

## Letter of Apology and Accountability

May 1, 2023

I have brought hurt, harm, and broken trust to the Native community at large, and to specific Native communities I have worked with and lived alongside, and for that, I am deeply sorry.

I am a white person who has incorrectly identified as Native my whole life, based on incomplete information. In uncritically living an identity based on family stories without seeking out a documented connection to these communities, I caused harm. I hurt Native people who have been my friends, colleagues, students, and family, both directly through fractured trust and through activating historical harms. This hurt has also interrupted student and faculty life and careers. I acknowledge that I could have prevented all of this hurt by investigating and confirming my family stories sooner. For this, I am deeply sorry.

Having my family claim Native identity does not mean Native nations claimed us. By claiming an identity as a woman of Mohawk and Mi'kmaq descent without confirming it with communities of origin, and by not confirming kinship ties back to politically and culturally affiliated Indigenous peoples, I betrayed and hurt my students, collaborators, and friends. I have negatively impacted people emotionally and culturally. For this hurt I have caused, I am deeply sorry.

Growing up I did not question who I was told I was, or how I identified. But as an adult, as an academic, I should have done my due diligence to confirm that my ancestors were who I was told they were. In my twenties and thirties, I lived in different Native communities, where I knew I did not have the breadth and depth of connection that these folks had to Native family, history, and culture. At the time I wrongly felt that my distant connection was enough for me to claim a Native identity alongside them. This identity guided the types of research and community work I carried out, and the communities I sought to be part of—communities who may or may not have welcomed me in the same way had I identified as white.

I was first directly challenged in my Indigenous identity when I began my first assistant professor job. At the time, I interpreted inquiries into the validity of my Native identity as petty jealousy or people just looking to interfere in my life. As such, I allowed my ego to drive my response and answered these inquiries with my family's story, rather than doing the proper research for the correct documentation to unequivocally prove that I was descended from these communities. That was wrong, and I now recognize that by doing this, I was, in fact, subverting the sovereignty of the Nations I was identifying with. I was wrong and should have done my due diligence in response to those who were only guarding the integrity of their community.

Identifying as a Native person gave me access to spaces and resources that I would not have otherwise, resources that were intended for students of color. Before taking part in programs or funding opportunities that were identity-related or geared towards under-represented people I should have ensured that I was claimed in return by the communities I was claiming. By avoiding this inquiry, I have received academic fellowships, opportunities, and material benefits that I may not have received had I not been perceived as a Native scholar. My current position was an open call for scholars that focus on environmental justice or food justice and was not part of the Native American Studies cluster hire, which was launched subsequently and is ongoing. Though my

current position is separate from the Native American Studies cluster, I recognize that I harmed those who advocated for me and trusted me as an advisor, educator, and community member.

I also want to acknowledge the harm I have caused by entering ceremonial and social spaces reserved for Native people. People invited me into these spaces with the understanding that I was a Native person, and I deeply regret the pain I have caused to some by entering those spaces. I deeply regret not investigating my blood ties before entering ceremonial spaces explicitly reserved for Native people, and I feel devastated to have perpetuated harms caused by white people on Native communities. Any knowledge or experiences I gained as a result of being in these spaces are not mine to share, and I will continue to hold them close to my chest. To those who welcomed me into your spiritual spaces, gardens, kitchens, and homes, I am truly sorry to have broken trust in this way. I realize it will take time and much more than a written apology to regain the trust of those who might welcome me into appropriate spaces again. I accept that many relationships may be broken beyond repair and recognize that this is the outcome of my willful ignorance.

The debate around my identity, and the turmoil it has caused on social media and in various circles, have been very harmful to people associated with me. I understand that even those who stand by my side have been harmed and their support often means enduring more grief, and I'm sorry for what they have endured as a result.

This apology has taken longer than expected, which may have caused more harm: it is based on deep self-reflection and input from others. This apology, insufficient as I imagine it is, in light of all that has happened, is an initial step in my attempts to take accountability for the harms that I've caused, in an effort to begin to acknowledge the hurt that people have felt as a result of my life and my actions. For many people, this letter will not provide relief or repair, and, as painful as that may be, I will accept that. This statement is not intended to be a comprehensive apology to everyone I've hurt, or a comprehensive listing of the actions I will be taking going forward, but a start, a beginning.

Going forward it is my hope that this apology will open pathways for repair with those who would still choose to be in relationship with me. I have been working with restorative justice facilitators to better understand how members of the UC Berkeley campus community have felt harmed and betrayed, and ways I can work to meaningfully make amends for this. I recognize this will take time and am committed to staying with this process. I will give space to those who need it as part of their healing process, and will be here if and when people would like to dialogue with me about how I can productively address the harm I've caused. I am also beginning to work on dialoguing with people outside of the campus community that I have worked with in an effort to figure out how I can be accountable to them. I don't have all the answers, or even very many answers right now. I'm open to exploring the best ways forward.

#### Initial commitments going forward

- I will continue to funnel the proceeds from my talks and book sales into Native farm, food sovereignty, and educational programs. I will make additional donations to practitioners in these fields.
- I have put away my dance regalia, ribbons skirts, moccasins, and Native jewelry. I've begun to give away some of these things to people who will wear them better.
- I will continue to reach out and be available to the communities and individuals I have engaged with over the years to learn more about how these revelations about my identity have harmed them, and what I can do to make up for that.

- I have committed to engaging in the restorative justice process taking place on campus and will continue to do so, as well as supporting restorative justice processes in other circles I have been involved with, where my participation is invited.
- I will work with campus partners to provide support to students who have been directly impacted by my inaccurate self-identification as an Indigenous scholar
- Based on ongoing personal reflection, conversations with colleagues, and especially keeping in mind the communities I have worked with and for, I will gear future research towards supporting people and communities with whom I have an authentic relationship and will accept spaces where communities ask me to step back. I will be transparent about my identity journey and the new role I'm occupying. In addition to having my research serve the communities I work with, my desire is to continue to contribute to student learning and academia more broadly, and I am committed to approaching this with thoughtfulness towards what has happened.

Thank you all for your time, openness, and the emotional labor you've provided in reading this and during the previous months.

### **Statement about Identity**

*I recognize that this original statement I put forward in October 2022 in an effort to explain my situation, ultimately caused more harm. I have chosen to keep this statement here to be transparent about my impacts and how I communicated about this issue in the past.*

I came to my commitments to Native American food sovereignty, seed sovereignty, and environmental justice through my upbringing. I was raised in rural upstate New York working the land with my family and spent formative years at pow-wows, ceremonies, and food summits over the past several decades hearing stories that have shaped my values, education and career. While in these spaces, I have always introduced myself as the person my parents had raised me to be—someone of mixed Mohawk, Mi'kmaq, French, English, Irish, and German descent and identity. According to my mother, her grandmother was a Mohawk woman who married a French-Canadian man. Unfortunately, he was abusive and an alcoholic, and my grandmother died by suicide, leaving her children behind to be raised by someone else. This was a traumatic aspect of my mom's family background that impacted her connection to her grandmother's heritage growing up. As an adult she wanted to reclaim her Mohawk heritage and share that with us. She took my sisters and me to ceremonies and powwows as kids to connect us to our heritage. For us, being dancers, and being invited into sweats was a way to connect with and contribute to this broader community. My dad's family said his grandma was Mi'kmaq, which was also something we were proud of but never quite as close to. My identity within the Native community, rooted in the histories of my family, is something that shaped my entire life, even though I was not eligible for tribal enrollment due to blood quantum requirements.

As a result of recent questions about my identity, I, along with others, conducted genealogical research to verify the tribal descent that my family raised me with, digging through online databases, archival records, and census data. While it is clear that racial identifications in census records are complicated and sometimes unclear (especially since the only race-identifying options

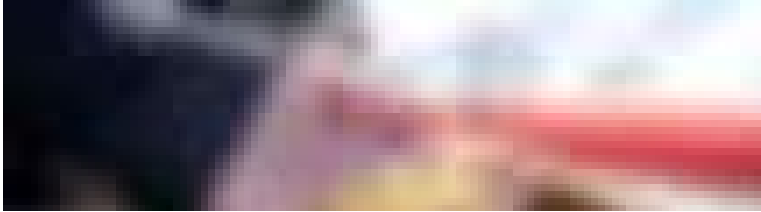
for a long time were white, black, and mulatto), we have to date found no records of tribal citizenship for any of my family members in the tribal databases that were accessed. Essentially what I am currently left with is that I do not have any official documentation to verify the way my family has identified.

I have discussed this with my sisters and my parents, who were, like me, shocked and confused about what this information means for us. Our Native identity has structured not only our family activities but how we relate to other people and they to us. I have been a fancy shawl dancer and bead worker for over three decades, something my sisters and I learned at powwows when we were young, and this has brought us great joy. I have been grateful to the people of Akwesasne who took me in called me their chosen daughter, auntie, and friend, and who put me to work. When people told me 'welcome home' when I would come to visit, that meant something to me. In short, this identity has shaped my entire life and guided my work. When I left home for Williams College, I helped run the Native student organization and organized the first powwows the campus had seen. While at Brown University for graduate school and later as a professor, I also helped to organize the now-annual powwow, and worked with the Native student organization there for close to two decades. Working with youth and garden projects in the Akwesasne community over the past 15 years or so has been incredibly important to me. These relationships strongly shaped my work as an advocate for and scholar of environmental justice and food sovereignty.

Given these new revelations about my background, I have asked myself: should I have dug deeper to confirm what my parents were telling us, through official genealogical records? In retrospect, yes. When I should have done this is much harder to say. At what point do you question whether the way your family raised you is correct? In high school? College? Grad school? As it is for many people—Native and non-Native alike—my identity was always just part of me. Since I knew I was not eligible for enrollment, locating official genealogical records did not seem important. But in retrospect, especially given the complexities surrounding tribal affiliations, I recognize that this examination should have come sooner.

Now, without any official documentation verifying the identity I was raised with, I do not think it is right for me to continue to claim to be a scholar of Mohawk/Mi'kmaq descent, even though my mother is insistent that she inherited this history for a reason. As such, I have been approaching my friends, collaborators, students, colleagues, and members of the general public, to share this information about my identity and to re-form these relationships as needed. As I have begun this process, I have been enormously grateful for the love and support I have received from the Mohawk people who call me their chosen daughter, friend, and ally, and from my friends and compatriots from across the Native food sovereignty movement. I am still the same person, with the same knowledge, skills, and commitments gained through decades of experience. But I will accept with humility and understanding the decisions of people who do not think I belong in certain spaces. Going forward, I will continue to passionately support food sovereignty and environmental justice movements in Native communities where and when I am invited to do so.

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