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Mentorship, Misrepresentation, and Moving Forward:
Reflections from a team of Métis Scholars in Indigenous Health Research

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Abstract
In Indigenous health research, mentorship shapes career trajectories, influences relationships with communities, and creates opportunities for growth. This paper presents reflections from Métis scholars whose early careers were influenced by a mentor later alleged to have misrepresented their identity. We examine how this experience disrupted academic and community relationships, eroded trust, and required navigation of complex emotional and political contexts. Grounding our work in Métis ways of knowing, we highlight both the harms experienced and the resilience fostered through new kinship networks. We conclude by outlining strategies to rebuild trust, support Indigenous scholars, and advance Indigenous health research with integrity and care.
Key words: identity politics; pretendian; misrepresentation

Introduction
The phenomenon of individuals falsely claiming Indigenous identity, referred to as "pretendianism" has garnered increasing attention across academic, political, and artistic sectors (Andersen, 2014; Gaudry et al., 2016; Kolopenuk, 2023; Leroux, 2019; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). The term pretendian, while informal, captures the harm inherent in these acts of identity fraud, particularly when they are used to access resources, relationships, or institutional benefits reserved for Indigenous peoples (Kolopenuk, 2023). These misrepresentations are not victimless; they undermine Indigenous sovereignty, distort research and representation, and occupy spaces intended for those with lived experience and community accountability. The National Indigenous Identity Forum (NIIF) in its report titled *Indigenous Voices on Indigenous Identity*, cites APTN News in defining "pretendian" as "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" (2022, p. 4).

In settler-colonial contexts like Canada and the United States, the issue of Indigenous identity has long been entangled with notions of policing and state-imposed definitions, such as blood quantum and government-defined Indian status (Kolopenuk, 2023; Shawanda & Maracle, 2025). At the NIIF, participants identified the 1982 Canadian constitution, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and other related legislation, policies, and frameworks, as key drivers of change that have unintentionally contributed to a rise in false claims to Indigeneity (NIIF, 2022). These frameworks, while intended to advance Indigenous rights and representation, have created incentives for individuals to falsely assert Indigenous identity to access employment opportunities, research and arts funding, scholarships, tax exemptions, and designated positions (Lawford & Coburn, 2019; University of Winnipeg, 2024). However, Indigenous identity is not solely a matter of lineage or government-issued paperwork. It is relational, embedded in community, ceremony, kinship, and reciprocal obligations (Tallbear, 2023; University of Manitoba, 2023). Individuals who falsely claim Indigenous identity often bypass these markers of belonging and accountability, relying instead on vague or changing ancestral stories, unverifiable genealogies, or performative cultural engagement to legitimize their claims.

Indigeneity is complex (Lawford & Coburn, 2019) and should not be understood as something that begins and remains fixed from birth. The impacts of the Indian Act (1876), federal and provincial policies, including harmful child welfare practices such as the Sixties Scoop, and widespread anti-Indigenous racism, have forced many Indigenous people to hide or distance themselves from their communities as a means of survival. During the Sixties Scoop and in ongoing child welfare practices known as the Millennium Scoop, many Indigenous children were adopted into non-Indigenous families and raised without access to their cultures, languages, or communities (Sinclair, 2007; Stevenson, 2020). As a result, generations of Indigenous people have experienced deep disconnection from their identities. Today, some are finding their way back to community, reclaiming their heritage, and rebuilding relationships that had been disrupted or denied. This reality profoundly challenges simplistic understandings of Indigenous identity as static or easily verifiable.

The presence of pretendians in academic and professional institutions is particularly troubling. These individuals often present themselves as representatives of Indigenous experiences and in some cases are promoted to prominent and influential positions while securing research funding opportunities explicitly intended to support and advance Indigenous scholars and communities. Their presence not only distorts understandings of Indigenous experiences but also causes harm by displacing authentic voices and actively stealing opportunities. To address these harms and prevent the commodification or co-opting of Indigenous identity, institutions must work with Indigenous communities to develop clearer protocols and relational accountability frameworks (Stolz & Toscano, 2024). In recent years, incidents of individuals falsely claiming Indigenous identity have become more prominent, prompting some institutions to implement formal processes of verification. While this represents a step toward greater accountability, the reality is that many pretendians continue to thrive, while authentic Indigenous peoples still face systemic barriers to access, recognition, and advancement.

Ultimately, the issue of false claims to Indigeneity is not simply about deception by individuals. Rather, it is about structural power and the perpetuation of colonial control and entitlement. Self-identification under the code of an honour system has proven to be yet another

vessel that is wielded against Indigenous groups, despite its intentions to dismantle structures of colonial racism and discrimination (University of Winnipeg, 2024). Addressing pretendianism requires more than genealogical audits or institutional gatekeeping. It demands a sustained commitment to Indigenous self-determination, respect for community-defined identity, and the centering of Indigenous voices in decisions that impact their representation and well-being (Shawanda & Maracle, 2025).

This paper reflects on the outcomes of having been mentored by someone whose Indigenous identity is in question. As scholars in Indigenous health research (IHR), we examine the personal, relational, and professional impacts of this experience. While there is a growing body of literature detailing with the institutional harms caused by pretendians, less attention has been paid to the effects on students and mentees who trusted these individuals, built relationships with them, and often advanced their own work under pretendian guidance. This reflection is offered not as a singular story but as part of a broader conversation about trust, accountability, and what it means to navigate Indigenous identity and representation in academic spaces.

Mentorship is a foundational element of graduate education and early academic careers. For students and early career researchers (ECRs), mentors often serve as connectors to research networks, funding pathways, and professional development opportunities. In Indigenous research contexts, the role of mentorship carries even greater weight, as emerging scholars are expected to navigate not only academic expectations but also complex cultural, ethical, and relational responsibilities (Atay, 2023; Manshadi & Stelkia, 2023; Sawyer et al., 2024). The guidance provided in these settings often extends far beyond methodological advice. It includes instruction in protocol, accountability to community, and the cultivation of trust in spaces where knowledge production is inherently tied to lived experience, collective memory, and spirit.

When a mentor's claim to Indigenous identity is later revealed to be false or comes under scrutiny, the effects can be far-reaching. It casts a shadow over the legitimacy of the research conducted under their supervision and may compromise the credibility of students who worked closely with them. For Indigenous scholars in particular, this rupture can lead to difficult questions about personal and professional alignment: How do we reconcile the relationships we built in good faith? What does it mean to have learned from someone who occupied space under false pretenses? How is the shame associated with the betrayal overcome? And how do we maintain accountability to the communities we are in relation with, when those communities may also feel misled or harmed?

Institutional structures that permitted the deception through absent protocols or the deliberate avoidance of difficult questions about identity among tenured faculty, exacerbate the harm. For students and ECRs, the consequences involve recalibrating scholarly trajectories, often in public, while bearing the emotional and reputational costs of association. These burdens fall most acutely on Indigenous scholars and those engaged in community-based work, who are subject to heightened expectations of authenticity and accountability yet occupy vulnerable positions within academic hierarchies.

This paper argues that the exposure of pretendians has significant implications for the ethical, professional, and relational development of students and ECRs. We examine how association with someone whose identity was later called into question shaped our professional trajectories and personal relationships, including the work of rebuilding trust, repairing community connections, and navigating the strain of lateral violence. Alongside these challenges, we reflect on the unexpected opportunities this rupture created, particularly the relationships formed with a circle of Métis "aunties." The paper raises urgent questions about institutional

complicity, the value placed on Indigenous identity in the academy, and the need for relationally grounded accountability mechanisms. Through reflection on personal experience and analysis of broader patterns, this paper calls for a more honest reckoning with the consequences of false claims to Indigeneity. These consequences are not abstract but lived, and they continue to shape the futures of those most committed to doing this work with integrity.

Context

IHR in Canada exists as part of a complex landscape shaped by historical and ongoing colonial violence. For decades, research involving Indigenous peoples was largely extractive, driven by academic priorities rather than community needs (Champagne, 2015; Hayward et al., 2021). This legacy has led to deep mistrust of institutions and researchers, especially when projects have failed to produce meaningful outcomes or have reinforced harmful stereotypes (Kaufman & Ramarao, 2005). In response, many Indigenous communities, scholars, and organizations have pushed for research to be accountable, relational, and grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Today, IHR is increasingly defined by principles of self-determination, cultural safety, and community leadership. National frameworks such as the First Nations Principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2022), the Principles of Ethical Métis Research (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2018), and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Government of Canada, 2022), recognize the rights of Indigenous communities to guide the research process. Indigenous-led projects often emphasize strengths-based approaches, holistic understandings of health, and methods that reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

In academic institutions, these shifts remain uneven; shaped by colonial power structures that determine the boundaries of legitimate scholarship, often to the exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing. While there is growing recognition of the importance of IHR and increasing demand for scholars with Indigenous expertise, institutional structures have been reluctant to acknowledge its value. This tension creates both opportunities and challenges, particularly for Indigenous researchers seeking to conduct meaningful, community-driven work in systems that continue to reward individual achievement, narrow definitions of impact, and superficial inclusion. Superficial inclusion in IHR often takes the form of involving communities in name only by treating them as research sites rather than research partners. This can include seeking a letter of support from an Indigenous organization to strengthen a funding application, without involving that organization in shaping the research questions, methods, or outcomes. It can also involve naming community partners on grant applications but failing to share control over key aspects of the project, such as the research design, decision-making processes, or budget. In these cases, the principal investigators retain full authority, and the community's role becomes tokenistic at best.

This kind of performative partnership undermines the principles of ethical Indigenous research efforts, particularly those centered on self-determination and relational accountability. While such projects may appear to meet institutional or funding requirements for community engagement, they replicate extractive dynamics by using Indigenous communities to gain access to resources, credibility, or career advancement without meaningfully redistributing power or honouring community priorities. Superficial inclusion not only erodes trust but also reinforces colonial patterns of control in research, even when the work is framed as in service of Indigenous health and well-being. Further, the validity of research is compromised when epistemologies are

falsely influenced by external versus internal rights holders. The growing visibility of IHR also creates conditions where false claims to Indigeneity can be strategically leveraged, raising serious concerns about authenticity, ethics, and accountability.

Indigenous Mentorship

Indigenous mentorship, relational accountability, and community trust are foundational to ethical and effective IHR. Unlike conventional academic approaches that prioritize individual or disciplinary expertise, Indigenous research is deeply relational. It relies on guidance from mentors who not only hold academic knowledge but also cultural teachings, community experience, and a strong understanding of the responsibilities that come with representing Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous mentors help emerging scholars navigate the complexities of doing work that is accountable to both academic standards and to the people and communities the research aims to serve.

Relational accountability means that researchers are not only responsible for the quality and integrity of their work but also for how they conduct themselves in relation to others such as colleagues, participants, Elders, and communities. It requires ongoing consent, transparency, reciprocity, and humility. In IHR, this often involves building long-term relationships, returning results in meaningful ways, being open to feedback and direction from community partners throughout the research process (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Castellano, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Smith, 2012), and fulfilling the commitments of the relationship with the community for and with which the research was carried out (Wilson, 2001).

Community trust is earned through consistent, respectful engagement and a demonstrated commitment to the collective benefit. When trust is broken, the consequences ripple across communities and systems. For example, project grants may come to a halt, which can lead to unfinished work and broken promises to community members. These impacts damage not only individual projects but also the broader credibility of researchers and institutions. For students and ECRs being guided by Indigenous mentors, it is critical to learn how to live up to these responsibilities while balancing the academic pressures and timelines of the Western model.

In some cases, Indigenous students and ECRs are positioned as the public face of a research project, with the visibility presented as mentorship or training. While these roles are framed as opportunities for growth, in practice these individuals navigate relationships, represent the project in culturally grounded ways, and build trust with partners. This dynamic exploits their identities and Indigenous epistemologies and places them closest to the day-to-day realities of the work while also holding the least institutional power. Indigenous students and ECRs carry essential cultural fluency, relational knowledge, and community connections that institutions and non-Indigenous researchers often lack. As a result, students and ECRs are tasked with high-stakes relational work of holding community accountability, managing expectations, and protecting the integrity of the project while lacking the authority to make key decisions. Behind the scenes, the control over the project, funding, and direction often remains with more senior faculty, reinforcing existing hierarchies and limiting meaningful power-sharing. This imbalance can lead to significant emotional and ethical strain, especially when the research is misaligned with community values or when harm occurs, leaving these individuals to absorb the fallout.

This produces a form of deep moral injury, where people are placed in situations that violate their values, relational commitments, or sense of responsibility but are given little protection, authority, or support to intervene in a meaningful manner. Over time, this dissonance can lead to burnout, disengagement, and deep personal distress. At the same time, this dynamic

reflects a broader pattern of institutional betrayal. Organizations that publicly commit to equity, reconciliation, and ethical research often structure their systems in ways that rely most heavily on the unpaid or under-protected labour of ECRs and trainees to uphold these values in practice. When harm occurs, the institution's failure to intervene decisively, redistribute responsibility, or provide care compounds the injury. In this way, extractive patterns are reproduced under the appearance of inclusion, using Indigenous presence to validate research that is not truly community-led, accountable, or structurally supported. The result is a layered harm that operates at both the personal and institutional levels, leaving those with the least power carrying the heaviest ethical and emotional weight.

In academic settings, the mentor–trainee relationship is shaped by inherent power imbalances. Mentors, positioned with institutional authority and established credibility, exert significant influence over a trainee's academic development, success, and career trajectory. Their support can shape research agendas, determine authorship, facilitate access to funding and professional networks, and influence key milestones such as the dissertation defense. Endorsements and nominations from mentors often affect hiring decisions, awards, and future collaborations. Through invitations to co-author publications, join grant teams, present at conferences, or receive stipends and travel support, mentors serve as critical gatekeepers to opportunities that can advance the careers of students and ECRs.

These dynamics are even more pronounced in research areas that involve vulnerable populations or community partnerships such as those in IHR. The mentor's guidance can shape not only what kind of research gets done but also how and with whom it is undertaken. This makes it difficult for mentees to question decisions or raise concerns, particularly in cases where ethical lines are blurred or community relationships are not respected. A supervisor's reputation and guidance can determine whether a student gains access to research sites and how their work is received. In these circumstances, the mentor's identity, values, and conduct not only shape the student's academic path but also influence the legitimacy and trustworthiness of that student's work as a whole.

These power imbalances have serious implications, including fear of retaliation, losing support, or being seen as "difficult," which can keep students silent even when serious concerns arise. This makes it critical for institutions to address the risks inherent in these dynamics and to establish clear, culturally safe avenues for students to raise concerns and seek support without fear of professional harm. If a mentor falsely claims Indigenous identity, misuses community partnerships or funding, or prioritizes personal gain over collective responsibility, a mentee's work may become entangled in unethical or exploitative practices without their consent or even their knowledge. The reputational stakes are especially high for these mentees, who may be left defending research they undertook in good faith or working to repair strained relationships with communities that were misled. These situations reveal the urgent need for more transparent, values-based approaches to mentorship that emphasize shared responsibility, cultural humility, and community-centered ethics.

The Emotional and Relational Impacts

For some people, encounters with pretendians occur within established networks where the individual is already embedded and respected, having built credibility through years of publishing, presenting at conferences, forming partnerships, and mentoring. Their identity is often reinforced by institutional titles, grant success, and visibility in Indigenous-focused spaces. In these contexts, there is little reason to question or compare origin stories with other colleagues

or mutual friends. Identity is taken at face value, especially when it appears to be affirmed by the trust of others.

It is only in the aftermath, when harm has already occurred, that inconsistencies begin to surface. Details that once seemed incidental or irrelevant suddenly take on new weight. Stories shift, affiliations do not hold up, and questions that were once unthinkable start to feel necessary. This delayed recognition can leave those in the Pretendian's orbit feeling blindsided, confused, embarrassed, or complicit, especially if they had trusted the individual or benefited from their guidance. The realization is not just about uncovering a false claim, but it is about grappling with how easily trust can be manipulated in systems that lack clear standards for accountability and recognition.

The discovery that a trusted mentor has falsely claimed Indigenous identity is both disorienting and profoundly damaging. In IHR, where identity and community accountability are inseparable from scholarship, mentorship depends on trust, respect, and shared purpose. Initial reactions often include shock and disbelief and sometimes defense or dismissal, yet once the deception is undeniable, confusion follows. Such revelations disrupt core assumptions about integrity, accountability, and the basis of legitimacy in academic spaces. Mentees may question their own judgment or feel uncertain about how to proceed, particularly if they fear being associated with the deception. The pressure to remain silent arises less from denial than from a desire to avoid unwanted attention and the risk of reputational or institutional consequences at a vulnerable stage of their careers.

That silence can quickly turn into isolation, especially when friends, colleagues, collaborators, and/or organizations distance themselves from anyone connected to an alleged pretendian. While this distancing is often framed to preserve credibility or demonstrate accountability, it can leave mentees closely tied to the mentor feeling abandoned, implicated, or silently judged. Conferences, community gatherings, and ceremonial events that were once spaces of connection and celebration can become emotionally fraught sites of fear and scrutiny, where the risk of being misunderstood, disappointing community, or seen as complicit makes it difficult to find supportive spaces to process what has occurred.

In the aftermath of being associated with an alleged pretendian, many students and ECRs may feel shame, embarrassment, and fear of being talked about in ways that misrepresent their intentions or integrity. Withdrawing from academic and community spaces becomes an act of self-protection to avoid re-traumatization and the emotional toll of navigating questions in which they never sought to be implicated. These absences, largely unnoticed by institutions, nonetheless carry significant weight, leading to disconnection, diminished visibility, and lost opportunities for collective healing. Over time, such experiences deepen feelings of betrayal and mistrust, leaving those most affected to navigate the professional and emotional fallout without clear guidance or institutional support. For Indigenous ECRs in particular, the impact extends beyond academic standing, eroding belonging, safety, and trust in spaces once considered home.

Finally, beyond the immediate isolation and mistrust, is a profound loss—the grief for an academic and professional path pursued and built in good faith that now feels clouded by the deception. For some, this rupture also extends into the personal sphere when the mentor, often a central figure of the scholar's professional and daily life, was formerly a trusted friend.

These emotional and relational consequences are not easily resolved. They linger long after the alleged pretendian has been exposed, and navigating this fallout may become an ongoing process of rebuilding trust with themselves, their communities, and the systems in which they are expected to work.

Professional Impacts

Being associated with discredited work and authorship can have lasting professional and personal consequences (Shawanda & Maracle, 2025). When a supervisor or investigator is later revealed to have engaged in unethical practices, including falsely claiming Indigenous identity, their entire body of work may come under scrutiny. This risks undermining the scholarly credibility of students and collaborators, regardless of the integrity of their own contributions. Citation practices matter in this context because—while excluding work tied to a pretendian may seem like accountability—it also shapes the production of knowledge and the legitimacy of the field in ways that risk erasing the genuine contributions of students and ECRs. We have a responsibility to lift up verified Indigenous scholars and respectfully engaged allies, ensuring that the work we cite contributes to ethical, community-grounded research (Shawanda & Maracle, 2025). However, this becomes complicated when publications were produced in partnership with mentees, or collaborators who believed they were working within an Indigenous-led team. Affected individuals face tough ethical choices: remove their name from the work, alert the journal, funder, or community partners, or disclose the situation to future employers and collaborators.

These associations can damage reputations, create hesitation among potential collaborators, cause discomfort in community settings, and generate skepticism from funders, peer reviewers, and hiring committees. The risk is particularly acute for Indigenous scholars whose credibility and community trust are hard-earned and tied to relational accountability. Being linked to a discredited scholar can jeopardize relationships that took years to build and force students and ECRs to publicly clarify or distance themselves from work in which they once believed. Most damaging are the effects on community relationships, which rest on trust built through relational, spiritual, and long-term commitment. Once broken, that trust may take years to restore if it can be restored at all. Community partners may withdraw from collaboration, express skepticism about new projects, or decline to work with institutions that failed to uphold ethical standards. These relational fractures have long-term consequences, not just for the individuals directly involved, but for the entire field of Indigenous research.

The professional toll of this association is compounded by the limited control students and ECRs have over how decisions are made or how their roles were represented. Attempts to remove their names from publications, correct the record, or clarify their contributions are often complicated by institutional processes that prioritize reputation over relational harm. Academic publishers are bound by strict authorship and contribution guidelines, rarely allowing names to be withdrawn once a manuscript is published unless fraud or misattribution can be proven (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2017). While designed to protect the integrity of the academic record, they often leave little room for addressing harms rooted in relational harm or misrepresentation. Students and ECRs then remain tied to work they no longer stand behind, with limited options to clarify their position. These include situations where an alleged pretendian served on a thesis committee as the sole Indigenous voice. Once their false identity is exposed, the student is left with no recourse to remove or correct that association.

This deception also triggers difficult questions about research integrity and positionality for both mentors and mentees. It can mean retelling their personal version of events, which often are laced with trauma, as they respond to scrutiny about the research that unfolded. When the mentor's positionality is revealed to be false, it casts doubt on the training mentees have received and the ethical grounding of the research, leaving them accountable for frameworks, ethical protocols, citations, processes, and assumptions that now carry a different weight.

This scrutiny can be both external and internal. Students may question their own decisions, wondering whether they were complicit in harm or in extractive models of research. These moments can provoke deep reflection on what ethical scholarship means, the need for transparency, and how to reposition oneself in the aftermath. For Indigenous and allied researchers, it reinforces the ongoing need to critically engage questions of identity, power, and accountability at every stage of the research process, not just in the work itself, but about who is doing it and how they came to be in that role.

Even without withdrawing, students and ECRs may face a significant risk of lost opportunities through reputational damage and professional distancing by colleagues. This distancing can extend beyond the pretendian to their academic and community networks, as colleagues may feel compelled to protect their own reputations by severing ties with anyone perceived to be associated with the exposed individual. This can be deeply isolating for affected Indigenous scholars, as years of effort to build relationships and access to spaces may be undermined by suspicion or caution. For direct or indirect connections to other scholars facilitated by the alleged pretendian, emerging scholars are left to question how the information will be interpreted and consider the potential impact on their professional reputation, credibility, and future opportunities. Promising Indigenous scholars may be quietly passed over for grants, job interviews, or invitations to contribute to projects, not because of any misconduct on their part, but because of discomfort or doubt about the integrity of their previous work and association.

In all scenarios, these decisions carry personal, professional, and community consequences that are rarely acknowledged by institutions, yet they risk derailing careers and leave emerging scholars with few avenues for recovery.

Navigating Trust and Accountability

For Indigenous ECRs, the deception creates a dual burden; they must re-establish trust with community partners while also navigating the very institutional structures that enabled this deception to occur. Restoring community trust is not as simple as offering an apology but requires time, transparency, and ongoing relational work to demonstrate genuine commitment, accountability, and an understanding of the harm that has been caused.

Institutions often fail to acknowledge the harm done to affected students, staff, faculty, community partners, and the broader field of Indigenous research. This lack of response shifts the weight of the fallout onto those students and ECRs, compounding the harm rather than alleviating it. In some cases, individuals in Indigenous-specific senior leadership roles are expected to step in to manage these situations, yet these positions are often structurally constrained, tasked with advancing reconciliation or community engagement on the surface while simultaneously upholding and navigating the systems that allowed the harm to occur. These leaders are placed in the impossible position of representing community concerns within institutions more focused on damage control.

This dual burden also places ECRs in a particularly vulnerable position as new faculty members. They are expected to demonstrate integrity and rebuild trust under heightened scrutiny, all while managing the steep learning curve of their new roles. This can include developing and teaching courses for the first time, establishing a research portfolio, navigating funding applications, and contributing to institutional service, often in ways that draw on their Indigeneity.

The emotional toll, career risk, and exhaustion that comes with carrying these responsibilities, compounded by the lingering effects of association with a discredited mentor, are rarely acknowledged by those in positions of power. Yet these burdens are real, deeply felt, and too often borne in silence, with little institutional recognition or support.

Reflections of Positionality

Reflecting on our positionality as Indigenous scholars working in Indigenous health research, we recognize that we carry both responsibility and vulnerability in this space. Our identities shape how we approach research, relationships with communities, and perceptions in academic institutions. We do not enter this work as neutral observers, we come with lived experience, community connection, and a commitment to relational accountability.

When someone we are connected to is named in such allegations, the ripples are felt heavily by those of us who are Indigenous. The betrayal brings up complex feelings of disbelief, anger, and grief but also sharpens the pressure to defend the legitimacy of our own presence in these spaces. It can reopen old wounds of being questioned or not believed and reminds us of the precariousness of our inclusion in academic institutions that are still learning how to engage with Indigenous peoples in a good way.

Supporting others impacted by the situation, whether students, staff, collaborators, or community partners, involves both practical and relational work. The experience is not just professionally disruptive but also personally destabilizing. Offering meaningful support involves creating space to process what has happened without judgment, acknowledging the betrayal, and validating the emotional fallout, which often includes grief, embarrassment, confusion, and a deep sense of mistrust.

In some cases, ECRs assume the responsibility of absorbing the consequences by becoming the point of contact for community concerns, taking on the emotional labour of explanation, and at times accepting blame by association. This can be especially painful when the responsibility placed on them also involves potential re-traumatization. Despite this unfairness, they carry this work forward out of responsibility to community and a commitment to prevent further harm. In this way, supporting others also becomes part of a broader effort to restore trust, repair relationships, and move forward with care.

For Indigenous students, there is likely a need to navigate complicated feelings about trust, belonging, and whether they were unknowingly complicit in something that harmed their communities. Meaningful support involves helping them shoulder the emotional weight, reinforcing that they are not at fault, and ensuring they are not alone in their experience. This can include informal conversations, mentorship, co-writing responses or statements, or connecting them with institutional or community supports, if available.

Structural Impacts

Institutions struggle to adequately respond to cases of pretendianism, and their handling of these situations can often cause further harm. While some universities have introduced identity verification processes or Indigenous citizenship policies (University of Manitoba, 2023; University of Winnipeg, 2024), these measures can be reactive, inconsistent, and shaped by legal risk and public relations rather than by meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities.

Investigations into false claims of Indigeneity are rarely transparent and typically reflect institutional priorities of self-protection over accountability, allowing the individuals in question to quietly resign, retire, or shift roles. This pattern reflects a broader reluctance in academia to

confront the structural incentives that allow pretendians to thrive. The rise of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) frameworks has created institutional demand for Indigenous scholars, leading some individuals to strategically claim Indigenous identity to access jobs, grants, and status. Yet, the same institutions that benefitted from these claims are often unwilling to take responsibility when those claims are revealed to be false. In most cases, there is no clear process for redress, no support for those affected, and no commitment to reforming the systems that enabled the deception. For Indigenous scholars and community partners, this failure to act meaningfully can feel like yet another betrayal. It reinforces the perception that institutions value the appearances of inclusion over accountability and that harm to Indigenous peoples can be quietly absorbed or ignored. As a result, those most impacted are left to carry the burden of repair, while those with institutional power are rarely held to account.

Addressing pretendianism must go beyond individual cases; it requires institutions to take a hard look at their own complicity, emphasize community-defined accountability, and invest in long-term structural change. In grant-funded work, funding agencies often prioritize applications that include Indigenous leadership, partnership, or lived experience. When a grant's lead investigator or co-investigator falsely claims Indigenous identity, the integrity and intentions on which it was awarded come into question. Community partners may feel misled or exploited, and funders may reassess whether the project meets the criteria under which it was awarded. This can jeopardize not only the funding tied to the individual but also the broader project and everyone involved in it, including students and community organizations.

Institutional Complicity in Pretendianism

The growing visibility of cases involving these false claims emphasizes the urgent need for clearer policies that address suspected and confirmed cases of misrepresentation, support for those harmed, and concrete guidance for moving forward. Most universities lack established procedures for verifying Indigenous identity in academic hiring or research leadership, relying instead on self-identification or informal vetting processes (Hudson, 2024; Koerner-Yeo & Schatti, 2023). Settler institutions, including universities, often co-produce the legitimacy of individuals falsely claiming Indigenous identity by rewarding surface-level indicators of Indigeneity such as self-identification, claims of distant ancestry, or involvement in Indigenous-focused work without requiring accountability to community. These institutions are structured to recognize legitimacy through documentation, performance, and alignment with institutional goals rather than through relational recognition by Indigenous communities themselves. In doing so, they create and sustain environments where false claims can flourish, often positioning the individual as a symbol of reconciliation or inclusion while sidelining questions of ethical practice and community connection. This systemic gap leaves room for manipulation and puts the burden on individuals (often Indigenous students, faculty, or community members) to raise concerns or respond after harm has occurred. Clear, community-informed policies are essential not only to prevent future incidents but also to signal a commitment to ethical, relationally grounded practice in Indigenous research and academic engagement.

This institutional production of legitimacy is by no means accidental; rather, it is deeply embedded in the ways that settler systems operate. Universities are incentivized to showcase diversity, secure funding, and meet equity targets, all of which can be advanced by highlighting Indigenous representation. As a result, institutions may actively avoid interrogating identity claims, particularly when doing so might complicate grant applications, public narratives, or trigger tensions within internal power structures. This creates a system in which the appearance

of Indigeneity can be more valuable than the responsibilities that come with it. In this context, relational harms such as broken trust, misrepresentation, or community disconnection are often ignored or minimized. Institutions are more likely to respond to breaches of academic conduct than to breaches of relational accountability, which are harder to quantify and often fall outside formal policy frameworks. A prominent example occurred in the case of Carrie Bourassa, whose false claims to Indigenous identity were exposed after years of occupying high-profile academic and leadership roles (Leo, 2021). Despite clear relational harm to Indigenous communities, students, and colleagues, institutional responses lacked meaningful accountability. When relational harm is acknowledged, it is frequently reframed as a misunderstanding or interpersonal conflict, rather than a symptom of deeper structural failure. This erasure of relational harm further marginalizes Indigenous ways of knowing.

This is not an "Indigenous problem" to solve but an institutional failure that must be addressed. Pretendianism is enabled by institutional structures that allow non-Indigenous individuals to falsely claim Indigenous identity and benefit from the opportunities these systems reward. This dynamic not only constitutes institutional failure but also fuels lateral violence by pitting Indigenous people against one another while the real beneficiaries of the system avoid accountability. These systems invite false claims by attaching material benefits, status, and protection to Indigenous identity while often avoiding the harder work of building genuine relationships with Indigenous nations and communities. In this way, pretendianism reflects a deeper colonization of identity itself, where Indigeneity is extracted, performed, and leveraged for gain in colonial institutions that remain fundamentally unchanged. These institutional conditions do not merely enable pretendianism; they actively reproduce harm by deflecting responsibility. When deception surfaces, attention is frequently redirected toward Indigenous scholars and communities to investigate, verify, explain, and repair the damage. This displacement of labour allows institutions to avoid reckoning with their own role in creating the conditions for harm. It also fuels lateral violence by positioning Indigenous people against one another through suspicion, scrutiny, and pressure to arbitrate legitimacy, while the true beneficiaries of the system's failures remain insulated from accountability. Framing this as an "Indigenous problem" is thus not simply inaccurate but continues to shift the burden of repair onto the very people most harmed by the deception while offloading the institutional risks onto those already carrying disproportionate burdens.

If institutions are serious about ethical responsibility, then symbolic commitments to reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization are not enough. There must be clear, enforceable accountability structures that are the responsibility of institutions, not with Indigenous individuals. This includes transparent and fair processes for addressing false claims, independent review mechanisms that do not rely on Indigenous people to police identity, and material or legal consequences when deception is confirmed. It also requires institutions to recognize and fairly compensate the labour of those who are repeatedly called upon to respond to harm, provide cultural context, and support those affected. Expecting Indigenous scholars to continually absorb and repair institutional failure without protection or remuneration is itself a form of ongoing exploitation.

More broadly, pretendianism demands that institutions confront how colonial logics continue to shape whose identities are valued, authenticated, and rewarded. When Indigeneity is treated as a symbolic asset rather than a living set of responsibilities grounded in community relationships, it becomes vulnerable to appropriation. Calls to action must therefore move beyond individual exposure toward systemic reform, which includes shifting how identity is

understood, how accountability is operationalized, and how power circulates within academic and professional spaces. Without this deeper reckoning, institutions risk reproducing the very dynamics they claim to oppose, while Indigenous people are left to carry the costs of harms they did not create.

Ethical Institutional Responses

Harm reduction strategies that prioritize the well-being of students, staff, collaborators, and community partners caught in the aftermath are crucial. Institutions must take responsibility for supporting those directly impacted, not just administratively, but also relationally and emotionally. This includes transparent communication, offers of counseling or restorative mentorship, and institutional recognition and validation of reputational harm, broken community relationships, and emotional distress. In cases where ECRs are expected to shoulder the burden of facing the community to uphold accountability, institutions should not remain silent under the guise of respecting autonomy or Indigenous sovereignty. The effort required to identify and articulate what is needed amid processing such a betrayal can be overwhelming, and it is unreasonable to expect those affected to map out their own recovery plan.

Support should not be passive or conditional. Proactive steps such as checking in on how the person is coping, taking responsibility for timely and formal communications with project collaborators or partners, and offering mentorship built around supporting the long-term success and well-being of students or ECRs are not just helpful but vital. For some, further support may also mean time away to attend ceremony to process intense feelings of hurt, to pick up their bundles, and to reconnect with their spirit. The time to ask what people need is not in the immediate wake of betrayal when individuals are still processing shock, grief, and confusion. Instead, institutions should seek guidance from those who have already been through it, after they have had time to reflect, regulate, and gain clarity. They understand what was missing in the moment, what is needed to prevent further harm, and what is demanded to support recovery. These voices can offer grounded, practical guidance shaped by experience rather than speculation, which can lead to institutional policies that are more accountable, responsive, and rooted in care rather than optics or liability. Too often, the guidance offered is shaped by institutional risk management rather than a genuine commitment to care and accountability. If institutions truly want to support ethical Indigenous research and protect the people who do this work, they must be willing to step forward when harm has occurred and leadership is needed. They must start by trusting and resourcing the people who were left to hold the weight of harm when systems failed to intervene.

Those affected by pretendianism need tangible forms of support to rebuild their work and their reputations. This might include funding for revised research projects, opportunities to reframe or republish work under new supervision, and advocacy in navigating the institutional and community politics that often follow these events. Without these supports, the fallout disproportionately affects those who held the least power in the situation. Clear policies, harm reduction measures, and long-term support are not just institutional responsibilities; they are essential conditions for repairing trust and making the academy a more accountable place for Indigenous research and relationships.

This pattern reflects a broader reluctance within academia to critically examine the structural incentives that enable false claims of Indigenous identity. The expansion of equity, diversity, and inclusion frameworks has increased institutional demand for Indigenous scholars, creating opportunities for some individuals to strategically misrepresent their identity to access

positions, funding, and professional recognition. When such claims are subsequently challenged or disproven, institutions frequently lack clear mechanisms for accountability, provide limited support to those affected, and demonstrate little commitment to addressing the systemic conditions that facilitated the misrepresentation.

The work of sharing insights, supporting others, and guiding institutions through harms must be recognized and fairly compensated. Those who step up to help shape better policies and responses are often already carrying heavy workloads, including teaching, research, and service to the institution. Indigenous individuals or allies in Indigenous research also carry additional community responsibilities such as relationship-building, cultural protocol, and ongoing accountability that are rarely acknowledged or compensated within academic systems. Those working outside academia face their own set of demands, including frontline work, community responsibilities, and organizational pressures. Regardless of the setting, the expectation to contribute stretches limited time and energy even further. In many cases, the burden of response falls on those who are Indigenous or closely connected to Indigenous communities. Asking those harmed to take on additional labour without recognition or fair compensation reinforces the same institutional dynamics that allowed the harm to occur in the first place. This work is more than an activity report; it is a testimony of common wounds, offered as lessons for others.

There is a need for institutions to commit to acknowledgment and accountability. This includes pushing for better protection, transparency around mentorship practices, and responses that prioritize harm reduction over liability management. Supporting others in this context is not just about tending to the fallout, but about building safer, more honest, and more accountable scholarly spaces going forward.

Collective responses are essential in these circumstances; no one should have to carry this work alone as the emotional toll is demanding (Henry & Tait, 2023). By building coalitions of students, faculty, community members, and institutional allies, we can create a foundation for sustained advocacy. These efforts help shift the conversation from individual wrongdoing to systemic responsibility and from silence and fear to action and care. For our team, this paper is a first step towards speaking our truth and honouring our stories.

Conclusion: Moving Forward Through Repair and Resistance

In the aftermath of harm, many Indigenous students and ECRs choose not to walk away but to reclaim their rightful space within academic and research institutions. This means continuing the work but doing so on different terms with integrity, in alignment with community priorities, and grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and ethical frameworks. Reclaiming space is not about salvaging what was lost but about affirming what has always been present: our values, our relationships, and our ways of doing research that centers respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. This process goes beyond taking distance from discredited individuals or projects and requires reshaping the foundation of the work itself.

For some, it means mentoring others in more accountable ways or creating research environments where relational accountability is a starting point and centerpiece throughout the project and beyond. Reclaiming space requires carving out room in academic institutions that were not built to support Indigenous scholarship on Indigenous terms. This is a slow process and often exhausting work, but it is also generative. It is a refusal to let deception define the field and a commitment to carry the work forward in ways that reflect who we are and where we come from. In this, Indigenous scholars and allies are not just responding to harm but rather asserting a

vision for what ethical, community-engaged research can and should be. For some of us, it means leading with and being guided by spirit, with a deep belief that research is still ceremony.

In the wake of harm, one of the most meaningful steps for students and ECRs is the process of embracing new mentors, allies, and community networks. While the loss of trust in a former mentor can be disorienting and painful, it can also open space to build relationships that are more aligned with one's values, integrity, and long-term goals. These new connections often emerge through shared experience, quiet support, and a commitment to doing the work differently. Embracing new mentors means seeking out those who lead with humility, transparency, and care. These are the people who understand that mentorship is relational, not transactional, and who are willing to walk alongside rather than in front. These mentors are not invested in status or control, but in creating space for growth, healing, and accountability. Their support is grounded in mutual respect and a shared commitment to doing the work in good ways. In practice, this kind of mentorship actively resists lateral violence by refusing competition and hierarchy as a default mode of working that embeds colonial views. It emerges through generous sharing of knowledge and care, clear communication about expectations, offers of introductions and opportunities, and a willingness to name harm when it occurs without shaming or silencing. It means backing students and ECRs when power dynamics become unsafe, crediting their contributions openly, and advocating for their protection in institutions that often reward productivity over people. Further, when grappling with the impacts of pretendianism, an important part of the healing process is reminding those who were deceived that they are not at fault. People acted in good faith, and it is important to extend grace to themselves as they work through the aftermath.

In one instance, a colleague reflected back to us the qualities that shaped our decision to trust someone's self-presentation: a commitment to a trauma-informed approach, loyalty, and a generous, trusting nature. Recognizing these values helped reframe our response. Instead of viewing our trust as a failure, it highlighted the strengths and ethical commitments that guided our actions. These reminders brought a sense of humanity and clarity to complicated emotions like shame, embarrassment, and guilt and created space for people to move forward with greater compassion for themselves.

Supportive and relational mentorship is an act of collective responsibility and includes creating spaces where care is the default approach. It asks us to notice how harm circulates, how power is reproduced, and how silence routinely protects the status quo. This style of mentorship is about making an ongoing commitment to interrupt harm, to support one another with integrity, and to build academic and community spaces where people are productive and their wellbeing is prioritized. It also means checking in when someone goes quiet, intervening when gossip or exclusion takes root, and modelling what it looks like to disagree without causing harm. For students and ECRs in particular, this kind of support can be the difference between staying engaged in their work or quietly withdrawing under the weight of isolation and fear. It can also be a way to retain Indigenous scholars in a safe environment where they feel seen and supported as they transition into their new roles.

What becomes clearer than ever is the value of community leaders, Elders, and peers who may not hold institutional titles but carry deep knowledge, lived experience, and community trust. Unlike institutional figures whose intentions may come into question, these leaders are grounded in a strong sense of relational responsibility and care, leaving no doubt about the integrity of their guidance and the intentions behind their work. These are the aunties, the mama bears, and the others who show up when things fall apart, who speak truth with love, and who

become fiercely protective of those who have been harmed. They offer quiet wisdom, laughter when it is needed most, and the kind of care that institutions cannot replicate.

In the darkest moments, their presence and prayers remind us that we are not alone and that despite the harm, we are still held in community even if we are falling into isolation. Their mentorship helps us remember who we are, where we come from, and what it means to keep going with integrity. Building new networks, within and beyond the academy, offers a way to move forward while staying grounded. These networks can provide practical support, cultural safety, and a sense of collective strength. Reorienting toward these relationships is not a detour from academic success but a pathway to it; one that centers integrity, kinship, and belonging.

Supporting policy changes is an important way to transform individual experiences of harm into broader structural accountability. For those who have lived through the consequences of pretendianism, sharing insights and advocating for change can be a way to channel grief, frustration, and betrayal into something constructive. This does not mean taking on the entire burden of fixing broken systems, but it does mean contributing to efforts that ensure others do not have to go through the same thing alone or unsupported. This work involves pushing for clearer policies on identity verification, stronger protections for those affected, and institutional mechanisms that prioritize relational accountability beyond procedural compliance. It also means advocating for processes that are transparent, trauma-informed, and community-guided. Those who have been impacted are often best positioned to identify where systems failed and what changes are needed, but this labour must be invited respectfully and compensated fairly.

Balancing grief and anger with hope and responsibility is one of the most difficult parts of moving forward after harm. The grief comes from what was lost, whether that be relationships built in good faith, work done under false pretenses, time and energy spent believing in someone who was not who they claimed to be, or even friendship. The justified anger is directed at the individual who caused the harm, at the institutions that failed to act, and at the systems that made the deception possible.

Alongside that grief and anger is a sense of responsibility for the people and the work we care about. Many of us continue to work in research because the work matters, because our communities matter, and because walking away would leave a space we have fought hard to hold. That responsibility is not a burden of blame but a commitment to doing things differently and to protecting those who follow.

Hope, in this context, is grounded in the relationships that remain—in the mentors and aunties who showed up when we needed their support and guidance the most, in the emerging scholars we now lift up, and in the knowledge that the way forward is already being shaped by those who refuse to repeat the harm. Carrying grief and anger alongside hope and responsibility is not a contradiction; it is how we survive and how we rebuild and move forward with integrity. We are deeply grateful to those people who have stood with us and continue to support us.

Biography

Ashley Hayward is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Applied Health at the University of Winnipeg. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on Indigenous reproductive health, the social determinants of health, and Indigenous ethics with particular attention to

community-led and relational approaches. As a Red River Métis scholar, she works in partnerships to support research that is grounded in local priorities and knowledge systems.

Community Connection: Ashley is a wife and mother to two daughters. She is a citizen of the Manitoba Metis Federation, and her kinship ties include the family names Hogue, Daignault, Ducharme, Turcotte, and Richard. She was born in Winnipeg, an urban center of Manitoba and continues to live with her family on Treaty 1 territory.

Monica Cyr is a proud Red River Métis woman of the Saabe clan born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Monica is a cultural educator, published author, anti-racism advocate, mentor, and active member of the College of Dietitians of Manitoba. Over the last decade, Monica – working for the Aboriginal Health & Wellness Centre of Winnipeg (AHWC), Manitoba's only Indigenous Community Health Agency – has transitioned from Director of Primary Care, to Director of Research, to Senior Director of Clinical Operations. Monica's exemplary leadership has led to the organization's unprecedented expansion, most recently through her creation of the agency's research arm. Further, Monica's networking ability invited groundbreaking research to Winnipeg, such as the Our Health Counts project - the first-ever Urban-Indigenous population data health survey that had representation from all 3 Nations (FNMI) and launched in 2023.

Equally impressive, Monica spearheaded the operationalization of two trailblazing clinical operations - the Rapid Access to Addiction Medicine (RAAM) Clinic & Mobile Healthcare Clinic - that have altered the way healthcare is delivered to urban-Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg. Monica places compassion and cultural integration at the forefront of all her work.

Her numerous academic achievements include a master's in Human Nutritional Sciences and is currently completing a PhD program at the UManitoba in the Department of Community Health Sciences. Monica's PhD project will evaluate the implementation, operations, challenges, and successes of Manitoba's only Indigenous-led RAAM clinic. This topic will explore community-based urban Indigenous governance using Indigenous feminism, self-determination, anti-Indigenous racism, and resurgence as its theoretical/core underpinnings.

Charlene Hallett is a proud Métis woman, raised in Winnipeg's north end with roots in St. Laurent, St. Francois Xavier, Pine Bluff, and The Pas. Names in her family line include Cyr, Mayer, Lavallee, Cashawap, Ducharme, Chartrand, Chaboyer, and Beauchamp. With a Master's degree in Community Health Sciences from the University of Manitoba and a love for qualitative research and evaluation, Charlene's areas of specialization include Indigenous methods and methodologies, substance use and harm reduction, program implementation, family violence and family health, and working in good ways with Indigenous communities.

In the last three years, Charlene has served as a Cultural Health and Integration Consultant for the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre of Winnipeg to support operationalizing two new, Indigenous-led clinical operations in Manitoba: The Rapid Access to Addictions Medicine Clinic and the province's Safer Consumption Site. In 2024, Charlene was honoured at the University of Manitoba's annual Honouring Our Indigenous Campus Community event where she was 'blanketed' for "her exceptional courage and leadership in the face of adversity, support in

creating pathways for other students and researchers wishing to dismantle barriers, and commitment to social justice, health, healing, and community."

Beyond raising three children with her partner of 30 years, Charlene is a consultant, cultural educator, community 'Auntie', mentor, and published author, who is deeply committed to reducing stigma and raising understanding related to mental health issues and harm-reduction. She participates in Sundance, Sweatlodge, Full Moon, and other ceremonies. Through and through, Charlene loves being an escaabe-kwe, or helper.

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