HAYDEN KING

Joseph Boyden, where are you from?

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My name is Hayden King. I am the son of Hayden (Sr.) and Carol. On my father’s side I am Anishinaabe, Ojibwe from my grandmother Eleanor and Potawatomi from my grandfather, Rufus. Through blood and adoption we can trace our roots back seven generations. But eventually threads of this lineage were woven together on the sandy shores of Gchi’mnissing, or Beausoleil First Nation (Christian Island), in southern Georgian Bay.

I offer this orientation as a matter of custom. Among Anishinaabeg, it is an expected response to the standard greeting-question, “Where are you from?” For we are a people of renewal, a people seeking each other out in our century-long reclamation of culture, language, family and identity. We are a people bound by our relationships.

But earlier this week, after years of unclear answers to this question from celebrated Canadian author Joseph Boyden, APTN reporter Jorge Barrera, supported by independent researchers, investigated the author’s claims and couldn’t find evidence of either Nipmuc or Ojibwe heritage. It appears that Mr. Boyden has not been forthcoming about his indigenous identity, benefiting from a crafted ambiguity.

Mr. Boyden is just the latest. Last year prolific scholar Andrea Smith’s claims to Cherokee ancestry were debunked. Before Ms. Smith were academics Susan Taffe Reed and Ward Churchill, writers Margaret Seltzer and Archie Belaney (Grey Owl), actors Espera Oscar de Corti (Iron Eyes Cody), Johnny Depp and so on. There is a long tradition of playing Indian.

While Canadians (and some indigenous people, including other Anishinaabeg) have responded to these findings regarding Mr. Boyden with support for the author, it is important to recognize that this kind of behaviour is also pernicious, in a variety of ways.

Firstly, it misrepresents indigenous peoples. When Mr. Boyden’s novel *The Orenda* was published in 2013, I wrote a critical review. For me, the work seemed detached from the claimed indigenous voice. Of course, while the diversity of indigenous peoples makes defining that voice challenging, it universally comes from our experiences *as* indigenous. Without that experience, results inevitably include inaccuracy and stereotypes.

Taking this further, consider some of the implications for public discussions on reconciliation. Is it the case that one of the pre-eminent indigenous voices in Canada is not indigenous at all, but a white Canadian speaking to other mostly white Canadians? And so we have yet another avenue to ignore indigenous perspectives.

Ethnic fraud, in general, takes up time, space and resources. In a Canada finally aiming to include indigenous peoples and offer limited restitution, there are grants and awards targeting those in the arts marginalized by colonialism. The list of brilliant and deserving but barely surviving indigenous writers and artists is very long. So when (already privileged) writers claim prizes for their performance instead of real indigenous peoples, the result is material harm as well as insult.

Ethnic fraud sabotages the necessary work of rebuilding indigenous nations. In his statements, Mr. Boyden has invoked Anishinaabe, Nipmuc, Métis, Two-Spirit and Bear Clan affiliations (this week he squarely identified as Anishinaabe). These terms are not hollow or symbolic. They situate individuals in a framework that requires obligations and accountability to communities. Misleading claims, void of embodiment, break tenuous indigenous social systems down even further.

Ethnic fraud alienates those struggling to find their identities. Indigenous identity has been fragmented by maze-like colonial categories. So this discussion is not easy. For those adopted or taken away from their communities, or those dealing with assimilation’s toll; there are the light-skinned and light-eyed, the tens of thousands raised in cities, and of course the utterly devastating insistence on blood quantum by the federal government. Many of the individuals trying to make their way back are all the more confused by the inconsistent and shifting parameters set by prominent ethnic frauds.

Taken together, playing Indian should not be ignored or excused but exposed.

Whether this column, the APTN investigation, the outrage on social media over the past few days – none of it is about envy, shaming or being #NativerThanYou. There are few Anishinaabeg (or Mi’kmaq or Métis) who haven’t struggled with their identity, certainly I have and continue to. The difference is that most approach the search for answers with humility and honesty – to do otherwise leads instead to appropriation, misrepresentation and ultimately causes real harm.

For Anishinaabeg then, in these bewildering times, asking where you’re from can be as much a greeting as a form of self-preservation.

WAB KINEW

There is room in our circle for Joseph Boyden

WAB KINEW

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Growing up around sundance ceremonies, I met a man claiming to be descended from the great Lakota warrior Tasunke Witko (Crazy Horse). The man did not look native and was raised far from our communities. Nonetheless, he called himself “Crazy Horse.” People made fun of him, but he danced with us for decades.

Then one day when I was a teenager, Tasunke Witko’s real Lakota relatives showed up to question the man. When he could not explain his connection to the family, they denounced the man as a fraud and stripped him of the name “Crazy Horse.” This happened in the middle of our circle, in front of our entire sundance community.

Just then, as the humiliation reached its nadir, the chief of our sundance walked out into the arbour and adopted the shamed man, giving him his family name in the process. This made room in our circle for the man, his children and his grandchildren.

Today my friend Joseph Boyden is the one in the centre of our circle being stripped of an identity. Though his disrobing is happening in the feedback loop of social media instead of a traditional arbour, as with the man at the sundance, many of the questions asked are legitimate.

Joseph Boyden will be changed by this. He owes some of our friends apologies for apparently misleading them. Media outlets will lose credibility if they present his as the voice of indigenous peoples. When he promotes his next book, he will be asked about his identity and this episode.

Already some non-indigenous readers are asking if they should read his work. His novels remain powerful. But they were always the work of a talented outsider. Even if he is Anishinaabe, he is not a member of the nations he wrote about – the Mushkegowuk, the Huron, the Haudenosaunee. Recognizing the distinctions will inform readers. So, yes, read Joseph Boyden. But also read authors who have lived a more indigenous experience.

The indigenous community also has questions to consider. First, why did we so quickly embrace someone who has long said he has little biological connection to us?

Our community hungers for reasons to celebrate, so when a brilliant artist claimed us, we claimed him. I am not sure this cost us much. While he should not accept award money meant to encourage writers who experience the very real challenges of growing up indigenous in Canada, his success did not prevent a half-dozen indigenous authors from releasing bestsellers in the past few years.

The second, and perhaps more important question, is what does it say that many of us have so quickly turned on him?

I am reminded of the man at the sundance. It could not have been easy, but he has returned year after year since his shaming. In the countless ceremonies since, all participating have repeated the prayerful Lakota words *Mitakuye Oyasin* (all my relations). The Anishinaabe and other peoples recite similar maxims. These axioms articulate the belief that every being is related to one another.

If we are to live this ethos, then perhaps the issue of how Joseph Boyden gained access to our circle does not matter as much as the fact he is present in our community now.

His place among us was built by writing about, giving back to and befriending us. Some, such as myself, continue to claim him. I can not give him a status card or confer on him the right to identify as Anishinaabe. But I can tell you if he keeps coming back, he will have a place in our circle.

I say this wishing he behaved differently. I want him to rescind the UBC letter, apologize for his comments about missing and murdered women, and be direct with us about his ancestry. If he is not native, he should confess. If he has one ancestor generations back, he should explain who they were.

Not long ago, a Lakota grandmother and I were teasing each other about that man from the sundance. “He’s your relative.” “No, he’s your relative,” we said to one another. But when the conversation turned to the now ailing man’s health the woman surprised me with her genuine sadness. The man was imperfect. He made us cringe sometimes. Yet, he was still a part of us.

There is room in our circle for everyone, even those who do not behave as we would like. We include them not just to make our circle bigger. We love one another as relatives because it frees our hearts from hurt and allows us to embrace the goodness in each of us. When we do that, we are stronger.

All my relations.

**ENGLISH 11**

**Response Journal 6 – Joseph Boyden Ancestry Controversy**

APTN Report

<http://aptnnews.ca/2017/01/04/i-think-he-should-be-completely-upfront-about-his-ancestry-wab-kinew-talks-about-joseph-boyden/>

University Prof Cuts Boyden Novels from Indigenous Literature Course

<http://aptnnews.ca/2017/01/18/university-professor-cutting-joseph-boyden-novels-from-her-course/>

CBC Radio Discussion

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-january-5-2017-1.3921340/indigenous-identity-and-the-case-of-joseph-boyden-1.3922327>

In addition to the above news clips and radio podcast, read the two perspectives that follow:

Questions to consider:

* How legitimate are the concerns regarding Boyden’s ancestry? Or, does proof of Joseph Boyden’s indigenous ancestry really matter?
* Is the way a reader approaches a Joseph Boyden novel influenced by how they understand his identity? Do the controversies regarding his ancestry change the way you view the novel?
* Does the controversy around Boyden’s ancestry diminish the effect of the novel?
* Should Boyden be criticized for ‘playing Indian?’ After all, here is a writer who has made his mark writing about Indigenous people/themes/topics, refuting stereotypes, and identifying himself as an Indigenous person and writer.
* Is Boyden a fraud, as Hayden King suggests?
* Is there still room to bring Boyden back to the ‘circle,’ as Wab Kinew argues?
* Can there be different ways of having a role in the Indigenous community without themselves being Indigenous?