

## DRAFT: Do Not Share

**Subject:** Dr. Leila K. Blackbird

**Title:** Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History at Brown University

**Determination:** American Indian claims are neither substantiated nor transparent

**Recommendation:** Leila Blackbird cease claiming to be American Indian, and that she publicly disavow her use of language that implies genealogical or community connection with any American Indian people.

**Date:**

### Executive Summary:

Despite Dr. Blackbird's public assertions of Indigenous positionality, TAAF's investigation concludes that her claims are neither substantiated nor transparent. Her claims fall short in terms of intellectual and ethical integrity. Over her career, Dr. Blackbird's self-identification has shifted repeatedly, claiming descent and status as an "unenrolled adoptee," notably of Cherokee and Apache heritage. Moreover, Blackbird alleges a constantly shifting number of putative ancestors without evidence that they are indeed Native or that she in fact descends from any of them. Although Dr. Blackbird is a trained historian, she has failed to provide primary documentation and basic genealogical information to verify her claims. Contrary to Dr. Blackbird's claims that she does not accept opportunities meant for enrolled tribal members, she has leveraged her unsubstantiated Indigenous positionality for professional gain, including fellowships, speaking engagements, and academic status. We recommend that she immediately cease identifying as American Indian and publicly disavow any language implying a genealogical or community connection to Indigenous peoples.

### Introduction:

Leila K. Blackbird (aka Leila Blackbird/Leila Garces/Leila McRaven/Lisa-Marie Ricca/Lisa-Marie L Garces Ricca) is a "sociological scholar, critical digital humanist, and postcolonial theorist" whose "research focuses on slavery, genocide, and state violence." She received her doctorate in History from the University of Chicago in 2025. Her dissertation, titled "Embodied Violence: Settler Colonialism and Slavery on America's Third Coast," explored the "relationship between divergent colonialisms and the enslavement of Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous peoples in the Gulf South across French, Spanish, and Anglo-American regimes." She is currently the Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History at Brown University and is an increasingly prominent representative of Indigenous perspectives in academic and community spaces.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://history.brown.edu/people/leila-k-blackbird>

On her personal web page, Blackbird includes a “positionality statement.”<sup>2</sup> In this statement, she asserts that “transparency...is part of the ethical framework that governs how we should engage with Black and Indigenous knowledges, stories, and communities.” She adds that “understanding your positionality is not optional” and that in “Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS), there is a further obligation to articulate oneself in relation to Indigenous communities, lands, and sovereignties, as well as to the responsibilities that emerge from those relations.”<sup>3</sup>

TAAF substantively agrees with her motivation to include a positionality statement with her public research profile. In particular, we support her assertions that scholarship is informed by a person's positionality, and that scholars need to be frank, forthcoming, and transparent in making these statements, especially those scholars who employ American Indian identity claims as part of their professional expertise and without a legitimate Tribal authority supporting those claims. We recognize that people's understanding of their family histories can sometimes change over time as more reliable information comes to light, but we also understand that firm statements of American Indian belonging based only on unverified and unverifiable family stories is an inadequate foundation for claims of experiential knowledge that informs professional expertise. We also believe that because positionality is a critical dimension of scholarship, statements such as these must be critically engaged and confirmable for them to have any legitimacy whatsoever.

For reasons detailed below, we do not believe that Leila Blackbird has lived up to the standards that she herself claims are vital elements of positionality statements or professional expectations in the disciplines she claims to have training and expertise. While others might interrogate her claims to “Louisiana Creole” descent and gestures to distant African American heritage given similar evidentiary concerns to those outlined below, our focus here is specifically her allegations that she writes from an Indigenous, American Indian, and especially a Cherokee and Apache positionality. This is the key issue in her case, and the one she seems determined to shield from legitimate verification and accountability.

#### Lack of Transparency in Genealogical Claims:

Blackbird's claims to being American Indian have repeatedly shifted. Yet they are very clear, and all the information in this research report was sourced through and tested against the available record, including her own published work, interviews, and commentaries, confirmed Tribal rolls and censuses, academic databases, online interviews, public legal, and government records, and other relevant documents in which she and her work have been featured. All of this material is in the public domain, much of it posted by Blackbird herself. On her website, Blackbird claims that she had “verifiable family ties,” and that she would be “happy to provide specific details—like

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Leila Blackbird's personal website: [leilablackbird.com](http://leilablackbird.com). TAAF accessed and copied this site on Feb 5, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Blackbird does not consistently identify as an NAIS scholar nor does she seem to be familiar with established research and positionality practices in the field; this seems to be a more recent development in her work, which has largely been focused on early American history in Louisiana and the Gulf South.

family surnames [sic], photocopies of primary sources, and enrollment information—to Cherokee scholars or representatives of Cherokee tribal organizations who contact me.” TAAF reached out to her expecting that this offer was sincere and that Blackbird would make this information available. Blackbird did not respond to TAAF’s request to review this information and has in fact edited her website to revise this invitation and further obfuscate her genealogical claims.

Early in her academic career Blackbird identified herself as [“an adoptee of Mescalero Apache and Eastern Cherokee descent.”](#) In an edited volume published in 2022, she identified herself as “Apache/Cherokee.”<sup>4</sup> In 2024, her identification shifted to [“Louisiana Creole, unenrolled adoptee of Apache-Cherokee descent.”](#) and presumably later that year, and in 2025, she identified more loosely as [“mixed settler, Louisiana Creole, and Indigenous descent”](#). In her dissertation, she alleges that her “biological mother is of mixed Afro-Indigenous-European descent, a Louisiana Creole, with Lipan, Mescalero, and Cherokee ancestry.”<sup>5</sup> Her current website lists at least nine different Cherokee family lines (many after TAAF requested further information but with no further clarity or context), adds Jicarilla to the Mescalero and Lipan Apache groups previously claimed, and alleges distant Nanatsoho/Nasoni Caddo heritage.<sup>6</sup> She has also vaguely claimed affinity kinship if not biological relations to the federally recognized Tunica-Biloxi Tribe as well as regional Native heritage associations and state-recognized groups such as the Atakapa-Ishak Nation of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas, the United Houma Nation, the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb, the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe, the Bayou Lafourche Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha, and the Bvlbancha Intertribal Collective, mostly through activist and research circles. The cumulative effect of these claims is to reinforce uninformed public perception of her alleged Indigenous identity by data-dumping a list of nearly a dozen different Tribes through fuzzy claims of kinship to unconfirmed and unverified lineal, lateral, and in-law relations.

Blackbird has repeatedly discussed her claims on her personal website with fluctuating degrees of detail and inconsistent Tribal specifics. This appears to be strategic rather than incidental. Because the content of this website is fully under her control, we can safely assume that it contains the most recent and complete discussion of her identity claims. On this website she says that she is not enrolled in any of the three Cherokee Tribes. Nor has she ever claimed to be an enrolled member of these Tribes. She acknowledges that she cannot “meet the burden of documentary proof required for enrollment” into any of these Tribes. On these points we are in complete agreement. However, she tries to have it both ways by admitting that she’s not a citizen but arguing that she’s a legitimate descendant without any evidence provided to confirm that claim. Not only is that illogical, it is unethical. You either support Cherokee sovereignty over who belongs to the Tribe or you do not, and slippery rhetorical moves to claim one thing and do another do not demonstrate ethical relations or accountable research methods. It is worth noting that the Eastern Band that she most consistently claims connection to is the one Cherokee Tribe

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<sup>4</sup> “Prud’homme-Cranford, Rain, Barthé, Darryl, and Jolivéte, Andrew J., eds. *Louisiana Creole Peoplehood: Afro-Indigeneity and Community*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. Contributors. Accessed February 19, 2026. ProQuest Ebook Central..

<sup>5</sup> Blackbird, Leila K. “Embodied Violence: Slavery and Settler Colonialism on America’s Third Coast.” University of Chicago, 2025. Page 22, note 43. <https://doi.org/10.6082/UCHICAGO.15862..>

<sup>6</sup> [leilablackbird.com](http://leilablackbird.com), “Indigenous Ancestry of Note,” accessed and archived February 26, 2026.

with a formal descendant status, yet there is no evidence that she has met the standards for that status or that she is even aware of it or how it functions.

Despite admitting that she lacks *any* status whatsoever with any of any of the three Cherokee Tribes or any verifiable relationships with actual Cherokee people, she contends that her past Cherokee claims that she is “‘unenrolled adoptee’ and a descendent” are “correct.” This claim relies entirely on her own personal assertion. She claims that she has family ties that can be verified through “family surnames [sic], photocopies of primary sources, and enrollment information,” but she provides none of the relevant sources or enrollment information nor evidence that the cited surnames are in fact *Cherokee* families with those surnames. Moreover, she provides no evidence that these individuals are, in fact, related to her. As many verifiable Cherokee families share English-language surnames with non-Native families, the basic fact of a similar surname is *not* evidence of kinship, and certainly not without substantial additional evidence linking the two. In addition, from all of the available evidence, the surname she uses for professional purposes—“Blackbird”—is itself a chosen name and not a *family* name at all. In this case her name has no American Indian association of any kind, but it is nevertheless likely used by her to provide others with the mistaken impression that she is in fact American Indian.

Blackbird makes these assertions in ways that lead the uninformed general reader to assume that these supposed but unavailable documents prove her connection with one or more of the three Cherokee Tribes. By publicly stating a willingness to share these documents with Cherokees and Cherokee Tribal organizations, a willingness we found to be disingenuous, she demands ongoing Cherokee labor to elicit this documentation rather than provide it proactively, openly, and honestly. Cherokees and other tribal people whom she claims as “relatives” should not have to request evidence of relations—these are *her* public claims, and given the clear absence of any legitimate Cherokee or Apache Tribal government recognizing the validity of these claims, it is *her* responsibility to be forthcoming and to do so *without conditions*. As Blackbird makes these public identity claims to affirm her relatedness in non-Cherokee-specific professional contexts, we wonder why she has not also agreed to share such documents more publicly. She occasionally alleges that she keeps this information private to “protect” family,<sup>7</sup> but has failed to clarify how obscuring her alleged Native relations would actually be protective of her family, especially given how extensively she discusses family members in her work, often in troubling and objectifying ways. Rather, we suspect that this virtue signalling shields her own increasingly unsustainable claims from scrutiny by the very family members she publicly represents (and without extending the same care for consent to those she writes about that she demands for herself).

Further, we find it telling that, with a Ph.D. in History and training in historical documentation and analysis, she chose not to post reliable primary documents verifying her claims on her website . Instead, she has uploaded screenshots from random [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) family trees with her purported ancestors, as well as a 2005 certified genealogy report produced *for someone else*

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<sup>7</sup> Blackbird, Leila (@ProfBlackbird). 2022. “It has been brought to my attention...” X, December 7, 2022. This strategy is evocative of the aggressive tactics pretendian [Buffy Sainte-Marie](#) used to prevent family members from sharing the true facts of her birth and upbringing with the public.

*entirely*, with no evidence that this was posted with that person’s knowledge or consent. **It is notable that she does not describe how or if she is actually related to these people, including the person whose genealogy report she posts.** As [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is an open genealogy site that does not vet public trees for accuracy, random screenshots from otherwise anonymous sites without attribution or verification fail to meet any baseline of scholarly practice of reputable trained historians. Nor do they meet the baseline genealogical proof standard among respected professional genealogists. Blackbird has also consistently refused to disclose the name of her birth mother, who, she claims, provides her undeniable genealogical connection to at least one of the Cherokee Tribes and at least one Apache Tribe. In short, her claims to being an “unenrolled-adoptee’ and descendant” are not only *not* transparent, they are intentionally opaque and thus fully unverifiable by the very people she claims to be related to. Yet because she asserts these relations as substantive facts that inform her professional profile, she’s explicitly shifted these from private familial claims to public statements of professional expertise, which by implication should be subject to some form of outside verification in the absence of Tribal recognition. Again, she cannot have it both ways: she cannot claim public benefits on otherwise private information, especially when making a claim that necessitates community review and affirmation. If the claimed communities are actively and repeatedly refused the opportunity to confirm the details of the claimed relationship, then this is not an ethical practice of relationality but an act of willful disregard for any recognizable form of respectful reciprocity or Tribal sovereignty. It is also disrespectful to the very people she claims as “kin.” If your supposed family members are refused the right to understand how you are related, how can you claim to be a good relative?

#### Lack of Transparency in Claims of Community Connection:

Blackbird implies that in the past she had “community or living enrolled family members in Tennessee or North Carolina” but that she has never had “community” relationships in Oklahoma. Her language is notably not specific, but the implication is that she had family members who were enrolled members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI).<sup>8</sup> In her 2025 dissertation Blackbird claims to “maintain community” with “the Band of Eastern Cherokee [sic].”<sup>9</sup> Yet by 2026 she claims that these community connections no longer exist. According to her website, she no longer has active relationships with any members of any of the three Cherokee Tribes, and any of her relatives whom she claims were members of the EBCI are no longer alive. Yet without providing any evidence, Blackbird alleges that her genealogical connections to the the three Cherokee Tribes are close, although the degree of alleged closeness varies in her public statements. She claims, without providing any names, that she “has relatives” on the Dawes, Baker, and Old Settlers rolls; after TAAF reached out for clarification, she posted more alleged Cherokee surnames on her website, but once again, with no evidence that these are Cherokees or her actual relatives. Suddenly producing a whole new set of unverified family lines as somehow corroborating already unproven and unverifiable heritage claims only compounds the many problems in this case, indicating that she is wholly

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<sup>8</sup> As scholars actually trained in NAIS understand, merely gesturing to regions where Cherokees have lived historically and today is not adequate foundation for making such claims.

<sup>9</sup> “Embodied Violence.” Page 22, note 43.

reliant on suspect, even specious amateur genealogy and is entirely motivated by confirmation bias rather than meeting any responsible standard of professional genealogical research that assesses actual evidence. Again, basic historical research methods and genealogical proof standards would necessitate showing confirmable evidence that the names she cites on Tribal rolls and other documents are indeed of her direct relatives, and she has not even met this low bar for such verification. In her earlier website post, she claims that her stepfather was enrolled in the “Eastern Cherokee Band [sic]”<sup>10</sup> but now asserts that “at least one of my grandparents was enrolled.” Which is it: stepfather or grandparents? Both? Who are they?

If one of Blackbird’s grandparents was actually enrolled she might meet the threshold for citizenship or descendant status, but she gives no indication that she does. She also implies that she is not eligible for enrollment because she “would not meet the burden of documentary proof required for enrollment *due to my status as an adoptee* [emphasis added].” Statements such as this leave readers to assume that, if not for the fact that she was adopted, she would be eligible for enrollment or descendant status in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Blackbird provides no evidence to support this statement. She leans heavily on stepfamily, in-law, and lateral family relations throughout her genealogy and a lengthy list of uncontextualized family names. But even if there was evidence of Indigenous relations among these people, they would *not* be clear evidence for Indigenous identification, any more than having a Spanish or Irish stepparent would make her Spanish or Irish. Nor would being married to a Navajo make her Diné. There are numerous such conflation in her self-identification across her work. Consistently, they function only to prop up her shaky claims to Native identity, not to actually give confidence that she is indeed in meaningful relationships with all these people and with all these communities.

Further, the allegation that her adoption closed the door on her own enrollability is either intentionally false or betrays a worrying lack of understanding of how Tribes approach the issue of adoption in citizenship. All three federally recognized Cherokee Tribes have enrollment processes that accommodate for adoptees with legitimate ties. Louisiana law is also clear: [adoptees can access their original birth certificate at age 24](#). Contrary to her statements, original birth certificates in that state are sealed along with relevant court orders—they are NOT destroyed as she claims.<sup>11</sup> According to Blackbird, the Catholic agency that managed her adoption did not maintain her original birth certificate. Yet there is no evidence that the *state* destroyed the original, as she claims, nor that the adoption agency had the original rather than the legally revised copy. Destruction rather than sealing of the original birth certificate would have been unheard-of practice at the time, one of many “coincidences” she claims as reasons she that she cannot be transparent about her heritage claims. Other than her own statement, does she have any evidence confirming that her original birth certificate was destroyed? Given Louisiana adoption laws since at least 1977, the destruction of an original birth certificate would have been highly irregular and indeed criminal; that no such criminal case has been pursued by her or other adoptees in spite of what she implies was standard practice, we are left to wonder why she would present this claim if not to discourage questions that ask for more clarity. This

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<sup>10</sup> “Embodied Violence.” Page 22, note 43.

<sup>11</sup> Blackbird, Leila (@ProfBlackbird). 2022. “It has been brought to my attention...” X, December 7, 2022.

claim that her original birth certificate was destroyed is remarkably similar to claims made by pretorian, [Buffy Sainte-Marie](#). Finally, Blackbird was born in 1981, almost three years after Congress passed the [Indian Child Welfare Act](#). According to Federal law, if she were eligible for EBCI enrollment all aspects of her adoption would have been controlled by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the EBCI has been notably vigilant about Indian child welfare matters.

#### Summary Assessment of Blackbird's Claims:

TAAF does not believe that Blackbird is identifying in a way that is recognizably Cherokee, Apache, or otherwise American Indian, that supports Tribal sovereignty, that has intellectual or ethical integrity, or that is transparent for the following reasons:

- She does not identify her American Indian genealogical connections according to language prescribed by any of the three Cherokee Tribes or any federally recognized Apache Tribe. Instead, she privileges language “originating from Native-led activist spaces.” Thus, by doing so she directly undermines the sovereign authority of Tribes to define their citizenry and determine who is and is not Cherokee, Apache, or otherwise.
- She claims to “stand with the [Cherokee Scholars] collective and affirm that being Cherokee is a political identity, not an ethnicity established through self-identification. Falsely claiming enrollment or political affiliation is a violation of both tribal sovereignty and professional ethics.” We agree with this principle. But in that statement, she leaves herself wiggle room that Cherokee Tribes and the [Cherokee Scholars](#) group do not assert and in fact consistently challenge: it is not simply “claiming enrollment or political affiliation” that is “a violation of Tribal sovereignty and professional ethics.” It is unsubstantiated public claims to kinship and relations. One cannot “stand with the collective” in affirming sovereignty with any integrity while still making substantive personal and professional claims to Cherokee and other Native relations that cannot in any way be confirmed or verified. She either recognizes Cherokee authority in this matter or she does not. If she does not, she should be transparent about where she stands. If she does, she should cease making unverified claims.
- She draws extensive attention to non-blood kin (for example, her stepfather and other married-in family members) to legitimize her otherwise biological claim to Cherokee connection and descent. Non-blood kin, however close, are irrelevant for Cherokee citizenship or affiliation claims. This conflating of different forms of kinship to functionally claim Indigeneity-by-proximity is both ethically compromised and intellectually unsound.
- Blackbird has repeatedly refused to identify her mother—the line through which she insists she is Native—citing unspecified trauma as an adoptee as the reason she cannot be transparent about her maternal claims. Despite publicly stating her willingness to share this information, she ignored TAAF's respectful request to review her genealogical records. Further, TAAF was willing to respect the confidentiality of this information. By her own account, Blackbird's biological

father was white.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, her contention that she “would not meet the burden of documentary proof required for enrollment *due to my status as an adoptee*” rests, almost entirely, on the verifiable relations and (in case of EBCI and Apache Tribes) the blood quantum of her mother. She claims that she reconnected with her kin and thus knows the name of her mother. If she wishes to be fully transparent she needs to identify her mother’s name for confirmation purposes and not demand labor of Cherokees and other Native people to solicit that basic information. If there is indeed a defensible reason for that information to remain private, there are other ways to ensure that verification of claims can still proceed under reasonable conditions of confidentiality. We find it extremely problematic that she does not claim that her mother was enrolled in any of the Tribes she claims. If her mother was not enrolled, it is extremely unlikely that Blackbird herself would be eligible for enrollment under any circumstances, in which case her claim of adoption as the sole barrier to citizenship would be entirely inaccurate and baseless. As all of Blackbird’s Native claims come through her biological mother’s line, the deliberate withholding of this basic information, despite publicly stating that she would do so, makes it impossible for Tribes and those Tribal members she claims as relatives to confirm their relations with her. The only reasonable rationale for that refusal is to hide the fact that she does not, in fact, have legitimate American Indian heritage and is not Cherokee or Apache as she has long claimed, no matter how many new family names and new tribal affiliations she adds to the ever-growing and still firmly unverified list

- In her narrative, she makes claims that we consider bright red flags. The first is that in her dissertation she refers to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians as “the Band of Eastern Cherokee.” It is hard to imagine a person who claims connection with and knowledge of the EBCI making this mistake. The second is that she changed her name to Blackbird. While “Blackbird” sounds like a stereotypic Cherokee name, to our knowledge there are no members of the EBCI who have this family name. There are Cherokees in Oklahoma with this surname, but there is zero evidence that she has any relationship to these families.
- She claims that she “does not accept scholarships, appointments, grants, fellowships, speaking engagements, or publishing requests that are meant for enrolled members or citizens of federally or state recognized tribes.” However, if she discloses her “positionality to committees, employers, agents, and others” such that she claims to be a Cherokee “unenrolled adopted” or descendent of Cherokees or other Native people, she is leveraging these unsubstantiated claims for economic benefit and to the detriment of actual citizens of the three Cherokee Tribes and other communities. For plausible deniability to function, it must actually be plausible, and in this case the argument that her Native heritage claims have not benefited her fail that test.
- She has also identified as a Two-Spirit person<sup>13</sup> by virtue of her various unsubstantiated claims to Cherokees, and Mescalero, Lipan, and most recently

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<sup>12</sup> Blackbird, Leila (@ProfBlackbird). 2022. “It has been brought to my attention...” X, December 7, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> *Louisiana Creole Peoplehood*. Contributors.

Jicarilla Apaches, not to mention diverse Native-by-proximity relationships. As Two-Spirit is an identity exclusively belonging to actual Indigenous LGBTQA+ people, this is an appropriation of the term, as well as the identity.<sup>14</sup> Pretendians abound in Two-Spirit academic circles and have done extensive harm through such vague and unverifiable claims, using them to infiltrate Two-Spirit activist and research community spaces and professional and personal relationships for personal benefit.<sup>15</sup> Blackbird's status as a member of the LGBTQA+ community is separate from identifying as Two-Spirit, and without verifiable Native heritage, her hijacking of this identity is an additional act of violence against some of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

- She claims to be “in community with” a range of Indigenous people and groups, as well as other communities, but never clarifies what “community” means in these contexts. She has used these claims to conflate research partnerships with community affiliation. That conflation not only misrepresents the nature of those relationships, it obscures problematic power dynamics and the potential for misuse of research findings. Moreover, it continues a long tradition of false community claims in academia, which are one of the most offensive characteristics of colonial scholarship.
- It is evident in both her written work and in the supplemental record that Blackbird's family has experienced various forms of family trauma, and we recognize the intergenerational impacts of such events, especially the disruptions of adoption that Blackbird has repeatedly chronicled. We are not unsympathetic to that history or those experiences. But such traumas are not exclusive to Native people, and there is no evidence that her family's painful experiences are *a result of them being Native and subject to anti-Native prejudice*. White people also experience family trauma, white people also struggle in the child welfare system, and white people also suffer from violence in the criminal justice system, especially those in lower socioeconomic conditions. The conflation of her family's suffering with a claimed Native heritage is deeply troubling, as if trauma is a uniquely Native experience: she suffered as a child, ergo, she's American Indian. We can sympathize with her family's pain without accepting her unverifiable claim that her family's pain is *Native*. Indeed, instrumentalizing that trauma to make unverified and unverifiable claims on American Indian people is an act of violence in itself and one that reinforces toxic stereotypes about American Indian brokenness and dysfunction. Claims of unique trauma are increasingly used in many false heritage cases to shield the speaker from scrutiny, but personal trauma cannot be a tool used to consistently avoid transparency and accountability. Many people experience harrowing trauma and are nevertheless honest about who they are and whom they are related to; healthy boundaries and honest conversations can go hand in hand.
- To accept Blackbird's American Indian claims as truthful, we would have to accept the following unlikely set of coincidences:

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<sup>14</sup> Not all LGBTQA+queer Indigenous people use this term for themselves.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/remove-professor-qwo-li-driskill-from-oregon-state-university-faculty>

- that her family history is so uniquely traumatic that key confirming details cannot be named for accountability without deep psychological and emotional injury, yet these things are somehow also not so harmful that she cannot repeatedly cite that same trauma for professional opportunities and financial gain;
- that she has multiple kinship communities and dozens of kin relationships in which she is in active relationships of accountability, but cannot provide a single verifiable example of a legitimate Cherokee or Apache Tribe that recognizes her claims of descent to ensure the claimed accountability she has long leveraged as part of her professional profile;
- that she has multiple Cherokee and Apache ancestors that she regularly invokes in public presentations and print but cannot freely disclose even one verifiable name for confirmation, even to those who are citizens of said Tribes who might even be potential relatives;
- that she knows without a doubt that her birth records alone of all the thousands of adoptees in Louisiana of her generation were illegally destroyed and yet no criminal case has been pursued, no media attention brought to the matter, and no adoptee advocacy group has addressed such a case or even such an accusation, not even anonymously; and
- that she has never once used any of these constantly shifting claims to position herself as a qualified fellowship and job candidate in her field, to smooth access to community relationships for research purposes, or to assert an unquestionable authority in various academic spaces.

For these things to all be true and this many coincidences to be aligning to her clear benefit, she would be incredibly unique among academics in the world. As the available evidence firmly indicates that this is not the case, we suggest that these claims have no factual basis and should be abandoned. We also suggest that Blackbird undertake a process of reparation to the Cherokees, Apaches, and other American Indian peoples that she has falsely claimed to represent through these unverifiable descendancy claims.

**TAAF therefore respectfully requests that Leila Blackbird cease claiming to be a Cherokee, Apache, or otherwise American Indian “‘unenrolled-adoptee,’ and descendant” and that she cease using any language that suggests that she had any connection whatsoever to an American Indian identity. We further request that Leila Blackbird publicly and transparently clarify that she has disavowed her previous and current use of this language that implied genealogical or community connection with Cherokee, Apache, and other federally recognized American Indian people.**

### TAAF Invitation to Blackbird to Clarify her Claims:

**This file remains open.** Should Blackbird or others provide confirmable details on the key point of concern here—namely her maternal claims to Cherokee and Apache heritage, claims she has repeatedly offered to clarify—we will revisit this report.

We would be remiss to not address a significant development in this case after TAAF reached out to Blackbird for more information about her mother's lineage, a request we made in direct response to her public offer to share those very details: "I have verifiable family ties, and I am happy to provide specific details—like family surnames [sic], photocopies of primary sources, and enrollment information—to Cherokee scholars or representatives of Cherokee tribal organizations who contact me." Not only did she not respond to the request **that she herself had invited**, she edited that section on her website to instead read: "I have verifiable family ties, and I have made specific details—like family surnames [sic], copies of primary sources, and enrollment information—publicly available here. I am willing to discuss my unique situation and commitments with other enrolled scholars or representatives of legitimate tribal organizations who contact me confidentially, respecting the privacy of my living relations due to the complexities involved with forced child removal."

Blackbird keeps moving the goalposts on transparency, and we must continue to ask: why? What possible motivation could she have to not answer the very simple question: who is your Cherokee and Apache family? How does sharing this information compromise the experiences of adoptees more broadly? Again, the "surnames [sic], primary documents, and enrollment information" she provides do not demonstrate that these are actually *her* relatives—they simply show people she *claims* are relatives without evidence. This fails to meet even a baseline standard of verifiable evidence for either genealogists or historians. As no legitimate Tribe has affirmed her connection or assessed her genealogical claims, it is *her* obligation to be transparent about how she is related to American Indian people. If she cannot or will not do so, she should cease making these claims. It is not up to Tribal Nations or their citizens to take on this work.

Rather than offering verifiable information of actual Native ancestors as she offered to do before TAAF took her up on her invitation, Blackbird has instead revised the invitation and added a "Letters of Support" section to her website. One such letter is by academic Andrew Jolivéte, who works on Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous issues in the Gulf South. We will not address his bad-faith critiques of TAAF or its whistleblower-protection processes here, nor his recent foray into armchair genealogy in defense of admitted non-Natives like Thomas King. One aspect of his letter, however, bears mentioning. He repeatedly affirms Blackbird's status as a relative, stating that "I/we stand in community and kinship with Dr. Blackbird and if anyone is to ascertain their belonging in our community it will be our network and tribal nations and communities," and notes that no outside group is qualified to "determine, Dr. Blackbird's ancestry or that of any other Native person with ties to Louisiana or to precolonial Louisiana/New France and New

Spain” and that TAAF has “no business interfering in our affairs”.<sup>16</sup> Leaving aside Dr. Jolivéte’s long- and very well-documented hostility toward federally recognized Tribes and Tribal sovereignty, his own lack of research expertise in Cherokee, Five Tribes, or Apache genealogies and records, his documented public advocacy for known pretendians like [Andrea Smith](#), and his admitted affiliation with a claimant group that even the Louisiana government does not acknowledge in its state recognition policies, we observe that *nowhere* does he address Blackbird’s central Indigenous claim of *Cherokee* and *Apache* heritage. Instead, he fully pivots away from those fundamental claims, arguing that Blackbird has “family connections to several of our communities from the unceded Natchitoches, Opelousa, and Bvlbancha territories” and is “recognized among us and other tribes across the state as kin.” Never once does he confirm or uphold her foundational Cherokee and Apache claims; if anything, he seems to intentionally avoid those claims entirely. Indeed, in another section of her site, Blackbird herself is clear about how she understands herself being related to these groups: “I am a member of the Bvlbancha Intertribal Collective and have family, including immediate family members and cousins from different ancestral lines, who are enrolled in the Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb, the Lipan Apache Tribe, the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana, and the Atakapa-Ishak Nation of Southwest Louisiana and Eastern Texas.” She does not claim descent but lateral relations. While this too may or may not be true, it is irrelevant to the question of whether the key kinship she has claimed is legitimate. That is the question here, and it goes unanswered.

The key problem remains: having family members “from different ancestral lines” who claim to be Native does not mean *she* is Native; she does not say these are her lineal relatives. Given Blackbird’s practice of claiming stepfamily and in-laws as direct lineal kin, even if such people are related to her, this does not make her Native, any more than having a much-loved family member from Iceland would make her culturally, experientially, or professionally Icelandic. If Professor Jolivéte and his Louisiana groups consider Blackbird to be “kin” in whatever way they understand that, it is their prerogative to do so, but federally recognized American Indian people are under no obligation to accept her unverified and unverifiable claims as legitimate or ethically defensible. Such personal endorsements still do not make her legitimately Cherokee or Apache. Nor do they address the inconvenient fact that, to date, her core Indigenous claims have rested almost entirely on those two unverified lineages from a parent whose Tribal connections she refuses to confirm; it does not rest on those of other Louisiana groups who are or believe themselves to be Native.

The troubling implication here and throughout her public profile is that Blackbird and her supporters see all Native people as basically interchangeable. This is apparent in how she conflates Cherokee and Apache communities. This construes all American Indians and Indigenous peoples as fundamentally the same and that specific histories and relations are irrelevant for making personal claims. Blackbird’s approach is to toss enough surnames and Tribes at the wall until one sticks and makes her pre-existing claim sound plausible. This is not Native American kinship: this is ethnicity fabrication and wish-fulfillment fantasy.

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<sup>16</sup> [leilablackbird.com](#), “Letters of Support: Andrew Jolivéte,” February 12, 2026; accessed and archived February 26, 2026.

Tribes have careful citizenship/membership verification processes that protect communities from non-Natives making fraudulent claims; these are the processes that TAAF prioritizes, not self-Indigenizing storytelling with no basis in evidence or fact. In the absence of a relevant Tribal authority confirming citizenship or legitimate descendancy, the burden of proof and testable evidence is *entirely* on the person making the claims. And even in the best of circumstances this non-Tribally verified evidence is inherently problematic. Blackbird has not met or even approached that burden of proof for any legitimate Cherokee or Apache Tribe. Her American Indian claims rest *entirely* on her repeated statements that she is a direct Cherokee and Apache descendant. Any lateral connections to Louisiana groups she and others now allege are irrelevant to the core American Indian claims she has used to build her professional profile for the better part of a decade.

If, as she claims, Blackbird is truly committed to honest and accountable relations with Native American people, there is still an opportunity to turn this around and be a genuine ally to Native people. TAAF is not interested in challenging the work of honest allies or of people with verifiable American Indian heritage. Blackbird does not need vague statements about Native kinship to do good work; her work will be better and have more of an impact if she is honest about her relationship to people she has long wrongly claimed as kin. She is the one making the claims. She is the one who must verify them. Trustworthiness and transparency in self-identification cases are essential to doing the work she claims to want to do, but refusing to clarify her key heritage connections while providing dramatic data dumps and long lists of supposed Native relatives without context are the opposite of transparency and accountability.

#### Call for Institutional Accountability:

Further, the entire Brown University community needs to redress this situation. Among other things, Brown University needs to institute policies that require scholars who claim or imply that their scholarship is informed by an American Indian or Indigenous positionality to produce documentation that they are enrolled citizens of legitimate Indigenous nations, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere. These policies will protect the scholarly community from academic misrepresentation of fact. We find it extremely alarming that Brown University would offer a fellowship to Lelia Blackbird so soon after former Brown University professor [Elizabeth Hoover](#) was very publicly exposed to have no American Indian ancestry. By taking no action, Brown University can expect to continue to enable pretendians who inflict harm and trauma on actual Native people (especially Native students), and undermine the academic mission of the university.

Falsely claiming an American Indian identity is anti-Indian hate speech.