

White Gatekeeping and the Promise of Shelter:  
Confronting Colonial Logics Within Women's Anti-Violence Services

by

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## Abstract

In response to the recent surge in activism surrounding the missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, the state has attempted to address colonial gender violence through strategies that involve the ongoing support and implementation of antiviolence services. While antiviolence agencies provide crucial short-term assistance to women in crises, indigenous women and two-spirited people have long questioned the ways in which these institutions exacerbate colonial gender violence by relying upon and strengthening apparatuses of state violence such as prisons, police and child protective services. In response to this problem I ask how white feminists invested in confronting colonial gender violence might begin to reform antiviolence service provision to help make indigenous women's lives more liveable on both an individual and systemic scale. Answering this, I highlight the meaningful ways that indigenous women are addressing and alleviating violence through approaches that recognize the interconnectedness between all forms of violence indigenous people face. Contrasting these thoughtful and diverse approaches with those of mainstream antiviolence shelters exposes the colonial logics that continue to permeate white feminist antiviolence agencies. Speaking to white feminist women working within these institutions, I argue that white feminists working within the antiviolence sector must recognize their obligation to stand in solidarity with indigenous communities in their struggle against colonization. Providing ongoing support to indigenous struggles for decolonization provides a framework through which white feminists can begin to self-reflexively confront and undo their investments in whiteness, recognize and reform the aspects of service provision that uphold colonial logics, and support decolonization struggles that seek to eradicate all forms of violence against indigenous people.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Situating the Shelter.....	7
Chapter 3 Indigenous Women Responding to Violence.....	32
Chapter 4 Interrogating Investments in Whiteness.....	50
Chapter 5 Epilogue.....	76
Bibliography.....	80

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

The Idle No More movement ushered in an era of indigenous activism that has brought indigenous struggles to the forefront of Canadian consciousness. This movement, which began during the Winter of 2012, generated awareness of the threats posed by the omnibus Bill C-45 (now the Jobs and Growth Act, 2012), which included the dismantling of environmental protection, the opening up of treaty territories, and the erosion of indigenous rights. The momentum generated by this movement has brought with it heightened media attention regarding the many concerns confronting indigenous communities, especially surrounding the overwhelming prevalence of gender and sexual violence. The RCMP published a report in 2014 that confirmed the overrepresentation of indigenous women among Canada's missing and murdered ("Missing and Murdered"). Response to this report by indigenous women anti-violence activists affirmed their decades of labour, while the RCMP's near-doubling of its number of confirmed cases informed a fresh wave of outrage in indigenous people and allied critics that culminated in widespread demand that the state commission a national inquiry into the disappearances and deaths of indigenous women. In response to this rising pressure, the federal government has produced a number of reports, action plans and recommendations that attempt to address indigenous peoples' concerns and move towards reconciliation.

While it is encouraging that these conversations are being had, they are for the most part taking place within the confines of colonial logics invested in maintaining the social arrangements that marginalize indigenous peoples and protect the security of white settlers. As a consequence of the asymmetrical relationship between Canada and indigenous nations, approaches involving the implementation of social services and the strengthening of the prison

industrial complex are often put on the table as responses to forms of violence that are much broader in scope and complexity than these institutions are able to address.

In this thesis, I turn my focus towards feminist antiviolence organizations – specifically women’s shelters—to examine the paradoxical ways in which these agencies that purportedly alleviate violence are part of a broader social machinery that exposes indigenous women to perpetual movement, placelessness, and premature death. In response to colonial gender violence<sup>1</sup>, the Canadian state routinely points to the strengthening of this machinery – namely police, prisons, and the foster care system – as evidence that something is being done to alleviate the violence. In the following chapters I draw upon the perspectives, experiences, and voices of indigenous people to highlight how indigenous women and two-spirited people are responding to violence in transformative ways that recognize the interconnectedness of all indigenous struggles. In response to the insights of these indigenous women and noteworthy white feminists who are engaging in meaningful alliance work, I offer suggestions on how white feminists involved in antiviolence organizations can support indigenous self-determination to alleviate colonial gender violence both within and beyond the shelter.

Throughout this text I understand “indigenous women” to be an expansive category that should be taken to be inclusive of two-spirited people of many gender identities and expressions. Two-spirit identity is a self-descriptor among lesbian, gay and bisexual indigenous peoples that “affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community, and spirituality” and recognizes “people with alternative genders and/or sexualities

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous women writers coined and popularized the term “colonial gender violence”; see, for example, Leanne Simpson’s “Not Murdered & Not Missing”. I use this term to acknowledge the inextricable connection between the ongoing violence enacted against indigenous lands and the violence enacted against indigenous women and their bodies. That is, violence against indigenous women serves not only as a tool of patriarchal control, but also as a tool of colonialism (Monture-Angus, *Journeying* 11; Nason “We Hold Our Hands Up” 188; Simpson, “Violence Against Women”). I offer an expanded description of these connections in Chapter Two.

as contributing members of traditional communities” (Wilson 304-305). While specific understandings of what it means to be two-spirited vary between nations, the value of two-spirited people’s difference is recognized in most indigenous cultures, oral histories, and traditions, and reflects a fluid understanding of gender identity that stands in stark contrast to European conceptions of gender as binary and dichotomous (305).

This work is an expression of my ongoing journey as a white middle-class feminist who is perpetually discovering and attempting to think my way out of my investments in whiteness and colonial logics – investments I have inadvertently inherited and absorbed by being raised in a society that naturalizes settlement and normalizes whiteness. I became interested in the politics of shelter when I was an undergraduate student after taking a challenging course on women in poverty taught by a socially conscious feminist professor whom I grew to deeply respect and admire. During one of our conversations she encouraged me to get involved in the community and suggested I start by getting involved with a local violence against women’s shelter. I met with the shelter’s volunteer coordinator shortly thereafter, and she invited me to assist with the various recreational events and programs that took place at the agency. Over the course of the next couple of years, I visited the shelter regularly and formed relationships with women and girls who were staying there. While I was volunteering I formed a relationship with one young woman around my age who told me about how she had had to travel for several hours – away from her family, her friends and her job—to come live at this shelter because it was the closest one with any vacancies. She regularly expressed distress at being so far from her support system, and ended up leaving the shelter sooner than expected.

During this time, I enrolled in a course on indigenous feminisms at the university. Over the course of the semester, I grew increasingly aware of the injustice of colonialism and was

forced to open my eyes to the ways in which I am implicitly involved in upholding the systems that maintain these unequal social relations and perpetuate ongoing conditions of dispossession and exploitation. What I learned in the course left me thinking about the myriad of ways in which I benefit from legacies of colonization and forced labour. As I learned more about the prevalence of violence against indigenous women, I began wondering about the role of shelters in providing safe space for these women in times of crisis. I decided to sit on the board of directors in the hope that I could offer an intersectional feminist perspective that might contribute to making the shelter a more accessible space for marginalized women.

I had the eye-opening experience of sitting on an all-white board of directors during the same time period when my thesis research immersed me in the scholarly work on violence by indigenous women and women of colour, who discussed the ways in which efforts to address violence in their communities can end up perpetuating and strengthening the systems of state violence enacted against their communities. I realized that these concerns went largely unexamined by white feminists within the shelter who for the most part have the privilege of viewing state institutions as neutral arbiters of security and justice. This experience made me aware of our collective responsibility as white feminists to educate ourselves about histories of colonization and to offer ongoing tangible support to indigenous communities: a responsibility that is based upon an understanding of our place as the beneficiaries of the colonial settlement of indigenous lands, the shortening of indigenous people's lives and the disallowance of indigenous nationhood and sovereignty.

In Chapter One I situate the shelter within the context of Canadian society. I first show how neoliberalism creates conditions that expose indigenous women to increased conditions of economic insecurity while reducing the social safety net upon which these women must

increasingly rely. I go on to discuss the proliferation of discourses and mechanisms that obscure the fact that the contemporary relationship between the Canadian state and indigenous nations remains colonial to its foundation. After first setting up the shelter as a biopolitical institution, I demonstrate the ways in which mainstream violence against women's shelters and the women who run them are involved in the perpetual shuttling of indigenous women to and from various institutions within urban space, rendering them out-of-place and subjecting them to conditions that expose them to violence and premature death. Ultimately I seek to demonstrate that recognizing the contradictions of shelter opens up the space for the white bureaucratic actors in positions of power to self-reflexively question the ways in which these institutions indirectly produce the very violence that they were created to abolish.

In Chapter Two I draw upon the work of indigenous scholars and activists working to combat the consequences of forced placelessness and unbelonging by advocating for and facilitating the reorganization of land, the regeneration of indigenous lifeways, and the restoration of good relationships within and between nations. I discuss this work to highlight the ways in which indigenous women are addressing violence by recognizing the interconnectedness among all forms of violence indigenous people face (political, economic, racial, gendered, cultural, sexual), and that struggles for decolonization must interlink them all. I ultimately argue that white feminists who seek to alleviate violence in the lives of all women have an obligation to support the political self-determination of indigenous nations by building an ongoing commitment to indigenous struggles for sovereignty and national resurgence as contexts for sustaining the wellbeing of indigenous people.

In Chapter Three I revisit the space of the shelter to expose and undo its investments in whiteness and white feminism. I shine a light on the ways in which racism and colonial logics

continue to permeate feminist spaces, so as to think about how investments in whiteness limit or prevent meaningful relationships of solidarity. I then highlight some of the meaningful solidarity work that has been carried out by white feminists invested in challenging and rejecting their race privilege and providing ongoing support to the struggle against racism. I highlight this work to provide examples of how white feminists can work towards combatting oppressive practices within and beyond the shelter.

## **Chapter 2 Situating the Shelter**

In this chapter I explore three social, political and economic forces that have shaped the contemporary Canadian social landscape in a way that secures state control and benefits white settlers while depriving indigenous peoples of vital resources. While the dismal condition on reserves is often highlighted and analyzed in the media, the social arrangements in Canadian society tend to be naturalized. These societal conditions are widely understood to be neutral, fair, and full of opportunity for all who are willing to work hard and contribute to society. In this chapter I analyze the contemporary Canadian landscape in order to set the context for the role of the shelter within society, to reveal the ways in which these arrangements subject indigenous people to state control and abandonment, and to expose the mechanisms through which the state is able to nonetheless uphold a positive national image. I go on to demonstrate the ways in which mainstream violence against women's shelters and the women who run them are involved in the perpetual shuttling of indigenous women to and from various institutions within urban space, rendering them out-of-place and subjecting them to conditions that expose them to violence and premature death. Ultimately I seek to demonstrate that recognizing the contradictions of shelter opens up space for the white bureaucratic actors in power to self-reflexively question the ways in which these institutions indirectly produce the very violence that they were created to abolish.

### **Major Power Relations Producing Colonial Dynamics within the Shelter**

Neoliberalism, multiculturalism and the proliferation of the non-profit industrial complex are forces that I argue have together shaped ideas about the prevalence and ongoing impact of

racism, what activist movements look like, and the availability of public resources to marginalized groups. I discuss these diverse social forces together because although they affect different aspects of society, when viewed side by side they portray how the women's shelter increasingly becomes a space upon which indigenous women must rely when other resources are absent. Together, these social phenomena illustrate how the social, political and economic landscape has transformed in a manner that suppresses the voices of racialized communities, reduces possibilities for mobilizing against ongoing marginalization, and shrinks the social safety net upon which many marginalized groups rely. Simultaneously, multiculturalism discourse has concealed the reality of racism and colonialism, the proliferating non-profit industrial complex has tempered the radical nature of the social justice movements that might have exposed this reality, and neoliberalism has led to the crumbling of the welfare state upon which many people of colour have depended for relief from the effects of racism.

### *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is an umbrella term that is useful in explaining the interrelations between various social and political trends that have emerged over the course of the last forty years. These trends have included privatization, globalization, environmental deregulation, the dismantling of social safety nets, decreased job security, increased government surveillance and the expansion of the prison industrial complex (Duggan; Bumiller 5). These trends have had a devastating impact on the most marginalized social groups, exposing them to increased economic instability and subjecting them to the strengthened apparatuses of state control (Spade 34). Furthermore, the rhetoric of individual freedom and choice that accompanies neoliberalism obscures and naturalizes this increasing inequality, suggesting that those being harmed by the upward distribution of wealth are "blameworthy, lazy, and, of course, dangerous" (58).

These neoliberal trends not only harm the worst off, many of whom are indigenous peoples, but they create the conditions for the continued theft of indigenous territories and resources. Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez exposes how the neoliberal expansion of global markets requires the increased extraction of natural resources, a demand that leads to the continued dispossession of indigenous peoples (Altamirano-Jiménez 2). At the same time, the Government of Canada has presented its new counter-terrorism strategy that essentially identifies indigenous peoples who resist this dispossession as “eco-terrorists,” their resistance qualifying as low-level violence by a domestic “issue-based” group (2). These political dynamics demonstrate ongoing colonial logics and underscore the question: “who has the right to control resource extraction and who bears the cost of protecting the environment?” (2).

Within Canada, the gradual emergence of neoliberalism simultaneously brought with it an increase in wealth inequality, and a decrease in the public resources and social programs available to support those whose wellbeing is most severely impacted by this financial downturn. Women’s shelters are one of the many social institutions that have seen the direct effects of the declining welfare state. In 2008, shelter funding was drastically reduced and all transitional housing facilities defunded, a shift that had on the ground consequences for abused women and their children (Young 1). In 2011/2012 Ontario women’s shelters turned away almost fifteen thousand women, or fifty-six per cent of those seeking safety (“Violence Against Women” 271). This shift has taken place during a moment when many indigenous women, who are disproportionately exposed to the most violent forms of abuse, are turning to shelters for survival (Burczycka and Cotter 16).

Statistics show that women from marginalized groups are more likely to be targets of interpersonal violence. Disabled, transgender, immigrant and racialized women are the most

likely groups to find themselves in situations of domestic violence (Bauer and Scheim 4, Sinha 19). Furthermore, women who are impacted by poverty are more likely than middle to upper class women to depend upon the shelter for safety because of their lack of alternative options (Block and Galabuzi 3). Therefore, the defunding of shelters can be interpreted as part of the biopolitical exposure of poor, disabled, racialized and immigrant women to shortened life chances.

During the same time period that neoliberalism has exacerbated social stratification and harmed the well being of the worst-off, Canada has seen a proliferation of mechanisms that naturalize inequality and undermine the ability for dissenters to challenge the order of things. Some of the most powerful mechanisms among these, I will argue, are the forces of multiculturalism and the non-profit industrial complex.

### *Canadian Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*

One of the most significant shifts in Canada's national identity to emerge over the past forty years has been the portrayal of the country as a multicultural nation. This development was sparked by the implementation of policy; namely, the inclusion of multiculturalism in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the introduction of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988). The implementation of official multiculturalism policy was heralded as the first of its kind, and it painted a picture of Canada as a unique cultural mosaic with a diverse and multiracial citizenry. However, many scholars have studied the ways in which colonial discourse such as multiculturalism and the rhetoric of recognition can obscure the historical and ongoing dispossession of indigenous nations, center white innocence and disavow the grievances of racialized groups.

Margot Francis notes that while multiculturalism has been widely celebrated as timely and progressive, it may also encourage a “national forgetting” of the dispossession, occupation and exploitation inherent to historical and ongoing colonial projects. She argues that these policy developments “reinscribe Canada’s historic self-image as a particularly benign, enterprising, and tolerant nation” (Francis 161). At the same time as Canada is praised for its tolerance for diversity and difference, however, indigenous people are systemically excluded from the benefits of equitable citizenship and disproportionately made to endure poverty, displacement, violence, criminalization, and institutional surveillance. This systemic marginalization is especially harmful during neoliberal times when access to social aid is limited. Francis points out the irony in the fact that those most likely to serve as the face of Canadian multiculturalism are also the most likely to face the most severe forms of social, economic and cultural exclusion (Francis 162). Carianne Leung also takes issue with the ways in which multiculturalism influences the perception of the nation’s responsibility to redress historical injustice. Rather than arguing that this discourse will necessarily cloud the collective memory, she argues that the narrative of liberal progress can have the effect of fixing historical wrongdoing in the past, thereby obscuring the ways past injustice shapes the present and denying the presence of ongoing colonialism (167).

Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill contribute to the conversation on the effects of multiculturalism on indigenous nations by discussing how it disavows indigenous nations’ desire for self-determination and sovereignty. They argue that multicultural discourse promotes the notion that all minority groups on this land are similarly working towards inclusion and equality within the Canadian nation-state (10). This view ignores the struggle of indigenous nations that have been

mobilizing against assimilation and towards sovereignty for hundreds of years. The discourse of multiculturalism, therefore, distances contemporary Canada from the violence of nation building and erases indigenous peoples past and present.

Glen Coulthard's work also addresses the insidious logics of the state, which work to cover up and maintain its colonial relationship with indigenous peoples. He moves beyond discussions of multiculturalism and takes issue with the set of discourses that emphasize the *recognition* of indigenous rights, challenging the commonplace idea that the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples can be transformed through the state's recently expressed claim to *recognize* and *accommodate* the political autonomy, land rights and cultural practices of indigenous nations (Coulthard 3). Rather than ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence, he argues that "the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that indigenous peoples' demand for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (3).

Coulthard writes about the tumultuous climate of the Red Power era in the 1960s and 70s that brought indigenous issues to the forefront of Canadian consciousness (6). He argues that in the wake of this activism, colonial power was forced to modify itself "from a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/ assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize our *recognition* and *accommodation*" (6; emphasis in original). Despite these conciliatory discourses, however, Coulthard argues that the relationship between the Canadian state and indigenous peoples has remained colonial to its foundation (6).

In order to sufficiently conceptualize the role of the shelter in both combatting and propping up the political, economic and social forces that are shortening the lives of indigenous women, we must examine the broader political landscape in which this marginalization and exclusion is taking place. The intertwined forces of colonization, wealth inequality and systemic marginalization contextualize the proliferating forces of multiculturalism and neoliberalism. Together, these relations inform the deepening of the roles of non-profit organizations in the management of social welfare.

### *The Non-Profit Industrial Complex*

The rise of neoliberalism has been accompanied by the proliferation of social service centered non-profit organizations. This phenomenon has received critical analysis from a wide range of scholars and activists who argue that activist work that was previously radical, decentralized, and transformative was tempered by the changes prompted by state funding and surveillance. With the changing political landscape, radical social movement work of the 1960s and 1970s became constrained and subsumed within the walls of increasingly professionalized non-profit organizations that carried out organizing within the limits of a nine-to-five work day. Raising money and administering social services became the central concern, while “the actual work of activism became secondary and watered down” (Thunderhawk 105). In this analysis, those most affected by life-shortening systems of domination -- who also were those with the most insight into how to best organize against such systems -- saw themselves pushed out of non-profit work and replaced by mostly white, educated, middle and upper middle class elites with graduate degrees. The consequence of this has been that much of the social service work being done in the name of alleviating the harm that marginalized groups face has actually relied

upon and strengthened the apparatuses of state violence that produce these sorts of socially stratifying conditions (Spade 175). These dynamics affect feminist organizations like shelters distinctly, because such organizations also often espouse a mainstream feminist politics that views violence against women through an individualistic framework that neglects to question the roots of oppression. In conversation with Jessica Danforth (Yee), Theresa Lightfoot reflects that: “mainstream feminism appears to be about individual women getting ahead or making patriarchy more tolerable, while... in an indigenous context it is more about making things better for a collective group of people and taking on the system that is responsible for the roots of patriarchy in the first place” (Lightfoot 106).

Understanding non-profits as part of an “industrial complex” can be a useful way to understand their complexity. Drawing from his extensive study of the political incarceration of Black and racialized social justice activists, Dylan Rodríguez understands the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) to be the natural consequence of the prison industrial complex (PIC). While the PIC represses dissent, “the NPIC manages and controls dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus” (Rodríguez 21). This framework forces us to attend to the ways in which the conduct of the shelter bolsters colonial logics. As Madonna Thunder Hawk observes, those working within the shelter system are not consciously working against the broader goals to end violence. But “just by trying to keep funding and pay everyone’s salaries, they start to unconsciously limit their imagination of what they *could* do” (Thunderhawk 105; emphasis in original). Woolford and Curran discuss the ways in which funding limits critical reflexivity within nonprofit agencies:

What is too often lost in the day-to-day demands of providing needed services within the bureaucratic field is the time and space for reflexive critique of the conditions that limit

possibilities of care and social justice for those who use social services. This loss is magnified in neoliberal times, as the managerial demands of accountability, measurement, best practices, and so forth, become further restraints on the activities of nonprofit service providers. Under such circumstances, nonprofit dispositions become circumscribed by the dull compulsion of agency management and further removed from a reflexivity that might challenge the very conditions that sustain the field. (60)

Clearly, mainstream violence against women's shelters are paradoxical spaces in that much of the work that they do in the name of alleviating interpersonal violence depends upon and strengthens apparatuses of state violence and control, such as police, prisons, the criminal justice system, and children's aid, all of which disproportionately target women of colour and indigenous women. As the anti-violence movement gained prominence and became professionalized, it also became reluctant to address the intersections between domestic violence and institutionalized violence (Durazo 117). The main challenge for anti-violence organizations and agencies interested in ending violence against all women, therefore, is to develop strategies for addressing domestic violence that do not strengthen the apparatuses of the PIC. To do so would be a crucial first step towards understanding their full scope of institutional complicity in reproducing state violence, which can be described by analysis of the NPIC.

Ontario shelters' growing ties with the Children's Aid Society (CAS) is of particular concern to indigenous women seeking shelter from domestic abuse. In 2003 the Ontario government made a commitment to formally connect Violence Against Women (VAW) and CAS sectors through the establishment of local collaboration agreements, which open lines of communication between agencies ("Making the Links"). Under the Child and Family Services Act (1990), all persons have a mandatory duty to report any suspicion that a child may be in need

of protection (“Violence Against Women Emergency Shelter Standards”). According to Section 72 (6) of the Child and Family Services Act, this duty to report applies in all cases wherein there is grounds to believe that “the emotional harm suffered by the child results from the actions, failure to act or pattern of neglect on the part of the child’s parent”. This broad definition of neglect puts women experiencing domestic abuse at particular risk of being identified as unfit mothers. Indigenous mothers experiencing abuse are put at even further risk of being identified as unfit, considering that their children are being taken into child welfare custody at overwhelmingly disproportionate levels (Trocmé et al. cited in Stirrett 3). Statistics from 2001 and 2003 showed that while indigenous children made up less than three per cent of the population, thirty to forty per cent of children and youth taken into custody were indigenous (Trocmé et al. cited in Stirrett 3).

This collaboration has obvious repercussions for indigenous women seeking shelter, who have inherited a traumatic legacy of state intervention and child removal. This collaboration has the simultaneous potential to prop up this disproportionate removal for indigenous mothers who choose to access services, and deter other indigenous mothers from seeking shelter services for fear of losing custody of their children. For women who are routinely targets of state intervention, an institution that heightens their exposure to children’s aid workers, police and the criminal justice system is anything but safe. Tara Williamson argues that anti-violence organizing must be “contextualized by a broader goal of dismantling colonial state power ... nothing less than that goal is going to fundamentally change anything” (Williamson). Without this broader goal in mind, even institutional spaces built to provide safety are destined to replicate colonial power structures that rely upon the erasure of indigenous bodies. Spaces

claiming to protect the lives of all women cannot do so while simultaneously disproportionately exposing racialized women to institutions of state violence.

Over the past forty years, the rise of neoliberalism has increased the vulnerability of marginalized groups to poverty and state control, while the proliferation of the NPIC and the implementation of multiculturalism have simultaneously tempered social movements and protected the reputation of the state. This social landscape will be foundational to understanding the limits and possibilities of shelter. The political and economic control exerted by state funding bodies has significantly tempered the anti-violence movement. Because of the immense focus on securing funding, shelter staff and board members now spend the majority of their time writing grants, planning fundraising events, and doing administrative labour. Shelters are encouraged to operate around short term goals, rather than engage in building structures that will support transformative social change and address the roots of the violence (Gilmore 177).

Work previously done by volunteers immersed in grassroots organizing is now contained within the boundaries of a nine-to-five workday, and activists are encouraged to think about social organizing as work that deserves compensation. Ontario shelters have also adopted hierarchical governing practices across the board (Koyama 212). Major decisions are made by elected board members who tend to be hired on the basis of their educational and professional skills rather than their community involvement (Durazo 116). This often results in a board made up of mostly white, middle to upper class, cisgender women whose decisions inevitably reflect their own experiences and as a result are poised to misunderstand or overlook the concerns of marginalized women who face the most extreme forms of interpersonal and state violence.

In the wake of generations of activism and feminist theorization by racialized and indigenous women, explicit attempts are sometimes made to ensure that violence against

women's shelters in Ontario are operating through a feminist framework based in intersectionality (Crenshaw 1244), or the awareness that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking" and demand simultaneous attention (Combahee River Collective 272). Yet, perhaps partly due to the influence of multiculturalism discourse, these efforts rarely go beyond the attempt to include and incorporate marginalized women into already-existing structures. Many shelters have hired indigenous counselors, and collaborate with local friendship centers that invite indigenous women that might be staying at the shelter to participate in traditional ceremony. These efforts may even be taken at the request of indigenous organizers who are seeking ways to provide immediate support for and to form connections with the indigenous women whom the shelters are contacting. However, in context of the shelter, adopting such approaches as the organization's primary form of responsibility to indigenous communities fails to question how the inherent structure of the shelter and the social and political landscape in which it is embedded might be inherently invested in maintaining white supremacy. In what follows, I situate shelters within Canadian society and argue that the shelter system is biopolitically involved in simultaneously protecting and endangering women experiencing violence.

### **Theorizing the Shelter in Relation to Colonial Displacement and Erasure**

In order to denaturalize the racial and national formations that influence the conduct of the shelter, I primarily draw upon the ways that Michel Foucault and Sherene Razack theorize erasure. Foucault's theory of biopower demonstrates how, at the level of the state, the erasure and elimination of groups deemed to be racially inferior came to be positively associated with the flourishing of the rest of the population (255). This discussion of biopower lends itself to Razack's work, in which she explores how the modern city is invested in rendering indigenous

peoples perpetually out-of-place. Through this forced transience, indigenous women are exposed to increased risk and vulnerability, and the emplacement and security of non-indigenous people is subsequently reinforced. I argue that the foundation that comes together once these theories are worked out in relation to one another exposes the shelter as a biopolitical institution that props up the white subject as the deserving inheritor of national resources and casts out indigenous peoples as threats to the wellbeing of these subjects. We see these power relations illustrated in official narration of access to shelter in government reports and in the erasure of indigenous women's experiences of placelessness that are produced by colonial conditions and exacerbated by their embedding within shelters.

### *Biopolitics and the Conduct of Shelter*

Foucault argues that before the emergence of the modern state, the sovereign had the right of life and death over its subjects, which was expressed as “the power to take life or let live” (241). Power's effect on the domain of life at this time could therefore only be exercised through the right to take it away. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, a transformation took place. Whereas the sovereign previously exercised power over life only through the deduction of life, this power was now expressed through the investment in life. In other words, the emergence of the modern state enabled the sovereign with the power to “make live or let die” (241).

This new power over life, referred to as bio-power, takes two forms that function simultaneously. The first is disciplinary power, which focuses on the individual body and concerns itself with increasing human productivity (242). The second, newer form is invested in the regulation of populations and seeks to control the population on a statistical level. This technology of power was established once it was possible to measure bio-political factors such as

ratios of birth to deaths, rates of reproduction, and fertility (243). It was through this technology of power that populations were able to be seen as a measurable scientific and political problem, and regulation as a tool to optimize the state of life.

If it is true that we live within a political system that focuses on the domain of life, Foucault asks how the function of death is exercised (254). He argues that the division that constitutes “the break between what must live and what must die” is constituted through racism (254). He argues in the 19<sup>th</sup> century racism was the primary mechanism of social organization alongside colonization as a technology of power to satisfy the need to justify not only conquest of lands, but the killing of previous occupants (257). Racism had two primary functions that legitimized the actions of colonizers: first, to fragment the population into racial subdivisions, and second to establish a positive association between the elimination of those groups considered to be racially inferior and the flourishing of the rest of the population (255). The biopolitical elimination of racially inferior populations could be accomplished through exposure to death, increasing risk of death, political death, expulsion and rejection (255).

When speaking of the biopolitical power to “make live or let die,” shelters are an illuminating site of analysis because they directly influence the life chances of women whose lives are directly at risk. Within a settler colonial state, a preferred population of white settlers is made to flourish through the subjugation of racialized and colonized Others (Razack, *Dying from Improvement* 191, Morgensen, “Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism” 2). The women’s shelter in such a context emerges as a space that paradoxically espouses the preservation of life while participating in a system that predicts and effectively ensures that some will die. With this in mind, I ask how the shelter, as an institution that is inherently bio-political, can claim to equally protect the lives of all women.

Shelters are institutions that have been critical in providing emergency protection to women fleeing from violence. While they are not involved in the overt or deliberate exposure of racialized women to premature death, as Foucault argues, in a bio-political state “letting die” can involve exposure to death, increasing risk of death, expulsion and rejection (255). This framework sets up shelters as institutions that are operating within a biopolitical state that is interested in optimizing the health of the population by eliminating groups that it designates as racially degenerate. Shelters are illuminating sites of analysis because they directly involve themselves in matters of life and death. How then are they, through a single administrative infrastructure, simultaneously protecting women whose lives are deemed worthy of fostering and exposing others to death? How is this racialization made so covert that shelters are able to promote themselves as explicitly anti-oppressive and anti-racist institutions? These are central questions that I set out to explore and illuminate in the remainder of this chapter.

### *Biopolitical Erasure within The Report of the Auditor General*

If the shelter is bio-politically invested in whiteness, its role in protecting the lives of women from all racial and cultural backgrounds requires investigation. We must critically analyze the efforts of women’s shelters to support indigenous women through incorporation into existing frameworks of care. I suggest that these efforts are in part driven by the forces of multiculturalism and state cooptation that characterize the current Canadian political landscape and that temper the dissent that neoliberalism might otherwise provoke. In this context, the shelter is brought up in political conversations as evidence that the state is taking action to address violence against indigenous women. Yet insufficient incorporation efforts permit the

shelter to maintain its investment in whiteness, protect itself from public scrutiny, bolster the reputation of the state, and undermine transformative efforts to create radical change.

The mechanisms that obscure the roots of this violence may be illuminated by examining a report submitted by the Office of the Auditor General in 2013 that focuses on violence against women in Ontario. I argue that the report illustrates the ways in which the shelter incorporates indigenous women without changing its structure, and in so doing diverts attention from and maintains institutionally entrenched investments in whiteness. While there have been numerous reports, studies and analyses conducted in attempt to address violence against women in Ontario, “The Report of the Auditor General” provides a distinctive glimpse into the interactions between the governing bodies that administer the conduct of shelters. I foreground a report that does not explicitly concern itself with indigenous women’s experiences, but focuses instead on violence against all women because it provides insight into whose issues are centered, and whose are bracketed or left out of mainstream conversations.

The Auditor General is responsible for monitoring the administration of Ontario’s finances to hold the government accountable for its spending. The reports produced provide an overview meant to illuminate how well public resources are being used and how effectively social service work is alleviating social problems. In December of 2013, the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario released its annual report, part of which included an audit of the programs and services aimed at helping abused women and their children find safety and reestablish themselves. These programs and services are provided by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS), and include services such as women’s shelters, crisis counseling and various skills workshops aimed at promoting independence.

While the contents of the Auditor General's Report may appear relatively benign, there are moments in the report wherein the cost-effectiveness and general success of anti-violence programs and services appear to be determined without regard for the particular struggles faced by indigenous women. One such moment is in the section regarding the determination of unmet demand. In this section, the report dismisses the impact of being turned away or made to travel to another shelter, an experience that has the potential of having devastating consequences for indigenous women with limited financial resources. The report reveals that in 2011/12 Ontario shelters turned away a total of fifty-six per cent of those who sought help from them (271). While it might be expected that this statistic would raise alarm, the auditor nullifies concern by pointing out that the reasons these women were turned away are unknown. That is, it is unclear how many women were turned away but referred to another agency where they did receive services. The auditor responds to this dilemma by calling for the MCSS to engage in more diligent record keeping regarding wait lists and how many women who were turned away received services elsewhere (285).

It makes reasonable sense that before the auditor can allocate resources to close a service gap, it must be verified that such a gap actually exists. However, my main point of contention is that the main issue expressed in the report is whether or not the women who are turned away are receiving help elsewhere. If they ultimately receive services from another shelter, the report implies, no unmet demand exists and therefore no service gap requires the allocation of additional resources.

I argue, however, that rejection from the shelter has severe consequences regardless of whether or not those seeking services are able to find them elsewhere. The implications of being turned away from an emergency shelter can be devastating, especially for women who are

simultaneously racialized, poor, and/or caring for children. Since indigenous women are more likely to be poor and more likely to be affected by levels of violence more severe than non-indigenous women, those indigenous women who seek access to shelters are especially vulnerable to the effects of displacement and rejection. When turned away, women must often travel great distances to find a shelter that can take them in. For many indigenous women, this journey is complicated by the financial burden of travel, the stress of caring for children during a time of crisis, and the isolation that accompanies removal from one's community and support system. To women living at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalization, this displacement is just one factor among a myriad of forces that produce the racialized poor as transient subjects who are repeatedly denied stability, belonging, and a sense of home.

The fact that the authors of this report do not register as a cause for concern the statistic that over half of women attempting to access emergency shelters are turned away indicates in and of itself the commonplace practice of centering white middle-class women's experiences as universal. A high rate of rejection at women's shelters is one of the many ways that indigenous women are "caught up in the ongoing displacement, relocation, and search for a safe space that is a consistent theme in the lives of most native women," a practice that is historical in nature and arguably driven by colonial logics (McConney 212). Shelters require intersectional frameworks that recognize the differences among women and therefore are capable of attending to women's diverse needs. In the existing multicultural climate, however, these kinds of frameworks often are shirked for inadequate cultural programs that do little to unsettle the exclusionary norms characteristic of much white feminist organizing. These oversights can have consequences that ultimately exacerbate the very conditions these non-profits were built to mitigate, as evidenced by "The Auditor General's Report". Clearly, the mode of writing in this report is a sign of

biopower at work; those subjects who are considered alive/ human are talked about in “make live” discourses that signal an investment in the optimization of their lives through ensuring access to various services. Conversely, subjects who are considered dead/ non-human -- and who may be harmed by being made to move from one institution to another -- are never imaginable, or are named as unworthy of further discussion. As such, the contents of this report raise questions that I explore in the remainder of this chapter about the capacity in which the shelter is involved in producing the conditions of placelessness and unbelonging that characterize the lives of many indigenous women and expose them to multiple forms of violence.

### *Displacement, Unbelonging and the Practice of White Gatekeeping*

Thinking about the power relations that connect space, place, and identity opens up new ways to analyze the difficulties faced by indigenous women when navigating the shelter system. The work of Sherene Razack demonstrates how the shelter is caught up in the ongoing displacement of indigenous women. Razack thinks carefully about the historical journeys of transgression made between respectable and degenerate spaces marked by their association with whiteness and indigeneity, and how it is through these transgressions that subjects come to know themselves and each other (“Gendered Racial Violence” 127). Along the same lines, I suggest that it might be illuminating to consider the shelter as a space characterized by white civility and neoliberal citizenship.

In recent decades, shelters have come to be mostly composed of staff and board members who are encouraged by funders to exhibit and promote the qualities associated with good neoliberal citizenship. In their study of the provision of social services (to indigenous peoples) in Winnipeg, Nelund and Woolford observe that “just as neoliberal policies pressure social service

agencies to embrace accountable, business-like, and responsibility-inducing models of service, so too are service users encouraged to adapt themselves to the demands of neoliberalism” (292). They found that the respondents they interviewed (eighty-five per cent of whom identified as indigenous) felt pressure to represent themselves as good neoliberal citizens when seeking access to social services, emphasizing that they were “active, prudent, autonomous, responsible, and entrepreneurial” in their attempts to convince gatekeepers that they were worthy of care (292). These neoliberal values are imbued with class privilege; that is, the proper neoliberal citizen exhibits the characteristics that would enable her to be self-sufficient and avoid having to rely on the state for support. If these values are classed, they also are racialized, since according to a report published by the Vancouver Status of Women, indigenous women are “the poorest of the poor in Canada” (Stratford 4). Therefore, those seeking access to shelter services are encouraged to self-present in a manner that aligns with the values of white middle-class respectability if they are to access the resources they need (Nelund and Woolford 311).

The white middle-class respectability exhibited by those in power therefore comes to saturate the site of the women’s shelter itself. These values are framed as inherently proper and good, and indigenous women are told that they must make the transition from the racialized space of the reserve/inner city to the white space of the shelter to experience healing and rehabilitation. The shelter then functions as a space in which colonial encounters are perpetually occurring between the white gatekeepers who belong and are in charge, and the indigenous women whom these gatekeepers invite into this space conditionally. These women experience themselves as outsiders who will inevitably be discharged from this space of white benevolence and forced back into transience. Through various workshops and counseling sessions, the suggestion is that if indigenous women are able to exhibit the individual characteristics of white

respectability and neoliberal citizenship, such as responsibility, hard work, cooperation and discipline, they might then be able to escape violence. This individualistic encouragement of neoliberal values implies that the circumstances that brought indigenous women to the shelter were caused simply by the failure to behave responsibly and industriously, rather than by the impact of the social, political and economic discrimination faced by indigenous women who continue to bare the brunt of colonization.

At the same time that the shelter welcomes indigenous residents, however, it subjects them to the surveillance of apparatuses of state control. The women's shelter is part of a larger social machinery that is involved in the control and restriction of the mobility of indigenous peoples. This is a common quality of the state institutions that intervene most violently in the lives of indigenous peoples. As Razack argues, the modern city is invested in rendering indigenous peoples perpetually out-of-place; it is through their displacement that settler emplacement is established (*Dying from Improvement* 32). Police stations, prisons, foster homes, social services agencies, welfare offices, shelters, and temporary housing units are just a few of the many sites among which indigenous peoples in the city are constantly made to shuttle. Given that indigenous women are disproportionately likely to have come from communities that are over-policed and regularly subject to police brutality, to have been forced out of the economy and into criminalized work, and to have developed or been exposed to substance abuse, hyper-surveillance by institutions of state violence already structures their subjection and cannot be presented as its solution. At these sites of interaction with the state, colonial encounters inevitably occur, wherein white settlers confirm their modernity by framing indigenous peoples and their struggles as proof that they are incapable of coping with modern society, and much less capable of governing themselves and their land.

Mary Louise Pratt discusses this forced mobility as a weapon of colonial dispossession in her lecture “Indigeneity and the Modern Myth of Travel”. In the modern western imagination, she says, the model of personhood is “an autonomous being defined by a set of inalienable rights that attach to its body wherever that body may be”. This modern colonial subject comes to know herself by exploring the unknown. However, the association of mobility with freedom is easily disrupted when we consider the places in which mobility is an enactment of *unfreedom*, such as transatlantic slavery, colonial dispossession, forced migration, and human trafficking in all its forms. Forced mobility is the dark side of travel and, Pratt writes, “has long been a privileged weapon of dispossession and the assault on the collective ways of life” (Pratt). While colonizers experience travel as a way to solidify their place in the world as people who can go anywhere and do anything, forced mobilization inserts indigenous peoples “into a world of exploitation, coercion and self-annihilation” wherein the goal is not to experience unfettered freedom, but rather “the aim is getting home, recovering the known, the place of kinship and belonging” (Pratt). Pratt argues that the indigenous peoples that have survived today have succeeded “because the struggle for emplacement and self-possession, against pressures of displacement and dispossession, are at the heart of survivance”.

The denial of rest, safety and belonging that persists in the lives of many indigenous women exposes them to increased risk and vulnerability. As Razack writes, “eventually, this shuttling kills” (*Dying from Improvement* 38). This out-of-placeness was never more evident than in the days leading up to the murder of Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old indigenous girl living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the day before she went missing, Tina made contact with multiple authorities and was shuttled to and from numerous institutions, including Child and Family Services, Winnipeg Police Services, Winnipeg Paramedic Services, and the

local emergency shelter (“Tina Fontaine’s Last Days”). Her body was found a week later in a nearby river. Almost a year later, police have laid charges against Raymond Cormier, a middle-aged white man who is said to have known Tina as they both frequented a home on the east side of the city (“Tina Fontaine Homicide”). Tina Fontaine was young, poor, indigenous, and a ward of the state when she was solicited for sex and murdered. She was regularly moved in and out of the care of foster homes, police, shelters, and hospitals, and had frequent encounters with men like Raymond Cormier, who ultimately felt entitled to exploit her vulnerability and take her life. Indigenous women are perceived within white settler society and mentality as particularly violable and disposable because they live at the intersections of multiple forms of vulnerability. When denied place, security, and stability, indigenous women are viewed as particularly powerless and become easy targets for those who seek to exploit them. This is just one illustration of how the perpetual placelessness and forced mobility that indigenous women are made to endure exposes them to life shortening circumstances. While shelters provide temporary safe space for some indigenous women, the Auditor General Report (2013) shows that there is an unwillingness on the part of those in positions of authority to contend with the ways indigenous women are exposed to violence when they are required to shuttle from one institution to another. As Razack notes, it is through this displacement that settler emplacement is established (*Dying From Improvement* 32) – a line of reasoning that is inherently biopolitical in nature.

Answering the normative colonial displacement and denigration of indigenous women requires placing the shelter in a new light. While there are many institutions that collectively render indigenous women placeless and expose them to violence, the shelter is particularly paradoxical in that its purpose is to provide temporary home and cover from violence. The shelter is regularly involved in rendering indigenous women out of place, but in a manner that

differs from overtly disciplinary carceral institutions that exercise control over the movement of indigenous people through containment. The shelter, in marking itself as a space of safety and rescue, primarily exercises biopolitical conduct through eviction. From this perspective, there is clearly a paradox when state institutions extend a hand to indigenous women to offer them rescue from colonization through shelter while simultaneously continuing to expose them to death through a never-ending cycle of dispossession, criminalization, and displacement.

A life marked by the denial of home, belonging, safety and rest may be especially harmful for women from indigenous nations whose philosophies and cultural roots are deeply place-based and connected to the land. Many indigenous scholars advocate for the return of land and the resurgence of indigenous traditions, cultures, languages and lifeways advocate against this debilitating placelessness and towards the safety and vitality that comes with establishing belonging and building pride in one's heritage, as this thesis will discuss next with respect to indigenous women's responses to colonial violence.

In sum, the white middle-class respectability and neoliberal values that saturate the shelter clearly delineate the white gatekeepers in power from the indigenous women whose mobility they bio-politically control. As one of many state institutions that indigenous women shuttle between, the shelter offers indigenous women and their children safety, belonging, and stability only temporarily before they are once again rendered out-of-place. This shuttling is especially harmful in an economic climate that increasingly involves the "rolling back of social services, and the rolling out of increased punitive controls" — trends that are particularly devastating for the racialized poor (Nelund and Woolford 293). All the while, the state has exercised increased control over the social movements that might promise to address this devastation through the consolidation of the non-profit industrial complex. What is more,

invocations of the rhetoric of multiculturalism serve as a reminder of the state's commitment to ethnic and racial equality but often have the effect of silencing those groups who would protest to the contrary. Recognizing the contradictions of shelter opens up the space for the white bureaucratic actors in power to self-reflexively question the ways in which these institutions indirectly produce the very violence that they were created to abolish.

### **Chapter 3** **Indigenous Women Responding to Violence**

In the previous chapter, I located the shelter among the apparatuses of state control that perpetually intervene in the lives of indigenous women and render them out-of-place. The increased surveillance and decreased social safety net that is a hallmark of neoliberalism has given rise to the shuttling of indigenous people in and out of temporary institutions like shelters, prisons, healthcare centers and foster homes. This transience puts their wellbeing in constant jeopardy and has especially harmful consequences for indigenous women. As Sherene Razack writes: “ultimately, the shuttling kills” (*Dying from Improvement* 38). In this chapter I examine the ways in which indigenous women scholars and activists work to combat the consequences of placelessness and unbelonging by advocating for and facilitating the reorganization of land, the regeneration of indigenous lifeways, and the restoration of good relationships within and between nations. The indigenous women cited in this chapter have dedicated themselves to addressing violence through a variety of approaches. They collectively emphasize that strengthening indigenous sovereignty, self-determination and governance is foundational to building healthy non-violent relationships within and between nations. In what follows I highlight some of the ways that indigenous women are actively strengthening their nations’ sovereignty in ways that protect the wellbeing of indigenous women, children and communities as a whole. These approaches seek both the transformation of the state and the resurgence of indigenous ways of life—what Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg writer and scholar Leanne Simpson calls “a flourishing of the indigenous inside” or *mino bimaadiziwin*, the good life (*Dancing* 17). Reestablishing these cultural and interpersonal connections subverts the effects of ongoing colonialism and strengthens the independence of indigenous nations.

## **Strengthening Sovereignty through the Resurgence of Indigenous Cultures**

Haudenosaunee legal scholar Patricia Monture-Angus explains how reestablishing good interpersonal relationships is at its core radically decolonial:

When I considered the consequences of colonialism, including suicide, conflict with the criminal justice system, child welfare apprehensions and intrusions, violence against women and children, sexual abuse, and so on, I began to notice that all the consequences had one thing in common – that is, the creation of varying degrees of disconnection. The obvious solution to the relations of disconnection ... is to create or reclaim relations of connection. (*Journeying* 11)

In this passage, Monture-Angus illuminates how violence against indigenous women is one of the many ways that colonialism destroys the connections among indigenous families and communities. Leanne Simpson further explains the significance of this disconnection, arguing that colonial gender violence can be understood as a means to break apart families and gain access to indigenous lands. She writes:

Gendered violence steals something very precious from us that's very difficult to get back, and that's our intimacy and our ability to connect in a good way to the people that we love. We know from experience that the fastest way to remove people from the land, the fastest way to dispossess, is to attack women and children with sexual and gendered violence, because it destroys families almost instantly. Families are the core of our governance and our political system and all of our social organization. They are the direct contact to the land. (“Violence Against Women”)

In this passage Simpson makes clear the connection between violence against indigenous women

and colonial dispossession. Many indigenous women are recognizing the far-reaching impact of violence against women and resisting by fostering good relationships that are nurtured through the resurgence of indigenous cultures, knowledges, traditions, and systems of government. The cultural and political resurgence of indigenous nations has the potential to not only strengthen the interpersonal connections within communities, but to transform their relationship to the Canadian state.

Simpson's book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* is profound in that she carefully shapes her writing into an example of the very kind of resurgence work that her thesis calls other indigenous peoples to engage in. Within the book's pages, Simpson illuminates the importance of the resurgence of indigenous nations' languages, cultures, stories and values in rebalancing their relationship to the Canadian state and regenerating indigenous lifeways. At the same time she crafts this book into a piece of writing that Anishnaabeg peoples can turn to as a resource to immerse themselves in their nation's languages, stories and teachings.

Simpson has published and released a significant body of work that affirms Anishnaabeg values and teachings and promises to inspire and enable future generations to live in a culturally inherent way. Her published works combine scholarship, poetry, and storytelling and ground themselves within Anishnaabe thought. She has facilitated a number of collaborations with other indigenous scholars, musicians, artists and activists who are engaging in similar resurgence projects to produce literary collections that highlight the diversity of specific indigenous nations' lifeways, lived experiences and visions for achieving indigenous freedom. Through her writing Simpson contributes to the regeneration of indigenous culture and fosters the kind of relationships that promise to contribute to the flourishing of indigenous ways of being.

If the breakdown of relationships is a means of dispossession, then the resurgence of

good relationships based on the core indigenous value of interdependence is a clear decolonial pursuit because strong communities are difficult to exploit and dispossess. As Simpson writes, interdependence was a core value of pre-colonial indigenous societies, and it had the effect of creating “communities that were profoundly less authoritarian, less coercive and less hierarchical than their European counterparts” (*Dancing* 122). This interdependence nourished cultures that built methods for dealing with violence and other forms of wrongdoing through processes that were based on accountability, responsibility, collective healing, and community support. These processes were premised on the maintenance of healthy relationships within communities and looked very different from the institutions that make up the Canadian prison industrial complex.

Mi’kmaq scholar and activist Cyndy Baskin has dedicated much of her activism and scholarship to the study of restorative justice. Baskin explains that many indigenous people refer to abusive behaviour as family violence because of the value placed on interdependence between individuals, families and communities. She writes, “the well-being of the family and community is valued above that of the individual, who is seen in the context of the community” (216). Therefore, when an individual is harmed, it is believed that all others in their family and community are also harmed, and so the healing process must focus on victims, offenders, and the wellbeing of the whole community (216). Baskin criticizes mainstream social service providers for their tendency to isolate individuals and take a polarized view of violence against women rather than understanding the situations holistically as a complex problem with many variables. She understands this violence to be the result of broader historical and ongoing colonial domination and control, and identifies that “aboriginal peoples have internalized this oppression and it has affected the family. The treatment of women and children within the family is a reflection of the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in this broader context” (219). In response to

this ongoing colonial domination, which has often exercised itself through attacking the strength of indigenous communities through gender and sexual violence, Baskin poured her time and effort into developing a family violence intervention program called the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program, which means “healing together” in Ojibwe (220). This program provided services to children, women and men within an indigenous community of about three hundred people, and focused on creating an environment in which all community members affected by violence could feel comfortable to share their stories, understand one another and heal together. Along with Simpson and Monture-Angus, Cyndy Baskin shows that building good relationships within indigenous communities through indigenous core values is a decolonial act that has the potential to strengthen indigenous sovereignty and destabilize colonialism in all of its expressions.

It is worth noting that individual nations’ processes for addressing wrongdoing are diverse and varied, and many indigenous women are skeptical about the effectiveness of peacemaking models for sexual violence. In her article “Decolonizing Rape Law,” Muscogee legal scholar Sarah Deer addresses the limitations of these models, arguing that they often let men off without repercussion, satisfying the perpetrators more than the victims (149). What is more, in cases of rape and sexual assault it can be traumatizing for women to have to sit in the same room as their perpetrator during the resolution process. However, because peacemaking models are often seen as more indigenous than the adversarial judicial system, many women feel that they must make the decision to either participate in the peacemaking model, or subject a family member or acquaintance to prison and partake in genocide. Deer puts forward two preliminary approaches to dealing with violence that addresses these concerns: by enforcing the right of indigenous women to enact a civil protection order to prevent the perpetrator from engaging them in further contact, and the development of a specialized court system solely

designed to address sexual assault crimes from a victim centered perspective (Deer, “Decolonizing” 162-163). Deer’s advocacy work has in large part made possible the enforcement within the United States federal law of her first recommendation: the Violence Against Women Act, which was amended in 2013 to recognize tribal courts’ inherent jurisdiction over defendants who violate protection orders within Indian Country<sup>2</sup> (“Violence Against Women Act”). Deer ultimately argues that in order to implement restorative justice models that take into consideration the needs of women, indigenous women should be at the forefront of the development of contemporary tribal remedies for rape.

While there are important debates to be had around this model, many indigenous scholars and organizers look to individual nations’ diverse processes for addressing wrongdoing as a promising framework for repairing the uneven relationship between the state and indigenous nations. For instance, examples of such discussions appear in the recent report published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the need to support indigenous cultural responses to the multigenerational trauma produced by Residential Schools (4), and in conversations among indigenous men on the topic of ending violence in the collection *Indigenous Men and Masculinities*, edited by Kim Anderson and Rob Innes (7). If violence against indigenous women is an expression of the asymmetrical and exploitative relationship between the Canadian state and indigenous nations, then restoring balance to this fractured relationship is a fundamental part of any attempt to alleviate this violence. While there is much for indigenous nations to do in terms of building resurgence, repairing indigenous-state relations demands cooperation on the part of the Canadian state. Moving forward, Simpson argues that the distinct processes among

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “Indian Country” to refer to the self-governing indigenous communities throughout the United States, where Sarah Deer bases her work. “Indian Country” is the American legal term used to refer to all land “within the limits of an Indian reservation,” “all dependent Indian communities,” and “all Indian allotments still in trust” (Natural Resources Conservation Service 1).

indigenous nations for dealing with wrongdoing should be looked to as frameworks for how the Canadian state approaches reconciliation. These processes, led by indigenous values of interdependency and accountability, would look drastically different than any of the propositions that have ever been put forward by the state. Looking to Anishnaabe processes for dealing with wrongdoing, she says:

What would reconciliation look like from within this system? It would be Anishnaabe people, the people who are the targets of the genocidal practices, who would be driving the process, not the Canadian state. Anishnaabe people would decide the steps that Canada needs to take to regenerate trust and to restore balance. Anishnaabe people would decide how Canada assists in the regeneration of our language, education, cultures, indigenous knowledge, political systems, governance, restitution. Canadians take on the responsibility of reconciliation in their actions and make changes to their society and political system to ensure that what's happened doesn't ever happen again. And central to this process, in my mind, is the reorganization of land so that indigenous peoples have the ability to maintain and continue their cultures and lifeways. Indigenous peoples must have homelands. ("Violence against Women")

While there is little evidence that the Canadian state would be willing to engage in such a process in the near future, this proposal clearly illustrates a fair and reasonable process for addressing wrongdoing that would no doubt lead to a transformed nation-to-nation relationship.

A crucial part of reconciliation, Simpson says, is the reorganization of land: indigenous peoples must have homelands if they are to continue to live as indigenous peoples ("Violence against Women"). The reorganization of land – on the terms of those nations from whom they were taken – would also facilitate the reestablishment of indigenous peoples' relationships to

their lands and protect against the endless displacement and subsequent violence that is a consequence of ongoing dispossession. The reorganization of land would provide the foundation for the strengthening of indigenous cultural traditions and lifeways that have deep respect for women and two-spirited people. Approaching reconciliation through Anishnaabe processes for addressing wrongdoing would radically transform state-indigenous relations and would provide indigenous women with the cultural and economic resources to overcome the placelessness that currently exposes them to overwhelming amounts of violence.

While the Canadian state has yet to express interest in entering into the kind of process Simpson proposes, indigenous women are taking transformative steps to restore balance and peace by strengthening their nations. They are responding to the violence being perpetrated against them by empowering their legal, political and governing systems and by nurturing indigenous thought, culture, traditions, and languages that promote respect for women and naturally give rise to healthy relationships. These transformative solutions expose the inadequacy of the various approaches put forward by Canada that propose to solve the problem of violence against indigenous women by strengthening apparatuses of state violence and administering social services.

### **Confronting Legal and Institutional Arrangements**

While many indigenous women have addressed gender violence by focusing on promoting good connections through the resurgence of indigenous lifeways, others have contributed to alleviating the violence by working within the Western legal system. Sarah Deer and Patricia Monture-Angus are indigenous legal scholars who critically engage with the Western legal system in order to expose, overturn and reform legislation that contributes to

sexual and gender violence against indigenous women. Their work has had a powerful impact on the ability of indigenous women to protect themselves from harm and prosecute offenders.

The scholarly work of Patricia Monture-Angus communicates a deep skepticism that solutions to colonial violence can be found within the existing justice system in Canada. This system legally enabled violence and dispossession, including the establishment of residential schools, the outlawing of potlatches and cultural dance, the removal of indigenous peoples from their homelands, and the imposition of the *Indian Act*. Her scholarship is more interested in highlighting the resilience of traditional indigenous laws and customs, which historically sanctioned only respect for women (*Listening* 234). She directed much of her focus on the cultural and political resurgence of indigenous lifeways and knowledges, which promote solutions to dealing with violence that are based on the traditional values of interdependency, responsibility and community support (*Journeying Forward* 160). Her work addresses ongoing gender and sexual violence by exposing the limits of the law and by emphasizing the need to strengthen the sovereignty and self-determination of indigenous systems of governance.

This skepticism is echoed by Leanne Simpson, who writes: “putting our energies into demanding that the state recognize us seems depressing, futile and a waste of energy, given the condition of our communities” (*Dancing* 19). While Simpson recognizes that much work still needs to be done to decolonize the state, she believes that indigenous cultural and political resurgence is the first step in transforming indigenous-state relationships (17).

In their work Monture-Angus and Simpson emphasize their doubt in western law and their subsequent belief in the possibility of putting their energies towards strengthening sovereignty through supporting the resurgence of indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions of governance. The work of Sarah Deer supports and aligns with these perspectives in that her

work has directly strengthened the self-determination of indigenous nations through increasing tribal courts' jurisdictional capacity and sentencing authority. Deer's advocacy work has been significant in restoring the capacity for indigenous peoples to protect themselves from violence in ways that align with their cultural values and traditions of governance.

Deer has long advocated for bringing justice to survivors of domestic violence in indigenous communities. She is widely celebrated for the significant role that she played in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 and for providing testimony that contributed to the passage of the Tribal Law and Order Act (TLOA) in 2010. These legal triumphs have ultimately empowered tribal justice systems and addressed jurisdictional gaps that had previously left indigenous women and children unprotected by law and incapable of prosecuting those who harmed them. These legislative changes will increase tribal systems' sentencing authority over any person who commits violence within indigenous territories ("MacArthur Fellows Program").

The advocacy work of Deer and other women who gave testimony that contributed to the passing of the aforementioned U.S. legislation significantly increased the ability for indigenous women to defend and protect themselves against violence. In the essay "Federal Indian Law and Violent Crime," which was published before these legal victories were won, Deer explains how a long series of laws and legal precedents created a situation in which tribal governments in the United States lost jurisdiction over the majority of violent crimes committed against indigenous women.

This erosion of tribal rights occurred gradually. First, with the passing of The Major Crimes Act in 1885, the Federal government came to exercise authority over crimes committed in Indian Country. This legislation never explicitly stripped tribes of jurisdiction, but after it was

established, few tribes continued to pursue the prosecution of serious violent crime, largely due to the fact that tribal nations are significantly under-resourced (Deer, "Sovereignty" 460). Then in 1953 Public Law 280 was established, which restricted the ability of tribal courts to persecute violent offenders. Criminal jurisdiction was transferred from federal to state governments, but states were not provided with any additional resources with which to enforce law on reserves. The combined lack of jurisdictional clarity and lack of state resources led to a sense of lawlessness in many communities, wherein violence against indigenous women could be committed with relative impunity (Deer, "Sovereignty" 460). In 1968 the Indian Civil Rights Act was implemented, which limited the punishment a tribe could impose upon a criminal defendant to a maximum of one year and five thousand dollars. This implicitly meant that tribal governments were capable of only persecuting for minor offenses (Deer, "Sovereignty" 461). Finally, Deer explains that in 1978 a precedent was set which eliminated tribal criminal jurisdiction over anyone not a member of a Federally recognized tribe. This meant that tribal courts could not prosecute non-Indian offenders for committing crime on reserve. This jurisdictional gap led to an increase in assaults by non-Indians and made Indian reserves an attractive site to engage in criminal activity (Deer, "Sovereignty" 462). Ultimately, these legislative developments culminated in a situation in which tribal courts had little to no power to protect indigenous women from sexual and gender violence, and the courts that did have jurisdiction and sentencing authority did not have the willingness to do so.

These jurisdictional gaps exemplify the apathy that white settler society has long held towards the wellbeing of indigenous communities. In her work, Deer develops an analysis of the colonial roots of sexual violence perpetrated against indigenous women and children and argues that it has historically been a means of destroying a people and removing them from their lands,

echoing the words of other indigenous women like Simpson and Monture-Angus (Deer, “Violence Against Women”; Monture-Angus, *Journeying* 11). In response to this violence and her holistic understanding of its roots in colonial dispossession, Deer has continually fought for and contributed to legal victories in the United States that are directly empowering tribal courts and what they can do to combat sexual and gender violence on their traditional lands.

The recent legislation that passed with the benefit of Deer’s advocacy work is beginning to remedy these jurisdictional concerns. The Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 (TLOA) both expands the sentencing authority of tribal systems and clarifies jurisdiction in states affected by Public Law 280. The Violence Against Women Act, which was amended in 2013, now recognizes tribal systems’ inherent power to exercise “special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction” (SDVCJ) over defendants, both Indian and non-Indian, who commit acts of domestic violence or dating violence within Indian Country (“Violence Against Women Act”). While these changes are a drastic improvement, there are stipulations: tribal courts still cannot try crimes committed between two strangers, crimes committed by persons who lack ties to the tribe, or persons who perpetrate intimate violence against children or elders (“Violence Against Women Act”). There is still much work to be done to strengthen the self-determination and legal authority of indigenous nations. Nonetheless, Sarah Deer demonstrates the ways in which indigenous women are confronting existing legal and institutional arrangements in practical, on the ground ways that are helping indigenous women survive.

### **Indigenous Programs and Organizations**

The work of Simpson, Deer and Monture-Angus demonstrate the diversity of ways in which indigenous women are actively strengthening their nations’ self-determination and destabilizing the colonial roots of gender violence. In what follows I highlight a number of

indigenous programs and organizations that are contributing to the regeneration of indigenous ways of being that promise to restore good relationships and strengthen the independence of communities.

### *The Mino-Yaa-Daa Program*

The Mino-Yaa-Daa (“healing together” in Ojibwe) Program was a family violence intervention program that operated from 1995-2000 in an urban indigenous community of about three hundred people. Cyndy Baskin was involved in implementing the program and she describes how she watched as people involved in the program dramatically changed their lives.

Drawing from the model of restorative justice outlined earlier, the program implemented Ojibwe teachings to promote healing for all members of the community affected by interpersonal violence. The children’s circle included activities intended to promote a positive indigenous identity and provide a safe environment where children could share their experiences and stories of family violence. Indigenous cultural teachings were emphasized, including elders’ teachings and full moon ceremonies (Baskin 221). This experience encouraged children to work through their complex thoughts and emotions regarding family violence and to develop the skills that would help them break the cycle of violence in the long run.

The program also brought women from the community together to express their concerns, share their stories, build relationships with each other and begin to heal through practices compatible with the values of indigenous teachings. Their circle emphasized the traditional indigenous value of interdependency and fostered the creation of support systems among women in the community.

Finally, the program implemented an educational and healing process for the men who committed violence, which included all of the elements of the healing circle provided for women and children. The key principles that were emphasized in the services for men were those of non-judgment and accountability (Baskin 223). This assured that the men felt safe to open up about their experiences without being viewed as ‘bad people’, but stressed that they had to be accountable and take responsibility for the harm that they had created.

At the end of each year, evaluations of the program showed that the women, children and men were learning to better take care of each other and live non-violent lives. Baskin recounts that in the six years that the program ran, only once did she hear of a participant reoffending by assaulting his partner (226). The program assisted in the building of community interdependency, fostered the growth of healthy relationships and encouraged participants to heal through traditional cultural ceremonies and practices. Programs like these demonstrate the practical, tangible ways in which the kind of decolonizing community growth and resurgence advocated by indigenous women against violence can materialize and flourish on the ground.

#### *Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning*

The Dechinta Centre is an educational institution led by indigenous elders, professors and local knowledge holders from northern communities and aimed at providing indigenous youth with a transformative land-based educational experience. Located in a remote community on Dene territory in the Northwest Territories, the program invites students to engage in a transformative twelve-week educational experience where they spend the majority of their time outdoors learning from the land, working with elders, and engaging in workshops while becoming part of a self-governing and sustainable community.

Dechinta's faculty include a number of leading indigenous professors including Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard, who have spoken at length about the importance of land-based learning that provides future generations of indigenous youth with the tools to promote self-determination and decolonization within their communities. If colonization involved the violent separation of indigenous peoples from land, Coulthard says, one of the best ways to correct that violence is by placing bodies back on the land and by providing the community with the opportunity to reestablish learning around their relationships with the land and local knowledge holders (Simpson and Coulthard).

This grassroots initiative provides a model of education that directly supports the resurgence of individual nations' languages, cultures and traditions. This kind of learning, Simpson emphasizes, is not dependent upon the implementation of government funding and the stipulations that might come with it. There are lots of elders that are willing to impart knowledge upon the next generation of their people. As she says, "all you need for land-based education is a tiny bit of land, one person with knowledge, and one learner. That's the model" (Simpson and Coulthard).

This land-based learning project plants the seeds for future generations of indigenous peoples to build communities that are based around indigenous ways of being and grounded in responsible connections with land and one another. This kind of education promotes the proliferation of indigenous belonging and emplacement that counters the current social arrangements that involve the constant exposure of indigenous women to violence.

*Native Youth Sexual Health Network*

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) is a Toronto based organization led by and for indigenous youth that advocates for sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice within Canada and the United States. They are involved in a number of ongoing initiatives that address the structural roots of violence against indigenous women and two-spirited people, which include facilitating community events, organizing around issues, building connections, generating theory, and developing spaces for cultural resurgence.

As an organization, NYSHN addresses colonial gender violence as a structural and systemic problem that is connected to the many other forms of exploitation and discrimination indigenous people face. In response, they argue for broad and multifaceted action that must address the connections between land theft, environmental violence, and the many forms of violence against indigenous women and two-spirited people. They maintain that “we can’t talk about violence or MMIW without talking about the extreme poverty, lack of housing, racism, and the discrimination we face” (“Creating Medicines”), and they are committed to continuing to take action with or without government funding. They recognize the limitations that can come with social aid, given that, in their words, “many of the systems that are set up to ‘help’ youth actually create and sustain such violence” (“Creating Medicines”). They are involved in projects of resistance and resurgence that directly foster the wellbeing of indigenous communities. Their work is exemplary of the kind of action that contributes to a “flourishing of the indigenous inside” (“Creating Medicines”) as in current work around environmental justice, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit acceptance within indigenous circles, and providing spaces of healing for the families of missing and murdered indigenous women.

One way NYSHN works to strengthen the self-determination of nations is by fostering good community connections that are based on the acceptance and understanding of gender and

sexual difference. They intend to launch a Two-Spirit and indigenous LGBTQ Elders and Mentors circle in Toronto to address the homophobia and transphobia that can drive indigenous youth away from their communities, and to increase the visibility of existing Two-Spirit support networks.

NYSHN is also taking action to combat the reverberations of violence against women, which Simpson and Monture-Angus have argued easily can lead to the destruction of families and the dispossession of indigenous nations. Working with *No More Silence* and *Families of Sisters in Spirit*, NYSHN designed the online website and database called *ItStartsWithUs*. The site includes a Family Tributes space where families of missing and murdered women can write about and share memories of their loved ones, combatting the stories that focus on the details of their death and disappearance. This space provides families the space in which they can express their grief, honour the ones they love, and connect with others who understand what they are going through. Spaces such as these encourage collective support, dialogue and healing that is the foundation for the regeneration of good relationships.

The incredible resurgence and resistance work being done by the members of NYSHN attempts to dismantle the roots of colonial gender violence through initiatives that directly support the collective health, wellbeing and self-determination of indigenous peoples.

To conclude, indigenous women are addressing colonial gender violence by taking action to strengthen the self-determination of their nations. Their actions build foundations for the thriving of indigenous nations and a renewed relationship between Canada and indigenous nations based on responsibility and mutual respect. They are addressing the colonial roots of violence by advocating for and facilitating the reorganization of land, the regeneration of

indigenous lifeways, the strengthening of tribal authority, the overturning of colonial legislation, and the restoration of good relationships within and between nations. These responses are all in various ways contributing to the rebuilding of place-based communities characterized by safety, belonging, and the celebration of Indigeneity. These spaces are direct interventions into the placelessness and unbelonging that endangers the lives of many indigenous women. Indigenous women are taking steps to restore balance and peace for their peoples and planting seeds to sustain the resurgence of indigenous nations in the generations to come.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Interrogating Investments in Whiteness**

This thesis has argued that the fundamentally colonial power of the settler state contextualizes the vulnerability of indigenous women to harm, as well as indigenous women's critical responses in context of indigenous activism for self-determination. Over the past forty years, neoliberal trends have emerged that have had a devastating impact on the most marginalized social groups. These trends have included the dismantling of social safety nets, decreased job security, increased government surveillance and the expansion of the prison industrial complex. Those hit the hardest by the growing wealth gap now simultaneously have less access to the resources they need to survive and experience heightened levels of state surveillance and interference. This interference is a common occurrence in the lives of many indigenous women, who are systematically ejected from public space, shuttled between social institutions, and denied the safety and stability of emplacement. This perpetual transience, compounded with the effects of gender, race and class based oppression, exposes indigenous women to disproportionate levels of violence. Indigenous women are confronting colonial gender violence by rebuilding strong communities, regenerating indigenous life-ways and strengthening their nations' self-determination. Their strategies reflect an understanding of the colonial logics at the root of violence: logics that have sought to destroy and delegitimize indigenous peoples' cultures, traditions, governance structures, and relationships in attempt to remove them from their lands. By regenerating their cultures, celebrating indigeneity, and passing their teachings onto younger generations, these women are pushing back against the violence of colonialism and taking steps towards a renewed relationship with Canada.

In this chapter I take inspiration from white scholars and activists who engage in anti-

violence work and who urge other white feminists to take responsibility for the ways in which whiteness has historically shaped present power relations. I argue that white feminists working to alleviate gender violence have a responsibility to support the self-determination of indigenous women, both inside and outside social service agencies like the shelter. Social service organizations provide important services to women surviving violence; yet given the colonial contexts in which they form and operate, they are capable of replicating the violence that they were built to alleviate. While shelters and other agencies in the violence against women sector will not solve colonial gender violence, many indigenous women say that these programs are nevertheless both essential and necessary in the short-term. Nevertheless, indigenous activists and scholars emphasize that the work that most destabilizes colonial power relations is being done by indigenous peoples who are working to change the structure of society by actively strengthening their nations' sovereignty and self-determination (Monture-Angus, *Thunder* 221). In this chapter I highlight the work of white feminists who are engaging in meaningful relationships of solidarity with indigenous communities based on their sustained accountability to indigenous leadership and the decentering of white agency. By building an awareness of how their positions of power within society are constituted in relation to indigenous women, white feminists can take action to minimize the degree to which shelters exacerbate colonial violence. Simultaneously, white feminists can become responsible to the broader agendas of cultural and political transformation that are being modeled by indigenous movements for resurgence and decolonization.

In what follows I revisit the space of the women's shelter to expose and undo its investments in whiteness and white feminism. I shine a light on the ways in which racism and colonial logics continue to permeate the feminist spaces of women's shelter and the broader

antiviolence movement, in order to think about how investments in whiteness within such activism limit the extent to which meaningful relationships of solidarity can be built. I then highlight some of the solidarity work that has been carried out by white feminists who are invested in displacing their privilege and engaging in decolonial practices under the leadership of indigenous people. I highlight this work to provide examples of how white feminists can work towards combatting oppressive practices within and outside of the shelter.

To build a framework centered on critical whiteness, I focus on the work of scholars who challenge the conceptualization of whiteness as natural, normal and unproblematic. Drawing upon this work, I offer an analysis of the ways in which the investment in whiteness shows up within the space of the shelter, and I think through how white feminists might displace their privilege and support the self-determination of indigenous women both within and outside of the shelter. I highlight the work of a number of exemplary white feminists who are engaging in anti-racist organizing work premised on the goal of decentering the white privilege, domination and normativity that frequently structures the organizations to which they belong.

By focusing on the shelter and exposing its investments in white feminism, my goal is that by extension, my thesis will provide a map for thinking through how white feminists working within the antiviolence sector can prevent inadvertently harming those at the intersection of multiple forms of systemic oppression, and instead can engage in work that supports the self-determination of indigenous communities.

### **Decentering Whiteness**

In this section I offer an account of whiteness that unsettles its tendency to be positioned as universal and void of racial and cultural significance. I later extend this account to lay out the

ways in which white feminists are interrogating their subject positions and engaging in decolonizing work that is informed by meaningful relationships of solidarity with marginalized communities. I echo the work of numerous scholars who argue that the characterization of whiteness as normative, neutral and unproblematic must be thrown into question if power relations are to be transformed within the shelter and within Canadian society. These scholars make it clear that the tendency to understand whiteness as devoid of racial and cultural specificity bolsters colonial discourses by setting up whiteness as the standard against which all other racial and cultural groups become nameable, knowable and “irreducibly Other” (Frankenberg 16). In moving forward, many of these scholars are urging others to take up similar analyses of the ways in which feminist organizations that are predominantly composed of and led by white people often replicate the racism and colonial dynamics of the wider society. This section’s analysis of the discursive centering of whiteness is a response to Sherene Razack’s work on the covering up of indigenous deaths in custody wherein she asks what it would mean to “examine the source of indifference rather than its object” (*Dying from Improvement* 130). Geonpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Ruth Frankenberg both focus on questioning how white feminists can overcome investments in whiteness, by asking respectively how white feminists can relinquish power, and how they can shape their lives to become sites of resistance to the reproduction of racism (Moreton-Robinson 186; Frankenberg 5). I structure this chapter as a response to these overlapping research questions that urge white feminists to become conscious of the specificities of our social positions, reject the power and privilege that whiteness confers, and become accountable to the leadership of people of colour and indigenous people who are working to undo the impact of generations of colonization.

Among the many dimensions of whiteness, I analyze the ways in which whiteness confers privilege, domination, universality and normativity with regards to race, culture, and national belonging. In her critical feminist ethnography, *White Women, Race Matters*, Ruth Frankenberg argues that race fundamentally shapes white women's lives. The name she has given to that shape is whiteness (1). Frankenberg understands whiteness as being constituted by a set of linked dimensions: it is a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people view themselves and others, and a set of unnamed cultural practices (1). Whiteness therefore refers to a socially constructed, historically informed and institutionally entrenched location that maintains its dominance, in part, through its apparent formlessness and banality within a white supremacist social context.

Indigenous people have developed deep understanding of the ways in which colonization has sought to delegitimize their political self-determination, disavow their ways of being, and destroy their ability to connect well with one another. In response, indigenous women are actively rebuilding their communities, regenerating their cultures, and strengthening the sovereignty of their nations. This work, as Leanne Simpson argues, is the first step in rebalancing the relationship between Canada and indigenous nations (*Dancing* 17). However, Frankenberg reminds us that the discursive emptiness of whiteness as a cultural identity has the effect of producing all non-white ways of being as “irreducibly Other” (16). In this view, whiteness is the generic norm into which all are expected to fit; it becomes the “unmarked marker of others’ differentness” both racially and culturally (Frankenberg 198). While indigenous communities are actively resisting colonial discourses that seek to marginalize their cultures, the positioning of whiteness as commonsense, universal, and correct must be dismantled if new relationalities are to be formed on equal footing.

The view of whiteness as an unmarked cultural category has its roots in colonization. As white settlers encountered indigenous peoples, they for the most part viewed them as different from and inferior to themselves (Frankenberg 193). Within the imperial European and white settler colonial societies and cultures they established by force, white people viewed other peoples and cultures as bounded and knowable, and also as subordinate to the supremacy and normality of whiteness. White people thus came to establish their sense of self not through the eyes of the peoples whom they sought to colonize, who already saw their ways of being from a distinctive perspective, but rather by distinguishing themselves for being “not Other” (Frankenberg 193). Under these conditions, white culture became conceptualized as an empty, unnamable, central point of reference for the measuring of racialized and colonized peoples.

The perception that both racism and cultural specificity are external to white people has material and discursive consequences: it ultimately preserves white dominance, reproduces racism, and shields white cultural practices from interrogation. When whiteness is viewed as empty of racial and cultural significance, white people are by default given the authority to measure and evaluate the peoples whom they racialize outside of whiteness. Those who are racialized out of whiteness are seen as carriers of essential difference, as transnational feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty has argued with respect to white feminist characterizations of the purported backwardness and victimhood of the ‘third world woman’ (Mohanty 19). Ann Russo problematizes these formulations of whiteness, noting: “There is often no simultaneous interrogation of the specific cultural context of white heterosexual Christianity. Without challenging ethnocentrism in a way that disrupts the hegemony of white heterosexual middle-class Christianity, the inequalities only get reinforced” (Russo 20). In this view, the dominant group is not perceived as a problem, and any attention by white people to racism attends only to

its effects among colonized and racialized people, without also naming or interrogating the authority and entitlement accorded to white people under white supremacy.

These patterns of white supremacy frequently appear within feminist work. These practices and logics produce Western feminism by distorting feminist solidarity across differences and its accountability to critiquing domination. For instance, when racism and cultural discrimination is seen as external to white people, the work of anti-racism in white feminism often becomes about white women helping indigenous people and people of colour out of the effects of racism (Russo 218). White people engaging in this work are positioned as compassionate saviors rather than as people who have an inherent responsibility to those groups who have been marginalized by the white supremacist systems that elevated their own social positions. The savior dynamic keeps white people in power by distancing them from complicity in systemic racism.

If whiteness is “based on maintaining innocence” (Russo 209) then, speaking as and with white feminists, we should be wary of what Black feminist theorist Barbara Smith calls the “self-aggrandizement” (Smith 48) that can emerge in our putatively anti-racist work that in fact reproduces white dominance rather than undermining it. As Russo eloquently puts it, “an antiracist feminist practice is about recognizing myself in others, and refusing the invitation to distance myself from the system of white privilege and supremacy and from those who perpetuate and benefit from it” (Russo 213). When addressing indigenous women, as white feminists we must acknowledge the many ways in which we have benefitted from the theft of indigenous lands and resources, and we must think through how we can commit ourselves to taking responsibility for the racial, cultural, and spiritual subjugation of indigenous peoples.

Dominant discourse on culture has worked to delimit a set of knowable cultures from a generic white space that appears to possess few distinguishing features to those who inhabit it. However, as Frankenberg writes, “whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those whom it does violence” (228). People who view whiteness from a marginalized vantage point recognize that whiteness does indeed have content, which can include the ways in which it produces and reproduces dominance, privilege, and normativity. If we seek to dislodge the centrality of whiteness and avoid reproducing white domination, white feminists must analyze the historical production and consequences of white normativity. As Frankenberg writes, “that which is most ‘given’ about whiteness is the materiality of its history – the impossibility of undoing what has already taken place” (239).

In *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, Moreton-Robinson critically theorizes her own experiences confronting white privilege and power as an indigenous Australian woman, and illuminates many of the ways in which white feminists’ well-intentioned involvement in anti-racism can be limited by their lack of awareness of how white authority and entitlement shape their behaviour. Moreton-Robinson’s perspective exposes the white feminist subject position as one that exudes a racial specificity that often manifests as privilege and dominance with respect to non-white subjects. Her perspective is informative for white people who are often inattentive to the workings of racism given that, as beneficiaries of a system structured along racist lines, they gain from not acknowledging or challenging their preeminence.

Moreton-Robinson writes about a number of instances in which she and other indigenous women perceived white feminists acting from a subject position of dominance and power while attempting to engage in anti-racist work. She recalls encounters with white feminists who gave

her unsolicited advice about what indigenous peoples should do to combat racism, thereby acting from a place of dominance, entitlement, and superiority, but failing to acknowledge or accept the capacity of indigenous women to perceive and challenge this behavior (xvii). This lack of awareness on the part of white feminist women is maintained by widespread belief in white racelessness, which allows white feminists to speak from a position of white race privilege that remains invisible to them, even as they invest in enacting it and benefiting from the normality, centrality, and dominance it grants them (Moreton-Robinson 68). This complicity demands accountability from white feminists.

In what follows I highlight the work of exemplary white anti-racist feminists who are engaging in indigenous work for decolonization by offering sustained, ongoing and tangible support to indigenous people as needed and requested. Exposing the material and discursive tendency of whiteness to signify and produce dominance and normativity underscores the importance of participating in relationships of solidarity that decenter white agency and that respond to the perspectives, experiences and knowledges of indigenous people. Building consciousness of the histories and specificities of whiteness and white people helps to dislodge them from claims of rightful dominance.

### **Investments in Whiteness and White Feminism in Women's Shelters**

#### *History of the Battered Women's Movement*

Looking back at the feminist movements in North America reveals the tensions, challenges and realizations that have culminated from decades of conversations between racialized women and the white feminists whom they have charged with racism. A retrospective

view reiterates the lessons that have come out of these conversations, and serves as a reminder to white feminists not to replicate the mistakes of the past.

The white middle-class feminists whose voices dominated the women's movement for the most part tended to look past the differences among women in an effort to come together based on their shared oppression as women. As Kimberlé Crenshaw wrote in 1991, the recognition of the systemic nature of individual struggle was a source of power and strength in many communities (1244). This single-axis framework of understanding difference, however, took whiteness to be the normative experience of all women, and as an effect marginalized the experiences of non-white women. As Crenshaw writes, "because of their intersectional identity as both women and of colour within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of colour are marginalized within both" (1244). As such, when women of colour attempted to address racial inequality between women, or gender inequality within communities of colour, their experiences and struggles were often silenced or dismissed as divisive.

When trying to address the ways in which colonialism and sexism impact their lives simultaneously, Indigenous women experiencing interpersonal violence within their communities have endured accusations of disloyalty within movements dominated by those who are interested in prioritizing one form of oppression or the other. This had detrimental consequences for those impacted by violence within their communities. Luana Ross describes her experience giving presentations and speaking with various reservation communities about feminism in the 1980s:

While Native women were ready to dialogue about sexism, they were not ready to air their dirty laundry in the white women's world. During this time period, Native women were fiercely protective of Native men, which must be viewed in the context of

colonialism. Native women were not about to turn their men over to a white criminal justice system. Consequently issues of violence were shrouded in silence. (45)

In an effort to protect indigenous men from state violence, to avoid fuelling racist stereotypes, and to maintain a united front against ongoing colonization, many indigenous women have felt the need to stay silent about the violence in their lives. Others have argued that decolonization must be prioritized and other struggles addressed only after ongoing colonialism has been overcome.

However, indigenous scholars like Leanne Simpson, Patricia Monture-Angus and the many other women who are currently working to alleviate violence against indigenous women and two-spirited people on the ground have developed a strong collective understanding of the ways in which gendered violence and colonial dispossession are deeply intertwined. Through their work toward political resurgence and self-determination in their communities, these women's work fosters the building of non-violent relationships based on traditional indigenous values and simultaneously resists ongoing colonization by strengthening indigenous ways of life. These women's perspectives demonstrate that confronting violence within indigenous communities requires an approach that is based in indigenous knowledge and led by indigenous people, and cannot be subsumed within the work of mainstream feminist institutions like the shelter.

Programs and social services that have been put in place to alleviate violence against women are nonetheless still necessary and many indigenous women are choosing to access them to help them survive. Within these spaces, women often are still seen by representatives of the institution as creating division when they expose the investments in whiteness held by women who are more apt to focus on the commonalities among women than the differences between

them. This choice to focus on commonalities is a practice that is only available to white women who perceive their racial subjectivity as normative and neutral, and who can choose to interact primarily with other white people who do not challenge their perspectives (Russo 213). Within white feminist spaces, the needs of women at the intersection of multiple interlocking forms of oppression are often peripherized, and white experience centered, normalized, and naturalized. When this whiteness is left uninterrogated, the goals of white middle-class women are consistently prioritized over those of the most oppressed women (Russo 182). Therefore, the inclusion of cultural programming and the hiring of some indigenous care providers is not enough to create meaningful change unless the differences among women are taken into account, and the approaches that are assumed to serve “all” women who access the shelter are constantly interrogated.

In what follows, I analyze an article written by Jan Forde in *Listening to the Thunder*. Forde is a white feminist who lived and worked in the Yukon for five years and in this article she shares her experiences working to combat gender violence within indigenous communities. I argue that a great deal of the frustrations expressed by Forde and the resistance she experienced from the community are consequences of her unexamined white race privilege. I conclude by highlighting the work of white feminists past and present who have shown disloyalty to whiteness through their engagement in decolonization work that is premised on the principles of indigenous solidarity organizing.

### *True North, True Solutions?*

In her article “True North, True Solutions?” Jan Forde describes her experience living and working in the Yukon in a women’s shelter that primarily offered services to indigenous

women. She discusses the approaches taken by indigenous women to address violence in their communities and highlights the reasons why she disagrees with many of them. Drawing upon current scholarship that encourages white feminists to interrogate their subject positions and build responsible relationships based on the principles of indigenous solidarity, I argue that her criticisms neglect to take into account the multilayered struggles of indigenous women who are simultaneously resisting the violence of colonialism and gender oppression. I also argue that her criticisms demonstrate blind spots that are characteristic of unexamined white race privilege.

One of the most significant things that Forde takes issue with is the way that many indigenous women in the community use non-gendered terms to imply community solidarity when speaking about the violence they experience (94). Despite accusations from staff that she is “being ‘anti-family’ for holding men accountable and always using gender-specific language,” Forde describes her insistence upon using the term “men’s violence” in a refusal to “let offenders off the hook” (94). She asks:

Am I and my white co-workers racist if we fail to respect ways of talking, ways of framing the issue, and more importantly, of dealing with it, which are generally accepted as culturally-determined, but which seem to serve the interests of offenders rather than the women who suffer abuse? What are we doing if we apply different standards to white and First Nations men and women when confronting incidences of wife battering or child sexual abuse? Should only white men be held accountable for their controlling and violent behaviours, since First Nations men have suffered so much themselves from the forces of white cultural imperialism? Does this historical reality lessen their responsibility? Does it in any way lessen the suffering of Aboriginal women trapped in violent relationships with men? Or does it make it that much more difficult for women –

and do they require that much more support—to speak out against the violent behaviour of men in their lives and communities? (94)

Forde poses a series of questions here that have long been confronted by indigenous women committed to combating violence within their communities. Together her questions imply a frustration that indigenous men are not being held accountable as perpetrators of violence and demonstrate a persistent attempt to make sense of this violence within a gender-exclusive framework that sees colonialism as having less of an impact in women's lives than that of gender oppression.

Her insistence on using the term “men's violence” instead of “family violence,” despite the criticism of indigenous women in the community, demonstrates a resistance to listening to the perspectives of women whose experiences do not match her own. Her determination in holding indigenous men accountable for gender violence, and her relative impatience with restorative justice approach, suggests a lack of engagement with indigenous struggles which are historically, culturally and socially situated differently from those of white communities. Furthermore, she does not appear to question her privileged subject position, and this allows her to represent herself as speaking from a position of rationality and objectivity.

Forde also suggests that white and indigenous men should face the same consequences for perpetrating violence when she asks: “should only white men be held accountable for their controlling and violent behaviours, since First Nations men have suffered so much themselves from the forces of white cultural imperialism? Does this historical reality lessen their responsibility?” (94). Here Forde voices concern about the need to prioritize the safety of indigenous survivors over the protection of perpetrators. However, the manner in which she voices her frustration obscures the specificities of racism and colonialism that impact indigenous

and white communities in very different ways. As Leanne Simpson has theorized, the resurgence of good relationships based on the indigenous values of interdependence and accountability is a decolonial pursuit because strong communities are difficult to dispossess (*Dancing* 122). The fostering and maintaining of strong interpersonal relationships is essential for indigenous nations to remain connected to their land and culture and to survive as a people. The indigenous approaches to addressing violence that Forde witnesses are not, therefore, about letting indigenous men off the hook because of how much they have suffered at the hands of colonization, but about addressing wrongdoing in inherently indigenous ways that strengthen community relationships that colonization has sought to destroy.

Many indigenous women have voiced Forde's concerns regarding the prospect of being silent about violence in an attempt to protect their communities from racist discrimination. Forde's view, however, is problematic in that she violates a basic principle of indigenous solidarity organizing by prioritizing her own views, experiences and political perspectives over those of the communities to which she is accountable (Walia 2). This is obvious when she voices her criticism of indigenous healing practices that take a compassionate approach to confronting male perpetrators. Her reaction implies the belief that the most effective way to hold male perpetrators accountable is through the intervention of the criminal justice system, an approach that has been criticized by indigenous people, who are "the primary targets of repressive policing and prosecutions in the criminal injustice system" (Walia 1).

By highlighting the sameness between white and indigenous perpetrators, insisting upon using the term "men's violence" and dismissing holistic healing practices as insufficient, Forde naturalizes existing racial and colonial power relations and implies that the structural power imbalance that is of primary concern is that which exists between women and men. Without

interrogating her own white subject position and the ways in which it shapes her experiences, attitudes, behaviour and beliefs, her actions replicate hierarchies that ultimately produce colonial gendered violence.

Forde also expresses dismay with the pace of change within the community. While the elders she has spoken with tell her that things must not be rushed, she experiences “frustration and impatience with what seems a slow and evasive approach to a critical situation” (98). Forde’s response is no doubt shaped by the emotional impact of the prevalence and severity of gender violence within this Yukon community. However, her response indicates a lack of understanding of the colonial roots of violence against indigenous women. As scholars like Simpson, Monture-Angus and Sarah Deer emphasize, transformative solutions to sexual and gendered violence demand a radical transformation of the asymmetrical colonial relationship between the Canadian state and indigenous nations (a relationship characterized by the ongoing colonial desire to fracture and dispossess indigenous communities of their lands and resources). Indigenous women are beginning to restore balance and peace in their communities by strengthening the sovereignty, self-determination and independence of their nations, and repairing the strength of their communities and relationships. The devastating impact of ongoing dispossession, displacement, physical and sexual violence, and exploitation perpetrated against indigenous communities cannot be resolved quickly or easily, as the Elders in the Yukon have made clear to white feminists who enter their communities searching for solutions.

Ultimately, the statements Forde makes about indigenous people – implicitly authorizing herself to intervene, because indigenous people won’t – is the active construction of herself and her political role as that of the white feminist saviour. This authorization on the part of white women to save indigenous women from their homogenously “cruel and lazy men” is a move

that, as Margaret Jacobs demonstrates, has a long history of being justified by white women through their commitments to feminism and the perception that they occupy a comparatively privileged position within their societies (112). In *White Mother to a Dark Race* Jacobs writes about how US and Australia mobilized white women to become headmothers in residential schools out of their investment in promoting civilized motherhood to indigenous children who would otherwise be raised by “savage” mothers. She writes that these women “cast themselves as important political players who would solve the Indian and Aboriginal ‘problem’ by metaphorically and literally mothering indigenous people and their children” (Jacobs 88). When casting themselves as authoritative and independent maternal subjects, white women often infantilize indigenous peoples in their efforts to save them. Speaking of the conduct of white Australian and American women in the early 1900s, Jacob writes that “it was not uncommon for colonizers to infantilize the people they sought to subjugate, and once infantilized, indigenous peoples were robbed of their ability to speak for themselves” (112). When Forde dismisses the perspectives, beliefs and experiences of those in the community and persistently pushes her own feminist anti-violence agenda, she is engaging in this very process of infantilization and white entitlement. In her mind, the imperialism of her as a white settler self-authorizing to intervene in the lives of the indigenous peoples whom she and her state colonizes is never apparent to her as part of the white settler colonial project. However, the white settler state has always relied on white women’s moral outrage at the “cultural differences” in the peoples they colonize as a supporting voice in the accomplishment of the white settler colonial project, a point that is underscored in Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” when she challenges the construction of an essentialized “third world woman” who requires saving.

Forde's response provides a clear example of the harm that can be done by well-intentioned white feminists when they neglect to honour front-line indigenous voices and attempt to direct indigenous resistance themselves. In what follows I highlight the many ways in which white feminists are modeling an engagement in solidarity in ways that support indigenous self-determination and subvert white privilege, dominance and normativity.

### **Building Solidarity with Indigenous Struggles**

Indigenous women are responding to violence by fostering the resurgence of their diverse cultures, languages, traditions, relationships, and systems of governance. While transformative decolonizing work is being done within these indigenous spaces, social services and programs are nonetheless crucial institutions that are helping indigenous women survive. Despite their good intentions, the white feminist women who occupy most of the positions of power within these agencies often end up replaying the racism and colonialism of the wider culture within these feminist spaces. This replication is largely informed by colonial discourse that views whiteness culturally and racially neutral. Returning to the work of Moreton-Robinson and Frankenberg, I ask how white feminists can overcome investments in whiteness in order to transform the shelter and their own capacity to meaningfully confront colonization. As these scholars respectively ask: how might white feminists relinquish power? And, how might they shape their lives to become sites of resistance to the reproduction of racism? (Moreton-Robinson 186; Frankenberg 5). Drawing from the scholarship and activism of non-indigenous women who are committed to confronting racism and colonialism, I demonstrate how building relationships that are premised on an ongoing commitment to the principles of solidarity organizing have the potential to subvert and displace investments in whiteness and settler emplacement.

In what follows, I predominantly focus on the exemplary self-reflexive antiracist organizing being done by white women in the United States due to the relative absence of available literature authored by white women reflecting upon their responsibilities to indigenous and non-indigenous women of colour in the Canadian context. While there is a wealth of self-reflexive anticolonial work being done in Canada, it is non-indigenous women of colour who have written most extensively in this area (see Razack, Thobani, Walia). And although there are a number of exemplary white American feminist scholars and activists engaging in this kind of critical work, the literature that I found demonstrates white American women speaking about their responsibilities to black women, not indigenous women. Although my original intention was to focus on Canadian scholarship, my aim to highlight the work of white women engaging in solidarity work while critically examining their whiteness has drawn me to the extensive work by white American women who have written about their direct responsibility to black women and their commitment to antiracist organizing. I highlight the work of Mab Segrest and Minnie Bruce Pratt, women whose critical and thoughtful organizing against antiblack racism demonstrates ongoing self-reflexivity, humility and commitment to building ongoing relationships of solidarity across difference.

Walia has written at length about the ways in which non-indigenous people can engage in relationships of solidarity that avoid replicating colonial power relations, providing insights that are illuminating for all non-indigenous people who are interested in engaging in decolonizing work. She describes the importance of non-indigenous people being accountable to the “experiences, voices, needs, and political perspectives on indigenous people themselves” (Walia 2). From the perspective of anti-oppressive solidarity organizing, non-indigenous people cannot be the leaders of decolonial struggle. Engaging in meaningful support for indigenous struggles

means “being humble and honouring front-line voices of resistance as well as offering tangible solidarity as needed and requested” (Walia 2). Organizing in accordance with these principles involves learning to strike a balance between being proactive and being too interventionist. As Walia writes, this involves “taking initiative for self-education about the specific histories of the lands we reside upon, organizing support with the consent and guidance of an indigenous community or group ... and never taking assuming or taking for granted the personal and political trust that non-natives may earn from indigenous people over time” (Walia 2). This kind of engagement means building relationships with indigenous communities and groups that are long-term and premised upon the inherent responsibility of non-indigenous people to challenge their place as the beneficiaries of colonization.

As Montreal activist Jaggi Singh has written, “the only way to escape complicity with settlement is active opposition to it” (cited in Walia 2). Métis writer Samantha Nock articulates this responsibility as obligation. She writes that we all have an obligation to “stand with and support the Nations we are visitors within” (Nock). This is essential if we are to create the kind of world we want to live in. Many social movements are recognizing that decolonization must be the foundation of broader social justice mobilizing (Walia 1). As Nock writes, “all these struggles we fight against -- environmental destruction, capitalism, violence against women -- these are all Indigenous struggles and are all symptoms of violent colonization”. Resisting and supplanting the colonial logic of the state has the potential to unravel all forms of domination and exploitation and create possibilities for a society that is premised upon mutually beneficial relationships within which all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can collectively flourish.

Speaking specifically to white feminist women who are attempting to undo investments in whiteness in feminist spaces and elsewhere, I draw from the work of Walia to suggest that we

can start by “cultivating an ethic of responsibility” (Walia 2). This ethic, she writes, is based upon an understanding of our place as the beneficiaries of the illegal settlement of indigenous lands and the exploitation of their resources. These are processes that have had devastating effects on wellbeing within indigenous communities, especially for women and children (Walia 2). This responsibility calls us as white settlers to actively oppose settlement through grounded organizing in support of indigenous self-determination. Harsha Walia has defined decolonization as “the process whereby we create the conditions in which we want to live and the social relations we wish to have” and these scholars show a mutual commitment to planting the seeds for decolonial relationships (3).

### **White Feminist Solidarity**

There is a long line of white women whose work can be looked to as examples of how to engage in the kind of meaningful solidarity work described in this chapter. Mab Segrest and Minnie Bruce Pratt are two exemplary white feminists who dedicated years of their lives to mobilizing alongside Black women and other women of colour who were fighting against the terrorizing actions of anti-Black forces in the South, and against racism more broadly in the United States and specifically within white feminist movements. Their achievements are testimony to the kind of transformation that white women can help bring about when they begin to recognize their obligation to take responsibility for the systems of domination from which they benefit.

Mab Segrest is a white lesbian feminist who documents her decade-long commitment to anti-racist organizing in the American South in her autobiographical book “Memoirs of a Race Traitor” (1994). In this book she documents her journey and describes the lessons that she

learned throughout the 1980s when she aligned herself with other antiracist activists organizing against the growing action of Klu Klux Klansmen and neo-Nazis in North Carolina. During this period of her life, she describes her sustained commitment to supporting the movement and establishing long-term relationships with prominent Black people who were doing front-line work in the fight against anti-Black violence in North Carolina (11).

Though she was accepted widely by Black people who saw her commitment to supporting them, she acknowledges the messy, uncomfortable, and complex challenges that accompany trying to come together across the distrust that results from the legacies of mass violence that white people have inflicted upon Black communities. Nonetheless, she insists that confronting and working through these divisions are a necessary part of creating transformative relationships. Of these moments, she reflects:

I learned to cipher the distances in Black friends, when in the middle of a conversation I would feel the attention drift or shift, a sudden space between us. Sometimes their challenge would be direct and swift, though seldom sharp; other times I would look back and recognize a subtle contradiction or re-routed conversation that left me searching through my words to find the point where I had thrown the switch. There was a constant possibility of small betrayals that could invoke the specter of much larger crimes” (20)

Later Segrest reflects upon these moments with her friend and co-organizer Christina. Christina describes the reasons why, as a Black woman, she is committed to engaging in relationships of solidarity with white women despite the patience and energy they require. She writes:

For me, the real issue is that the hope for the world rests in us, people of good will, people of consciousness, working together to do the hard work of reforming, deconstructing, reworking this society. [...] We have to be willing to grapple with the

issues of distrust, the history that has provided those dynamics to be real for us, to work on them personally so that we do the universal healing, the universal work that has to happen (173).

These acknowledgements are noteworthy because both Segrest and her colleague carry with them the mutual expectation that organizing across differences will at times be rife with distrust and discomfort. Like Segrest, white feminists engaging in solidarity work will have to face “the constant possibility of small betrayals that could invoke the specter of much larger crimes” (20). These women convey an understanding that these transgressions are inevitable, and when they occur they will often be painful and difficult. Nonetheless they frame the work of grappling with these moments as necessary and productive because they allow people to learn from each other and provide opportunities to heal together.

Minnie Bruce Pratt is another exemplary white lesbian feminist whose reflections on what she has learned fighting against racism alongside Black women and women of colour provides a template for how white feminists can reflect upon the histories that inform their subjectivities to better organize across differences.

Like Segrest, she came to form an understanding of her relationship and responsibility to antiracist struggles by recognizing the complex ways that her fight for her own liberation as a lesbian woman inadvertently implicated her in the oppression of women of colour. She writes about the realization of her complicity, as a white woman living in eastern North Carolina, saying: “I had set out to make a new home with other women, only to find that the very ground I was building on was the grave of people my kin had killed, and that my foundation, my birth culture, was mortared with blood” (52). In her reflections on the process she consistently interrogates the assumptions, experiences and worldviews she holds that have been shaped by

her white subjecthood, refusing to submit to colonial discourses that frame whiteness as racially and culturally devoid of character. By reflecting upon the specificities of whiteness, Pratt demonstrates the behaviours and assumptions that white feminists must consciously resist:

I was taught to be a *judge* of moral responsibility and of punishment only in relation to *my* ethical system; was taught to be a *martyr*, to take all the responsibility for change, and the glory, and expect others to do nothing; was taught to be a *peacemaker*, to mediate, negotiate between opposing sides because I knew the right way; was taught to be a *preacher*, to point out wrongs and tell others what to do. (31; emphasis in original)

By pointing out the behaviours and belief systems indicative of white dominance, Pratt lays challenge to colonial logics that posit non-whites as the source of racial and cultural difference and frame whiteness as universal, normative and unnamable.

Pratt also speaks candidly of the moments in which she encounters feelings of discomfort, fear and guilt when engaging in alliance work. She recognizes these struggles but urges herself and other white feminists to commit themselves to listening to challenging truths. This listening, she says, is “one way of finding out how to get to the new place where we can all live and speak to each other for more than a fragile moment” (31).

Pratt prepares herself to engage in a politics of solidarity when she reflects upon, questions, and rejects her investments in white supremacy. She subverts the dominance and power conferred by the white subject position by recalling the forced enslavement, dispossession, and assimilation that has benefitted whites at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and other racially marginalized groups. She writes: “when we begin to understand that we have benefitted, in our privilege, from the lives and work of others, when we begin to understand how false much of our sense of self-importance has been, we do experience a loss: our self-respect.

To regain it, we need to find new ways to be in the world, those very actions a way of creating a positive self” (59). In this way, Pratt lays out her journey towards a practice of critical solidarity that can serve as a framework for other white feminists committed to engaging in anti-oppression work that seeks to support the liberation of all women. She comes to a place of responsibility and accountability by remembering the histories of violence inflicted by her people and taking action to repair the fraught relationships that these ongoing dynamics have produced.

Together, the grounded work of Mab Segrest and Minnie Bruce Pratt demonstrate the kind of transformative relationalities that can be formed and the meaningful collective work that can occur if white women are committed to a practice of listening, self-reflection, and decolonial resistance. These women demonstrated an ongoing commitment to antiracist struggles by offering long-term tangible support and being proactive in supporting the wellbeing of racially marginalized women. This support predominantly took the form of on the ground organizing through involvement in antiviolence coalitions, public speaking engagements, participation in conferences, showing up for marches and demonstrations, and working to spread what they had learned to other white feminists within their circles. While the terms of engagement will vary depending on the specific nations and groups to whom white settlers offer support, the approaches taken by Segrest and Pratt offer a framework for how white feminists can take responsibility and accountability in their engagement in solidarity

To conclude, in response to the questions posed by Razack, Moreton-Robinson and Frankenberg regarding how to confront and transform white indifference, I have highlighted the prior work and experiential knowledge of white antiracist feminists whose writing clearly guides white women towards taking up a politics of solidarity that recognizes the interconnectedness of all social justice struggles. As Frankenberg writes: “white women have a range of awareness in

relation to racism, with greater awareness based on, among other things, their long-term connectedness to communities of colour” (5). Drawing from this recognition, I emphasize that all white settlers, especially white feminists committed to confronting violence against women, have a responsibility and obligation to actively resist colonization if they do not wish to be implicated in the replication of colonial violence within the space of the shelter and in their lives outside of such feminist organizations. The unlearning and self-reflexivity that is inherently a part of engaging in responsible solidarity work has the potential to transform the ways in which white feminists view their relationalities with Indigenous women, as well as with Black women and all women of colour. By understanding white subjecthood as historically constituted through violence, dispossession, forced labour, and assimilation directed against racialized and colonized peoples, white feminists can better understand their responsibilities in finding a way to confront their complicity as beneficiaries in these legacies of historical injustices and offer their support in building a brighter future.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Epilogue**

The process of writing this thesis challenged me to rethink many of my previously held assumptions about feminism, solidarity, and the role of the state in administering justice. By reflecting on the work of scholars who offer thoughtful insights on the logics of the Canadian state, the promise of indigenous resurgence, and the principles of indigenous solidarity organizing, I made a case for how white feminists can learn to approach social justice work in ways that consciously decenter whiteness and support the self-determination of marginalized communities.

Indigenous women in Canada live in a neoliberal social climate that has brought with it an increase in poverty and a decrease in the public resources and social programs that are available to assist those who need it most. At the same time, the colonial discourses of multiculturalism and recognition have proliferated and the state has increased its surveillance over public dissent through the non-profitization of social movements. These developments have led to a political climate in which dissenting voices are routinely silenced and widespread social injustices obscured. At the same time, many of the most highly regarded social service organizations, namely the mainstream women's shelter, are paradoxically involved in the exposure of indigenous women to premature death through practices of white gatekeeping and perpetual displacement. Through the shuttling of indigenous peoples to various apparatuses of the state, such as prisons, police, foster care homes and various state agencies, indigenous women are denied the safety and security of home and belonging.

Indigenous women are addressing this violence by engaging in resurgence projects that directly combat the consequences of placelessness and unbelonging by fostering place-based regeneration of indigenous peoples' relationships with their lands, strengthening their

identification with their specific indigenous cultures and traditions, and restoring their good relationships with one another. From land-based educational programs like those offered at Dechinta University, to the resurgence of indigenous nations' traditional stories and languages like those that are recalled in the writing of Leanne Simpson, indigenous peoples are actively resisting colonization by building a home within which their people can finally find stability and rest.

The perspectives of indigenous women addressing violence by working within their communities provide a framework for how colonial gendered violence must be addressed if meaningful and long-term transformation is to be achieved. White feminists who are committed to anti-violence organizing have an obligation and responsibility to actively oppose colonization by offering long-term support to indigenous communities as needed and requested. Building these relationships is the first step to creating relationalities within and beyond the shelter that are premised upon mutual respect for our differences, the understanding of our interconnectedness as human beings, and the desire to achieve the collective flourishing of our diverse communities.

At many points in this thesis I wrote specifically to other white feminists who are trying to figure out how to take responsibility for their inheritance of legacies of dispossession and domination. I am grateful to the long line of feminists who have come before me who have worked actively for social justice and who have spoken honestly about their experiences of trying to build accountable relationships of solidarity across differences. I am continuously inspired by the conduct of other white feminists like Mab Segrest and Minnie Bruce Pratt, among others, who have offered their ongoing supporting to the struggles of communities of colour while acting from a place of responsibility, accountability and humility. The work of these

women resonates with me because they do not assume that their work has been without flaw; they speak candidly about encountering discomfort when charged with racism and acting in oppressive ways, and about their journey in learning to embrace instead of resist the correction of their prejudice. Their work has shown me that white women must not let our fear of slipping up paralyze us into inaction, because it is in the messy work of learning how to work across differences towards change that we begin to form new relationalities based on our collective responsibility to support anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles.

During the process of conducting research for this thesis, I learned to think differently about how change may occur. I have come to the realization that the state does not have to be the primary medium through which we seek transformation in the relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people, and very well may be the barrier to the change that indigenous people seek. Leanne Simpson emphasizes the importance of non-indigenous people in Canada also expressing the willingness to engage with indigenous peoples on equal terms, writing: “I wonder how we can reconcile when the majority of Canadians do not understand the historic or contemporary injustice of dispossession and occupation” (*Dancing* 21). I am inspired by the simplicity of her approach to fostering resurgence within her communities. As she says, “all you need for land-based education is a tiny bit of land, one person with knowledge, and one learner. That’s the model” (Simpson and Coulthard). In thinking through how white feminists can confront their investments in whiteness, I have come to believe that the most transformative work is being done by women who have built meaningful relationships with communities based on friendship, shared values, and the desire to support one another’s wellbeing. While there is much work to be done to decolonize the state, white settlers who are frustrated by the state’s inaction have shown that they do not need to act through it. Perhaps the simplicity of Simpson’s

model can be translated to our collective relationships with one another, and all we need to create change is the humility to take responsibility for the legacies that we have inherited, and the determination to figure out how to build better relationships with one another.

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