

Report

Subject: Dr. Sandra Muse Isaacs

Title: Associate Professor, Dept of English and Creative Writing, University of Windsor

Indigenous Identities falsely claimed: Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians descendant

Determination: Zero American Indian ancestry

Date: February 3, 2026

Introduction

For many years, actual American Indians have seen proverbial red flags in Dr. Sandra Muse Isaacs's presentations of herself as an Eastern Band Cherokee descendant. Eventually these Indians reached out to TAAF for assistance. Specifically, they asked TAAF to conduct genealogical research to either confirm or refute Isaacs's claims.

Researchers at TAAF regarded this investigation as of high importance given that Isaacs has appropriated at least four scholarships that have been set aside exclusively for Indigenous people. Additionally, Isaacs's current faculty position at the University of Windsor is a position that was created explicitly and only for professors who are Indigenous. Isaacs was hired as part of the President's Indigenous Peoples Scholar Program. The program's webpage asserts that, "in response to the historic under-representation of Indigenous Peoples in leadership roles on campus, the University allocated five tenure-track positions for the appointment of Indigenous scholars" (1). By so doing, this program seeks to, among other things, "expand the community of qualified, promising Indigenous scholars on campus," and "support, recruit, and retain Indigenous learners and faculty" (2). University administrators have explained that the President's Indigenous Peoples Scholar Program is a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's recommendations for institutions of higher education to address meaningful Indigenous inclusion in curriculum, hiring, and staffing. As University of Windsor administrators have further explained, "The cohort of *all-Native American/Indigenous scholars*," which includes Isaacs, is a cohort that will work "closely on programs to indigenize the university's curriculum" (3).

It is nothing less than anti-Indian hate speech to claim an American Indian identity or to claim to be descended from American Indians without actually being an American Indian or an American Indian descendant. It is also reprehensibly anti-Indian and unethical to appropriate resources, including scholarships and jobs, that have been designated specifically and only for Indigenous people, especially a position developed in part to address systemic educational harms resulting from Canada's long and brutal residential school history. In an effort to stop such hate speech and other anti-Indian behavior, TAAF has joined and is helping lead the Indian-led movement to end the theft of our Indian identities.

Toward this goal, TAAF's lead genealogist investigated this case with their team of genealogists, thoroughly researching Isaacs's genealogy. The lead genealogist is a trained specialist in Five Tribes genealogy with over fifteen years of experience in this work. The team researched, reviewed, and evaluated hundreds of Isaacs's relatives, both lineal and lateral kin in both her maternal and paternal lines. Team members meticulously consulted numerous rolls and records, both tribal and non-tribal. They used multiple search databases. As part of the team's

comprehensive genealogical methodology and other research protocols, TAAF and its associates consulted, among other records, death certificates, military records, federal records, state records, county records, and city records.

This genealogy team found that Isaacs has zero American Indian ancestry. Based on public records, Isaacs's genealogical tree (which is available on TAAF's website) identifies 70 of Isaacs's direct lineal ancestors by name, together with their birth and death dates, and found that all of Isaacs's direct lineal ancestors are non-Indian. More specifically, none of her kin includes anyone other than persons of exclusively European ancestry. It should be noted that the tree posted on TAAF's website does not include the hundreds of her lateral kin, several of whom are discussed in this report, whom TAAF also investigated.

Upon completing their investigation, and prior to the posting on the TAAF website their press release and report, TAAF approached Dr. Isaacs, privately and respectfully. Specifically, TAAF asked Isaacs to identify the basis of her claims to having Eastern Band Cherokee ancestry. Isaacs chose not to respond at all to TAAF's queries. TAAF's extensive experience with pretendians indicates that those pretendians who do not respond at all to TAAF's inquiries tend to be well aware that their claims to being Indian or having Indian ancestry are spurious.

Isaacs's General Claims about Having Cherokee Ancestry

Isaacs's claims to having Eastern Band Cherokee ancestry have been frequent and public. On her website, she asserts, "I'm of Eastern Cherokee (Ani-tsisqua, Bird Clan) and Gaelic heritage" (4). In her book, she identifies her mother as Bird Clan, strongly suggesting that it is through her mother that she is Bird Clan. Given that Cherokee clans are matrilineal, with clan membership requiring that all of the women in the maternal line of an individual be Cherokee, by identifying both her mother and herself as Bird Clan, Isaacs implies that she descends from an unbroken line of Cherokee women. In her book, she also writes, "Both of my parents' ancestors . . . were a mix of Cherokee, Scots, and Irish" (5). "I am [thus] a diasporic Cherokee descendant," she alleges, later referencing "diasporic Cherokees, myself included" (6). In endnote 32 on page 260, she mentions that when she was a journalist, she was a member of the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) (7). Given that NAJA permits only Natives to be members of its organization, requiring interested non-Natives to affiliate as associates, it appears that Isaacs falsely identified to NAJA as Native American.

TAAF's review of Isaacs' publications, together with media stories and digital evidence about her, found that Isaacs seemingly seizes every opportunity she can to perpetuate her false claims. For example, in early 2019, Isaacs told a reporter, "I'm Bird Clan. We're the storytellers [in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Tribe]" (8), which is a false claim that Isaacs also makes in her book (9). Another example is her assertion, "Like many Cherokees, my parents and grandparents grew up as Southern Baptists," but "throughout my life" "[I] have had the chance to sit and hear about various Native teachings" (10).

In a stunning move, in her book and elsewhere, Isaacs claims to be "the first of my family in three generations to move back [to the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation]" (11). She explains that, from 2010 through 2013, her research "took her to the community of her grandmother" (12). In

other places, too, she refers to the Eastern Band Cherokee Indian reservation as "*her grandmother's reservation in North Carolina*" (13). Isaacs does not identify which grandmother, maternal or paternal, allegedly lived on, then moved off the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation. Even so, genealogists at TAAF found that neither one of her grandmothers (maternal and paternal) ever lived on or anywhere near the Eastern Band Cherokee Indian reservation. Moreover, none of Isaacs's more distant blood relatives has ever lived on or near the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation.

Isaacs is not the first, nor will she be the last, pretender to deploy the trope of having a Cherokee grandmother. Yet Isaacs does not stop there. She goes further, claiming not only a Cherokee grandmother but also many other Cherokee ancestors on both sides of her lineage. Her book contains numerous dubious stories about her relatives. For example, she asserts, "My mother, Lenora Sellers Muse, often told stories to teach us a lesson or to explain to us just who our people are, what she knew about where our Tsalagi (Cherokee) and white Ancestors came from, and why we had southern accents even though we lived up north" (14). Ostensibly to try to legitimize her mother as a Cherokee and as an Indian, Isaacs clothes this woman (her mother) in stock, non-Indian-authored stereotypes of Indigenous people. For example, she claims that her mother grew up in "a cabin made with red clay jammed between rough-hewn pine boards," and that her mother's life was "filled with extreme poverty and few physical comforts" (15). In continuing to try to establish herself and her family as actual Cherokees, she writes, "When I think back over my mother's repertoire of stories, I can clearly see from whom I am descended and what my duties are as a mother, wife, daughter, sister, aunt, and *as a Cherokee woman*" (16). It goes without saying that American Indians, especially Cherokees, do not in fact "clearly see" this, as Isaacs implies that they would or should. Given the high frequency with which non-Indians make false claims to being Cherokee, such claims cannot credibly be made when there exists zero evidence to substantiate these claims.

Isaacs's Specific Claims about her Maternal Line

In one of the endnotes of her book, Isaacs asserts that her maternal grandmother, Willie Elizabeth Stokes (born in 1902) was "*a mixed-blood Cherokee*" who died when her daughter (Isaacs's mother) was two (17).

Isaacs adds that her maternal grandfather, Sydney Johnson Sellers (born in 1882), was also Cherokee. Isaacs writes that her maternal grandfather grew up in Oklahoma (which, tellingly, did not exist as such at that time) and that his siblings are listed on the Cherokee Nation rolls, by which we surmise that she means the Dawes Rolls of the Cherokee Nation (18). Her explanation for why her maternal grandfather is not on these Cherokee rolls is that he left Oklahoma (which again, did not exist as such) "before allotment" and thus does not appear with his siblings on these rolls, which, again, we surmise she means the Cherokee Nation Dawes Rolls.

The Truth about Isaacs's Maternal Line

The truth about Isaacs's maternal line is that numerous documents, including tribal rolls and censuses, death certificates, military records, federal records, state records, county records, and city records, affirm that every single one of Isaacs's maternal ancestors is white. All are listed as

white on all records, all engaged extensively with non-Indian governments, and all were taxed. None was ever listed on any Indian rolls, including the multiple extant Cherokee Nation rolls. If, as Isaacs claims, her maternal grandfather, Sydney Johnson Sellers, was born in the Cherokee Nation in 1882, which he was not (he was born in Mountaintown, Georgia in 1882), he and/or his family would have been on at least six rolls, possibly seven: the 1883, 1886, 1890, 1893, and 1896 Cherokee Nation census rolls; the 1894 Starr Roll; and possibly the 1896 Old Settler Payment Roll. The Dawes Roll is the base citizenship roll of the Cherokee Nation, but it is not the only Cherokee roll that is used to determine descendants' claims. Contrary to the claims in Isaacs's book (see above), the siblings of Isaacs's maternal grandfather are not listed on the Dawes Rolls or any other rolls or censuses of the Cherokee Nation.

Significantly, none of Isaacs's ancestors is on the early-twentieth-century Guion Miller roll. This is striking because this roll included Cherokee descendants who had severed relations with the Cherokee Nation and/or the Qualla Cherokees (now the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians). The Guion Miller roll thus includes people who were no longer Cherokees but rather were Cherokee descendants, and this roll documents extensive kinship relations for both Eastern Cherokees and those in the west. Like the direct lineal ancestors on Isaacs's paternal side (discussed in the next section), none of Isaacs's maternal ancestors *ever even applied* to be considered for inclusion on the Guion Miller roll, much less on any Tribal membership rolls. Historians and others agree that individuals, especially those such as Isaacs's relatives who were living in the South during the early twentieth century, would likely have at least applied to be included on the Guion Miller roll if they had even the slightest of suspicions that they had Cherokee ancestry. This is especially true given that inclusion on the Guion Miller rolls qualified the enrollees for monetary compensation, sometimes referred to as "payouts," from the U.S. government, and there was a brisk cottage industry of grifters signing white people up to get "free" Indian money through manufactured heritage claims. Isaacs's ancestors did not even do that.

Moreover, far from living, even as a child, on the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation, Isaacs's maternal grandmother was born in Bibb County, Georgia, which is nearly 250 miles from the Qualla Cherokees' reservation. Furthermore, she was born in the U.S. South as many as six decades after the expulsion of Cherokees to Indian Territory. Isaacs's grandfather, too, was born more than 100 miles from the Eastern Cherokee reservation in Mountaintown, Georgia, and he, too, was born in the U.S. South as many as four decades after the Cherokees' expulsion. When placed in the context of the great wealth of documentary evidence about Isaacs's maternal relatives, these facts overdetermined the conclusion that both of Isaacs's maternal grandparents and every other individual in her maternal line were white, with no evidence at all of any of them having any Cherokee ancestry or that they even made an effort to formally claim Cherokee resources or connections. For people who supposedly had deep cultural ties and extensive tribal relations, her family's clear detachment from a major Cherokee community experience seems strange at best.

The genealogy team's careful inspection of the documents about Isaacs's maternal relatives revealed one piece of relevant information about one of her direct, lineal ancestors in this line and additional information about two of her lateral maternal kin. In 1838 when Isaacs's great-great-great grandfather John Marcus Newberry, who was born in 1788, was 50 years old, he entered and won the Cherokee land lottery. Only white citizens of Georgia were eligible for this

land grab of the Cherokee homeland. Cherokees were barred from participating in this lottery. A resident of Monroe County, Georgia, Isaacs's third great grandfather John Marcus Newberry was awarded 40 acres of stolen Cherokee land in Butts County, Georgia. Perhaps this is where the story of Cherokee heritage entered family lore, but if so, it is a troubling case of intergenerational shapeshifting, where a white man who benefited from Cherokee dispossession is later presented as the patriarch of a dispossessed Cherokee family.

Isaacs's Claims About Her Paternal Line

Isaacs writes somewhat extensively about her father, John Lester Muse, who was born in Resca, Georgia, which is more than 130 miles from the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation, in 1920, eighty years after the Cherokees' expulsion to Indian Territory. Isaacs alleges that her father said that "he and his siblings were told not to say anything" about being Indian and Cherokee (19). Isaacs makes this claim even though, at the time, there were literally thousands of Cherokees of all physical appearances who quite openly named their Cherokeeness and Cherokee relations. Isaacs adds that, despite her family's refusal to divulge that they were Cherokee, every summer her father took her and the rest of his nuclear family from Detroit, where Isaacs was reared, "to Cherokee, North Carolina . . . so he could show us where the rest of the Cherokee people lived" (20). She asserts that these family road trips included visits to Cherokee mounds, where she claims that her father "always got into arguments with the archaeologists who were excavating mounds, furious with them for desecrating the dead and disturbing the spirits in this sacred ground" (21).

Isaacs also alleges that in Detroit, where Isaacs was born and reared, her father organized powwows. Tellingly, powwows are not Cherokee; they were created by citizens of Plains Indian Tribes. In her writings, Isaacs discloses, as well, that her father was a close friend of Robert K. Thomas. Born in 1925, Robert Knox Thomas, who died in 1991, was a prominent anthropologist and pretendant who claimed to be Cherokee for many decades despite having zero Cherokee or American Indian ancestry. (The results of TAAF's investigation into Thomas's genealogy is forthcoming.) Isaacs writes that Dr. Thomas would often visit their abode when she was a teenager, "and the two men would discuss issues around Cherokeeness" (22). She adds that her father owned a New Testament in the Cherokee language, a language that she says he did not know, and that he owned a dictionary of the Cherokee language, as well (23).

The Truth About Isaacs's Paternal Line

The truth about Isaacs's paternal line is that numerous documents, including tribal rolls and censuses, death certificates, military records, federal records, state records, county records, and city records, affirm that every single one of Isaacs's paternal ancestors, like her maternal ancestors, is white. All engaged extensively with non-Indian governments, all were taxed, and none was ever listed on any Indian rolls.

All are listed as white on all records. This includes a 1940 census, which Isaacs inaccurately claims lists her paternal grandfather, Lester Muse (born 1897 in Sugar Valley, Georgia), as Indian, because the racial designation of "white" seems to be crossed out and an "I" put next to it. She describes this so-called "Indian" designation as a self-identification, asserting that her

grandfather was "brave enough to write that down on a federal document" (24). Isaacs appears to have looked only at a typed, transcribed entry of this census record on Ancestry.com, which the transcription indicates was uploaded as late as 2012. This transcription identifies Lester Muse's race as "White [Indian (Native American)]." TAAF inspected the original census records on which Mr. Muse is listed, alongside approximately 2,000 of his fellow residents of the Carbondale district in Whitfield County, Georgia. TAAF found that the enumerator of this district clearly failed to follow the census directions for how to designate race for every person he listed in his district. Instead of listing a white person, including Lester Muse, as "W" as required, he wrote the entire word "White." Then, either he or his supervisor underlined or crossed out the handwritten word "White" and put a single vertical tally mark above each entry. This vertical tally mark did not mean "Indian." First, the census key at the bottom of each census page instructs enumerators to mark Indians as "In," not "I." Next, the race of almost every one of the approximately 2,000 white people in the Carbondale district in Whitfield County, Georgia are listed in the same way as is Lester Muse. There is simply no possibility that 2,000 American Indian people made up the entire population of the Carbondale enumeration district of that single Georgia county in 1940—the assumption is absurd on its very face. The people enumerated in this district were white, not Indian, as they clearly were in the 1930 census and in all other demographic data of the region, including Isaac's ancestor. Moreover, contrary to Isaacs's claim that her grandfather "wrote that [Indian] down on a federal document," it was the census enumerator, not Isaacs's grandfather, who filled out the name, race, and other census information for Isaacs's grandfather and for all the other residents of this district. This is clearly a paperwork error, not a Red Power moment.

Notably, every other census record, beginning with the 1900 census when Lester Muse was three, lists Lester Muse, as white. Moreover, none of the children, parents, or siblings of this man, Lester Muse, were defined as Indian on any records. Nor did any of them leave any evidence that they ever even claimed to be Indian. Indeed, none of Isaacs's paternal grandfather's siblings or his parents ever even applied to be included on the Guion Miller payout roll. None of his ancestors were ever in Oklahoma, and none ever applied to be included on the Dawes Roll of the Cherokee Nation.

The genealogy team's extensive review of documents involving many dozens of Isaacs's kin in her paternal line revealed two pieces of information that are noteworthy but do not change TAAF's determination that Isaacs's entire paternal line, just like her entire maternal line, is white. The first of these two noteworthy genealogical facts is that one of Isaacs's paternal great grandfathers, Thomas L. Gaston Sr. (born in 1845 in Tennessee), married a Cherokee woman, Nancy Elizabeth Mayfield, the daughter of Elizabeth Hildebrand. After Nancy died in 1892, her widower, Isaac's paternal grandfather Mr. Thomas L. Gaston Sr., married a white woman named Annie Anna Carter (born in 1876). Their daughter Maybelle "Maggie" Gaston was born in 1900, eight years after the death of Nancy. Maybelle is Isaacs's paternal grandmother. Like both of her parents, Maybelle was white.

A second noteworthy genealogical fact is that Isaacs's paternal grandfather, Mr. Lester Muse (born 1897) had a brother named William Arthur Moss. Mr. Moss married a white woman named Timp Moss. Timp Moss was the daughter of Ida M. Parker, who applied for inclusion on the Guion Miller roll. Ms. Parker was rejected. Far from having verifiable Cherokee heritage,

Muse's kin are instead among the many whites who sought to benefit from Cherokee dispossession and land losses. Her career seems to indicate that this is an intergenerational family tradition.

Claiming What is Not Hers to Claim: "The White Possessive" Part I (25)

Despite having no Cherokee or Indian ancestry, Isaacs brazenly claims seemingly all things Eastern Cherokee as her own. She refers to the Eastern Cherokee reservation as "our mountain homeland" and the "community where my Ancestors grew up" (26). In an interview, she references "my Indigenous perspective" (27). Elsewhere, she asserts that "our cultural perspectives, lifeways, and values have been created through the ancient spoken stories" that are in her book (28). She further writes, "As Cherokees, we are told that our Ancestors, the original Real Human Beings, all came from the Mothertown known as Kituwah" (29). A final example of many similar such examples in her book appears in her discussion of history. "Our [Cherokee] villages," she writes, "were scattered throughout what is now the Appalachian mountain range" (30).

At times in her scholarship, Isaacs comes across as more than a little delusional. For example, she writes, "I often took the short drive there [to Birdtown on the Eastern Cherokee reservation] to sit and study and enjoy the peace and quiet and the strong spiritual feelings of being around the Ancestors" (31). Later, she states, "It is deeply moving to stop and think of how we are walking or dancing with the Ancestors all around us, watching us continue the traditions that they started" (32). Yet another of many similar examples pertains to her brief discussion of Eastern Cherokee Tribal work days, during which she says that "her" community worked to "recreate (in a modern form) the way things were done by our Ancestors" (33).

Claiming to be Cherokee for Profit: The White Possessive Part II

Isaacs is one of many pretendians who claims to be Cherokee for profit. In numerous instances, she has claimed for herself funding and jobs earmarked for actual Native people. In so doing, aggressively and unethically she has been taking funding and jobs away from actual Native people. For example, more than twenty-five years ago in 2000, Isaacs won the Harvey Longboat Graduate Scholarship for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Students at McMaster University in Ontario. Isaacs's website indicates that she claimed this award for herself three additional times, depriving actual Native people of these funds to complete their education. Again, Isaacs took for herself, a white person, what was set aside for Native people in honor of a respected Six Nations leader and educator and thus was not hers to take as a U.S.-born white person, enacting and perpetuating the white possessive.

Upon graduating with her Ph.D., Isaacs was hired as a faculty member at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This position does not appear to have been earmarked for Native people, though a journalist did write a story about Isaacs in which she celebrated Isaacs as "the first Indigenous faculty member" ever at that university (34).

In the late 2010s, Isaacs accepted a faculty position at the University of Windsor that is part of the President's Indigenous Peoples Scholar Program. In so doing, Isaacs claimed for herself a

faculty position that was earmarked specifically and only for Indigenous faculty. The program's webpage asserts that, "in response to the historic under-representation of Indigenous Peoples in leadership roles on campus, the University allocated five tenure-track positions for the appointment of Indigenous scholars" (35). By so doing, this program seeks to, among other things, "expand the community of qualified, promising Indigenous scholars on campus," and "support, recruit, and retain Indigenous learners and faculty" (36). University administrators have explained that the President's Indigenous Peoples Scholar Program was developed in part as a response to the educational priorities of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. "The cohort of all-Native American/Indigenous scholars," which includes Isaacs, is a cohort that University administrators hope will work "closely on programs to indigenize the university's curriculum" (37).

It is worth noting that, despite the misinformation, detailed above, in Isaacs's book, her book was awarded the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award.

Claiming Cherokee to Gain Access and Other Research Benefits, Furthering Her Career

The evidence suggests that Isaacs claimed Cherokee in part to gain access to Cherokee stories and to other Cherokee knowledge from Cherokees living on the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation, then to claim for herself the right to tell Cherokee stories, especially in print. Furthermore, allegedly to reduce the amount of competition she faces in the field of Cherokee Studies, she has publicly been promoting the idea that it is inappropriate for non-Cherokees to tell Cherokee stories. For example, following the revelation that Canadian novelist Joseph Boyden falsely claimed to be Indigenous, to a reporter Isaacs proclaimed that she struck Boyden's novels from her Native literature course at the University of Windsor. After falsely identifying herself to the reporter as "Cherokee," Isaacs condemned Boyden for "misrepresent[ing] himself" as Indigenous (38). Then, she proclaimed, "Joseph Boyden doesn't have the right to tell stories for people who have their own voice" (39).

Later, Isaacs explains in her book that the stories therein "belong only to the Cherokee people," which she insists includes her, and that there are many "words [that] are only meant for Giduwah [Cherokee] people" (40). At the same time, she asserts that being Cherokee provides access to these stories and to other tribally-specific knowledge. There is a "Cherokee belief," she writes, "that certain sacred things should not be shared with anyone who is not of the tribe" (41).

Isaacs expands upon her understanding that being Cherokee is a condition for gaining access to Cherokee knowledge in her discussion of non-Indian anthropologist James Mooney. Between 1887 and 1889, Mooney spent several seasons living on the Eastern Band Cherokee reservation in order to extract from tribal members Cherokee stories and other knowledge. Isaacs writes, "It is a well-known fact among Eastern Cherokees that the Elders who shared their stories with Mooney, such as Swimmer, Ayosta, and John Ax, did not tell Mooney many things because he was not Cherokee" (42). Clearly, Isaacs believed that the way for her to most effectively overcome the challenge of persuading Cherokees to disclose stories and other knowledge to her was for her to claim to be Cherokee.

Isaacs discusses, then condemns the tactics Mooney used to extract from Cherokees the knowledge he was able to acquire during the period when he conducted fieldwork on their North

Carolina reservation. She provides detailed descriptions of these tactics, which included, among other things, extortion, threats, coercion, bribes, and disrespectful statements that declared Cherokees to be inferior to whites. Alarmingly, Isaacs then strongly suggests that such tactics justified Mooney's extraction and publication of Cherokee stories and other knowledge. She writes, "I admit that overall, despite the lack of respect he demonstrated at times, his collection is such a remarkable and enduring contribution to the continuance of the Giduwah culture that we must all be grateful" (43). It does not require much of a leap to surmise that Isaacs likely saw and still sees her false claims to being Cherokee as justifiable given the "data" to which she was able to gain access because her consultants may have believed her false claims that she was Cherokee. Moreover, Isaacs may regard herself as a hero of sorts for collecting and preserving imperiled Eastern Cherokee knowledge, a stance that is not too far removed from the salvage anthropology that Mooney practiced.

Other Reprehensible Tactics Isaacs Used to Extract Knowledge from Cherokees

The evidence suggests that, in order to gain access to Cherokee knowledge, Isaacs did not simply falsely identify as Cherokee. She leveraged her false claims to more effectively wheedle her way into Eastern Cherokee families and into broader relationships with Cherokee academics, claiming in her book that a number of Eastern Cherokees "adopted" her as one of their kin. Her use of this tactic appears to have begun as early as the 1990s when she says that she began attending Green Corn ceremonies and stomp dances with her son at the Raven Rock Stomp Grounds in the community of Big Cove on the Eastern Cherokee reservation. She writes that the "community chief" (her words) who presided over these reservation-based grounds was Walker Calhoun, whom she claims "revived" the Green Corn ceremony while Isaacs was joining this community (44). Isaacs thus appears to have wheedled her way into possibly being recognized as a member of these grounds at a time when Calhoun may have been working hard to establish the grounds' viability. If this was the case, the status of these grounds as incipient grounds may have facilitated Isaacs's inclusion in the community that utilized them, provided that Isaacs was in fact included, as she claims. Conveniently for Isaacs, Calhoun passed away seven years before the publication of her book, so he was unable to address these claims directly.

Repeatedly, Isaacs refers to Calhoun in her book as "Grandpa Walker" and claims that he named her "Ayosta" after his grandmother (45). She further claims that several "strong Cherokee women," whom she names in her book, adopted her as their sister. At several different points, Isaacs refers to these Cherokee women as her sisters, and she intersperses at least one of her actual sisters, Judy Muse, into a list she provides of her sisters (46). In so doing, Isaacs appears to be trying to blur the line between her actual and fictive sisters. At another point in the text, Isaacs claims that a male tribal citizen, whom she also names, adopted her. Here, however, Isaacs does not try to blur the lines between her actual and fictive relatives: he is "my adopted brother," she proudly asserts (47). The tactic of trying to persuade consultants to adopt a researcher as a member of their Indian family has a long history in anthropology and American Indian Studies. Yet comparatively few white researchers have taken advantage of their becoming the beneficiary of these generous acts by then claiming to themselves be Indigenous. There are, however, some such individuals, and unfortunately they include Isaacs.

Other Reprehensible Tactics Oriented Toward Bolstering Her False Claims

Isaacs's use of unethical tactics to bolster her false claims to being Cherokee, discussed and documented briefly above, includes two additional tactics worth mentioning. One is deflection. Isaacs engaged in deflection in 2016 when she loudly and publicly condemned pretendant Joseph Boyden for making false claims to being Indigenous (see above). By expressing outrage that an individual would falsely claim to be American Indian, Isaacs deflected public attention that might otherwise have been given to her own false claims. Many pretendians are well aware that, when a person who is known to be Indigenous condemns the phenomenon of pretendianism, others may find it virtually unbelievable that such an individual would themselves be a pretendant. The most well-known user of the tactic of deflection is pretendant Circe Sturm. Sturm researched and wrote a book about pretendians in part to deflect attention from her false claims to being Cherokee and Choctaw, as well as to bolster those false claims. For more information about Sturm, see the Press Release and Report on Sturm that are posted on TAAF's website (48).

Isaacs has used the tactic of deflection multiple times. In the spring of 2018, two years after publicly expressing outrage about Boyden's false claims, Isaacs resigned her position at Saint Mary's University. With another job offer (from the University of Windsor) in hand, she explained to reporters that she resigned "in protest over [Saint Mary University's] failure to 'indigenize the academy'" (49). She added that, throughout the period of her tenure at Saint Mary's, "she felt like the 'token' Indigenous professor" (50). Through this publicity stunt and the Boyden-related one two years earlier, Isaacs bolstered her false claims to being an aggrieved Cherokee while deflecting attention from the spuriousness of her Cherokee claims.

Isaacs engages in another tactic common among pretendians, one that pretendians likely engage in only semi-consciously. Seemingly to legitimize her own false, unsubstantiated claims to being Cherokee, Isaacs legitimizes other scholars' false, unsubstantiated claims to being Cherokee. For example, in her book, Isaacs identifies Jace Weaver as a scholar of Cherokee descent even though his claims to being Cherokee have long been debunked. (TAAF aspires to publish a report on Weaver and his false claims in the near future.) Likewise, Isaacs identifies as Cherokee descendants Craig Womack and Robert Knox Thomas, both of whom are known to have zero Cherokee and Indian ancestry. (Craig Womack also claimed to be of Creek ancestry.) Similarly, known pretendian Circe Sturm expresses nothing but praise for the work of her fellow pretendian, Professor Brian Klopotek, who TAAF's team of genealogists found has zero Indian ancestry. In 2011, Sturm crooned that Klopotek is "an emerging new star in the field of Native American Studies" (51). She added that his book is "a sophisticated piece of scholarship" and "is essential reading for scholars of Native North America and U.S. race relations" (52).

It is possible that, at the semi-conscious level, Isaacs feels impelled to recognize as Cherokees scholars who have a background that is similar to hers and in this way to legitimize, if only to herself, her own claims to being Cherokee. Alternatively, Isaacs may be recognizing these scholars as Cherokee as part of a larger, more sinister effort to redefine who is Cherokee. After all, the three federally recognized Cherokee Tribes hold exclusive jurisdiction and authority over determining who is Cherokee. Affirming as Cherokees individuals whom none of these Tribes have claimed as Cherokee viciously and disrespectfully undermines tribal sovereignty.

As discussed above, none of the records of any of the three Cherokee tribes revealed any names or other identifying information that could possibly be Isaacs's ancestors. It goes without saying that none of Isaacs's ancestors are on the base roll of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Nor are they on the Dawes Rolls of the Cherokee Nation.

In sum, there is no evidence that Isaacs has even the most distant of relations by blood to Cherokees. Anyone who claims an American Indian identity has a responsibility to factually substantiate that claim. Moreover, to the point made above, discussions of genealogical descent obfuscate the fact that citizenship in a sovereign American Indian tribal nation is core to American Indian identity.

Implications of This Case

The implications of the results of the Isaacs investigation are serious. Among other things, they reveal that Isaacs's teaching and scholarship are foundationally flawed. Isaacs purports to teach, speak, and write from a Cherokee perspective. The reality is that she has never had and will never have a Cherokee perspective. Disturbingly, she teaches courses in Native American literature. Given the public nature of her false claims to being American Indian, it is almost certain that students are led to believe that she provides them with an American Indian perspective in the classroom.

In light of the results of this investigation, the practices and policies at the University of Windsor with respect to Indigenous people deserve 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." Unlike many Canadian universities that are developing Indigenous verification policies, TAAF found zero evidence that the University of Windsor 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. By enabling Isaacs's false claims to being American Indian, the University of Windsor is failing to support American Indians, American Indian Nations, First Nations, and non-Indians. In so doing, the University of Windsor has contributed to the erasure and replacement of actual American Indians, and the misrepresentation of American Indian experience and perspectives. We strongly recommend that the University of Windsor take immediate action to rebuild and repair its relationships with American Indians, American Indian Nations, and First Nations rather than continuing to perpetrate harm on Indian people by legitimizing Isaacs and other scholars at the University of Windsor who falsely claim to speak from an American Indian perspective.

TAAF would like to also censure other organizations for bolstering the false claims of pretendian Sandra Muse Isaacs. The University of Oklahoma Press needs to cease the practice of awarding publishing contracts to pretendians. Funding agencies, too, need to make sure that their awardees are not lying on their applications when they claim to be Indian.

Many people now obviously consider Sandra Muse Isaacs to be an American 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 Isaacs let the world know in writing that she is not, in fact, an American Indian. Additionally, Isaacs 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.

Isaacs is clinging to the hope that she might appear innocent due to the fact that she has never claimed to be a Cherokee citizen. She should know better than that. The vast majority of the non-Indian public does not know the importance of tribal enrollment and federal recognition 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 even more the case given that Muse lives and works in Canada, which has a very different history on these matters from that of the U.S. This is why the onus is upon individuals like Isaacs to behave with integrity. As an educator, Isaacs should have known better. She should have taken her genealogy to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and asked them to determine whether she has a blood-based kin connection to their Tribe before she ever claimed to be Cherokee.

Our determination

Dr. Sandra Muse Isaacs has zero American Indian ancestry. It was her responsibility to verify her genealogy before making a Cherokee identity 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, Isaacs has engaged in academic dishonesty by misleading her colleagues and students into believing that she is Cherokee and implying that her scholarship is informed by an American Indian positionality.

The entire University of Windsor community needs to redress this situation. Among other things, the University of Windsor needs to institute policies that require scholars who claim or imply that their scholarship is informed by an American Indian positionality to produce documentation that they are enrolled citizens of legitimate Indigenous nations whether in Canada or from elsewhere. These policies will protect the scholarly community from academic misrepresentation of fact. By taking no action, the University of Windsor can expect to continue to enable pretenders 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.

Endnotes

(1) President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars Program, University of Windsor.

<https://www.uwindsor.ca/indigenous-peoples/297/presidents-indigenous-peoples-scholars-program>

(2) President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars Program, University of Windsor.

<https://www.uwindsor.ca/indigenous-peoples/297/presidents-indigenous-peoples-scholars-program>

(3) Emphasis ours. Quoted in Britta M. Anson, "Andrea Sullivan-Clarke Joins Initial Cohort of President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars at University of Windsor." University of Washington Department of Philosophy, July 25, 2018. <https://phil.washington.edu/news/2018/07/25/andrea-sullivan-clarke-phd-2015-joins-initial-cohort-presidents-indigenous-peoples#:~:text=We%20are%20pleased%20to%20announce,Indigenous%20Thought%20in%20the%20Americas>

(4) This statement was still posted on Isaacs's website as late as January 31, 2026, four days after TAAF sent her a letter asking her the basis for her claims to having Eastern Cherokee ancestry. <https://www.uwindsor.ca/english/399/dr-sandra-muse-isaacs>

(5) Isaacs, Sandra Muse. *Eastern Cherokee Stories: A Living Oral Tradition and Its Cultural Continuance*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019, 4.

(6) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 252n46, 23.

(7) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*.

(8) Quoted in Sarah Sacheli, "Returning to Teach Brings Alumna Storyteller Full Circle." *University of Windsor Daily News*, January 28, 2019. <https://www.uwindsor.ca/dailynews/2019-01-26/returning-teach-brings-alumna-storyteller-full-circle>

(9) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 6.

(10) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 266n22,14.

(11) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 162.

(12) Emphasis ours. Quoted in Judy Pattison, "A History of Firsts for Former Longboat Scholar and McMaster Ph.D." *McMaster University News*, March 8, 2016. <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/news-events-news-2016-history-firsts-former-longboat-scholar-and-mcmaster-phd/>

(13) Emphasis ours. "Returning to Teach."

(14) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 4.

(15) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 3–4.

(16) Emphasis ours. *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 6.

(17) Emphasis ours. *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 247n2.

(18) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 247n2.

(19) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 248n3.

(20) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 5.

(21) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 5.

(22) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 252n49.

(23) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 272n23.

(24) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 265n9.

(25) Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

(26) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 7, 244.

(27) Quoted in Amy Dodge, "Indigenous Professor Shakes Up the English Curriculum at University of Windsor." June 21, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/indigenous-professor-shakes-up-the-english-curriculum-at-university-of-windsor-1.5179738>.

(28) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 25.

(29) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 221.

(30) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 6.

(31) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 274n41.

(32) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 231.

(33) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 26.

(34) See Isaacs's website as of February 1, 2026: <https://www.uwindsor.ca/english/399/dr-sandra-muse-isaacs>. See also Judy Pattison, "A History of Firsts for Former Longboat Scholar and McMaster Ph.D." *McMaster University News*, March 8, 2016. <https://gs.mcmaster.ca/news-events-news-2016-history-firsts-former-longboat-scholar-and-mcmaster-phd/>.

(35) President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars Program, University of Windsor. <https://www.uwindsor.ca/indigenous-peoples/297/presidents-indigenous-peoples-scholars-program>

(36) President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars Program, University of Windsor. <https://www.uwindsor.ca/indigenous-peoples/297/presidents-indigenous-peoples-scholars-program>

(37) Britta M. Anson, "Andrea Sullivan-Clarke Joins Initial Cohort of President's Indigenous Peoples Scholars at University of Windsor." University of Washington Department of Philosophy, July 25, 2018. <https://phil.washington.edu/news/2018/07/25/andrea-sullivan-clarke-phd-2015-joins-initial-cohort-presidents-indigenous-peoples#:~:text=We%20are%20pleased%20to%20announce,Indigenous%20Thought%20in%20the%20Americas>:

(38) Quoted in Trina Roach, "University Professor Cutting Joseph Boyden Novels from Her Course." APTN News, January 18, 2017. <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/university-professor-cutting-joseph-boyden-novels-from-her-course/>

(39) Quoted in Trina Roach, "University Professor Cutting Joseph Boyden Novels from Her Course." APTN News, January 18, 2017. <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/university-professor-cutting-joseph-boyden-novels-from-her-course/>

(40) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 221, 269n2.

(41) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 261n13.

(42) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 21.

(43) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 24.

(44) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 251n42, 269–70n4, 252n43.

(45) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 251n42, 269–70n4, 252n43.

(46) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, xii, 241.

(47) *Eastern Cherokee Stories*, 268n37.

(48) <https://tribalallianceagainstfrauds.org/>

(49) Quoted in Brett Bundale, "Indigenous Professor Resigns in Protest over Lack of Aboriginal Faculty, Curriculum." The Canadian Press, June 22, 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4291684/indigenous-prof-resigns/>

(50) Quoted in Brett Bundale, "Indigenous Professor Resigns in Protest over Lack of Aboriginal Faculty, Curriculum." The Canadian Press, June 22, 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4291684/indigenous-prof-resigns/>

(51) Sturm, Circe. *Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*. Santa Fe, NM: Society for Advanced Research Press, 2011, 49.

(52) *Becoming Indian*, 51.