about Indigenous people. In doing so, she has undermined the ability of Cherokee people to assert political sovereignty in the form of determining who belongs to our community and who does not. Citizenship in the Cherokee Nation is the only way for someone to “be” Cherokee, and any form of negating or subverting that sovereign right is detrimental the entire body politic. Thus, for someone to claim to be Cherokee, as Smith did for many years, without being recognized by Cherokee people as a citizen of our nation, means that she has directly contravened the specific categories, qualities, experiences, and historical documentation that is required for us to assure that we are who we say we are.

Finally, when someone produces work about Cherokee people, while falsely claiming to be Cherokee, that work not only enacts the type of ethical harm noted above, but it also enacts epistemic violence against the knowledge and practice of what it means to be Cherokee. In addition, this violence extends to the knowledge of and about our communities, histories, and kinship ties. To produce work about Cherokee (or any Indigenous community) under false pretenses is to harm the integrity of our knowledge systems, which are not always meant for consumption by outsiders.

There is one more issue that I would like to mention regarding the appropriation of Cherokee identity. I am the child of an adoptee—my Cherokee father was adopted by a white family as a newborn—and thus, my connection to Cherokee culture has been part of a long process of reconnecting to kin, to the Nation (enrolling as a citizen), and to other Indigenous communities. Because of this experience, I understand what it feels like to be disconnected, as well as what it feels like to seek out connection with other Indigenous people, even if the story of my own Cherokee identity was strange and circuitous. For those of us who have experienced this type of disconnection (and there are many of us across Turtle Island), when someone like Andrea Smith claims to belong to a community without having any connection to that community, it makes those of us who are in fact displaced and reconnecting less likely to be trusted by members of our own nation. This is perhaps a difficult point to make, but because of Smith, there are likely many people who actually are Cherokee, but who will not reconnect to community for fear of being labeled a “pretendian”. Thus, the actions of people like Smith are detrimental to those of us who are in fact Cherokee, but who are not connected to Cherokee people because of the colonial displacement and rupture of our families and communities over time.

I hope this letter helps to explain some of the stakes in this type of fraud, at least from the perspective of a Cherokee person who is also a scholar of Indigenous studies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe P.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Joseph M. Pierce
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