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Pretendians and Publications:

The Problem and Solutions to Redface Research

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Studies, as a discipline, has rapidly grown in the past few decades. Yet a troubling trend has more recently emerged: the rise of "pretendians" — individuals fraudulently claiming Indigenous identity and misrepresenting Indigenous research, threatening the integrity of Indigenous Studies broadly. *Pretendians and Publications: The Problem and Solutions to Redface Research* examines how academic pretendians distort research, misappropriate resources, and undermine the goals and values of authentic Indigenous communities. These authors also look at how the institutions that shape the academy nurture and perpetuate this phenomenon. *Who truly belongs?* is a more urgent question than ever. Pretendians exploit institutions, weak identity verification processes, and insufficient cultural competence in research, funding agencies, and ethics boards. The report argues for more rigorous, community-led identity verification, with Indigenous voices guiding these policies. It emphasizes the need for culturally competent data collection practices to ensure research is both authentic and accountable. This work is a call to action to more formally challenge the academy to address these harms — not just through policy enforcement, but by safeguarding Indigenous self-determination and communities themselves from exploitation. Institutions and individuals must take responsibility for preventing identity fraud and championing the authenticity and dignity of Indigenous peoples.

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Table of Contents

Indigenous Studies, as it's expressed in the contemporary academy, is a relatively new phenomenon. Driven by growing numbers of Indigenous students and the re-articulation of Indigenous research methods and pedagogies, there is now a critical mass of Indigenous scholars in Canada.

But there is a preoccupation among those scholars: Who among us actually belongs?

THIS SPECIAL REPORT has emerged because, as pre-tenure Indigenous scholars at two universities, the scope and scale of "pretendians" in the academy affect our ability to conduct meaningful research. There is a constant need to question and verify research partners for publications. Doing anti-colonial research is difficult enough as research has historically been used to perpetuate settler colonialism, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith highlights:

> **The term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (p. 1.)**

"Pretendian," it seems, is becoming a part of this vocabulary. Because the reality is that they are now a part of research. Those fraudulently claiming Indigenous identity have been found time and time again flourishing in universities, often with substantial financial and administrative support. Investigating pretendians — and crafting policies around protecting Indigenous communities, students and researchers from them — is a very difficult and intensive process.

However, this Special Report is not about identifying pretendians or exposing them. Many scholars, journalists, thinkers, and activists work in those spaces. Our work discusses how pretendianism can impact Indigenous scholarship and Indigenous communities. We aim to examine how fraudulent identity claims compromise the integrity of Indigenous Data and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and practices. Also, we examine how Indigenous data becomes distorted through three distinct mechanisms: individuals falsely claiming Indigenous identity, organizations misrepresenting themselves as Indigenous entities, and unrecognized groups asserting First Nations, Métis, or Inuit identities. The existence of these groups adversely affects potential community-based decisions based on faulty data or can be the basis for policy outcomes that are not grounded in real Indigenous lived experiences.

We proceed in five parts. First, we consider the context for this discussion, with a focus on the relationship between settler colonialism and pretendianism[1] and the difficult but necessary work exposing this link entails. Second, we consider the reproduction of pretendianism in academic

[1] Pretendianism is as the phenomenon of individuals claiming Indigenous identity without First Nations, Inuit, or Métis ancestry, or those asserting Indigenous connections through distant ancestry while maintaining predominantly non-Indigenous heritage (Beaver, 2024)

spaces, specifically the interaction between individual scholars, communities, universities, funding agencies and publishers. Third, we address data and the consequences for Indigenous data sovereignty — and even reliability — of pretendians in the academy. Fourth, we discuss the pernicious impacts on actual Indigenous scholars and the stakes involved in this phenomenon. Finally, we offer recommendations for how we might proceed.

Taken together, we hope to identify the scope of the challenge and promote a wider conversation about how it can be addressed, reclaiming a space of sovereignty and authenticity in Indigenous research.

I. Background

Avoiding engagement with pretendianism represents a privilege and luxury we are not afforded. Those who (falsely) claim some form of Indigenous identity and craft entire careers out of that falsehood are a significant group that Indigenous people have to navigate in academic institutions.

Pretendians who take up space in the academy are often in positions of power and can pose a threat to real Indigenous researchers and scholarship. As Karen Lawford and Veldon Coburn point out:

> **Perhaps predictably, non-Indigenous interest in Indigenous issues has swelled. Today, major research funding agencies, such as the federal Tri-Council, have set aside historic funding levels for Indigenous-related research, which is cause for optimism. But there are also many reasons to be cautious. (Lawford & Coburn, 2019, p. 1)**

The consequence of this funding is the increased interest of people who wish to capitalize on the research funds offered to Indigenous peoples.

Regardless of the potential consequences, we cannot avoid engaging with the issue. Kim TallBear (2022) illustrates how those who confront the pretendian phenomenon are met with aggression.[2] Building their careers as "legitimate" Indigenous scholars, pretendians develop relations with Elders (sometimes long-standing ones), community members, and other scholars, which can create a protective barrier for themselves. As Métis scholar and lawyer Jean Teillet stresses,

> **Indigenous identity fraudsters spend years cultivating relationships with powerful Indigenous leaders and elders to obtain and retain an insider status. Once secured inside, they push others out of their way, not only by playing insider, but also by playing gatekeeper which allows them to take up Indigenous space. (Teillet, 2022, p. 36)**

Indigenous women often bear the brunt of trying to address the consequences of pretendians in the academy, as there are more Indigenous women than men in academia (TallBear, 2022; Brunette-Debassige, 2024). Verified First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Peoples often challenge settler colonial narratives and power structures that contradict false and self-proclaimed identities. The aggression of pretendians experienced by Indigenous Peoples is a continuous attempt to silence genuine Indigenous Peoples as well as Indigenous-led research, funding, and dissemination.

A core premise of this paper is that pretendianism, in all of its facets, is an insidious arm of settler colonialism. As Patrick Wolfe discusses in his book on settler colonialism, "settler-colonization is at base a winner-takes-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement" (Wolfe, 1999, p. 163). Indigenous people are reshaping academic research and crafting our own methodologies and approaches to knowledge and understanding, which threatens colonial institutions and understandings of research. Pretendians without lived experience offer a solution in the form of affirming legitimacy to institutions hesitant to engage with

[2] Kim TallBear, a Tier 1 Canadian Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience, and Society at the University of Alberta presented at the University of Vermont Symposium in 2023 on "Indigenous Sovereignty, Raceshifting, and University Responsibility". This section, "Self Indigenization a continuation of the Indian Wars," in paragraph 3 was summarized.

Indigenous research. In other words, pretendians can *serve* the university to maintain the status quo.

Pretendianism is the advancement of settler colonialism by replacing Indigenous research with settler research dressed up in redface.

It is achieved by exploiting Indigenous erasure throughout history and then weaponizing it against our communities. Individuals claim distant ancestry or make up ancestry and blame colonial policies. They exploit the history of Indigenous experiences of colonialism, including destroyed records from schools, churches, or band offices, or the Sixties Scoop and the theft of our families — a history that not only fractured relationships among families, communities and nations but now serves as a smokescreen for frauds to navigate within Indigenous spaces.

When Indigenous scholars resist pretendianism and assert control over their research data, they will face professional and personal attacks. This is because settler structures actively resist data sovereignty principles, notably seen with Gabel, Henry, Tait, and Smylie (2024), as the "academics who uncovered and exposed Carrie Bourassa's Indigenous identity fraud" (para. 1).

This is the context in which we intervene. It speaks to the scope of the challenge confronting Indigenous scholars. As we demonstrate below, the challenge is even more pernicious than individuals falsely claiming to be Indigenous; it implicates the very institutions that purport to support us.

II. Framing Pretendianism

There are many expressions of pretendianism, many of which get at settler colonialism's often complex and contradictory nature. One aspect of this phenomenon is that pretendianism also highlights the effects of colonialism on how Indigenous nations claim citizens. This section discusses the main issue within the phenomenon of pretendianism: self-identification or self-Indigenization.

At its core, pretendianism is about claiming and using an identity that is not the individual's to claim. There is a common family story across Turtle Island of a distant family member who was an "Indian Princess." These tropes speak to the perceived disposability of Indigenous women and the justification of settler colonialism (Green, 1975, p. 719). While this narrative trope is a facet of settler colonialism, it is not often used as a vehicle for personal, financial, or professional gain. The notion of a person adopting an identity that is the focus of an ongoing and sustained genocide is absurd unless there is some perceived advantage that can be leveraged.

The process of this is called "self-identification," whereby a person's identity is not bound by the rules or regulations of the federal government, nor is the person explicitly connected to an Indigenous community. This phenomenon was recognized as a significant contributor to the overall population growth of Indigenous people. One way this has manifested is through the Canadian census; the census asks if the person self-identifies as Indigenous. As reported by Statistics Canada,

> **Two main factors have contributed to the growing Aboriginal population: the first is natural growth, which includes increased life expectancy and relatively high fertility rates; the second factor relates to changes in self-reported identification. Put simply, more people are newly identifying as Aboriginal on the Census—a continuation of a trend over time. (Statistics Canada, 2017, p. 1)**

This trend continues as those with Indian Status[3] grew from 744,855 people in 2016 to 751,110 in 2021, for a growth rate of 4.1 percent, while the growth of those claiming First Nations identity without status grew from 232,380 to 295,295, for a growth rate of 27.2 percent (Statistics Canada, 2022, p. 5). Self-Indigenization is an ongoing issue, as it often does not rely on living connections to a living Indigenous nation.

[3] Under the *Indian Act*, there are three categories of "Indians" in Canada: Status Indians, Non-Status Indians, and Treaty Indians. The Act does not directly reference non-status First Nations people, Métis or Inuit; Status Indians alone are recognized under the Act and, as such, entitled to certain rights and benefits.

In 2021 alone, several academics, scholars, writers, and artists were called out as "pretendians." People like Amie Wolfe at UBC (Alden, 2021), Caroline Bourassa at the University of Saskatchewan (Dayal, 2021), Cheyane Turions, curator at Simon Fraser University gallery (Ryan, 2021), and director and filmmaker Michelle Latimer (Hertz, 2021), are just a few people who made a fraudulent claim about their identity. Their connection to Indigeneity is rooted in self-identification and self-Indigenization.

III. Upholding Pretendianism

So, just how deep is the problem? Shockingly, Bourassa and many like her are able to maintain the fraud for years, building and sustaining long-standing careers in the academy. This is due to inadequate verification processes in employment offers, funding agencies, and publishers. Policy loopholes allow those with fraudulent identity claims to maintain employment, often occupying positions intended for genuine Indigenous scholars through targeted hiring initiatives.

As universities and other institutions attempt to establish verification policies, they face resistance from those aligned with merit-based approaches, a refusal to engage deeply with questions of identity, and resistance from pretendians. This resistance gets traction based on their often long-standing relationships with communities and individuals. Relationships can be weaponized to both question the credibility of Indigenous scholars and function as a shield of legitimacy for the pretendians leveraging that relationship. There is also legal uncertainty with attempting to apply hiring policies and procedures to address the issue retroactively.

Moreover, in academia, career advancement typically requires faculty to demonstrate their ability to secure research resources. This often involves Tri-Agency[4] funding. While the Tri-Agency has recently implemented a verification policy, it applies only to Indigenous researchers and does not address inauthentic Indigenous organizations. In the Tri-Agency applications, there are no mechanisms to address unethical or problematic research. Even when multiple Indigenous adjudicators raise the concerns, no policies exist to address them. When we refer to Linda Smith's quote as "research" being one of the dirtiest words, it is exemplified by government funding policies of eroding Indigenous voices. It takes courage from Indigenous faculty to raise the issues due to the risk of alienating themselves. Speaking out is even more challenging for those of us in pre-tenure roles because of our precarious positions.

Once the review process is completed, the awards are granted to pretendians. In some cases, awards are given to pretendian organizations, research is completed, and researchers are encouraged to disseminate results in publications. Unsuspecting journals or book publishers reach out to others in the field to peer-review the content, and those reviewers could be pretendians or legitimate voices. There are no mechanisms in place to filter out inauthentic studies from the researchers, organizations, or illegitimate organizations.

These organizations are an important part of reproducing and sustaining pretendians. To assert and validate their interests, fraudulent individuals congregate to create organizations or groups. While these congregations may vary in their origins (from those with distant identities to those with no ancestry or connection at all) to their interests, they all aim to claim an Indigenous voice and perspective, misrepresenting actual Indigenous people. Darryl Leroux (2024) has created a website that documents several groups attempting to do this, ultimately distancing themselves from their settler ancestry and undermining Indigenous identity.

Pretendians are able to infiltrate these organizations and create conditions that allow other people with dubious claims to be supported under the guise of institutional legitimacy. The sad reality is that many of these organizations lack capacity, and the appearance of an eager, hardworking collaborator can often limit scrutiny.

[4] CIHR (Canadian Institutes of Health Research), SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council), and NSERC (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council) are three Canadian federal agencies that provide government funding to support and advance high-quality research in Canada.

However, a critical function of these organizations is a type of reciprocal validation. When individuals are a part of these misrepresenting organizations and groups, there is a perception of legitimacy to unsuspecting researchers, administrators, and students. They become the "community" that funding agencies seek when granting to Indigenous applicants. In turn, the pretendians with academic credentials likewise authenticate the organizations. From there, these groups reinforce their perceived validity. With funds and subsequent publications, they have all they need to be considered credible.

This gets particularly pernicious when pretendians infiltrate legitimate organizations. Indigenous people have been creating organizations that respond to the needs of their communities, running a gamut of roles, from representation and advocacy to program and service delivery. As a result of the proliferation of Indigenous organizations, space has been created for people to more comfortably claim Indigenous heritage, ancestry, or identity (Weaver, 2001, pp. 250–251). Historically, other than organizations that are based in specific communities, there has been a lack of identity verification or an identity verification process that fails to stop fraud.

IV. Delegitimizing Indigenous Data & Dirty Data

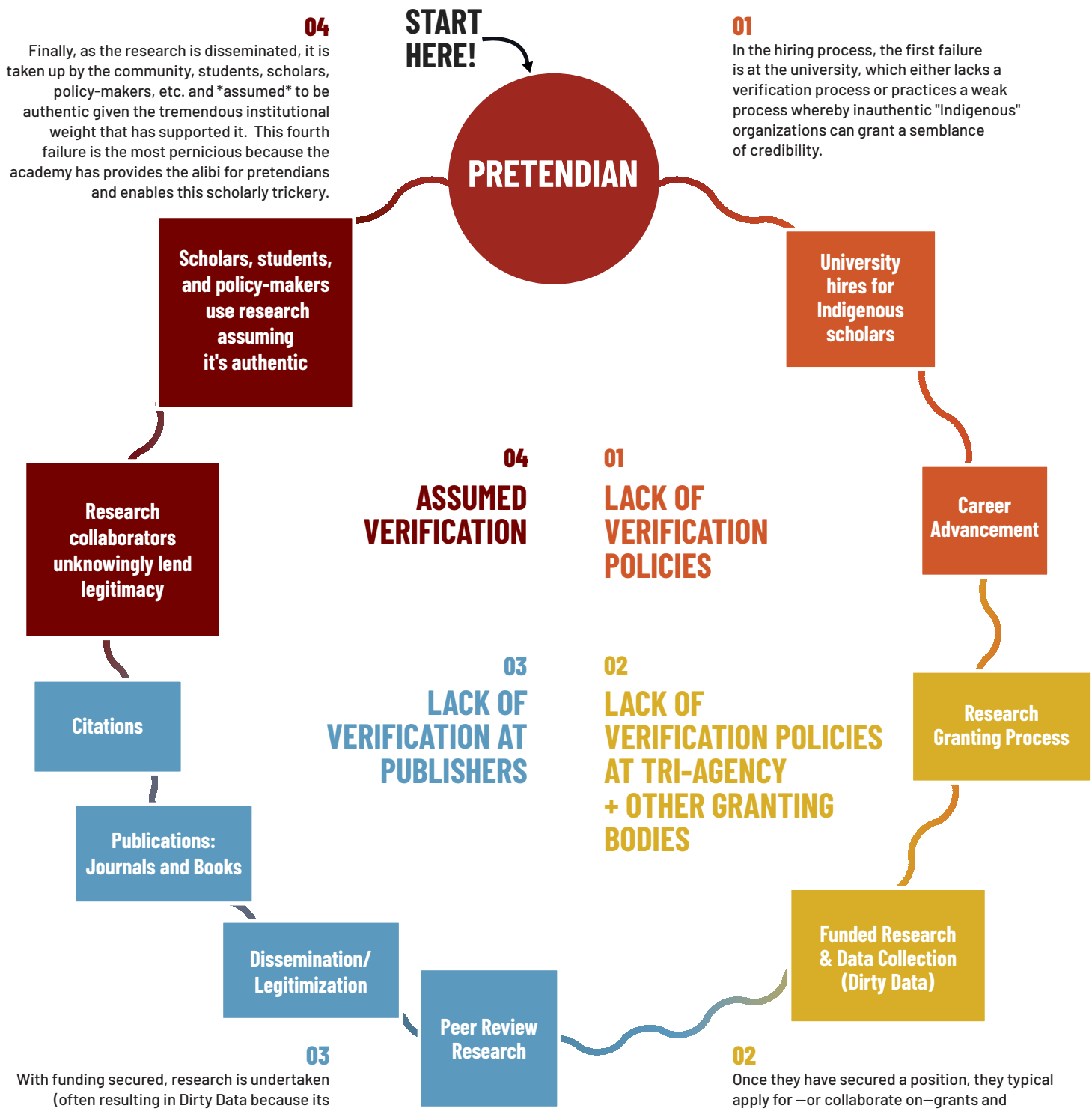
Whether the organization is legitimate or not, they are a central part of the pretendian problem. And as they produce research, the snowball grows. Unknowing academics, colleges, and universities will consider studies thinking they are based on accurate and legitimate Indigenous data, which is becoming evident in health, education, social services, and the Canadian justice system. Additionally, studies conducted by pretendian researchers can come from misguided or false perceptions of Indigenous people as being in a constant state of catastrophe, be it research on substance abuse, suicide, children in foster care, or the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system. Framing things within a deficit has a tendency to overlook the strength and resilience of Indigenous people and minimizes the work that Indigenous are constantly doing to affirm sovereignty and self-determination.

Ultimately, this is settler research that attempts to whitewash Indigenous data. While this is undertaken in myriad ways, there are some trends.

1. Pretendians writing the research questions and gathering research partners that are misrepresenting themselves as Indigenous entities and unrecognized groups asserting First Nations, Métis, or Inuit identity.
2. Submitting a grant application to one (or more) of the Tri-Agencies.
3. The research design is flawed because the research is being conducted from a deficit lens, the assumption that Indigenous people are perpetually in some form of disaster or have no clear understanding of Indigenous communities or Indigenous realities.
4. The data collection becomes precarious because there can be a mix of genuine and inauthentic individuals participating in the research studies.
5. The researchers have the power to interpret the data and answer their own questions, which could serve to further the agenda of legitimization.
6. When research results are disseminated, they are presented as deficit-based or feigning resiliency. For example, a pretendian posits their research as existing or being published *in spite of* a challenging issue or existing colonial tactics. However, the reality is that there are far fewer obstacles for them to overcome in the first place: Being a settler, the pretendian utilizes their knowledge of settler culture, and because they do not necessarily present as Indigenous (or are white-presenting), their research is able to flourish because of the ongoing, if under-discussed, racism that exists within institutions
7. The perceived research is viewed as legitimate and could be used to gather more funds for further research, thus restarting the cycle.

The Four Failures of Verification

How Academia enables "Red Face Research" - from university hiring, to granting agencies, publishers and, most pernicious, the Indigenous and academic community.



The challenge to maintain Indigenous integrity and sovereignty is crucial because, as sovereign Indigenous nations and peoples, we should maintain authority over the collection of data, interpretation, presentation, and the ongoing defence against settler colonialism.

Misrepresentative or fraudulent data is a direct attack on Indigenous sovereignty. Even if the research is somehow sound under these conditions, collectively, we should not loan legitimacy to inauthentic claims.

If we do not have a clear indication of the reliability of data and data collection, we risk having *Dirty Data*. Dirty Data is when any data contains inaccuracies, inconsistencies, errors, or compromises its usefulness and reliability (DigitalRoute, 2024). In the definition of Dirty Data, we would like to include deliberate manipulation or fabrication with the intent to misrepresent or undermine Indigenous research outcomes and knowledge systems. This can include:

- Falsified or distorted information presented as genuine First Nation, Inuit, or Métis data
- Deliberately incorrect interpretations of Indigenous data to serve non-Indigenous agendas
- Indigenous personal lived experiences were collected and shared without proper consent and then used to draw misleading conclusions

This kind of deceptive data serves no educational purpose and is purely harmful. We cannot build accurate or effective models for action or change if they are based on fabrication, distortion, or misrepresentation.

Institutions must develop and maintain better verification processes in research ethics boards, while research partnerships must prioritize genuine Indigenous Peoples. These conversations, while necessarily uncomfortable, are crucial for protecting the integrity of Indigenous research. Only through such diligence can we ensure that Indigenous research truly serves and represents our communities.

Impacts on Indigenous Scholars: From Publications to Citations

This Special Report has offered a description of the complex that supports redface research as well as the impact on the quality of research and on Indigenous communities. However, there are also profound impacts on Indigenous scholars and students. Some find themselves forced to withdraw from their own projects when questions arise about the authenticity of research partners or participating organizations. Well-meaning but uninformed settler colleagues may inadvertently compromise research integrity by involving unverified partners, placing the burden of maintaining data integrity squarely on Indigenous scholars' shoulders.

The revelations of questionable or false identity claims impact the trustworthiness or reliability of even foundational books, articles, or arguments. Indigenous Studies as a discipline has only been around since the 1960s.

The canon of works by Indigenous peoples — or works that are not perpetuating extractive or exploitative research — is still relatively small, and the revelation that some of these works were conducted under pretenses damages the discipline and reputation of Indigenous academics.

What initially appeared to be anomalies were revealed to be part of a broader, systematic pattern. This observation prompted us to consider the perspective of Indigenous first-year students and mature students, particularly those at the undergraduate or master's level. When conducting research and completing assignments, these students may not yet possess the tools to evaluate several key elements critically:

- The authenticity of author credentials and claimed identities
- The legitimacy of research participant selection
- The credibility of participating organizations
- Methodological integrity and potential flaws

- The lack of rigour in publication verification processes
- The superficial inclusion of Indigenous scholars to legitimize potentially problematic research

A critical examination of publication verification processes reveals significant systemic gaps in research validation protocols. A serious problem exists in how research publications do or do not verify their authors and content. While we spend considerable time and effort reviewing the quality of research through peer review and funding applications, there are few safeguards to prevent pretendian individuals and organizations (such as problematic organizations that link themselves to Métis, First Nation, and Inuit identities without any legitimate connections) from publishing their research.

The gap in the publication process means that research from people misrepresenting their Indigenous identity can be published and circulated widely despite the otherwise strict standards for academic publishing. This discrepancy raises significant questions about the integrity of our academic publishing ecosystem and highlights a critical vulnerability in how we validate and disseminate Indigenous research. Despite the substantial resources invested in traditional peer-review processes, the lack of robust identity verification mechanisms undermines the authenticity and legitimacy of published Indigenous scholarship, which impacts actual Indigenous scholars. As a widespread problem, we now have to establish an additional informal review process rooted in skepticism of any research produced.

Increasingly, Indigenous scholars must question everything.

The Carrie Bourassa[5] case demonstrates how fraudulent identity claims can compromise entire bodies of research and contaminate scholarly discourse. Each time we (Indigenous scholars and students) cite research or data produced under false pretenses, we risk perpetuating harmful misrepresentations. This problem underscores

Certificate of Pretendian Status, Sonny Assu

why careful consideration of who we cite is not merely an academic exercise — our citation choices actively shape knowledge production and influence how Indigenous research is conducted, interpreted, and shared. We must prioritize supporting verified Indigenous scholars and acknowledge allies who conduct respectful work with our communities.

The presence of pretendians in positions of authority can have far-reaching consequences, including delaying or preventing access to research funding, frustrating the process through onerous tasks, or inserting themselves into the research. When pretendians are able to limit legitimate Indigenous research, they are upholding their own positions of power, misunderstanding the depth of Indigenous research, or retaliating against Indigenous scholars. This attempts to limit Indigenous researchers from conducting community work, thus controlling research outputs, influencing funding decisions, and effectively making certain groundbreaking research or fields suspect or in dire need of thorough reexamination.

Fraudulent identity claims as the basis of a career or research output should be treated with the same degree of scrutiny as plagiarism, a copy being passed off as authentic or original work.

[5] Carrie Bourassa held a prestigious position as scientific director at CIHR's Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health, where she was responsible for overseeing the distribution of research funds to Indigenous health-focused projects across Canada. While she was widely recognized as a prominent Indigenous health expert, an investigation by CBC traced her entire family tree to European origins, finding no evidence of Indigenous ancestry (Leo, 2021).

Recommendations to Address Red-Faced Research

Now that we have laid out the context and issues that surround the phenomenon of pretendianism in academia, we have endeavoured to provide a series of recommendations to help address this issue. We must stress that these recommendations are not the be-all and end-all, nor is there a one-size-fits-all solution. However, they can at least provide a foundation or inspiration for addressing pretendianism in various academic sectors.

The recommendations use some of the policy work completed by U15[6] universities on Indigenous identity verification policies. They focus on three pillars: "convening; advocacy; and stewardship of the research ecosystem." In some cases, these universities have been at the forefront of addressing pretendianism within their own institutions. While many of them are still in the consultation phase, less than half have fully developed Indigenous verification processes for faculty, thus highlighting how important and immediate this issue continues to be within the academy.

We view these recommendations as best practices; in some cases, there are concrete recommendations, while others are more conceptual and should be considered when discussing and writing policies at universities and funding agencies. We encourage readers to refer to the variety of resources from institutions throughout this section as they highlight the work being done and emphasize how seriously universities are taking this issue.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is one of the most important aspects of addressing the phenomenon of pretendianism within the academic community at an institutional level. Pretendianism is a direct result and manifestation of settler colonialism. Understanding the numerous ways in which it impacts communities will give policymakers a better understanding of the need for these types of policies and the complications of having these discussions. Cultural competency is foundational to ensuring that implementing policies that are directed at addressing pretendians does not turn into extensions of Indian policies that were designed to assimilate or exterminate Indigenous people in the past. The University of Manitoba's Guiding Principles aims to "reflect Indigenous values and cultural ways of working together."

Cultural competency includes understanding potential red(face) flags from organizations claiming to be Indigenous. The University of Waterloo has, as a part of its Indigenous identity verification policy, a series of potential warning signs for fraudulent organizations (University of Waterloo & Office of Indigenous Relations, n.d.). This can include organizations that claim to represent all First Nations, Inuit, or Métis people as opposed to a specific people or community. Organizations that have some sort of membership fee are also an indicator of a fraudulent organization. Additionally, there is no official federal recognition of Eastern Métis communities or organizations, which are often located in Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces.

Discussing the effects of pretendianism and organizing a deliberate, logical process to address it are two different matters. The planning and rollout of these types of policies can be emotionally draining and damaging for Indigenous people, as they can dredge memories or experiences of exclusion or alienation. There is a long history of systemic exclusion through direct policy and racism; it is not our intention to replicate these policies or retraumatize people who are engaging in these discussions, which should be grounded in Indigenous protocols and trauma-informed approaches. Understanding that the long history of colonialism is both the root cause of the disconnection of Indigenous people from their communities *and* the source of the pretendian phenomenon needs to be taken as a valid concern. This is reflected in McMaster's approach to some degree, which does not cut-off services to students who cannot verify.

[6] The U15 are comprised of: University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, University of Calgary, Dalhousie University, Université Laval, University of Manitoba, McGill University, McMaster University, University de Montreal, University of Ottawa, Queen's University, University of Saskatchewan, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, and Western University

Universities should integrate training on pretendians into existing training for hiring practices, evaluation committees, and research ethics boards, as was recommended by the University of Manitoba. Funding agencies should likewise integrate this training.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Community Engagement

It is crucial to have Indigenous voices and perspectives included in policy development, as Indigenous experiences can highlight issues or concepts that would have otherwise been overlooked. The development of a policy around Indigenous identity fraud needs to have space for Indigenous peoples. This issue directly impacts our communities, so policies to address it should be developed in consultation with Indigenous people. The University of Saskatchewan's approach to developing a verification policy involved creating a task force that included Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community members, staff, and students (p. 3). Academic institutions that have undertaken policy development initiatives have established dedicated ad hoc committees and extended invitations to various university constituencies for the formulation of an Indigenous identity verification framework. This is not to suggest that Indigenous people or communities need to be involved at every step, as that can heap additional work on them. However, this type of policy cannot be created in a vacuum, behind closed doors, or developed using a top-down process.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Navigating the Verification Policy

The policy requirements and navigation are two separate issues. As mentioned, the verification policies generally create more labour for Indigenous people. The University of Manitoba's Guiding Principles indicates that "having Indigenous representation on committees is a critical element in creating safe processes" (2023, p. 20). Misappropriation of Indigenous identity necessitates the implementation of a procedurally transparent framework that has representatives to maintain a central position within the adjudicative mechanisms.

For example, across the policies, there is a request for proof of Indigenous identity from a federally recognized community that has issued documentation from the individual or parents. In some cases, a request is submitted to our communities' membership/citizenship offices to issue letters confirming the identity of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis individuals. However, some places have verification guidelines, such as the University of Waterloo, which created an Indigenous Verification Advisory Committee (IVAC) that will review documentation or evidence provided from the application. This committee's compositional framework endeavours to ensure representation from each of the three constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples of Canada — First Nations, Inuit, and Métis — to maintain diverse Indigenous perspectives in its deliberative processes. Moreover, the procedural framework of the University of Manitoba articulates a commitment to accommodate alternative authentication methods that recognize and validate Indigenous epistemologies, specifically oral traditions, through mechanisms such as testimonial evidence in collaborative consultation with Indigenous communities and Nations for individuals whose circumstances require such accommodations.

Increasing numbers of higher education institutions are requesting Indigenous individuals to write a relational positionality statement to detail their lived experiences, while other institutions now require a written affidavit to confirm lived experiences. However, these lived experiences will vary from individual to individual; colonialism has rendered Indigenous peoples' experiences nuanced and complex. Some of us come from urban upbringings, others grew up in their home communities, or more rural/country areas, and many are disconnected from community due to multiple systemic factors. Consequently, these policies create substantial time burdens and administrative challenges that fall heavily on Indigenous applicants as well as faculty and staff, placing an undue workload on them and resulting in inequitable labour distribution. However, they are another step in preventing fraud.

Another thing to consider in implementing policies that request a written statement of lived experience could also benefit pretendians, who could use their knowledge of systemic issues affecting Indigenous persons and communities to create a false narrative for themselves. The entire process of identity verification is complex,

requiring due diligence and cultural competency, which is why settlers must understand and learn about legitimate and inauthentic peoples and communities.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Strategies for Confirming Indigenous Identity

Protecting against Indigenous identity fraud can be a complicated matter, and the strategies around confirming a person's identity can be equally so. An individual's relationship with a community or nation can be relatively straightforward or be frayed due to alienation or the ongoing effects of settler colonialism.

Organizations and Universities, such as Carleton University and McGill University, have worked to put in policies that protect Indigenous students, academics and staff from Indigenous identity fraud, as well as have space for the often complex foundations of Indigenous identity (Carleton University et al., 2024, pp. 2–3; McGill University, 2024). During the hiring process for an Indigenous-specific position, potential applicants must include one of two categories of documentation and a mandatory third category of documentation.

The first category is "Status, Beneficiary, or Citizenship Document." This category covers documents such as, but not limited to: Indian Status Cards; a copy of Métis Citizenship from a federally-recognized Métis organization; a copy of a Nunavut Trust Certificate Card or an Inuit Enrollment card associated with the four Land Claim regions of Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, and Inuvialuit; proof that an ancestor was assigned an Inuit disk number; or proof of an ancestor's name being on an Indian Register.

The second category is "Self-Declaration of Indigenous Identity" documentation for people who may not have specific government identifications or documentation. It must include a clear declaration of Indigenous ancestry with a *specific* Indigenous community, nation, or people.

The third category, which is mandatory in either case, is a letter of recommendation from a "community or community member, Elder, knowledge keeper, or other organization affiliation with whom the candidate has worked" (Carleton University et al., 2024, pp. 3). This letter supports the person's connection and belonging to the claimed group. This category also includes a written statement from the applicant explaining their ongoing relationship with the community and the reasoning behind their application for the position.

One aspect of the institutional perspective to keep in mind is that advocacy or service organizations cannot supersede the rights of Indigenous communities and nations to determine their own members. Organizations like Friendship Centres provide critical infrastructure to Indigenous peoples and communities; however, they are service hubs and cannot affirm a person's Indigenous identity, as they are not nations, nor are they governments.

Policies to protect against Indigenous identity fraud need to be thorough. However, these policies should not aim to replicate the restrictions and gatekeeping that have surrounded Indigenous citizenship and belonging since the establishment of the Indian Act.[7] There are ways to strive for honesty and equity while respecting that colonial policies have shaped how individuals relate or connect to their communities.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Knowledge Contribution in Data Collection Strategies

When collecting data from Knowledge Contributors/ research participants (Shawanda, 2022), deliberate measures need to be embedded within the research procedures to ensure that potential Indigenous identity fraud is filtered out, particularly when there is the potential to gather this sort of disaggregated data. There is a critical need for more robust data collection strategies as integrity concerns in Indigenous research continue to grow. Current Indigenous research practices often rely on overly simplistic self-identification checkboxes, and more rigorous data collection methods are needed.

[7] There are numerous instances of the Indian Act overwriting the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous Nations. For example: before the passage of Bill C-31, when a status Indian woman married a non-status man, the woman lost her Indian status. This would also mean that if there were children produced, the children would also be non-status. This was particularly harmful because numerous Indigenous nations were matrilineal, and heritage and citizenship was determined by the mother.

Most commonly, research ethics board consent forms simply ask for acknowledgement:

Do you identify as:

- ☐ Indigenous

Some questionnaires do provide a follow-up section generally formatted as such:

- ☐ First Nations
- ☐ Inuit
- ☐ Métis

However, the latter approach is rarely used. Therefore, a more comprehensive method is needed to capture essential information about community connections and family ties, which are fundamental to Indigenous identity.

Forms should include spaces for detailed information:

- ☐ **First Nations**
  Community: _____
- ☐ **Inuit**
  Region: _____
- ☐ **Métis**
  Community and family lineage: _____
- ☐ **Other** (including but not limited to non-status, reconnecting): _____

This format would provide crucial context about participants' connections to Indigenous communities and help maintain research integrity. The simple approach of grounding Indigenous identity in a community is critical to Indigenous identification (Kolopenuk, 2023, p. 471). Publication results should include the methodology of Indigenous identity data collection for transparency. This is integral because it must be explicit who is represented in the data, and establishing connection is central to the practices and cultures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples and communities.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Representation in Publications

Publications have a dual role: they serve researchers' careers and disseminate knowledge. As these publications travel throughout higher education institutions and communities, they present legitimacy upon knowledge claims and establish authoritative discourse within their fields. The authoritative nature of published academic work requires implementing robust verification protocols within the publication process. Given that universities and Tri-Agencies have begun instituting measures addressing Indigenous identity verification, it is now imperative that academic publications develop and implement comparable mechanisms to maintain the integrity of scholarly discourse concerning Indigenous knowledge and research.

Publications could establish Indigenous advisory groups to develop verification policies. These Indigenous members could increase representation in scientific publishing, such as the editorial boards and in the peer-review processes. An enhanced review would document whether authors identify as Indigenous or non-Indigenous, specify which Indigenous individuals or communities they collaborated with, and outline the Indigenous research protocols they followed throughout their work. This approach would support ethical research practices and respect Indigenous peoples and communities within the scholarly conversations.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Policy Re-Evaluations

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, these types of policy discussions are a new experience. There is a marked difference between developing a policy and refining it. Any policy developed to address this issue must have a component that requires re-evaluation and reassessment.

In the long history of Indigenous-Crown treaty-making, the Crown's approach was that once treaties were agreed upon, they were set in stone. The Indigenous approach was to view treaties as living agreements that must be cared for, reassessed, and continually re-evaluated. In order to develop a policy that is both protective and respectful, there must be mechanisms by which it can be

discussed and evaluated regularly, whether it be biannual, annual, or biennial. Institutions like the Tri-Agency have put in a specific section (7. Policy Review) that states: "The agencies will review and iteratively revise this policy within two years of its implementation and, as appropriate, in collaboration with Indigenous communities, with its advisory bodies including the Indigenous Leadership Circle in Research, and with the Compliance Oversight Committee."

RECOMMENDATION 9

Policy Application and Layering

Developing a policy as a defence against pretendianism is essential; in general, updated hiring practices cannot be retroactively applied. That being said, because pretendianism is, at its core, about financial or professional gain, this type of policy can be layered into any opportunities that present themselves to interested parties. Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig's approach to the Indigenous verification process includes language that singles out that the identification verification policies apply to "candidates" applying for employment opportunities (p. 1).

Internal or external grant applications, promotion processes, or bursary applications can all have some variation of this policy integrated into the application process, which can contain or minimize the people who have integrated into organizations or institutions. Additionally, the policy should be applied at every level or stage, not just when hiring or during the initial project proposal. The policy should be layered throughout existing frameworks — especially when a person is being considered for tenure, a grant, funding, or otherwise. This type of policy should not be used within one context but at any point where someone may benefit from having an Indigenous identity.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Legal Implications

When drafting this form of policy, it is essential to consult legal experts to ensure that the policy addresses the underlying issue of pretendianism while respecting all employment and organization laws. Addressing this issue is a complicated and nuanced process; there must be precision in how the policy is applied to ensure that those committing fraud are prevented from furthering their career while those in the process of reconnecting to their communities are not punished or discriminated against. The University of Manitoba's executive summary of the Indigenous Identity verification process stresses that the policy "must include a process for situations of possible fraud, appeals and repercussions for fraud" (p.5).

Conclusion

The implications of this issue have become increasingly apparent in our research landscape. Current self-identification methods are insufficient, as they do not require individuals to specify their community connections, be regionally specific, or list their family relationships. This allows Indigenous data to become skewed when mixed with responses from non-Indigenous participants falsely claiming Indigeneity.

Furthermore, Indigenous people often have very different lived experiences from non-Indigenous people due to ongoing colonialism and genocide. When non-Indigenous persons claim Indigenous identities and stories for themselves, not only is it fraudulent and exploitative, but it diminishes the real traumas experienced by Indigenous individuals, families, and communities by transforming them into nothing more than a checkbox for existing "inclusive" practices that can ironically serve as a tool to bolster the pretendian identity.

The problem is compounded by the fact that there is no method to remove Dirty Data. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers have an ethical obligation to identify and understand individuals who falsely claim an Indigenous identity and examine the impacts of their actions, which includes recognizing how such claims affect research integrity, community relationships, and resource allocation for Indigenous peoples.

With that said, this process is by no means straightforward. As we have highlighted before, Indigenous peoples' experiences with colonization continue to fracture relationships and connections to communities and families, and that history needs to be

acknowledged and respected; it cannot be an excuse for researchers to avoid upholding ethical principles that would protect Indigenous people from exploitation.

The dedication required to advance Indigenous Data Governance and address Indigenous identity fraud demands substantial emotional and intellectual labour. It includes the depth of commitment necessary to elevate these crucial discussions to the forefront of academic and policy discourse. It also requires great efforts to advocate for and implement Indigenous Data Governance protocols within academic and institutional contexts, underlining the complex intersections of scholarly praxis, emotional labour, and decolonial resistance. It is a deeply personal investment in ensuring Indigenous data sovereignty and methodological integrity.

Standing up for the truth about Indigenous identity is about protecting our future generations. This is not just a matter for Indigenous people to deal with alone. If you do not take a position on pretendianism, then you *have* taken a position on it. By staying silent about people who falsely claim Indigenous identity, you have made a choice. All of us in higher education must step up and take action to address this issue.

Settler colonialism is about replacement and erasure. It takes efforts from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike to make sure that the extermination of Indigenous peoples and voices does not happen. Allyship is critical in these conversations and advocacy. As Indigenous scholars, we must continue to develop and strengthen research ecosystems while educating others about the importance of ensuring that research and data management practices support Indigenous self-determination, cultural continuity, and community well-being. These discussions are by no means easy, but they are critical to ensuring the flourishing of Indigenous knowledge and peoples. We look to our nations for guidance and make our choices today based on Indigenous dignity, Indigenous intellectual traditions, and Indigenous sovereignty.

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