

Indigenous girls and the violence of settler colonial policing

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Abstract

In cities and towns across Canada, Indigenous girls are being hunted, harassed, and criminalized by local law enforcement agents and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. These normalized outbreaks of state control, often punctuated by the use of deadly force, are not isolated incidents in an otherwise just and fair social order. Rather, they are reflective of Indigenous girls' daily realities embedded within the structure of an *ongoing* settler colonial social context that has strategically invented the criminal justice system to secure and maintain settler sovereignty. As such, this paper aims to redirect our critical analysis of the policing and caging of Indigenous girls through the geopolitics of settler colonialism. In the wake of mass protests against colonial state violence throughout 2014, resistance decrying the justice system and insisting that #BlackLivesMatters and that Indigenous lives matter, I argue that we have an urgent need to listen to the stories that Indigenous girls have to tell. These are not just any stories, but narratives that profoundly destabilize the hubristic portrayal of Canada as a humanitarian nation cleansed of settler colonial rule.

Keywords: *Indigenous girls; settler colonialism; policing; colonial state violence; gender; criminality*

Introduction

“Look with your wire / cutters, she / says. Look what the world has done to you.”

No’ukahau’oli Revilla, *Say Throne*

The rain was torrential. Hopscotching across puddles, we dashed through the umbrella-laden street until reaching the weighty doors of the Empire State Building. Iconic in its grandeur and notable for its ability to grant a striking aerial view of New York City, this structure houses the headquarters of Human Rights Watch (HRW), a prominent global organization documenting human rights violations worldwide.

I was accompanying Annabel Webb, co-founder of the Vancouver based NGO Justice for Girls, to a meeting with the Women’s Rights Division of HRW. We were there to discuss the possibility of HRW conducting an investigation in Canada, specifically an inquiry into police violence in the lives of Indigenous girls. HRW had never before launched an examination of human rights abuses in Canada—the deceptive and widely circulating narrative equating this settler colony with a humanitarian nation imbued with justice and equality, ever present—and we were there to persuade them that this was both necessary and urgent.

The team at Justice for Girls, and a number of their allies, including scholars like myself as well as organizations such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada, had been working diligently over many years to document instances of police brutality and failures in the protection of Indigenous girls by the Canadian state. However, despite all of the fierce advocacy and careful, meticulous research, including petitions to the international community, the staff at JFG felt as though they hit intractable institutional blockage whenever they attempted to draw attention to these issues in Canada, colonial walls that would simply not move. In the face of such barricades, they appealed to HRW to lend the organization’s influential credibility and resources to reveal how Indigenous girls were under siege by police and other law enforcement agents—to offer a crucial corrective to the optics of erasure and make legible how police (state) violence has reached terrifying velocity under settler colonialism. Indigenous girls, we argued at that meeting, were living with incomprehensible colonial gender violence in their day-to-day existence, in the viciousness of everyday life taking place in the back alleys, shadowed corridors, *and* open streets of white settler society.

At one point during the meeting, when the Director of the Women’s Division asked whether British Columbia, where the investigation would be carried out, was unique in its treatment of Indigenous girls, I spoke directly to instances of police violence that I have witnessed through my longstanding work in Saskatoon. “This is not just happening in BC,” I told her, “this is an entire circulation of networked settler state power that targets Indigenous girls in egregious and insidious ways, wherever they are. Sometimes this is dressed up as “crime prevention”¹ and sometimes it is camouflaged under the guise of “community policing.” Regardless of the way it is classified by the state, or the province in which it takes place, it is still

¹ See Dean (2005) for an analysis of “state protection.”

abhorrent colonial gender violence.” Eventually HRW agreed to carry out the investigation, resulting in the 2013 report *Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia, Canada*.

Building on the foundation of this collective work and pushing its critique several steps further into the realm of critical praxis and decolonization, this article begins from the premise that in cities and towns across Canada, Indigenous girls are being hunted, harassed, and criminalized by local law enforcement agents and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. These normalized outbreaks of state control, often punctuated by the use of deadly force, are not isolated incidents in an otherwise just and fair social order. Rather, I contend that they are reflective of Indigenous girls’ daily realities embedded within an *ongoing* settler colonial social context that includes the strategic (historic) invention of the criminal justice system to police (quite literally) the borderlands of possession and dispossession. As such, this article aims to redirect our critical analysis of the policing and subsequent caging of Indigenous girls through the geopolitics and broader horizon of settler colonialism. In doing so, it offers alternative frames for interrogating this violence with the aim of dismantling it. In the wake of mass protests against colonial state violence throughout 2014, resistance decrying the justice system and insisting that #BlackLivesMatters and Indigenous lives matter, I argue that it is crucial for us to learn how to listen to the stories that Indigenous girls have to tell. These are not just any stories, but narratives that profoundly destabilize the hubristic portrayal of Canada as a humanitarian nation cleansed of settler colonial rule.

Before proceeding, I wish to clarify the social and political location from which I author this piece. I write this from the complicated position of a woman of colour born and raised on Cree territory in Saskatchewan, the daughter of immigrant parents fleeing from their own colonial inheritance in Northern India. Growing up on this land and being educated by its people has undoubtedly shaped the way I see and understand the world. I have learned a great deal over the years about the ways in which Indigenous histories and struggles have been elided within dominant anti-racism discourses of social change. People of colour are situated in and through incongruous terrain in Canada as collectives, marginalized by a white settler nationalist project while at the same time being invited to take part in the pervasiveness and harm of ongoing settler colonialism (Lawrence and Dua, 2005). Following Razack (2015), I contend that, “rather than focus on our individual histories of dispossession and migration, and thus handily avoid the question of what it means to live in a settler colonial state, people of colour and white settlers alike must confront our collective illegitimacy and determine how to live without participating in and sustaining the disappearance of Indigenous peoples” (p. 27). This is not simply a matter of “giving back” or offering patronizing charity in the face of grossly unjust social, political, and economic realities or a facile acknowledgment of the stolen land upon which settlers reside. Rather, it requires that we attempt to think through what it means to embody the practice of “standing with” Indigenous peoples, finding common ground with Kim TallBear’s call for conceiving and enacting scholarship and advocacy that seeks a shared conceptual ground amongst a community of people working towards similar political ends (TallBear, 2014).

Decolonization can only happen in concert with Indigenous peoples, and this requires all of us to think long and hard about the relationships we have to these struggles. Perhaps more importantly, it requires that we be honest about them.

Working as an advocate for youth in both British Columbia and Saskatchewan for over a decade also created a host of moments through which I was able to bear witness² to colonial state violence enacted against Indigenous girls. In turn, I have been confronted with the question of what to do with this knowledge, knowing full well that inaction is complicity within the context of unequal power relations, regardless of how much you try to convince yourself otherwise. Brutal assaults on the lives of Indigenous girls continue while many of us willfully ignore what is happening. The isolation persists. The exploitation and violence continues to be positioned, strategically, as a problem of their own making. Thus, while the accounting I offer in the following pages is a partial and preliminary one, it is a first step towards a larger community-based research and advocacy project under development in Saskatoon (happening in the wake of a \$4.3 million dollar increase in the police budget for the hiring of additional officers, I might add). I envision it as a provocation to expand and deepen how we think about the violence of settler colonial policing in the everyday lives of Indigenous girls and to inform future decolonial advocacy that centres their leadership, lived realities, and stories more robustly.³ In doing so, I hope to contribute to, and augment, all of the important work that is already being undertaken by Indigenous women and youth in this area (see, for example, Clark, 2012; Hunt, 2015; Allooloo, 2014; L. Simpson, 2014; Wilson, 2013; Laboucan-Massimo, 2015; Smiley, 2012; Kingsley and Mark, 2001; and various initiatives through the Native Youth Sexual Health Network and the Indigenous Young Women's National Council) and to act in solidarity with Indigenous peoples resisting colonial state violence in its multiple forms.

The remainder of the article unfolds as follows. I begin by theoretically situating this critique within the frameworks of settler colonialism and critical anti-racist and Indigenous feminism, making clear how Indigenous girls' violent encounters with the police are intertwined with the politics of territorial seizure characteristic of settler colonies, as well as the maintenance of settler sovereignty. Next, I sketch a number of lived realities on the ground that demonstrate the gravity of settler colonial violence enacted against Indigenous girls through the institution of policing. This section draws on findings from the HRW report, my cumulative work as an advocate for Indigenous youth, as well as ethnographic research carried out on the prairies between 2006 and 2013. In the next section, I trace the linkages between settler colonial policing and the horrific reality of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada; I push against portrayals of these material and political manifestations of colonial gender violence as separate issues. Finally, I conclude with a call to action that strategically positions the eradication of colonial gender violence at the epicenter of Indigenous critical praxis and decolonization.

² See Farmer (2005) for a more in-depth discussion of the politics of bearing witness (p. 25).

³ For further information regarding this increase in the budget of Saskatoon City Police, see Waldner (2015).

Policing Indigenous bodies on stolen land

Building a deeper, anti-colonial critique of the violent policing of Indigenous girls requires being vigilant about the way we unravel the normative frameworks that structure the everyday in a settler colonial reality intent on mutilating Indigenous bodies, dislocating them, holding them in captivity, and ultimately, making them disappear.⁴ It requires, in other words, adjusting the critical aperture through which we render competing truth claims about Canada and the stolen land where its contested sovereignty rests. “We know the happy stories that the settler state tells about itself,” writes Billy-Ray Belcourt (2015), “stories about multiculturalism, about reconciliation, about nationalism, about gay-friendliness” (p. 9). In line with these “happy stories,” the settler state of Canada also fashions tales about the safety, protection, and purported care for all of its citizens. Resurrecting social and political histories of conquest, territorial seizure, and dispossession, however, brings an alternative image into view—it forces us to think differently about what is really going on.

The (ongoing) need for positioning encounters between Indigenous peoples and the criminal justice system, including the police, within the larger context of settler colonialism is as urgent as it ever was. As a nation, we are masters of historical erasure, experts of institutional cover up. This crystallized for me, once again, at a conference about the criminalization and incarceration of Indigenous women and girls where I presented a talk on the violence of settler colonial policing in Saskatoon in May of 2015—the talk that became the foundation for this article.⁵ Hosted by the College of Law at the University of Saskatchewan, the two-day event was designed to bring together scholars, activists, policy makers, government agents, and those with lived experiences to collectively consider the issues of racism within the justice system and the disproportionate representation of Indigenous women and girls in Canadian prisons. I listened to numerous presentations and, apart from a couple of exceptions, there was a surprising and notable absence of discussion about colonial state violence within the context of settler states. The majority of conversations focused on issues of over-representation (which while certainly important, misses the point about the historic role played by criminal justice system with respect to Indigenous peoples), how prison personnel needed to do a better job of treating “prisoners”

⁴ Sherene Razack’s (2015) *Dying from Improvement: Inquest and Inquires into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* deftly takes up the notion of the “disappearance” of Indigenous peoples in Canada. In her chilling words, “The idea of a disappearing race is also productive for settler subjectivities. Through it, settlers are able to feel Indigenous disappearance and to imagine their own superiority” (p. 5).

⁵ The day following my talk, I was approached by a young white woman (she self-disclosed as an emergency room nurse at one of the local hospitals) who told me she found my critique of state violence and policing in the lives of Indigenous girls too “aggressive.” She explained that she worked closely with many police officers, some of them were her friends, and that “they are trying their best to work with a community that has a lot of problems.” I responded by arguing that my “aggressiveness” and anger was derived from years of bearing witness to the atrocities enacted against Indigenous girls by police and other state actors. From where I was standing, unapologetic, affective outrage to this ongoing colonial injury was the only response that reflected any kind of humanity. Her hostility towards me for bringing forth this critique, however, clearly indexed the power of settler colonial machinery to (re)instate notions of white settler benevolence, even in the face of mounting empirical evidence that clearly indicates otherwise.

with care, and strategies for making the criminal justice system more responsive to Indigenous communities. Even the conversations about the criminalization of Indigenous women and girls were noticeably truncated.

My aim here is not to unproductively criticize the organizational efforts aligned with this conference. Indeed, we need venues where we can think through the intellectual, political, and material problems of Indigenous peoples' encounters with the criminal justice system in rigorous ways. What I am concerned about, though, is that without an *explicit and deep* anti-colonial analysis we run the risk of reinscribing the narrative of white settler benevolence (the state is trying hard to improve the situation for Indigenous peoples) *and* a colonial subjectivity that keeps white settler power in tact. The dispersal and dissemination of ideas, theories, and notions of cause and effect about Indigenous women and girls' over-representation in prison generated in these spaces of authoritative knowledge production, then, serves a pedagogic function for both those in attendance and a wider public. It helps to determine what comes into view and what recedes or vanishes altogether, a decidedly vital camouflaging technique when a state has been built through occupation. Robert Nichols (2014) captures this succinctly when he says, "When the critique of incarceration rests upon the over-representation of racialized bodies within penal institutions, this tactically renders carcerality as a dehistoricized tool of state power—even if distorted by the pathological effects of a racist society—displacing an account of the continuity and linkages between carcerality, state formation, and territorialized sovereignty" (p. 444).

In step with these concerns, I contend that it is crucial to locate Indigenous girls' experiences with policing within the distinct political, ideological, and material formation of settler colonialism and to vociferously interrogate the colonial violence enacted against Indigenous peoples by state institutions—an anti-colonial spin on Weber's insight into state monopoly over legitimate violence (Weber, 1994). Drawing on the work of scholars who have traced the itineraries of "the colonial present" (Gregory 2004) in settler nation states (Alfred, 2009; Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014; Turner, 2006), then, I regard Canada first and foremost as a settler colony marked by the on-going dynamics of colonialism. In the tradition of this scholarship that ruptures the myth of the two founding fathers, the emergence of Canada is configured as a narrative of conquest based on the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the principle of "empty lands," and no longer as a mystical migration story. The principle of "empty" lands served, historically, to unlock the ideological gates and secure the secular and religious rationalizations leading to the "legal" dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their original territories and the subsequent implementation of laws and social policies that institutionalized the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples and elevated the cultural and social status of white settlers.

The goal of settler colonizers is to create a new social and political order with the ultimate aim of securing a permanent hold on specific, conquered locales. Ongoing dispossession is also indexed by the persistent seizure of Indigenous land and displacement of peoples for the purposes of capital development and natural resource extraction which is carried out through, as Glen Coulthard (2014) in *Red Skin White Masks* indicates, "settler state policies aimed at

explicitly undercutting Indigenous political economies and relations to and with land” (p. 4). Structural decolonization, as both a political and practical undertaking, exists *entirely* outside the purview of a colonial social order—there is *no* intention to return stolen territory. Settlers come to stay.

To successfully build a settler colony, however, there is a surreptitious, recurring need to disavow the presence of the Indigenous “other” and effectively repress, co-opt, and extinguish Indigenous alterities (Povinelli, 2002). As Tuck and Yang (2012) remark, “the settler positions himself as both superior and normal; the settler is natural whereas the Indigenous inhabitant and the chattel slave are unnatural, even supranatural” (p. 6). The emergence of settler nation-states, in this sense, embodies a distinctly sovereign charge and claims a “regenerative capacity” to conquered territory (Veracini, 2010, p. 3) that aims to destroy, replace, rename, classify—to assimilate in all of the ways that mitigate threats or resistance to the process of growing settler dominance. Through this process, power is consolidated across social institutions and legal mechanisms that reorganize geography, access to land, cultural practices, family and kinship networks, spirituality, identity, and ultimately political subjectivity (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011).

Patrick Wolfe’s (2006) work is especially instructive in illuminating the staying power of the settler colonial present. Tracing the footsteps of colonial settlement through what he calls the “logic of elimination,” Wolfe argues that this logic, which seeks to contain and regulate all things Indigenous, may change in form, but ultimately remains continuous through time (p. 387). When explaining the variance in elimination strategies, he writes, “the positive outcome of the logic of elimination can include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking down of native title into inalienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations. All of these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism” (p. 388). Accordingly, “invasion is a structure rather than an isolated event” and the particular manner in which elimination takes place, both in terms of target and methods, changes with the specificity of the historical moment in which we find ourselves. At the heart of the matter, though, lies this reality: the continual existence of Indigenous peoples in Canada constitutes a direct conflict with settler control and the related political entitlements ensconced in settler governance. They have not been eliminated, nor wholly assimilated. They continue to fight for what is theirs.

With respect to undertaking a critical appraisal of violent policing in the lives of Indigenous girls, the lens of settler colonialism importantly serves to re-establish essential linkages between the everyday lives of these young women and the dynamics of colonial power in which they are entangled. In other words, while the lived realities of Indigenous girls may be positioned by state agents, youth workers, and law enforcement officers to be outside the scope of the larger political questions of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (characterized instead as a matter of immediate crisis response, individual failure, and fragility),⁶ scholars of settler colonialism enable us to collapse the distance between these seemingly disparate sets of

⁶ See, for example, Parliament of Canada’s report from October 2003 called “Urban Aboriginal Youth Strategy.”

issues and place them in direct conversation with one another. Indigenous girls, then, operate as young Indigenous people in a *distinctly* settler colonial space where their very resistance and survival stands in opposition to fully consummating settler ownership and legitimacy—they stand in the way of settler colonialism and question the existence of the settler state as *a fait accompli*.⁷ Part of my preoccupation in this article, then, is with uncovering how forms of colonial state violence, including policing targeted at Indigenous girls, intertwine with the historiography of a Canadian settler state whose nationalist project continues to rest on stolen land.

It is also important to flag that when critiques of policing are absent of a settler colonial framing, it is much easier to position the actions of a few police officers as a case of “a few bad apples.” Critique rooted in the social and political histories of Indigenous peoples places front and center the *fundamental* role the institution of policing has played in colonial state formation. Moreover, set against the broader reality of persistent occupation, displacement, dispossession and environmental wreckage, it follows colonial logic that the criminal justice system would only be extended, enhanced, and strengthened to further control, undermine, and terrorize Indigenous polities (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011). Policing is an essential state vehicle through which conquest becomes inscribed on the ground. Indigenous peoples, thus, experience policing itself as a colonial force, an apparatus of capture *imposed externally* by a government they have not authorized and do not have effective participation within—one of the indicators of militarized surveillance and discipline (Nichols, 2014, p. 446).

Repositioned through the channels of settler colonial social and political histories, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (previously the North-West Mounted Police) can be viewed as a constitutive entity designed to carry out genocidal extermination, subjugation, and physical containment of Indigenous communities.⁸ The actions of this police force were directed by Ottawa’s policy of coerced assimilation (Jacobs, 2012; Dickason & McNab 2002). Mounties, as they are popularly known in Canada, were deployed on the Canadian frontier to facilitate Indigenous peoples’ subjection to colonial law and to “ensure the negation of Indigenous sovereignty and to implement effective policies of containment and surveillance” (Nettelbeck and Smandych, 2015, para. 3). The RCMP were well positioned for this task; Ottawa had invested in them the power to arrest, prosecute, judge, and sentence offenders, making any notion of the legal protection of Indigenous people under the British Crown a complete illusion (Graybill, 2007). In 1920 when residential school became compulsory, the RCMP was part of the settler state’s front-line foot soldiers that guaranteed the attendance of Indigenous children. Gendered racism and the underlying colonial ideologies of white superiority and “Indigenous

⁷ See A. Simpson (2014) for an excellent analysis of the politics of refusal and nested sovereignty.

⁸ On this point, Razack (2015) explains, “from its inception as a colonial police force, the Northwest Mounted Police, which would become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), assisted in the securing the territory, ultimately transforming its largely military function into a domestic policing of the settler’s town, a town surrounded by reserves (p. 14).

savagery,” as fabricated by a newly emerging Kanata to legitimate the theft of land and natural resources,⁹ are therefore encoded in the operation of the Canadian criminal justice system; they *are* the cruel, unjust, and bloody historical roots of its inception as a social institution *and* they are the roots that make possible the contemporary, ongoing reproduction of the desecration of humanity in the lives of Indigenous girls.

Bleeding out: Colonialism, gender and violence in the everyday

A critical analysis of settler colonial policing in the lives of Indigenous girls would be both harmful and limiting without emphasizing how colonial relationships are highly gendered and sexualized. And once we have established this understanding, it follows that contemporary police interactions with Indigenous girls are building on a historical pattern of gender violence. “The roots of sexual violence in Canada are as deep as colonialism itself,” argues Sarah Hunt (2010, p. 27). Elsewhere, I have written that, if you are an Indigenous girl, these mephitic roots strangle life and sanction the invisibility of violence against you.¹⁰ It is structural exploitation offered up in plain sight yet systematically denied, a deliberate bleeding out of decolonial futurity in both past and present.

Tracing the linkages between then and now brings to the surface how sexual violence, and the concomitant disempowerment of Indigenous women and girls, was an integral part of nineteenth-century strategies of domination and *carries forward* to the present day through the foundational violence of the state and state’s complicity in sanctioning the invisibility of gender violence against Indigenous women and girls. The condoned invisibility works in concert with individual acts of male violence (Razack, 2002) and reinscribes a dehumanized and racialized Other (the Indigenous woman or girl) that can be violated at will with minimal or no consequences. Further, the Canadian regulation of Indigenous identity through the gendered notions of “Indianness” produced through the Indian Act has generated, as Bonita Lawrence (2003) writes, “unimaginable levels of violence, which includes, but is not restricted to, sexist oppression” (p. 5). This legislation also eradicated traditional leadership in Indigenous communities through the creation of band governments, which in turn systematically restricted Indigenous women’s role in politics and reinforced politics as a strictly male domain.¹¹ In stark contrast to the highly patriarchal character of European society prior to colonization, Indigenous

⁹ The *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba* speaks to the long history of punitive measures carried out by police and state agents against Indigenous populations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, including the capturing and executing of “rebels” associated with the North-West Rebellion of 1885 (Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1991, p. 593).

¹⁰ See Dhillon’s (2014) “Eyes Wide Open” as part of the online compilation series *#ItEndsHere* created by Indigenous Nationhood Movement in response to the disappearance and murder of Loretta Saunders in New Brunswick, Canada.

¹¹ Sangster (2002) offers compelling insight into the preoccupation of the Canadian state with Indigenous girls’ sexuality as well as the state’s desire to limit Indigenous girls’ exposure to cities.

societies for the most part were not male dominated. Women served as leaders across the domains of the political, spiritual, and military; many societies were matrilineal. In her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American Indian Genocide*, Andrea Smith (2014) skillfully advances this argument when she says, “putting native women at the center of analysis compels us to look at the role of the state in perpetrating both race-based and gender-based violence. We cannot limit our conception of sexual violence to individual acts of rape—rather it encompasses a wide range of strategies designed not only to destroy peoples, but to destroy their sense of being a people” (p. 3). The project of colonial sexual violence, then, establishes the ideology that Indigenous women and girls’ bodies are inherently violable and by extension, that Indigenous lands are available for the taking.

In *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson (2014) explains how Indigenous girls’ bodies have historically been rendered less valuable because of what they are taken to represent: land, reproduction, kinship and governance, an alternative to heteronormative and Victorian rules of descent. “Their bodies carry a symbolic load,” she argues, “because they have been conflated with the land and are thus contaminating to a white, settler social order” (p. 156). State failures to respond to instances of abuse, and the implementation of social policies that eclipse the layered realities of Indigenous women and girls, brings into relief how the state itself is the driving force behind violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples historically and in the present, the primary perpetrator in fact (Clark, 2012). In a similar vein, Downe (2006) declares, “the abuses experienced by Aboriginal girls over the past 130 years are not isolated occurrences; they are connected through a pervasive colonial ideology that sees these young women as exploitable and often dispensable” (p. 3).

Augmenting this critique, scholars working in the field of girlhood studies are calling for the need to reconceptualize Indigenous girlhood in light of the way it is shaped under a western neocolonial state and in the midst of overlapping forms of colonial violence targeting Indigenous girls (de Finney, 2014, p. 8). This means exploring the ways that Indigenous girls themselves unpack persistent stereotypes of what it means to be an Indigenous young woman growing up in a settler state—and the paradox of invisibility/hypervisibility that accompanies this existence—and situating their everyday processes of resurgence within and against this colonial matrix. In a critical webinar entitled “Self Governance for Our Bodies and Communities: Responding to Colonial Based Gender Violence,” (part of the Idle No More series) representatives from the Native Youth Sexual Health Network and the Indigenous Young Women’s National Council exemplify de Finney’s (2014) emphasis on Indigenous girlhood. The young women in this webinar speak courageously and insightfully about Indigenous girls’ experiences with colonial gender violence and the various forms of “unconventional leadership” that Indigenous girls are demonstrating in their communities to actively resist and respond to structural violence. They also outline the variance in colonial gender violence faced by Indigenous girls, both historically and in the present. Alexa, for instance, clarifies: “colonial gender based violence has many, many forms. Sometimes it’s easier for me to try to think about it as a trickster and all of the many ways that a trickster appears. Colonial gender based violence is the state taking children away from

their homes, whether that was the child welfare system, the 60s scoop, residential schools, or even just when young Indigenous people have to move away from their homes to get access to supplies and education or resources. It's that deliberate removal of children and breaking down of family and rooting into our communities more hate and violence than love.”

In concert with the voices of the Indigenous young women speaking out in the webinar, I contend that state violence directed at Indigenous girls is a mirroring back of the white settler society of Canada—a mediation between past and present, a jump between historical and lived. It is the material manifestation of the difference between “the truth that is told and the truth that is sold” (Marker, 2003, p. 362). I purposefully write in opposition, then, to those who would de-race and de-gender the experience of what it means to be an Indigenous young woman living in Canada.¹² Settler colonizers have inscribed hierarchy and domination on the bodies of Indigenous peoples through patriarchal gender violence and the day-to-day experiences of Indigenous girls are not exempt from this practice. Rather, as Leanne Simpson (2014) reminds us, “white supremacy, rape culture, and the real and symbolic attack on gender and sexual identity and agency are very powerful tools of colonialism, settler colonialism, and capitalism, primarily because they work very efficiently to remove Indigenous peoples from our territories and to prevent reclamation of those territories through mobilization” (para. 9). As such, Indigenous girls’ experiences speak volumes to the power of colonial gender violence that has, from the point of first contact, systematically subjugated Indigenous women and girls and symbolically positioned them as bearers of a counter-imperial order and consequently, a direct threat to colonial rule (Smith, 2005). Their contemporary encounters with settler colonial policing only shatter the ostensible temporality of this violence.

Dispatching colonial power: Badges, guns, and flashing red and blue lights

As previously mentioned, this article builds on the collective work undertaken by Justice for Girls and Human Rights Watch. *Those Who Take Us Away* (Human Rights Watch, 2013) is a chilling testimony to the persistent usage of violence by law enforcement agents to capture and injure the bodies of Indigenous girls, to even take their breath away. Dissecting the relationship between the RCMP and Indigenous women and girls in ten towns across Northern British Columbia, it documents not only how Indigenous women and girls are *under-protected* by the police but also how they have been *subjected to* gross levels of state violence through the dispatching of colonial power vis-à-vis the institutional of policing—reports of physical abuse by both police and judges, sexual assault, the terrorizing of Indigenous communities through hyper surveillance, unjust detainment for intoxication, racist threats, and zero accountability for police misconduct litter the pages. As a case in point, a young Indigenous woman, Sophie, explains her

¹² These points are underscored by my previous research highlighting the problematics associated with the homogenization of the urban youth experience in general (Dhillon, 2011).

run-in with police after they showed up in a field where gang members were chasing her. The RCMP picked her up and dragged her to the back of a police car and the following unfolded:

“I was yelling at them saying: “I was the one who called for help. Why are you guys chasing me?” And they didn’t say anything else... They roughed me up. They handcuffed me and put me in the back of the police car and would not allow my mother to come and see me... One of them came and said [through the police car window], “keep kicking and see what happens”... He punched me in the face more than six times. Half of his body was in the police car. Both my mom and sister saw him punch me. Then they came over and saw my face swollen up. I said, “Look what they did to me!” (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 50).

What crystalizes into plain sight through this young woman’s testimony radically dispels the myth that we live in a post-racial/post-colonial social reality.¹³ Her story, and many others throughout the report, paint a clear picture that violent policing practices serve a profoundly regulatory function in settler states like Canada, a way to attach colonial power to the flesh and bones of Indigenous bodies.¹⁴

While I do not have space to provide an exhaustive overview within the limited scope of this article, there are several key points emerging from the report that merit restatement. I include these points as reminders of the stakes we are up against in thinking through strategies of critical praxis and decolonization. Moreover, as Nichols (2014) reveals, while North American settler colonies may be positioned as colonial spaces that “have moved from openly coercive and violent relations with [I]ndigenous communities towards a more flexible docile politics of recognition and assimilation,” this move is “coeval with the growth of a whole shadow system of hard infrastructure that is every bit as material, physical, and coercive as ever” (p. 448). These findings are not just findings. They are grave windows into the capacious power of settler colonial governance and the tremendous harm that is incurred when we disregard the high degree of interaction between the everyday realities of Indigenous girls and the criminal justice system—it remains a primary locus of settler social control.

To briefly summarize the central insights set forth by *Those Who Take Us Away* regarding policing brutality and failures in protection of Indigenous women and girls by Canadian police:

- There is excessive use of force used against Indigenous girls by the police including physical beatings, the breaking of limbs, and attacks by police dogs during arrest and while in custody.

¹³ Wang (2012) speaks to this point of collective delusion with respect to living in a post-racial/post-colonial world.

¹⁴ In the parlance of Razack (2015), “The violence state actors visit on [I]ndigenous bodies imprints colonial power on the skin, as much as the branding of slaves or the whipping and abuse of children in residential schools did. Such a branding declares Indigenous bodies, and crucially their lands, to be settler property, and simultaneously announces that Indigenous people are subhuman, the kind that one can only deal with through force” (p. 6).

- The deployment of tasers—electric shock weapons—has been undertaken in response to threats deemed “low level.”
- Inhumane conditions in city cells where Indigenous women and girls are held for public intoxication. They are kept for extended periods without food, in cold temperatures and can be released in the middle of the night inadequately clothed.
- Repeated allegations of rape and sexual assault by police officers, including one case where an Indigenous woman was taken to a remote location outside of town and raped by four police officers.
- Verbal denigration is commonplace, with repeated references to racist and gendered slurs.
- Failure to respond to calls from Indigenous women and girls regarding domestic abuse and shoddy investigative work, if it is carried out at all.
- Displacement of blame onto Indigenous girls by police officers in instances of violence, domestic and otherwise.

HRW, in partnership with Justice for Girls, launched the report in three cities across Canada in early 2013. Ottawa was first with the official press conference on Parliament and meetings at the RCMP headquarters. Prince George, the city in British Columbia’s north that served as the geographical center of the study, with the support of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, was second. The third was a prairie launch (February 2013) I organized in Saskatoon in collaboration with the Elizabeth Fry Society and local Indigenous activists. Saskatoon was chosen, in part, because of the notorious reputation of the Saskatoon City Police as perpetrators of violence against Indigenous communities, including attacks on Indigenous youth, and the well cited statistics depicting the disproportionate representation of Indigenous peoples—men, women and children—in Saskatchewan jails.¹⁵ It is a settler urban center well versed in the technologies of colonial statecraft where “policing remains devoted to evicting Indigenous bodies from the prairie city, and the imprinting of colonial power on both Indigenous men and women continues apace in gendered ways” (Razack, 2015, p. 22).

The launch took place at the Indian and Metis Friendship Center in Saskatoon’s downtown in February of 2013. There were a number of speakers on the panel, including myself, Meghan Roads (the primary researcher from HRW and author of the report), representatives from organizations working on issues of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, one of the founders of Idle No More, and the executive director from the Elizabeth Fry Society. After brief opening remarks we opened the floor for a question and answer period. Over a hundred people, including police officers, were in attendance. Various media outlets covered the event (“Women’s,” 2013; Johnson, 2013; “Landscape,” 2013; “Report,” 2013).

¹⁵ The infamous and horrific Starlight Tours are, of course, a central piece of this well-earned reputation. See Wright’s (2004) *The Commission of Inquiry into the Matters of the Death of Neil Stonechild* and “Ten Years Later” (2014) for recent discussion of ostensible changes in the Saskatoon City Police as a result. Also see Hubbard’s (2004) NFB film “Two Worlds Colliding.”

Not surprisingly, after the formal presentation of findings numerous women and girls approached me to ask if HRW would be conducting a similar investigation in Saskatchewan. They also had stories to tell about police brutality and failures in protection that were occurring both in Saskatoon and outside of it, in the transit spaces between reserve and city. One Indigenous girl asked me for my phone number so she could call me to share her experience in private, out of the public exposure of the day's event. She was scared, she said, to say anything when the police were so close by. She called me the next day to explain how she had been severely beaten by a police officer when he came after her in the parking lot of a strip mall in Saskatoon's Westside. "I don't even know why he came after me," she said, "I think he thought I was planning to steal something. He called me a little bitch and threw me onto the ground and kicked me really hard. I was hurting all over." When I asked her if she had told anyone about this experience after it happened, she explained that she felt as though there was no where she could go for help. Apparently, no one was going to believe her anyway.

Prairie policing

The story of police violence recounted by this young Indigenous woman is consistent with my longstanding work as a youth advocate and ethnographer researching state interventions in the lives of urban Indigenous youth in Saskatoon.¹⁶ In the remainder of this section, I share snapshots of my ethnographic fieldwork that reveal the gravity of settler colonial policing in the lives of Indigenous girls in this prairie city. To be clear, my interest here is in prioritizing the state's ongoing and manifold strands of assault on Indigenous girls in order to *make visible* the profound restrictions and harm that comes from everyday, routinized violence inherent in particular social, economic, and political formations, and in this case, specifically settler-colonial ones.¹⁷

Indigenous girls carry history, memory, and otherwise futures within their bodies, within their varied experiences of colonial occupation and their resistance to it. This came across loud and clear one morning when I entered a community and youth organization in Saskatoon where I was conducting a portion of my fieldwork. I walked into the office space that serves as a sort of headquarters for a program supporting Indigenous youth in custody (both open and secure). Case workers are assigned to each youth file and the case worker is supposed to offer support to the youth as she or he transitions from youth detention out into the "real world." This support can take the shape of assistance in enrolling into community education programs, finding housing, attending probation meetings, and seeking employment. On this particular morning, a young

¹⁶ This ethnographic research has culminated in my first book titled *Prairie Rising: Indigenous Youth, Decolonization, and the Politics of Intervention*, forthcoming with University of Toronto Press.

¹⁷ I am being attentive here, to Eve Tuck's (2009) important words about the danger of producing "damage-centered" research (p. 409). My aim in this article is to indict the state – not to create portraits of damage.

Indigenous woman named Sherry¹⁸ was seated next to a desk when I stepped in the room. I had seen Sherry a few times before, but on this day she looked visibly different. There was a large, blackish bruise on her face, although her long brown hair concealed a part of it, and her arm was in a sling. She was dressed in jeans and a simple t-shirt, some kind of mobile device was clutched in her hand. She looked visibly upset, her eyes were narrowed, her mouth in a frown. She wasn't speaking. Sherry's caseworker, Pauline, was sitting behind her desk sipping coffee and typing on her keyboard.

When I saw Sherry, I immediately, of course, asked what happened. Pauline responded in a matter of fact tone, "Oh, it's the cops. They are harassing her again. It happens all the time once you get involved with Corrections and Public Safety." I learned that Sherry had been out walking in the Westside, later in the afternoon the previous day, when she was stopped by two male police officers and accused of breaching her probation orders. According to Pauline, Sherry had tried to explain that she was not in breach of her probation orders but the cops didn't believe her and started accusing her of lying. The situation "escalated," that is how Pauline described it, and Sherry eventually contacted Pauline from St. Paul's Hospital, where she ended up to get her arm and face examined after the altercation with the police. "They let her go, but they roughed her up before they did," Pauline told me. When I asked Pauline what she was going to do to take this matter up, she told me that the only recourse she had was to go to the police station and file a formal complaint. But that, she said, would be very time consuming and often didn't result in anything being done. During this conversation Sherry simply sat still. Dead silent.

What can we make of Sherry's silence? Was her silence imposed from above, from below? What is our role in witnessing these events and making sense of them? All of these questions are fundamental to how we think about what it means to place Indigenous girls' experiences at the centre of critical investigations into settler colonialism. At the moment in which all of this was unfolding, I did not feel like it was my place to ask Sherry to speak or to share her viewpoint on her violent interaction with the city police. I opted not to scratch at the surface of her silence, to be respectful of her decision to remain quiet on the matter. But, I also did not assume that her response reflected stoicism or a lack of awareness about what was happening. I did not assume that there was not a powerful eloquence about the situation that would be uttered if I ever had the opportunity to listen to her. My prior experiences alongside youth in the past suggested quite the opposite. In fact, this entire exchange further reinforced in my mind why it is so important to create avenues for Indigenous girls to speak out safely and with all of the necessary supports. The last thing I wanted to do in this situation was increase this Indigenous young woman's vulnerability and exposure. Nonetheless, I was left thinking about what we might learn from youth like Sherry about the ways Indigenous girls are creatively navigating and negotiating the terrain of state violence if there were more spaces for them to share their knowledge. How might this allow us to interrogate settler colonialism in more complex ways and, in turn, reveal different pathways to decolonization?

¹⁸ All names in this section have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Reflecting further on this encounter, I would also like to suggest that the violence Sherry experienced in this instance contains two discrete parts. The first one relates to the violence she has endured at the hands of the Saskatoon City Police, an egregious violation in its own right. And the second is wrapped up in Pauline's individuation and dismissal of Sherry's encounter with settler colonial violence, thereby legitimating it as part of routine behavior and misrecognizing (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004) it because of its predictability and familiarity. In *Violence and War and Peace*, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois (2004) describe how "structural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life and transformed into expressions of moral worth" (p. 4). For Pauline, the experience of this young woman had become entirely normalized to the point that it did not warrant additional time or attention—or even a report to her Director of Programming. It was expected. It was simply what happened. Even when I pressed the issue further, asserting that this was happening to other Indigenous girls too, she didn't seem to think there was anything she could do. She offered no explanation beyond acknowledging that this was "the way things were," nor did she consider the possibility that her own actions of turning a blind eye to the young woman's experience may, in some way, be contributing to a lack of police accountability and in turn, the relentless and vigilant policing of Indigenous youth in the Westside. At best, the underlying message communicated to this young woman was: exercise fortitude when challenged by the onslaught of racist police provocation and coercive force. Suppress your feelings of anger and vulnerability. Keep your head down. Stay out of trouble.

My point here is not to direct all of the blame towards Pauline—she is one caseworker operating within a system of structural, colonial violence—but instead to draw attention to the blatant acceptance of violent policing practices enacted against Indigenous young women in Saskatoon and to redirect us back to the importance of looking at settler colonial gender violence through the social dynamics of everyday practices, which reveal how larger orders of social force come together with micro-contexts of local power to shape material realities on the ground (Kleinman, 1997). In fact, the violation of personal liberty and insidious debasement of human dignity recounted by this Indigenous young woman, in addition to her experience of racism and public humiliation, was not news to me. Having done research and advocacy in Saskatoon for years, this story while stunning in its level of injustice is also stunningly prosaic in its *repeated* occurrence as an act of settler colonial surveillance. On numerous occasions, I have found my senses met with the following scene: a Saskatoon City Police cruiser pulled over on the side of 20th Street (or on more isolated roads, in back alleys, next to forsaken train tracks) with an Indigenous youth standing in the shadow of circulating red and blue lights, arms raised above the head or clasped behind the back. Personal belongings, sometimes broken, have been strewn about the unforgiving ground. One or two police officers are usually engaged in some form of rough "questioning," voices are often raised. The interminable power of the criminal justice system well evidenced by the material presence of guns, slash resistant gloves, bulletproof vests, handcuffs, batons, and split second radio back up. Sometimes there are dogs. The potential use of deadly force by these public-safety sentries, in instances of perceived threat, imagined or

otherwise, looms large. They hold the authority to trigger the deployment of lethal violence to maintain the safety and protection of a white Canadian citizenry, to shut down by any means necessary those whose very presence threatens the social, political, and economic structures that have birthed white power and privilege.¹⁹ They are the city's front line drones of white settler defense. And in moments like these, time becomes dilated. Anything can happen.

Numerous youth workers have corroborated the high incidence of racial profiling and surveillance by city police that has been revealed, anecdotally, by Indigenous youth in Saskatoon. When I interviewed a Cree worker involved in counselling Indigenous youth approaching the end of their prison sentence, he told me it was commonplace for Indigenous youth to recount instances of being stopped by the police to the point of feeling deeply harassed because of the style of their clothing and the colour of their skin. He revealed, "If you live in the *core*, it's almost a certainty. They [Indigenous youth] always seem to be conscious of the presence of police. It doesn't matter where we go in the city, they are always looking out for them."

The reference this youth worker made to the geographical specificity of heightened police surveillance also signals the way that the "core neighbourhood" in Saskatoon has become coded as "Indigenous space," a frontier where "law has authorized its own absence and where the police can violate Indigenous peoples with impunity" (Razack, 2015, p. 23). Idylwyld Drive is the borderline that cuts the city longitudinally, bisecting Saskatoon into the east associated with prosperity and wealth, and the west (also known as Alphabet City because the Westside avenues have no names, just letters) associated with poverty, crime, and suffering—often tagged "ghetto territory." "This spatialized relationship," remarks Joyce Green (2011) "maintains the focus on the [I]ndigenous as needing to be controlled, for racism suggests they are ultimately not fit for civilized society" (p. 238). The targeting of Indigenous girls, and Indigenous youth more generally, by police, then, is interlinked with a criminalization of the neighbourhoods where Indigenous families live, and a deliberate categorization of these communities as simultaneously "native and degenerative" (Razack, 2002). Whiteness is able to move freely into these "projected crime zones" as a matter of exercising power over "Indigenous deviance" and ensuring the quarantining of Indigenous bodies. In the words of Razack (2015), "to mark and maintain their own emplacement on stolen land, settlers must repeatedly enact the most enduring colonial truth: the land belongs to the settler, and Indigenous people who are in the city are not of the city. Marked as surplus and subjected to repeated evictions, Indigenous people are considered by settler society as the waste or excess that must be expelled" (p. 24). In Saskatoon, the processes of gentrification, the spatial politics of safety, and the ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples on *Cree territory within the city*, have further fuelled white invasion into Indigenous urban space.²⁰

¹⁹ As Albert Memmi (1965) asserts, "privilege is at the heart of the colonial relationship" (p. xii).

²⁰ For a brief glimpse into gentrification on the Westside of Saskatoon, see Casey (2014).

Bringing the propensity of this ongoing domination into razor sharp focus, a Metis youth worker and activist disclosed the following during one of our interviews in 2007. His recitation of how the criminal justice system works as a mechanism of settler state control, and the ways Indigenous girls are particularly susceptible to the violence of this institution, warrants being quoted at length:

“When it comes to the city police and the aboriginal youth I have worked with for close to fifteen years, or even longer... well, I have seen the abuse from city police. I’ve seen the ego, the attitudes, the complete injustice. I understand why young Indigenous people don’t trust the police. It’s all right to take some Aboriginal girl into a back alley and get a blowjob from her because what is she going to do? Because with most of these kids it’s always us against them, it’s us against the system. The judges don’t care. The cops are a big part of the problem. The majority of the justice system in this province, in this city, is broken. I would love to see what would happen if a 14-year-old aboriginal girl told a white judge that it was me against the white cop. The cop is always going to win.”

And of growing concern is the now swarming police presence in community spaces where Indigenous youth are *supposed to feel safe* through the model of “crime prevention through social development.” Bronwyn Dobchuk-Land’s (2015) research in Winnipeg lends considerable insight into this more recent configuration of settler colonial state power. Analogous to Winnipeg in this regard, community organizations in Saskatoon, including Indigenous organizations, are increasingly being asked to welcome police into the spaces they are trying to construct as “safe spaces” for youth.²¹ Ironically, this means that Indigenous girls, and youth more generally, are encountering settler police agents even in the places where they are supposed to access youth programming—initiatives ostensibly designed to “help” them. Youth community organizations, emergency rooms, the office of a social worker, the corridors of school, recreational centers, and the street are all fair game. In Saskatoon, you can even find police, the very same state entity that was created to aid Indigenous extermination, *leading* rallies and discussions on murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls.

Thus, the persistent sensation of being hunted, of monitored movement, of freedom being truncated through institutional caging *is central* to the daily reality of being a young Indigenous woman in Saskatoon. It is not an anomaly. It is not the fictitious creation of a youthful imagination on overdrive. Through their existence as *Indigenous* girls, these young people constitute a direct threat to an already existing settler social order. A large part of the way this threat becomes contained is through state mechanisms of criminalization, policing, and incarceration that function as both regulators and producers of socially constructed notions of normativity and deviance against which Indigenous youth sociality can be measured. Judith

²¹ This movement has intensified with police programs like such as the Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Plan (SHOCAP)—read targeted enforcement. The Saskatoon Police Service SHOCAP Unit, in partnership with agencies serving youth throughout the city, “*tracks* [emphasis added] the activity of a select group of young persons” (Saskatoon Police Service, [n.d.](#)).

Butler (2015) argues, within the context of black conquest in the United States, that “one way that this [white dominance] happens is by establishing whiteness as the norm for the human, and blackness as a deviation from the human or even as a threat to the human, or as something not quite human” (para. 22). Similarly, young Indigenous lives have been constituted by the Canadian state as “throw aways,” lives that are expendable in the quest to maintain settler control, subaltern lives that represent everything Canada does not want to become. Racism’s ratification as a way of seeing, as a mode of dominant “public perception” (para. 6) that is both recurrent and customary, everyday and systemic, gendered and sexualized (Jiwani, 2006), fuels the construction of these binaries of value on human life and, in turn, standardizes heinous state techniques of subjugation. Settler colonies are heavily reliant on the reproduction of this longstanding controlling technology because of their need to consistently extinguish Indigenous alterity—to stand firm in the march toward the endpoint of successful “elimination.”

Hence, it comes as no surprise to anyone working with Indigenous girls that incidents of “conflict” with law enforcement agents are common markers of lived experience—this is where criminalization and caging enter the picture. In urban centers where Indigenous youth come into more direct and frequent contact with state institutions, clashes with the criminal justice system take on even more heightened levels. According to a report presented to The Commission on First Nations and Metis Peoples and Justice Reform:

For Saskatchewan Aboriginal youth, conflict with the justice system was primarily urban. Similar to the Canadian data, most Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan committed their offence of alleged offence in a city, and most planned on relocating to a city upon release. Many of the Aboriginal youth experienced conflict with the justice system in the city even though they lived on reserve. (Government of Saskatchewan, 2004, p. 104)

Incarceration rates mirror the intensity of settler colonial confrontation between Indigenous youth and the criminal justice system, although it is important to reinforce that incarceration is part of a *continuum of violence* in the criminal justice system as a whole, which begins with initial police “contact,” followed by arrest, detainment, court proceedings, sentencing, jail time, and, eventually, probation orders. In 2004, the Canadian Department of Justice conducted a snapshot of Indigenous youth in custody. The report confirmed the disproportionate representation of Indigenous youth in prison, although scholars and youth advocates have been reporting this phenomenon for some time.²² While they comprise only five per cent of the population, Indigenous youth make up 33% of young people in custody. The highest rates of incarceration are in northern and central Canada, and Saskatchewan is among the most punitive provinces, second only to the Northwest Territories (and Saskatchewan, along with Manitoba, holds the greatest number of police per capita across all of the provinces). In Saskatchewan, an astounding 87% of Indigenous women and girls make up the female prison population (Native

²² For a list of publications regarding the criminalization and incarceration of Indigenous girls in Canada, please see Justice for Girls (n.d.).

Women's Association of Canada, 2012) and *young Indigenous youth are more likely to go to prison than finish high school* (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). Neve and Pate (2005) have argued, in fact, that the prairie provinces have witnessed some of the most egregious examples of criminalization of Indigenous women and girls. They note:

Aboriginal women continue to suffer the devastating impact of colonization. From residential school and child welfare seizure, to juvenile and adult detention, Aboriginal women and girls are vastly over-represented in institutions under state control....in the Prairie Region most of the women and girls in prison are Aboriginal. (p. 27)

The concluding remarks emerging from Canada's 2012 periodic review, with regards to the country's adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, also reiterated the criminal justice crisis signalled by the over-representation of Indigenous youth in Canadian jails (United Nations, 2012).

And the violence does not stop there.

This is not an unexplainable phenomenon

Tina Fontaine. Loretta Saunders. Cindy Gladue. Pamela George. Bella Laboucan-McLean. These names are the halting signposts of colonial gender violence in Canada. They are part of a growing, state-generated epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls across Turtle Island. An unmistakable rendering of settler state power juxtaposed against its claims of benevolence and post-colonial calm.

In January of 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) released a 127-page document outlining the egregious levels of violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls in Canada. According to the report, the number of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls is overwhelming in its scope, tallied at approximately 1200 cases. Indigenous women and girls are 8 times more likely to die of homicide than non-Indigenous women (2014, p. 49). Given that Indigenous women and girls comprise only 4.3% of the overall Canadian population, this revelation is particularly alarming.

I would caution, however, about the danger of getting caught in the numbers game—the constant focus on numbers does a particular kind of work in limiting the focus of the problem. It is vital, I would argue, that we remember that these numbers are not just abstract figures or horrific, sensationalized stories that appear in newspapers or across TV screens in the form of nightly news. Every single one of those 'numbers' corresponds to a life. These statistics are Indigenous girls and women who were integral parts of their communities, human beings who withstood brutal assaults on their bodies and spirits, and daughters, mothers, sisters, students, cousins, aunties, friends, and partners whose lives were extinguished in unconscionable ways. This vicious story of elimination, then, casts light on the devastation and collective wreckage endured by so many Indigenous families and communities across Turtle Island who are suffering

immense loss and righteously demanding justice for their loved ones, and for Indigenous peoples more broadly. But it also renders a clear, ominous picture of where Indigenous women and girls stand in the eyes of the settler colonial state of Canada.

It is my contention that Indigenous girls and women continue to “disappear” and be murdered in Canada because the state is actively engaged in ensuring this continues to happen. Violence against Indigenous women and girls is, after all, the *modus operandi* of the Canadian criminal justice system. This is not an unexplainable phenomenon. It is not a mysterious “crime problem.” It is a reworking of the gender violence that has been targeting Indigenous girls and women since the point of first contact, since before Canada became Canada. It is the effect of a criminal justice system that was instrumental in the historical disempowerment of Indigenous women and girls, and a system that is relentless in its pursuit of colonial gender violence as a central feature of settler sovereignty. “Gender violence and murdered and missing Indigenous women are a symptom of settler colonialism, white supremacy and genocide,” attests Leanne Simpson (2014), “symptoms of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from our territories.” The settler state of Canada has something very material to gain—the continual seizure of territory coupled with a dismantling of Indigenous political efforts centered on decolonial mobilization—with the continuance of colonial gender violence. And it is made real through a number of cunning technologies of governance, of which settler colonial policing plays an important part. Stated otherwise: as a central component of the criminal justice system, perhaps one of the most fundamental, settler colonial policing has a great deal to do with this epidemic of murdered and missing Indigenous women.

For example, state omissions lead to killings and disappearance without consequence—the complete and utter failure of the police, specifically, to respond to violence against Indigenous girls and women has created a culture of impunity for men to rape and murder at will. State actions (including violence) work in concert with targeted acts of male violence that are effectively borne of state neglect and complicity. Both the provincial police and the RCMP have failed to adequately prevent and protect Indigenous women and girls from a continuum of violence (the extinguishment of life itself being the concrete endpoint) and have abjured the responsibility to thoroughly investigate acts of violence when they are committed.²³ “Family members of murdered and missing women have described dismissive attitudes from police officers working on their cases, a lack of adequate resources allocated to those cases, and lengthy failure to investigate and recognize a pattern of violence” (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2014, p. 12). Confirming allegations of Indigenous women and girls exclusion from state protection, the Report on the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry has also reiterated the ways that police have come to view Indigenous peoples not as a community deserving protection, but a community from which white society must be protected. This has led to a situation often described as one of Indigenous communities being “over-policed” but “under-protected”—

²³ The story of Bella Laboucan-McLean is particularly revealing in this regard. For the details of her case, please see Klein (2014).

positioning Canadian white society as in need of *protection from* Indigenous nations (Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1991).

Furthermore, as opposed to serving as sources of assistance and help, Indigenous women and girls are often scared to reach out to police for fear that they will be further violated through terrorizing policing practices or have to contend with the outright omission of their accounts of violence. In her exploratory research on girls in city cell lock up in Vancouver, Sue Brown (2011) heard a young Indigenous woman say,

“So as far as just being like out on the street corner and running into police officers and stuff. They really treat women out there like shit. They really really do. And it is sad because most of the women out of there are so young. And it is like, you know, they are still very impressionable, and no one wants to be out there. I don’t give a shit what anybody says. Nobody truly wants to be that way. And when you run into cops, you know, and they call you a “fucking whore” or... you know, tell you to “get your fucking ass off the street” well, I mean, that is not helping” (p. 151).

The projection of criminality cast onto Indigenous women and girls also further fuels state failure to protect them and solidifies the elision of their lived experience. During an interview of policing in the lives of Indigenous girls, Annabel Webb explained how the positioning of Indigenous girls as “criminals” makes them more prone to becoming targets of male violence. She remarks,

“The criminalization of Aboriginal girls is defined by a pervasive assumption of delinquency, one that ensures that girls will come into frequent contact with police and are more likely to be questioned, searched, arrested, detained, and subjected to the brutality of criminal justice procedures such as strip searches, imprisonment and solitary confinement. *Perpetrators, whether they happen to be police officers or other men in the community, act with impunity because the positioning of Indigenous girls as “criminal” means that the first impulse of criminal justice response to her victimization will be to question the child’s credibility.*”

Thus, breakdown in police protection and investigation, coupled with the projection of criminality onto Indigenous girls, *works to sustain* violence against Indigenous women and girls because male perpetrators believe they will be exempt from legal ramifications as a result of their actions (and they often are). Natalie Clark’s intersectional based policy analysis of violence in the lives of Indigenous girls, which draws extensively on cases studies of indigenous girls’ experiences, further reveals how state policies fail to protect Indigenous girls from victimization (Clark, 2012, p. 136).

The utter failure of the Canadian public to stand up and demand answers in relation to violence against Indigenous women and girls is an indication of the value Canadian society

places on their lives.²⁴ In many ways, they serve as the “unmournable bodies” (Cole, 2015), bearing the lethal consequences of Canada’s quest to maintain the territorial power and the broad reaching control required to keep Canada a sovereign, industrial, and capitalist nation.²⁵ On the disposability of life in the context of relations of domination, Inuit/Taino writer Siku Allooloo (2014) attests, “the fact that society sees Indigenous women and girls as violable, as eligible targets of assault and domination, as “less than human” or, as weak, isolated and defenseless is, to my mind, the heart of the issue (para. 4).²⁶ It follows, then, that murder and other forms of colonial gender violence are the state’s most concrete triumphs over Indigenous resurgence in the greater geopolitics of settler colonialism (Balfour, 2014).

Recasting decolonization and Indigenous freedom

A critical politics of encounter with settler colonial policing in the lives of Indigenous girls necessitates thinking through a sustained politics of decolonial transformation. Indeed, as eloquently captured by Ashon Crawley (2015) when reflecting upon Black life in the United States, “the quotidian, ordinary, everyday nature of these violent incidents should produce within us a restlessness, a desire to exist *otherwise*” (para. 4). What actions will we take to dismantle colonialism’s death grip on the lives of Indigenous girls? How do we reimagine Indigenous critical praxis and decolonization when colonial gender violence sits at the center of strategies for political change? How do we ensure we are addressing the multifaceted dimensions of colonial gender violence vis-à-vis settler colonial policing in a manner that includes queer Indigenous bodies? What will Indigenous peoples’ self-organizing and self-governing look like when Indigenous women and girls are leading the struggle against settler colonial rule? These are big questions, but they are questions we need to ask if we are in this fight for the long haul and if we are in it to win.

²⁴ For a glimpse into white Canada’s perception of Indigenous peoples’ struggle for self-determination please see Angus (2013).

²⁵ Echoing this sentiment, Naomi Klein spoke the following words at a speech on murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls she delivered in Toronto, Ontario on December 18, 2014: “Here is one link to consider: the greatest barrier to our government’s single-minded obsession with drilling, mining and fracking the hell out of this country is the fact that Indigenous communities from coast to coast are exercising their inherent and constitutional rights to say no. Indigenous strength and power is a tremendous threat to that insatiable vision. And Indigenous women really are “the heart and soul” of their communities. The trauma of sexual violence saps the strength of communities with terrifying efficiency. So let us not be naïve. The Canadian government has no incentive to heal and strengthen the very people that it sees as its greatest obstacle” (para. 45-47).

²⁶ Following in step, Judith Butler (2015) explains, “[w]hat we see is that some lives matter more than others, that some lives matter so much that they need to be protected at all costs, and that other lives matter less, or not at all. And when that becomes the situation, then the lives that do not matter so much, or do not matter at all, can be killed or lost, can be exposed to conditions of destitution, and there is no concern, or even worse, that is regarded as the way it is supposed to be” (para. 2).

As I mentioned at the start of this piece, as a non-Indigenous person growing up on Cree land in Saskatchewan I am in no position to be directive towards Indigenous nations about shifting political strategies and the multivariant forms of resistance to colonial occupation that already exist. What I can offer are some speculative points for consideration that I believe we should take seriously as we go about the hard work of decolonization and bending the light toward political actions and social practices that advance Indigenous freedom. These are thoughts based on important, vital lessons I have learned from Indigenous and non-Indigenous comrades alike, and are reflective of my own insights as a person of colour who knows she is living on stolen land. They are by no means exhaustive or complete. They are a series of loose starting points for deliberative dialogue about inciting the world to be otherwise than it is. And they are an ethical articulation of the political responsibility I have inherited as someone who carries a Canadian passport and calls Canada home. I hope we can build from them.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, point is that colonial gender violence is alive and well. It has not recessed into historical record or taken a back seat to other forms of violence enacted upon Indigenous nations. What all of the preceding pages tell us, rather, is that there is a war on Indigenous women and girls across Turtle Island. And an awareness of the material, everyday violence that is a core feature of being an Indigenous woman or girl in Canada pushes us, as Sarah Hunt (2015) adeptly urges, to rethink conceptions of what is politically significant within the context of Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and self-governance. It calls for a suturing together of the micro dynamics of daily life with macro political struggles for land. It demands that we bring gendered violence, police brutality, carcerality of everyday life, death of kids in care, and a willing negligence of Indigenous communities into the realm of the political and that our strategies of defense are always attentive to this materiality (Hunt, 2015, p. 4). In concrete terms, this also means that we must be moved to mobilize every time an Indigenous woman or girl is subjected to state violence and to support Indigenous communities to develop alternative pathways for addressing violence in their own communities in ways that minimize state contact. “It’s in all our best interests to take on gender violence as a core resurgence project, a core decolonization project, a core of any Indigenous mobilization,” says Leanne Simpson (2014, para.10). I believe this call to action is clear and also points to the way that those of us committed to eradicating colonial gender violence must operate in consensual allyship with the formidable Indigenous women and girls already paving the way.

A second and related point involves recognizing the importance of engaging critical praxis that exists outside the so-called justice and freedom offered through state mechanisms of recognition and redress. Glen Coulthard (2014) captures this succinctly when saying, “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of capitalist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have sought to transcend” (p. 3). While I recognize the need for ongoing advocacy to change social policies and practices from within domestic government agencies and institutions (and this means we need people working in these spaces with a politicized understanding of Indigenous-state relations and the stronghold state institutions have on Indigenous girls), as well

as legal international bodies, I would argue it is shortsighted to assume that the state is simply going to step in and right its wrongs, regardless of how many more inquiries are called or reports commissioned. If, as numerous scholars and activists have pointed out, the state is the chief perpetrator of violence in Indigenous nations, its institutions, agencies, and programs cannot be the place where justice is found, nor can strategies for eradicating colonial gender violence be rooted in these power structures. “There is no freedom to be found in a settler state, either one that would seek to give it or take it away,” writes Jarrett Martineau (2014, para. 19). Alternatively, there must be a turning away from state prostrations of assistance and a *turning towards* the longstanding strength, artistic practice, intergenerational wisdom, and epistemologies that are central to Indigenous ways of life. There must be an arsenal of resistance to colonial gender violence that is rooted within nations themselves. A futurity and decolonial terrain, in other words, that operates on Indigenous frequencies.

And third, there is an urgent need to *decolonize* and *politicize* youth studies, youth programming, and almost every single initiative out there in Canada that addresses “the needs” of Indigenous youth in general, and Indigenous girls specifically. Youth studies scholars and social policy-makers have, in fact, paid very little attention to the ways that the distinct political and material formation of settler colonialism has mediated the scope and discourse through which we understand Indigenous youth experience in Canada (Lesko and Talburt, 2012). Decolonizing and politicizing this work includes a giant step away from the grossly homogenized renditions of Indigenous youth experience in the quest for Indigenous sovereignty—an elimination of the cursory, lip service attention paid to the diverse nature of the materiality of the social (Farmer, 2004). Settler colonialism impacts bodies differently depending on their social markings. Indigenous youth differentially experience injustice, a lack of protection, policing, social regulation, and state intervention, containment, and disciplinary punishment – these things operate in different ways depending on who you are. In a striking example of this diversity of experience, Billy-Ray Belcourt’s (2015) recent talk, *Queer Indigenous Poltergeists*, at the North American Indigenous Studies Association Meeting in Washington D.C. in 2015, highlighted the fundamentally affective impact of settler colonialism on queer Indigenous bodies that serves as “an affective rupturing of our attachments to life, to each other, and to ourselves.” In doing so, his incantation that summons the figure of the queer Indigenous poltergeist demands that we re-think the criteria for membership in a decolonial future and pay heed to the numerous ways that settler colonialism winds itself around Indigenous bodies, including through the destructive work of heteronormativity.

This also means decentering the author/researcher/advocate as the single voice of authority. If we are to understand the hidden and insidious dimensions of violent settler colonial policing in the lives of Indigenous girls, *then we need to listen to them*. If we are going to take seriously the leadership role that can be assumed by Indigenous youth in the fight for Indigenous self-governance and ways of living, then we need to identify concrete ways to bring those opportunities into being. We need to take direction from the Indigenous young women in the Native Youth Sexual Health Network and the Indigenous Young Women’s National Council

who are demonstrating, everyday, how Indigenous girls are *already* leaders in the struggle to end colonial gender violence, and we have to think strategically about how we can actively support them in expanding and growing this work.²⁷ A solid effort must be made, then, to avoid becoming tangled in Laura Berlant's (2011) web of cruel optimism and implementing tokenistic inclusionary efforts. Indigenous youth, after all, are the lived connections among history, extant colonial realities, and the unfolding of what comes next—they are, as Alexa from the Native Youth Sexual Health Network powerfully renders, the “bridges between our ancestors and the people that are ahead of us.” It's time we back them in the fight for the future; a future, I would argue, that is intimately bound up with their fight for the present.

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²⁷ For an excellent example of this leadership, see the zine entitled, “Indigenous Young Women Lead: Our Stories, Our Strengths, Our Truths” which focuses on Indigenous young women's leadership, empowerment, solidarity building, and ending violence.

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