

Report

Subject: Dr. Circe Sturm

Title: Professor, University of Texas-Austin Department of Anthropology

Indigenous Identities falsely claimed: “Mississippi Choctaw descendant” and “Cherokee ancestry”

Determination: Zero American Indian ancestry

Date: February 2025

For many years, actual American Indians have seen proverbial red flags in Dr. Circe Sturm’s presentations of herself as being a Mississippi Choctaw descendant and a person of Cherokee ancestry. Eventually these American Indians reached out to TAAF for assistance in conducting genealogical research to either confirm or refute Sturm’s claims. In TAAF’s role as a watchdog group that serves American Indians and American Indian Tribes by defending our American Indian people against the theft of our American Indian identities, TAAF researched Sturm’s genealogy. TAAF’s lead genealogist, who is a member of both the Mississippi Historical Society and the Oklahoma Historical Society, led TAAF’s investigation of this case with their team of genealogists. This team researched, reviewed, and evaluated almost 900 of Sturm’s relatives and meticulously consulted numerous rolls and records, both tribal and non-tribal. The team used multiple search databases, including Family Search and Ancestry dot com. In addition, a member of TAAF’s genealogy team made in person visits to the Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma Historical Society, which is the official repository of the National Archives; the Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center; and the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation office.

The TAAF genealogy team found that Sturm has zero American Indian ancestry. Sturm’s genealogical tree is publicly available on the TAAF website. Based on public records, this tree identifies Sturm’s direct lineal ancestors (N=85) by name with TAAF’s findings that each of Sturm’s lineal ancestors is non-Indian. In addition, TAAF contacted six sovereign Indian Nations: the three federally recognized Choctaw sovereign nations and the three federally recognized Cherokee sovereign nations. As will be discussed below, all six of these American Indian nations affirmed that their membership records show no evidence that Sturm’s ancestors in question are Choctaw or Cherokee.

Circe Sturm has long claimed to be a Mississippi Choctaw descendant and a person of Cherokee ancestry. In *Rock & Vine* magazine, Sturm reveals to a reporter that she began studying American Indians because she felt “cut off from the Indigenous part of herself” (Willome, 2022). In the book, *Speaking of Indigenous Politics*, Sturm asserts boldly, “I am a Mississippi Choctaw descendant” (Kauanui, 2018, 281). In her book, *Blood Politics*, Sturm writes that, when Cherokees asked her, “Are you part Cherokee?” she responded yes, then added that she “identifies more as Choctaw” (Sturm, 2002, 112). Earlier in the book, Sturm explains that her paternal grandmother was both “Mississippi Choctaw” and “Cherokee” (p. 5). She also uses the following phrases: “my Choctaw identity,” “my Choctaw relatives,” and “my own Native American identity” (pp. 5-6). In a collection of writings by a “circle of Black and Indigenous writers” in which Dr. Sturm claims membership based on her false claim to being Indigenous, Dr. Sturm identifies as “a Mississippi Choctaw descendant” (Sturm et al., 2023). In writing, Sturm has asserted that she is not eligible for enrollment in the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians or the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (Sturm, 2002, 6). In an instance of shifting

narratives, however, it has been reported to TAAF that Sturm has told scholars that she is eligible for enrollment in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, but that she has elected not to enroll. Two American Indian scholars reported to TAAF that Sturm told them that she is “one-quarter Choctaw.”

The TAAF genealogy team found that all of Sturm’s ancestors are non-Indians of European extraction. In *Blood Politics*, Sturm contends, “our family’s Choctaw name is Wesley” (Sturm, 2002, 7). Yet TAAF found that her direct lineal ancestor, who introduced the surname Wesley into her family, is Charles Wesley, a non-American Indian man of European ancestry who was born in 1870 in Michigan, more than 700 miles from where Choctaws lived. TAAF genealogists further determined that none of Sturm’s relatives, including but not limited to those with the surname Wesley, married or reproduced with Choctaws. Sturm is not related to any of the Choctaw families with the surname Wesley, a determination that was facilitated by the fact that the majority of Choctaws with the surname Wesley were enrolled at the turn of the twentieth century as fullbloods, with nearly all of the rest of the Choctaw Wesleys being individuals of one-half Choctaw “blood.” Further, TAAF genealogists found that Sturm is not related to any Choctaws. As regards her Cherokee claim, Sturm has stated that her Cherokee ancestry comes from her paternal grandmother’s father (Sturm, 2002, 5), whom TAAF identified as James Edward Galloway. TAAF genealogists’ comprehensive analysis found that, like Charles Wesley, Sturm’s ancestor James Edward Galloway was a non-American Indian man of European ancestry with no Cherokee or other American Indian ancestry. TAAF genealogists found that Sturm is not related to any Cherokees.

In general, the genealogical trees that TAAF develops tend to span six to seven generations and include, on average, 200 to 300 individuals. For the Sturm case, TAAF genealogists extensively investigated and developed Sturm’s genealogical tree, extending their identification, review, and analysis to include significant numbers of lateral kin, in addition to direct lineal kin. By the conclusion of TAAF’s research, Sturm’s tree included 888 individuals, all of whom TAAF determined to be non-Indians. These individuals are consistently listed as white in all records, which include death certificates, military records, federal records, state records, county records, city records, and more. Notably, there are zero family stories posted on, for example, Ancestry dot com about any individual in Sturm’s genealogical tree who might be Indian, much less Choctaw or Cherokee.

To reiterate, TAAF’s genealogical research reveals that Sturm has zero American Indian ancestry. There is no evidence that she has even the most distant of kin relations to the Choctaw or Cherokee people. TAAF genealogists found zero American Indian ancestry in Sturm’s tree of 888 direct ancestors and lateral relatives. Tellingly, Sturm has never provided any evidence that she has actual kinship connections to Choctaw and Cherokee people. Anyone who claims an American Indian identity has a responsibility to factually substantiate that claim.

Reminiscent of pretendian Elizabeth Warren, Sturm revealed to TAAF that her claims to having Indian ancestry are based on family lore, DNA tests, and a photograph of relatives who “looked to have Choctaw ancestry.” Unlike pretendian Elizabeth Hoover, however, Sturm reported that she has researched her ancestry for years. Sturm told TAAF that when she asked her father about the Indian ancestry allegedly in his line, he replied that he “had limited knowledge” and “only

noted a supposed Cherokee connection.” Sturm subsequently hired three professional genealogists, including a genetic genealogist, none of whom found any evidence of any Indians in Sturm’s ancestry. Sturm admitted to TAAF that there exists no documentation of her Indian ancestry. She also explained away counterevidence from records that identify her supposed Indian ancestors as non-Indian individuals, specifically as white individuals. Even so, Sturm insisted to TAAF that she has Indian ancestry. One TAAF member summarized her logic as follows: “I did all this research and hired these people to do this research. No one could find any proof I was descended from Indians. But because they could not identify some of my ancestors, I must be an Indian.”

Discussions of genealogical descent obfuscate the fact that citizenship in a sovereign American Indian Tribal nation is core to American Indian identity. Sturm acknowledges that she is not enrolled in any American Indian Tribe. Six American Indian Tribes (discussed below) confirmed that she is not enrolled in any Tribe. Further, these Tribes affirmed that none of Sturm’s ancestors in question, identified below, had ever been acknowledged to be American Indian by any of these Tribes.

Because Sturm claims a kin relationship to Choctaws and Cherokees, the three federally recognized Choctaw Tribes and the three federally recognized Cherokee Tribes were contacted to verify whether or not Sturm’s family members in question were enrolled citizens of their tribal nations, or had any known connection with their Tribes. These Tribes confirmed that Sturm’s ancestors are not and were not ever enrolled in their Tribes or part of their tribal records. These Tribes attest that Sturm’s paternal grandmother, Lucille Ida Galloway b. October 11, 1908, d. October 6, 1994, and her great grandparents, James Edward Galloway b. February 4, 1889, d. February 16, 1967 and Elizabeth Ethel Wesley b. August 4, 1893, d. March 24, 1983, are not and never have been enrolled in any of these six Tribes. None of these six Tribes found any genealogical connection in their records between Sturm and the Choctaw and Cherokee people. Further, Sturm’s great grandparents in her paternal line, James Edward Galloway and Elizabeth Ethel Wesley, are not on the Choctaw Nation or Cherokee Nation Dawes Rolls as enrolled tribal members. Nor are they on the Dawes Rolls of any of the Five “Civilized” Tribes as tribal members. Finally, they are not in the tribal records of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians or the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, and they are not on the Baker Roll, which is the base roll of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The implications of the results of this investigation are serious. Among other things, they reveal that Sturm’s teaching and scholarship are foundationally flawed. The quotes above (see third paragraph) provide evidence that Sturm purports to teach, speak, and write from an American Indian perspective. The reality is that she has never had and will never have an American Indian perspective. Disturbingly, she teaches courses in American Indian and Indigenous Studies. Given the public nature of her false claims to American Indian ancestry, it is almost certain that students are led to believe that she provides them with an American Indian perspective in the classroom. Considering TAAF’s findings that Sturm has falsely claimed to be Choctaw and Cherokee, it is notable that, on her faculty website, Sturm describes herself as “a public intellectual with a deep commitment to ethics.”

This investigation also reveals the likelihood that Sturm deflects attention from her false claims to being Indian by taking on as a major research topic a sociological phenomenon she terms “race shifting.” In her book, *Becoming Indian* (2011), Sturm addresses the phenomenon of the rapidly growing number of people in the United States who self-identify as American Indian. These individuals, Sturm reports, usually identify as Cherokee and claim to be American Indian 1) without being claimed by any of the three federally recognized Cherokee nations or by any other federally recognized American Indian Nation, and 2) without any documentation to support their claims to being Indian. It appears that Sturm may have taken on this topic at least in part to deflect attention from her own spurious claim to being American Indian, specifically Choctaw and Cherokee, which she has done without being claimed by any Indian Tribe and without any documentation to support her claims.

In light of the results of this investigation, the practices and policies at UT-Austin with respect to American Indians deserves scrutiny. TAAF endorses the Cherokee Scholars Statement’s position that “in the context of higher education, falsely claiming a Cherokee [or other legitimate Indian] identity is academic dishonesty, falsification of a material fact, and expropriation of Indigenous peoples’ resources and opportunities.” TAAF found zero evidence that UT-Austin has *any vetting process at all* for determining whether those who claim that their scholarship is authored from an American Indian perspective are in fact American Indian. In addition to Sturm, TAAF researchers have determined that UT-Austin professor of nursing, Dr. John Lowe, has falsely claimed at various times to be Cherokee, Lenape, Creek, Osage, and/or Powhatan. The report on Lowe can be found on the TAAF website. Like Sturm, Lowe has zero Indian ancestry. By enabling Sturm’s, Lowe’s, and others of its faculty members’ false claims to being American Indian, UT-Austin is failing to support American Indians, American Indian Nations, and non-Natives. In so doing, UT-Austin has contributed to the erasure and replacement of actual American Indians, and the misrepresentation of American Indian experience and perspectives. We strongly recommend that UT-Austin take immediate action to rebuild and repair its relationships with American Indians and American Indian Nations rather than continuing to perpetrate harm on Indian people by legitimizing scholars who falsely claim to speak from an Indian perspective.

Many people now obviously consider Circe Sturm to be an Indian woman. Therefore, it is very important that she clearly correct this misinformation. Many pretendians never correct the record after their false claims have been revealed. They let people continue to assume that they are Indian. Hence, we request that Sturm let the world know in writing that she is not, in fact, a descendant of American Indians. Additionally, Sturm needs to apologize to American Indians and non-Indians at length, explain her past actions in full, acknowledge the harm she has done, and find ways to redress that harm.

Sturm is clinging to the hope that she might appear innocent due to the fact that she has never claimed to be a Choctaw or Cherokee citizen. She, of all people, should know better than that. Her decadeslong claim to have Indian ancestry has helped her sell books and secure speaking engagements, which obviously equate to monetary gain and fame. When an individual claims to be a Choctaw descendant, they are effectively claiming to be Choctaw. Sturm knows better than most that the vast majority of the non-Indian public does not know the difference because they know so little about American Indian identity, let alone sovereignty, and they do not question

these claims because they have little idea of how to properly vet such claims. This is why the onus is upon individuals like Sturm to behave with integrity. As an educator, Sturm should have known better. She should have taken her genealogy to Choctaw and Cherokee federally-recognized Tribes and asked them to determine whether she has a blood-based kin connection to their Tribes before she ever claimed to be Choctaw or Cherokee by claiming, as she continues to do, that she is a Mississippi Choctaw descendant.

Our determination: Dr. Circe Sturm has zero American Indian ancestry. It was her responsibility to verify her spurious family myth before making it part of her academic identity. It is worth reiterating that TAAF agrees with the Cherokee Scholars' Statement that "in the context of higher education, falsely claiming a Cherokee [or other legitimate Indian] identity is academic dishonesty, [and] falsification of a material fact." Based on this standard, Sturm has engaged in academic dishonesty by misleading her colleagues and students into believing that she is of Choctaw and Cherokee ancestry and implying that her scholarship is informed by an American Indian positionality. The entire UT-Austin, especially the Department of Anthropology, needs to redress this situation. Among other things, UT-Austin needs to institute policies that require scholars who claim or imply that their scholarship is informed by an American Indian positionality produce documentation that they are enrolled citizens of legitimate tribal nations. These policies will protect the scholarly community from academic misrepresentation of fact. By taking no action, UT-Austin can expect to continue to enable pretendians who inflict harm and trauma on actual Native people, and undermine the academic mission of the university.

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

References Cited

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