

## **Allyship: Youth Activism and Indigenous Issues**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will attempt to provide you, the reader, with an understanding of how one person's choice can create opportunities for further change. In this way, others experience a vast desire to become involved in resistance and partnership to seek out a more inclusive and equitable future for all. Through the generations, we see a decline in adult participation in boycotts and walkouts, leaving room for a more energized youth population. The outcomes from these youth activists will have a profound impact not only on our future but also on everyone involved. There will be challenges, and of course, there will be hardships. We will even encroach upon the deceitfulness of those who will try to take advantage of being an ally to our causes. In this paper, we will focus on allyship connected to Indigenous issues.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous, Allyship, Pretendians, #Landback, Youth Activism*

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### **Introduction**

It was December 1, 1955, on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, which would forever show the world that one person could be effective and change the world for the better. Rosa Parks, a forty-two-year-old Black woman, refused to move from her seat that the bus driver, James F. Blake, had designated as a “white” section for passengers. She was removed from the bus and arrested. This sparked the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott (History.com, 2024).

Months before Rosa Parks sparked a call for resistance, Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old Black woman from Montgomery, Alabama, experienced similar discrimination. As with Rosa Parks, the bus driver demanded Claudette vacate her seat and refused, saying she had paid her fare and would not move. She, too, was handcuffed and arrested (The Associated Press, 2021).

Two women, one a middle-aged woman and the other a teenager, were fighting a system that kept them down, discriminated against them and did not recognize that the times were changing. When Rosa Parks was arrested, the officer asked her why she did not move. Rosa Parks responded by saying that I would have to know what rights I had as a human being and a citizen of Montgomery, Alabama. People always say I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically or any more tired than usual at the end of a working day. No, the only thing I was tired of was giving in. Rosa Parks, as cited in Human Gene, 2024).

Rosa Parks was tired of giving in. No one could blame her for this as she had been treated as a second-hand citizen all her adult life. Not a human being, but as something to look down upon. Claudette Colvin was later asked why she was an unknown compared to Rosa Parks. Her response is astounding, “*She was an adult. They didn’t think teenagers would be reliable*” (Adler, 2009, March 15).

### **Terminology**

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Before we begin, we need to define some terminology to build our foundation. What is meant by “Indigenous”? According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (2024), Indigenous refers to *“of or relating to the earliest known inhabitants of a place and especially of a place that a now-dominant group colonized”* (para. 2). This will include the many Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, Australia, Norway, Turtle Island, the Asian-Pacific rim, and other first peoples worldwide. This leads to the question: what is decolonization? For Indigenous people, decolonization is first and foremost about cultural, psychological, and economic freedom to achieve Indigenous sovereignty - the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems (Belfi, 2021). This is important to understanding the so-called uprising of Indigenous protests, boycotts, and rallies today in many parts of the world. As with Rosa Parks, Indigenous people worldwide, and especially here in Canada, are tired of giving in. Non-Indigenous allies often play pivotal roles in many actions focusing on Indigenous freedom and self-determination. An ally, or allyship, is “someone who supports people in a minority group or who are discriminated against, even though they do not belong to that group themselves” (Collins, 2024).

### **The Importance of Allyship**

Gatherings and rallies always begin with an idea, a cause, or a purpose— often conceived of by one or two people. Others of different races, religions, colours, ages, and educational backgrounds share these ideals and beliefs. For this reason, allies are crucial for any cause to have stability and meaning. In August 2018, fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg began her “Skolstrejk för klimatet,” or school strike for climate. She started protesting for climate change despite her parents’ initial discouragement. In a tweet from Greta on November 17, 2021, after the COP26 Climate Conference, she stated,

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Indigenous nations were not part of the negotiations even though 80% of the planet's biodiversity survives in our territories. The problem is not only the blah, blah, blah of politicians but the bang, bang, bang of greenwashing (Thunberg, 2021).

A non-Indigenous youth who is a faithful ally for Indigenous people. However, this is not just about her but about the future of all people: old and young, the youth of today and tomorrow. How do you become a successful ally to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people (FNMI) or the First Peoples of the various territories now colonized as Canada? You must go beyond being well-intentioned and sympathetic towards Indigenous peoples' issues. Allyship requires hard, painful work: humility, respect, and commitment are some qualities necessary to be considered an ally by Indigenous people. This is about partnership and awareness that you, as a non-Indigenous person, accept that you are a settler and a colonizer. This moment may create pain and suffering. Still, you must push through that to understand how to be an ally. As Indigenous people, we have a responsibility to Mother Earth to protect her, care for her and nurture her so that she provides all that we need for our people—the air, the water, the land, and the sky. These are vital for our survival.

### **#LANDBACK**

The Dakota Access Pipeline protests, or #NODAPL, is a 1,172-mile-long underground pipeline that transports crude oil from North Dakota's Bakken region to an oil terminal in Patoka, Illinois. There, it connects with the Energy Transfer Crude Oil Pipeline, which brings oil down to refineries on the Gulf Coast. Together, the two pipelines make up the Bakken Pipeline. The most contested section of DAPL is its crossing just upstream of the Standing Rock reservation under Lake Oahe, a reservoir section of the Missouri River. A leak or spill along the route risks contaminating the reservation's water supply and sully culturally sacred sites. Hu, S. (2024), June 12). On Tuesday, November 22, 2016, a reporter ran an article stating that during the peaceful

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protest of the Water Protectors, the enforcement officers turned a water canon on them. In turn, the protestors began to return fire, throwing various objects. A 21-year-old woman, Sophia Wilansky (a non-Indigenous ally and supporter), was severely injured and almost lost her arm after being hit by a projectile. This occurred when North Dakota law enforcement officers turned a water cannon on Dakota Access Pipeline protesters and threw less-than-lethal weapons at the protestors. She was one of thousands of activists who travelled to the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota to attempt to halt the pipeline's construction (Wong, 2016).

Back home, here at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, land claims have been ongoing for over two hundred years. The youth have begun to feel betrayed and unheard of by the federal and provincial governments. #1492 Land Back Lane refers to a protest site in Caledonia, Ontario, in July 2020, where Haudenosaunee and non-Indigenous protestors, known as land defenders, occupied a housing development they argue stood on unceded Six Nations territory. This land is part of a long-standing issue between the Haudenosaunee, settlers, and the government over Caledonia's land rights—problems that date back to the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784. In July 2021, the housing development was officially cancelled (Gignac, 2023). There were many arrests, but most of the allies and other land-defenders were released without further charges.

The Dakota Access Pipeline project and #1492 Land Back Lane are only two examples. The stories continue, always ending in arrests and governments turning a deaf ear. But always, our non-Indigenous allies have been there, by our side, protesting peacefully to change the way Indigenous issues are viewed in the public eye. As I mentioned, we are typically seen as an uprising and disobedient people. This is our time, as Indigenous people, especially as Indigenous youth, to continue the “reclaiming of Indigenous identity, knowledge, ceremony, traditions, and nationhood” while “addressing the unbalanced power dynamics put in place by colonial violence while valuing

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and revitalizing Indigeneity” TeenTalk (2022, February 9; paragraph 2). The environment is ours to protect and save for future generations. But as Indigenous people, we have become weary, suspicious, and jaded towards allyship. We have become very untrusting of non-Indigenous people and their ways. After all, pre-colonial times saw all Indigenous people coming together to create community, providing a healthy and uncomplicated way of life. Yes, it was hard, but this was who we were and how we lived – modestly, humbly, kind, and hardworking. We showed the settlers how to survive on this land, where to hunt, fish, trap, and protect themselves from the elements. Ironically, this is how European settlers treated others back in their home countries, especially Eastern European territories. Here, they brought religion and a way of life, one they forced us to adjust to.

### **Privilege**

The government and corporations continue to take away our language, culture, and resources for their profit. Contemporary examples of this include corporations like Nestlé. This company is funnelling spring water from our natural sources here at Six Nations for profit, selling spring water in plastic bottles. Nestlé, the world’s biggest water bottler, extracts up to 3.6m litres daily from nearby Six Nations treaty land (Shimo, 2018). At a peaceful protest against Nestlé just two years ago, crowds of over two hundred from all over the region, including the Guelph and Kitchener-Waterloo chapters of the Council of Canadians, Wellington Water Watchers, and Save Our Water, joined the day’s events to show solidarity (Lui, 2018). This example demonstrates the tension between trusting allies and questioning whether they are merely ‘bandwagon fans.’ We have become very skeptical of those offering to participate in our issues. Sometimes, in the back of our minds is the provocative question, What do they want from us? Do they even understand why we are here at this moment in time? In sports, you might cheer for your favourite sports team

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and notice many more people join you. We call them bandwagon fans, not loyal fans, but they are there because our team is in the spotlight, with film crews and interviews pasted all over media and social media. Like in sports, when your sports team is winning, you often find fans only there because of the spotlight. These bandwagon fans only show up for their own benefit, watching for the film crews and interviews pasted all over the media.

What does it mean to be a trustworthy ally? Allies who use their privilege and advantage to support our message(s) are of immense importance to our causes if they constantly remind themselves that they are settlers. Use your voice to get the message out there and show the injustices around us. Never forget that you are an ally, not the voice of the people. In the summer of 2021, Lorde, an internationally known pop singer from New Zealand, released her third studio album, *Solar Power*. She then released a five-song EP of songs from her third release called *Te Ao Mārama* (Māori for “world of light”) (Te Ao Mārama | New Zealand Ministry of Justice, n.d.). The five songs released are as follows:

1. *Hine-i-te-Awatea (Oceanic Feeling)*(Lorde, 2021).
2. *Hua Pirau (Fallen Fruit)* (Lorde, 2021)
3. *Mata Kohore (Stoned at The Nail Salon)*(Lorde, 2021)
4. *Te Ao Mārama (Solar Power)* (Lorde, 2021)
5. *Te Ara Tika (The Path)*(Lorde, 2021)

Lorde is an ally to the Māori. Their term for an ally, “Pākehā,” refers to a New Zealander of European descent, applied initially to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Moorfield, n.d.). Lorde has directed all revenue from the five-song EP to the New Zealand-based charities Forest and Bird and the Te Hua Kawariki Charitable Trust. Despite being an excellent idea, I am skeptical because of the timing. The album was released before this EP came out. As of

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August 30, 2021., Lorde. (2021). Solar Power [Album]. Universal debuted at No. 5 on Billboard 200. According to Billboard, the record earned 56,000 equivalent album units, including 34,000 in album sales, 22,000 in streaming equivalent album units (28.38 million on-demand streams for the tracks) and under 1,000 in track equivalent album units (Caraan, 2021). How does this success show Lorde's commitment to being an ally? As I mentioned, being a good ally means being humble, respectful, committed, and a partner. After releasing this EP, Lorde said the following: Even if you do not understand te reo, I think you will get a kick out of how elegant my words sound (Renshaw, 2021)

White privilege shines through in a statement such as this. There is no way to see humility in announcing how elegant you sound, singing songs in a language you do not speak or use daily. Lorde went through the proper channels to acquire the best linguists from the Māori community to assist her with all the translations. Her intention was not to embarrass or harm the Māori culture or language in any way. Still, being a young ally doing her best NOT to appropriate the culture, she found her youthful voice having a foot inserted. At the same time, her album is making much money through downloads and streaming sites. Did she intentionally release this EP with the possibility of influencing sales of her third album, which her critics call a flop? Still, her album is riding the coattails of the EP release.

After reading about this event, I talked with two of my Māori colleagues from Auckland, New Zealand, who are also aunties to my twin babies. Dr. Aroha Harris, who is an Associate Professor at the University of Auckland, had this to say regarding the assistance that Lorde received: *"It's hard to stomach the idea of her being so well supported when so many of our people struggle to learn our language and are sometimes deeply traumatized by the experience"* (A. Harris, personal communication).



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Dr. Aroha Harris went on to say,

I get the argument about her taking the language to the world, but how does that help the people most hungry for it and to whom it belongs? And how did a white kid from one of the most privileged suburbs here get to centre herself in the reo Māori movement? (A. Harris, personal communication, September 28, 2021)

I then spoke to another Māori auntie to my babies, Dr. Te Kawehau Hopkins, the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Māori, from the Education and Social Work department. The following was part of a friendly conversation between us. The negatives are that,

Lorde has made no prior commitment to the language. Other local non-Māori who have sung in the language have not been criticized, partly because they are local and connect with the people and the politics. (T.K. Hopkins, personal communication, September 28, 2021).

Dr. Te Kawehau Hopkins did concede that Lorde worked with highly respected Māori language experts, all of whom support any initiative of this kind because they see its benefits for the revitalization of the language and the possibility of local and international support. The big question is, did Lorde step up to be the ally she has claimed to be, or did she use her white privilege and resources to benefit financially from the Māori community?

### **The Pretendian**

Finally, these tensions lead us to discuss the new wave of allyship if we can even mention it in the same sentence as allyship: Pretendians. A **Pretendian** (a combination of the words *pretend* and *Indian*) is a **non-Indigenous** person who falsely claims Indigenous ancestry and/or falsely claims to be from a specific Indigenous nation. (The Indigenous Foundation, n.d.). Of the many other types of cultural appropriation, this is the worst and most extreme. In Canada, the numbers

grow steadily as “pretendians” have been found to use Algonquin, Metis and Mi’kmaq ancestry to claim academic success. These Indigenous peoples are not condoning this behaviour. For example, the new revelations have prompted Pikwakanagan First Nation — the only federally recognized Algonquin First Nation in Ontario — to renew efforts to remove people who rely on Lagarde for their Algonquin ancestry from membership in the Ontario Algonquin Land Claim. This statement was mailed to CBC News, *“The Chief and Council of (Pikwakanagan) have no tolerance for fraudulent actions that impact the negotiation process and beneficiary criteria and directly affect the integrity of the process.”* (Leo, 2021).

It is essential to understand that there is a definitive difference between culture and identity. Some allies have been integral in Indigenous issues to the point that an Indigenous family has adopted them. They have adopted the culture to be a part of who they are, understanding that they are still settlers and acknowledging their place within the Indigenous community. Identity, however, is blood. Your people's lineage is who you are and where you come from. The culture you can obtain, but the identity into which you are born. I have found two types of “pretendians” – those who have been allies to the Indigenous community for an extended period, then quietly adopt their “Indigenous” identity. Such is the case of Dr. Michelle Coupal, Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Literature at the University of Regina. She holds a Ph.D. from Western University, an MA from the University of Waterloo, a B.Ed. from Western University, and a BA from the University of Waterloo. She is also the former President of the Indigenous Literary Studies Association. She has long been an ally to Indigenous issues and framed her education around this. Following the publication of CBC’s investigation three years ago (September 13, 2021), Coupal removed much of her biography from her university profile, including a reference to her being Algonquin. She stated in this article that,

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If my Algonquin status changes, and I am deemed not to meet federal and provincial standards, I will adjust how I identify accordingly... Even if all of my ancestors are taken off the list in the fall protests (a highly unlikely situation), I will remain a member of BAFN because I have community acceptance. Leo, G. (2021, September 13).

Other Pretendians, even when blatantly called out, hope the invisible shield in front of them will protect them from harm and embarrassment. Such is the case of Dr. Carrie Bourassa, BA (hon), MA., PhD., Professor in Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan. (she has since been removed from the USask website, but her LinkedIn account is still active) Bourassa's public claims of Métis, Anishinaabe and Tlingit ancestry proved to be as made up as fairy dust. In her response to the report, Bourassa changed her story, claiming she was Métis because a Métis friend of her grandfather adopted her (RCI, 2021). The most significant selected appointment given to her is Scientific Director, Canadian Institutes of Indigenous Peoples' Health (CIHR-IIPH), University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon 2017-2021. The University of Saskatchewan's original claim that Prof. Bourassa had not benefited from claiming Aboriginal ancestry is pathetic hokum. Bourassa tellingly accused her sister of "looking for ... a way to make some money" by accepting Indigenous scholarship funds during her PhD studies (Cosh, paragraph 7, 2021). Yes, claiming to be Indigenous can amount to a financial lottery win. For example, about a year ago, the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation gave Bourassa an award (not her first) and published a capsule summary of her career. If you read it, you will notice how she was occasionally offered career advancement unexpectedly by Indigenous supporters whom her stories had taken in. Her only defence was,

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In our Métis ways, in the event of a loss, community members would adopt the individual who had no family, and they would then automatically be seen as family...We see this as custom adoption. Those adoptions were more meaningful and had stronger bonds than colonial adoptions. (Reyes & Diaz, 2021).

And, who bears the cost of these “pretendians” infiltrating our academic institutions and clawing away at our bursaries, awards, and funding streams? Every “Pretendian” occupying a position in academia has the opportunity to take away a career or position from an Indigenous academic as well as swallow up the monies that flow downward. The economic gains of ethnic fraud cannot be understated. Ingrained racism has allowed White institutions to materially benefit from Indigeneity, especially in an era of reconciliation, by preferring to work with Indigenous people who look, act, and think like them because, in reality, they are them (Fung, 2021).

Academic institutions need to be held more accountable for hiring and harbouring these so-called academics who have been called out for their morally and ethically fraudulent behaviours. I recently mentioned in class that as an educator, I have a code of ethics that follows me in my back pocket. Academics at post-secondary institutions must also adhere to the code of ethics in their programs and chosen careers. Whether obtaining an MEd, Ph.D., or any other degree, a code of ethics is like the invisible, permanent tattoo you had etched onto your arm back in your undergraduate years. It may fade, but it is always going to be there. As academics posing as Indigenous scholars, you must uphold those ethical standards because I have yet to find an expiry date on any code of ethics at any institution. You may not wear a headdress or have a dreamcatcher hanging from your car mirror, but cultural appropriation runs through your veins if you are a Pretendian.

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### Conclusion

Youth have a powerful voice and can make positive societal change. We, as adults, must stop telling them what is right and wrong as if we understand the position that we have placed them in. Their minds have and are continually growing and developing into exciting, critical-thinking machines with something to say and share. We must shut up and listen to them—believing in our youth by facilitating and supporting them. By being the role models (that we keep telling ourselves that we are), we help them as they fight to create a future that subsequent generations can benefit from, one filled with possibilities and successes. Claudette Colvin took a stand in 1955 in Alabama against a volatile adult world filled with prejudice and anger, handcuffed and jailed for standing up for her rights. Greta Thunberg took a position of striking from school on Fridays for climate change in Sweden against the will of the government, the public, and even her parents...at first. Both young ladies and activists took a stand against insurmountable odds and were a part of a new generation of activists who were not to be denied their place on the public stage. As activism grew amongst the youth, Indigenous activism became more critical to all aspects of activism.

Racism, the environment, the land, the water, and the culture bonded to form alliances, creating numbers that could not be ignored. Allyship with Indigenous people has been an ever-growing partnership amongst the youth. Allies have a place within the Indigenous communities because we are all fighting for the exact cause: saving the planet from self-destructive human-caused means. Their voices grow louder, more explicit. Dr. Carrie Bourassa was a youth who saw and felt the energy within the Indigenous fight and became an ally. However, being an ally, if managed improperly or deceitfully, can lead to misappropriation. Bourassa inhaled an Indigenous identity, all the while being an Indigenous ally. Over time, allies can become familiar faces,

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familiar partners as we stand for our treaty rights. These so-called allies, or “Pretendians” as they are now known publicly, find ways to “shape shift” into an Indigenous identity and use it to better their position financially and academically. Lorde, the New Zealand pop star, portrayed herself as an ally. Instead, as someone who did not use the Māori language in her daily speech or movements, she released an English album and a subsequent five-song EP using the Māori language. Did this benefit her financially and in popularity rather than benefitting the Māori community?

When these academic and professional frauds use their fake Indigenous identity or allyship to gain fame, financial gain, or educational position, those funds, grants, and privileges that were designed for Indigeneity and Indigenous academia are taken away from young Indigenous academics who then lose their voice. Not only that, but they lose their standing and their belief in a system that has constantly balked on treaty rights, the right to hunt, fish and trap on sovereign lands and waters, land claims, cultural misappropriation, residential schools, MMIWG and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Yes, allies are appreciated and welcome, but to be a faithful ally, you must never forget that you are a settler, a colonizer, and even though you are doing your part to make the world a better place for all, your ancestors created a world entire of divide, war, dominance, and genocide. Being an ally means understanding that you are with us but for our causes, not your agenda. We will rise and use our voices when minimalized and dismissed as only having a seat at the table. You will hear us as our numbers grow, as our allies stand beside us. The youth is the megaphone of the present, future and past, as our ancestors watch over us, smiling down as we fight the good fight effectively and with a sound mind. Mother Earth will have a chance to flourish if we allow our Indigenous youth activists and their allies to come to the forefront and be heard.

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