

Perils of Settler-Colonial Patriarchy: The Case of the Cherokee Princess

A brief Twitter essay on the abusive uses of the great-great-grandmother/"Cherokee Princess" stereotype and its impact on Cherokee representational sovereignty.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

1. At least once a week I see a post or hear a comment from someone about the whole "Cherokee princess" phenomenon. Here are some thoughts.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

2. First, for those new to topic, "Cherokee princess" is supposed ancestor invoked by non-Indigenous to assert authority on Indig topics.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

3. For these folks, this usually unnamed great-great-grandmother is brought out to claim an authoritative voice without actually connection.



11 MONTHS AGO

(In Canada there's a similar phenomenon around Métis identity and claims of very distant and often unsubstantiated Indigeneity being used to assert identification today. See the work of [@adamgaudry](#), [@apihtawikosisan](#), and [@BigMMusings](#) for insightful analyses of this parallel but no less troubling discourse.)



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

4. It's so common that it's a joke in Indian Country, that every White person has a Cherokee Princess g-g-grandmother in their family tree.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

5. I get it. And I assure you, if other Indigenous folks find it frustrating, Cherokees find it even more so.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

6. But it's not just non-Indigenous uses of the stereotype—it's also how it plays out among other Indigenous folks that needs attention.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

7. The Cherokee Princess is a source of great amusement to other Indians, often combined with some snide crack about blood quantum.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

8. Sheer pervasiveness of the Princess is simplistic stereotype that minimizes & misrepresents complexity & continuity of Cherokee people.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

9. She's a presumption of compromised Indigenousness, used to critique our history of adaptation while erasing deep histories of tradition.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

10. The Cherokee Princess is often treated as a biting and dismissive joke, but she's anything but harmless.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

11. She functions as a representational symbol of larger discourses of sexism, racism, & violence against Cherokees, historically & today.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

11. We need to understand Princess as a settler-colonial construct used to diminish Cherokee continuity, complexity, & sovereignty.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

12. She represents corrosive colonialist presumptions, not those of proud & powerful nations who thrive in spite of centuries of assault.



11 MONTHS AGO



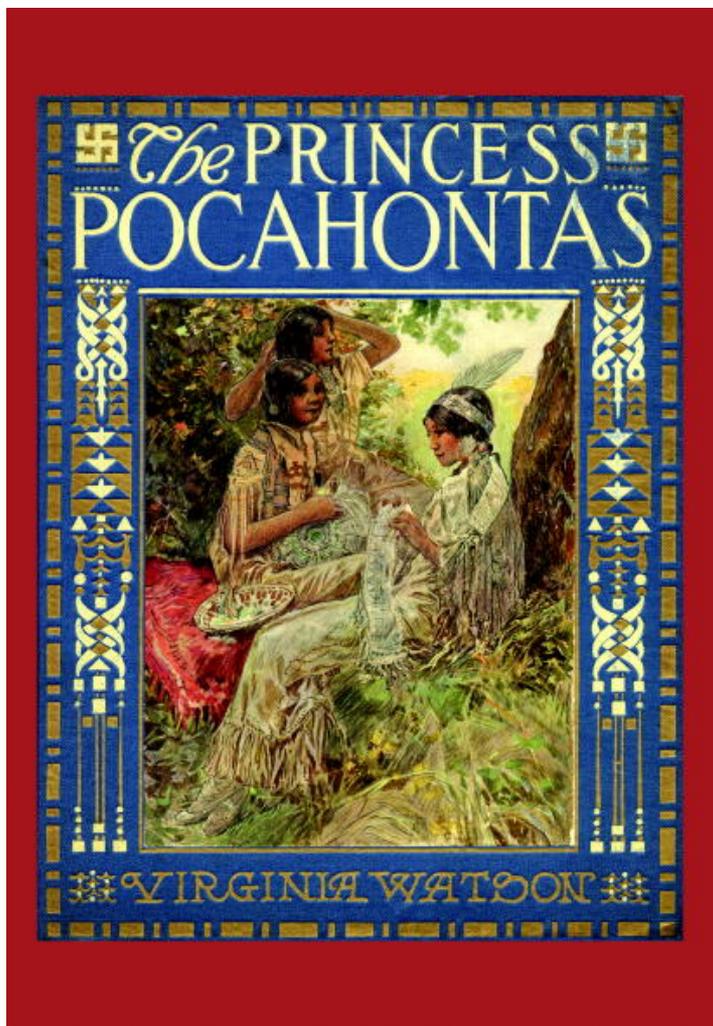
Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

13. Cherokee Princess is related to Pocahontas, who was transformed by John Smith & other writers into a willing handmaiden of colonialism.



11 MONTHS AGO



UNITED STATES - CIRCA 1900: From the Lewis and Clark expedition, this young native american maiden and child became legend. (Photo by Buyenlarge/Getty Images)

 BUYENLARGE · 118 YEARS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

14. There are now 1000s of Americans who claim to be “descendants of Pocahontas” & who embrace claim as connection to homegrown royalty.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

15. Pocahontas was one of the 1st, but certainly not the last, Indigenous women of rank, respect, & power to undergo trivializing makeover.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

16. Case in point: Nancy Ward, or Nanye'hi, last Cherokee Beloved Woman of 19th c. War Woman when young, peace advocate in later years.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

17. She's most remembered by Whites for brief assistance to US squatters during Revolution rather than years of GWY land rights advocacy.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

18. So pervasive is mainstream historical amnesia that the memorial over her grave reads like a love song to settler colonialism:

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

19. "Princess and Prophetess / of the Cherokee Nation / The Pocahontas of Tennessee / The Constant Friend / of the American Pioneer"

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

20. Like w/Pocahontas, there's a "Descendants of Nancy Ward" organization that only marginally connects w/Cherokee communities & continuity.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

21. Nanye'hi's long service to the People erased to justify White claims to land through marginal connections to very distant "grandmother."

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

22. A “grandmother” of whom most know little aside from friendship to “the American Pioneer.”



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

23. Both culturally-grounded women have been transformed into ahistorical, de-cultured “princesses” whose sole purpose is to aid White men.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

(See Green's "The Pocahontas Perplex" for a great analysis of this long pattern of representation.)



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

24. In that transformation, they provide the tacit approval of entire colonialist enterprise—they become symbolic stand-ins for the land.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

25. Because they're the constellated centre of White land hunger, patriarchy, & racism, they allow colonial desire to continue w/o guilt.



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

(See [@tuckeve](#) & Wang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" and the discussion of "settler moves to innocence" for great analysis of this.)



11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

26. The Princess is thus figured as willing recipient of White domination, in all its ugly sexual and ideological violence.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

27. Nanye'hi gives way to Nancy Ward, Nancy Ward becomes "Pocahontas of Tennessee," & the Cherokee Princess rises in the colonial imaginary.

 11 MONTHS AGO

The Princess also valorizes Whiteness and erases/displaces histories of Black Cherokees, Cherokee participation in African enslavement and the chattel slavery industry, and the long legacies and continuing struggles of the Cherokee Freedmen within the Cherokee Nation today. There's a complex, multidimensional history here that's completely obscured by the presence of the Cherokee Princess, who always ultimately functions as a projection/construction of White entitlement and authority.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

28. Indig feminists remind us: settler colonialism rooted in violence against Indigenous & Black women's bodies, symbolically & physically.

 11 MONTHS AGO

Check out the reading list from the online, open-access journal, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, for the relevant work of some of the most powerful and vibrant intersectional Indigenous feminist scholars of multiple genders and locations: [decolonization.wordpress.co...](https://decolonization.wordpress.com/) A great foundation for folks interested in the critical work in this area and its links to other struggles.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

29. Land was figured by Europeans as symbolically female; connect that to the Biblical admonition that it was woman's duty to submit to man.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

30. It should therefore be no surprise that the Cherokee Princess herself ultimately serves the cause of settler colonial patriarchy.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

31. The Princess generally has no name/identity, an anonymous referent whose sole purpose is exotic historical womb in service to Empire.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

32. Overwhelming prominence of Princess obscures political, cultural, & familial power/achievements of real Cherokee women in wider culture.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

33. Nancy Ward's GWY realities displaced as she's co-opted as "Princess and Prophetess" & becomes herald of Manifest Destiny's fulfillment.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

34. Symbolically, Princess is noble but passive receptacle of a White man's seed; her purpose is to give land legitimacy to his descendants.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

35. Cherokee Princess is mobilized by non-Indig to affirm genealogical ties to land, often when denying settler colonialism & their role.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

36. She's brought out in discussions of colonialism to assure us that speaker is really "a little bit Indian" & is thus authorized to speak.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

37. Important to note here that many communities/families have been deeply wounded by displacement & diaspora.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

38. A lot of vibrant cultural recovery work today involves people whose ancestors were scattered & disconnected from kin & communities.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

39. But not all. Many people's families have maintained deep connections to land, language, kinship, ceremony.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

40. Their vital work is completely ignored when the Princess becomes the dominant representation, whether by settlers or other Indig folks.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

41. & their work has often been made more difficult by those of us raised outside community, or those more invested in settler approval.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

42. Cherokee Princess distracts us by prioritizing vague affiliation over informed histories, reciprocal relations, & grounded knowledge.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

43. She reinforces authority removed from accountability, & further embeds us in discourses of diminishment & past-tense significance.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

44. The Princess doesn't serve the People today. She never did. She's only ever served the cause of settler colonialism & White patriarchy.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

45. By erasing continuing social & political presence of GWY people today she affirms settler colonial claim of legitimacy through violence.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

46. The Cherokee Princess is thus, in addition to being a misogynistic & racist symbol, also a threat to nationhood & sovereignty.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

47. If Cherokees in popular imagination so often linked w/diminishment & erasure, our political identities as sovereign nations are at risk.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

48. It would be merely obnoxious if there weren't real consequences to such perceptions.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

49. Remember that the current US president has history of attacking Indian sovereignty specifically on such grounds. Consider Baby Veronica.

 11 MONTHS AGO

And "Baby Lexi," a Choctaw child who was the focus of a similar custody case in 2016:

[huffingtonpost.com/mirah-ri...](https://www.huffpost.com/mirah-ri...) In each circumstance, the child's low "blood quantum" (rather than the citizenship status and *tribally determined identification standards*) was consistently identified in the media and the White foster parents and their lawyers as justification for thwarting the Indian Child Welfare Act.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

50. Ultimately, Cherokee Princess is racist, misogynistic symbol of stasis that presumes all Indig adaptation is illegitimate & inauthentic.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

51. Our very modernity is used to indict us; the fact that we don't exist in unchanging stasis is seen as evidence of our deficiency.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

52. The Cherokee Princess serves that settler colonial fantasy of ahistorical purity, but she doesn't serve Cherokees.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

53. She actually functions to displace Cherokees, to give credibility to Eurowestern land claims & absolution for the legacies of genocide.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

53. She exists to diminish the reality of our continued existence as political nations and complex, diverse cultural peoples.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

54. When she's done with her work, she leaves behind only misunderstanding, diminishment, & continued suspicion.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

55. So when I hear other Indigenous folks joke about the Cherokee Princess, I get it—I really do.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

56. But every invocation of the Cherokee Princess obscures & displaces important realities, experiences, & voices.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

57. & I'd much rather foreground awesome work of Cherokee folks today as well as historically. These are far more interesting & important.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

58. P.S. For those w/”Cherokee princess/g-g-grandmother” stories who want to comment, this is a good time to just listen & do your homework.

 11 MONTHS AGO

For a start, read Robert Conley's *The Cherokee Nation: A History*, Circe Sturm's *Blood Politics*, Eva Marie Garroutte's *Real Indians*, Andrew Denson's *Demanding the Cherokee Nation*, Rose Stremmler's *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*, and Chris Teuton's *Tales of the Turtle Island Liars' Club*. So many other important works, too, but this gives a bit of a foundation for further understanding. Watch *On Blood*, a documentary about the Cherokee Freedmen and their fight for re-enfranchisement in the Cherokee Nation, and the Trail of Tears episode from *We Shall Remain*. And be sure to read Kim TallBear's *Native American DNA*--essential reading for a broader context.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

59. The Cherokee Nation has great genealogical resources online. Lots of great research by Cherokee community-based and academic scholars.

 11 MONTHS AGO



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

60. Read about our histories. Learn about diverse communities. Pay attention to Cherokee Freedmen issues and voices, too—these are vital.

 11 MONTHS AGO

And remember that it's not just the Cherokee Nation that's part of the discussion: it's also the United Keetoowah Band, the Eastern Band, and the Freedmen. Deep and complicated histories and networks of relations. There's diversity here, too.



Daniel Heath Justice

@justicedanielh

61. Don't look for “noble savages.” We're complex, diverse, strong peoples today. Always have been.

 11 MONTHS AGO



62. My grandmother, Pearl Clara Spears. A fierce GWY woman who died too young & who I never knew. So much more than a princess to us. pic.twitter.com/CHyblZts8O

 DANIEL HEATH JUSTICE @JUSTICEDANIELH · 11 MONTHS AGO