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# A "Blue-eyed Ojibway" is not a 'Pretendian'

Being biracial and of mixed ethnic background has always been a challenge for Indigenous people living on as well as off the reserve and until not long ago, they often tried to hide their Native ancestry and background when they were living off the reserve. Drew Hayden Taylor, the Ojibway playwright, short story writer, novelist and essayist is blue-eyed, has a white skin and fair hair and does not look like an Indigenous person at all. He was born in Curve Lake, Ontario and his mother is Ojibway, whereas his father, who he never met, was white. Taylor's voice is that of a humorist and he is mostly known for, as he himself describes it, "a lighthearted and satirical take on the Native experience" (Taylor 2014, vii). It is therefore no wonder that already in the 1990s he wrote an essay called "Pretty like a white Boy" (Taylor 1998, 3–8), in which he reflects on his experiences as a young Indigenous man, who does not "look like one" (ibid.), especially after he had moved from the reserve to Toronto to go to college. His life on the reserve had been joyful, but in the city, it was not only that he, as a "blue-eyed Ojibway" (ibid.), did not meet people's expectations of an "authentic Indian" (ibid.), but he also rather felt like a traitor when he had to witness and hear racism towards First Nations people, simply because people thought he was Caucasian.

Daniel Bear, an actor and filmmaker from Winnipeg, Manitoba, tells of similar experiences. His father is Ojibway, but he has more of his English mother. In "Unreserved", a radio programme produced by CBC Canada that provides "a radio space for Indigenous voices",[1] Bear was interviewed to the issue of "Growing up Indigenous when you don't look it" (Bear 2016). He said that "he always knew he was Indigenous but did not start fully exploring his cultural background until junior high when residential schools were introduced in class" (ibid.). As a young boy he also often had to experience how his friends discriminated against Indigenous people, when they, for example, "pointed at a group of homeless people and called them 'dirty Indians' but said 'don't worry Daniel, you're not like that.' It kind of felt like betrayal" (ibid.).

1 For more information on the broadcast see: www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/about-unreserved-1.4349977.

**Race Shifters, Imposters, and Cultural Appropriation**

For quite some years, the tide seems to have turned and claiming to be Indigenous has increasingly become desirable for people who do not look Native and have either none or only a distant and unspecified Indigenous background. Native people call them wannabes, shape or race shifters, and imposters. Indigenous communities consider this identity theft and reactions have, at times, been harsh, outspoken, and angry. Some people even see them as interlopers, who try to adopt an Indigenous identity by sneaking into the ancient cultures and nations. Métis Lawyer Jean Teillet, who is the great-grandniece of the Métis leader Louis Riel, wrote a report about this issue for the University of Saskatchewan and for her, Indigenous identity fraud represents "the ultimate step in colonialism" (The Canadian Press 2023). In the past years, the term 'Pretendians' has come up, a blend of the two words 'pretend' and 'Indian', and a denomination Teillet does not like, because for her, "'pretend' makes it too innocent" and she argues that it "makes it difficult to see the harm" (ibid.) this causes for Native people and their communities. For her, identity fraud is "akin to violence", not one that causes "physical bruises. But it bruises the community" (ibid.). Indigenous identity theft is also a serious problem in the USA, and Lianna Constantino, who works for the Cherokee Tribal Alliance against Frauds, is even more point-blank when she says: "They are literally erasing us by replacing us" (Taylor 2022, *Pretendians*).

In fact, cultural appropriation as, for example, Indigenous art fraud and art theft, but also appropriation of voice, especially in literature, have both been very much debated since the 1990s, although they were already a problem long before that. Authors like W. P. Kinsella, Rudy Wiebe or the playwright and poet Henry Beissel have been criticized for depicting Native peoples and their culture in their writings and for unrightfully assuming and representing the Indigenous voice. Identity fraud, however, has only recently become the focus of discussions and concern, although it is not a new phenomenon either.

As a matter of fact, one of the earliest known 'Pretendians' in Canada was Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, alias 'Grey Owl', who was born in Hastings, England, in 1888 and who died in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, in 1938. He had claimed that his father was a Scotsman and his mother an Apache woman. 'Grey Owl' was a well-known conservationist and early environmentalist, and he published articles and books about Canada's wilderness. However, his reputation suffered, when, after his death, his real identity became public. In a recent BBC feature article, he was called "Canada's great conservationist and imposter" (Onyanga-Omara 2013).

What, perhaps, was mainly an exception or often ignored in the past has now become a hotly debated topic among Native peoples in Canada as well as in the USA, especially after a number of prominent people had either to admit or were accused of Indigenous identity fraud. One example is the highly acclaimed novelist and author Joseph Boyden, whose case was made public in 2016. Since then, he has faced a lot of criticism for claiming an Indigenous identity as well as the right to speak for the

Indigenous cause. In 2017, he passionately defended his claim in a *Maclean's* article and put forward a number of arguments, for example that a DNA test proved that he and his family could perhaps not be called mixed, but that they were 'mutts', admittedly mainly Celtic but with blood in their veins from numerous Indigenous ancestors. He counters his critics by asking them:

> If I am accepted by people in Indigenous communities, if I have been traditionally adopted by a number of people in Indigenous communities, if my DNA test shows I have Indigenous blood, if I have engaged my whole career in publicly defending Indigenous rights as well as using my public recognition as an author to shine light on Indigenous issues, am I not, in some way, Indigenous? (Boyden 2017)

Boyden also stresses that he was not chosen by Indigenous families for his "bloodlines or his blood quantum" and he, therefore, demands that "it is up to the individual Indigenous families and communities to decide. If a family or community accepts you as a member, you are a member. And other families and communities need to respect that" (ibid.).

No doubt, Boyden's case illustrates how difficult and complex, but also delicate and sensitive the issue is and that there are many uncertainties about how to deal with the subject.

### *The Pretendians* – A Documentary About False Identities

Drew Hayden Taylor is not only a writer, but also a filmmaker. He has recently produced a documentary in which he investigates various facets of cultural appropriation and the phenomenon of 'Pretendians' and fake identities, in particular. As someone who does not look like an Indigenous person himself, Taylor seems to have a particular interest in shedding some light on the issue. He wonders, why there has been "an explosion of new status claims" (2022, *Pretendians*) and he wants to understand what motivates non-Native people to adopt an Indigenous identity. Is it because of financial gains, job careers and influence "or is there something deeper going on?" (ibid.). No doubt, benefits that come with a status card seem to be one important reason, because "tax, education and jobs subsidies have been granted to Native people" (ibid.) as a kind of amends and compensation for the many injustices of the past or, as Taylor puts it, "to even the playing field" (ibid.). Taylor shows that non-Native people, for example, buy forged status cards from dubious organizations to get tax-free gas at gas stations or save money when buying new cars.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada considered education one of the most important factors for the reconciliation process aiming, among others, to put an end to educational and employment disparities at colleges and universities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Many universities followed the recommendations formulated in the Commission's Calls to Action and

started to develop plans and policies to increase Indigenous student populations. They also began to offer scholarships and bursaries as well as positions for Indigenous staff, faculty members and scholars, which seems to be one reason that people are lying about being Indigenous on college or on job applications and that an increased number of 'Pretendians' can, especially, be found in the academia and in the arts. No doubt, acquiring forged status cards is already an infringement, but claiming an Indigenous ancestry to become, for example, eligible for job positions, financial subsidies or scholarships that are designed for Indigenous people is, no doubt, a step further.

However, who should have a right to claim an Indigenous identity and who finally decides? What are prerequisites and is perhaps a certain blood quantum running through one's veins necessary to claim an Indigenous heritage? In his documentary, Taylor talks to Lisa Dillon, a historic demographer from the University of Montreal about this question and here, especially, about people in Eastern Canada, who call themselves 'Eastern Métis'. Many of them often claim an Indigenous heritage dating back to a 16th- or 17th-century ancestor. Dillon points out that, as a matter of fact, most French Canadians do have some Indigenous blood in their veins; however, when one looks at all their ancestors, this one ancestor contributes only a very small part to the whole genetic mix. She underlines that it is "mathematically impossible to say that you have substantial Indigenous heritage, if your heritage is from this French-Canadian Catholic population" (ibid.) since it only amounts to one or two percent Indigenous representation. For her, claiming benefits against this background is certainly "a big leap" (ibid.).

Taylor is convinced that a few drops of Indigenous blood are definitely not enough, and yet, what about people who can show half or even only a quarter Indigenous heritage? As a matter of fact, at the beginning of his documentary, Taylor uses a DNA-Kit (saliva collection kit) to find out about his own percentage of Indigenous heritage and mails it off. At the end of the film, Taylor refrains from revealing the results and that way, perhaps, suggests that knowing the blood quantum does not necessarily solve the problem. It seems, though, to be commonly agreed that the most important factor is a traceable connection to a family and community, their history and ancestry and that the communities and families concerned not only accept the person but can also prove the claim and the connection.

Another contested issue is the adoption of a white person into an Indigenous family and a community. Does it automatically render this person the right to claim status, as, for example, Joseph Boyden demands? Taylor discusses this complicated problem with his Ojibway journalist friend Angela Lavallee, who, however, has a clear opinion on the rights white people should have, if they marry into a First Nation community or are adopted by a Native family and community. For her, "they are visitors, husbands, wives, part of the community, but not Anishinaabe" (ibid.) and should, therefore, not receive the benefits of a status.

**A Harmful Discussion**

In 2022, Plex, alias Doug Bedard, an Indigenous rapper and Hip Hop musician who claims himself Ojibway, Cree, and Ukrainian, released his song *Red Flags*:

> Let's finish this, I'm sick of this,
> calling yourself Indigenous
> Don't even know the differences
> between eagles and pigeons kid,
> lying 'bout who you are,
> thriving off of who you know
> […]
> something missing from your
> claims and that's a(p)parent.
> […]
> Red Flags, Red Flags, Red Flags
> Your story don't add up,
> It's Red Flags, Red Flags, Red Flags, Red Flags (Bedard 2022)

When asked why he had written the song, he explained that he had heard about a number of musicians who had been accepted as Indigenous and had that way taken up spaces for years, and what had only annoyed him in the past, had now "grown into something I've really come to despise" (Melanson 2022). For Plex, the song was a chance "to put these 'Pretendians' on notice" (ibid.).

Many Indigenous people want to draw a line and to take action and there has been an increased effort to expose 'Pretendians' and to make them accountable for what they are doing. Drew Hayden Taylor also clearly demands that a line has to be drawn, but he also points out: "When it comes to the 'Pretendian' issue, have we gone too far and trying to out people?" (2022, *Pretendians*). Unfortunately, also innocent people suffer from these actions, and in his documentary, Taylor talks to Cyndy Baskin, Associate Professor of Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University, who was accused of being a 'Pretendian', anonymously and online from people she never got to know, when her name showed up in a list called "Pretendians for hire". Cyndy Baskin is Mi'kmaq on her father's side and Celtic on her mother's. The university as well as her book publisher were contacted, and while she eventually managed to successfully fight the false accusations, it nonetheless meant an "enormous amount of stress" (ibid.) for her. She often cried about it, and she was very scared about where it would finally end.

Anton Treuer, who is Professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University, Minnesota, also advises people to be careful when judging "Pretendians" (Treuer 2023). He fears that a side effect of this development can be to keep biracial people who do have Native blood in their veins from claiming their Indigeneity and thus away from their

rightful place in their Indigenous communities. Moreover, Treuer pleads to be more inclusive and suggests that even people who are no status Indians, might have sufficient Indigenous blood running through their veins to entitle them to participate in the ceremonies, to learn the language and to learn about the culture.

Drew Hayden Taylor does not have a problem with his biracial background, and in an interview he even said that, now, he feels "comfortable in both cultures" (Taylor, Interview 2022). Yet, many young Indigenous people who do not look like their ancestors are troubled by the question of where they belong and the controversy about the 'Pretendians' could, perhaps, make them even more insecure. Dawna Hearl, a young voice from British Columbia, vividly describes the dilemma many young Indigenous youths are in, when they do not visibly look 'Indian':

> I didn't grow up on reserve. […] Even though I'm only a quarter European, I'm a bit pale for a Native, and that never really occurred to me until very recently. I knew I didn't pass as White, but I was lighter than most Natives I've known, who are brown with black hair. Do I still get to be Native with lighter skin? Or do I not belong, even though my grandpa went to residential school? (Hearl 2018)

**A Romantic End to It?**

Taylor does not only see benefits and personal gain as reasons for non-Native people to claim Indigeneity, but also "white settlers' guilt" (2022, *Pretendians*). He thinks that because of bad treatment and their land claims "more folks want to be on the Indigenous side" (ibid.). Rick O'Bomsawin, who is the chief of the Abenaki Nation of Odanak, even has the impression:

> I tell you what I see. A lot of people, all of a sudden, become Indian and it's the romantic end of it. It's the power of dancing. I'm going to ceremonies. It's all beautiful, everybody loves each other, everybody likes each other. (Ibid.)

Some readers might perhaps now be reminded of "Indianthusiasm" in Germany, as Hartmut Lutz describes it in the introduction to a book with the same title he edited together with Florentine Strzeczyk and Renae Watchman on the Germans' love for Karl May, *Indianer*, and everything that has to do with North American Native people. Yet, with "Indianthusiasm",[2] a blend of the words 'Indian' and 'enthusiasm', Lutz refers to people who basically adhere to popular romantic stereotypes, often showing mis-

2 Hartmut Lutz "derived the term from the German word 'Deutschtümelei', which mocks ethnocentric, exaggerated, and nationalist celebrations of an idealized Germanness. In searching for an English term that would preserve the irony of the original German, Lutz coined the English neologism 'German Indianthusiasm'" (2020, 12).

representations and are guided by racial prejudices and, last but not least, use cultural appropriation. Yet, to be clear, 'Pretendians' are not a romantic North American version of German "Indianthusiasm".

Even if some 'Pretendians' long for community and togetherness, lines have to be drawn. Native people demand, for example, from universities to take action and to implement relevant measurements that end the system of self-identification on an honorary basis and that ensure that positions are filled by Indigenous people. However, this can only be effective if universities and government institutions work together with the Indigenous families and communities. The issue of 'Pretendians' remains a contested and also a very sensitive and emotional topic, and one can only hope that solutions will be found on common grounds.

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