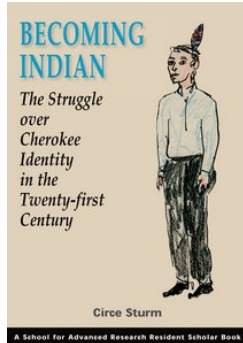


A Review of *Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*

Book Review by Suzan A. M. McVicker



*Becoming Indian:
The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*

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In *Becoming Indian*, author Circe Sturm examines Cherokee identity politics and the phenomenon of racial shifting. Racial shifters, as described by Sturm, are people who have changed their racial self-identification from non-Indian to Indian on the US Census. Many racial shifters are people who, while looking for their roots, have recently discovered their Native American ancestry. Others have family stories of an Indian great-great-grandmother or grandfather they have not been able to document. Still, others have long known they were of Native American descent, including their tribal affiliation, but only recently have become interested in reclaiming this aspect of their family history. Despite their differences, racial shifters share a conviction that they have Indian blood when asserting claims of indigeneity. *Becoming Indian* explores the social and cultural values that lie behind this phenomenon and delves into the motivations of these Americans—from so many different walks of life—to reinscribe their autobiographies and find deep personal and collective meaning in reclaiming their Indianness. Sturm points out that “becoming Indian” was not something people were quite as willing to do forty years ago—the willingness to do so now reveals much about the shifting politics of race and indigeneity in the United States.

Back cover description of *Becoming Indian*:

Twenty-first century United States Census results stoke a wildfire racial conversation that sweeps far beyond Kituwah, the ancient mother town of the Cherokee People in the Great Smoky Mountains. The Cherokee People of the Fire and their hidden descendants who passed as white are engaged in an expanding talking circle over questions of identity and belonging. Circe Sturm, an interdisciplinary anthropologist with Sicilian, German, and Mississippi Choctaw ancestry, is quick to state that she was not raised on tribal land or in tribal community. Though her readers do not know how she checked boxes indicating her race on the US Census form, she is clear about her aspiration for the book, *Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*. Sturm invested over fifteen years of research toward realization of her vision for greater political understanding about a topic that arouses a conflagration of polarized perspectives.

During the time that mobile phones shifted from elite use as yuppie devices and into a modern means to communicate across Indian Country, Sturm boldly set the field for academic and popular conversation on the history of blood quantum and the formation of national Cherokee identity in her 2002 book, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. Her 2011 sequel text, *Becoming Indian*, reads like a novel alight with research graphics. Her artistry as a scholarly writer is resonant with metaphor-rich Cherokee language (Altman and Belt 2009, 9-22). She presents insightful reflections on metaphors heard in her interviews, such as bankruptcy of a white culture that is running out of gas. Sturm's Cherokee Identity Matrix chart offers a template for looking at six continua of differences and commonalities in discerning "Cherokeeity." She documents and details what is being said and, importantly, not said in public discourses on Cherokee identity. Her goal of igniting the need for additional attention to racial shifting is met through skill in infusing life into findings from analysis of her interviews.

**Indigenous Reclamation Is a Political Act:
Clarity to Protect Rights of Sovereignty**

Sturm gives voice to the growing party involved in the talking circle about "Cherokee converts." Her book, *Becoming Indian*, may support federally recognized Cherokee tribes in responding to racial shifters. Hot-topic dangers

alongside spiritual reasons for racial shifting are lifted from the groundswell of racial “converts.” Gaining clarity regarding Cherokee bloodlines, politics, and spirituality may open consciousness of deeper identity about self-in-relationship. This expanded experience of self can be understood from systems theory as opening to the reciprocal relationship of humans with all living beings in physical, energy, and spiritual dimensions (McVicker 2014, 2). At stake in the public discourse about becoming Indian is the protection of sociopolitical boundaries, rights of sovereignty, and perpetuation of Cherokee culture and worldview. Through her own respectful listening for understanding, Sturm cultivates compassionate witness of a complex political reclamation process. Balanced sharing of the talking stick invites polarized voices to contribute perspectives for the benefit of all who consider themselves to be People of the Fire.

Encouraged by tribal authorities to scrutinize Cherokee political rights and sovereignty entitlements associated with identity and belonging, Sturm opens her book with questions designed to reevaluate ancestry and tribal belonging. Ancestry, reckoned differently even by members of the same kinship group, involves entangled viewpoints on kinship that force this conversation into a lengthy one. Kinship claims are evaluated by sifting through ideas of belonging based on blood as well as cultural knowledge. Between quoted voices, Sturm tells a well-researched backstory of complex Cherokee American history. Documentary evidence of indigeneity versus undocumentable oral history is an area the author steps into skillfully. Preservation of the value of oral knowledge calls for a delicate balance with questionable stories asserting Cherokee ancestry.

Asking Again, “Who Is Indian?”

Snap judgment still prevails in everyday encounters between citizen Cherokees and racial shifters. Accusations of cultural appropriation are spun differently depending on answers to the “Who is Indian?” question. In traditional Cherokee inclusiveness, Sturm moderates a conversation, begun in the last century, with strong boundaries to protect against any attempt to force a false sense of resolution. As if the ancestors were whispering in her ear, she invites Cherokee speakers to, in turn, listen with hospitality to the experiences of their relatives.

First, the racial shifters speak. Chapter topics follow an oratory sequence introduced with “Hidden Histories and Racial Ghosts” (Sturm 2011, 31). Cherokee-identified individuals are observed to have a need to talk about pride of

ancestry, an eagerness akin to a dam breaking—something held back for so long that pressure finally overcomes barriers. Labels like “half-breed” or “wannabe,” encountered in remapping personal racial narrative, are deconstructed with dignity in this circle and examined with scholarly curiosity for “What Lies Beneath” (Sturm 2011, 31). As intricate and confusing accounts coalesce into “White Before, Cherokee After: Racial Conversion as a Resolution of Meaning” (Sturm 2011, 73), transformational learning links with spiritual ideals. Learning that takes place in the borderlands between Indigenous and Western worldviews often necessitates grief along with illumination (Herrmann, unpublished dissertation). Talk of a larger self-in-relation emerges from burdensome stories into a new form of politics born of neighborly engagement and interrelational spirit. At this point in Sturm’s book, when racial converts highlight remedies that they see through the eyes of Cherokee soul-sense of self, the talking stick passes to citizen Cherokees.

With citizen Cherokees, as with racial shifters, Sturm picks up the term “wannabe” only after others utter it. The wannabe term, usually associated with impoverished social class and white appearance, is an everyday word in Indian Country. Federally-recognized Cherokees generally perceive wannabes as suffering from a lack of desirable identity, hailing from a bankrupt white culture. Racial shifters who stagger under the weight of poverty while lugging the name “white trash” welcome newfound Cherokeeness as a step up into higher social respect. When experienced in community spiritual practice, life as a racial convert brings richer meaning. As day-to-day circumstances brighten, even derogatory appellations that also carry the inference of being Indian are suffered with pride.

Citizen Cherokees have much to say about “‘Descendants’ and ‘Thindians’: Blood Measures and the Negotiation of Racial and Cultural Marginality” (Sturm 2011, 128). A Thindian is a Cherokee descendant whose genealogical blood appears to be too thinly stretched from tribal forebears (Sturm 2011, 227). Blood, the sacred medium connecting ancestors and descendants, mattered in Ancient Times and continues to matter in modern times. Citizen Cherokees express greater tolerance and empathy for shifters whose claims appear to have genealogical likelihood. The still-relevant historical backstory appears in the present moment. Citizens and shifters who clash over what it means to be Indigenous in Indian Country and in the United States busily exhume the issue of Indian families who long ago passed for white. Native American passing, buried and forgotten, lies as an unmarked part of the social terrain of American history. Indian destiny was portrayed as

extinction because the tribal way of life made it impossible for Indians to belong in the modern landscape. Instead, Cherokee identity went underground. Passing, one way to deal with the specter of Removal or extinction, represented an early instance of racial shifting. Then and now, passing signifies status change.

In the last pages of her book, Sturm (2011, 165-192) explores how discordant understandings of change in racial status fuel controversies around Cherokee identity claims. Maintaining her refusal to stereotype, she shows readers the possibility that a centuries-old course of assimilation may be reversing. Lumping all wannabe, Thindian, and descendants into one homogenous camp could obscure key stories shedding meaning and significance about racial shifting at this historical moment. Strengthened by ethnic renewal, American Indian political resurgence, informal social changes, and ideological openings, Cherokees whose ancestors were scattered by Removal meet each other in a form of “Racial Alchemy in the Twenty-first Century” (Sturm 2011, 183).

Embracing Opposites within the Circle

Since Ancient Times, the People of the Fire combined seemingly opposing positions to create alchemical forward movement. Instead of seeing each foot as separate, right and left feet are accepted as two parts of one body. Grounded in a worldview that embraces life as a circle and that respects interrelatedness of all positions within the circle, The People of the Fire value questions that seek opportunity in contrapositions (Garrett and Garrett 2002, 92-99). As Cherokee racial claimants and citizen Cherokees find old kinship bonds and relax rigid boundaries that severed them from each other in recent centuries, how might boundaries that protect cultural identity and political sovereignty strengthen? “Memories hold hands” despite gaps in cultural knowledge following Removal and assimilation (England-Aytes 2014, ii). Messages to future generations from individual stories and oral histories can support rejuvenation of Cherokee identity (England-Aytes 2014, 2). Sturm exhibits her strength through her ability to engage readers long enough to sit through difficult conversation.

Opportunities to listen and reflect, to readjust for ceremonial meeting common in all Cherokee communities, are spiritual reflections as well as political reflections. Whether trauma and loss befell them along the Trail of Tears, struck them by remaining with their land of origin, or afflicted them when passing for white, for Cherokees, ceremonies handed down by common forebears are inherently

understood to create a flow of potential healing that protects cultural identity. Ceremonies, the heart of Indigenous storytelling and performance, open space and embody Indigenous experience of time so that deep cultural relationships with the natural and spirit worlds can be renewed (Walker 2007, 26-31). Through singing and dancing in ceremony, the worldviews of participants are met with respect and may undergo transformation (Walker 2007, 32-36).

Long-unrecognized Indians Forced to “Play White”

Listen to twenty-first century accounts of outsiders, non-Indian Americans, at public events where they still cheer to see American Indians in Hollywood costume behaving in stereotypical ways staged by colonial dominance. With Sturm, invoke Wilma Mankiller to hear the cry of danger raised at a 1995 US Senate Committee meeting over gross misrepresentation of authentic Indian identity. “A tribe’s sovereignty, identity, and reputation are at stake.” Whole communities, domestic and international, who do not live near tribal peoples learn about Native Americans from the Internet. Disreputable identity information shines across the screen as believable. How identity is shaped and understood inside the Cherokee world by those who perpetuate Cherokee bloodlines also molds social and political recognition outside the tribes.

Issues of tribal identity and “false tribes” that are ambiguous to insiders risk stirring up confusion for non-tribal policymakers. Across the United States, Sturm maps a mounting number of state-recognized and self-identified tribes that divide Native American sovereignty into gradations. Well-meaning policymakers who want to do right by tribal peoples may have trouble discerning authentic tribes in a range of sovereignty levels. If resources are diverted to questionable tribes, rightful shares are siphoned off from legitimate tribes in the confusion. Sturm alerts readers that as census results continue to document swelling numbers of racial shifters, momentous Cherokee-specific issues will impact other tribal communities.

Sturm (2011) touches a hidden depth when she talks about homesickness for Kituwah. “Racial wistfulness” lurks in the psyche of non-whites trying to live as white (Sturm 2011, 185). As racial shifters understand what their families lost when they passed for white, they link sadness with the generations-long assimilation process. They feel the branch of the family that had been cut away. Though the exact means of the transmission of the felt sense of Cherokee experience are not fully understood, unrecognized Cherokee descendants feel gaps

in identity and belonging much like reacting to a phantom limb (Sturm 2011, 185). During social climate change of redignification (a multi-step process in which victims of violent crime reclaim control over their own historical narrative and social dignity) of Native Americans when such feelings became more acceptable, racial shifters begin to see themselves “not as whites who ‘play Indian’ but as long-unrecognized Indians who have been forced by historical circumstances to ‘play white’” (Sturm 2011, 184).

A Pivotal Moment: Reconnection or Repeated Suspicion?

The early twenty-first century is a pivotal moment in Cherokee history. During this time of language renewal and sifting for authentic Cherokeeness, official tribal policy for belonging in federally-recognized tribes could either dilute or bolster cultural empowerment if racial-shifter Cherokee descendants are welcomed. A majority of interviewed citizen Cherokees maintain that culture is acquired by osmosis in childhood. Even if shifters learn the stories, language, and worldview in adulthood, they are considered to be unable to transmute far enough from whiteness to be able to transform into full Cherokeeness.

Sturm’s (2011) own leaning toward the minority viewpoint of cultural pliability and Cherokee conversion shifts the conversation from wannabes to “could-bes.” Racial converts who are willing to engage in respectful mutuality with citizen Cherokees could claim ancestral belonging within the tribe (Sturm 2011, 143). No room exists, however, for misrepresentation or appropriation of Cherokee identity. Neither is there room for entitled attitudes, no matter how understandable these reactions might be to past rejections from citizen Cherokees. Attitudes of citizen Cherokees toward descendants with thin blood claims must also soften into respect and appreciation for historical reasons that some families rejected US Government blood quantum policies. For some, the original intention behind refusal to enroll was to protect the next generations from further losses through dealings with US federal, state, and local authorities (Sturm 2011, 175). Maturing self-in-relationship calls for connections built with compassion, curiosity, calmness, and creativity (McVicker 2014, 4-7). If more citizen Cherokees adopt an understanding that cultural learning in adulthood may be transformational, and, if “entities using the Cherokee name” establish collaborative relations with federally-recognized tribes—two sizeable “ifs”—meaningful ties may take root. A great number of people with Cherokee ancestry might eventually be rewoven into the distinctive patterns of their tribe of origin (Sturm 2011, 145).

Sturm is both master storyteller and researcher. In the Cherokee old way, an artist and her finished work can be described together as one entity (Smith, Strickland, and Smith 2010, 20). The author together with *Becoming Indian* might be called “empowering Cherokee knowings.” *Becoming Indian* is a gift both from and to the People of the Fire; the book is for anyone who recognizes that the struggle over contemporary Cherokee identity is about social justice, individual and collective healing, and the development of a balanced and harmonious self-in-relationship. Sturm’s compassion, clear historical contextualization, and creative weave of connecting identity with politics voice cutting-edge emergent questions. Tribal sovereignty and Cherokee cultural persistence depend on kinship connections born of appreciation for how each blood relative arrived at Cherokeeity. The conversation in Sturm’s book is a pivotal one intended to continue at Cherokee kitchen tables, in classrooms, in chambers where policymakers meet, through cousin-to-cousin video calls, among philosophers, in coffee shops, and by texting in the Cherokee syllabary on iPhones.



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