

ELŻBIETA WILCZYŃSKA¹

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Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6603-4540>

Hostipitality—Pretendians in the Host and Guest Matrix

Abstract: The paper examines the phenomenon of Pretendians within the framework of the discourse of hospitality, as proposed by Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak, following the trajectory of the host vs. guest (stranger) positions as they have shifted between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. Pretendians have been observed across multiple spheres of life and studied extensively as subjects of interest, scrutiny, and criticism. Legitimate Pretendians are welcomed by the nations they aspire to join, whereas racial impostors are either detribalized or denied enrollment. These outcomes often stem from issues related to colonialism, tribal sovereignty, or questions of propriety. The former group encounters hospitality, while the latter provokes hostility—or hostipitality, a term reflecting an oscillation between the two elements of this portmanteau. The negative emotions are ascribed to the imposition of the rules of hospitality by the current host of the US, which is interpreted as a self-colonizing factor, undermining Native American integrity as peoples who have a special status in the USA. The author explores how changing historical circumstances, from the precolonial period to the present day, have shaped these attitudes. The shifting host-foreigner paradigm between Native Americans and settlers, alongside various policies, has created fractures in identities and relationships, ultimately creating conditions in which Pretendians might have appeared, as it turns out, not only in the United States and Canada. The paper argues that the discourse of hospitality provides a nuanced framework for understanding Pretendians and the reasons for hostipitality towards them.

Keywords: Pretendians, Native Americans, hospitality, Derrida, identity

Introduction

The Pretendian phenomenon has opened up a Pandora's box of identity issues for Native Americans, raising questions such as: Who is a Native American? Who has the authority to determine this, and on what grounds? How does this affect Indigenous people? This phenomenon has been studied widely (TallBear, "Native American DNA," "Native 'Identity' Fraud"; Sturm²; Kolopenuk).

1 Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, ul. Grunwaldzka 6, 60-780 Poznań. Email: elzbietw@amu.edu.pl

2 Disclaimer: As Prof. Circe Sturm is an important source and authority for the paper, the author would like to acknowledge that at the moment of writing the paper (2024), the author was not aware of the accusations

Debates over Pretendians have sparked heated emotions ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to outright hostility. The former stems from admiration for those who claim Indigenous identity out of genuine love for Indigenous culture, while the latter arises from the recognition of the damage Pretendians inflict on the image, culture, and status of Native Americans, as well as the theft of economic, career, and advancement opportunities. One of the most robust indicators of this phenomenon is in U.S. census numbers: In the 1960 census, only 500,000 people identified as Native American (Passel 79); by 2020, that number rose to 3.2 million (alone—since 2010—11% increase) and 6.3 million in any combination (96% growth since 2010) (US Census Bureau). In total, the last census showed 9.6 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives (alone or in combination). A striking example of this unprecedented increase is among the Cherokees: in the 2010 census, 819,000 people self-identified as Cherokee, but by 2020, the number had reached 1.5 million (US Census Bureau). This phenomenon has been referred to as the “Cherokee syndrome”³ (Sturm 17; Qiu; “Who Belongs in the Cherokee Nation”).⁴ Naturally, this rise was not due to a significant increase in birth rates.

This paper will examine the Pretendian problem within the framework of hospitality as conceptualized by Jacques Derrida and further developed by Gayatri Spivak in her concept of “hospitality from below” (Puspa 16). Operating between the host-stranger binary and allowing for a reversal of their roles, hospitality engenders diverse relationships between the two, ranging from friendship to hostility, which is coded in the term “hostipitality,” essential for the present analysis. This term enables us to explore the conundrum of Pretendian identity in all its complexity, moving beyond a simple binary of oppressed/oppressor (Sturm 40–41; Muszeika 80–81) within the post-colonial studies or constructivist/essentialist perspectives in cultural studies (Sturm 31–2, 57–8; Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Representation*; Roth et al. 41). Such positioning helps us explain why the issue is so dramatic and how it resonates with contemporary perspectives on identity, belonging, and relationality embodied in Western and Indigenous views. The Pretendian phenomenon complicates the issue of identity, illustrating

made by Tribal Alliance Against Frauds that Prof. Circle Sturm herself was a “Pretendian”. She did not claim it openly, yet conceded that her link to the nation of Choctaw comes from her “family lore” but was not substantiated by any records or family acknowledgement. This does not repudiate her research on the topic, yet might constitute an explanation of her positive bias in her sympathetic and understanding attitude towards ‘race-shifters.’

- 3 The name Cherokee syndrome should be used cautiously, as – like many terms i.e., race, nation, ethnicity – is has been imbued with different meanings, some of them very derogatory. Sturm is respected for bringing attention to the phenomenon of mass self-identification as Cherokee, but she has been criticized for (1) the pathologizing language of “Cherokee syndrome,” (2) leaning too much on racialized frameworks instead of sovereignty, (3) blurring lines between citizens and claimants, and (4) writing from a non-Native perspective that some view as extractive (Qiu).
- 4 The U.S. Census Bureau reports on race and ethnicity, but “Cherokee” is not always a precise, stand-alone category. Some people may have selected “American Indian,” written “Cherokee” under “tribe,” or identified as ‘Cherokee plus another race’; hence, though the numbers suggest a trend, they are not very precise.

its entanglement in American history, post-colonial policies, and contemporary power dynamics. To this end, the paper will introduce Pretendians (who they are and their motivations for pretending to be an “Indian”) and then the theory of hospitality. After outlining Indigenous approaches to hospitality, it will cover key historical points in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and colonizers, highlighting—within the hospitality framework—the moments in which the prospective Pretendians may have emerged, and where their mixed relations ranging from hospitality to hostility were formed, breeding the attitude of eponymous hostipitality. The paper concludes with a discussion on current approaches to Pretendians, seen in any relational framework as “the host from below,” by American federal and state authorities and Indigenous nations, both federally and state-recognized. In the end, travestying Spivak’s words, the paper is trying to answer the question: ‘What would it be to be hospitable to [Pretendians]’? (Spivak 308).

To establish a framework for these reflections, it is worth recalling a quote by Duane Champagne:

The challenge for Native peoples in the 21st century is not necessarily physical survival or affluent survival, but rather surviving as Native communities that continue to be informed by Native worldviews, values, and philosophies. This does not mean that Native intellectual life will not change, but Native philosophies of the nature of human beings and of the universe are what justify the continuity and constitution of Native communities and their rights to self-government, territory, and cultural change. (329–330)

This quote exemplifies three threads woven throughout this discussion. The first emphasizes the inextricable link between being Native American and having Indigenous worldviews or values. For Native Americans, retaining this link is essential, as it defines them as a distinct ethnic community separate from the broader U.S. population. In this context, Pretendians—intentionally or not—undermine this link. The second thread challenges the first by assuming that all social or national groups evolve, sometimes shedding or modifying essentialist characteristics (Smith 20). Individuals may adopt views and values from other groups through intermarriage or moving away from reservations, thus evolving culturally. This aspect will be explored in the context of (de)legitimizing those who embrace dual worldviews or now seek to privilege their Indigenous identity. The third thread asserts that retaining core traits entitles this group to specific rights and privileges that foreground its existence. A problem arises when, to receive this entitlement, a nation must relinquish certain foundational traits, thus compromising the essential features tied to the first thread. This creates a paradox: Can Pretendians be seen as legitimate “altered” Indians who, after historical disruptions, seek to reconnect with their ancestors’ descendants to reclaim what colonization took from them? Should they be welcomed by the community they or their ancestors left and later had no more contact with? Or, as Deloria suggests, is it essential for nations to retain foundational traits by making it compulsory for the new members to have a lived Native American experience rather than a romanticized image of Indigenous culture

based on past visions, tenuous ancestry, or superficial participation in indigenous ceremonies to pass as a Native American? The answer hinges on how Pretendians are defined.

Pretendians and identity

Identity

Inherent in this analysis is the concept of identity, traditionally perceived as a sense of oneself. What is debatable is what constitutes the sense of oneself. There are many approaches to the issue. Erik Erikson claims that “the sense of identity provides the ability to experience one’s self” as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly” (42). The implication of this approach for a person who wants to fit a particular identity is to show a link between one’s uniqueness and sameness at the same time, between past and present, and then to manifest those links in one’s actions. Stuart Hall added two perspectives to the concept, one acknowledging that identity is a “being” rooted in shared culture, a sort of collective oneself (“Cultural Identity” 223), while the second arguing that identity is rather a ‘becoming’, “a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (225). Another scholar, Rogers Brubaker (29), criticized the very term “identity” as too ambiguous and vague, focusing instead on processes such as identification – the way people identify themselves—and categorization—the way others and institutions define people. His approach avoids “groupism,” the tendency to see groups as internally homogeneous, fixed, and often exclusionary; instead, it highlights commonality and connectedness across shifting contexts.

In this paper, the above terms will be applied to the identity of those who call themselves Native Americans and those accused of being Pretendians. The identity debate reopens the question of Indigenous identity: whether it is ‘inborn’—a matter of race, blood quantum, or DNA, and then we talk about an essentialist approach to identity (TallBear, *Native American DNA* 45–48; Roth et al. 42; Sturm 40–42; Smith 43–44)—or ‘acquired’ through culture and political membership (Sturm 40–44; Roth et al. 44–48; Hall *Representation* 5, 25). The second approach is named constructivism.

For Indigenous peoples, the U.S. census allows for self-identification as either a racial or ethnic group. Racial identity rests on perceived biological differences, while ethnic identity emphasizes ancestry, shared culture, and history (Brubaker 64–66; Roth et al. 41). Both are socially constructed, shaping how individuals recognize themselves and are recognized by others. Essentialist approaches argue that racial, ethnic, or cultural groups “share defining qualities, or essences, that are innate and unchanging and inform the nature, behavior, or abilities of group members” (Roth et al. 41), making Indigeneity a birthright tied to lineage and tradition. By contrast, constructivists view identities as fluid, contingent on social, historical, or geographical contexts (Roth et al. 42; Hall “Cultural Identity” 225). From this perspective, Indigenous identity may be affirmed not just by descent but also by cultural participation, self-identification, and community recognition. Constructivism’s emphasis on fluidity, self-identification, and process

provides Pretendians with intellectual cover to justify their claims, as it loosens the boundaries that Native communities have historically used to maintain their identity. However, it also acknowledges the need for recognition by people and institutions, framed as categorization by Brubaker. Yet, if we take seriously the relational dimension that Brubaker stresses in his notion of “identification” and the word “community recognition”/or categorization in the constructivist approach—with its emphasis on processes and contingent, situational, and relational nature of identity—then Indigenous community recognition remains central, and Pretendian claims lose legitimacy when detached from that grounding.

Pretendians – concepts and meaning

The Pretendians differ from Indian Hobbyists (Wilczyńska 348–9), or “wannabes” as they are also known in Europe, who adopt Indian culture, dress, and practices on a seasonal basis to “play Indians.” This phenomenon is often categorized as cultural appropriation, as Philip Deloria describes in *Playing Indian* (128–154). In the U.S., however, the phenomenon may be more complex. Consider this definition from the National Indigenous Identity Forum in 2022:

Pretendian is [a] person who falsely claims to have Indigenous ancestry, who fakes an Indigenous identity, or who digs up an old ancestor from hundreds of years ago to proclaim themselves as Indigenous. (Kolopenuk 469)

As the definition suggests, Pretendians fall into at least three categories: those who fabricate an Indigenous backstory entirely for personal gain and are deserving of the moniker “fake Indians” (Sturm 2; Hilleary “Going Native”); those whose disconnection from their tribes was involuntary and who now wish to reconnect for various reasons; and those with no biological ties who yet seek a more meaningful life by joining Native nations and embracing their culture. Overlap between these categories is possible, and clear-cut distinctions are sometimes impossible; perhaps each case of Pretendianism should be considered individually.

A striking feature of the Pretendian phenomenon is the sheer range of names used to describe it. From affirmative action Indians and Johnny-come-lately Indians to census Indians and appropriators (Chavers) or Google Indians, the labels are many. This text, however, will focus on the most central ones: race-shifters—because assuming an “Indian” identity involves a racial change, often from white but at times from Black; Indigenophilopaths—because Pretendians often claim pathological fascination with or love of Native culture; identity imposters—because the act of identity change is judged not only mistaken but deceitful; and wannabees—because they long to become Indians but can cite no authentic nation to which they belong (“Playing Pretendian”). These key names will be used interchangeably here, according to context.

Pretendianism is far from a niche; it is justifiable to examine the issue from different angles to avoid harmful stereotyping or naive acceptance of all claims made by race shifters. Following Circe Sturm’s caution, it can be reiterated that most Pretendians operate in good faith, “on the

firm conviction that they have Indian ancestors” (essentialist approach) (14), though conflicting narratives often arise from their stories, as reported by journalists and researchers (Chavers; Cyca; Hilleary “Going Native,” “Native American Tribal Disenrollment Reaching Epidemic Levels”; Kang). Therefore, statements about Pretendians must be made with care to prevent undue harm, while still pursuing the ultimate goal of survival of the communities as Indigenous people, as defined by Champagne.

Research to date (Sturm 11) has shown that individuals with illegitimate claims (first category) often commit fraud to reap specific benefits. Some artists wish to enter the Native art market regulated by the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, e.g., the infamous case of Jerry Chris Van Dyke (Sutton); others want to publish within Native literature e.g. Timothy Barrus (Qiu), and still others to access the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework in academia (e.g., allegedly Elizabeth Hoover, Andrea Smith) (Hilleary “Native, First Nations Scholars”); access the Indian Health Care System; or secure casino shares distributed equally among tribe members, e.g., Ron Roberts (Younge), among other advantages. They are often motivated by a desire to shed stigmatizing labels e.g., “white trash” or “redneck,” and gain entry to a different race or social class (Gonzales 201–202; Sturm 10). Yet, this claim may be contradicted by the already high-profile positions many identity impostors occupy (Sturm 11)—as academics (e.g., Andrea Smith), lawyers (e.g., Turpel-Lafond in Canada, Cree), artists (e.g., Jimmi Durham), actors (e.g., Johnny Depp, Sacheen Littlefeather, Iron Caddy), and even politicians (e.g., Elizabeth Warren, Bill Clinton).

The second group is primarily motivated by a desire to re-indigenize. Some people have long been aware of having “Indian blood” or Indian connections in family history, but had not acted on it until recently. This is an explanation most commonly invoked. For others, discovering an ancestral link through a DNA test (TallBear 84–85, 89–90, 133–35), an archival search, an untested relative’s account, or a family legend has prompted them to seek a tribal connection (an essentialist stance). Some, after being adopted before the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 was passed, are now searching for their biological parents and community; still others initiate identity exploration based on physical characteristics associated with Indigeneity (e.g., straight black hair, high cheekbones, or slanted eyes) (an essentialist stance). A notable example here is the desire of some to join a tribe, or if denied, to form their own (Sturm 70). Such individuals claim that dislocation or forced assimilation severed their ties, as with some Cherokee people who avoided removal during the 1838 Trail of Tears, Black Cherokees/Chickasaws who were disenfranchised because of the notes on Dawes Rolls (Qiu), or the Black Dutch (Sturm 33). Now they seek to reclaim what they perceive as an almost irreparable loss and to do justice. This group wishes to reconstruct its identity, yet what its members miss is their lived experience or group recognition.

The third category consists of individuals from various backgrounds, primarily white (hence Pretendianism is linked to “white-coded Indians,” cf. Kolopenuk 468), who endeavor to reidentify as Indians for political, historical, or moral reasons. In the present day, Native American culture occupies minimal space in mainstream American life (Muszeika 17, 22; Silverman “Member’s View” 05:55–07:00)—whether in classrooms, literature, film, or public multicultural discourse—and often

bears stereotypes of poverty and marginalization. Yet, many Indigenophiles assert that they gravitate toward Indigenous groups because these communities offer alternatives to modern American culture: instead of individualism, a sense of the collective and community; instead of secularism, a spiritual life; instead of anomie and emptiness, a sense of life ingrained in the narrative of community and kinship. The list also includes those who wish to cast off the feeling of guilt imposed on white men by the neocolonial/settler narrative. Taking inspiration from Andrew Delbanco's 1999 book *The Real American Dream—A Meditation on Hope* (96–97), it can be even claimed that being Native today or shifting into the Indian is a way of realizing the American Dream because the Indigenous meaning system seems to be encompassing what American Dream promised – not only “upward mobility, enough economic success to lead a comfortable life” but also “exhortation urging all Americans to do better, to be fairer,” to have hope (Churchwell). American culture, based on the self-realization of an individual, the instant gratification of desires, neoliberal-driven consumerism, focus on property, decay of social networks, and the fall of the role of the family and kin, is seen as empty and unfulfilling, thus not instigating hope and transcendence (Sturm 83–85). Philip Deloria, in his book *Playing Indian* (95–127), had noticed this syndrome of redefining oneself to have a more self-fulfilling life, already among 19th-century Americans—Boy Scouts movements and environmental movements—yet, “the move was always about claiming to be indigenized, not indigenous” (Sturm 87).

The phenomenon of race-shifting might seem astonishing, as a few decades ago, very few people wanted to admit to being Indians; they shunned any connections with indigeneity and desired to pass for white or black. Before the 1990s, it did not pay to be an Indian, for so few economic, political, social, or cultural benefits were accrued to them because of colonial policy and the many losses it incurred. Now, however, for a handsome minority, the trend of being ashamed of being an Indian has been reversed, inspiring enthusiasm at the prospect of converting into one, thus breeding “Indigenophilopaths.”

It is interesting to note that the phenomenon of self-indigenizing has been reported in New Zealand and Australia, other countries colonized by Great Britain, though it pales in scale. In New Zealand, the first report about fake Maori was published only in 2024, and it concerned four academics who likewise sought career and academic benefits accrued to Maori (Galbraith 1–2) as well as a white-skinned group called Ngāti Hotu who claim to precede the Maori (Galbraith 2,4) and have originated ca. 200BC. However, the race-shifters have not been identified to the public, and the issue did not win widespread recognition. In Australia, in contrast, the problem is on the rise, as “more and more ‘opportunists’ are making ‘false claims’ to membership of Indigenous groups to scuttle resource projects seeking environmental approval (Karp and Middleton). A special Deep Fake Project has been set up to trace those ‘fake’ Aborigines, which so far has identified many academics or famous figures (*Dark Emu Exposed*).

How can Pretendians be connected to hospitality discourse and what new light can this discourse shed on the phenomenon? Do the recognized native nations welcome the aspiring Indians to increase their ranks, or do they mistrust them?

The Discourse of Hospitality

Hospitality is the act and practice of being hospitable (Manzanas Calvo and Sánchez 2). It involves a host and a guest, typically in the host's home, and assumes a welcoming attitude from the former towards the latter, along with an expectation of reciprocity. Hospitality determines who belongs within a given space, who has authority over its rules, and who can enforce them. It is essential to remember that "all the words that are readily associated with hospitality have evolved from the same hypothetical root 'ghos-ti'" (O'Gorman 7). In Indo-European times (c. 4000 BC), the word "guest" also implied "stranger." In often hostile tribal societies, strangers could be perceived as potential threats. The Latin cognate "hostis" also means "enemy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 21, 43), as "the notion 'favorable stranger' developed to 'guest'; that of 'hostile stranger' to 'enemy'" (Benveniste and Lallot 61). These concepts underpin the contemporary discourse on hospitality, especially as developed by 20th-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Of Hospitality* (with Anne Dufourmantelle, 2000). While Derrida's reflections address a European immigration crisis, they are broadly applicable, allowing us to interpret his "Foreigner Question" in more general terms.

Derrida presents hospitality as an aporia or antinomy (76). On the one hand, the host, by the laws of their land, has the right to invite the foreigner but also to "mark the limits, powers, rights, and duties" that the foreigner must respect. Depending on how the foreigner complies with the rules, this stance can create acceptance or resistance to the stranger's presence, ultimately limiting or even denying hospitality. On the other hand, the law of hospitality dictates that the "new arrival" should be offered an unconditional welcome (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). Unconditional hospitality allows for the possibility that the foreigner, as a guest, could ultimately take over the host's land, rearrange its laws, introduce new legal systems, and establish new networks of "communication and information," thereby creating "new spaces of hospitality" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 57). In this scenario, the balance between host and guest is disrupted, and their roles may be reversed. The original host may then become a hostage to the new host—an idea that seems applicable to the relationship between Indigenous Americans and American settlers, as will be further discussed.

Moreover, as a result of this invasion, the attitude of "true" hospitality displayed by the original host may morph into hostility toward the new host or foreigner. The original host, now "a colonized subject acting as host to a colonizer guest" (Puspa 20), also referred to as the "host from below" by Spivak (308; Puspa 21), may feel ambivalent toward the foreigner, a concept expressed in Derrida's notion of hostipitality—a portmanteau of hospitality and hostility. This term captures the clash of attitudes in the host-guest or host-stranger relationship, a fitting way to describe the complex stance of Indigenous Americans toward the American government. The now-subjugated host or "host from below" may either accept the situation or resist it, in the latter case developing hidden hostility toward the oppressor and fighting to reclaim their former status and rights, while anticipating a possible reversal of roles.

However, on the surface, the “hosts from below” are often bound to accept the laws imposed by the new host, as these laws also generate some benefits. This acceptance may eventually lead to a situation in which the “host from below” no longer views the new host—the Foreigner—as an invader or parricide (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 5). Spivak theorizes that this might occur if the foreigner is welcomed through the act of “forgetting the murder of the fathers” (309).

What, then, is the situation concerning Indigenous Americans and their relationship to their colonizers? Do they harbor hospitality, hostipitality, or hostility? And what role do the Pretendians play in the conundrum created by the reversal of roles between the original host (now “host from below”) and the new host, once a foreigner?

Hospitality among Native Americans

Before European settlers arrived, the American continent was inhabited by numerous Indigenous nations, both large and small. Their migratory trajectories brought them into contact with one another, which led to either hospitable relationships—if resources were plentiful—or hostility, if they had to compete for resources (Witgen 31). In cases of mutual prosperity, tribes formed alliances and strong bonds through trade, intermarriage, mutual support in warfare, or cultural exchanges. A natural result of these encounters was intermarriage and the mixing of different groups, as seen among the Civilized Tribes (Sturm 15; Churchill 47), as well as the Iroquois and the Sioux (Churchill 44).

Traditionally, Indigenous tribes “governed their citizens and territories based on their own understanding of kinship, ancestry, and history” (TallBear 4). An individual would either be born into or become a member of a family, clan, or tribe, and could trace their kin—close or distant—depending on whether the tribe followed matrilineal or patrilineal descent (Churchill 41). Whole groups could also be integrated through adoption or naturalization, such as captured prisoners or entire surrendered villages, who—if they survived and were not enslaved outside—eventually received the same rights as other members of the host tribe. Thus, tribal identity was not determined by genetics or race, as Indigenous groups did not recognize a racial hierarchy (Churchill 41), but rather by genealogy and lineage. As a result of these enrollment processes, all tribes were genetically diverse, with few individuals being “full-blooded” Cherokee or Lakota. Consider, for example, the role of “mixed blood” John Ross in the Trail of Tears, or Quannah Parker among the Comanche, both having a white parent (Churchill 44).

In terms of hospitality, Indigenous tribes set clear conditions for those seeking entry into their ranks: the former “stranger” had to meet specific requirements, and once these were fulfilled, they could become legitimate members of the tribe. This process created a “common pot”—a community cooperating and tightly interconnected for the common good and survival (Brooks 3–5), where loyalty and dedication to the tribe were essential. Over time, either the newcomer or their descendants would fully integrate into the host community. This shifting of identities was often formalized through ceremonies and gift-giving, which sealed new bonds (Witgen 384) formed through marriage, adoption, or naturalization.

While acknowledging the instances of hostility between Native Americans and newcomers that led to tragic conflicts (such as the Jamestown massacre of 1622 and the Pequot War of 1637), it is important to remember that when Europeans were arriving in moderate numbers, “the same time-honored principles” (Churchill 41) of hospitality prevailed. Early European immigrants, if they emerged unscathed from skirmishes, were often adopted, naturalized, or married into tribes, strengthening them militarily, economically, or culturally. Notable examples include members of Raleigh’s “Lost Colony” in Virginia, various English, Dutch, and Irish settlers (Axtell 168–206), as well as figures like Joseph Renville and Eleazer Williams (Clifton 31). Many runaway or freed Black individuals were also integrated. Thus, “foreigners” became part of the host society as they respected the host’s rules, and their or their ancestral kin’s “parricides” were forgotten.

All of this indicates that Indigenous people, as hosts, accepted individuals from diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds—whether Black, white, or otherwise—and established pathways for them to transition from foreigners to fully integrated tribal members. In this process, genes, bloodline, or skin color of the guests played no or little role in their eventual status within the community. Once incorporated, they might come to share the nation’s lifeways and traditions as well as increase the pool of genes defined as indigenous, which will appear essential in the 21st-century genetics.

Welcoming the Colonizer

At the moment of first contact, Indigenous nations were the hosts of their territories, which they held in deep reverence, stewarding the land according to their customs and viewing it as sacred—not as “terra nullius,” or vacant land, for the taking by “strangers.” Receptions of these foreigners varied widely (Kolodny 1), depending on each tribe’s previous experiences, cultural assumptions, and contemporary situation. For example, the symbolic meeting of the Puritans and the Wampanoags, which later inspired the Thanksgiving myth, was marked by Chief Massasoit’s calculated decision to welcome the Pilgrims as allies. In *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving*, Silverman argues that Massasoit, facing the ravages of European-borne plagues and seeking stability, extended hospitality to the Pilgrims with clear conditions: newcomers needed permission to use the land and were required to contain their livestock while also learning Wampanoag customs, such as gift-giving and pipe-smoking (22).

Initially, Europeans respected the agreements they made with Indigenous people, but as their numbers grew, these contracts were increasingly violated; the newcomers imposed their laws, seeking sovereignty over lands to which they had no rightful claim (Gibson 236). Over time, in those territories, the Pilgrims began to act as hosts, leading to escalating conflicts. One significant example is King Philip’s War of 1675–76, which the Algonquin tribes ultimately lost. These defeats enabled settlers to assert dominance over Indigenous lands, establish their own rules, and expand westward as conquerors.

Under the “right of conquest,” European powers—and later the United States—laid claim to Native lands through war, purchase, or deceitful contracts. Through these treaties, the federal

government promised protection for some Native territories while designating tribes as “domestic dependent nations,” still hosts on reservation land but with limited sovereignty (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 1831). This ruling effectively shifted the role of hosts into the hands of strangers, placing Indigenous lands under federal control and making tribes, in effect, hostages or “resident aliens” (Spivak 308; Puspa 21).

As settlers moved westward, this cycle of contact and conflict repeated itself with each encounter with new native groups, culminating in violent confrontations, such as the Plains Wars, where tribes resisted but ultimately faced defeat. The transformation from guest to host officially ended in 1871 with the Indian Appropriations Act, which declared all Native Americans wards of the federal government, making them “strangers” and subjecting them to federal and state laws. This change led to a significant loss of tribal membership, as Indigenous people were either confined on reservations or went to live outside of them, either assimilating or living on the margins, potentially losing personal or cultural connection with their tribes and national identity. The federal government expected that the members of tribes would eventually either die out or “reemerge,” not as Indians, but as Americans, with the memory of their original status as hosts fading from both individual and collective memory. What mattered was which attitude the “host from below” would adopt towards the foreigner (Gibson 425-450).

Landmarks in the Process of Turning the Original Host into the “Host from Below”

The Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act, profoundly undermined tribal sovereignty by placing the federal government in control of determining allotment rolls and establishing membership criteria. When federal agents created the rolls between the 1880s and 1920s, they determined the allotment size, depending on the enrollees’ age and household size, as well as laid the foundations for tribe membership by assigning each enrollee a degree of Indian blood (e.g., $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{8}$), based on parentage. Yet, no blood notification was given to the freedmen, who—by virtue of the 1866 Treaty with Oklahoma Tribes—became tribe members and, along with their descendants, received the same rights as members of all Civilized Nations in Oklahoma (“Playing ‘Pretendian’”). However, in the late 1970s, a lack of this notification allowed the BIA to refuse the freedmen membership legally. In this way, these Dawes rolls shifted identity from being tribal/national (membership, kinship, adoption) to being racial/biological (“blood quantum” as a criterion for determining tribal membership and eligibility for land allotments).

This federally imposed system severely limited tribal sovereignty by dictating membership and land use terms, effectively disenfranchising many full-blooded individuals by establishing guardians for them. During the already mentioned trust periods, the federal government held Native lands in trust, controlling their sale and cultivation without tribal consent, further undermining tribal autonomy. Blood quantum also indicated that those with less than “one-fourth degree of blood” were outright disqualified from the new rolls, the consequence of which was more land for the settlers (Churchill 50). With hindsight, it is possible to see how this practice

contributed to a possible rapture both among the original hosts (between the prospective Pretendians and the enrolled members of each nation, especially in the case of the Cherokee Nation) and in their relations with the US as the ultimate host.

In the enrollment process, cultural markers such as language, religious practices, and traditional regalia were also used to define “authentic” Indigeneity. However, many of the core aspects of native cultures had been suppressed, especially after the introduction of boarding schools focused on assimilation. Losing these identity markers left many Native Americans feeling they no longer belonged, and economic hardships on reservations forced thousands to leave in search of better opportunities, deepening the divide between those who remained on reservations, clinging to traditional ways, and those who assimilated into broader society. Those who stayed, often with higher blood quantum and less racial mixing, were sometimes stigmatized as resistant to modernity, yet they played the role of “host from below,” preserving the culture necessary for the survival of an integral Native community, as Champagne argued. Those who departed often felt pressure to hide or deny their Native heritage, becoming disconnected from their communities (Sturm 133–137) physically and relationally. This also shows how the future emergence of “Pretendians” was inscribed in the past events and practices.

In the 1950s, the federal government adopted the termination policy, aiming to dissolve tribal lands and disperse Indigenous communities. Termination sought to erase the original host’s cultural and physical presence, reducing Native identity to a mere ethnicity without the distinct rights promised in treaties to the original hosts. This policy was reversed in the 1970s, also under the influence of the Red Power Movement, and this led to a resurgence of Indigenous cultural pride (Wilkinson 89–150). This cultural revival forced the federal government to recognize tribal sovereignty through The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 and a series of court cases, relying on legal principles such as the federal government’s fiduciary duty to Native American tribes (through the Federal Energy Management Agency) (“Federal Trust Responsibility”). A notable example is the *Seminole Nation v. United States* case (1942), in which the U.S. government committed itself to “moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust” toward Native American tribes (Wilkinson 61, 104). The government vowed to protect Native American assets and resources and serve as a trustee for Native American lands. These obligations were extended primarily to reservation nations, as it became in the federal government’s interest to limit the number of Native people and the size of the land base, already reduced by the aforementioned dislocation, removal, and assimilation policies like the Dawes Act or blood quantum requirement. When reservations revealed extreme poverty, disease, and stagnation, the government began providing welfare benefits and annuities, establishing a pattern of assistance. Today, these services include healthcare, food and housing support, educational scholarships, and more—entitlements that are sometimes sought after by Pretendians.

These shifts in policy and law prompted many tribes to seek federal recognition, especially after the economic shares of tribal casinos emerged in 1988. Federal recognition criteria required tribes to demonstrate an enduring cultural continuity and identity as well as blood-based lineage

dating back to the early 20th-century Dawes rolls. However, for many Indigenous people, this requirement evoked the same discriminatory policies based on race that had eroded their rights and autonomy in the past.

In this context, questions of Indigenous identity became increasingly complex. Who is truly “Indian”? Is it the reservation-based host preserving tradition and meeting federal requirements, or those who adapted to mainstream society and succeeded, albeit at the cost of shedding visible markers of Indigenous culture while, possibly, retaining Indigenous ways of thinking and spirituality? The latter has been the experience of many of the Pretendians from the 2nd category mentioned, and they have never before addressed the experience of exclusion. This complexity is heightened by the fact that those who left often intermarried with people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, further diluting physical markers of Indigeneity, including the blood quantum. Without enrollment numbers, traditional Indian looks, or tribal language, how could they prove and display their Indigeneity without being accused of pretending to be Indian? (Sturm 6; TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

The “Pretendians” in the Matrix Created by the Host and the “Host from Below”

Given that the federal government welcomed the federally recognized tribes as its indigenous partners, within a system referred to as divided sovereignty, the tribes are declared sovereign in their decision about enrollment requirements. Yet the federal government determines the overarching boundary conditions for membership, while Native nations can formally establish their own criteria for enrollment—such as choosing to use or avoid blood quantum measurements. However, most do rely on blood quantum, a prominent exception being the federally recognized Cherokee Nation. As a sovereign “host from below,” each native nation typically also requires applicants to prove descent from tribal members enrolled in the early 1900s, often equating descent with blood quantum metrics that range as much as one-quarter to as little as one four-hundredth Indigenous ancestry. Blood, then, serves as a metaphor for lineage, acting as a marker of Indigenous cultural and racial distinction, reflecting the colonially introduced system of racial categorization that Indigenous communities have since adopted, albeit with “hostipitality.” As Kolopenuk describes it, this system “produced Indianness as a matter of racial rather than relational identity,” and is seen as self-colonizing, undermining the attributes associated with a “host” (472).

While blood quantum is a common standard, the foundation of tribal identity is not primarily genetic but communal, based on interconnected relationships, shared traditions, and collective worldviews. In each community, each member knows how they are connected to others—whether by blood, adoption, or marriage—and can verify these connections. Thus, the first challenge for a “Pretendian” is proving “relationality.” When asked, “Who is your grandparent? Do you know them?” a wannabe must answer authentically, and their relatives must be able to verify their responses. If they are unable to do it, then the Pretendians face humiliation and disavowal,

as happened, for instance, in the case of Elizabeth Hoover (Kang) or Jimmie Durham (Pobric). Kolopenuk looks white but is an enrolled member of the Peguis Nation; she was not raised on a reservation, yet when questioned about her authenticity, she did not respond with offense or denial but instead cited family members who could affirm her heritage. She suggests that others also apply “Indigenous relationality” as a key test of authenticity—a way “the host from below” can uphold membership in line with Indigenous traditions (Kolopenuk 469).

Another method consistent with traditional values, albeit more severe, is “detrribalization” (Malinowskaya). If a Pretendian’s documentation is found to be fraudulent or lacks corroboration from other relatives, the individual or group may be “detrribalized,” effectively uninvited from the tribe (Malinowskaya; Hilleary “Native American Tribal” 19). This action, though counter to traditional Indigenous hospitality (constructivism or identification), is seen as a necessary measure to maintain the tribe’s reputation and protect its authenticity (essentialism) under the “divided sovereignty” agreement established with the federal government (TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

The issue of Pretendians is sensitive because of the distinct legal rights held by Indigenous people under treaties and contracts dictated by or negotiated with the present host. Native Americans are recognized as rights-bearing subjects, with entitlements granted in compensation for past harms, by virtue of, for example, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), the Child Welfare Act (1978), and healthcare systems. These rights, often hard-won from the federal government, are now perceived as privileges, prompting some non-Indigenous individuals to falsely claim Native identity to access them. Tribes are thus compelled to preserve their unique status by following the terms of divided sovereignty, even when these rules conflict with traditional customs of hospitality. “A host from below” has a right to protect their interest (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 46-47).

Despite these complexities, strong relations between tribal governments and the U.S. government remain vital to advancing the Indigenous agenda and achieving meaningful outcomes for tribes. The political reality is inescapable: the United States holds established political, economic, and cultural dominance. Some indigenous nations, however—like the Iroquois Nation (Hill)—reject this reality, expressing a desire, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, to “flip the roles by reinstating the colonized as host” (qtd. in Puspa 21), which is manifested in their consistent efforts to fight for their passports. Yet realistically, tribes will continue to operate within the framework of divided sovereignty. While this framework grants them special status, land rights, and certain benefits, it also ties them to the federal government, the current host, where the sole authority able to change their status is Congress. This arrangement fosters a lingering “hostipitality,” as tribal sovereignty predates the U.S., a fact that continues to fuel tensions and breed hope for a change or nostalgia. Meanwhile, Pretendians highlight the contradictions inherent in this framework, exposing how both Indigenous communities and settlers grapple with the effects of some historical policies and colonial legacies. Some Indigenous communities claim that they have already “forgotten” the past patricides committed by the Foreigner in the

colonial era; some will never want to forget, not only to bear a continual grudge for committed atrocities, but foremost to remember and honor ancestors and their lifeways. To this effect, as Champagne asserts, what should be prioritized is to “surviv[e] as Native communities that continue to be informed by Native worldviews, values, and philosophies” (329). Therefore, Pretendians should be dealt with accordingly, and any attempt at fraud should be disclosed and punished (TallBear “Native ‘Identity’ Fraud”).

Conclusion

This analysis argues that the concept of hospitality provides a valuable framework for understanding the Pretendian phenomenon, positioning these individuals as strangers to both the original and present hosts. Central to this discussion is Derrida’s notion of “hostipitality,” which encapsulates the duality of the host-stranger relationship, oscillating between hospitality and hostility.

The historical evolution of the host-guest dynamic between Native Americans and European settlers—and later American settlers—has led to complex reversals and reconfigurations of these roles. Federally recognized tribes, as hosts of their “nations and reservations,” may seek to extend hospitality to legitimate race-shifters who aim to reconnect with their Indigenous heritage. Such gestures could potentially enhance Indigenous cultural vitality, presence, status, and rights within the United States. However, some criteria—often imposed externally by the host-usurper, such as blood quantum requirements or documentation of ancestral enrollment rules—limit their ability to do so.

Referring to my initial question, “What would it be like to be hospitable to Pretendians?” it must be stated that welcoming Pretendians without scrutiny risks undermining tribal sovereignty and identity, potentially allowing individuals, particularly identity impostors, to exploit hard-earned rights and privileges secured through centuries of treaty negotiations and legal struggles. Consequently, while native nations might wish to offer hospitality, they often prioritize the interests and good of their own community over the desires of Pretendians, especially if the grounds for enrollment are dubious. They do it aware of the fact that their resistance to freely welcoming Pretendians is often approached as a guarded, even hostile, stance.

On the other hand, Pretendians, as strangers seeking belonging, frequently interpret this resistance as rejection. Their response may include frustration, defiance, or even hostility toward the nation they aspire to join. They may perceive the nation’s adherence to colonial-era constructs—such as proof of relationality to the community—as a betrayal, echoing the exclusionary practices of colonizers. For these individuals, the desire to reconnect with Indigenous identity feels, in their view, like sufficient grounds for acceptance and enrollment. If they are not welcomed, or uninvited (i.e., detribalized), they set up their independent tribes, with or without the state’s approval (Sturm 17).

This tension underscores the delicate balance that indigenous nations and the federal government strive to maintain in the host-stranger matrix, remembering that it is the present host that sets the criteria for acceptance, and second in line is the “host from below.” Protecting

the integrity of Indigenous identity and autonomy requires caution in addressing Pretendians, a phenomenon that reflects the enduring complexities of U.S.-Indigenous relations shaped by a legacy of colonialism.

Presented within the framework of identity theories, the problem of Pretendians exposes the limits of both “strict essentialism” (which can be exclusionary), “pure social constructionism” (which can be too open-ended and allows for fraud), privileging the concept of identification by Brubaker, as it emphasizes it as a process involving sacred values and relationality. This is so because indigenous identity as ethnic and national is best understood as “relational, political, and historically grounded”, requiring both descent and community affirmation.

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Elżbieta Wilczyńska is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, in the Department of Studies in Culture. Her primary area of expertise revolves around American ethnic minorities, particularly Native Americans, encompassing their history, culture, identity, and contemporary role in America. Within this field, she has taught a variety of courses and seminars, ranging from Native American literature to different aspects of Native American history, art, and cultures in both the United States and Canada. Additionally, she has academic interests in Australian and New Zealand cultures, focusing on indigenous art. Her publications predominantly concentrate on Native Americans and Indigenous art, with recent works that include "Nowe tropy, nowi bohaterowie, nowe historie, nowe konflikty – stara sprawa czyli indiańskie kontrnarracje i NAISA," *Historyka*, vol. 51, 2021, pp. 481–501; "Transculturation and Counternarratives: The Life and Art of the Wurundjeri Artist William Barak," *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2022, pp. 51–67; and "#NoDAPL as a Performance of Indigenous Identity and Sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux," 2024, pp. 144–169. She is a member of the American Indian Workshop and the Polish Association of American Studies.