

Chapter 3: Impostors and the Authentic Indian Experience

Sci Fi and Philosophy: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

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2 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we'll be reading and discussing the story "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience", along with a related philosophical essay ("Impostors") on issues of race, culture, gender, and identity. Both are written by transracial adoptees, and explore similar themes and ideas.

"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.

Warning: Please read the story before looking at my notes (you can find it later in the chapter), as I don't want to spoil it for you!

About Rebecca Roanhorse (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.

2.1 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!

2.2 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 there 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?

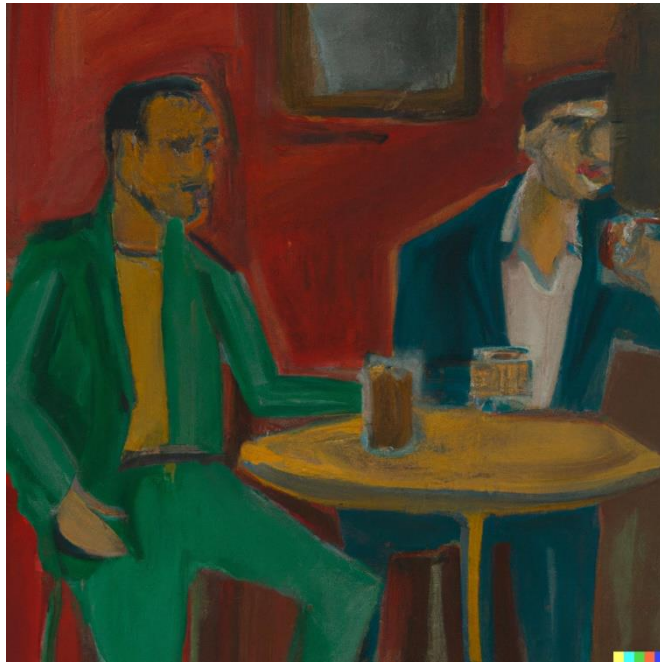


Figure 1 A painting of two men in a bar in the style of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Created using Dall-E (an AI tool for making art) solely for the purposes of this class. While I technically "own" this art, would I really have the right to sell it, or even distribute it widely online? Or would this violate the rights of the living (Native American) artist whose style Dall-E is imitating? (The other art in this class is not based on living artists).

"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

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

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?

2.3 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?

3 READING: WELCOME TO YOUR AUTHENTIC INDIAN EXPERIENCE (BY REBECCA ROANHORSE)²

In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts.

—Sherman Alexie, *How to Write the Great American Indian Novel*

You maintain a menu of a half dozen Experiences on your digital blackboard, but Vision Quest is the one the Tourists choose the most. That certainly makes your workday easy. All a Vision Quest requires is a dash of mystical shaman, a spirit animal (wolf usually, but birds of prey are on the upswing this year), and the approximation of a peyote experience. Tourists always come out of the Experience feeling spiritually transformed. (You’ve never actually tried peyote, but you did smoke your share of weed during that one year at Arizona State, and who’s going to call you on the difference?) It’s all 101 stuff, really, these Quests. But no other Indian working at Sedona Sweats can do it better. Your sales numbers are tops.

²² From: *Apex Magazine* (Aug 2017): <https://apex-magazine.com/short-fiction/welcome-to-your-authentic-indian-experience/>

Your wife Theresa doesn't approve of the gig. Oh, she likes you working, especially after that dismal stretch of unemployment the year before last when she almost left you, but she thinks the job itself is demeaning.

"Our last name's not Trueblood," she complains when you tell her about your *nom de rêve*.

"Nobody wants to buy a Vision Quest from a Jesse Turnblatt," you explain. "I need to sound more Indian."

"You are Indian," she says. "Turnblatt's Indian-sounding enough because you're already Indian."

"We're not the right kind of Indian," you counter. "I mean, we're Catholic, for Christ's sake."

What Theresa doesn't understand is that Tourists don't want a real Indian experience. They want what they see in the movies, and who can blame them? Movie Indians are terrific! So you watch the same movies the Tourists do, until John Dunbar becomes your spirit animal and Stands with Fists your best girl. You memorize Johnny Depp's lines from *The Lone Ranger* and hang a picture of Iron Eyes Cody in your work locker. For a while you are really into Dustin Hoffman's *Little Big Man*.

It's *Little Big Man* that does you in.

For a week in June, you convince your boss to offer a Custer's Last Stand special, thinking there might be a Tourist or two who want to live out a Crazy Horse Experience. You even memorize some quotes attributed to the venerable Sioux chief that you find on the internet. You plan to make it real authentic.

But you don't get a single taker. Your numbers nosedive.

Management in Phoenix notices, and Boss drops it from the blackboard by Fourth of July weekend. He yells at you to stop screwing around, accuses you of trying to be an artiste or whatnot.

"Tourists don't come to Sedona Sweats to live out a goddamn battle," Boss says in the break room over lunch one day, "especially if the white guy loses. They come here to find themselves." Boss waves his hand in the air in an approximation of something vaguely prayer-like. "It's a spiritual experience we're offering. Top quality. The fucking best."

DarAnne, your Navajo co-worker with the pretty smile and the perfect teeth, snorts loudly. She takes a bite of her sandwich, mutton by the looks of it. Her jaw works, her sharp teeth flash white. She waits until she's finished chewing to say, "Nothing spiritual about Squaw Fantasy."

Squaw Fantasy is Boss's latest idea, his way to get the numbers up and impress Management. DarAnne and a few others have complained about the use of the ugly slur, the inclusion of a sexual fantasy as an Experience at all. But Boss is unmoved, especially when the first week's numbers roll in. Biggest seller yet.

Boss looks over at you. "What do you think?"

Boss is Pima, with a bushy mustache and a thick head of still-dark hair. You admire that about him. Virility. Boss makes being a man look easy. Makes everything look easy. Real authentic-like.

DarAnne tilts her head, long beaded earrings swinging, and waits. Her painted nails click impatiently against the Formica lunch table. You can smell the onion in her sandwich.

Your mouth is dry like the red rock desert you can see outside your window. If you say Squaw Fantasy is demeaning, Boss will mock you, call you a pussy, or worse. If you say you think it's okay, DarAnne and her crew will put you on the guys-who-are-assholes list and you'll deserve it.

You sip your bottled water, stalling. Decide that in the wake of the Crazy Horse debacle that Boss's approval means more than DarAnne's, and venture, "I mean, if the Tourists like it ..."

Boss slaps the table, triumphant. DarAnne's face twists in disgust. "What does Theresa think of that, eh, Jesse?" she spits at you. "You tell her Boss is thinking of adding Savage Braves to the menu next? He's gonna have you in a loincloth and hair down to your ass, see how you like it."

Your face heats up, embarrassed. You push away from the table, too quickly, and the flimsy top teeters. You can hear Boss's shouts of protest as his vending machine lemonade tilts dangerously, and DarAnne's mocking laugh, but it all comes to your ears through a shroud of thick cotton. You mumble something about getting back to work. The sound of arguing trails you down the hall.

§

You change in the locker room and shuffle down to the pod marked with your name. You unlock the hatch and crawl in. Some people find the pods claustrophobic, but you like the cool metal container, the tight fit. It's comforting. The VR helmet fits snugly on your head, the breathing mask over your nose and mouth.

With a shiver of anticipation, you give the pod your Experience setting. Add the other necessary details to flesh things out. The screen prompts you to pick a Tourist connection from a waiting list, but you ignore it, blinking through the option screens until you get to the final confirmation. You brace for the mild nausea that always comes when you Relocate in and out of an Experience.

The first sensation is always smell. Sweetgrass and wood smoke and the rich loam of the northern plains. Even though it's fake, receptors firing under the coaxing of a machine, you relax into the scents. You grew up in the desert, among people who appreciate cedar and pinon and red earth, but there's still something home-like about this prairie place.

Or maybe you watch too much TV. You really aren't sure anymore.

You find yourself on a wide grassy plain, somewhere in the upper Midwest of a bygone era. Bison roam in the distance. A hawk soars overhead.

You are alone, you know this, but it doesn't stop you from looking around to make sure. This thing you are about to do. Well, you would be humiliated if anyone found out. Because you keep thinking about what DarAnne said. Squaw Fantasy and Savage Braves. Because the thing is, being sexy doesn't disgust you the way it does DarAnne. You've never been one of those guys. The star athlete or the cool kid. It's tempting to think of all those Tourist women wanting you like that, even if it is just in an Experience.

You are now wearing a knee-length loincloth. A wave of black hair flows down your back. Your middle-aged paunch melts into rock-hard abs worthy of a romance novel cover model. You raise your chin and try out your best stoic look on a passing prairie dog. The little rodent chirps something back at you. You've heard prairie dogs can remember human faces, and you wonder what this one would say about you. Then you remember this is an Experience, so the prairie dog is no more real than the caricature of an Indian you have conjured up.

You wonder what Theresa would think if she saw you like this.

The world shivers. The pod screen blinks on. Someone wants your Experience.

A Tourist, asking for you. Completely normal. Expected. No need for that panicky hot breath rattling through your mask.

You scroll through the Tourist's requirements.

Experience Type: Vision Quest.

Tribe: Plains Indian (nation nonspecific).

Favorite animal: Wolf.

These things are all familiar. Things you are good at faking. Things you get paid to pretend.

You drop the Savage Brave fantasy garb for buckskin pants and beaded leather moccasins. You keep your chest bare and muscled but you drape a rough wool blanket across your shoulders for dignity. Your impressive abs are still visible.

The sun is setting and you turn to put the artificial dusk at your back, prepared to meet your Tourist. You run through your list of Indian names to bestow upon your Tourist once the Vision Quest is over. You like to keep the names fresh, never using the same one in case the Tourists ever compare notes. For a while you cheated and used one of those naming things on the internet where you enter your favorite flower and the street you grew up on and it gives you your Indian name, but there were too many Tourists that grew up on Elm or Park and you found yourself getting repetitive. You try to base the names on appearances now. Hair color, eye, some distinguishing feature. Tourists really seem to like it.

This Tourist is younger than you expected. Sedona Sweats caters to New Agers, the kind from Los Angeles or Scottsdale with impressive bank accounts. But the man coming up the hill, squinting into the setting sun, is in his late twenties. Medium height and build with pale spotty skin and brown hair. The guy looks normal enough, but there's something sad about him.

Maybe he's lost.

You imagine a lot of Tourists are lost.

Maybe he's someone who works a day job just like you, saving up money for this once-in-a-lifetime Indian Experience™. Maybe he's desperate, looking for purpose in his own shitty world and thinking Indians have all the answers. Maybe he just wants something that's authentic.

You like that. The idea that Tourists come to you to experience something real. DarAnne has it wrong. The Tourists aren't all bad. They're just needy.

You plant your feet in a wide welcoming stance and raise one hand. "How," you intone, as the man stops a few feet in front of you.

The man flushes, a bright pinkish tone. You can't tell if he's nervous or embarrassed. Maybe both? But he raises his hand, palm forward, and says, "How," right back.

"Have you come seeking wisdom, my son?" you ask in your best broken English accent. "Come. I will show you great wisdom." You sweep your arm across the prairie. "We look to brother wolf—"

The man rolls his eyes.

What?

You stutter to a pause. Are you doing something wrong? Is the accent no good? Too little? Too much?

You visualize the requirements checklist. You are positive he chose wolf. Positive. So you press on. "My brother wolf," you say again, this time sounding much more Indian, you are sure.

"I'm sorry," the man says, interrupting. "This wasn't what I wanted. I've made a mistake."

“But you picked it on the menu!” In the confusion of the moment, you drop your accent. Is it too late to go back and say it right?

The man’s lips curl up in a grimace, like you have confirmed his worst suspicions. He shakes his head. “I was looking for something more authentic.”

Something in your chest seizes up.

“I can fix it,” you say.

“No, it’s alright. I’ll find someone else.” He turns to go.

You can’t afford another bad mark on your record. No more screw-ups or you’re out. Boss made that clear enough. “At least give me a chance,” you plead.

“It’s okay,” he says over his shoulder.

This is bad. Does this man not know what a good Indian you are? “Please!”

The man turns back to you, his face thoughtful.

You feel a surge of hope. This can be fixed, and you know exactly how. “I can give you a name. Something you can call yourself when you need to feel strong. It’s authentic,” you add enthusiastically. “From a real Indian.” That much is true.

The man looks a little more open, and he doesn’t say no. That’s good enough.

You study the man’s dusky hair, his pinkish skin. His long skinny legs. He reminds you a bit of the flamingos at the Albuquerque zoo, but you are pretty sure no one wants to be named after those strange creatures. It must be something good. Something...spiritual.

“Your name is Pale Crow,” you offer. Birds are still on your mind.

At the look on the man’s face, you reconsider. “No, no, it is White” —yes, that’s better than pale— “Wolf. White Wolf.”

“White Wolf?” There’s a note of interest in his voice.

You nod sagely. You knew the man had picked wolf. Your eyes meet. Uncomfortably. White Wolf coughs into his hand. “I really should be getting back.”

“But you paid for the whole experience. Are you sure?”

White Wolf is already walking away.

“But ...”

You feel the exact moment he Relocates out of the Experience. A sensation like part of your soul is being stretched too thin. Then, a sort of whiplash, as you let go.

§

The Hey U.S.A. bar is the only Indian bar in Sedona. The basement level of a driftwood-paneled strip mall across the street from work. It’s packed with the after-shift crowd, most of them pod jockeys like you, but also a few roadside jewelry hawkers and restaurant stiff s still smelling like frybread grease. You’re lucky to find a spot at the far end next to the server’s station. You slip onto the plastic-covered barstool and raise a hand to get the bartender’s attention.

“So what do you really think?” asks a voice to your right. DarAnne is staring at you, her eyes accusing and her posture tense.

This is it. A second chance. Your opportunity to stay off the assholes list. You need to get this right. You try to think of something clever to say, something that would impress her but let you save face, too. But you’re never been all that clever, so you stick to the truth.

“I think I really need this job,” you admit.

DarAnne’s shoulders relax.

“Scooch over,” she says to the man on the other side of her, and he obligingly shifts off his stool to let her sit. “I knew it,” she says. “Why didn’t you stick up for me? Why are you so afraid of Boss?”

“I’m not afraid of Boss. I’m afraid of Theresa leaving me. And unemployment.”

“You gotta get a backbone, Jesse, is all.”

You realize the bartender is waiting, impatient. You drink the same thing every time you come here, a single Coors Light in a cold bottle. But the bartender never remembers you, or your order. You turn to offer to buy one for DarAnne, but she’s already gone, back with her crew.

You drink your beer alone, wait a reasonable amount of time, and leave.

White Wolf is waiting for you under the streetlight at the corner.

The bright neon Indian Chief that squats atop Sedona Sweats hovers behind him in pinks and blues and yellows, his huge hand blinking up and down in greeting. White puffs of smoke signals flicker up, up and away beyond his far shoulder.

You don’t recognize White Wolf at first. Most people change themselves a little within the construct of the Experience. Nothing wrong with being thinner, taller, a little better looking. But White Wolf looks exactly the same. Nondescript brown hair, pale skin, long legs.

“How.” White Wolf raises his hand, unconsciously mimicking the big neon Chief. At least he has the decency to look embarrassed when he does it.

“You.” You are so surprised that the accusation is the first thing out of your mouth. “How did you find me?”

“Trueblood, right? I asked around.”

“And people told you?” This is very against the rules.

“I asked who the best Spirit Guide was. If I was going to buy a Vision Quest, who should I go to. Everyone said you.”

You flush, feeling vindicated, but also annoyed that your co-workers had given your name out to a Tourist. “I tried to tell you,” you say ungraciously.

“I should have listened.” White Wolf smiles, a faint shifting of his mouth into something like contrition. An awkward pause ensues.

“We’re really not supposed to fraternize,” you finally say.

“I know, I just ... I just wanted to apologize. For ruining the Experience like that.”

“It’s no big deal,” you say, gracious this time. “You paid, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s just ...” You know this is your ego talking, but you need to know. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it was me. You were great. It’s just, I had a great grandmother who was Cherokee, and I think being there, seeing everything. Well, it really stirred something in me. Like, ancestral memory or something.”

You’ve heard of ancestral memories, but you’ve also heard of people claiming Cherokee blood where there is none. Theresa calls them “pretendians,” but you think that’s unkind. Maybe White Wolf really is Cherokee. You don’t know any Cherokees, so maybe they really do look like this guy. There’s a half-Tlingit in payroll and he’s pale.

“Well, I’ve got to get home,” you say. “My wife, and all.”

White Wolf nods. “Sure, sure. I just. Thank you.”

“For what?”

But White Wolf’s already walking away. “See you around.”

A little déjà vu shudders your bones but you chalk it up to Tourists. Who understands them, anyway?

You go home to Theresa.

§

As soon as you slide into your pod the next day, your monitor lights up. There’s already a Tourist on deck and waiting.

“Shit,” you mutter, pulling up the menu and scrolling quickly through the requirements. Everything looks good, good, except ... a sliver of panic when you see that a specific tribe has been requested. Cherokee. You don’t know anything about Cherokees. What they wore back then, their ceremonies. The only Cherokee you know is ...

White Wolf shimmers into your Experience.

In your haste, you have forgotten to put on your buckskin. Your Experience-self still wears Wranglers and Nikes. Boss would be pissed to see you this sloppy.

“Why are you back?” you ask.

“I thought maybe we could just talk.”

“About what?”

White Wolf shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. Whatever.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? This is my time. I’m paying.”

You feel a little panicked. A Tourist has never broken protocol like this before. Part of why the Experience works is that everyone knows their role. But White Wolf don’t seem to care about the rules.

“I can just keep coming back,” he says. “I have money, you know.”

“You’ll get me in trouble.”

“I won’t. I just ...” White Wolf hesitates. Something in him slumps. What you read as arrogance now looks like desperation. “I need a friend.”

You know that feeling. The truth is, you could use a friend, too. Someone to talk to. What could the harm be? You’ll just be two men, talking.

Not here, though. You still need to work. “How about the bar?”

“The place from last night?”

“I get off at 11p.m.”

§

When you get there around 11:30 p.m., the bar is busy but you recognize White Wolf immediately. A skinny white guy stands out at the Hey U.S.A. It’s funny. Under this light, in this crowd, White Wolf could pass for Native of some kind. One of those 1/64th guys, at least. Maybe he really is a little Cherokee from way back when.

White Wolf waves you over to an empty booth. A Coors Light waits for you. You slide into the booth and wrap a hand around the cool damp skin of the bottle, pleasantly surprised.

“A lucky guess, did I get it right?”

You nod and take a sip. That first sip is always magic. Like how you imagine Golden, Colorado must feel like on a winter morning.

“So,” White Wolf says, “tell me about yourself.”

You look around the bar for familiar faces. Are you really going to do this? Tell a Tourist about your life? Your real life? A little voice in your head whispers that maybe this isn’t so smart. Boss could find out and get mad. DarAnne could make fun of you. Besides, White Wolf will want a cool story, something real authentic, and all you have is an aging three-bedroom ranch and a student loan.

But he’s looking at you, friendly interest, and nobody looks at you like that much anymore, not even Theresa. So you talk.

Not everything.

But some. Enough.

Enough that when the bartender calls last call you realize you’ve been talking for two hours.

When you stand up to go, White Wolf stands up, too. You shake hands, Indian-style, which makes you smile. You didn’t expect it, but you’ve got a good, good feeling.

“So, same time tomorrow?” White Wolf asks.

You’re tempted, but, “No, Theresa will kill me if I stay out this late two nights in a row.” And then, “But how about Friday?”

“Friday it is.” White Wolf touches your shoulder. “See you then, Jesse.”

You feel a warm flutter of anticipation for Friday. “See you.”

§

Friday you are there by 11:05 p.m. White Wolf laughs when he sees your face, and you grin back, only a little embarrassed. This time you pay for the drinks, and the two of you pick up right where you left off. It's so easy. White Wolf never seems to tire of your stories and it's been so long since you had a new friend to tell them to, that you can't seem to quit. It turns out White Wolf loves Kevin Costner, too, and you take turns quoting lines at each other until White Wolf stumps you with a *Wind in His Hair* quote.

"Are you sure that's in the movie?"

"It's Lakota!"

You won't admit it, but you're impressed with how good White Wolf's Lakota sounds.

White Wolf smiles. "Looks like I know something you don't."

You wave it away good-naturedly, but vow to watch the movie again.

Time flies and once again, after last call, you both stand outside under the Big Chief. You happily agree to meet again next Tuesday. And the following Friday. Until it becomes your new routine.

The month passes quickly. The next month, too.

"You seem too happy," Theresa says one night, sounding suspicious.

You grin and wrap your arms around your wife, pulling her close until her rose-scented shampoo fills your nose. "Just made a friend, is all. A guy from work." You decide to keep it vague. Hanging with White Wolf, who you've long stopped thinking of as just a Tourist, would be hard to explain.

"You're not stepping out on me, Jesse Turnblatt? Because I will—"

You cut her off with a kiss. "Are you jealous?"

"Should I be?"

"Never."

She sniffs, but lets you kiss her again, her soft body tight against yours.

"I love you," you murmur as your hands dip under her shirt.

"You better."

§

Tuesday morning and you can't breathe. Your nose is a deluge of snot and your joints ache. Theresa calls in sick for you and bundles you in bed with a bowl of stew. You're supposed to meet White Wolf for your usual drink, but you're much too sick. You consider sending Theresa with a note, but decided against it. It's only one night. White Wolf will understand.

But by Friday the coughing has become a deep rough bellow that shakes your whole chest. When Theresa calls in sick for you again, you make sure your cough is loud enough for Boss to hear it. Pray he doesn't dock you for the days you're missing. But what you're most worried about is standing up White Wolf again.

"Do you think you could go for me?" you ask Theresa.

"What, down to the bar? I don't drink."

"I'm not asking you to drink. Just to meet him, let him know I'm sick. He's probably thinking I forgot about him."

"Can't you call him?"

"I don't have his number."

"Fine, then. What's his name?"

You hesitate. Realize you don't know. The only name you know is the one you gave him. "White Wolf."

"Okay, then. Get some rest."

Theresa doesn't get back until almost 1 a.m. "Where were you?" you ask, alarmed. Is that a rosy flush in her cheeks, the scent of Cherry Coke on her breath?

"At the bar like you asked me to."

"What took so long?"

She huffs. "Did you want me to go or not?"

"Yes, but ... well, did you see him?"

She nods, smiles a little smile that you've never seen on her before.

"What is it?" Something inside you shrinks.

"A nice man. Real nice. You didn't tell me he was Cherokee."

§

By Monday you're able to drag yourself back to work. There's a note taped to your locker to go see Boss. You find him in his office, looking through the reports that he sends to Management every week.

"I hired a new guy."

You swallow the excuses you've prepared to explain how sick you were, your promises to get your numbers up. They become a hard ball in your throat.

"Sorry, Jesse." Boss actually does look a little sorry. "This guy is good, a real rez guy. Last name's 'Wolf'. I mean, shit, you can't get more Indian than that. The Tourists are going to eat it up."

"The Tourists love me, too." You sound whiny, but you can't help it. There's a sinking feeling in your gut that tells you this is bad, bad, bad.

"You're good, Jesse. But nobody knows anything about Pueblo Indians, so all you've got is that TV shit. This guy, he's ..." Boss snaps his fingers, trying to conjure the word.

"Authentic?" A whisper.

Boss points his finger like a gun. "Bingo. Look, if another pod opens up, I'll call you."

"You gave him my pod?"

Boss's head snaps up, wary. You must have yelled that. He reaches over to tap a button on his phone and call security.

“Wait!” you protest.

But the men in uniforms are already there to escort you out.

§

You can’t go home to Teresa. You just can’t. So you head to the Hey U.S.A. It’s a different crowd than you’re used to. An afternoon crowd. Heavy boozers and people without jobs. You laugh because you fit right in.

The guys next to you are doing shots. Tiny glasses of rheumy dark liquor lined up in a row. You haven’t done shots since college but when one of the men offers you one, you take it. Choke on the cheap whiskey that burns down your throat. Two more and the edges of your panic start to blur soft and tolerable. You can’t remember what time it is when you get up to leave, but the Big Chief is bright in the night sky.

You stumble through the door and run smack into DarAnne. She growls at you, and you try to stutter out an apology but a heavy hand comes down on your shoulder before you get the words out.

“This asshole bothering you?”

You recognize that voice. “White Wolf?” It’s him. But he looks different to you. Something you can’t quite place. Maybe it’s the ribbon shirt he’s wearing, or the bone choker around his neck. Is his skin a little tanner than it was last week?

“Do you know this guy?” DarAnne asks, and you think she’s talking to you, but her head is turned towards White Wolf.

“Never seen him,” White Wolf says as he stares you down, and under that confident glare you almost believe him. Almost forget that you’ve told this man things about you even Theresa doesn’t know.

“It’s me,” you protest, but your voice comes out in a whiskey-slurred squeak that doesn’t even sound like you.

“Fucking glonnies,” DarAnne mutters as she pushes past you. “Always making a scene.”

“I think you better go, buddy,” White Wolf says. Not unkindly, if you were in fact strangers, if you weren’t actually buddies. But you are, and you clutch at his shirtsleeve, shouting something about friendship and Theresa and then the world melts into a blur until you feel the hard slap of concrete against your shoulder and the taste of blood on your lip where you bit it and a solid kick to your gut until the whiskey comes up the way it went down and then the Big Chief is blinking at you, How, How, How, until the darkness comes to claim you and the lights all flicker out.

§

You wake up in the gutter. The fucking gutter. With your head aching and your mouth as dry and rotted as month-old roadkill. The sun is up, Arizona fire beating across your skin. Your clothes are filthy and your shoes are missing and there’s a smear of blood down your chin and drying flakes in the creases of your neck. Your hands are chapped raw. And you can’t remember why.

But then you do.

And the humiliation sits heavy on your bruised up shoulder, a dark shame that defies the desert sun. Your job. DarAnne ignoring you like that. White Wolf kicking your ass. And you out all night, drunk in a downtown gutter. It all feels like a terrible dream, like the worst kind. The ones you can’t wake up from because it’s real life.

Your car isn't where you left it, likely towed with the street sweepers, so you trudge your way home on sock feet. Three miles on asphalt streets until you see your highly-mortgaged three-bedroom ranch. And for once the place looks beautiful, like the day you bought it. Tears gather in your eyes as you push open the door.

"Theresa," you call. She's going to be pissed, and you're going to have to talk fast, explain the whole drinking thing (it was one time!) and getting fired (I'll find a new job, I promise), but right now all you want is to wrap her in your arms and let her rose-scent fill your nose like good medicine.

"Theresa," you call again, as you limp through the living room. Veer off to look in the bedroom, check behind the closed bathroom door. But what you see in the bathroom makes you pause. Things are missing. Her toothbrush, the pack of birth control, contact lens solution.

"Theresa!?" and this time you are close to panic as you hobble down the hall to the kitchen.

The smell hits you first. The scent of fresh coffee, bright and familiar.

When you see the person sitting calmly at the kitchen table, their back to you, you relax. But that's not Theresa.

He turns slightly, enough so you can catch his profile, and says, "Come on in, Jesse."

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

White Wolf winces, as if your words hurt him. "You better have a seat."

"What did you do to my wife?!"

"I didn't do anything to your wife." He picks up a small folded piece of paper, holds it out. You snatch it from his fingers and move so you can see his face. The note in your hand feels like wildfire, something with the potential to sear you to the bone. You want to rip it wide open, you want to flee before its revelations scar you. You ache to read it now, now, but you won't give him the satisfaction of your desperation.

"So now you remember me," you huff.

"I apologize for that. But you were making a scene and I couldn't have you upsetting DarAnne."

You want to ask how he knows DarAnne, how he was there with her in the first place. But you already know. Boss said the new guy's name was Wolf.

"You're a real son of a bitch, you know that?"

White Wolf looks away from you, that same pained look on his face. Like you're embarrassing yourself again. "Why don't you help yourself to some coffee," he says, gesturing to the coffee pot. Your coffee pot.

"I don't need your permission to get coffee in my own house," you shout.

"Okay," he says, leaning back. You can't help but notice how handsome he looks, his dark hair a little longer, the choker on his neck setting off the arch of his high cheekbones.

You take your time getting coffee—sugar, creamer which you would never usually take—before you drop into the seat across from him. Only then do you open the note, hands trembling, dread twisting hard in your gut.

"She's gone to her mother's," White Wolf explains as you read the same words on the page. "For her own safety. She wants you out by the time she gets back."

“What did you tell her?”

“Only the truth. That you got yourself fired, that you were on a bender, drunk in some alleyway downtown like a bad stereotype.” He leans in. “You’ve been gone for two days.”

You blink. It’s true, but it’s not true, too.

“Theresa wouldn’t ...” But she would, wouldn’t she? She’d said it a million times, given you a million chances.

“She needs a real man, Jesse. Someone who can take care of her.”

“And that’s you?” You muster all the scorn you can when you say that, but it comes out more a question than a judgment. You remember how you gave him the benefit of the doubt on that whole Cherokee thing, how you thought “pretendian” was cruel.

He clears his throat. Stands.

“It’s time for you to go,” he says. “I promised Theresa you’d be gone, and I’ve got to get to work soon.” Something about him seems to expand, to take up the space you once occupied. Until you feel small, superfluous.

“Did you ever think,” he says, his voice thoughtful, his head tilted to study you like a strange foreign body, “that maybe this is my experience, and you’re the tourist here?”

“This is my house,” you protest, but you’re not sure you believe it now. Your head hurts. The coffee in your hand is already cold. How long have you been sitting here? Your thoughts blur to histories, your words become nothing more than forgotten facts and half-truths. Your heart, a dusty repository for lost loves and desires, never realized.

“Not anymore,” he says.

Nausea rolls over you. That same stretching sensation you get when you Relocate out of an Experience.

Whiplash, and then ...

You let go.

4 READING: IMPOSTORS (BY KATHARINE QUARMBY)

[Brendan: This essay by Katharine Quarmby explores some similar themes as the story above. As you read it, see if you can pick up similarities (and differences!) in the way these authors approach the issues.]

Alice, the heroine of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), has many extraordinary encounters, but the one that’s always stuck with me is her meeting with Humpty Dumpty, an egg-shaped being, balanced on a wall. He is annoyed when Alice calls him an egg, he tells her she should stop growing, and they end by arguing about the contextual meaning of the word ‘glory’.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty says, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

As Alice walks away, Humpty Dumpty comes crashing to the ground.

I was reminded of Humpty’s insistence that words mean just what you want them to during the furore over the racial posturing of Rachel Dolezal, a white American woman, who publicly declared herself black, even when the evidence stacked up to the contrary. In June 2015, Dolezal was unmasked as white from birth when a newspaper reporter approached her white American parents in Montana, who affirmed her European heritage. Dolezal’s unmasking did not clear the air: in a number of carefully chosen TV interviews, she continued to define herself as black, despite mounting evidence that her blackness had come from a spray-tan salon and hair weaves, not DNA.

Amid widespread (though not universal) condemnation for Dolezal, some anti-racist campaigners – both black and white – pointed out that she’d done valuable work, especially as a representative for the venerable anti-racism organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Even her own family – Christian evangelicals who believe in salvation through the adoption of orphan children, and who adopted four black children after having Rachel and her birth-brother Joshua – took sides.

Dolezal’s love of black culture deepened as she grew up with her black siblings. She went on to apply successfully to study art at Howard University in Washington, DC, famed for celebrating black culture, yet ended up suing the university for racial discrimination (unsuccessfully) on grounds of her whiteness. In an interview on *The Today Show*, Dolezal denied that her blackness was a performance. ‘This is not some freak, Birth-of-a-Nation mockery blackface performance. This is on a very real connected level... and the point at which that really solidified was when I got full custody of Izaiah [her adoptive brother, who’d come to live with her as her son]. And he said, “You’re my real mom”, and he’s in high school, and for that to be something that is plausible, I certainly can’t be seen as white and be Izaiah’s mom.’

[Brendan: Have you heard of the Donezel story before? What is your reaction to it?]

At this point, I should declare a personal interest in the Dolezal story, which trended on Twitter as #transracial, while people groped for words to describe Dolezal’s rebranding. ‘Transracial’, as a word, has been used since the 1960s to describe children of one race being adopted by another. Cue adults who were adopted as children transracially in the US writing an open letter to the media, asking journalists to stop using the term in relation to Dolezal: they felt it ‘belonged’ to them. And if it belongs to them, then it belongs to me, too.

I was born in the 1960s, after a brief liaison between an Iranian naval officer and an English girl on the South Coast. He offered to marry my mother and take us to Iran. She wanted to go to university, so refused to leave the UK, and instead put me up for adoption. At that time, dual-heritage babies were ‘hard to place’, in the parlance of today. My adoptive parents were unfazed: my mother is half-Bosnian Serb, partly Spanish and English; my father is a Yorkshireman. Neither of them minded about the colour of my skin, although the adoption society kept me with a foster family throughout the summer, to see how dark I would become and whether I would develop, as the adoption officer feared, ‘the large Persian nose’.

Luckily, the summer was rainy, my nose stayed small, and I was adopted across the races into a loving family (instead of going to a children’s home). But I never forgot my roots, and later searched for, and found, my Iranian birth father. I was lucky to find him, and he is lucky to be alive – many Iranian naval officers like him were imprisoned after the Iranian Revolution of 1979; some were executed.

Like others adopted transracially, I have learnt to explain a complicated identity in a paragraph rather than a sentence. However my brothers – tall, blonde, blue-eyed – have never felt impelled, like Dolezal, to lay claim to my Iranian heritage. Equally, I've never claimed to be genetically part-Bosnian Serb. My mother and father (unlike Dolezal) have never felt the need to assume an Iranian identity in order to parent me. This is why Dolezal puzzles me: because being in a transracial family is enough to get on with, without people cherry-picking bits of identity they like and claiming them for themselves.

[Brendan: Were you raised in a transracial family? Or have you known people that were? What, if anything, do you think outsiders “miss” about this experience?]

Outside the specifics of transracial adoption, the only ‘trans’ identity to gain some mainstream acceptance thus far has been gender identity, undeniably aided by Caitlin Jenner’s very public ‘transition’ from male to female, posing on the cover of *Vanity Fair* as a transgender cover star, also in June this year. Easily lost, as the neologisms multiply, is that the word ‘transracial’ on social media emanated, on closer examination, largely from the conservative right who deployed it to undermine transgender identity. A low blow – while gender transition does not affect many people (between 0.3-2 per cent of US and 1-5 per cent of the UK population, according to different studies), surgery is painful and there are high rates of transphobic crimes.

Yet the underlying question, as different ‘trans’ identities vie for authenticity, is why we allow some parts of our identity to be chosen, but not others? Though I suspect that part of the growing acceptance of transgender people reflects the fact that there’s no going back.

An extreme case is that of ‘transabled’ – people who ‘identify’ as disabled, despite lacking impairments. The transabled have become more prominent with the inclusion in 2013 of Body Integrity Identity Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the latest edition of American psychiatry’s diagnostic guide. Some, described as ‘wannabes’, go so far as to amputate or damage themselves so that they can become disabled: only last month, the media ran lurid reports about Jewel Shuping, from North Carolina, who’d dreamed about being blind since childhood, and eventually found a sympathetic psychologist to pour drain-cleaner in her eyes.

More common are ‘disabled pretenders’, who use leg braces or wheelchairs to experience life as disabled people, but with the ability to switch back into a non-impaired life at will.

On Tumblr, things get a little weirder. Some people, hiding behind the anonymity of the internet, self-define as ‘transfat’ – fat people trapped inside thin bodies; ‘otherkin’ claim to be animals or elves and otherworldly creatures trapped inside human bodies. There are crumbs of comfort on Tumblr for Dolezal too – bloggers who ‘identify’ as ‘transethnic’. One says she is a Japanese teenager trapped in a white American body and writes: ‘I’ve always experienced extreme nationality dysphoria, and recently realised it’s ethnic dysphoria too.’ Another, a white American man, claims he ‘identifies’ as a black American woman.

Werner Sollors, a professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, calls such people ‘ethnic transvestites’. But none of these examples answers the question – **why do people feel the need to inhabit an identity that is not their own? And if they do feel that need, why not tread the fictional route, as many writers have done in the past, switching in and out of character in the process?**

[Brendan: What do you think of these questions?]

Most new ‘trans’ identities (apart from transgender) seem baffling or even ridiculous to most people. But it’s not a new problem – in the late 1980s and early ’90s in the UK, it was particularly fashionable for middle-class students to claim that they had working-class roots, join the Socialist Workers Party and assume dubious accents. **[Brendan: There’s a great 90s song about this—“Common People” by Pulp. Look it up on YouTube!]** A long line of people down the ages have profited from playing the imposter – defined in

the *Chambers English Dictionary* as ‘someone who assumes a false character or impersonates another’. Occasionally, collective motives surface, such as the ‘good of the nation’. T E Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia, laid claim to that, as have other spies, while he led a revolt, in Arab dress, against the Ottoman Empire to help the British war effort.

Others have assumed new identities just to stay alive. My Anglo-Spanish grandmother, marooned in war-time Yugoslavia and living under Nazi occupation, spoke Serbo-Croat fluently enough to pass as a national. If she had not become an ethnic imposter, would she and my mother have survived the war, or gone to a concentration camp, like all their Jewish friends? Indeed, other Jewish people passed themselves off as Aryans to stay alive during the Holocaust.

‘Passing as white’, as it became known, originated in the slavery era in the US, when people of multi-racial ancestry would claim white (often South European) forbears to escape rigid segregation laws. One of the most powerful examples is Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP (the organisation Dolezal later joined, serving as chapter president in Spokane, Washington). He, unlike Dolezal, was of mixed race, but he could pass for white. In his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948), he wrote: ‘I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me.’ While working for the NAACP, White travelled to the deep South, using his apparent ‘white privilege’ to play a dangerous game, investigating nearly 50 lynchings and other savage attacks, by interviewing white people who attended them.

In his pursuit of social justice, White avoided transforming himself into a member of a perceived pariah nation or group (in fact, both his parents were born into slavery). He ‘passed’ up the scale of hierarchy. Meanwhile, those who attempt to pass against the flow of privilege are almost automatically suspect, however noble their motives might appear (to themselves at least).

[Brendan: What is the difference between “passing up” (a Jew or African American hiding their identity to escape persecution) and “passing down” (trying to pass as Jewish or African American when you are not)?]

There is a long and somewhat ignoble history of ‘passing’. The US journalist John Howard Griffin wrote *Black Like Me* (1961) to describe his travels through the US South during segregation, and the lengths to which he went to pass as African American. Espera Oscar de Corti, the Louisiana-born son of Italian immigrants, renamed himself Iron Eyes Cody, claiming to be Cree-Cherokee, going on to portray Native Americans in a number of films from the 1930s to the ’80s. In a more dubious case, the white supremacist Asa Earl Carter used the pseudonym Forrest Carter to write the novel *The Education of Little Tree* (1976), purportedly about his experience of being raised by his Cherokee grandparent in the 1920s. In the late 1970s, it emerged that he was, in fact, a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Then there are the notorious ‘Gypsy gentlemen’, the Englishman George Borrow and the American Charles Leland, who from the 1850s onwards boasted that they could ‘pass’ among the Romanies and not be known as *gorgio* – non-Gypsies. In his book *The Gypsies* (1882), Leland is quite open about the pretence. He travels to Russia to meet Romanies in St Petersburg and greets them in Romanichal, a common language with national dialectical differences. He writes: ‘In an instant, they were all around me... earnestly expressing their marvel, at what new species of gypsy I might be.’ Later, in Moscow, he tells the fortune of some Romanies there, saying: ‘I should indeed know very little about Romany ways... if I could not *pen dorriki*,’ a subterfuge for which he is later rebuked by the English critic G H Lewes, who professes Leland’s imposture as ‘the *ne plus ultra* of cheek’ at a meeting with the writer George Eliot. Leland shrugs this off, and is irked to be taken for a *gorgio*, describing himself instead as a ‘Romany Rye’.

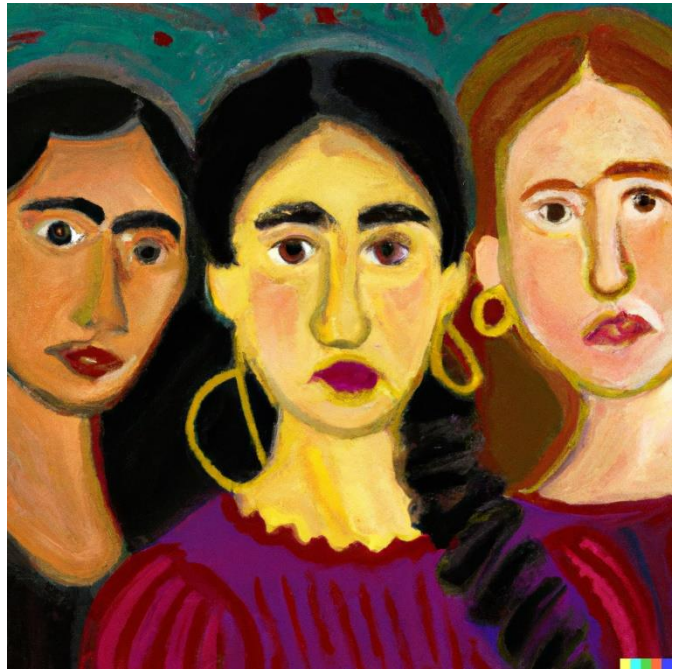


Figure 2 Three women in the style of Marcel Janco. (Brendan Shea x Dall-E.

Borrow, for his part, fancied he could pass among English and Welsh Romanies without detection. In his essay collection, *Danger!: Educated Gypsy* (2010), Ian Hancock, a Romani academic and linguistics expert at the University of Texas at Austin, writes that Borrow liked to idealise the Gypsy life. He travelled in Russia and Romania, interviewing the Roma, and describing them as ‘wandering about’ at a time when almost all Roma were still enslaved. Borrow later pretended to be a Gypsy but, according to Hancock, he mixed Romani dialects from various countries into a mishmash – which Hancock calls ‘Borromani’.

Another imposter, one who still haunts Canadian national identity, was the English-born Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, aka Grey Owl. Born in Hastings in 1888 and abandoned by his parents to the care of maiden aunts, Belaney became fascinated by Native American culture: he learnt woodcraft, sleeping outdoors and practicing bird calls. Sailing to Canada in 1906, he eventually transformed himself into the leading Native American conservationist and writer of his time. When he went to England on a book tour, he gave a command performance to the King and the young Princess Elizabeth. Belaney was not unmasked until after his death.

Anahareo, his partner in the 1920s, defended him in her memoir, *Devil in Deerskins: My Life with Grey Owl* (1972), with a telling nod to the Romany Ryes:

Grey Owl, the imposter of the century; the modern Bluebeard; the magnificent fake; the greatest imposter in literary history. Grey Owl, fraud, hoax, etc... I thought of the worries, the near starvation that we'd gone through after he'd quit the trap-line, of his writing and lecturing, of all the time and effort he'd put towards conserving wildlife, and it was awful to think it was all for nothing. Archie's public felt they'd been gypped [my italics], and that he'd only been after the fast buck. This wasn't true.

Belaney’s deception is still debated today, with the novelist Margaret Atwood writing in her essay ‘The Grey Owl Syndrome’ (1995) that:

if white Canadians would adopt a more traditionally native attitude towards the natural world, a less exploitative and more respectful attitude, they might be able to reverse the galloping environmental carnage of the late 20th century and salvage for themselves some of the wilderness they keep saying they identify with and need. Perhaps we should not become less like Grey Owl but more like him.

Other commentators do not think the end justifies the means. Once unmasked, as Dolezal knows too well, the pretence becomes the story. Grey Owl's unmasking ended up threatening the legacy of conservation, just as Dolezal's has led to questioning of the NAACP and its valuable work.

[Brendan: What do you think of the story of Grey Owl? He did some good things (e.g., promote conservation of the environment, raise awareness of native people). However, it rested on deceit about who he was.]

The vexed question of identity, particularly in the US, still seems branded with the painful legacy of slavery on the one hand, and the ethnic cleansing and forced assimilation of Native Americans on the other. The 'one-drop' rule, where just one drop of black blood meant you were tainted as black under Jim Crow segregation laws, has been reclaimed by African Americans today to mean that anyone with just a trace of African-American ancestry can identify as black, even if they are genetically white.

So are there more 'ethnic imposters' in the US because of its history? Is it, as the white American anti-racist activist Tim Wise wrote in June, an impatience to 'cut out the middle man, and just be black', because black people don't automatically trust white folk? Or do imposters look for financial advantage and social standing, or an inverted hero identity? Why do those who claim what was previously a 'pariah' identity so often rise to prominence, then seek to teach about the identity they have fought so hard to appropriate? Motives, clearly, are mixed.

Native Americans, for example, have become tired of what they call the 'Wannabee Tribe' or 'Pretendians' claiming Native heritage without evidence. For some, the lure is a romantic link to the *ur*-past of America; others likely have career motives. In the US, it is useful for universities to be able to trumpet the numbers of their academics from minority ethnic backgrounds. In the 1990s, Elizabeth Warren laid claim to being the first woman of colour – with Cherokee ancestry – to be employed by Harvard Law School, yet exhaustive analysis of her family history yielded no Native American link. Likewise, Andrea Smith, associate professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside, and a leading Native-American studies scholar and activist, has claimed to be Cherokee. But when David Cornsilk, a research analyst and genealogist, twice researched Smith's genealogy, at her own request, he found no trace of the heritage she claimed.

In Australia, too, the number of people ticking the box as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the National Census rose by more than 20 per cent between 2006 and 2011, leading to fierce debate about whether this marks the emergence of First Nation pride – or an attempt by some white Australians to obtain services earmarked for the minority population. A national conversation about what constitutes identity is still evolving, yet most Aboriginal leaders believe their identity is based on kinship – descent, identification and acceptance.

On this basis, Dolezal would probably fail the identity test. You cannot cross the DNA floor – it's fixed, unlike gender. Dolezal had a perfect right to immerse herself in black culture and to parent her son by birth and her brother/son. But authenticity matters, even if DNA is on your side.

I visited my Iranian birth father in Tehran in 2007. While there, I had to wear the *hejab*, or headscarf, and a *mantoux*, a knee-length tunic or coat, just like any other woman. I was often stopped on the street and asked for directions because people thought I was Iranian – on the sleeper train to the historic city of Isfahan, I was

pointed to the queue for Iranians, rather than for foreigners. Tempting as it was to ‘pass’, I decided not to. I might look Iranian – half my DNA is Iranian – but I never felt more English than I did in Iran, because that is what I am. Even if I am fully accepted by my birth family, I remain culturally English (and half-English in ethnic terms). I did not live through the Iranian Revolution, as my half-sisters did, nor through the trauma of our shared father having been tortured and imprisoned. You cannot make this stuff up.

My reality is to live between two worlds as a transracial adoptee. As those Aboriginal elders say, **kinship comes down to descent, identification and acceptance**. I tick some of those boxes, but not all. I didn’t want to run the risk of being accused of being something I couldn’t, truly, say I was. Just as Borrow exoticised Romani life, wilfully refusing to see slavery before his eyes, anyone claiming blackness or any other ethnic identity who has not lived it is playing a very dangerous game.

[Brendan: The author claims that kinship (in term of one’s ethnic heritage or race) depends partly of DNA, but also on one’s upbringing and identification with a culture. What do you think of this]

What also of the disabled pretenders? One of the most controversial of these figures, Chloe Jennings-White, was born male in the UK (she has also transitioned in gender terms) and now lives in the US. She participated in a documentary for National Geographic in which she appeared in braces and a wheelchair, and explained that, although she enjoys extreme sports such as climbing and skiing, she yearns for disabling surgery, which she calls ‘ability reassignment surgery’. Below-the-line comments from disabled people on various websites evidence an almost universal anger at her pretender status, given that she climbed two high mountains in 2013.

As the transgender academic Alexandre Baril – who has carried out a number of studies of the ‘community’ – says, the transabled are rejected, in the main, by disabled people themselves, who are horrified that people would deliberately amputate themselves. Disabled activists also point out that the wannabes add fuel to the fire of ‘scrounger rhetoric’, by allowing the public to believe that some disabled people are only pretending to be so. It might be compassionate, however, to acknowledge that at least some of those articulating a wish to acquire an impairment might be troubled by a mental health condition. Whether or not they should be treated, and how, is another matter.

If identity is the currency that allows us to speak and be heard, and if white people, in particular, feel that they are automatically dismissed because no part of their identity is valorised, what next? After all, many white people have fought and even died in the universal struggle for human rights – in the US, the UK, and elsewhere. That should never be forgotten. In a brilliant essay for the *New Left Review* in 1996, the historian Eric Hobsbawm cautioned against the ‘deep waters of identity politics’. The essay is as fresh now as it was then. We must look beyond our self-interest in minority silos to wider, universal interests, he wrote, and I agree.

In her first public appearance after her ‘outing’, Dolezal reiterated that, in her mind, she identifies as black. Re-reading *The Jungle Book* (1894) by Rudyard Kipling, I feel that Dolezal’s journey has helped me understand Mowgli’s struggle to be accepted by the wolf pack – and by humans – on a deeper level. Stripped from all pretence, Dolezal holds to her position – that she will stay with the pack with which she has chosen to run. Mowgli is cast out from the wolf pack that rescued him, but also rejected by the village whence he came. Yet when he accepts who he is, so do his brothers: ‘We will hunt with thee,’ said the four cubs. Later, Mowgli even marries. As Kipling says, ‘that is a story for grown-ups’.

[Brendan: How would you describe the author’s conclusion in your own words?]