

Indigenous Identity Fraud in the Academy

Winona Wheeler

Associate Professor, Department of Indigenous Studies
College of Arts and Science

Indigenous identity fraud occurs when non-Indigenous people pose and represent themselves as Indigenous. This phenomenon is not new news to us. We have been dealing with it for a few centuries. From Archie Belaney (Grey Owl), to Dr. Andrea Smith, Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at UC Riverside¹, writer Joseph Boyden, filmmaker Michelle Latimer, and even more recent newsworthy instances, there have always been a few non-Indigenous people “playing Indian” in our midst. Each of these, and many others, were well published, highly regarded professionals, who built esteemed careers on stolen identities and were rewarded with “personal, professional, positional, and financial gain.”² Indigenous identity fraud is also known as “race-shifting” and pretendianism. It is fraud and academic misconduct.

Indigenous peoples are calling it

out because of its many and varied harmful effects. The most obvious harms include taking up positions and acquiring grants intended for Indigenous people. The reality is, in this age of reconciliation and Indigenization “there are suddenly more grants and benefits to identifying as Indigenous.”³ For every fraudster holding a university position, acquiring Indigenous grants and scholarships, there are Indigenous scholars, students and staff who are shut out.

When one claims to be Indigenous in the academy, students and peers alike expect that they are bringing experiential knowledge into their teaching and research, that they have lived Indigenous experiences and knowledge that provide unique perspectives and understandings. It is not just the space and opportunities they take away from Indigenous peoples that offends, it is the heinous strategy of stealing

the experiences we have lived through and claiming them as their own for the purposes of self-authentication. Misappropriating Indigenous identities and falsely speaking as an Indigenous person reeks of white privilege and is an act of aggression and disrespect against the self-determination of Indigenous peoples.

When a fraudster is finally exposed the impact on Indigenous students is absolutely painful. Students question everything they learned in class, feel duped and manipulated, and experience tremendous emotional turmoil. This is especially true for graduate students who are not only reeling emotionally but are also dependent on research assistantships, financial support, their committees and supervisors.

Try to think about it from the perspectives of our families and communities—first they took our lands and resources, then they made laws and policies intent on destroying our cultures, languages, ways of life, and identities (some of which, according to the UN, constitutes genocide at the worst, and crimes against humani-

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ty at the least). Having endured a few centuries of all that historical trauma, we are now doing our best to carve out spaces in the mainstream, as best we can, WITHOUT compromising who we are. I hear old people lamenting that so much has been taken and lost over time, that all we really have left is our identity.

The 2015 Smith case mentioned above prompted the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association to issue a “Statement on Indigenous Identity Fraud” which stresses, as we have all been stressing for decades, that self-identification is not enough.⁴ However, most universities refuse to act on it, on the grounds that identity is a personal issue and that universities were not in the business of determining who is and who is not Indigenous. Both these arguments are disingenuous.

Indigenous identity fraud is encouraged in academia. Where self-identification is the norm there are no systems in place to prevent it from happening, and fraudsters are often well rewarded for their efforts. For years, Indigenous faculty and staff at the University of Saskatchewan have been arguing that where positions and opportunities are Indigenous focused there needs to be more than mere self-identification in place to evaluate

that qualification.

We agree 100% that the university is not equipped and has no business determining who is and who is not Indigenous. That responsibility falls under the jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples. It just so happens that Usask has at least 40 Indigenous scholars on faculty (smart people with PhDs who know how to do stuff) and probably around the same number of Indigenous staff, who have significant Indigenous connections and networks locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. We are in a pretty solid position to provide some direction in this regard.

How some universities handle the calling out of Indigenous identity fraudsters is very telling. In most instances, the university’s first reaction is to stand by the fraudster even when presented with irrefutable evidence of Indigenous identity fraud, which they choose to ignore. The disregard, gaslighting and silencing that Indigenous faculty and staff experience from senior management in these instances is nothing short of neo-colonial violence.

Universities need to seriously think about what reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization really require of them. We do not need pretty pictures and light

shows. We need systemic and structural change, in this instance, to protect communities, the university, faculty, students and staff from Indigenous identity fraud. We need the university to stand up for integrity, honesty and ethics. We need the university to create a space in the structure and systems where Indigenous peoples bring their expertise to the table to make these determinations. We need an official space where Indigenous scholars and staff can work with communities to develop a policy with criteria to evaluate Indigeneity claims.

Fear of systemic and structural change should not be a barrier to authentic decolonization and Indigenization. Clearly the current system does not work. And this is not just, or merely, an Indigenous issue either. This is about academic integrity. Indigenous identity fraud is fraud. According to University ethical standards and the standards expected of tenured faculty, it is also academic misconduct. If tenured faculty are permitted to falsify and fabricate their identity, and hoodwink not just the university but funding agencies, colleagues, students, and communities, then academic standards are meaningless.

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¹Scott Jaschik, “Fake Cherokee?” *Inside Higher Ed*, posted July 2, 2015. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/06/scholar-who-has-made-name-chokeee-accused-not-having-native-american-roots>

²Karen Lawford and Veldon Coburn, “Research, Ethnic Fraud, And The Academy: A Protocol For Working With Indigenous Communities and Peoples,” *Yellowhead Institute*, August 20, 2019, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2019/08/20/research-ethnic-fraud-and-the-academy-a-protocol-for-working-with-indigenous-communities-and-peoples/>

³Brett Forester, The harmful, 'cynical and self-serving' nature of Indigenous identity fraud," *APTN National News* November 4, 2021, <https://www.aptnnews.ca/nation-to-nation/the-harmful-cynical-and-self-serving-nature-of-indigenous-identity-fraud/>

⁴Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, "NAISA Council Statement on Indigenous Identity Fraud, approved by NAISA Council, 15 September 2015." Posted August 12, 2015. <https://naisa.org/about/documents-archive/previous-council-statements/#identityfraud>

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