



cheyanne turions

Dialogue around curatorial practice

UNCATEGORIZED

The Histories We Carry

Please note: this post has been substantially revised to reflect the fact that online geneological sources do not corroborate the family histories presented here.

8 FEBRUARY 2021 | C. T. |

Social and political discourses are always evolving, and in Canada these discussions need to have Indigenous self-determination and settler decolonization at their core. Rising up from a long history of Indigenous identity being adjudicated by the settler state, recent conversations around indigeneity have called for greater accountability on how Indigenous people fit into Indigenous communities, recognizing also that Indigenous identity is impacted by historical and ongoing processes of colonization.

And so, I have been talking with members of my family, with colleagues and close friends, about how I have publicly situated my identity in my professional biography. I've been wondering how to be in relation to shifting political discourses in ways that are responsive, honouring my family's histories as well as social transformations that move towards greater justice. I want to reflect critically upon the choices I have made, pose questions back to those decisions and figure out how to be in a meaningful dialogue with the ever-changing urgencies of the world.

In my bio, I have previously made the choice to identify as having mixed settler and Indigenous ancestry. It has felt productive to me to claim both of these positions because they are often levelled as binary opposites. I have hoped that this choice was a way of being committed to understanding identity as complex, both my own and others. However, these days, I am confronting the fact that this language is vague. I have thought that my personal relationships could be that place for nuanced stories to be shared, but this doesn't take seriously the fact that my bio circulates without me and that language does not wholly determine the meaning it produces. In reflecting critically upon these conditions, I would like to share some of my personal story.

I was born in High Prairie, a small town in northern Alberta located on territories of the Michif Piyii (Métis) and Woodland Cree, which is Treaty 8 land. My father was born and grew up there too, and my mother moved there, from southern Alberta, shortly after their marriage. I spent my childhood on a farm, where we lived in proximity to my father's parents.

I grew up thinking of my paternal grandparents as Ukrainian, though this is the simplest way of summarizing their migration stories, which are more complicated than what that singular name encompasses. This inheritance is part of why I identify as a settler. In using this specific language, “settler,” I am hoping to make a connection between their history and my own, one that recognizes settler colonialism as an ongoing structure.

I never met mother’s mother; she passed away before I was born. She and her family were settlers too, who came from Europe before landing in Canada. Although I have always felt distinctly distanced from this arm of my family history, there are undoubtedly opportunities to learn more of their stories. This is something I am working towards.

My mother’s father, who I knew as a child, was French and Ojibway. When I mark my Indigenous ancestry, I mark a relationship to my mother, through her father. Growing up, my mom raised me in a simple, matter of fact way: these mixed lineages are part of who she is and part of who I am. It is important for me to acknowledge that because of breaks in family ties, and different kinds of migrations, she was not raised with a connection to Ojibway culture, and neither was I. But, in spite of not growing up with these connections, my mother raised me with a knowledge of these relations, however broken. I understand this to be an attempt to interrupt an inheritance of shame and self-directed racism that can be traced back through her childhood and, as far as I understand it, to her father’s too.

I have come to realize that it is possible to interpret the sentence I have used in my bio, that I am of “settler and Indigenous ancestry” as implying that I grew up within Indigenous culture, which I did not. It is also possible to read it and think that I am claimed by a specific Indigenous community, which I am not.

Conversations about Indigenous identity being tied to being claimed by Indigenous communities are important because they emphasize the self-determination of Indigenous nations, acting as a corrective to the many ways that colonial governments have tried to adjudicate Indigenous identity out of existence. And so, while it has been important for me to align myself with my mother’s refusal to be ashamed of her family’s Indigenous heritage, I wonder if this is the best decision; broken family relationships mean that as far as my Indigenous ancestry goes, I have only my mother to claim me. This is not community.

For the time being, I’ve re-articulated that line in my bio. It now reads that I am “a settler with some Ojibway ancestry to whom connections have been fractured due to violence, shame and racism.” This isn’t a wholesale address of how to best situate myself for readers here, but it feels more precise. I’m going to keep working on the language.

Another aspect of the language as I am using it here is that I am naming a people, the Ojibway, rather than naming a specific nation. I don’t have a specific nation to name because the relationships required for such a naming are not mine, and I owe much to these fractured histories in order to not replicate those same disconnections. The family healing required to make good on this is difficult, but it is in motion. I am trying to do this work with as much care as possible. To reflect this, I’ve included a note of learning in my bio too: “Better understanding these inheritances is an ongoing project for her.”

An additional change I have made to my bio is the inclusion of this commitment: “As someone who benefits from white privilege, she tries to be responsible to the reciprocal obligation to dismantle the structures that enable white supremacy and perpetuate settler colonialism.” I have grown up in a world that is ferociously dedicated to maintaining white supremacy, and it is a force that I have been conditioned by and have perpetuated. I want to get better at the work of dismantling white supremacy

—in myself and in the world—and I hope that by naming the fact that whiteness has structured my life might be one kind of very modest crack in its force, a crack that might enable more cracks to form, joining with other revolutionary energies to remake the world.

Through my work, I have tried to understand the structural forces that have come to make the settler colonial nation state called Canada, which is my home, and how those same forces have come to shape my family too. In particular, in the work that I have done that has been explicitly aligned with my indigeneity, such as residencies supported by the Canada Council for Aboriginal curators or with the Wood Land School, I have committed to working with artists to challenge structures of supremacist power and to critically interrogate the systems that allow settler colonialism to continue to unfold. However, I know that my lived experiences differ greatly from folks who are visibly Indigenous or grew up in community, and this includes the professional opportunities that I have had access to. I recognize that this is a symptom of those same systems I am wanting to dismantle. And so, I am considering how to push this work further and make it more precise. In part, this means figuring out how to work in a way that doesn't detract from the urgent labour of Indigenous self-determination as articulated by folks who have connections to their Indigenous communities, and to figure out how I might use the privileges I am afforded in service of these decolonized futures. This is life work, and I hope that it is continued through this thinking-in-public, through the rearticulation of my bio, and through expressing questions I have about how to be responsible to the places and people that I am from.

As part of the questioning and learning I am engaging in here, I want to preserve a copy of the associated part of my bio as it has been written for the last long while. My revised bio can be found [here](https://cheyanneturions.wordpress.com/information/) (<https://cheyanneturions.wordpress.com/information/>).

cheyanne turions is a curator, cultural worker and writer currently based in Canada. From the farmlands of Treaty 8, she is of settler and Indigenous ancestry.

Other parts of my bio have been reorganized, and aspects such as my research interests or professional affiliations are updated regularly. These changes are not noted here.



[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](#)