

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Notes on Becoming a Comrade: Indigenous Women, Leadership, and Movement(s) for Decolonization

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6c99n95d>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 43(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Dhillon, Jaskiran

**Publication Date**

2019-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953/aicrj.43.3.dhillon

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Notes on Becoming a Comrade: Indigenous Women, Leadership, and Movement(s) for Decolonization

*Jaskiran Dhillon*

## THE STAKES

This essay was written out of a desire to think more deeply, theoretically, and practically about what it means to be a politicized ally—a comrade—to Indigenous peoples in their struggles for justice and freedom in the settler-colonial present.<sup>1</sup> In sharing my own perspectives and experiences of politicized allyship, rooted in principles of integrity, accountability, care, and reflexive collaboration, I hope to spark critical conversations about the hard work of solidarity and forge a space for crafting alliances that transcend the reproduction of colonial dynamics. Ethnographic research, political organizing, and movements for decolonization are all bound up with how we develop a sense of connection to one another. Reflexive relationality, in many ways, is the core foundation from which all other social and political work stems. This essay is an attempt to map this relationality, to offer an opening into understanding the stakes, possibilities, and challenges of working collaboratively in the present context of structurally unequal power relations and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their homelands.

In 2014, Alice Goffman's ethnographic study *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* erupted and within weeks became a highly contentious topic of debate both inside and outside the US academy.<sup>2</sup> Admirers quickly elevated the book to the

---

JASKIRAN DHILLON is an anti-colonial scholar and organizer who grew up on Treaty 6 Cree Territory in Saskatchewan, Canada. She is the author of *Prairie Rising: Indigenous Youth, Decolonization, and the Politics of Intervention* (2017) and coeditor of *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (2019). Jaskiran is an associate professor of global studies and anthropology at The New School in New York City.

heights of critical acclaim, positioning *On the Run* as an “extraordinary” contribution to revealing insights about why Black life is lived under and against occupation.<sup>3</sup> Others cast an anti-colonial, judicious gaze on Goffman and her work, resurrecting historical and contemporary critiques of the way research, ostensibly undertaken in the service of advancing liberation for Black people in America, fashions marginalized lives into subjects of scholarly inquiry and functions as a technique of social and political domination through the (re)production of colonial modes of knowing and the production of knowledge itself. In a scathing review in *The New Inquiry*, for example, Christina Sharpe takes issue with Goffman’s role as a white academic researching young Black men without due consideration of the history and politics associated with such a project, or a detailed explanation of Goffman’s positionality in relation to this work. She also questions Goffman’s decision to follow in the footsteps of a long sociological tradition of researching “urban Black America.”<sup>4</sup> Goffman’s book, Sharpe claims, is only the most recent installment of the neoliberal “engaged” university’s attempt to do immersive urban ethnography on Black lives. She cautions, however, that “field-work itself reproduces modes of knowing straight out of plantation slavery, plantation management, and plantation geographies that were laboratories for black subjection and black resistance.”<sup>5</sup> Simply put, research and advocacy for social transformation is far from a benign enterprise; it is always about power.

Sharpe’s essential reminders of the problematics of research and activism within a world structured by unequal, asymmetrical power relations are equally applicable within the context of settler colonialism on Turtle Island. In the field of critical Indigenous studies, important and fierce critiques of anthropology’s tainted hand in (re)producing accounts of the essential and objectified “Indigenous tribal culture” have cast light on how academic depictions of Indigenous civilizations feed into settler colonialism—the story of the primitive, the savage, the backward—and more specifically, how these accounts have been used by the settler state to legitimize conquest and dispossession en route to elimination.<sup>6</sup> More recently, there has been an Indigenous-led indictment of those who have claimed to be working towards decolonization for Indigenous nations across Turtle Island through the production and circulation of knowledge, in both scholarly and popular media outlets—for accessing public platforms to speak on Indigenous issues without divulging who they are or the motives for engaging in research, writing, and advocacy with Indigenous Nations, and for failing to demonstrate how they are accountable to the Indigenous communities for which they are speaking on behalf of and writing about.<sup>7</sup> The controversy surrounding Joseph Boyden’s bogus claims to indigeneity, as an exemplary case in point, is a grave reminder of what happens when questions of politicized allyship coupled with an ongoing, reflexive discussion of who speaks for Native peoples recedes too far into the shadows.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this spirit of recovering accountability that this essay explores the possibilities and challenges of becoming a comrade to Indigenous peoples in their struggles for decolonization, justice, and liberation. Written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous woman of color “standing with” Indigenous communities through politicized allyship, I engage in a kind of auto-ethnography that maps my trajectory

to becoming a comrade.<sup>9</sup> I highlight key moments in the development of my critical consciousness by foregrounding the fundamental leadership of Indigenous women in decolonial activism and scholarship across a range of sociopolitical arenas, including environmentalism and climate change, colonial gender violence, and the arts, that have been foundational to the anti-colonial frameworks guiding my own scholarship and political organizing efforts. Most centrally, I argue for the importance of placing Indigenous women's intergenerational social and political knowledge, intellectual prowess, and direct action at the epicenter of social movements focused on critical praxis and decolonization.

Beginning by socially locating myself and my interest in critical Indigenous studies, I then offer a series of key moments central to creating my understanding of what it means to be a comrade, explicitly linked to the leadership of Indigenous women and the guidance I have received from them. The closing section of the essay speaks more directly to questions of representation and confronting settler complicity, paving the way for careful movement forward.

## BEGINNING WHERE YOU ARE: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF BECOMING A COMRADE THAT "STANDS WITH"

I use the term "comrade" rather than "ally" to signal urgency around the politicization of solidarity work. Benign notions of allyship, or solidarity with no teeth, has been rightfully critiqued for reinscribing colonial relations of domination, and doing little to interrupt or dismantle white settler power and broader colonial structures upholding white supremacy.<sup>10</sup> Thinking of oneself as a political comrade demands, first and foremost, that you know who you are, that you have a deep understanding of what you have inherited by virtue of your social history and political standing—that you look inward to unveil, as Scott Morgenson importantly asks: "who, under what conditions, inherits the power to represent or enact settler colonialism?"<sup>11</sup>

Real talk.

I grew up on Treaty Six Cree Territory in the province now known as Saskatchewan. My parents migrated to Canada in the 1960s, fleeing from their own inheritance of British imperialism in Northern India. I grew up hearing stories about the violence associated with occupation and of the partition of India in 1947. My maternal grandfather and grandmother sheltered Muslim families until they could make safe passage across the newly developed (colonial) border between Pakistan and India. My father, only twelve years old at the time, and many of his friends, attempted to find medical help for people brutalized from violence associated with partition who ended up in their village. My family members carried these and other experiences and histories with them to Canada.

Not unlike many first-generation immigrant kids, I developed an innate curiosity and awareness about difference and power by virtue of the complex terrain in which I grew up. My father was an atheist, an immigrant, and the school principal in a farming community of approximately 300 people almost entirely homogenously white. I, along with my father, my mother, and my two sisters, all tried to make sense of the

dislocation and tensions we encountered as individuals positioned outside of white-settler Canadian nationalism. I always felt lodged in an invisible seam between two worlds and grew up accustomed to being asked where I was from, despite having been born in Canada. A consistent stream of spoken and unspoken reminders reinforced the idea that even though my family had made Canada home, we were not wholly welcome. Settler whiteness thwarted our sense of belonging, sent us into the zone of perpetual spinning that comes along with asking the slippery question: “where do I fit?”

Growing up in this environment, however, also allowed me to witness ruptures in the dominant trope regarding Canada’s “peaceful history.” I began to notice firsthand how discussions about Indigenous and white relations pervaded local newspapers, educational debates, and federal concerns over place, land, and belonging. Over the years, I watched as my father, a K-12 school principal, struggled to support the few Indigenous students who attended, youth who were placed in foster homes in farms close to the town. I also remember visiting small prairie cities where there was a significant urban Indigenous presence and witnessing my father’s respectful and inquisitive interactions wherever we travelled—positioned as alien himself, he always seemed to be seeking answers. I would often ask questions on these excursions, wondering why the perceived difference of Indigenous peoples seemed to matter so much and how their history was tied to the land where he and my mother chose to immigrate.<sup>12</sup>

These cumulative experiences assisted in the development of my political awareness of the dirty business involved in “the making of Canada,” both as an “imagined community” and a formal colonial state entity.<sup>13</sup> They also brought to the fore the history of disinvestment and colonial violence enacted against Indigenous peoples by the Canadian settler state through a constellation of social, economic, political, and legal mechanisms that carry forward to the present.<sup>14</sup> My political sensibility was thus cultivated with an awareness of the messiness that comes alongside conceiving of oneself as someone who has unwittingly become part of the dynamics of conquest, a variant Jodi Byrd terms “arrivant colonialism.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, my political and ethical labor (in both thought and action) is bound up with, as Leey’qsun writer Rachel Flowers puts it, “imagining alternative ways to be in relation with Indigenous peoples.”<sup>16</sup>

This is not to say that I am caught in a web of guilt that forces my hand to aid in the process and goal of decolonization. Indeed, guilt can lead to a state of self-absorption that does very little to actively dismantle systems of white supremacy that, in the end, harm *all of us*. On the contrary, I hope that I have learned about the ways in which Indigenous histories and battles are elided within dominant, anti-racist discourses of social change. People of color in Canada overall are situated in and through incongruous terrain as collectives in their own right. At the same time as we are being marginalized by a white settler nationalist project, we are nonetheless invited to take part in the pervasive harms of settler colonialism—even though the material force of our actions may be harder to see.<sup>17</sup> Following Sherene Razack, 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 color and white settlers alike must confront our collective illegitimacy and determine how to live without participating in and sustaining the disappearance of Indigenous

peoples.”<sup>18</sup> It also means considering the politics of migration as interconnected with displacement wrought by colonialism and border imperialism<sup>19</sup> on the other side of the world, in the home countries of people of color.

Of course, there is complexity in these experiences; settlers of color (a contested term in and of itself) occupy social spaces quite different than those of white settlers, but that does not preclude our playing a part in perpetuating settler colonialism. Moreover, the disciplining of migrant brown bodies, or racialized others of all kinds, also serves to expand a white settler project—one that has unleashed capitalist expansion and concomitant planetary demise at alarming rates. Malissa Phung builds further on this reasoning: “mobilizing all settlers to become aware of the ways in which their settler privileges are anything but natural and well deserved can constitute a first step in supporting Indigenous activism against settler domination.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, decolonization can only happen in concert with Indigenous peoples, and this requires all of us to think long and hard about how white settler power operates relationally to further consolidate settler hegemony while simultaneously disqualifying Indigenous political sovereignty and histories.<sup>21</sup> This is not a matter of “giving back” or offering patronizing charity in the face of grossly unjust social, political, and economic realities, nor a facile acknowledgment of the stolen land upon which settlers reside. Rather, it means that we actively engage what it means to embody the practice of “standing with” Indigenous communities—what Kim TallBear calls conceiving solidarity work—that seeks a shared conceptual ground amongst a community of people working towards similar political ends.<sup>22</sup>

*This* marks a critical turning point in one’s political consciousness.

*This* is the space from which genuine politicized solidarity work can begin.

## LEARNING FROM THE LEADERSHIP OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Decolonization, as both process and goal, takes place across multiple sites. This section offers a glimpse into how Indigenous feminists have guided and expanded my understanding of the variant material and ideological landscapes of settler colonialism, and how this guidance has informed the way I think about political resistance against the white settler state. In my experience, Indigenous women are expanding the reach of anti-colonial organizing—they are linking the everyday with the systemic, harnessing the power of history to alter the present, and forging new decolonial pathways into the future through their intellectual contributions, revolutionary visioning, and grounded leadership.

They have helped me become a better comrade.

### *Scene 1: Frames, Instincts, and Stories from the Ground*

It was 1993. I was walking on the cement sidewalks of the University of Saskatchewan. I was eighteen years old, an undergraduate with a major in sociology. It was the start of the semester and I was looking for my class on Aboriginal Justice (that was its official title). Eventually, I found the classroom in the College of Law and stepped

inside just as the session was about to begin. I took a seat near the front of the room; it was a medium-sized seminar hall that could fit about forty students. The professor, Mohawk legal scholar Patricia Monture-Angus, was standing at the front of the class. A commanding presence, she towered over six feet tall, with glasses and long brown hair that flowed to her knees. She was looking at each of us intently as we entered the room. "Leave everything you think you know about Indians at the door," she told us. I could tell right away that she meant business.

As I looked over the syllabus, I realized quite quickly that the class was not going to be a rehearsal of how the criminal justice system could be reformed to be more fair with respect to Indigenous peoples (something, at this point, I naively assumed was a possible and *desired* outcome). Rather, Professor Monture-Angus made it clear that we would be unpacking how the criminal justice system was fundamentally at odds with Indigenous political claims to sovereignty—how it was, in fact, a colonial legal system created to aid in the elimination of Indigenous peoples. In doing so, Professor Monture-Angus upended my ways of seeing and understanding the world. Of equal importance, however, was that from the very start she foregrounded gender violence as a powerful tool that operated in tandem with a racist and colonial criminal justice system to efficiently remove Indigenous peoples from their territories and prevent successful reclamation of those territories.<sup>23</sup> By sharing community stories passed down by her elders and drawing on historical cases, she cast a spotlight on the numerous ways the lives of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people were (and are) mediated through everyday acts of interpersonal and systemic colonial violence—violence resulting in tremendous harm, the breakage of communities and families, and the abolition of life itself.

After the first few classes, admittedly, I wanted to quit. The content was difficult to absorb. It forced me to contend with some hard truths about myself—my own choices, practices, and silences. I got the first C of my undergraduate career. I couldn't understand where my analysis was falling short. I was being pushed to stretch the limits of my own thinking and complicity.<sup>24</sup> As I have written elsewhere, "the illusion of innocence is more than dangerous; it impedes our ability to imagine anything beyond the status quo. It masks our own culpability."<sup>25</sup>

And so what happened next?

My instincts told me that if I walked away from this experience I would foreclose my own learning, that my drive to be someone fighting for justice across Turtle Island would be undercut by my reluctance to challenge dominant perspectives about what anti-racism really meant, that I would be participating in the ongoing distortion of my own analytics and my desire to be part of a collective struggle that lifted up Indigenous history and politics. How would I know how to play my position strategically if my notion of justice slanted toward freedom for some, but not others? Tara Williamson offers counsel on this point when she says, "independent acts of activism are useless when they are not grounded in community and contextualized by a broader goal of dismantling colonial state power."<sup>26</sup> So, I made the decision to labor my way through it, to awaken myself and to keep my eyes open. Indeed, I believe these nascent encounters with an anti-colonial framework taking up gender and sexuality in concert with

questions of settler colonialism laid the foundation for my understanding of how Indigenous women were *leading* the fight for decolonization *through* their efforts to end colonial gender violence. Importantly, Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson has alerted us to the power of Indigenous women and girls: “Their bodies carry a symbolic load because they have been conflated with the land and are thus contaminating to a white, settler social order.”<sup>27</sup>

And my encounters with the intellectual prowess and political organizing strategies of Indigenous women around issues of colonial gender violence didn’t end there. Fast-forward several years and in 2000 I found myself in the women’s anti-violence movement in Vancouver, taking guidance from Indigenous women who were educating the public about the murder and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls and drawing issues of colonial gender violence into the purview of decolonization politics and praxis, including Fay Blaney, Beverly Jacobs, Angela Sterritt, Natalie Clark, Sarah Hunt, Cherry Kingsley, and others. As Sarah Hunt rightfully asks—challenging the distinction between the nature of state violence in negotiations for land, and in the home of an Indigenous woman being beaten—“What would happen if every time an Indigenous woman had her personal boundaries crossed without consent, we were moved to act in the same way as we’ve seen to the threat of a pipeline in our territories?”<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson argues that the colonial imposition of gender binaries served to replicate the heteropatriarchy of colonial society while effectively undermining more fluid conceptions of gender within Indigenous nations.<sup>29</sup>

Most recently, I have become acquainted with the decolonial efforts of the Indigenous Young Women’s National Council. These youth are enacting “unconventional leadership” in their communities to actively resist and respond to colonial gender violence, and, in doing so, have demonstrated that there is tremendous power and creativity *within* community to create social change *outside* the parameters of the settler state. Similarly, Inuit/Taino writer and community organizer Siku Allooloo, from Denendeh, Northwest Territories, writes of the power, wisdom, and strength of Indigenous women and girls in her poem “(In)Visibility”:

To whoever is keeping tabs:  
I am an Indigenous woman  
We have always stood in your way  
We have always paid the price  
So see me, or don’t see me  
you don’t understand anyway  
I am of a collective truth  
that beats in my heart and speaks through my voice  
I do not own it  
and you cannot stop it.  
To you I am a threat.  
To my people, a beacon.”

A beacon, indeed, they are.<sup>30</sup>



## Scene 2: Land, Bodies, and Life

Kilometers of barren landscape stripped entirely of boreal forest lay before me, the unearthing of the natural world in all four sacred directions. Boundless piles of gray-looking silt replaced a multiplicity of trees, plants, and wildlife that previously made up the Athabasca River region's diverse ecosystem. The hazy sky grew increasingly colorless with the byproducts of extraction billowing from tall towers, the putrid air thick with the smell of rapid-fire development and relentless economic profit. In the background, cannons echoed periodically through contaminated air, reminiscent of a war zone. The aim: deterring birds from landing in one of the many toxic tailings pits, where millions of liters of water too polluted to be reused stand still in time. Disoriented by the severe transformation of these surroundings, I had to keep reminding myself where I was—the topography itself offered little to pinpoint my location. It looked more like a postapocalyptic scene out of a science fiction novel than the prairies.

As we ambled along the road, heavily trafficked with trucks and buses, we were guided by Dene and Cree elders who performed cultural ceremonies, prayed, and gave offerings back to the earth, while drummers sang traditional songs. People spoke repeatedly of treaty violations, loss of culture and dignity, and high incidences of suicide for Indigenous youth. Indigenous writer and feminist activist Winona LaDuke reminded us of our own complicity in the mad rush for oil when, at one point over the weekend, she remarked, “we got to be these people that consume one third of the world's resources and that requires pretty much constant intervention into other peoples' territories whether they are Dene, Anishinaabe, Cree or whether they are in Venezuela or Africa. It requires a constant violation of peoples' human rights.”<sup>31</sup>

This excerpt is taken from a reflective piece I wrote in the summer of 2013, when I coordinated my trip home to Saskatchewan to align with the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Tar Sands Healing Walk, an Indigenous gathering focused on healing the environment and giving voice to the people whose lives are affected by this project. I knew the tar sands existed, but I had a desire to see firsthand the physical and social spaces where this massive resource extraction project was taking place—to bring experiential insight to the urgent words of Indigenous environmental feminists who were indicting the central role of the colonial state in sanctioning and benefitting from this devastation. It is not uncommon to see environmental assessments that map the ecological devastation of the tar sands in relation to green questions of preservation and sustainability. Less visible, though, are the stories of social and political harm emerging from the Indigenous communities whose lives are enmeshed with the land, water, and air upon which this development is deeply and essentially dependent. Less visible are the mounting and fierce campaigns of resistance to this industrial genocide that are being led by Indigenous women; the material embodiment of Audra Simpson's “politics of refusal.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the fourteen-kilometer walk around the Syncrude loop, we listened that weekend to a number of speakers from the climate justice movement. The haunting testimonies of two Indigenous feminist co-organizers of the Tar Sands Healing Walk, Eriel Deranger and Melina Lubicon-Massimo, stopped me in my tracks. Standing at the front of the crowd, rain pouring and wind gusting, Eriel and Melina spoke about how the battle between the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and European white settlers over access, control, and governance of land has been waged since the point of first contact. They spoke of the ways the Doctrine of Discovery, used to justify claiming title to Indigenous homelands, positioned Indigenous relationality to the land as “uncivilized and savage” because they did not view the natural world as something to be dominated. And they spoke about settler violence against Indigenous women as inherent to ongoing colonization and land theft—Indigenous women, they asserted, were at the center of their communities and have always been an obstacle to the colonial project, which requires ongoing violence in order to secure access to water and land for the political economy of settler colonialism.

It is also important to note that the lived realities voiced by Eriel and Melina were not in some distant, far-off place. They were close. Right next to me. Their words were building clarity for all of us. They were making me see how domination over the land required domination over the Indigenous people who stood in defense of their homelands. They forced me to consider how this was not only a fight about our climate, but also an ancient, decolonial fight over the appropriation and occupation of land, the gross exploitation of our earth, and the elimination of entire peoples for the pursuit of conquest and profit. It is a fight that should compel all of us to recenter Indigenous worldviews that offer crucial guidance about what it means to live *in balance* with the land, water, air, and all of the living species that are part of our natural world. Eriel and Melina were calling for revolutionary and respectful coexistence that rests on shared collective vision, stewardship of the land, and the reinstatement of governance systems that recognize the leadership and power of Indigenous women.

### *Scene 3: A New Kind of Weaponry*

Wanuskewin Heritage Park—a nonprofit cultural and historical center that offers a window into history and life of Northern Plains People—sits in a protected valley cut into the flat lands of Saskatchewan. This area, located on the west bank of the South Saskatchewan River about ten kilometers north of the prairie city of Saskatoon, holds 6000 years of Indigenous history. In October of 2014, Wanuskewin hosted *Walking with Our Sisters*, a commemorative art installation and exhibition comprised of more than 1,763 pairs of moccasin vamps and 108 pairs of children’s vamps, created and donated by hundreds of caring and concerned individuals to draw attention to the epidemic of murdered and missing Native women and girls across Turtle Island. The exhibition’s website explained

Each pair of vamps (or “uppers” as they are also called) represents one missing or murdered Indigenous woman. The unfinished moccasins represent the unfinished lives of the women whose lives were cut short. The children’s vamps are dedicated

to children who never returned home from residential schools. Together the installation represents all these women; paying respect to their lives and existence on this earth. They are not forgotten. They are sisters, mothers, aunts, daughters, cousins, grandmothers, wives and partners. They have been cared for, they have been loved, they are missing and they are not forgotten.<sup>33</sup>

Entering the physical space, you couldn't help but feel the memories and prayers that were woven into each piece of fabric to honor the lives of Native women. You walked barefoot on the path right next to the vamps, the smell of smudge infused in the air. Each step prompted visceral confrontation with the material reality of colonial conquest—both past and present. Outside, firekeepers kept the fire ablaze around the clock for the duration of the installation. This observance signaled the sacredness of *Walking with Our Sisters* as something other than an exhibit. Cree/Assiniboine writer Desarae Eashappie offers: “this display is more than an art exhibit. It is ceremony.”<sup>34</sup>

The lead coordinator of *Walking with Our Sisters* is a Metis woman and artist named Christi Belcourt. Belcourt is part of a resurgence of Indigenous artists whose artistic practice is a form of social and political awakening, a way to communicate lived reality in ways that words fall short. Belcourt believes that the role of the artist is being overlooked within the movement to advance decolonization. On the power of artists to revive Indigenous nationhood, fuel battles for sovereignty, and serve as *leaders* she says, “A long time ago, there was not a specific category of an artist. The artists were thinkers. The artists were philosophers. The artists were the lodge leaders. The artists were the traditional ceremonial people. So it's not doing us any favours to keep artists confined to the production of art.”<sup>35</sup> Indigenous artistic resurgence, according to Belcourt, is an underutilized form of decolonial weaponry.

Indeed, there is a growing cadre of scholars who are opening up space to (re)imagine, (re)invent, and (re)vision how Indigenous creativity, the act of creation itself, is a necessary strategy for survivance, reclaiming Indigenous presence, and transforming social reality for the better. Karyn Recollet, for example, guides us to consider how “creative solidarity challenges the influence of multiculturalism's narrowly defined Indigeneity, and offers up geographies of resistance which manifest in relationship with traditional caretakers of the land within distinctive Indigenous urban spaces.”<sup>36</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris's *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* centers “submerged perspectives” to showcase the labor and life of artists and their communities who are producing archives about the future in order to challenge a monocultural view of developmentalism and colonial capitalism.<sup>37</sup> To my mind, this work holds important implications for connecting and supporting decolonization throughout Turtle Island. What if we harnessed our resources towards these ends—towards producing spaces of creative engagement that could become ammunition in the struggle to decolonize? I believe we need to think more deeply about how the arts may be a place where we can foster critical consciousness and draw upon an armory of Indigenous inventiveness.

The three scenes I have outlined broadly constitute the foundation from which I approach comradeship with Indigenous people and communities. They hold lessons that lift up the importance of humility, self-interrogation, and the necessity

of interreflexivity in building social movement relationships that actively promote justice and make visible the intertwining of lived experience. As Yazzie and Risling Baldy so clearly remind us, “it is in our interdependencies and reciprocities that we derive our greatest power and secure a future for all.”<sup>38</sup> These lessons also set forth a challenge to all of us, as non-Indigenous comrades, to do the hard work of (re) education and confronting, head-on, our blind spots about history and present; to begin to see linkages between social issues that are often positioned in isolation from one another, such as environmental politics; and to remember the potential that lies within imagination and creativity when we consider the political strategies we employ to collectively advance change. It is a matter of being attentive to the moments that, in everyday life, signal the existence of an alternate flight path to individual agency and collective freedom, and a resurgence charted by radical dreaming, beginnings, and continuations of another kind. Those moments that boost your ability to decipher the future’s serial numbers as they are imprinted on the land, water, and sky; Indigenous ancestral hieroglyphs that are visible in the present and hold the key to where our shared lives move next.

The possibilities for collective, radical action *do* exist.

## IT’S GOING TO TAKE ALL OF US

As settlers of color who have done the self-education to know that the lives we lead are intimately interlinked with ongoing Indigenous dispossession, it behooves us to confront the wild contradictions that frame our lives.<sup>39</sup> “The only way to escape complicity within settlement is active opposition to it.”<sup>40</sup> Where are the decolonial points of rupture in the state systems in which we find ourselves? How do we actively work to foster and care for the existence and persistence of decolonial potentiality within our present world? What risks are we willing to take?

Settler colonialism feeds on the politics of division, dissonance in consciousness, and accelerated exploitation fueled by shock capitalism. Settler states have no interests in non-Indigenous people identifying with Indigenous movements for the very simple reason that it opens one’s eyes to the processes of settler capitalist accumulation that *are only possible* through Indigenous erasure and elimination, thus exposing a system of white supremacy that, while it operates differently, comes at the expense of all of us.<sup>41</sup>

Settlers of color have an opportunity to “listen, learn, and act in relation to colonial difference alongside assertions of Indigenous Sovereignty and nationhood”—to willingly engage in the difficult yet essential work of transforming the colonial relationship upon which settler states thrive, mutate and reproduce themselves.<sup>42</sup> Turning back to the spinning question of “where do I fit,” I fit in the messy terrain of the unmaking of settler colonies like Canada and the United States as “white settler possessions.”<sup>43</sup> I fit in the political space of situating myself on occupied Indigenous land and being in respectful relationship to Indigenous ways of doing things. I fit in a decolonial social movement sustained by Indigenous women who are leading the way.

This, for me, is no longer a choice but a political responsibility I have come to enact over time. It is naive to assume we won’t make mistakes, that there will not be

moments of fracture and dissension. But I believe we can find our way through these moments if our thoughts and actions are informed by accountability and a sincere desire to “stand with” our Indigenous comrades—productive critique that catapults us into strength instead of weakness, that unites instead of breaks apart. This means that this movement must be accountable to Native people by considering another moment in time when a different arrangement of land and life reigned—“a way of living—often antithetical to an anthropocentric view—that *predates* the settler state.”<sup>44</sup> In a recent exchange I had with my sister comrade Siku Allooloo around these big questions of politicized allyship, she told me, “Just as solidarity is ‘a sustained lifelong commitment,’ so is transformation, and I believe that both must necessarily begin with the individual as they commit themselves in relationship to Indigenous peoples and to both our shared and respective struggles.”<sup>45</sup>

*This is powerful insight.*

I hold the lessons I have learned, the teachings I have been given, and the stories that have been shared with me by the formidable Indigenous women I have met through my personal and political journey of building solidarity, with intense care and attention and respect. I do so because these intellectual, organizing, and spiritual experiences have taught me how to be a better human being, how to open up my imagination to the possibility of another kind of social existence, and how to bring that existence into the material form through my everyday actions and commitments. And I pass these stories of luminescence, this cumulative wisdom inherited through the generations, this ability to stand up against the rapid planetary reordering of our world that privileges few over many—ultimately, this insight into what humanity *can* be—onto my two daughters so they too will carry it with them, into the future and beyond.

This is a new kind of uprising, built on relationality, trust, humility, critical self-reflexivity, and learning, that requires us to be our bravest and best selves.

Until all of us are free.

## NOTES

1. This essay was originally developed for a talk at Yale University in 2016. It also became the basis of an artistic installation created by myself and Siku Allooloo for Nuit Blanche Toronto in 2017 as part of a collection of projects curated by Anishinaabe artist Maria Hupfield, <https://mariahupfield.wordpress.com/2017/09/30/nuit-blanche-toronto/>.

2. Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

3. See, for example, Jennifer Schuessler, “Fieldwork of Total Immersion,” *The New York Times*, April 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/30/books/alice-goffman-researches-poor-black-men-in-on-the-run.html>.

4. Christina Sharpe, “Black Life, Annotated,” *The New Inquiry*, August 8, 2014, <https://thenewinquiry.com/black-life-annotated/>. For additional critiques, see Leon Neyfakh, “The Ethics of Ethnography,” *Slate Magazine*, June 18, 2015, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2015/06/alice\\_goffman\\_s\\_on\\_the\\_run\\_is\\_the\\_sociologist\\_to\\_blame\\_for\\_the\\_inconsistencies.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/06/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_is_the_sociologist_to_blame_for_the_inconsistencies.html); and Paul

Campos, "Alice Goffman's Implausible Ethnography," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 21, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/Alice-Goffmans-Implausible-/232491/>.

5. Sharpe, "Black Life, Annotated," np.

6. See Audra Simpson, *Mobawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Border of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Verna St. Denis, "Rethinking Culture Theory in Aboriginal Education," in *Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada: A Reader*, ed. Martin J. Cannon and Lina Sunseri (Don Mills, CN: Oxford University Press, 2011), 177-88.

7. For an excellent discussion of the politics of authenticity, see Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

8. Alicia Elliot, "Why Non-Indigenous Support for Joseph Boyden Should Set Off Alarm Bells," *CBC: Point of View*, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/why-non-indigenous-support-for-joseph-boyden-should-set-off-alarm-bells-1.3951223>.

9. Kim TallBear, "Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry," *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (2014), Article N17, <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/407>.

10. For further information on this point, see Rachel Flowers, "Refusal to Forgive: Indigenous Women's Love and Rage," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): 32-49, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22829/19320>; and Harsha Walia, "Decolonizing Together: Moving beyond a Politics of Solidarity toward a Practice of Decolonization," *Briarpatch Magazine*, January 1, 2012, <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/decolonizing-together>.

11. Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 20.

12. For an excellent discussion of the immigrant rights movements in Canada in conjunction with issues of capitalism and settler colonialism, see Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013).

13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, UK: Verso Press, 1991).

14. There is no shortage of empirical evidence to prove this point. See, for example, Nancy Macdonald, "Canada's Prisons Are the New Residential Schools," *Maclean's*, February 18, 2016, <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/canadas-prisons-are-the-new-residential-schools/>.

15. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

16. Flowers, "Refusal to Forgive," 34.

17. Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, "Decolonizing Antiracism," *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005): 120-43.

18. Sherene H. Razack, *Dying from Improvement: Inquest and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* (University of Toronto Press, 2015), 27.

19. Harsha Walia. *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2013).

20. Malissa Phung, "Are People of Colour Settlers Too?" in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, ed. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DeGagné (Ottawa, CN: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 289-98, 296, <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/cultivating-canada-pdf.pdf>.

21. Saranillio, 2013, 282).

22. TallBear, "Standing with and Speaking as Faith."

23. Leanne Simpson, "Not Murdered and Not Missing," March 17, 2014 blogpost, <https://nbmediacoop.org/2014/03/17/not-murdered-and-not-missing/>.

24. Later, however, I came to realize that my critique was framed in such a way that, in the end, privileged settler control of the land and collapsed violence against Indigenous women with the more

homogenous category of “violence against women”—a problematic move when you consider ongoing Indigenous dispossession. In the striking words of Leanne Simpson, “White feminism is not our ally either because discussing violence against women without discussing gender violence within a colonial context has no meaning for me.” *Ibid.*, para 9.

25. Jaskiran Dhillon, “Eyes Wide Open,” Indigenous Nationhood Movement *Voices Rising* blogpost, March 10, 2014, para 7, <http://nationsrising.org/eyes-wide-open/>.

26. Tara Williamson, Indigenous Nationhood Movement blogpost, 2014, para 3.

27. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 156.

28. Sarah Hunt, “Violence, Law, and the Everyday Politics of Recognition,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the North American Indigenous Studies Association, June 4, 2015, Washington DC, 9.

29. Leanne Simpson, “Not Murdered, Not Missing,” blogpost, the #ItEndsHere Indigenous Nationhood Movement blog series, March 8, 2014.

30. Siku Allooloo, “(In)Visibility,” in *Abolishing Carceral Society (Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics)*, ed. Abolition Collective (New York: Common Notions, 2018), 208–12.

31. Jaskiran Dhillon, manuscript in preparation.

32. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*.

33. See Walking with our Sisters, <http://www.nativepeoples.com/Native-Peoples/September-October-2014/Walking-With-Our-Sisters/>.

34. Desarae Eashappie, “Walking with Our Sisters: A Healing Journey in Unfinished Moccasins,” *Native*, October 2014, para 3, <http://www.nativepeoples.com/Native-Peoples/September-October-2014/Walking-With-Our-Sisters/>.

35. Christie Belcourt, qtd. in Kerry Benjoe, “Metis Artist Believes Art Can Provide People with a Voice,” *Regina Leader-Post*, February 26, 2016.

36. Karyn Recollet, “Glyphing Decolonial Love through Urban Flash Mobbing and Walking with our Sisters,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2015):129–45, 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2014.995060>.

37. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

38. Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, “Introduction: Indigenous People and the Politics of Water,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1–18, 9, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/30378/23031>.

39. “Specifically, this translates to taking initiative for self-education about the specific histories of the lands we reside upon, organizing with the clear consent and guidance of an Indigenous community or group, building long term relationships of accountability and never assuming or taking for granted the personal and political trust that non-natives may earn from Indigenous peoples over time.” See Walia, “Decolonizing Together,” para 6.

40. *Ibid.*, para 9.

41. Dean Itsuji Saranillio, “Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters: A Thought Piece on Critiques, Debates, and Indigenous Difference,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 3 (2013): 280–94, 291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.810697>.

42. Flowers, “Refusal to Forgive,” 34.

43. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

44. Saranillio, “Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters,” 290.

45. Personal email correspondence, Jaskiran Dhillon and Allooloo, March 1, 2016.