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Foundational Document

NAISA Council Statement on Indigenous Identity Fraud

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NAISA Council Statement on Indigenous Identity Fraud

Approved by NAISA Council, 15 September 2015

Issues of Indigenous identity are complex. Hundreds of years of ongoing colonialism around the world have contributed to this complexity. However, such complexity does not mean that there are no ethical considerations in claiming Indigenous identity or relationships with particular Indigenous peoples. To falsely claim such belonging is Indigenous identity fraud.

As scholars of Native American and Indigenous Studies, we are expected to undertake our work with a commitment to the communities with whom we work, about whom we write, and among whom we conduct research — we are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards of our profession. Further, as scholars it is incumbent upon us to be honest about both our ancestries and our involvement with, and ties to, Indigenous communities. This is true whether we are Indigenous or non-Indigenous. In no way are we implying that one must be Indigenous in order to undertake Native American and Indigenous Studies. We are simply stating that we must be honest about our identity claims, whatever our particular positionalities. Belonging does not arise simply from individual feelings – it is not simply who you claim to be, but also who claims you. When someone articulates connections to a particular people, the measure of truth cannot simply be a person's belief but must come from relationships with Indigenous people, recognizing that there may be disagreements among Indigenous people over the legitimacy of a particular person's or group's claims. According to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues statement on Indigenous identity, the test is “Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.”¹

Being dishonest about one's identity and one's connections to Indigenous communities damages the integrity of the discipline and field of Native American and Indigenous Studies and is harmful to Indigenous peoples. If we believe in Indigenous self-determination as a value and goal, then questions of identity and integrity in its expression cannot be treated as merely a distraction from supposedly more important issues. Falsifying one's identity or relationship to particular Indigenous peoples is an act of appropriation continuous with other forms of colonial violence. The harmful effects of cultural and identity appropriation have been clearly articulated by Native American and Indigenous Studies scholars over the past four decades, and it is our responsibility to be aware of these critiques.

The issue is not one of enrollment, or blood quantum, or recognition by the state, or meeting any particular set of criteria for defining “proper” or “authentic” Indigenous identity. The issue is honesty and integrity in engaging the complexities, difficulties, and messiness of our histories (individual and collective), our relations to each other, and our connections to the people and peoples who serve as the subjects of our scholarship.

¹ United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, “Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Voices Fact Sheet, ‘Who are indigenous peoples?’” http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf. Posted 09/05/2006, accessed 12/08/2015

For these reasons, the Council of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association expresses its conviction that we are all responsible to act in an ethical fashion by standing against Indigenous identity fraud.