



## UNDER THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

### Indigenous Girls' Presenting as Decolonizing Force

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Like other Western liberal democracies, Canada—despite its global reputation as a progressive, multicultural country—owes its existence to centuries of colonial dominion over places and societies. As a result of the insatiable drive of European nations to expand their empires into new places, incalculable physical, spiritual, political, economic, and sociocultural traumas have been, and continue to be, enacted on Indigenous<sup>1</sup> peoples, with women and girls as prime targets. Over the course of my work with Indigenous girls as a front-line worker, community-based researcher, educator, and advocate, many encounters have profoundly affected me. In this chapter,<sup>2</sup> I revisit conversations that spurred radical shifts in both my girlhood praxis and my evolving understanding of how girlhood is produced and lived in the context of a colonial state. In the following dialogue, part of a participatory research study with young people in care,<sup>3</sup> four First Nations girls unpack persistent stereotypes of Indigenous girlhood.<sup>4</sup>

There's not any Natives on media and stuff, Native girls in magazines or TV, video games, you know ... we're not really shown in a real way. (Kristin-Lee, fourteen, Cree/Métis/Irish)

We're kind of left out. (Danielle, seventeen, Tsimshian/Haisla)

Yeah, the beauty of our culture gets left out. (Kristin-Lee)

I feel like people just think Native women complain and complain and complain all the time, we just want something for nothing. (Cindy, sixteen, First Nations)

Uh-huh, and yeah, why is nobody paying attention to the actual history? (Kristin-Lee)

It's true, 'cause it's not getting better through the ages. (Danielle)

For sure, it's like, how loud do we have to yell? Hello, there's a problem here, there's a lot of violence against us First Nations girls and women. A

lot. It's a problem, hello. We're NOT shown to be strong, or beautiful, or even worth much. (Cindy)

Oh my god, that's so true! They do think, at school they think Native women are working girls or we're just so—we can't do anything for ourselves. (Kristin-Lee)

This one guy one time told me that First Nations girls are all like raped since they're young so they're just, um, that's it for them, like they're ruined for life, so that's all they know, and I was like "wait a minute, take another look." (Cindy)

I return in this chapter to Cindy's question: "How loud do we have to yell?" I want to heed her call to "wait a minute, take another look." In taking another look, I hold up ways that Indigenous girls bravely and creatively negotiate colonial traumas that seep into bodies, spirits, relations, structures, systems, and places. I aim to explore how girls enact a different kind of presence (see Simpson 2011), galvanized through humor, contestation, and proud resurgence that exceeds exclusionary neocolonial notions of white, liberal girlhood. To do so, it is important to situate Indigenous girls' everyday processes of resurgence and presencing as they take shape amid intersecting forms of traumatic violence that colonial states and societies produce: epistemic and ontological violence; territorial, geographic, and spatial violence; embodied/material, affective, cognitive, and spiritual violence; and political, economic, and sociocultural violence. As Downe argues, "[T]he 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" (2006: 3).

In trying to reconceptualize Indigenous girlhood in the midst of overlapping forms of colonial violence, I consider the following guiding questions: How do we challenge the persistent construction of Indigenous girl bodies as insignificant, dispensable, and irrevocably broken? What other conceptualizations of trauma, place, and girlhood can we engage with to enact a different praxis of girlhood? How might such stories inform creative approaches that support resurgence and presencing as cumulative decolonizing forces?

I approach these questions by interrogating the notions of trauma and place as they relate to Indigenous girlhoods and to the field of girlhood studies. I begin by providing some context for presencing as girlhood praxis to unpack the pervasive image of Indigenous girls as exploitable and dispensable. Given the increasingly diverse and stratified societies in which we work with girls, we need expanded defini-

tions of Indigenous girlhood that foreground the political, historical, economic, and sociocultural forces that structure girls' encounters with trauma as it is shaped by, and in, colonized places.

To this end, I conceptualize the girls' local and contextualized experiences of dominant coloniality and whiteness that are emblematic of Canadian places—the predominantly Euro-Western cities, towns, and rural communities in which the girls live. I do so by thinking through how place is produced by state formations, mutating colonial forces, connections with ecosystems and all relations (Simpson 2011), and relationships among European settlers, racialized migrants, and First Peoples that are mediated through intersecting formations of nationality, citizenship, age, gender, race, class, and sexuality, among other systems.

Just as I take place out of dominant colonial discourses of *terra nullius* and European dominion (Anderson 2011), I take trauma out of its bio-psychologized boundaries to conceptualize it instead as a deliberate, ongoing, pervasive tool of historical and contemporary colonialism. Mobile forms of colonial trauma make girls into particular kinds of “ungrievable bodies” (Butler 2009: 14)—bodies without hope and without capacity, victim bodies, disenfranchised bodies. Such conceptualizations place the burden for healing on Indigenous girls while facilitating a state agenda of economic and political control over place via the extinguishment of Indigenous self-determination. At the same time, hundreds of missing or murdered Indigenous girls and women across Canada are revictimized by systemic failures on the part of the state to ensure appropriate policy, legal, and community-based interventions to address racialized, gendered, sexualized violence (Anderson 2011). This violence is too often obscured by individualized, medicalized conceptions of trauma that portray Indigenous girls as faceless and broken, as illustrated by the conversation among Danielle, Kristin-Lee, and Cindy with which I began this chapter.

## **Presencing as Girlhood Praxis**

As a disruptive practice, I look for counternormative conceptual frameworks that offer openings to rethink trauma in our work with Indigenous girls. One such framework is Leanne Simpson's notion that acts of presence are integral to Indigenous resurgence. Simpson emphasizes that decolonization involves understanding and generating meaning “through engagement, presence and process.” She asserts that “Indigenous societies were societies of presence. Our processes—be they political, spiritual, education or healing—required a higher degree of

presence than modern colonial existence” (2011: 92–93). Simpson explains that presencing is nurtured by collective advocacy and mobilization, rooted in spiritual and cultural resurgence. In the following passage, she shares the importance of participating with her family and community in a political manifestation as a way of enacting a sense of political and spiritual engagement and visibility. For her, presencing is a grounding process, a transformative decolonizing force: “That day, we were not seeking recognition or asking for rights. We were not trying to fit into Canada. ... This was not a protest. This was not a demonstration. This was a quiet, collective act of resurgence. It was a mobilization and it was political because it was a reminder that although we are collectively unseen ... when we come together with one mind and one heart we can transform our land and our city into a decolonized space and a place of resurgence, even if it is only for a brief amount of time.” (11) Like the “com[ing] together” in a “quiet, collective act of resurgence” that Simpson describes, girls’ everyday acts of presence—avoiding, protecting, contesting, laughing, hoping, dreaming, connecting, documenting, imagining, challenging—are not singular, simplistic examples of rational agency; they are messy, contradictory, and inherently diverse. This diversity brings to light other conceptualizations of trauma and place with which we can engage to enact a praxis of girlhood that challenges feminist analyses of structural barriers that leave little room for honoring girls’ everyday engagements with hope, desire, humor, and possibility.

Instead of seeking to meticulously define resurgence and presencing, I hope to expand understandings of their diverse effects as decolonizing forces so as to provide a more nuanced account of what a politics of decolonization may mean for a girlhood studies future. I punctuate my discussion with other conversations with Indigenous girls.<sup>5</sup> I draw on participatory research and community projects conducted over several years with girls and young women aged between twelve and nineteen years in Victoria and surrounding communities on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The studies were diverse in scope, topic, and methods. They included Indigenous methodologies and other participatory methods: discussion circles; cultural camps; ceremony; individual and group interviews; action and advocacy projects; and arts-based methods such as photography, theater, mask making, and drumming. Each project included a range of participation options, from one-time-only participants to girls who deepened their involvement with each other and the research over several years. I have written about these studies elsewhere (see de Finney 2010; de Finney et al. 2011; Loiselle et al. 2012; de Finney and Saraceno 2015). In this chapter, I bring together themes

and currents in and across the studies as they relate to trauma, place, and Indigenous girlhood. The examples are not meant to serve as tokenized accounts taken out of context or superficially universalized. They reflect girls' everyday entanglements with complex questions and highlight the possibilities in girlhood studies for supporting Indigenous girls' presencing strategies as an active, politicized, decolonizing process.

## **The Politics of Place and Trauma: Canada as Neocolonial State**

When trauma is presented as a biomedical-psychological effect, we fail to theorize its strategic uses as a colonial relation of power. Canada, as "a settler society with a history of genocide and colonization" (Razack 2002: 89), has maintained its colonial authority through policies that use trauma to break down sovereign Indigenous nations. Cradle-to-grave colonial policies like the Indian Act have aimed to manage "the Indian problem" from birth to death by targeting Native bodies, social and economic organizations, political structures, spirits, memories, and cultural fabric. Such policies targeted Indigenous children as a deliberate strategy to "kill the Indian in the child" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada n.d.: 4), to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of cultural values and claims to land. Children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in residential schools where they were severed from connections to their siblings, families, communities, and lands; beaten for practicing their spiritual and cultural traditions; and often systematically abused sexually, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

The residential school system has become the iconic representation of intergenerational colonial trauma in Canada, and it is often represented as a horror of a colonial past from which the country has now recovered. In this representation, its effects are seen to be residual at best, carried across generations that have failed to heal from residential schools' traumatic effects. Far from being resolved, however, colonial practices of cultural disenfranchisement and economic and political exclusion are compounding over time. Several newer waves of residential internment, each worse than the previous one, have targeted Indigenous children. More Indigenous children are in government care today than during the height of the residential school era. While Indigenous children represent less than 4 percent of Canada's population, they currently constitute over 50 percent of children in foster care (First Nations Education Council 2009). Most Indigenous children in

care live with non-Aboriginal families, a trend that exacerbates the cycle of forced disconnection from culture, language, and communities. On-reserve First Nations children and youth have the highest rates of poverty yet receive the least funding—up to 22 percent less for social services and between 25 percent and 40 percent less for education than for non-Aboriginal children (First Nations Education Council 2009). In 2011, Auditor General Sheila Fraser released an evaluation of ten years of federal policies dealing with First Nations. Her report states that the basics of life—clean drinking water, adequate housing, education, and child welfare—are persistently and dramatically substandard for First Nations, and in some cases the situation is deteriorating. In speaking to these findings, Fraser said: “I am profoundly disappointed to note ... [that] a disproportionate number of First Nations people still lack the most basic services that other Canadians take for granted ... in a country as rich as Canada, this disparity is unacceptable” (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2011: 1–2).

Through a fully active governmentality of colonial traumatization involving necropolitics, death by bureaucracy, spatial containment, and political, cultural, and economic disenfranchisement, Canadian society continues to rely on the subjugation of Indigenous people. Canada’s colonial state practices sustain a system of chronic poverty, social exclusion, and political and cultural disenfranchisement, with particularly dire effects on Indigenous women and girls. In Canada, Indigenous girls and women suffer the highest rates of sexual exploitation, racialized violence, incarceration, murder, poverty, underhousing and homelessness, and underservicing in health and education sectors (Anderson and Lawrence 2003; Sikka 2009; Suzack et al. 2010).

## **Presencing against Colonial Traumatization**

The conversation among Danielle, Kristin-Lee, and Cindy presented at the beginning of this chapter speaks to the power and difficulty of developing a critical analysis of racialized, gendered, sexualized violence as a form of presence. The girls voiced their invisibility in dominant sociocultural contexts such as popular media and public discourse and linked this invisibility to the erasure of their cultures’ beauty, diversity, and significance. They used humor to contest the notion of Indigenous girls as damaged, dependent, and broken. Their collective questioning, analysis, and satire are compelling engagements of presence. In a context of pervasive denial, developing an analysis of active coloniality

constitutes powerful, courageous acts of presencing: this is knowledge that cannot be taken for granted as being easily accessible to girls. A prevalent theme in the girls' struggles to make sense of this erasure is that of "not quite know[ing] why or how to explain it different, even though you know it's wrong and it keeps happening all around." When Kristin-Lee asks, "Why is nobody paying attention to the actual history?" Danielle responds that, "it's true, 'cause it's not getting better through the ages." Supporting girls' efforts to presence themselves by disrupting dominant narratives of Indigenous girlhood, by building connections with each other and with communities, entails making this history visible and contestable, producing other possibilities for transformative girlhood praxis.

These possibilities collide with an alarming new trend in fields that inform girlhood studies (such as education and gender, sexuality, and cultural studies) regarding the appropriation of decolonization discourses. In this convenient reimagining, settler colonialism is recast as just another so-called special interest issue. We are now invited to decolonize our programs, methodologies, and institutions (Tuck and Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang deplore the "casual ease" with which decolonization language has been adopted, "with little recognition given to the immediate context of settler colonialism on North American lands." They add that "when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (3).

To trouble a settler future and avoid metaphorical evasions, I pay particular attention to the specificity of girls' contestations of settler colonialism. One connection that girls highlight is that colonial relations have produced both Indigenous girls/women *and* land/place as colonial property. Extending our analysis beyond a human-centered focus enables us to understand colonial trauma as highly spatialized and ecological in scope. The colonial state has for centuries engaged destructive and highly adaptable methods to secure its supremacy over land by extracting both resources and people from their ecosystems. Colonial hegemony involves segregating First Peoples, not only from culture and community, but from land and water (for example, burial grounds; traditional harvesting, fishing, and hunting grounds; shores and forests) that were essential to Indigenous economies, cultural traditions, wellness, and self-sustainability (Tuck and Yang 2012). As Seeka and TJ explain in the following conversation, Indigenous peoples were simultaneously mined for their knowledge of ecosystems and forcefully removed from them.

When they settled ... here, the whites who came early, they used what we knew about nature, how to use animals and all that, fishing, the tree bark, how we used ... our berry patches and everything. (Seeka, sixteen, First Nation living on reserve)

Yeah, it saved their life. (TJ, fourteen, Métis and Irish)

Or, like even when it's a Native name, like they change it to make it more English-sounding ... like they're never saying, "This is actually a Native river that we took without paying for it" but guess what, now it's called like England River or whatever, "Isn't that great? Let's celebrate ourselves." (Seeka)

Sherene Razack links colonial appropriation to a mindset that "not only enabled White settlers to secure the land but to come to know themselves as entitled to it" (2002: 129). In this colonial reimagining, Indigenous lands and societies are erased through markers of imperial hegemony (expropriated and renamed berry patches, rivers, fields, and mountains; colonial province, town, and street names; monuments celebrating explorers, pioneers, monarchs, and empires). TJ and Seeka describe the colonizers' spatial claims that established European dominion while they appropriated and negated Indigenous traditional scientific knowledge. The girls' naming of these dynamics contests the construction of Indigenous people as static relics of the past, as peripheral to contemporary Canadian society and to appropriated places.

The girls explain that counternarratives have been passed down to them through intergenerational stories of resurgence and presence: "My mom explained this to me growing up, like all the women kept the language alive and they even went to jail for it" (TJ). Intergenerational connections feature prominently in girls' conversations. Their stories emphasize the creative ways in which Indigenous women and girls have, for hundreds of years, mobilized as activists, teachers, healers, leaders, and advocates, pushed for legislative and policy change, initiated grassroots movements and organized international advocacy, created community-based services and alternative economies, and acted as spiritual and cultural leaders (see Anderson and Lawrence 2003; Martin-Hill 2003; Andrea Smith 2005; Suzack et al. 2010). Many of the girls I work with are aware of this legacy of tremendous strength and resilience, and many participate in individual and collective resistances of all kinds that connect them with other girls, sisters, women, aunties, and grandmothers.

At the same time, many girls have spoken at length about missing a woman role model and not having a strong woman to look up to. Martin-Hill stresses that colonial patriarchy is continuously reconfig-



ured in Indigenous communities by horizontal oppression. She writes: “The emergence of an Indigenous “traditional” woman who is silent and obedient to male authority contributes to the image of a voiceless woman whom I call She No Speaks, born from the tapestry of our colonial landscape ... defeated, hunched over, head down and with no future” (2003: 108). In this context, colonial trauma must be understood as intimately gendered. Indeed, many girls I have worked with struggle against narrow gender binaries that produce the constitutive categories of girl and woman, leaving little room for other gender identities. It is to the intersecting gendered, sexualized, racialized dimensions of colonial trauma that I now turn my attention.

### **Colonial Gender Formations: Rethinking Trauma and the Ungrievable Girl**

Lugones (2007) argues that colonialism produced the male/female gender binary that permeates normative Western subjecthood under neoliberalism. Smith (2005) expands on this idea, emphasizing that the gender binary is part of a colonial matrix that also includes the dichotomy of hegemonic whiteness/racialized other, compulsory heteronormativity, and capitalist exploitation. In this regard, transnational analyses of global imperialism and its implication in global capitalism and Indigenous women and girls’ sexual and labor exploitation inform the girls’ localized analysis. Indigenous girls and women have been treated very differently than boys and men by colonial institutions, in part because they were essential to the intergenerational transmission of culture and thus to First Peoples’ sovereignty and continuity. Over centuries, colonial policies have sought to disenfranchise women from their Aboriginal status, their leadership in Indigenous societies, and their access to housing and employment in their communities (Anderson 2011; Tuck and Yang 2012). Indigenous girls and women have been seen as property while being degraded and sexualized to justify colonial violence (Sikka 2009). Government agents would often “withhold rations unless Aboriginal women were made available to them” (Razack 2002: 131). This violence persists, as indicated by the disproportionately high rates of sexualized violence, criminalization, trafficking, and murder of Indigenous girls and women. It is continually (re)produced and normalized through its systemic denial across public, legal, and state discursive constructions of Indigenous girl bodies as exploitable, and their trauma as ungrievable and thus acceptable. For Judith Butler, grievability presupposes that life matters: “without grievability, there is no life,

or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, 'there is a life that will never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost" (2009: 14–15).

Ungrievability, as Cindy explained in the opening dialogue, engenders Indigenous girl bodies as "ruined for life, not strong, beautiful, or even worth much." Elsewhere, fifteen-year-old Rianna described the racial slurs and stereotypes she heard growing up: "Let's see ... there's the drunk, the ho, like all Native girls are on the street. There's the dirty Indian, broke. There's the whole Indian woman in a blanket thing, with the braids, like two hundred years ago. The whole Pocahontas thing. That's what we have to choose from." Seeka jumped in: "No wonder ... Native girls disappear and stuff and it never makes it to the news." As Cindy, Rianna, and Seeka offer in their precise, grief-filled accounts, these narratives cast Indigenous girls as voiceless, broken, colonial caricatures; they obscure girls' complex experiences, knowledges, strengths, and desires. The girls speak to the paradoxical invisibility/hypervisibility of Indigenous girls who, under the Canadian colonial state, are both objects of social and political anxieties and constructed as less valuable and grievable than other girls. Simultaneously pathologized and criminalized for colonial violence, their exploitation is seen as less deserving of public empathy, government resources, and comprehensive social, economic, and political interventions (see de Finney and Saraceno 2015). Indigenous girls do not fit the victim image that has been negotiated and sustained by societal discourses that inform funding policies for education and intervention services for women and girls (Sikka 2009). And, despite their personal knowledge of these dynamics, they are rarely included in programing debates that affect them (de Finney and Saraceno 2015).

It is clear that we need to move away from generalized, narrow psychological understandings of trauma toward historicized, politicized conceptions. Pathology-driven lenses "seek [only] to document pain, loss, brokenness or damage" (Tuck 2010: 638). Within such a model, Indigenous girls remain marginalized, relegated to proving their worth and entitlement through the mutually constituting discourses of risk/trauma and deservedness/thankfulness. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, a damage-centered approach reduces Indigenous people to "making claims" about their "rights and dues" (2012: 143). This approach reasserts settlers' authority to legitimize Indigenous contestations, to give up the resources they now control—a restructuring of power that is unlikely under an active colonial state, and one that mutes invaluable accounts of resurgence and presencing. We urgently need to take another look and search for other accounts.

## Toward a Politics of Spirited Presencing

When I step into the Big House, being there, it's when I feel most powerful.  
(Raven, fifteen, Coast Salish)

As an alternative to pathologizing frameworks that depict “entire schools, tribes, and communities as flattened, ruined, devastated” (Tuck 2010: 638), Tuck proposes a framework of productive possibility that is equally “intent on convoking loss and oppression” and invested in nurturing “wisdom, hope, and survivance.” She cites Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, who explains that what he calls “survivance” constitutes an “active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” that strengthens sovereignty and resurgence (639). Sovereignty, Damien Lee reminds us, involves implicating ourselves fully, since colonialism occupies not only our lands, but “our minds, bodies and narratives, and re-occupying these spaces is a form of resurgence” (2011: 4).

Girls enact presence when they contest their positioning as invisible by physically, spiritually, and symbolically (re)occupying the places that hold their ancestral connections as First Peoples. Some girls describe seeking out relationships to places that recenter the power of dream work, spiritual healing, and ancestral relations. In the following conversation, two girls, Raven and Tamrah, discuss their relationship to a creek near their home and the powerful healing energy they encounter there.

There's this place, it's a creek. I always have a vision there. Lots of people have seen the ancestors there. It's the old people that, they come and check, check in on us, and the other living things, like they check in on the trees and the water and they kinda come there to replenish themselves too, 'cause the water is healing that way. (Tamrah, eighteen, Coast Salish)

That's a real power, powerful energy or something there that's beyond anything we here could do in a workshop, website, or whatever. It's not something government funders would understand (laughter). It's more for us, for just us, that it feeds that, our spirits. (Raven)

Presencing with what Tamrah describes as “all relations” of ancestors, living things, trees, water, and other powerful energies draws on generations of communal knowledge. Importantly, presencing exceeds the interpersonal notions of relational practice that dominate analyses of how to work with girls. Here, girlhood is a situated, collective, relational event, intimately connected to place, to other forces, and to beyond-human relations; it involves intensities of place, affect, spirit, healing, embodied contestation, political struggle for sovereignty, and commu-

nity building. As such, presencing is part of a decolonizing “relationship framework” (Amadahy, cited in Walia 2012: 4) that moves us beyond psychological understandings of relational practice to a more politicized accountability and grounding in an ethic of mutual responsibility.

Of course, it is difficult to enact mutual, politicized accountability under an active colonial state. Presencing clearly cannot be extricated from ongoing colonial effects and other power relations, and I seek to honor the girls’ acts of presence without romanticizing and exception-izing them. Girls live with multiple, diffuse formations of patriarchy, sexism, racism, heteronormativity, class relations, migration, and overlapping nationalisms that always operate at multiple levels and in unpredictable ways. Girls’ identity formation and presencing cannot be disentangled from these shifting forces. Celebratory back-to-the-land statements are fraught with tension about access, feasibility, and the trappings of identity politics; the phrase can evoke essentialized notions of the noble savage and an unrecoverable past; and it also tends to erase heterogeneity among girls, communities, nations, and locations when, in fact, girls’ relationships with land and place are entangled with the politics of skin color, gender, social class, family background, personal histories, contested claims to Indigeneity, and so on. I have met many girls who know nothing about their Indigenous backgrounds, who are not interested in further exploration, who express deep shame or a deliberate lack of interest, who do not feel entitled to claim an Indigenous identity, and/or who say they do not want to be pigeonholed as Native girls. These are valid and important facets of the diverse stories of Indigenous girls. But to simply accept these expressions as normal, inevitable outcomes of multiculturalism, globalization, and growing cultural hybridity erases the colonial forces that produce disconnection, shame, and lateral and internalized racisms. It also reconstitutes Indigenous girls as perpetually passive, culturally disconnected victims of colonization. This is an important topic and one I have explored elsewhere (see de Finney and Saraceno 2015). Here, I want to focus on the many girls for whom ancestral and community connections matter. For so many girls, particularly those of mixed backgrounds who may not identify as Indigenous or who grew up disconnected from their territories, cultures, and communities, stories that model presencing are salient even if tenuous and partial. As Krestin and Sarah outline, such connections, however difficult, are meaningful:

It’s hard, because for me, I personally don’t have that cultural knowledge. I ... didn’t grow up knowing my culture. But it still matters to me. I mean,

I do want that choice ... I wouldn't just give that up. (Krestin, seventeen, Métis/Scottish/English)

I grew up in care, and it's so important. It's just knowing 'OK, I'm not that drunk Indian' or also, on the flip side, I don't have to give it up as a white girl. (Sarah, nineteen, Cree/Haida)

Krestin's assertion that her history matters even if she is not connected to her community, that she would not "just give that up," offers a powerful antidote to Sarah's description of the binary of being either "a white girl or that drunk Indian." Laenui (2000) suggests that decolonization involves mourning as much it does recovery, action, and dreaming. And so, even when girls' perspectives are impossibly disconnected, even when their actions are small, painful, contradictory, or haphazard, their presencing nonetheless accumulates intensities that erode the overwhelming force of gendered, racialized, sexualized colonial narratives, and creates new possibilities for well-being, belonging, and everyday solidarities. "You can't give up. It's kind of all the little things. It's a daily struggle. I mean, most of the time, I don't think about sexism, racism, but it's more just a daily thing, saying 'I'm here, I'm here.' I try to just keep my head up and do what I can, you know? The little things add up, just talking with Elders, community events. I try to role model to my little sisters that we can do things differently. It does add up—that's what I believe. In my heart I believe that" (Anonymous). These varied strategies are precisely what speak to many girls who do not see their realities represented in normative Euro-Western perspectives on girlhood. Their stories of participating in community events and ceremonies, working with elders, role-modeling with siblings, engaging with places, building relationships with others do still matter and they add up. They say, "I'm here" despite "the daily struggle." This notion depicts presencing as imperfect yet productive of related and accessible webs of connection and engagement. Girls negotiate resurgence and resist sustained assaults on Indigenous bodies, lands, and sovereign Nations through everyday practices of ceremony, hope, creativity, subversion, storytelling, outrage, dream work, political action, critical analysis, and centering community knowledges. These are not individualized, self-determined acts of the empowered so-called postfeminist liberal girl subject that is prevalent in Euro-Western girlhood studies. The girls' reflections on gender, race, ecology, and social change speak to knowledge and ways of being that flow outside the overwhelmingly Euro-Western perspectives that define girlhood, girl agency, and girl bodies.

## Arguing for a Trans-theoretical Girlhood Praxis

What, then, might a framework of resurgence and presencing teach us about coming together differently, critically, productively to subvert exclusionary notions of girlhood and girlhood praxis? What critical theories and practices can contribute to a more politicized, inclusive girlhood studies?

I am concerned about the limited interdisciplinarity among Indigenous and feminist theories, the undertheorizing of girlhood in feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, and the absence of Indigenous analyses in girlhood studies. First, the erasure of Indigenous girlhood that the girls in this chapter discuss is replicated in the undertheorizing of Indigenous issues in girlhood studies. Given that Indigenous girls are the fastest-growing girl population in Canada (Statistics Canada 2008), such an analysis is increasingly important. Yet, despite girls' potential to inform such debates, the intersecting effects of gendering, sexualization, racialization, and colonization are not substantially examined in studies of Aboriginal youth, which tend to subsume girls under the boy-centered youth category (Jiwani, Steenberg, and Mitchell 2006; de Finney 2010). A gender/sexuality analysis is also lacking in much Indigenous rights and Indigenous nationhood literature and advocacy work—an issue addressed by a small but growing number of Indigenous feminists (for example, Kim Anderson, Leanne Simpson, Rebecca Tsosie, and Eve Tuck). And, while girlhood studies centers girls as a category in feminist inquiry, Griffin (2004) emphasizes that some girls are more visible than others in this process.

Also at stake is the very notion of the girl; girlhood studies generally fails to unpack the colonial legacies that make the term *girl* possible or question its role in producing normative girlhood (and, by default, normative gender and sexuality binaries and related concepts of woman, teen, tween, girls as women-in-progress, and so on). Taft implores us to address girls' complex relationship to girlhood as a way to "redefine what it means to be a girl" (2011: 18). Certainly, as argued in this volume on the politics of place and girlhood studies, the girl remains an important, constitutive category of lived experience and of inquiry and practice that warrants dedicated focus. At the same time, a small but growing body of literature is bringing much-needed queer theorizing to girlhood and Indigenous studies that highlights not only how Indigenous girls but young people of all genders and sexual orientations relate to these categories. I unpack these ideas elsewhere (de Finney et al. 2010; Loiselle et al. 2012), and I am aware that my inquiries provide

a useful site of contestation while simultaneously reifying the notion of girl as reproductive of the colonial matrix.

Given these gaps, a trans-theoretical framework would explore potential coalitions among theoretical histories to provide a more nuanced account of what a politics of decolonization might mean for the future of girlhood studies. I am stirred by Cindy's request for an analysis of place and trauma that contests a pervasive understanding that "all girls have issues" and Indigenous girls "just want something for nothing." The excerpts I have shared here disturb the mainstream positioning of Indigenous girls outside of normative ideas of what it means to be adjusted, healthy, successful, beautiful, worthy and, even, girl itself.

## **Conclusion: Tensions and Possibilities**

Taft stresses that girls' activism are "located in their own struggles against and within the global flows of power," that they entail "radical political practices that aim to counter the scattered hegemonies that affect their lives" (2011: 18), and that they include intensive and theoretical political conversations, the building of activist communities, and horizontalist political engagements, fueled by girls' desire for transformation.

As Taft advocates, the girls I work with want information and critical language to explain the persistent violence targeting Indigenous girls and women. Some wonder why the Canadian government refuses to call a national inquiry into hundreds of cases of missing Indigenous girls and women. Many want strategies for transformation and radical reimaginings that involve not only looking forward, but also looking back, to old knowledges and ancestral connections that remain vibrant and important. They want to represent themselves against and outside of limiting bio-psychological descriptions like low self-esteem and high-risk, and cultural disconnection that pathologize and victimize them. They describe a trivializing and a denial of their perspectives, an assumption that they do not already know about or engage with issues that have shaped generations of their families. Many reject superficial, essentialized notions of empowerment and diversity that are prevalent in girlhood practice. They are equally critical of apolitical, color-blind approaches that are disconnected from what is going on in their lives and communities.

In holding up examples of presencing as a productive direction in girlhood studies, we cannot ignore the power of ongoing colonial effects to constrain possibilities for resurgence. The Canadian state is not

a static, homogenous entity, and its fluidity is the very thing that ensures the reproduction of colonial relations over time. How and why girls presence is never one-dimensional; diffuse and multiple forces both produce and constrain possibilities for transformation.

Still, paying attention to girls' presencing strategies opens pathways into much-needed alternative stories of Indigenous girlhood. They highlight the need in girlhood studies for courageous, expansive conversations that disclaim the superficial appropriation of decolonization discourses. It is critical that analyses of (de)colonization not reproduce metaphorical erasures that entrench a settler future, but instead center issues of land, sovereignty, and resurgence. The presencing possibilities presented here are emergent, situated, and context-specific. They come out of critical relational praxis with the histories, communities, places, and issues at hand, and as such they cannot be neatly reapplied in other settings. Vital to this approach is struggling and collaborating in the specific places where we work as community members, girlhood scholars, practitioners, advocates, and allies. It takes time to produce critical girlhood praxis in each new context, to live with the tensions and productive possibilities, and this approach brings to light the incommensurability of the many deep-seated structural traumas girls repeatedly name. However, taking up alternatives to dominant frameworks in and as girlhood praxis produces urgently needed openings for presencing amid Indigenous girls' complex socio-material conditions and against and beyond colonial formations of place and girlhood.

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## Notes

1. I avoid using the state-produced term “Aboriginal” denoted in the Indian Act and imposed on Indigenous people to highlight their constitution as colonial subjects. Where possible, I use a Nation’s self-determined name. I use the terms *Indigenous* and *First Peoples* to refer to original societies, not only in a Canadian context, but worldwide.
2. This chapter first appeared as an article in *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 1 (2014): 8–26.
3. This conversation took place during community-based research with Indigenous youth in foster care funded by the Victoria Foundation and the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. Other excerpts are drawn from these studies or from a SSHRC-funded study, under the direction of Dr. Jo-Anne Lee (University of Victoria), that led to the creation of antidote ([antidotenetwork.org](http://antidotenetwork.org)), an award-winning grassroots network for and by racialized and Indigenous girls, young women, and women. All studies were conducted exclusively by research teams of Indigenous and racialized girls and women.
4. These verbatim accounts have not been edited.
5. I identify the girls in the ways they requested, including whether or not they wanted their real name or a code name (including Anonymous) used, their age and other descriptors, and how they self-identified their ethnic backgrounds and Indigenous ancestry (for example, Native, First Nation, Indigenous, Indian, Métis, Aboriginal, mixed race, status/nonstatus, on/off reserve). In my work, I use such terms provisionally to engage girls in unpacking their meanings and effects.

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