

“Claiming bad kin”

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Many white people I know have been sparked to reflection in the wake of the “not guilty” verdicts in the Gerald Stanley and Raymond Cormier murder cases. Some have been moved to ask what it means to be a white settler in this place currently called Canada, confronting the unjust deaths of Coulton Boushie, Tina Fontaine, and so many others. When we understand what is happening, wherever we notice it, many of us respond by wanting to distance ourselves from harm, or by denying that it’s really so bad, or by attempting to be firmly on the side of the angels. In particular, those of us who benefit from harm and wrong-doing may want to take the side of the oppressed, the murdered, the wounded. We may respond by disavowing our connection to the people killing the earth and its people, critters, and ecosystems. In some real way I love this response, this rejection of being complicit with harm. I think it signals a lively and laudable rejection of wrongdoing that we can all get behind, and a desire to transform or end the social relations that produce suffering. But precisely because the complicity-denial impulse expresses a wish to end suffering we ought to assess whether denying complicity is an effective political stance.

In this talk I'll be primarily focusing on whiteness in its articulation with the past and present of colonialism, Black enslavement, and border militarism. But it is vital to mark that all of this takes place and is complexly entangled with environmental devastation, global warming, and the spread of industrial toxicants alongside everyday vitalized materials that capitalism renders pollutants. And all of this rests on a eugenic logic that dictates who

deserves to live and who to die and that threads disability-hating throughout its narrative of fitness of species. People who benefit from social relations of harm frequently try to claim kin relations with the people who are targeted by racism or to reject kin connections with wrongdoers. Many white settlers respond to histories of colonization by claiming Indigenous ancestry, or to histories of enslavement by claiming abolitionist ancestry or by remaining ignorant of enslavers in the family tree, or we respond to histories of border militarism by naturalizing or celebrating contemporary state formations. Many white settlers mobilize individualizing and neoliberal logics, that is, to deny complicity with or benefit from ongoing social relations of harm that result from colonization, chattel slavery, and militarized borders.

Christina Sharpe's piece "[Lose Your Kin](#)" came out shortly after the US election of Donald Trump. The article begins with a quote from Saidiya Hartman's book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade Route*. "Slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship." Hartman's project in *Lose Your Mother* is to trace what happens when someone cannot find the traces, the names, the histories of history they know is present and shapes their lives. Sharpe's project in "Lose Your Kin" is to invite white people to refuse white kinship and to recognize that, as she writes, "One must be willing to say this is abhorrent. One must be willing to be more than uncomfortable. One must be willing to be on the outside. One must refuse to repair a familial rift on the bodies cast out as not kin" (Sharpe 2016, para 10). She is right, I think, to argue that "Kinship relations structure the nation. Capitulation to their current configurations is the continued enfleshment of that ghost [of slavery]" (para 11). In this inquiry into what it means to resist the continued enfleshment of the ghosts and present hauntings of slavery, eugenic projects, the violence of borders, and

colonialism, I pivot to ask if refusing to capitulate to current configurations might require acknowledging our social and political entanglement with them.

I am interested in what it could mean for white people and settlers more generally who benefit from historical and current effects of enslavement, colonialism, border militarism, racial distributions of environmental devastation, and capitalism to claim kin with the people producing these effects. If we are complicit in the pain of this suffering world, how might we take responsibility for our bad kin? I started thinking about this question in part through listening to conversations over the past several years about people who claim various sorts of Indigenous identities without being able to trace their family history to the lived, community experience of indigeneity. One articulation of why this move doesn't work came from Kim Tallbear's important work on why DNA tests cannot confirm or deny Indigenous identity. She says, "We construct belonging and citizenship in ways that do not consider these genetic ancestry tests. So it's not just a matter of what you claim, but it's a matter of who claims you" ("Sorry, That DNA Test Doesn't Make You Indigenous" 2017). Audra Simpson, speaking of the case of author Joseph Boyden, wrote:

this conversation has never been about Indian status, or blood quantum, it is simply a matter of kin. Do settlers understand what it means to be a relation to each other? And the crucial relationship of this relatedness to one's society, to politics, to land? The settler state does, that's why it took our children from us and dismantled our kinship systems with the Indian Act in 1876. So we hold on to our kin relations where we can and we reclaim them as we can. We understand kin very well indeed. .. It is not shameful to ask who you belong to. It is not "lateral violence" or a lynch mob to ask who your relations are. It is the beginning of a conversation that unlocks

who you are and how you shall proceed with each other.” (“Eksá:’a Onekwenhtara on Twitter: ‘Mic. DROP. All Hail the IroQueen. <https://t.co/QedwCGBSAq>” 2017).

It seems to me clear that, indeed, it does not only matter what we claim about who we are; it matters who claims us as kin.

White nationalists claim me, as a white person, as kin. Though they may not know me personally and though they would likely despair of my politics, they are working for a world in which I and white people like me hold citizenship, reproduce “the white race,” and are safe and flourishing. Listening to Tallbear and Simpson, and reflecting on Sharpe’s work, I started to wonder what would happen if I claimed them back.

My argument here has three parts. First, I argue that Indigenous practices of relationality cannot be taken up by settlers, and that instead we must craft new practices of being in relation that can destroy settler colonialism and its articulation with anti-Black racism and border militarism. Second, I forward a conception of situatedness as arising from both the histories we inherit and the webs of connection that shape the social relations within which we exist; differential inheritance produces differential responsibilities. Third, I argue for a specific form of responding to whiteness that involves white settlers claiming rather than disavowing our connection to white supremacist people and social relations. I explore the potential of the roles of friends and comrades working as race traitors against whiteness and gesture towards the importance of directly confronting white supremacists.

1. “Settlers make terrible kin”

At a conference in August, 2017, on a panel about the concept of “threat,” Kim Tallbear talked about what it means to exist in the wake of a threat already manifest - to have

already experienced attempted genocide and world-destruction, and to still continue.

“Settlers,” she said in that talk, “make terrible kin.” There is a vast literature on kinship relations, much of it emanating from what Vine Deloria Jr. ironically named “Anthropologists and Other Friends” who discussed the kinship relations of their objects of study (Deloria 1969, 78–101).

Kinship has been a live topic in anthropological, critical race, feminist, and queer intellectual spaces for a long time. I believe we should worry about any attempt to translate or transport specific Indigenous kin practices into settler contexts. Holding in view an understanding of colonialism as a structure rather than an event, “settlers make terrible kin” not because of who particular people are, but because settler colonialism is a structure based on betraying relationality, historically and in the present. Settlership is formed in and through anti-Black racism and enslavement as a key piece of capitalism; it is formed in and through militarized border protectionism that simultaneously steals land and determines by force who will be allowed to cross into it. There is always resistance to each of these dynamics, as when Black Lives Matter supported the opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock or when Indigenous activists oppose travel bans and welcome migrants (Walker 2016; “‘No Ban on Stolen Land,’ Say Indigenous Activists in U.S.” 2017).

Métis feminist scholar Zoe Todd’s important work on kinship is generative here. Beginning from Leroy Little Bear’s reflections on the very narrow range of ideal conditions that humans need to live, Todd critically engages the context of an oil spill in the North Saskatchewan River. She reads not only the river and the critters that live in it, the rocks and plants it touches as it flows through, but also the remnants of dinosaur denizens now manifest as petro-fuel or fossils, as *kin*. Reading Todd reminds me again about the multi-

layered, dense history of being with kin over the long term. And learning from the work of people like Colleen Cardinal, responding to the 60s Scoop, in which Indigenous children were stolen from their families and adopted by settlers, I reflect on how the experience of displacement, discontinuity, and fragmentation has also come to be part of Indigenous experience; continuity of residence is not a condition of kinmaking under conditions of settler colonialism. Reflecting on what it would mean to include “petro progeny” as kin, understanding the conditions under which oil spills kill other beings, also kin, Todd concludes her piece with a reflection and an invitation:

... I must also engage with the complex responsibilities that come with re-framing fossils and fossil-beings – including the petrochemical products of decayed matter buried deep within the earth of my home province – as a kind of kin. ... I hope that I can encourage settler Canadians to understand that tending to the reciprocal relationality we hold with fish and other more-than-human beings is integral to supporting the ‘narrow conditions of existence’ in this place (99).

Not being able to tend to kin relations in the same way that Indigenous people do does not mean that settlers cannot tend to kin relations at all. On the contrary, if we care for the world, *tending to the reciprocal relationality* is necessary work, perhaps especially for those of us structurally situated as settlers in relations of betrayal and broken promises. But if we are structurally situated at people defined by failures of relational reciprocity, what should we do? Situatedness may help us answer this question.

2. Differential inheritance, differential responsibilities

I would like us to understand situatedness as a key part of relationality; situatedness includes the histories that place us where we are, the relations that we inherit, as well as the webs of relations that benefit us in the present.

Steeped as I am in a politics arising from feminist epistemology that theorizes situated knowledge, I come back over and over to the materialities of knowledge claims. As Tallbear has argued, “White Americans make claims to Native American genetic ancestry and identity in ways that mirror the kinds of claims that whites have made to other forms of Native American patrimony - whether land, resources, remains, or cultural artifacts” (TallBear 2013, 136). Making knowledge claims usually carries a material reason for knowing one thing rather than another, a reason that truth matters. As both Tallbear and Circe Sturm have examined, white people’s attempts to “race-shift” towards indigeneity carry a moral valence for them as well, in which it is somehow more virtuous to (attempt to) choose to be native than to acknowledge or affirm whiteness.

There are certainly ephemeral gains that white people might find in claiming Indigenous identification - a sense of being on the righteous side of history, a spiritual connection to people and traditions closer to the earth, or a kind of subjectivity that feels meaningfully resistant even though it is based on erasing actual Indigenous histories and identities. That is, claiming indigeneity can be a way to attempt to escape the constitutive alienation of North American whiteness, a way to reach towards a kind of wholeness and being right with the world; it can be an attempt to respond to the harms of colonialism and racism. But if this is genuinely what motivates race shifting, we should see a transformation in behavior when Indigenous people say that claiming Indigenous identity is not helpful to

work against colonialism. As people like Darryl Laroux have been exploring, frequently the reverse happens.

There are also material relations undergirding making claims. So, perhaps some of the desire to claim indigeneity comes from the perception that many white people have that Indigenous people receive material benefit from being so classified in the eyes of the state - supposed freedom from taxation, the capacity to run casinos on reservations, free education, and so on. These perceptions frequently are simply not true, or so simplistic that they don't track people's experience. It may be that it is possible to perceive indigenous classification as a gain, as something desirable, (only) when a person has not experienced the collective and personal accretion of the effects of colonialism. Perhaps white people claim Native blood so much more readily than they claim Black ancestry because of the material harms assigned to being classified as Black carried -- and it is vital to perceive the transition into whiteness forced on many Indigenous people in conversation with the refusal of personhood (qua whiteness) to Black people. And these social relations, on this continent as perhaps elsewhere, are in dense but disavowed dialectic with securitizing borders against the racialized refugee and migrant other.

All of us inherit history; the life we enter into is a product of what has come before us. "History" here names the life experiences of our ancestors as well as the material conditions in which those experiences unfolded. "Situatedness" references this sense of what has come before us in our family and society, and how that inheritance sets the conditions for our individual lives. And all of us experience benefit or harm from the social relations currently constituting our lives. Differential inheritances mean that we do not enter the world with equal life chances; social relations of oppression and benefit mean that we receive harm and

help simply because of how we are socially placed. We aren't personally responsible for the social relations and material conditions that came before us or that we enter in to; we can become responsible for what we do in response to those conditions. What soil roots us, and what sun do we track over the course of our day? Thinking again about whiteness, we can mark the ways that whiteness functions in the histories we inherit to unjustly benefit people designated white. We can mark the ways that we who are white benefit from racism in the present, whether or not we want to. As George Lipsitz says, "whiteness has a cash value" - this is a social relation, not something we personally choose. In this sense, whiteness accrues to white people in our inheritance of the past as well as our benefit in the present. Some of this benefit in the present is due to overt and structural racism oriented toward a future for whiteness; this is why the so-called "14 words" are so often evoked by people ranging from their originator, David Lane, to last month's tweet (for example) by "Real Doctor White": "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."¹ This present commitment to the wellbeing of white people and to the eugenic project of white children marks something about white people's inheritance, our present, and the imagined future that whiteness secures for its children.

I see the task, then, as a question of how to be situated in relation to whiteness in ways that do not disavow or evade its past and present, while simultaneously working toward a future in which more beings than white children have any kind of future at all.

I have been thinking a lot about Canadian colonialism and its entanglement with capitalism and border militarism, so let me illustrate what I mean using Canada as an

¹ <https://twitter.com/RealDoctorWhite/status/913051713527042050>

example. Capitalism and colonialism are, perhaps obviously, always connected - but it's worth saying again that making profit has been a major motor for colonial projects globally. In Canada, the capitalist project was initially held primarily by the Hudson's Bay Company, which for the majority of its life in the colonies was a fur-trading business (with later ventures into oil industries and, in the 19th century and on, department stores). The pathways for extracting fur for profit were also disease vectors, transmitting smallpox and tuberculosis westward and northward. And the fur trade also contributed to ecological devastation and famine as buffalo herds were hunted to devastation to produce pemmican to send north to feed fur hunters and traders.

Beaver, a valuable fur, were not routinely hunted by Assiniboine peoples (perhaps because of an understanding of beaver's role in water management in the plains); Anishinabe hunters, who moved west following the hunting, and who had a major presence in the west in part because of their earlier encounter with the diseases that were devastating people further west, did take beaver in response to the Hudson's Bay Company's voracious appetite for their fur. The collapse of beavers in the west likely contributed to drought conditions, which contributed to the collapse of buffalo herds, which in turn undermined Indigenous subsistence capacities. Simultaneously, people were confined to reserves if they wanted to access food and medicine promised to them in treaty agreements. The prime minister at the time, John A. Macdonald, commenting on the government's policy towards plains people, said in the House of Commons "We cannot allow them to die for want of food ... [We] are doing all that we can by refusing food until the Indians are on the verge of starvation, to reduce the expense" (Daschuk 2013, 123). In practice, this meant that representatives of the Canadian state kept food in storehouses on reserves while people went hungry, fed them

rancid pork and flour, and kept rations at below-subsistence levels. People then frequently succumbed to sicknesses, made vulnerable by starvation.

None of this was done just to be hateful. Macdonald and his henchmen starved the indigenous people of the plains to make money for themselves (as investors in the companies supplying tainted food to reserves) and to open the plains for settlement by mostly European immigrants. My immigrant ancestors directly benefited from the starvation of plains Indians and preferential immigration policies aiming to bring in Europeans; my great-great grandmother Eliza Ritchie moved to Winnipeg to join her brothers and parents, who had moved there from Nova Scotia. The Ritchies moved west during the height of the Canadian government's starvation policies and flouting of treaty obligations; they started out in Bristol, UK. Eliza's son Tom married my Irish great-grandmother, Blanche Mahwinney; her father was a surveyor who initially settled his family in Ontario and then moved west, most likely to survey the land for property claims and the railroad. My family biography is not interesting; it is a genealogy of ordinary settlers just trying to make a life, often fleeing starvation in their own homelands (the Irish potato famine was in 1845, and it is likely that the Mahwinneys left Ireland because of famine). Ordinary settlers just trying to make a life lived that life because of the immiseration and death of ordinary Indigenous people, because of the systematic and planned betrayal of treaty agreements and theft of land, and for a few settlers to extract money from the people and places they invaded. I, and other descendants of ordinary settlers, inherit this history.

Canada remains a state engaged in an ongoing colonial project of attempting to dispossess Indigenous people of places, resources, and culture. It is a resource extraction economy in which wealth continues to be funneled and pipelined from the north and the

west south and east. Of course, extraction is distributed and uneven, but visiting or living in the places at the heart of oil production or nickel extraction shows also how the effect of that extraction is hidden from the profits it generates. And Canada continues to ignore its treaty obligations with what frequently seems like the flattest contempt — despite promising a turn to “nation to nation” relations our current prime minister has done no such thing. More than half of First Nations children live in poverty; more than 150 reserves are currently under a boil water advisory; several have been unable to drink their water for more than twenty years. The Canadian government continues to fight against paying for dental and medical care for First Nations children; it continues to fail to meet its obligations for Indigenous education. Canada just spent half a billion dollars celebrating its 150th anniversary. I, and everyone else living on stolen native land, benefit from these social relations that distribute harm and death.

White nationalist Canadians abut the government’s colonial project with a growing anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-Black popular project. Over the last year there has been an upswing in overt, militarized, white supremacist organizing across the Canadian context - from Soldiers of Odin patrols to La Muette, the Quebec organization who gesture again towards the future children: “Afin que l’avenir de nos enfants ne se retrouve pas entre les mains de l’islam radical pro-charia. Nous sommes... La Meute.”

So we have differential inheritances, and the material effects of what we receive bequeath differential responsibilities. And while Indigenous people and Black people and people of color are related to white settlers, the inheritances and social relations that constitute those connections are different. Those relations have been and are systematically set up to refuse, harm, and kill people not rendered white and to break their relations with

their ancestors, places, and people. The ethical and political imperative to claim bad kin also falls solely on the people - white settlers - who benefit from white supremacist actions, policies, and inheritances. As with all political imperatives, this is a hypothetical one. Whiteness is an inheritance we cannot disavow or divest from, only make a reckoning with. The question, individually and collectively, is how we will reckon with it.

3. Treason to whiteness

The group Bring the Ruckus and the journal *Race Traitor* used the formulation “Treason to Whiteness is Loyalty to Humanity.” I have critiqued some aspects of their politics in earlier work, especially because I have seen the approach as too individualized. In thinking about claiming kin, I would also say now that it relies too much on rejecting kin relations with racists and the systemic production of whiteness. So I have been returning to Mab Segrest’s formulation of race treason, especially in her book *Memoir of a Race Traitor*. Reflecting on going to visit her sick father, who had been a key organizer in North Carolina for segregation and someone who figured for Segrest everything wrong with her family, she writes, “When had my “racist daddy” contracted to himself - to one aging man - from the balloon into which I had inflated him: a caricature of everything in the culture that I hated, my archetypical white person, whom I could never convert because I could never accept, the him of me? No Black friend had ever asked me not to love my daddy” (Segrest 1994, 173).

The context for this quote is a sustained personal and political reflection on decades of organizing, Segrest’s lifelong work to confront and transform whiteness and the harm it does. She discusses the historical creation of white identity in the 17th century, saying: “The implications are profound: If we white folks were constructed by history, we can, over time and as a people, unconstruct ourselves. The Klan knows this possibility and recognizes those

whites who disavow this history as ...*race traitors*... How, then, to move masses of white people to become traitors to the concept of race?” (195).

It is useful to understand the traitor as individual relation to collective situation(s), as someone who stands in relation to a formation they, at least in part, want to destroy. Individual treason is only possible because of how one is placed in relation to a collective situation (like the state, or, maybe, whiteness). But what race treason actually means needs to be more explicitly worked through.

Aside from the roles of being a liberal or a “good white person,” recent work has argued that a key piece of resisting injustice is to move from nouns to verbs, and especially to move from the claim that “I am an *ally*” towards acting as an *accomplice*. On this logic, one can only be something through doing something. The problem is that the model is episodic and periodic, and on that front I find it unsatisfying. So I would like to close by exploring other possible roles, which retain the sense of being-as-doing but are less merely metaphoric than race treason: Friendship, comradeship, and direct opposition.

In thinking about friendship, I turn to Aristotle’s understanding of friendship as a practice of virtue through which we develop excellence and share it with others. It is a kind of individual orientation only possible to manifest in the context of a relationship, and I think there is a lot of traction here for thinking about whiteness and claiming kin. Confronting the racist uncle, calling in, supporting people targeted by social relations of racism and colonialism -- these can all be seen as part of the work of friendship. For Aristotle, friendship requires duration and commitment; he says about friends, “being steadfast in themselves they hold fast to each other, and neither ask nor give base services, but (one may say) even prevent them; for it is characteristic of good men neither to go

wrong themselves nor to let their friends do so.”(Aristotle, Rowe, and Broadie 2002, VIII.8). So the friendship of resisting racism could involve helping one another to become excellent, situationally, acknowledging the dense histories and presents that place us as needing to do some work on the world in order to practice virtue ourselves.

In practice this might look like what Ngọc Loan Trần calls “[calling in](#)” - a departure from “calling out,” where the project is to identify, often publically, what someone has done wrong. Calling in involves acting as a virtuous friend, in Aristotle’s sense - someone who invites us to become a better version of ourselves. Sometimes people of color and Indigenous people offer this kind of friendship to white settlers, through calling us out or calling us in on issues of race and colonization; these practices of friendship are incredibly generous, especially in light of how resistant, whitesplained, angry, and defensive we white people get when people tell us we’ve done something racist. In arguing for taking the role of a friend who opposes racism, among other social relations of oppression, I look toward how calling one another in should be a practice for white people and settlers to take up with one another. This kind of friendship can be a way of claiming kin with the parts of our selves and our world that we want to designate “bad” and reject, including actual people.

And work on the world is always collective, and moving beyond our individual family and friend relations. I suggest that *comradeship* is a useable framework for thinking about how we might work against whiteness and for a world in which many worlds can flourish. Comradeship names collective formations organized around future-oriented solidarities or extant shared social conditions; it assumes that we all have a stake in the transformation at hand. It implies actively supporting existing struggle without abdicating responsibility for understanding which work to engage and why. Frequently the kind of work that people like

Segrest describe involves taking the lead of people directly affected by social relations of harm, recognizing that the resources white people have to offer to resistance are not our own even as we use them.

In practicing political friendship or comradeship, the question of race treason can be a usable heuristic in tuning our political goals. It can be a tool for asking oneself, In this specific situation in all its complexity, which side of the line am I going to stand on? Am I going to participate in something that consolidates or loosens whiteness's hold on the world? Without being able to accurately predict what will happen as a result of any given political action, does this action disrupt or affirm social relations of oppression? Does it help or harm some specific person who is targeted by those relations? What might be the effects, strategic value, and dangers involved in claiming kin through practices of friendship or comradeship in rejecting whiteness while perceiving how it claims us?

In holding friendship and comradeship as relational practices we can take up, then, a conception of treason to whiteness can offer normative guidance. If we understand whiteness as the systematic denial of being in relation, in particular to Black and Indigenous people, we can ask what being in right relations, relations of reciprocity, could mean or look like. White treason is a way to claim kin. We can only be treasonous to something we claim, or that claims us.

So, finally, consider the work of claiming actual, literal white supremacists as kin - people like Alexandre Bissonnette, or the Proud Boys in Ottawa, or the people who think Coulton Boushie deserved to die. The way we white settlers claim kin with white supremacists is by directly opposing them - directly, strategically, in coalition with others, and in ways that build power to support Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour. I

believe white people putting ourselves at the front ranks of counter demonstrations to white nationalist rallies, putting our bodies between Richard Spencer's ilk and Black Lives Matter manifestations, standing against pro-fascism on our campuses, and other forms of direct action opposition are ways to claim our bad kin. So are many forms of ongoing organizing, educating, and structural intervention work with fellow white people. Claiming bad kin in all of these senses - calling in our friends and comrade and fighting the white supremacists who claim us - is, I believe, the only way to "live with any human dignity on the planet at this moment," to quote Assata Shakur.

Let me return to Sharpe's "Lose Your Kin." Her injunction is to: "Refuse reconciliation to ongoing brutality. Refuse to feast on the corpse of others. Rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice" (para 13). I have tried to argue here that only through actively beginning from our understanding of our complicity in ongoing brutality can white settlers participate in the project of remaking the world. Any solidarity relation we can take up will have to start from our understanding of who is claiming us as kin, and from an ongoing commitment to pulling back on the ties that bind us to kinship relations of expropriation and violence.