

CURRENTS/QUESTIONS D'ACTUALITÉ

The Pretendian Problem

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Abstract

Pretendianism is a problem in academia (and of whiteness). Its long-standing existence is well researched and analyzed in the academic record, and it has been brought to wider audiences through news and social media. In response, task forces, committees and advisory councils are being created in universities to determine stronger identity validation policies, with emphasis on engaging relationships with local Indigenous nations, communities, elders, and knowledge holders. Policy making, including processes and procedures of identity validation, will be a powerful apparatus going forward to administer indigeneity in universities. This approach will also lead to the intensification of Indigenous definition and regulation by predominantly non-Indigenous institutions. This article proposes a set of complementary extrapolicy practices addressing pretendianism worth exploring and that emerge from the everyday embodied vantage points of Indigenous academics. We must (continue to) name whiteness, model Indigenous relationality and learn from Indigenous women's leadership.

Résumé

Le prétendianisme est un problème dans le monde universitaire (et de la blancheur). Son existence de longue date a fait l'objet de recherches et d'analyses approfondies dans les antécédents universitaires et a été portée à la connaissance d'un public plus large par le biais de l'actualité et des médias sociaux. Pour y répondre, des groupes de travail, des comités et des conseils consultatifs sont créés dans les universités afin de définir des politiques de validation de l'identité plus solides, en mettant l'accent sur l'établissement de relations avec les nations, les communautés, les anciens et les détenteurs de savoirs. L'élaboration de politiques, y compris les processus et les procédures de validation de l'identité, sera un outil puissant pour administrer l'indigénéité dans les universités. Cette approche conduira également à l'intensification de la définition et de la réglementation de l'indigénat par des institutions majoritairement non autochtones. Cet article propose un ensemble de pratiques extra-politiques complémentaires pour lutter contre le prétendianisme, qui méritent d'être explorées et qui émergent des points de vue quotidiens et incarnés des universitaires indigènes. Nous devons (continuer à) nommer la blancheur, modéliser la relationnalité autochtone et apprendre du leadership des femmes autochtones.

Keywords: Indigenous peoples; pretendians; academia; university policy; whiteness

Mots-clés : peuples autochtones ; prétendus Indiens ; monde universitaire ; politique universitaire ; blancheur

Pretendianism is a problem in academia (and of whiteness). The long-standing existence of playing Indian, race-shifting, self-indigenizing, and fraudulent identity-claiming is well researched in the academic record (Andersen, 2014; Deloria, 1995; Gaudry and Andersen, 2016; Leroux, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2021; Pewewardy, 2004; Sturm, 2011; TallBear, 2022). It has also been brought to the attention of wider audiences through news outlets and by having incidents shared on social media. Some of the harms of pretendianism include the misappropriation of resources earmarked for Indigenous students and researchers and the promotion of harmful stereotypes and other misrepresentations about indigeneity by those without lived experience. Indigenous women, including the Indigenous Women's Collective (IWC) and the Indigenous Women Scholars (IWS) group, have been leaders in addressing pretendianism. For example, in 2015, the IWS published an article in *Indian Country Today* identifying Andrea Smith as a pretendian and how she was invited to address her false identity claim. The disavowal of pretendians like Smith did not get taken up broadly in 2015 but gained more attention when the *New York Times* published a 2021 feature exposé on the issue.

Universities are responding to the pretendian problem by forming institutional bodies and developing identity validation policies that emphasize documentation. As well as assessing this policy-oriented response, I want to foreground three complementary practices available for Indigenous academics to also address the pretendian problem: naming whiteness, modelling Indigenous relationality and learning from Indigenous women's leadership. To explore these practices, I draw on an auto-ethnographic case study in which, in a recent experience, it was suggested that I am not from the First Nation I claim and how I (and my relatives) addressed the situation.

In 2022, the National Indigenous Identity Forum (NIIF) produced *Indigenous Voices on Indigenous Identity*. The report has become an orienting document for institutions grappling with the pretendian problem. It defines a pretendian as “[a] person who falsely claims to have Indigenous ancestry, who fakes an Indigenous identity, or who digs up an old ancestor from hundreds of years ago to proclaim themselves as Indigenous” (NIIF, 2022: 4). Pretendians, in this definition, include flat-out fakes and those with distant ancestry claims. It follows that the pretendian problem is not about establishing degrees of Indigenous authenticity but about whether one's Indigenous relationality (continues to) exist(s). The need to address the problem is, therefore, linked to the collective concerns of Indigenous peoples around caretaking our relatives, governing Indigenous relationality and struggling against colonialism.

Yet the pretendian problem has become framed as a policy issue among Canadian universities. Indigenous expert committees are being established, identity validation guidelines are being constructed, collective agreement policies are being reconsidered, and reprimands for fraudulent identity claims are being discussed (NIIF, 2022: 6). Task forces, committees and advisory councils are being created in universities to determine stronger identity validation policies, with emphasis

on engaging relationships with local Indigenous nations, communities, elders, and knowledge holders. Organizational statements denouncing pretendianism, such as the one made in 2015 by the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA, 2015), are no longer (if they ever were) considered adequate in addressing the problem. Going forward, policy making will be a powerful apparatus to administer indigeneity in universities. This approach, even as it is Indigenous-led, will also lead to the intensification of Indigenous regulation by predominantly non-Indigenous institutions.

Not lost on many Indigenous scholars is that the policy-based approach in Canada, in some measure, echoes the biopolitical logic of colonial governance established through the Indian Act, which administered the historic “Indian problem.” The growing hyperawareness of indigeneity in universities makes sense, given that as biotechnologies shift to bring smaller, farther and unseen realities into scientific view, technologies and techniques of governance also become refined to see bodies and populations on intensified scales. Indigenous scholars and students have been left wondering if our now Indigenous-led biopolitics (if it can be called that) will be an effective approach to quell the menacing force of pretendianism in academia. We hope that it is.

Drawing on a personal case study, I explore a set of extrapolicy practices to address pretendianism. In 2021, the university that employs me made a Facebook post including a link to a story regarding an award I had won. Among the positive comments made to the post from colleagues and family members was one made by someone who is presumably from the First Nation I claim. It reads:

She’s not from here and we’ve never heard of her.

A university staff member made me aware of the comment and offered to delete it, but I urged them not to. I responded (I’ve replaced names with — to respect anonymity):

Hi —. Thanks for your comment. With the presence of so many pretendians in academia, it’s important for Indigenous scholars to be transparent about who they are and what families they come from especially when questions and concerns like yours are raised. I’m a status Indian registered with Peguis, but more importantly, I’m a McCorrister and Spence. My late grandmother is — McCorrister. I am bear clan and received my names, colours, and clan in ceremony with — —. I did not grow up on reserve, but I can assure you that while you and others may not know me, my family surely does. It looks like you are even FB friends with two of my relatives — and —. Some (not all) of my other relatives who are on FB include —, —, —, —, —, —, —, —, —, —, —, and —. Thanks again for your comment and all the best.

In addition to my legal recognition, the post emphasizes my kinship relationality, including my clan and relatives. My cousins and aunties, tagged in the post, joined the thread in claiming their connection to and support of me. The individual who made the initial accusation privately messaged to apologize for their comment

and encouraged me to continue working in service of our people. The entire process of validation was community initiated, discussed and clarified. Being accused of not being claimed by those you claim is not an indictment. It is an invitation.

This case study is instructive because I am an Indigenous person who, like many, did not grow up on reserve and is multigenerationally dispossessed through previous Indian Act registration rules, residential schooling and the Sixties Scoop; but I am not disconnected. Stories about disconnection and family dysfunction caused by colonial policy tend to animate pretendian lore. However, despite colonial policies, my family, again like many, has always maintained our relationship to our family on and off reserve, to our territory and to our nation. My experience attests that you can be dispossessed and still connected through ongoing Indigenous relations beyond vapid ancestry claims alone. I make this assertion by also speaking directly to the experience of being a white-looking Indigenous person who takes seriously the responsibility of exposing whiteness as a system of power that conditions the possibility of pretendianism in academia.

Pretendians account for some of the white-looking “Indigenous people” in universities, but we must also acknowledge that real Indigenous people who look white make up a large proportion of Indigenous academics—and that collectively, we produce knowledge about indigeneity from this standpoint. White-looking Indigenous people experience the violence of colonial dispossession (as all Indigenous people do) while also experiencing effects of white privilege in daily interactions with individuals and institutions. The complexity of this embodiment is dizzying but nonetheless real and in need of further analysis. After all, which characteristics, if not ones connected to whiteness, enable individuals and families to “hide in plain sight,” as is so often argued by pretendians and some real Indigenous people? We must begin analyzing the *densities* of whiteness.

The density (Andersen, 2009), immediacy (Hokowhitu, 2009), embodiment (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) and relations (TallBear, 2018) of my indigeneity/whiteness mean that I simultaneously experience dispossession and privilege—an undeserved penalty and an unearned benefit—both ontologically linked to colonial dis/possession. I raise this experience to speak to instances where white-looking Indigenous people in Canada describe being victims because their physical appearance makes them feel less Indigenous (Cyca, 2022). I do not deny the existence of internalized racial hierarchies and lateral violence between Indigenous people—I have experienced them myself—but I reframe the dynamic of being Indigenous and looking white by talking about the responsibility we have in addressing the pretendian problem from this positionality.

One might feel defensive when their indigeneity is questioned—a feeling I had initially in the above case (because of its groundlessness) but which I suggest needs to be processed and dispelled quickly. Making false or unsubstantiated accusations about an individual’s indigeneity is not consistent with Indigenous governance and relationality on the northern prairies from which I originate. But when this happens, it is indicative of the broader field of colonial power in which whiteness has become relationally productive of indigeneity. The possibility of pretendianism is conditioned by the Indian problem—itself a product of whiteness and legal and discursive relations of colonial power. The production and re/iteration of indigeneity as a rights-bearing subjectivity and the incumbent property

interest of its possessors have made its appropriation possible. Indigenous peoplehoods that predate colonialism are illegible but sensed by technologies of colonial governance, and so partly remade in the ontological image of whiteness. Naming and analyzing whiteness as a system of power that limits and contorts Indigenous peoplehoods will do more for collective anticolonial pursuits than will vilifying our own people who invite us to prove our relations. Indigenous women have especially been role models in asking for peer accountability in academia, just as Indigenous women have been vital in making Indigenous identification policies such as Indian Act registration less discriminatory.

While questions about one's relations is an appropriate practice, remaining silent when false accusations or genuine questions arise results in missed opportunities to model the richness and diversity of what real Indigenous relationality looks like locally. We also deny the everyday governance of our community-based practices of validation to take place (even if it is on Facebook) and leave official authority to institutional policies that define and regulate us. If insecurity in one's indigeneity results in one's silence or in the defence of pretendians, then white-looking (real) Indigenous academics risk reproducing the precondition of pretendianism—the system of whiteness that produced Indianness as a matter of racial rather than relational identity. Staying quiet will not address the pretendian problem; it will allow it to thrive and, in doing so, will contribute to the backlash against Indigenous women who have led efforts to defend Indigenous relationalities on multiple fronts.

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