

WELCOME TO YOUR AUTHENTIC INDIAN EXPERIENCE

“Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience” is a 2017 short story by the writer **Rebecca Roanhorse**. It won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards for best science fiction story of the year (these are the most prestigious awards in science fiction). Philosophically speaking, it raises a ton of interesting questions: about culture, identity, our responsibility for our own lives, and much else.

Author Bio (adapted from Wikipedia): Roanhorse was born Rebecca Pari in Conway, Arkansas in 1971. Raised in northern Texas, she has said that “being a black and Native kid in Fort Worth in the ’70s and ’80s was pretty limiting”; thus, she turned to reading and writing, especially science fiction, as a form of escape. Her father was an economics professor, and her mother was a high school English teacher who encouraged Rebecca’s early attempts at writing stories. She was adopted as a child by white parents. In a 2020 profile by Vulture Magazine, she said that at 7 years old she learned from looking at her birth certificate that she is “half-Black and half-Spanish Indian”. She reunited with her birth mother later in life, though they rarely speak. Roanhorse has said that she is of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo and African American descent, though she is not an enrolled tribal member.

Warning: Please read the story before looking at my notes! I don’t want to spoil the experience for you, and (especially) stop you from reading it in a different way than I have. Part of the beauty of fiction is that it (unlike most philosophy) is *supposed* to be “many different things to many different people.”

SUPER SHORT SUMMARY

To help set up our later discussion of philosophical themes and ideas, it will be helpful to review the outline of the story, so we’re all on the same page.

Setting. The story is set in the small tourist city of Sedona, Arizona. It is set sometime in the not-super-distant future. The major technological change is the existence of improved **virtual reality (VR)**, which allows people to fully “experience” things like smells, physical sensations, etc. The main character works at VR service called “Sedona Sweats” in which clients/customers sign up to get the experience of life as an “American Indian” (or so they think). The story’s action is split between the “real” and the “virtual” world and, by the end, it’s not always clear which is which!

Characters. It’s a short story, so there’s really one “main” character, and a number of side characters. All of the characters except White Wolf are American Indians:

- **Jesse Turnblatt** is the main character of the story. He works at Sedona Sweats, giving tourists VR experience of “Vision Quests.” He’s worried about lots of things, including his relationship with Teresa (and the other characters), his employment status, how tourists perceive him (as masculine, “authentic”, etc.).
- **Teresa Turnblatt** is Jesse’s wife. She eventually leaves Jesse for White Wolf.
- **DarAnne** is Jesse’s coworker. She seems more politically/ethically concerned about many things that Jesse does (such as their Boss’s proposal for a “Squaw Fantasy”, which is presumably something like pornography)..
- **White Wolf** is a white tourist who signs for a Vision Quest with Jesse, and who becomes his “friend” in real life. He eventually replaces Jesse, and takes over his job, his marriage, etc. Everyone agrees that White Wolf is “better” at Jesse’s life than he is!

Plot Points. The main plot points are:

1. We meet Jesse, and learn about his job and life circumstances. Jesse and White Wolf meet on a Vision Quest.
2. Jesse and White Wolf start meeting in real life. White Wolf learns a lot about American Indian “life.”
3. Jesse falls ill for a few days. Teresa meets (and presumably falls for) White Wolf. White Wolf takes over Jesse’s job, as Boss thinks he is “more authentic.” Even DarAnne seems to like him.
4. Jesse descends into alcoholism, despair, etc. as his life falls apart. At the end, we discover that *he* (and not White Wolf) might have been the one who signed up for a virtual “Authentic Indian Experience.” That is, maybe Jesse is NOT an American Indian, but someone who “wanted to know what it is was really like.” And this (unpleasant!) experience is what he was presented with.
 - a. Like many short stories, the story doesn’t *tell* us what exactly happened. Instead, It is intended to make you think!

ETHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

Identity and the “Lies that Bind.” The philosopher **Kwame Appiah** has argued that many aspects of our “personal identity” such as religion, nationality, gender, and race are the “lies that bind.” They are “lies” in the sense that they are no “biological” facts underpinning

them (e.g., we now know that race/gender don't biologically "cause" people of race A to be smarter, kinder, etc. than those of race B). Nevertheless, they are hugely important to who we are as people, and the sorts of lives we want to lead. They can, also, of course, be harmful (as when people come to believe that those of other races or nationalities are inherently inferior). How does Jesse's identity as an American Indian fit into his life? How does this compare with that of the other characters? How does this compare to your own experience of identity?

"Cultural Appropriation" and "Transracialism" In the story, White Wolf apparently "takes over" Jesse's life, including his job and romantic relationship. He also takes over his racial/ethnic identity. (Unless, of course, it's Jesse who is living in the simulation!). Moreover, he seems to do "better" at it in some ways that Jesse does—he "knows" more about American Indian lore, seems to be better liked by the native community (including Jesse's ex-girlfriend, coworkers, and bosses). At no point does he do anything "violent" to Jesse. And yet, it seems clear to Jesse that he's done something wrong in "claiming" an identity that isn't his. How do we make sense of this? What's the relevance to the real world?

More on Cultural Appropriation. Rebecca Roanhorse's work has generally been celebrated by American Indian scholars and critics. However, at least a few people have accused *her* of cultural appropriation, at least in part because she wasn't raised as part of the tribe of her biological mother, and hasn't sought formal "membership" as an adult (though both her husband and son are tribal members on his side in a different tribe). Moreover, some of the American Indian material that she writes about in her books don't concern "her" people, but rather those of other tribal people (which she learned about by doing research). Does Roanhorse have the "right" to write about such things? Why or why not?

Are We Living in a Simulation? Does it Even Matter? Lots of movies (such as *The Matrix*), novels (*Alice in Wonderland*), and short stories take up some version of the question: "What if the world we see around isn't the *real* world?" In recent years, some philosophers and computer scientists have defended the **simulation hypothesis**¹, according to which *our* reality is simply a computer simulation of some type. So, our lives might be just like White Wolf's (or Jesse's). There are all sorts of interesting philosophical questions about how we could possibly determine whether or not this is true. However, there's also an ethical question: How much would this actually matter? So, for example, suppose that Jesse IS living in a simulation. Would this make it OK for him to treat Teresa (or the other people he meets) badly? Why or why not?

What are the Ethics of Pornography? Jesse seems relatively unconcerned about the Boss's proposal to start a "Squaw Fantasy" scenario, which sounds vaguely pornographic. In fact, he even seems to find the idea of being seen as a "Savage Warrior" by tourists to be attractive. DarAnne, by contrast, thinks this would be demeaning (and presumably, *ethically wrong*). What do you think about the "ethics" of this idea? Would it be morally OK for the Boss to ask the employees to do it? For them to agree? Is it OK for tourists to "sign up" for this sort of fantasy? And what does this mean for the ethics of pornography (and/or sex work) in the real world?

How Much Responsibility Do We Have For Our Own Lives? A final question concerns the extent to which Jesse is *morally responsible* for the choices he makes (e.g., being a less-than-perfect husband, drinking too much, going along with the "Squaw" fantasy). From his perspective, he feels like society has "forced" him into these choices. For example, it isn't his "choice" to need money, and it wasn't his "choice" to live in a culture that presented him with certain "images" of what it meant to be an *authentic* "American Indian" or "Man". On the other hand, though, it would seem wrong (and even demeaning) to say that he has no "free will" at all. What do you think?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Give an example of an identity (such as religion, ethnicity, race, gender) that it is important to your own life. Now, answer the following questions, based on your own experience:
 - a. What does it mean to live this identity "authentically"?
 - b. What sorts of ethical obligations are related to this identity? (For example, does this identity place any constraints on how should treat others? On how you relate to society? On how others relate to you?)
2. What exactly IS cultural appropriation? What, if anything, is *morally* wrong with it?
3. What, if anything, is wrong with people identifying with races/ethnic groups that aren't "theirs"?
4. To what extent are Jesse's struggles in this story reflective of the problems that have faced real-life American Indians? Does the story suggest any way that we (as a society) might respond to these problems?

¹ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/4/10/18275618/simulation-hypothesis-matrix-rizwan-virk>