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Thirteen Grandmothers, Queering Kinship and a "Compromised" Source



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I am approaching the call to write up the results of the "Make Kin" Workshop at the STS Conference with mixed feelings and a lot of time spent in critical self-reflection since then. In the workshop I pointed out the striking parallels between Haraway (2015) and a self-identified Indigenous author, Sams (1993), in regard to the broad concept of kinship and the transgression of human/non-human boundaries in these authors' ways of knowing. I was taken by the notion to "make kin" with "nature," with animals, with resources, with abiotic actors in order to minimize harm for all beings. Donna Haraway (2015) shared some neologisms as clues to explore the field of queering kin (e.g. "clanarchist" derived from clan+anarchist, or "kinnovation" out of kin+innovation, cf. Haraway 2015: footnote 15), so in the workshop I proposed to add "kinimize-kinimizing" (make kin + minimize harm) to the list in an attempt to honor and learn from indigenous approaches to life and death. A few emails later I found myself stigmatized with the labels "colonialist," "violent" and even "Nazi" because I (unknowingly) had used a "compromised source." This short reflection then, is not only an attempt to convey my original idea, presented in the allotted five minutes, but also an opportunity to deal with the sadness and the anger these labels have caused. It is thus not only a personal reflection on the misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge, but also a reflection on academic feedback culture.¹

Setting the stage: What the Thirteen grandmothers would say about queering kin

"Where are the feminist utopian, collaborative, risky imaginings and actions for earthlings in a mortal, damaged, human-heavy world?" asked Anita Thaler and Birgit Hofstätter as organizers of the queer STS workshop. They offered Haraway (2015) as inspiration, who proposes the slogan "make kin, not babies," to point out the need for a non-

¹ I am indebted to Anita Thaler and Birgit Hofstaetter for valuable discussions during and after the workshop, as well as to my co-presenters of the panel who brought a wealth of sources and inspiration to my attention. Many thanks also to Heather Laube and Brigitte Kukovetz for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

natalist perspective on human life in order to decrease overpopulation of the planet and make space for an anti-racist and queer social project in which we "make kin" with immigrants and non-normative, creative formations of sexualities. Haraway (2015) suggests we make kin *sym-ctonically* — as opposed to auto-ctonical/self-reliant and thus make kin with non-human, even abiotic actors, because all life and abiotic actors are connected: "No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too." (Haraway 2015: 159).

Even more path breaking is her invoking of energies and methodologies of female goddesses (e.g. Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa, Medusa, Spider Woman) for her utopian imagination of the *Chthulucene*. Haraway (2015, 2016) proposes *Chthulucene* as a supplementary concept to *Capitalocene*, *Anthropocene*, and *Plantaciocene*, which are all labels for the present state the destruction of the planet by humans, capital, plantation industry, toxins etc. "Cheap nature" with unlimited resources is at an end, we are overpopulated, and we will kill this planet unless we change the story and assemble in a "thick kind of on-goingness" that "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages — including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (Haraway 2015: 160).

As a sociologist and gender scholar I was struck because I imagine my more "traditional" sociology colleagues asking me which medication I am on, if I discussed these concepts in a normative academic setting familiar to me. When I thought through Haraway's ideas here I was suddenly reminded of a book I studied with a multiracial group of women — including a First Nation Canadian — during my grad school years in the Northeast Ohio area. It was also recommended to me by a Native American therapist, healer and founding president of an NGO engaged in transnational peace and anti-violence work. The book, *The Thirteen Original Clan Mothers*, is by Jamie Sams (1993), a non-academic, Indigenous author. I was intrigued by the non-elitist, open format of the STS workshop that allowed me to bring in this "esoteric" non-academic source by a woman who conveyed concepts through stories. I was interested in bringing in these "stories" since Haraway (2014) emphasizes that the power of storytelling and collecting up peoples human and non-human really matter to her. Sams' (1993) representation of indigenous knowledge seemed to directly link to Haraway (2015) and I demonstrated these links in the workshop by means of juxtapositions of quotes, like the following:

"No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too."

Haraway 2015: 159).

Chthulucene: "...entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages - including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (Haraway 2015: 160)

"In Native American culture, we see everything as being alive. Each living thing has a specific role as a teacher and family member. Everything on Earth, whether stone, tree, creature, cloud, sun, moon, or human being, is one of our relatives. We capitalize the names of each part of our Planetary Family because they represent the sacred living extensions of the Great Mystery who were placed here to help human-kind evolve spiritually. We capitalize Traditions and Teachings because these words represent the equivalent of another faith's holy books." (Sams 1993:viii)

"Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans."
(Haraway 2015: 161)

"The Tree People, Creature-teachers, Stone People, Cloud People, and all other life forms are our Sisters and Brothers. Our aunts and uncles are the Four Clan Chiefs of Air, Earth, Water, Fire. Our Mother is the Earth, our Father is the Sky, and our Grandparents are Grandmother Moon and Grandfather Sun." (Sams 1993:31)

I posed the question: "What would the Thirteen Grandmothers say about queering kin?" and answered it hypothetically with "We are doing it, ever since, in a way that transcends human, non-human boundaries." I added in my concluding remarks that while Sams seems to work with a heteronormative framework, I think we should be careful to ascribe "gender" to the entities she is working with and remain gender-playful. Grandfather Moon could be a butch Lesbian choosing to use masculine pronouns today. Most Native Communities have concepts of gender that transcend the Western "two-box-system" and Two-Spirit, cross-gender identities have been documented in over 155 tribes across Native North America (Roscoe 1988). Sams structures the Grandmothers according to the Seneca Medicine Wheel, and added a 13th Cycle of Truth. The Thirteen Grandmothers then are also representing women's solidarity as they unite women in (moon related) bleeding cycles (flow of Moontime). This is not *necessarily* pro-natalist and could include trans women: "Every woman has the potential to birth the dreams of the Sisterhood whether she can birth babies or not...Women who have their wombs removed can give birth to their dreams and projects without having the physical organs" (Sams 1993: 21).

The flaw enters the scene: The spoiled identity of Jamie Sams

A person approached me in the discussion part of the workshop (I will henceforth call them "the commentator") and pointed out to me that the source I was using might be "compromised." They had heard the name Jamie Sams connected to notions of a fraudulent sellout of Native knowledge, and that the Indian background Sams claims for herself might be made up. I thanked the anonymous commentator for this valuable comment in my final remarks to the workshop and pledged to follow up on this important critique. I confessed again publicly that I am not an expert in the field and had used the open format of the workshop for some experimental thinking instead of my usual business of presenting empirical data. I added that I am principally cautious about questions of authenticity (a problematic term I chose to use despite its shortcomings) because it reminded me of processes of inclusion and exclusion I had observed in my own field work in transgender communities in the US and the realm of the United Nations (Is someone queer or trans enough to be part of a particular in-group? Who can and cannot participate in policy making qua "authenticity"?). Until then I had no reason to question Sam's background. Sams identifies as Native American (in her books and her website) and states that she received the teachings of these Thirteen Grandmothers from Kiowa Grandmothers in the early 1970s, yet (parts of) the teachings are common to many tribes. Somewhat naively, and influenced by queer understandings of identity labels (which we should be able to choose and alter for ourselves), I had not considered in a general way what it means to allegedly pose as a "Fake Indian."

But it was suggested that Jamie Sams might be "fake," when shortly after the workshop an email reached me (and the rest of the workshop presenters) by the commentator. The commentator situated themselves as white settler scholar critically engaged with Native American and Indigenous Studies and with deep and ongoing collaborations with tribes and indigenous scholars, and shared some political context and analysis pertaining to the compromised source I had been using. They pointed out that they are not intending to rule on Jamie Sams' "authenticity" (because no white settler should do so and only tribes and First Nations have the right to determine membership) but there is a long history of people claiming Native American, Alaska Native, or First Nation identities who are misrepresenting and colonizing Indigenous scholarship in order to gain benefits, to profit by selling spiritual traditions, or to gain power or prestige within indigenous academia. The commentator stated that Sams apparently curated her online persona very carefully; however they found some evidence of her questionable background. The commentator closed with the words "scholarship that cites sources like these perpetuates colonialist erasures of indigenous voice, sovereignty, and self-determination."

I was shocked. First, my shortcoming and ignorance was now "public" through the gesture of directing the email to the entire panel of presenters. Second, I had been called colonialist. I have identified as a feminist since age 13, when I was fighting for my own education against my father who did not approve of my schooling. I grew up working class and am the first one in my family to attend college. As a fat kid I have always felt a bond and identification with people less privileged. I feel that I have always been open to being called out by women of color, queer and migrant folk, and old and disabled folk for my blind spots as a white, able-bodied, female-bodied, cis, queer person who is read as straight and normative most of the time. I have worked thousands of hours as a volunteer in women's and queer organizations and have worked to nearly burnout during my years as independent women representative for the City Council of Graz, with love, much love for the cause and the goal of social equality. I turned to transnational feminism in my dissertation in order to become more self-critical about my white feminism. I do not want to be a colonialist from the bottom of my cis, queer, and pansexual heart.

My first impulse was to "substitute" another source for Jamie Sams. I did not want to be marked as colonizer because I was using a compromised source. Second, the idea of connection to all matter and the idea of vitality of the nonhuman are not specific to Jamie Sams. Clearly, among the several hundred indigenous cultures in North America alone there exists a pluralism of worldviews and lifeways, and there is no generic Native American spirituality or a monolithic Indigenous cosmology. Yet, the basic idea that nature, non-human, non-vital matter is kin and teacher, is common in many Indigenous traditions (Hirschfelder 1995) and has been described as "kincentric ecology" (Salmon 2000). The idea is inscribed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) that honors the "distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands" and indigenous spiritual and medicinal relationships with plants, animal, and minerals. More recently also [Rebecca Adamson of the Eastern Cherokee Deer Clan](#) contrasted the "*kinship-based sense of enoughness*" of Native economy with the violent, predatory, exploitative economic and government forces that support DAPL/Dakota Access Pipeline. In my quest to replace Sams I also learned that the human/inhuman relationship has been taken up in queer studies recently by a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* taking up the idea that "many indigenous thinkers, in particular, show that various indigenous ontologies not only consider "inanimate" entities to be alive, sentient, and agential, but also have relational capacity "akin to personhood" (Luciano and Chen 2015: 195). Also Kim Tallbear (2016) powerfully challenges us to think through making love and relations beyond settler sexualities, addressing the colonialization of indigenous kin making.

At second glance replacing Sams as my key frame did not sit well with me from a feminist perspective. I had not fact checked accusations against Sams and I was already

willing to silence her and make her invisible, as many women authors before her had been silenced in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. And if it is true that Sams is a “fake Indian” wouldn’t it be important to spark a discussion and make other people aware that her background and thus her ability to speak on behalf of Indigenous folk might be compromised? So I followed up on the “evidence” given by the commentator. One of the two given links is a dead link but under the title “Don’t Get Burned by Fake First Nations” a list of fake Indian authors is reposted on several occasions in the web that all link back to this source. This list does indeed contain the name Jamie Sams, but everyone posting and reposting the list claims they did not compile it, so a proper source of the list is not identifiable. The second source leads to an online forum with a short thread on Jamie Sams containing nine anonymous postings. A person named “Epiphany” states that Sams had two white parents and grew up in Waco/Texas. One given link is dead, the other one links to Sams’ mother’s obituary. In fact the obituary does not identify Sam’s father and contradicts the statement that Sams grew up in Waco. It states that her mother moved to Waco after she married 1969, yet Jamie Sams was born 1951. In the same forum a person named “Yells At Pretendians” states that Sams changed tribal affiliation several times (no source given) and goes on to say that “despite Sams’s changing backstory, the newage white women love her. It’s very common for hippie enclaves to have a women’s group that use her books as gospel.”

The flaw blows up: *My spoiled identity*

I had no genuine interest in finding out if Sams’ claims to her Native heritage are true or untrue, and I am not in the position to evaluate anything indigenous as I am lacking indigeneity myself and any scholarship in the area. I do not speak any indigenous languages. But this now felt personal, beyond being political. True, I had learned about Jamie Sams in a women’s group. It was neither in the context of a hippie enclave, nor was it a white women’s group, and we certainly did not use her book as gospel. It was a multiracial women’s group in Northeast Ohio reading Sams’ book together through monthly meetings over the course of one year during 2013-14. A First Nation Alaskan friend and member of the reading circle picked a (Native) name for the group, let’s call her Dee. Dee said she felt very validated through this book and our gatherings. Her mother language and her Native spirituality had been beaten out of her during Catholic school in Canada after she was ripped away from her parents living on a reservation. I did not question whether Sams is a “fake” Indian because my friend Dee embraced and thus validated Sams’ approaches. I was not completely unaware of the politics of Native identity. This was Northeast Ohio after all, and the red-faced mascot of the “Cleveland Indians” thus a much contested symbol. I had been following closely a friend’s fieldwork among the protesters of the logo, and stood in the streets of Cleveland shouting “This is not an honor!” while what seemed like a stream of thousands of yelling, drunk, white men walked by wearing feathers on their heads (see e.g. Michelle Jacobs 2014 for an

examination of this issue). From this work I also learned that there are distinct pathways to urban Indian identity—reclamation and relocation—and that accomplishing "Indianness" in personal and public realms is particularly challenging for reclaimers, however, because they lack tangible evidence (e.g., brown skin, government issued identification cards) to support their Indian identity claims. Questions of Indian identity are not easily sorted out in relation to the colonizers but also within urban Indian communities (Jacobs 2015).

More generally, there is no consensus about what "indigenusness" or "cultural authenticity" actually is, what it entails, or how to judge it. Claims for indigenous authenticity have historically been tied to nationalist, colonialist, and racist projects. "Indigenous" and "cultural authenticity" are concepts that have been, and continue to be, unstable and multiple in their meanings. They continue to shape State policies and colonial practices that regulate the everyday lives of Indigenous people and contribute to their alienation of their land and resources (Harris et al. 2013). While I was thinking through all this another email from the commentator arrived. In this last feedback the commentator forwarded an anonymous quote from another person with whom they had been in touch. It reads:²

"he was so outraged about the violence of erasure [by works like Sams, and in citing such work, which he sees as like] the Nazi schutztruppen who complete the final violence of erasing of what little there is of native lives and culture. Important to remember that Europe lacks this whole debate about first nations (put in a very generalising shorthand, there is good stuff coming out of scandinavia on sami e.g.). there is the violent romanticism about "Indians" specially that we German speakers (but interestingly also czechs) grew up with through the winnetou films - karl may - you probably never heard of him, but *hugely* popular. ask people in austria about winnetou; films were shot in Yugoslavia, so you might literally transverse this.. . all this to say, this is not an innocent error but something much more interesting..."

I had felt curiosity, interest, and maybe a little sadness and confusion until now. When I read this feedback, anger and sheer revulsion crept up. So far I had been thanking the commenter kindly for every input, but confronted with all these labels I felt violated. I have never read Karl May or seen a Winnetou movie, and I also do not believe in a homogenous entity of "we German speakers," yet there is a collective history we share. A friend who specializes in Indigenous studies tells me that they watched Winnetou films and this indeed sparked their interest in indigeneity and colonization. Being a

² Lacking a source for this anonymous quote I was unable to ask for authorization to cite it. Since the author remains anonymous and unbeknownst to me and the readers I sensed no ethical conflict using this direct quote.

(neo)Nazi or in any way promoting these beliefs is a statutory offence in Austrian criminal law ([Prohibition Act, 1947](#)). Why would someone accuse me of being one behind my back because I used a "wrong source"?

This kind of criticism is paralyzing and destructive and, quite honestly, the violent language and assumptions make me angry. As an Austrian I live with the fact that "we," my kin, were perpetrators of genocide. I remain painfully aware of my history and share a probably pretty typical ancestry for an Austrian: One set of great-grandparents migrated from the Balkans by foot to the area in order to survive and work as day laborers for farmers in Styria. They managed to buy a little house after a while and my great grandfather was picked up by Nazis and almost got shot because he wouldn't raise the flag for Hitler's birthday. I learned from my other grandfather that he was in the Hitlerjugend. He apparently enjoyed the vacation camps and the community with other youth, which his mother, a single mom who had given birth to him at 15 and was expelled by her parents, could have never afforded. I have given countless presentations on Hitler in school, I have visited several KZ's in Europe, and I have used what we call the "Nazi club"³ myself on plenty occasions. I am well aware that the Nazi club comes easier to people from non-German speaking countries, but it had just hit me for the first time. I have close friends who lost parts of their families in the Holocaust and I cry with them. I see "Identitaere," neo/right wing agitators, climbing college stages in Austria as I write this in June, 2016, protesting everything I have ever fought for. I reject that I or my behavior is comparable to the Nazis'.

Dealing with the flaw: Calling for a respectful discussion...and a reading list

Summing up, I learned that I have a lot to learn in the field of technoscience, indigeneity, and questions around politics of authenticity. So many questions were raised that I could by no means do them justice in the tight time frame given for the write up. The outcome of the workshop is manifold for me: I do owe apologies and I do have a reading list for the fall. I owe an apology because it is true that I used Jamie Sams as a singular source for a (presumed generic) indigeneity in my presentation. I did not sufficiently point out the diversity among indigenous thought and I should have substantiated the kincentric ecology I sought to compare to Haraway with more sources. I could have done my homework better. Secondly, I should discuss indigenous kincentric ecology only if I simultaneously point out the violent and problematic history and presence of land-grabbing from indigenous populations around the world. Each feminism that does not question the systematic destruction of the cultural practices of indigenous peoples remains limited and exclusionary (John 2014). Last but not least, I was not aware of any false identity claims of Jamie Sams (that I am unable to dispute and unable to confirm on the base of information available) and remain grateful for that part of the commentator's input and

3 The "Nazi Keule" is the accusation of someone as a Nazi, which usually silences the person immediately

the questions they raised. Despite all these shortcomings and flaws of my five minute presentation in the workshop, I reject the form and words that have been used to point them out to me — the assumptions about me, the anger, the negativity and the violent speech I do not take on — it is theirs.

A possibly comparable case to learn from is that of Andrea Smith, as Cleo Woelfe-Erskine kindly pointed out: Andrea Smith is an American academic, feminist, and activist against violence. In July 2015, Smith was outed as having claimed Cherokee identity without proof or acceptance by the community. In an [open letter by indigenous women scholars](#) it becomes clear that “Smith’s self-acknowledged false claims and lack of clarity on her own identity perpetuate deeply ingrained notions of race—black, white, and Indian—that run counter to indigenous modes of kinship, family, and community connection. When she and others continue to produce her as Cherokee, indigenous, and/or as a woman of color by default, they reinforce a history in which settlers have sought to appropriate every aspect of indigenous life and absolve themselves of their own complicity with continued dispossession of both indigenous territory and existence.” The letter also criticizes that Smith has often served as singular representative of indigeneity in a variety of academic and activist social justice contexts. [Erica Lee](#), a Nēhiyaw student at the University of Saskatchewan and Idle No More organizer writes in the context of Andrea Smith, “If you are 1) a reporter who has never bothered to do a story on Indigenous issues until today, 2) a white settler, 3) a white scholar of Indigenous studies, or 4) an Indigenous male scholar who has rarely/never engaged with Indigenous feminism except to crap on it, I implore you to go away and do something productive, rather than throwing tomatoes at a woman whose work has likely made more impact in the lives of Indigenous women than yours ever will.” This statement resonates with me right now also when it comes to Jamie Sams.

I stand with my friend Dee (and true to myself and other women and friends) whose life was positively impacted by Jamie Sams’ work and our collaborative exploration of queering kin: Dee has since returned to her home Canada to go to college with the goal to work with Indigenous youth in the future, a task she never thought possible before as a shift factory worker. I also stand for a commitment to a fair and respectful academic feedback culture. Anonymous chatter is not part of that for me. The Nazi club isn’t either. Along these lines I want to end with a Twitter quote from [Mouthy Michif Todd \(@Zo-eSTodd\)](#), an urban metis scholar I have encountered during the reflective journey of this write up. It is a great inspiration for life but also for dealing with academic feedback: “Speak truth. Move with love. Forgive. Move on. Be gentle. Fight for justice. Make this time matter. Love.”

Start of a Reading List...

Joseph Massad's work on the eliteism around indigenous identity and queer sexualities and ("Massad, Joseph A. *Desiring arabs*. University of Chicago Press, 2008, Massad, Joseph Andoni. "Re-orienting desire: The gay international and the Arab world." *Public culture* 14.2 (2002): 361-385.

Saba Mahmood's oeuvre, in particular "Politics of Piety" (Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press, 2011.) for thinking about questions around cultural authenticity and the vast and sticky ethico-political problems that may forever remain unresolved around these concerns.

More from: Technoscience and Indigeneity: Kim Tallbear <http://www.kimtallbear.com/about.html>.

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