The Solidarity Encounter
Between Indigenous Women and White Women
in a Contemporary Canadian Context

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation tracks the gendered operation of white settler liberal subjectivity at a specific site of settler colonial relations—the “solidarity encounter” between Indigenous women and white women in Canada. Through in-depth qualitative analysis of interviews and self-reflection (as a white settler woman ally), I examine the encounter’s intersubjective relations, shining the theoretical spotlight on how white women negotiate our tenuous status as settlers. Attentive to the complexity of these relations, including how white women allies grapple with our dominant positionality, I signal the perniciousness of white settler liberal subjectivity and the deep quest for legitimacy/innocence at its core. This quest, I argue, manifests itself as a white desire for proximity to Indigenous women, which in turn takes various forms and is often experienced by Indigenous women as invasive. I dedicate three chapters to mapping the sometimes subtle expressions of this desire (e.g., the need for acceptance, inclusion, forgiveness, healing, empowerment/purpose, friendship) and its role in liberal self-making projects, i.e., how it serves to negate colonial hierarchies and/or white settler women’s colonial complicity therein. Further, I develop the concept of the “impulse to solidarity”—the bundle of desires and discursive practices that propels white settler women in their pursuit of proximity, an impulse related to,
but distinct from the “helping imperative” (Heron, 2007). White women allies find it difficult to resist the gendered dictates of liberal subjectivity, which in a settler colonial context demand our reproduction as legitimate national subjects vis-à-vis Indigenous women Others. Despite the inescapability of the “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004), I also note a cautious optimism among participants regarding the possibility of non-colonizing solidarity. I propose a framework for reconfiguring intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter best encapsulated by the directive “step back, but not out.” Struck by pervasive spatial references in participant narratives, I characterize the problem (colonizing solidarity) and its solution (non-colonizing solidarity) in spatialized terms—white settler women must interrogate and curb our solidarity impulse and related practices of proximity. We must recognize when settler liberal self-interest takes centre stage, compels us to “come too close” and diminishes the collective political work of solidarity.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge those with whom I’ve shared this journey. You are many and, as they say, more valued than words can express . . .

First, this research would simply not have been possible without the participants: Zainab Amadahy, Lee Maracle, Wanda Whitebird and those who remain anonymous. I extend to you my heartfelt gratitude for your time and insights.

And, to my supervisor, Dr. Sherene Razack, I send my sincerest appreciation. Your particular combination of encouragement, critique and generosity of time and spirit (not to mention your incredibly fast turnaround with feedback) is truly remarkable. Thanks also to the members of my committee, Dr. Jean-Paul Restoule and Dr. Rauna Kuokkanen, for your discerning comments and kindness throughout these many years. I am also indebted to Dr. Juanita Sundberg, Dr. Lauren Bialystok and Dr. Njoki Wane for their willingness to serve as external and internal-external examiners in the final oral exam.

I am also fortunate to have received generous public funding in the form of an Ontario Graduate Scholarship and a Canada Graduate Scholarships (CGS) Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Additionally, I’d like to acknowledge the camaraderie and support of all my fellow OISE students and Robarts buddies, including Adam Perry, Valerie Damasco, Yu Kyung Kim-Cho, Robyn Bourgeois, Sheila Stewart, Tannis Atkinson, John Doran, Arie Molema, Lori Neale, Sara Carpenter, Dan Hill, Hang-Sun Kim, Rob Heynen, Adil Mawani, Arun Chaudhuri and so many others. Thanks also to the professors who have guided me in course work and beyond, including Dr. Bonnie McElhinny, Dr. Angela Miles, Dr. Kiran Mirchandani, Dr. Martin Cannon and the late Dr. Roger Simon. I have also been warmly welcomed by my colleagues at the Department of Gender Studies (and beyond) at Memorial University. One could not ask for a better work environment! Thanks especially to Joan Butler, Dr. Pat Dold, Dr. Sonja Boon, Dr. Vicki Hallett, Natalie Duchesne, Dr. Amanda Bittner and Dr. Katherine Side (and our friendly neighbours in the Humanities Program—that would be you, Dr. Jennifer Dyer). I am also thrilled to be working alongside Dr. Mario Blaser. And, I am indebted to my students who remind me continually of the main reason why I took this path.
For much of my time as a doctoral student, I lived at 35 Charles Street West (UofT Student Family Housing) with my partner and daughter. This community has created lasting, fond memories for me, and I continue to miss you and your families—this includes Brenda Wastasecoot, Bobbie Flowers and Dayle Wastasecoot; Rochelle Johnston and Koen Van Rossum; Alon Eisenstein and Neta Raz; Asia Cichocka and Lukasz Sicinski; Mandeep Kaur Mucina and Devi Dee Mucina; Adwoa Onuora; Sheila Batacharya and Prasad Bidaye; Vichi and Cristian Ciocani; Mete and Jitka Eryilmaz; Soma Chatterjee and Praśanta Dhar; Sudhaseel Sen and Anupama Mohan; Ajamu Nangwaya; Jeff Myers and the many others who came and went over those (seven) years. A big shout-out to my friends and compañeras in struggle at No More Silence—Audrey, Barbara, Carmen, Krista, Doreen, Stephanie, Jen, Sheryl, Wanda, Cass, Selina, Gloria and Darlene, and the many others who have supported the work. I am also much appreciative of Dr. Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Dr. Margot Francis and Dr. Lee Cormie for their friendship, intellectual prowess and political vigor. A special thanks to my mentor, colleague and friend, Dr. Janet Conway. I continue to be sustained by your positivity, intellectual wit, political astuteness and confidence in my abilities.

And to my far-away family, please know that I always carry within me your humour, love and intense zest toward life. Finally, I feel blessed to have both Dennis and Marlena in my life. You are my guiding lights. (I owe you some quality time!) I thank you with all my heart.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

I distinctly remember the first time I heard about the disproportionate numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women\(^1\) across Turtle Island\(^2\) (North America)—at a gathering hosted by the University of Toronto’s First Nations House some dozen years ago. The speaker was Lubicon Cree\(^3\) scholar-activist Robyn Bourgeois whose informative talk on the colonial discursive construction of Indigenous women as disposable provoked my anger and activist impulse (responses that I scrutinize more closely in this thesis). Not long after, I became a non-Indigenous ally member of No More Silence (NMS)\(^4\) a group of Indigenous women and non-Indigenous allies dedicated to raising awareness about this issue. In the intervening years, public awareness of the problem has increased exponentially (although insufficiently), thanks to decades of organizing by Indigenous “warrior women” (Bourgeois, 2014). But at that time, the matter rarely appeared on the public radar. It was certainly new to me. That talk at First Nations House became a defining moment of my life, but also of this thesis, inspiring me to apply my activist energies to anticolonial endeavours, which in turn propelled me toward exploring the nuances of intersubjective relations at a specific site—the “solidarity encounter” between Indigenous women/feminists and white women/feminists\(^5\) in what is now called Canada.

In this introductory chapter, I discuss my reasons for undertaking this research, situate my study in the relevant literature and introduce some recurring terms and concepts. I also provide an overview of the study’s principle lines of inquiry and design, and of the chapters that follow. Finally, I summarize the findings and suggest how this research might contribute to our collective thinking about the paradoxical proposition of non-colonizing solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in a context marked by ongoing colonial inequalities.

The Problem/Paradox of Solidarity

Education scholar Susan Dion (2009) asks, “What would it take to transform the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada?” (p. 11). My participation in NMS was grounded from the start in this urgent question. Immersed in the realm of Indigenous/non-Indigenous political solidarity, I became familiar with the anticolonial analysis that undergirded (or was supposed to undergird) most activist imaginaries. I heard the constant refrain by Indigenous voices that would-be non-Indigenous allies take direction from the Indigenous actors in our midst. I became well-versed in widespread Indigenous critiques of the quintessential
saviour mentality that seemed to drive many (especially white) non-Indigenous allies. I got the gist of these critiques, but lacked a deeper understanding of how the attitudes and behaviours of well-meaning non-Indigenous allies damaged attempts at political solidarity. In other words, I wanted to get clearer on how colonialism is enacted (and embodied) in such commonplace activist spaces. I wanted to be able to explain the relationship between the micro and the macro, that is, how everyday encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could reproduce colonial power structures between the same groups. I also, quite frankly, wanted to better understand—and check—the insidious operation of my own “good intentions,” which as scholar-activist Andrea Smith (2013a) points out, so often shore up white privilege.

Thus positioned as a white settler woman engaged in solidarity, I began my inquiry into the ways in which white settler colonial power relations are articulated (i.e., reproduced and contested) in the solidarity encounter, taking particular note of how the white settler woman subject negotiates her dominant positionality. That said, a caveat is in order: this study is not about white settler allies failing to get solidarity right or lacking commitment, but rather is about taking a careful look at the pernicious nature of white/settler liberal subjectivity in a context of ongoing colonial inequality. This also means conveying the “messiness” of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter. Notably, throughout this intellectual journey, I have tried to remain anchored in actual practices of political solidarity via my ongoing participation in NMS, which has helped to remind me of the importance of solidarity work despite the challenges.

In this vein, Dion (2009) reminds non-Indigenous Canadians to stop “remembering to forget” (p. 52) and to no longer “continue to position Aboriginal people as figures of the past, as people of a make-believe world” thus jeopardizing any “possibilities for accomplishing an equitable and just relationship” (p. 5). Idle No More (INM), the Canada-based grassroots movement of Indigenous peoples and allies that emerged in late 2012, has certainly reinvigorated public debate around the vital importance of redefining Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014; Wotherspoon & Hansen, 2013). Moreover, the responsibility of the non-Indigenous population in Canada to redress the injustices realized against Indigenous peoples has made it onto the public’s agenda with regular frequency since INM’s arrival— injustices around issues ranging from First Nations education; environmental concerns such as resource extraction; the missing and murdered Indigenous women; and, as Anishnaabek scholar Leanne Simpson mentions, the elephant in the room, the unresolved matter of the land.
Even as I write, renewed debate about the merits, limitations and possible parameters of a public inquiry (steadfastly refused, I might add, by a Harper-led Conservative Government) into the matter of missing and murdered Indigenous women echoes across social and conventional media alike. An unequivocal demand from Indigenous sources is for non-Indigenous settlers to not only acknowledge the gravity of the issue, but also support Indigenous communities in addressing its root cause—the colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources through gender-based violence (INM Collective, 2014; Smith, 2005a). By definition, working to end these murders and disappearances requires working to end white settler colonialism in Canada and hierarchical Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations.

Indigenous calls for non-Indigenous involvement in dismantling settler colonialism come from a variety of ideological quarters, including from scholar-activists such as Taiaiake Alfred (Kanien’kéha\(^\text{11}\)) whose well-developed critiques of reconciliation discourse suggest strong doubts about the possibilities of Indigenous/non-Indigenous political solidarity (Alfred, 2010).\(^\text{12}\) My experiences at a variety of events from public rallies to more intimate settings such as NMS meetings attest to Indigenous calls for non-Indigenous political allies to back the former’s assertions of nationhood and autonomy on Indigenous terms (Indigenous nationhood movement, n.d.; see also Walia, 2012).\(^\text{13}\) These terms would involve, as Sylvia Maracle points out, a new conversation in which Indigenous people are not seen as deficient.\(^\text{14}\) Indigenous peoples are above all demanding (and fostering) a new set of social relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous (white settler) peoples where the latter do not position ourselves as superior (see also LaRocque, 2010). The problem of solidarity rests on a paradox: how can hierarchically-positioned subjects work together to foster equitable relations in a context of ongoing inequity?\(^\text{15}\) It is the roots of this paradox—the effects of the inescapable “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004) on solidarity relations—that require a more careful look, which is precisely what this thesis sets out to do.

**Situating the Problem: A Review of the Literature**

Both the paradox of solidarity, and the concomitant demand to reconfigure Indigenous/non-Indigenous social relations are, of course, direct consequences of Canada’s fraught colonial history, itself the subject of much scholarly literature (Dickason & McNab, 2009; King, 2012; Miller & Upton, 1991; Miller, 2000; Ray, 2010). As Lynne Davis (2010b) points out, “there has been considerable writing on Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships in general, as well as
numerous historical analyses . . . and a number of guides on forming partnerships between Indigenous communities and the corporate sector” (p. 4). There is also a growing body of scholarship on Indigenous/non-Indigenous political alliances, solidarity and coalition-building, as I discuss below. My research can be situated at the intersections of these and several other literatures, including Indigenous/feminist thought and anti-racist/critical race feminisms (particularly the subset of critical whiteness studies). I have also drawn on postcolonial feminist literature for my theoretical framework (see Chapter 3). I centre my work, however, within a burgeoning literature by Indigenous women/feminists on Turtle Island that, among other things, theorizes their colonial encounters with the mainstream (white) women’s movement. Thus, I begin with an overview of this literature especially as it pertains to political solidarity.

Indigenous women’s/feminist theorizations of the colonial encounter

That is the madness, the psychosis, of racism; the mistress accords herself distinction as a certain type of woman while erasing the womanhood of other peoples. . . . Sojourner Truth told you already, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ She asked the white feminist movement on our behalf, a hundred years ago, and the white women of North America have yet to face the answer. She served up the question; we need do no more.

——Lee Maracle (1996, p. 138)

Scholar, writer and activist Lee Maracle (1996) (Stoh:lo/Métis) voices a common assessment of Indigenous women/feminists regarding the contemporary state of relations between themselves and the mainstream (white) feminist movement in Canada—that white women have historically positioned, and to a large extent still position themselves/ourselves as superior vis-à-vis the Indigenous female Other (see Chapter 3). Although Indigenous women’s/feminist scholarship generally has not focused on white women/feminists or the terrain of encounter between Indigenous women and white women—Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s (Geonpul) (2000) work being a notable exception—dispersed throughout are mentions of obstacles to political solidarity between Indigenous women and white women. Specifically, Indigenous women hint at the ways in which the white, colonial impulse operates in these encounters, and how certain feminist theoretical formulations can facilitate these operations. While I do not engage in the broader discussion underway about the contours of Indigenous feminisms, many of the allusions to Indigenous/non-Indigenous women’s solidarity increasingly appear within this literature.
It is also important to situate Indigenous women’s/feminist literature in relation to the vast body of scholarship spanning the past several decades by women of colour that enumerates the ethnocentric and universalizing tendencies of white feminist thought and practice. (As I mention below, a considerable portion of this critique has concerned how to work effectively across differences among women.) Many Indigenous women express indebtedness to women of colour for having forged a path toward liberatory praxis (Maracle, 1996; Settee as cited in Rebick, 2005; St. Denis, 2007; Sunseri, 2008; Turpel, 1993). As Maracle (1996) notes in her ground-breaking exposé of Indigenous feminism, women of colour have played an essential role in feminist history. She notes that “othered” groups such as “Black, Asian and Native women” share a struggle against racism and the discursive power of whiteness given that racism is an “ideological rationale” of colonialism (Maracle, 1996, p. 89). In short, these groups cite similar race-based impediments to solidarity and require similar gestures or actions from white women to overcome those impediments. In fact, a main contribution of women of colour scholarship—the notion that differences of identity, belonging and power among women must be accounted for in feminist theory and practice—finds echo in the more recent writings of Indigenous women/feminists. Additionally, Indigenous women and women of colour both ask white women to face their complicity in racist structures and to work to dislodge white supremacy. That is, the theoretical advances of women of colour—including intersectional or interlocking oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1997; Crenshaw, 1991; Razack, 1998); the myth of common oppression and sisterhood (hooks, 2000); and the race to innocence (Fellows & Razack, 1998)—also apply to Indigenous–white relations.

Even as Verna St. Denis (2007) credits “feminists of color” with having provided her “an opening to feminist scholarship,” she clarifies that “some Aboriginal women maintain that the processes of racialization do not solely define their identity” (p. 48). To employ an intersectional analysis is to reveal the specificity of Indigenous women’s concerns about white feminists/feminisms, concerns that flow from the historically-derived modes of oppression to which they have been subjected. In noting this specificity in Indigenous women’s/feminist scholarship, I pay particular attention to how Indigenous women centre colonialism in their work and urge settler women to do the same. This thesis considers why settler women continue to find it so difficult to operationalize this advice, as individuals and as a social movement.
The legacy of “whitestream” feminism

Aligning with postcolonial feminists such as Gayatri Spivak (1985) and Anne McClintock (1995), Maracle (1993) describes the birth of feminist movement among Euro-American women: “Nationalism and racism infused life into patriarchy and bent the direction of feminism before it was ever fully conceived. The women’s movement in Europe, and most particularly North America, was exclusively white and centred on achieving white male status for themselves” (p. 126). Influenced by, and contributing to, the racist, colonialist and classist discourses of their time, Euro-American feminists sought entrance into modernity based on white male subject terms. Indigenous scholars’ critiques of contemporary encounters with white women/feminists, demonstrate the legacy of these origins—the primacy that mainstream white feminist theories still give to the white female subject and gender-based oppression and the concomitant erasure of the Indigenous woman subject, both recipes for problematic praxis.

Indigenous women have rebuked the mainstream women’s movement for not having made ongoing colonialism, Indigenous women’s issues and/or white settler women’s complicity in oppressive structures central to their analyses. In this context, Indigenous women are thus at best rendered only partially visible as historical agents, as Joyce Green (2007c) notes, due to the unthinking racism of a movement that has often failed to see Indigenous women in their full historical and contemporary contexts: as simultaneously Aboriginal and female, and as contemporary persons living in the context of colonial oppression by the occupying state and populations of, for example, the U.S., Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia, with their racist mythologies, institutions and practices. (p. 20–21)

Several Indigenous scholars cite the complicity of whitestream feminist theory in maintaining this invisibility, particularly through a depoliticized embrace of difference (Clark Mane, 2012). Moreton-Robinson (2000) finds that “white feminist discourse on ‘difference’ continues to be underpinned by a deracialised but gendered universal subject” (p. xviii), which for Sandy Grande (2004) leads to the continue privileging of “the desires of the white bourgeois, female subject” (p. 148). Grande (2004), a staunch critic of the so-called linguistic turn in “third-wave” feminism, argues that this turn can operate to deflect attention away from the historical critiques of mainstream feminism as exclusionary, white and middle-class as well as from the “ubiquity of the colonialist project” (p. 138). This is accomplished by two discursive moves, which “(1) decenter the subject entirely (conveniently blurring the boundaries between margin.center, oppressor/oppressed); and (2) remove feminism from the political project,
rearticulating it as a struggle over language and representation” (Grande, 2004, p. 138). Also concerned about how oppression can be relativized, Makere Stewart-Harawira (2007) takes to task “post-” arguments that would effectively “inscribe difference as the new totalizing discourse” (p. 128) and thereby negate power differentials between oppressor and oppressed. Consequently, as Moreton-Robinson (2000) notes, mainstream feminist methodological frameworks do “not allow for the theorisation of Indigenous women as socially situated subjects of knowledge” (p. 91). For these scholars, the result has been an ethnocentric, universalizing and exclusionary women’s movement concerned primarily with the interests of white middle-class women of Euro-American descent. As if to prove the point, Donna Greschner (of European ancestry) admits to her own “arrogant universalism”; she applied her own “understanding of patriarchy within White society,” which meant assuming that “Aboriginal women were at the bottom of the heap in Aboriginal society [as were white women in white society] and therefore they were the worst-off of the worst-off” (Johnson, Stevenson, & Greschner, 1993, p. 158).

For many scholars, this ethnocentrism derives from the Western individualistic notion of personhood “based on the denial of even the existence of community” (Lawrence quoted in Anderson, 2000, p. 275). This construction has led to a false binary and ideological impasse within Indigenous communities and beyond—pitting the so-called individual rights of Indigenous women against the collective rights of Indigenous peoples (FIMI, 2006; Green 2007a; Jaimes Guerrero, 1997; Maracle, 2006; Smith, 2005a; Sunseri, 2000). Indigenous epistemologies, however, provide a lens that supplants liberal notions of the autonomous individual: “Individual rights exist within collective rights, and the rights of the collective exist in the individual. Any hierarchical ordering of either the notion of collective rights or individual rights will fundamentally violate the culture of Aboriginal Peoples” (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 184). Therefore, Indigenous feminists, brandishing a unique blend of anticolonial and feminist analytics (e.g., Kuokkanen, 2007; Stewart-Harawira, 2007), reject this false binary and demand that collective struggles around Indigenous land rights and self-determination/sovereignty be redefined as feminist struggles (Sunseri, 2000; Kuokkanen, 2012).

While Indigenous struggles on the ground may stray from this ideal (in part, a colonial legacy), for many Indigenous women/feminists, a departure from liberal values necessarily leads to community-focused political activism. Kathie Irwin (2007) states, “Simply put, the political nature of [Maori women’s] projects is about survival in authentic terms: decolonizing our
community and the wider society, so that we can find new futures” (p. 182). Devon Abbot Mihesuah (2003) draws a similar conclusion about Indigenous women’s political activism in the U.S.: for Indigenous women, “female, male, tribal, and racial oppression” are inextricably linked and hence “gender is inexorably tied to their race and tribe” (p. 162). Haunani-Kay Trask (1999) sees Indigenous women’s collective struggle as critical in the face of “neocolonialism and the co-optation of indigenous sociopolitical structures,” which includes “an increasing individualistic identification” amongst Native Hawaiians (p. 108). For Bonita Lawrence, despite the risks of promoting essentialized views of themselves as, for example, tradition-bound, Indigenous women (and men) cannot afford to define themselves in individualistic terms that would increase threats to community survival (quoted in Thorpe, 2005). What is ultimately at stake for Indigenous political struggles? As one Indigenous woman put it, “this is the only land we can call home.”

Solidarity relations suffer when hegemonic feminism is unable or refuses to link Indigenous women’s empowerment to that of their communities, i.e., when white women/feminists do not (want to) understand the abiding connection between self, family, community and nation posited by Indigenous (feminist) epistemologies (Anderson, 2000). Winona Stevenson recounts her exasperation with (white) feminists who promote the notion of a common oppression among women: “The colonial oppression experienced by me, my brothers, my uncles, and my grandfather causes us horrendous damage and pain, and in my evaluation, more grief and pain than the oppression I receive as a woman” (Johnson et al., 1993, p. 167). Dian Million (2008) notes that mainstream women’s movements in Canada during feminism’s so-called second wave “were slow to recognize the double indemnity of race and sexual discrimination—much less the necessity for solidarity with sovereignty and self-determination activists” (p. 269). Indigenous women have explicably baulked at needing to explain themselves in whitestream feminist terms: “‘I am not you’ (read that as ‘I am not White’). This allows that I may only define my existence in a negative way” (Monture-Angus as cited in Turpel, 1993, p. 187). In this light, the rejection of the feminist label or movement by some Indigenous women is unsurprising (St. Denis, 2007).

**Lack of an anticolonial theoretical framework and practice**

Million, St. Denis and Stevenson all hint at the main problem with whitestream feminist praxis—the omission of colonialism (sometimes along with other axes of oppression such as racism or classism) as an analytical category for conceptualizing women’s oppression (Monture-
Angus, 1995; Ouellette, 2002). In fact, a principal tenet of Indigenous feminism is the centrality of historic and ongoing colonialism to Indigenous women’s oppression (Green, 2007b, 2007c; Monture-Angus, 1995; Smith, 2005a). Stevenson recounts her first exposure to mainstream (white) feminists in the 1970s when working to change section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act: “All they saw was an issue of sex discrimination and they flew with it. They didn’t see it as another aspect or manifestation of systemic colonial oppression” (Johnson et. al., 1993, p. 160).

Being blind to colonial oppression is also indicative of a broader tendency to misrecognize or disregard histories of gender relations outside of European-based capitalist patriarchy, which can lead to a misguided analysis of gender relations in Indigenous communities past and present (Emberley, 1993; Gunn Allen, 1986; Johnson et al., 1993; Monture-Angus, 1995; Turpel, 1993). For example, many Indigenous women (some of whom reclaim feminism and some of whom reject it) tell of more balanced gender relations prior to conquest, contending that Indigenous women enjoyed greater respect, power and influence in their societies than did their European counterparts. 33 Noting a reluctance among white feminists to “accept that patriarchy is not universal,” Mary Ellen Turpel (1993) states, “Our communities do not have a history of disentitlement of women from political or productive life . . . [which is] probably the most important point for feminists to grasp in order to appreciate how State-imposed gender discrimination uniquely affected First Nations women” (p. 180). Importantly, however, some Indigenous women acknowledge that “there is no consensus on whether sexism in Aboriginal communities is an entirely colonial creation or whether it preceded colonialism in some communities,” but that regardless, “sex discrimination is now a reality for many Aboriginal women” (Green, 2007c, p. 145). 34

Paula Gunn Allen (1986) sums up the consequences for women’s/feminist solidarity of this mainstream incredulity towards the existence of non-patriarchal societies wherein women were not only empowered, but where “that empowerment [was] the basis of rules and civilization. The price the feminist community must pay because it is not aware of the recent presence of gynarchical societies on this continent is necessary confusion, division, and much lost time” (as cited in Mankiller et al., 1998, p. 187). As Patricia Monture-Angus (Kanien’kéha) (1995) notes, Indigenous women’s distinctive histories would warrant different end goals for women’s movements: “Involving myself deeply in the women’s movement, including locating my quest for identity there, means being willing to accept less than the position accorded to women of my
nation historically” (p. 179). For both Turpel (1993) and Monture-Angus the distinctive history of gender relations of many Indigenous societies explains why for some Indigenous women “equality is not our starting point” as it has been and remains for many middle-class white women (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 179; see also Razack, 2014). Both critique the mainstream feminist movement for its “well-intentioned paternalism” that assumes a desire on the part of Indigenous women for equality on white (male) terms.

At the same time, Indigenous feminist thought has contributed to a fuller understanding of the “unpleasant synergy” between colonialism, racism and sexism, and the impact on Indigenous communities (Green, 2007c, p. 20). Many Indigenous women describe this impact in terms of gendered colonial disempowerment—the large-scale imposition of patriarchal gender roles and Christian values onto Indigenous communities and the dismantling of more equitable gender relations. Whether or not more equitable gender relations existed in Indigenous communities prior to colonial aggressions, as Rauna Kuokkanen (2012) states, “the internalization of patriarchal colonial structures has resulted in circumstances where women often do not enjoy the same level of rights and protection as men” (p. 233). Thus, Indigenous women have framed their political efforts—to amend the Indian Act and to redress violence against Indigenous women—as struggles for sex/gender equality. That said, Indigenous women note the general failure of white feminists to fathom the depth of gendered colonial disempowerment and the specificities of colonial violence, as well as to conceptualize the diverse perspectives, priorities and activist strategies of Indigenous women, particularly as related to the interconnected struggles against violence and for the self-determination of their nations (FIMI, 2006; Green, 2007a; Jaimes Guerrero, 1997; Kuokkanen, 2012; Lawrence, 2003; Maracle, 2006; Mihasuah, 2003; Million, 2008; Monture-Angus, 1995; Ouellette, 2002; Smith, 2005a; Sunseri, 2000; Trask, 1999).

The bottom line for many Indigenous women seems to be this: lack of an analysis of colonialism serves to occlude how differently positioned settler women have been and are complicit in colonial processes (Monture-Angus, 1995; Anderson, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Grande, 2004; Lawrence & Dua, 2005), and to blind whitestream feminists in particular from grasping how colonialism frames Indigenous women’s experiences of—and struggles to redress—the oppression in their lives and of their communities at the hands of the Canadian State. This thesis explores what can happen when (white) settlers lack or do not consistently apply an anticolonial
framework in their solidarity encounters with Indigenous women (or men)—the perpetuation of ethnocentric, condescending attitudes and roles, including that of “saviour” or helper.\(^{36}\)

**Indigenous/non-Indigenous solidarity, alliances and coalitions**

My study is also situated within an emergent literature in Canada chronicling contemporary alliance-, coalition- and solidarity-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.\(^{37}\) As Davis (2010b) notes, little has been written on “relationships between Indigenous peoples and social movement organizations such as social justice groups, the women’s movement, environmental organizations, and organized labour” (p. 4). A main theme traversing this scholarship is the need to reconfigure Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in a more equitable manner. Another is that such spaces represent “microcosms of colonial relationships” (Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010). To date, the edited collection *Alliances* (Davis, 2010a) appears to be the most comprehensive survey of recent attempts at such alliance building in Canada.

The existing literature can be put into at least three overlapping categories: the issue or topic addressed; a focus on strategies/tactics; and the approach (empirical or theoretical). Many of the empirical studies pertain to specific case studies, for example, on the Coalition for a Public Inquiry into Ipperwash (Davis, O’Donnell, & Shpuniarsky, 2007) or Indigenous/non-Indigenous peace-building initiatives (Wallace, 2014). Others discuss alliances with specific Indigenous communities such as the Lubicon First Nation (Funk-Unrau, 2005; Long, 1997), or in relation to fishing and/or environmental struggles (Davis, 2009; Lipsitz, 2008), a trend somewhat repeated in the collection.\(^{38}\) There is also a growing scholarship on reconciliation since the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on “Indian Residential Schools” (IRS) and the Harper Government’s apology to IRS survivors, both in 2008 (Castellano, 2011; Henderson & Wakeham, 2013; Regan, 2010; Rogers, DeGagné, Dewar, & Lowry, 2012). However, there is little material in the Davis collection or elsewhere that explicitly focuses on Indigenous/non-Indigenous women/feminist solidarity, or on intersubjectivity or subject-making processes.

Nonetheless, there are several sources that inform my study. Adam Barker’s (2010) contribution to *Alliances*,\(^{39}\) for example, although lacking a gender analysis, cites several barriers to solidarity, two of which are potentially relevant for my purposes: a dictatorial tendency in allies to control and define alliance efforts; and guilt arising out of egocentricity often combined with an aversion to personal sacrifice.\(^{40}\) He proposes “radical experimentation” as a conceptual
guideline for allies to apply in their efforts to decolonize and become better allies. Although employing different terminology, Barker is ultimately concerned with intersubjective relations. However, his is not an empirical study, but rather a reflection based on personal experiences.

Paulette Regan (2010) also draws on her lived experience, as a former IRS claims manager, to consider the “pedagogical potential of truth-telling and reconciliation processes” (p. 11). Sharing Alfred’s critique of hegemonic reconciliation discourse, she seeks to reframe “reconciliation as a decolonizing place of encounter between settlers and Indigenous peoples” (p. 12) where settlers would be induced to “unsettle” their internal settler selves, that is, to “deconstruct the foundational myth of the benevolent peacemaker—the bedrock of settler identity” (p.11). However, Regan’s starting point is different from my own—she seeks to develop “decolonizing pedagogical strategies” that would transform “colonizers” into “allies,” whereas I start with people already disposed to being/becoming allies. Also, she does not sufficiently explore the limits of critical reflection, as I attempt to do in Chapters 2 and 7.

Transformation is also a central theme in Davis and Heather Yanique Shpuniarsky’s (2010) work. They distill their findings from the Alliances Project into a list of guiding principles for effective Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliances, their target audience being primarily non-Indigenous allies: respect Indigenous self-determination, i.e., avoid paternalistic behaviours and centre Indigenous agendas; foster respect and trust; establish ongoing, long-term relationships; and be open to learning and transformation. They describe coalitions as sites of pain: “As Indigenous people struggle to confront the pain of colonization in its many forms, non-Indigenous peoples struggle to look inward at their own roles within colonialization, and confront themselves” (p. 343). Similarly to Regan, however, Davis and Shpuniarsky (2010) stop short of interrogating the limits and pitfalls of self-reflexive settler subjectivity. They also risk reproducing the traumatized Indigenous subject in need of assistance (Million, 2013).

In a short article on the same topic, Harsha Walia (2012) rehearses a somewhat distinct list of basic principles related to solidarity and decolonization. She too calls on non-Indigenous people to take Indigenous leadership, build long-term relationships, establish good communication, and grapple with “the complicated ways, often as simultaneously oppressed and complicit,” in which they are located in relation to colonialization (p. 30). She also appeals for “cultivating an ethics of responsibility within the Indigenous solidarity movement [that] begins with non-natives understanding ourselves to be beneficiaries of the illegal settlement of Indigenous peoples’ land
and unjust appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ resources and jurisdiction” (p. 28).

Additionally, however, Walia cautions against the paralysis of guilt that can ensue “when faced with this truth” (p. 28), touching upon how white/settler privilege is often upheld through self-reflexivity (Smith, 2013a). Non-Indigenous allies must recognize “the line between being too interventionist and being paralyzed” (p. 28), or what Audrey Huntley and I discuss as striking a balance between “assuming responsibility for a decolonizing solidarity . . . and the potential reinstatement of settler ally dominance” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012, p. 56). My research builds on Walia’s (2012) very useful macro account of how colonialism and solidarity operate.

Andrea Smith’s *Native Americans and the Christian Right* (2008a) straddles the literature on alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and that of alliances more generally. Also calling for a re-conceptualization of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, Smith (2008a) showcases examples of activism in a terrain largely unexplored by mainstream social movement theory: organizing efforts in and between Native American and Christian Right communities. She does this to elucidate the complexities of alliance building and to generate a “prolineal genealogy” (p. xxvii) of coalition building and Native American studies. She characterizes her work as one that “assesses the possibilities of building alliances for the goal of political liberation ‘without guarantees’” (p. xxii). Smith (2008a) highlights strategies employed often out of necessity by Native people, and Native women in particular, to forge “unlikely alliances,” a point that resonates with the findings of this study. Among the most important strategies for Indigenous activists is a politics of rearticulation—“the process of transforming political allegiances to build movements for social change” (p. xvi)—wherein issues are reframed in a way that make alliances more attractive. Above all, Smith calls for a “shift in the way we think about coalition building in general” (p. xii) so as not to foreclose “new possibilities for political organizing that do not depend on uncritically held assumptions about what constitutes progressive politics and who is able to participate in them” (p. xii). I build on Smith’s (2008a) work, but rather than focus on the tactics and strategies of alliance building, I look more deeply into the subject formation processes therein.

**The intersections of Indigenous/feminist postcolonial and critical whiteness studies**

Lastly, I locate my study at the intersection of Indigenous/feminist postcolonial studies and critical whiteness studies. An important postulation for my research emerges at this juncture: the idea that white supremacy and colonialism/imperialism are mutually constitutive (see Chapter
Even so, as Barbara Heron (2007) contends, “there has been little attention paid by post-colonial studies to issues of whiteness, and vice versa” (p. 9), although this is changing with the establishment of settler colonial studies, which included the founding of a journal in 2011 with the same name (Edmonds & Carey, 2013). That said, feminist researchers have long produced scholarship that recognizes the impact of the colonial/imperial genesis of Western (white) feminism on different social issues (Razack, 2008; Thobani, 2007). For example, Sheryl Nestel (2006) argues that the movement to legalize midwifery in Ontario, “like many feminist projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, [has occupied] a ‘historically imperial location’ . . . deriving material and discursive benefits from an engagement with Third World women” (p. 7).

Still, few empirical studies take up whiteness and colonialism/imperialism in relation to solidarity, a notable exception being Heron’s (1999, 2007) work on the subjectivities of Canadian women development workers in Africa. In researching how these women “negotiate and understand [their] positions in relations of power in developing countries,” Heron (1999) identifies the pervasive operation of a “helping imperative” replete with what she calls “colonial continuities” (pp. 41–42). In fact, as I later explain, her main research question bears a striking resemblance to my own.

Emma Kowal (2011) also interrogates whiteness, solidarity and colonialism, but in the Australian context, in her ethnographic study of white anti-racist subjectivities. She argues that “progressive White anti-racists” working with remote Indigenous populations mobilize various discursive techniques to transcend the “stigma of white privilege”—a “voluntary” stigma felt only by “White people who accept responsibility for the effects of colonization on Indigenous people” (p. 320). In their desire to avoid being cast as “missionary, mercenary or misfit,” white anti-racists most often attempt to minimize their agency (e.g., describing themselves as “merely” or “just” behind-the-scenes helpers). The ultimate fantasy of white anti-racists, according to Kowal, is to invert power relations, that is, “to divest themselves of power altogether (if only discursively)” (p. 325) by casting themselves as children who stand to learn from the “experts”—Indigenous people. Like Kowal (2011), I am concerned with white settler women subjects who “readily acknowledge their privilege” (p. 6); and I build on her research by applying it to the Canadian context and by considering the gendered aspects of white stigma.

As I suggest above, Moreton-Robinson’s (2000, 2006, 2008) work stands firmly at the crossroads of whiteness studies, feminist postcolonial studies and Indigenous studies, and is
highly relevant to my study. In *Talkin up to the white woman* (2000), she explores whiteness as a colonial instrument in contemporary relations between white feminists and Indigenous women/feminists in Australia. She exposes how the privilege of white feminist academics hinges on the structural invisibility of whiteness, which in turn allows them to remain unaware of their dominant positionality and complicity in racist, colonial processes. Through an extensive review of feminist texts coupled with in-depth interviews of both white feminist academics and Indigenous women/feminists, Moreton-Robinson (2000) concludes that the former “perceive themselves as autonomous independent individuals, whose anti-racist practice is orchestrated through an intellectual engagement based on objective rational thinking and behaviour” (p. 147). In other words, white feminist academic engagement with race/racism too often precludes the recognition of their embodied, lived experiences of white privilege. I draw extensively on Moreton-Robinson’s work in my own in an attempt to elucidate some of the ways in which white colonial subjectivity operates in the solidarity encounter in Canada.

**Mapping Intersubjective Dynamics in the Solidarity Encounter**

This study continues to tackle the profound question raised by Davis (2010b) and others: How can non-Indigenous people “work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples without replicating the continuing colonial relations that characterize the broader frame of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships in Canada today” (p. 2)? The inspiration for my particular focus comes mainly from three places. First, the critical assessments by Indigenous women of their encounters with white women and whitestream feminism signal the importance of looking more closely at the gendered and racialized aspects of solidarity relations—especially in light of the shortage of empirical studies on the topic. Second, there is merit in honing in on quotidian social practices, whose role in solidifying hierarchal relations between subjects is highlighted by Sunera Thobani (2007), who argues that the white supremacy of Canadian nation building “had to be constantly defended and reproduced at the level of daily life” (p. 83). Thobani implies the centrality of intersubjective relations for any political project, which brings me to Stewart-Harawira’s (2007) more explicit statement: “The most fundamental principle in the search for a new political ontology for being together in the world is the relationship between the ‘self’ and ‘other’” (p. 134). Third, my activist experiences have convinced me that improved practices of solidarity would follow from a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous/non-Indigenous social relations. Influenced by these critiques, visions and experiences, I chose to study the micro
interactions of what I call the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women/feminists and white women/feminists in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In more theoretical terms, I sought to explore the unfolding of intersubjective relations at a specific site of colonial encounter.

Reflecting on the above literature and my own experiences, I came to the research with a broad question: How do white women/feminists grapple with our dominant structural positionality in the solidarity encounter, that is, in the context of ongoing colonial relations? From there, two lines of inquiry formed the backbone of my analysis. The first sought to illuminate the tensions in and challenges of the solidarity encounter. I was compelled (by Indigenous women’s/feminist literature in particular) to consider what had become of the colonial roots of Western feminism. (See Chapter 3 for an overview of the historical production of the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist subject vis-à-vis her Indigenous Other). Are there “colonial continuities” (Heron, 2007) in the contemporary solidarity encounter? What discourses and discursive practices do white settler women employ and to what effects? Are we still apt to see ourselves as superior “helpers” of purportedly more oppressed Indigenous women? Is there a “new missionary” impulse among us that “uses secularity as a guise behind which lurks the imposition of values no less damaging than Christianity” (Kowal, 2011, p. 323)? Are we still evasive about our complicity in settler colonialism and resistant to adopting an anticolonial imperative in solidarity work? Do we universalize our particular experiences and elide differences in identity, belonging and power in the process? As Moreton-Robinson (2000) contends, do we knowingly or otherwise insist on seeing ourselves as “autonomous independent individuals”?

The second line of inquiry sought to highlight the possibilities for non-colonizing solidarity: Are (whitestream) social justice activists more aware in contemporary solidarity encounters of our complicity in settler colonialism (partly due to the feminist turn towards self-reflexivity)? What happens when white women confront/are confronted with our settler status? Are we consumed by the “stigma of white privilege” (Kowal, 2011)? What about the impact of white settler guilt as discussed by scholars as diverse as Alfred (2005), Barker (2010) and Regan (2010)? What else besides self-reflexivity is required to move towards non-colonizing solidarity practices? In short, (how) can colonial scripts be re-written, and what would the corresponding practices of non-colonizing solidarity look like? How can white women negotiate our subject position in solidarity encounters to minimize the reproduction of colonial relations? More broadly, how would changes in intersubjective dynamics at the micro level change social relations at the
macro level? I am brought back to the problem/paradox of political solidarity and its necessity for bringing about lasting social change (see also the below section “Key terms and concepts”).

**The study design**

This study is an autoethnographically-informed analysis of the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women/feminists and white women/feminists in the GTA. Rather than do a case study of a specific group, I decided to investigate the solidarity encounter as a phenomenon in itself, by interviewing women who had done solidarity work with or without an organizational affiliation. I drew on ethnographic methodology to define the solidarity encounter as a “social institution” (Spradley, 1980) marked by broader colonial power relations. I then completed fieldwork, engaged in participant observation and conducted in-depth interviews. Finally, I used discourse analysis to evaluate the data. My research is autoethnographic in that I weave into the narrative relevant experiences from my involvement as a white feminist in social justice and human rights activism in the US, Central America and Canada—especially my time with NMS.

I collected data in the form of field notes, self-reflexive journaling and participant interviews. In total, I conducted 24 in-depth interviews from April through July 2011 with 13 self-identified Indigenous women and 11 self-identified white women. Because my solidarity work predated my doctoral research, I had already attended community events and various organizational activities for several years, having annotated some of those experiences in a personal journal. I also had on-file lots of NMS-related documents including emails and minutes dating as far back as 2006. My thinking on the topic of political solidarity is inescapably shaped by all of that history. Once I became a doctoral student, I continued to attend community events and NMS group meetings, and from that point on systematically took field notes and kept a journal.

This research poses methodologically challenging questions. It was difficult if not impossible to ask participants directly about their subjectivity (e.g., asking white women to explain how they negotiate their structural positioning in colonial relations). Therefore, I relied on a combination of inductive and deductive strategies for data analysis, as interviews were my primary method of data gathering. In Chapter 4, for example, I undertake an inductive analysis of participants’ responses to questions about their reasons for entering into solidarity relations and about the tensions, challenges and/or power relations therein. By placing participant “self-presentations” alongside their perceptions of other participants’ involvement in solidarity, I was better able to
glean a sense of the encounter’s intersubjective dynamics. For instance, Indigenous women describe some behaviours by white women in the solidarity encounter as invasive and thus as sources of tension and conflict, whereas these same behaviours are not necessarily seen as problematic (let alone invasive) by white women. By juxtaposing the two sets of narratives, I was able to identify an underexplored, often problematic aspect of gendered colonial subjectivity in solidarity work—white settler women’s desires for proximity to Indigenous Others. Finally, I applied theoretical insights from relevant literatures in a deductive analysis of participant interviews to identify other possible manifestations of gendered colonial subjectivity.

**Key terms and concepts**

My study begins with the theoretical premise that settler colonialism provides the central frame for understanding the hierarchical relations between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settlers, and thus for mapping the intersubjective dynamics between Indigenous women and white women in the solidarity encounter. Furthermore, following scholars such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), I identify settler colonialism as a distinct colonial formation in that “there is no spatial separation between metropole and colony” (p. 5; see also Wolfe, 2006).

Thus, in the text I refer to settler colonial relations. My intention is not to reify Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, or essentialize and/or ascribe malevolent intentions to subjects in either category, but rather to centre the fact of colonial encounter as does Emma LaRocque (2010):

> I believe the majority of non-Native peoples in our country want to be fair and caring, not just replicating a history full of mistakes and some malefaction. Native peoples, a dynamic and engaging peoples [sic], also take exception to being restricted to colonial models or experience. Nevertheless, our encounter is informed by colonization. (p. 14)

Additionally, my analysis recognizes the evolution of colonial policies over time. Writing about policing policy and practice vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples in Australia, Chris Cunneen (2001) uses the term neocolonial “as a way of bringing together both the continuities of policing in the colonial period with an understanding of the political changes which have occurred in the legal context of citizenship, equality and the rule of law” (p. 8). And, while I do not review particular colonial policies in this study, I acknowledge both the consistency and changing nature of Canadian settler state colonialism over time, and also signal what Deborah Bird Rose (1996) calls the “deep colonizing” practices that occur in a context of ostensible equality under the law. Having been reminded early on in the research process of the fundamental fact that Indigenous
peoples across Canada remain dispossessed of their land, I decided to stick to the term colonial to highlight this central continuity in colonial policies.\textsuperscript{44}

I use the modifiers “Native” and “Indigenous” interchangeably in this study to denote the descendants of the first inhabitants of the territories now called Canada. I am mindful of the risks in using overarching terms (as opposed to naming specific nations)—the re-homogenizing, essentializing and othering of many distinct peoples or what LaRocque (2010) calls the “lumping effect” (p. 142). LaRocque rightly insists on seeing Native peoples (her preferred term) as diverse along geographical, linguistic, cultural, religious and political lines even as she emphasizes “the common experience of [colonial] invasions in our lives” (p. 32).\textsuperscript{45} In this same spirit, I have opted to use the terms “Indigenous” and “Indigenous peoples” (in the plural) as they are employed by many in the global Indigenous rights movement and in international human rights laws and standards (Amnesty, 2004). I do so as an inclusive gesture to acknowledge the heterogeneity of “status” and “non-status”\textsuperscript{46} First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples across Turtle Island (see Monture-Angus, 1999). Following Alfred (2005) and various Indigenous activists I have known, I do not use the term “Aboriginal” precisely because of its official usage by the Canadian settler state.\textsuperscript{47} I make an exception and use terms such as “Aboriginal,” “First Nations,” and “Indian” when they appear in the material I cite.

I contrast the category of Indigenous/Native with that of non-Indigenous/non-Native, even while acknowledging a parallel risk of homogenization. Importantly, I understand such categories to be socially constructed and thus “historically porous” (Morgensen, 2011, p. 20) in accordance with the political project of settler colonialism. However, as Scott Morgensen (2011) asserts, “no degree of complication . . . removes the meaningful difference indigeneity continues to make in a settler society” (p. 22). In Chapter 3, I argue for the importance of retaining the Native/settler binary, a now conventional categorical distinction in the postcolonial canon.\textsuperscript{48}

I also frequently use the term ally. At the start of my research, I ascribed to a definition provided by Anne Bishop (2002): “[An ally is] a member of an oppressor group who works to end a form of oppression which gives her or him privilege. For example, a white person who works to end racism or a man who works to end sexism” (p. 152). Over the course of the research, however, I have come to see this definition as limited, a point deserving of more study (see Chapter 2). This definitional logic could preclude the involvement of Native allies in many instances and
inadvertently sustain hierarchical relations between differently positioned subjects. That said, I retain all mentions of ally in my write-up to best represent the research process as it unfolded.

The concept of political solidarity, as opposed to social solidarity, is central to this research.\(^4^9\) And, I bring a purposively broad and explicitly material understanding of political solidarity to the study; by using the phrase, I allude to a loose set of practices in which people engage together to pursue a political project. This definition includes common evocations of political protest and mobilization for social change, and the less visible material practices of grassroots groups like NMS (e.g., behind-the-scenes lobbying, group meetings and/or social events, email exchanges and, increasingly, the use of social media). Along with bell hooks (2000), I conceive of solidarity in temporal terms—as “sustained, ongoing commitment” in contrast to occasional support, which “can be given and just as easily withdrawn” (p. 67). Importantly, my focus is on theorizing the intersubjective relations that comprise political solidarity. That is, the stuff of political solidarity—the embodied, material encounters of differently positioned subjects—constitutes a site for the study of intersubjective relations in a settler colonial context.

The feminist notion of working across difference, encapsulated here by Audre Lorde (2007), is also foundational to this study: “We sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival” (p. 123). Bernice Johnson Reagon’s (1983) work also infuses my own: she tells us that despite being indispensable to the pursuit of social justice, coalitions are neither inherently easy nor safe, but threatening “to the core” for those involved (p. 356).

I work with the related concept of intersecting/interlocking oppressions as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), bell hooks (2000), Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and others.\(^5^0\) Sherene Razack (1998) conveys the core message: in failing to understand oppressions as mutually constitutive, “we fail to realize that we cannot undo our own marginality without simultaneously undoing all the systems of oppression” (p. 14). I also adhere to the praxis embedded within the theory: dominant subjects (in this study, white settler women) are called to acknowledge historically-derived, structural power differences (as opposed to only cultural differences\(^5^1\) and the ways in which they are sustained, in part through subject formation processes (Razack, 1998).\(^5^2\) Another linked idea is the “race to innocence” (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Razack, 1998), where subjects focus on their subordinate rather than
structurally dominant positionality, an idea of which I make use, particularly in Chapter 6. Further to this is the denial of differences (of identity and oppression) that facilitates and validates the race to innocence and the problematic claim of women’s common oppression.

My notion of working across difference owes much to hooks (2000), specifically her critique of the “myth of sisterhood” alongside an insistence on the need to strive for feminist political solidarity. Similarly to Reagon (1983), while acknowledging the exceedingly difficult nature of the task, hooks sees solidarity as necessary for transforming (as opposed to reforming) society. Lorde’s (2007) and Trinh’s (1997) remarkably similar visions of difference complement those of Reagon and hooks. For both scholars, it comes down to how we conceive of difference, and what we do with the undeniable differences between us: our transformative potential is unleashed not through the formation of power-laden hierarchies out of our differences, but rather through the creative mingling of non-hierarchical (what Lorde call’s “nondominant”) differences.

Along these same lines, I use the concept of non-colonizing to gesture toward the creation and sustainment of equitable Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in the solidarity encounter and beyond. I draw inspiration from Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) vision of non-colonizing transnational feminist solidarity across borders. In my reading, Mohanty does not so much provide a definition of non-colonizing solidarity as describe an “intellectual move that allows for [a] concern for women of different communities and identities to build coalitions and solidarities across borders” (p. 226). The move she proposes resonates with the nuanced approaches to political solidarity established in the preceding decades (to which she also contributed): “The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully” (p. 226). As for a more precise definition, this is precisely the work of this study, which seeks among other goals to map the possible contours of non-colonizing solidarity.

Finally, there is the concept of decolonization. On occasion I employ the term and its derivatives as a synonym for “non-colonizing.” However, I am wary of its increasing use in a variety of contexts as “a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools,” in the words of Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 1). These scholars remind those of us involved in “other civil and human rights-based social justice projects” (p. 2) that decolonization projects are
distinct, materially-based and focused on furthering Indigenous sovereignty struggles. I also make note of Gaile Cannella and Kathryn Manuelito’s (2008) proposed alternative—an “anticolonialist” social science praxis that “would challenge the illusion that decolonizing can eliminate the effects of oppression” (p. 49). However, even when properly contextualized, the language of decolonization can be used in appropriative ways. Both non-Indigenous researchers based in the Global North, Laura Reinsborough and Deborah Barndt (2010) critique their own application of a “decolonizing lens” to assess a transnational community arts and popular education project, noting the possibility that “we will lose sight of whose struggles this term addresses. . . . Therefore, it is important to remember how some are more negatively affected than others in the struggles that the term addresses” (p. 161). Underlying my use of all terms—including decolonial, anticolonial or non-colonizing—is an attentiveness to how subjects are differently positioned in relation to political struggle and concomitant solidarity attempts.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I discuss the methods and methodologies used to conduct this study, which is decidedly feminist, anticolonial and auto/ethnographic in orientation. I also situate myself as researcher, highlighting how my work with NMS has shaped the study. At the same time, I note the peril involved in the self-reflexive act of disclosing my subject position: the risk of re-centring whiteness. More broadly, I consider the “research as encounter,” or how the research process mirrored the very encounter I attempt to theorize and thus presented a fundamental methodological challenge: How does a white settler woman researcher avoid reproducing a colonial encounter in either study design or implementation? In posing the question, I recognize that my subject position is reflective and productive of the collective social relations of which I am a part. I end by considering the extent to which the very hierarchical relations that the study examines (i.e., the gendered, racialized and colonial relations of the solidarity encounter) might infuse the study itself—despite methodological designs to mitigate this risk.

In Chapter 3, I present the theoretical concepts that frame my study of intersubjective relations in the contemporary solidarity encounter. I begin with the premise that Canadian settler colonial relations infuse the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women. I also argue that a central dynamic of these relations—a deeply entrenched (white) settler desire for legitimate (liberal) subject status—is in turn operationalized by a desire for proximity to the Indigenous Other. In light of the historical production of white women as the “saviours” of
Other women, I suggest that the settler desire for proximity is also gendered. Moreover, I contend that this particular subject position, which is configured by casting white women as simultaneously subordinate and dominant, remains extremely difficult to resist/transgress. Importantly, I identify the (settler) colonial subject as a modern liberal subject, and thus the white settler woman ally as always already occupying a liberal subject position prior to solidarity work. The chapter unfolds as follows: I review the literature on the historical production of the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist subject in (hierarchical) relation to her Indigenous Other. I explore the ways in which this subject was/is constituted through the production of gendered colonial difference as the civilizer (saviour/helper) of Other women. I also touch upon some of the specificities of the Euro-Canadian settler woman/feminist subject in Canadian nation building. I thus set the stage for an analysis of gendered colonial difference in the contemporary solidarity encounter, asking how white settler women allies comply with, resist and/or transgress the parameters of their subject position as settlers. In other words, I ask, what has become of the white settler woman’s impulse to civilize, save or help the more “oppressed” Other woman? Finally, I consider the relevance of Sara Ahmed’s (2000) notion of proximity, as one mode of colonial encounter, for exploring settler colonial intersubjective relations at the micro level of solidarity work.

In Chapter 4, I describe the parameters of the white settler woman’s desire for proximity to Indigenous women, and the subtle and not so subtle ways in which it can operate in the service of liberal self-making. I include a host of interrelated desires and discourses under the proximity umbrella, from the longing to be accepted into an Indigenous community to the desire to have a purpose in life. Through a careful reading of participant narratives, I argue that gendered colonial subjectivity—and the quintessential helping behaviour at its core—is often operationalized via the pursuit of proximity. By (figuratively or literally) “getting close” to Native women, the white settler woman attempts to transcend her location in colonial power relations, and thus maintain a sense of legitimacy/belonging. White settler liberal desires—to know the Other and to be moral, innocent, transcendent and, above else, legitimate—are extremely hard to relinquish. However, the reproduction of white settler liberal subjectivity in solidarity encounters is a fraught endeavour, never proceeding seamlessly without contestation. White settler women do grapple with our dominant positionality, even as we find it exceedingly difficult to give it up. That being said, despite knowing what to avoid—prototypical colonial
helping behaviour—at some point most of us exhibit behaviours and attitudes characteristic of
the gendered colonial subject.

The chapter begins with the observation that Indigenous participants and white participants
respectively describe different modalities of entry into political activism/solidarity: the former
tend to emphasize their location as members of a collective, the latter to describe a more
personal/individualistic involvement. This suggests both the effects of structural positioning on
a subject’s engagement in solidarity and also how much Western individualism marks white
women’s subjectivities. After discussing the workings of proximity discourse in more detail, I
turn to Native women’s narrations of the solidarity encounter, arguing that the potentially
colonizing effects of this desire are most detectable in these narrations. While noting that many
white women do not exhibit these problematic behaviours all or even most of the time,
Indigenous women emphasize the inevitable display of “needy do-gooder” behaviour among
white women allies—behaviour they often experience as invasive/colonial. In short, the white
woman’s desire for proximity (in order to pursue liberal subjectivity) often seems to manifest as
“neediness.” To encapsulate the specificity of intersubjective relations in a settler colonial
context, I develop the concept of the “impulse to solidarity”—the bundle of desires and
discursive practices that propels white settler women in their pursuit of proximity. A nexus of
the seemingly contradictory white desires to help and to be helped by the Indigenous Other, the
solidarity impulse both reflects and facilitates white settler women’s liberal self-making
projects. By employing the phrase “to be helped by,” I highlight the constitutive underside of
“helping” behaviour—an assortment of self-serving/self-making reasons why white settler
women might engage in solidarity with Indigenous Others. Further, I distinguish the solidarity
impulse from the “helping imperative” (Heron, 2007) to reflect the intersubjective dynamics of
solidarity work at “home” as opposed to development work abroad. I infer throughout the
chapter that un-interrogated solidarity impulses often generate tensions among women in the
solidarity encounter.

In Chapter 5, I discuss a particular manifestation of the white pursuit of proximity to Indigenous
women—the tendency to romanticize and then appropriate Indigeneity in the interests of white
settler self-making. To do so, I trace participant constructions of Western and Indigenous
cultural “difference.” While a minority discourse in white participant narratives, a nostalgic,
romanticized admiration for Indigenous values/cultures all too easily slips into an invasive,
appropriative mode. This slippage, I argue, is akin to the self-making dynamic of “going strange/go ing native” (Ahmed, 2000), which works to consolidate the (white) settler’s sense of legitimacy as national subject at both the individual and collective levels. In other words, the liberal subject’s capacity to “know” the Other and “master” difference is reinforced. My analysis highlights the striking role of white settler critiques of “Western lack” in this discursive move. At the same time, I identify a complication in the dynamic—the tendency of some Indigenous women to also idealize Indigeneity, although for the distinct purpose of furthering the political aspirations of Indigenous peoples. Drawing on LaRocque (2010) and Lawrence (2003), I contextualize such discursive moves by Indigenous women as part of a broader pattern of resistance to ongoing colonialism in which they engage despite the risk of reproducing essentialized or romanticized cultural notions of Indigenous difference. I end with a question for consideration in the concluding chapter: Given the colonial discursive parameters and tightly scripted roles that circumscribe all participant subjectivities (although with uneven benefits), what steps can be taken to mitigate this particular manifestation of white/settler liberal subjectivity?

In Chapter 6, I examine the discursive operation of claims of exceptionalism in white participant narratives. Put simply, I argue that some white women attempt to position themselves as exceptional “good white settler allies” through recourse to a good/bad settler binary or notions of friendship (via proximity) (Thompson, 2003). I consider the role of white settler guilt in these dynamics, asking to what extent exceptionalism discourse is an attempt to alleviate this guilt. I also note that the pursuit of exceptionalism can crystallize as competition among white settler women allies, with self-righteousness and a sense of entitlement com mingled therein. I apply the insights of critical race scholarship to suggest that white subjectivity itself is constituted through claims to exceptionalism/innocence, including theories of “white disaffiliation” (Wiegman, 1999); “White stigma” (Kowal, 2011); and white moral agency (Applebaum, 2010). I assess the role of declarative statements (Ahmed, 2004) and self-reflexivity (Smith, 2013a) in the microworkings of exceptionalism discourse. I end with thoughts on the fraught promise of self-reflexivity for tempering this facet of the impulse to solidarity. My argument rests on the idea that moves to exceptionalism are fostered by an individualistic understanding of solidarity work: it is the white settler woman subject (who thinks of herself as) entering solidarity as an autonomous individual, rather than as a member of a white settler collectivity, who can sustain
the fantasy of overcoming colonial power relations. In short, I argue that exceptionalism is part of the liberal subject’s arsenal of strategies to deny/transcend structural white/settler privilege.

In the concluding chapter, I propose a framework for attempting non-colonizing solidarity, which incorporates a spatialized understanding of both the problem/paradox of solidarity and its mitigation. I base my proposal on a synthesis of participant narratives, arguing that Indigenous narratives in particular present us with a phenomenology of the solidarity encounter such that we can begin to re-conceptualize political struggles, subjects and subjectivities—including white settler women’s roles as allies in political struggle with Indigenous women. That is, I flesh out the contours of what might constitute non-colonizing solidarity and subjectivities, and the paths we as Indigenous peoples and settlers might collectively take to get there, even as we interact under decidedly colonial circumstances.

I propose that if the problem with settler colonial subject production is the desire for proximity (and concomitant invasiveness and creation of racial hierarchies), then the solution involves distance/distancing, or a shift into intersubjective dynamics that produce subjects in non-hierarchical relation (Lorde, 2007). Drawing on scholars such as Ahmed (2012), Smith (2013a) and Leslie Thielen-Wilson (2012), I point to the reconfiguration of boundaries (material, discursive and thus intersubjective) as a central condition for fostering non-colonizing solidarity in theory and practice. This would involve a reorientation of white settler women allies in solidarity spaces, a “stepping back, but not out” (as put by Gabriela, an Indigenous participant) to bring collective white settler privilege (back) into view (Ahmed, 2012a). Such a reorientation would embrace relationality and delineate certain limits, striking a balance between proximity (too much of the wrong kind of investment on individualistic terms) and distance (too little or no investment at all). This framework calls upon the white settler woman subject to exercise her agency, but through/at a distance. I also reconsider the fraught promise of self-reflexivity as a mechanism in this framework.

I end by recapping those moments of white settler woman ally subject-making that most require our pause and vigilance. As white settler women allies, we must learn to identify those times when, spurred by a deep-seated desire for legitimacy, our self-interest takes centre stage, when individualistic desires (for acceptance, inclusion and/or forgiveness; for healing, empowerment or purpose) compel us to overstep our (intersubjective) bounds and diminish the collective
political work of solidarity. I start and end with the premise that, for the white settler woman ally, negotiating an ethical position in solidarity work is a never-ending process.

**Summary and Contributions**

The solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in Canada is inescapably entrenched in broader colonial relations. And, political solidarity under these circumstances is a fraught, though necessary, endeavor. In this study, I reflect on the proposition that solidarity work between hierarchically-positioned subjects *can* be refashioned in non-colonizing ways. I bring a novel concern to scholarship on political solidarity by focusing on its intersubjective relations, charting the interlocking effects of colonialism, race (whiteness) and gender therein. In this way, I make a unique contribution to current conversations about the terms of political engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—especially *who* sets them.

First, I provide an in-depth look at the micro-dynamics that comprise the solidarity encounter. In so doing, I expose the cracks and fault lines along which the reinstallation of the white settler liberal self is attempted, and thus along which solidarity is attempted. In particular, I explore the ways in which a deep-seated desire for legitimacy appears to undergird white settler women allies’ subjectivities, with its mutually constitutive desires for improvement/transformation, innocence and exceptionalism that are in turn expressed and operationalized through the desire for proximity. Moreover, I show that this desire requires appropriation, both material and figurative, and (allows for) the negation of structural inequality and/or settler complicity therein. On the other hand, most if not all white participants do struggle to varying degrees with their/our historic settler status. We seek to avoid the quintessential helping behaviour that has marked the white settler/imperialist woman subject’s interactions with Other women. Nonetheless, I note a strong psychic underpinning (Pratt, 2008) to the desire for legitimacy that even the most self-aware white settler woman seems unable or unwilling to permanently give up.

I also propose a framework for fostering non-colonizing relations in solidarity work. It calls for a reconfiguration of intersubjective boundaries in which white women would curb the complexly layered “needy do-gooder” behaviour that Indigenous women find so problematic. Concretely, for white settler women allies, this means questioning our sense of entitlement to
“do/be good”; our right to unfettered access to Indigenous spaces; our capacity to “know” the Other and “fix” things; and our ability to claim the status of exceptional settler who has earned an exemption from complicity in colonial relations. In short, we are called upon to identify the moments when we begin to think/act like liberal subjects. To forestall the “impulse to solidarity,” I suggest that white women allies re-conceptualize our seemingly personal desires (for friendship, belonging and intimacy) as largely a reflection and consequence of our structural positionality as members of a white settler collectivity. Perhaps if we can see political solidarity as not necessarily bound to friendship or belonging, we can disrupt the impulse to proximity and the “individualistic” self-serving/self-making processes it serves. In other words, we must continually remind ourselves of our structural positionality—we remain settlers complicit in colonial relations, irrespective of our ability to connect to Indigenous people or communities.

1 According to recent estimates, there are 1,181 total cases of missing (164) and murdered (1,017) Indigenous women and girls across Canada (RCMP, 2014). CBC correspondent Trinh Theresa Do (2014, May 2) reports on the disproportionality of missing and murdered Indigenous women: “[The RCMP report] also included the point that while aboriginal women make up four per cent of Canada’s population, they represent 16 per cent of all murdered females between 1980 and 2012, as well as 12 per cent of all missing females on record.”

2 The term Turtle Island is widely used in Indigenous activist circles and beyond, and reflects the importance of the turtle in the origin stories of many Indigenous nations in what is now called Canada and the US. While Indigenous activists discuss the phenomenon as nation-wide, the focus of their organizing is local, provincial and/or national. It has become common practice among some academics to identify Indigenous scholars by their nation as a way to make Indigenous scholarship more visible. I adopt this practice to some degree, identifying a scholar’s nation when they do so themselves or when it seems especially relevant to the point being made. Otherwise, as when referencing non-Indigenous scholars, I make no mention of their positionality in this regard.

3 No More Silence (NMS) is a Toronto-based group co-founded in 2004 by an activist and documentary film-maker of mixed Indigenous/Euro-immigrant ancestry, and a feminist educator ally of European ancestry. Our mandate includes ending the impunity of state actors (the police, judiciary and coroners’ offices) in cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Since 2006, we have organized an annual February 14 ceremony in front of Toronto police headquarters. In subsequent chapters, when relevant, I discuss NMS and my involvement in it since 2006.

4 By using the phrase “women/feminists,” I acknowledge that not all self-identified women self-ascribe as feminists. While I sometimes use only one of the terms—women or feminists—that acknowledgement still stands.

5 In subsequent chapters, I discuss how good intentions, and “friendship” in particular, are imagined (by the white/settler subject) to function as a leveler of unequal structural power relations.

6 By messiness, I am signaling the way in which intersubjective practices and dynamics defy neat theoretical description. I also allude to the indeterminate nature of intersubjective relations wherein struggles to negotiate and overcome inequitable power relations are ongoing. In reflecting on and writing about NMS, Audrey Huntley and I made describing the messiness of the encounter our foremost goal (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012).

7 INM’s reach has transcended Canadian borders. Amanda Morris (2014) writes, “According to [Sylvia] McAdam, human rights violations by multinational corporations as they relate to land use are a concern for Indigenous peoples worldwide and are not just restricted to Canada. . . . [and] Idle No More has been an inspiration in the global fight around loss of land, language, and Indigenous cultures” (p. 254).

8 The less well-known, but arguably more radical Indigenous Nationhood Movement considers Indigenous activism in terms of resurgence. See nationsrising.org and Glen Coulthard (2014, p. 151ff).

9 Simpson referred to the unresolved matter of stolen Indigenous land as the “elephant in the room” during a public talk that I attended on May 13, 2014 at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland.

10 According to FirstVoices Kanien’kéha (Mohawk) Community Portal, “the name of our Nation is Kanien’kéhá:ka, which means ‘People of the Flint Nation’” (FirstVoices, n.d.). I have inferred Kanien’kéha to be the adjective form of Kanien’kéhá:ka; any error in this formulation is mine.
While sharing his critique of reconciliation discourse in its post-apology incarnations at a public talk at the University of Toronto (February 16, 2012), Alfred also stated that non-Native allies are needed to advance Native political struggles. For example, I received this email on January 20, 2011 written by a prominent Indigenous woman activist: “It is good to hear the organizations [in Toronto] are uniting [around the February 14 event] . . . Solidarity is one of the tools we need to bring awareness and to help promote safety nets for our beautiful women and their children, our future generations. We have to teach our children to work together so that things get done.”

Maracle made this statement in her keynote address at a public forum on “challenging racism and appropriation in our classrooms and schools” on November 8, 2011 at the University of Toronto.

Even the most conscious/conscientious of white settler women face this challenge: how to curb the desire to “equalize Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations under conditions that are not yet ‘equalizable’” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012, pp. 53–54).

I primarily cite literature emerging from Turtle Island, but also from Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Indigenous scholars/activists are usually careful to direct their critiques of feminism to mainstream, hegemonic or dominant forms, which have privileged the issues of white, middle-class Western women. Verna St. Denis (2007) calls attention to “the varied trajectories of feminism” (p. 34), i.e., the pluralistic, heterogeneous and dynamic nature of feminist theories and practices over time. Authors do not always define the term being used, however, which can lead to generalizations/oversimplifications. In this essay, I employ the term(s) used by the scholar/activist in question, aware of the risk of reproducing these same generalizations.

The utility of feminism as a political or theoretical stance to further Indigenous struggle has been intensely debated among Indigenous women themselves. There is no single Indigenous position on feminism (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill, 2013; Green, 2007a). Devon Abbot Mihesuah (2003) emphasizes the heterogeneity of both Indigenous women and their opinions about feminism: “How we as Native women define ourselves as female and how we relate to the concept of feminism, to feminists, and to each other . . . depend on our relation to our tribes, our class, appearance, life partners, education and religion” (p. 159). See also Joyce Green (2007b), Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) and Verna St. Denis (2007).

In this literature, Indigenous feminist scholars have taken issue with the “common argument” by some Indigenous women themselves that feminism is not relevant for Indigenous women (LaRocque, 2007, p. 56; see also St. Denis, 2007; Smith & J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, 2008). They call for the reclamation of feminist theory as a useful tool for theorizing the gendered aspects of colonial oppression as well as creating visions of change, both of which have been neglected by mainstream feminist movements. I am not suggesting that Indigenous women have only now acquired a feminist sensibility, but rather wish to acknowledge a vibrant and growing body of Indigenous social and political thought “within the confines of [Western] academia” (Ladner, 2000, p. 37).

In using the term “women of colour,” I am following Christina Gabriel (1999) “to suggest a political constituency as opposed to a racial category” (p. 154, note 3). Additionally, following the lead of many Indigenous women in Canada, I do not include Indigenous women in the term “women of colour.”

I refer to the well-known critique of mainstream, white feminism as universalizing, ethnocentric and exclusionary articulated most vociferously by women of colour since at least feminism’s so-called second wave. However, as Enakshi Dua (1999) points out, “since the arrival of Europeans, Canadian anti-racist feminists have been actively engaged in deconstructing race and gender relations” (p. 7). Contemporary scholarship of this ilk includes the work of Himani Bannerji, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Sherene Razack, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Sunera Thobani among others. See also the groundbreaking Combahee River Collective Statement (1997) published in 1979.

Several US-focused anthologies about the unique, yet heterogeneous elements of women of colour feminisms followed, including This bridge called my back (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) and Home girls (Smith, 1983). For more on Canadian anti-racist feminist thought see edited collections by Dua and Angela Robertson (1999) and Sherene Razack, Malal Smith and Sunera Thobani (2010).

Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde and Sojourner Truth are prominent among the list of feminist scholars and activists mentioned by Indigenous women.

Maracle (1996) writes, “Embodied in my brilliance is the great sea of knowledge that it took to overcome the paralysis of a colonized mind. I did not come to this clearing alone. Hundreds walked alongside me—Black, Asian and Native women whose tide of knowledge was bestowed upon me are the key to every CanAmerican’s emancipation” (p. 139).

Sherene Razack (1998) argues for “a theory of difference that accounts for the violence in the lives of women and our complicity in it . . . [R]elying on the notion of an essential woman, the idea that all women share a core oppression on to which can then be grafted their differences, has enabled a masking of how systems of domination interlock and thus how we, as women, are implicated in one another’s lives. Tracing complicity thus begins with a mapping of relations among women. We can then critically examine those constructs that homogenize our
differences or package them as innate, decontextualized, and ahistorical” (p. 21). Razack’s insistence on mapping relations among colonialism to understand how oppressions interlock and our complicities therein provides a blueprint for how to make colonialism foundational to feminist praxis, and also to “acknowledge that we all share the same land base and yet to question the differential terms on which it is occupied” as called for by Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005, p. 126).

25 Sandy Grande (2004) adopts the term “whitestream” as developed by Claude Denis (1997), who had borrowed from the feminist canon: “Adapting from the feminist notion of ‘malestream,’ [Denis] defines ‘whitestream’ as the idea that while American society is not ‘white’ in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally and fundamentally structured on the basis of the Anglo-European, ‘white’ experience” (p. 9). See Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill (2013) for more critiques of whitestream feminism (p. 17ff).

26 Some feminist scholars of colour—such as Himani Bannerji (1993), Sherene Razack (1998) and Sunera Thobani (2007)—are noted for their exceptional work in employing colonialism as an analytical category. But the scholarship of women of colour has also been the target of critique. As Emma LaRocque (2007) states, “It is unacceptable that many feminist writers, perhaps especially white and African American writers, seem unaware of our existence, both as politically situated women and/or as intellectuals and scholars. There is in mainstream Canadian and American feminist writings a decided lack of inclusion of our experience, analysis and perspectives” (p. 67).

27 Tracking this universalist streak in North American feminism and echoing the sentiments of many women of colour, Grande (2004) writes, “Second-wave feminists have been rigorously critiqued for their obdurate insistence on a unified sisterhood, their failure to comprehend the difference between gender-based and race-based oppression, and their continued construction of patriarchy as the universal oppression” (p. 135).

28 Jo-Anne Fiske (2000) is concerned that postmodern notions of the fractured and incoherent subject undermine Indigenous sovereignty or land claims by making it difficult for the Indigenous legal subject to “claim stability and hence credibility as a legal subject” (p. 8). She calls for “judicious acceptance of the postmodern concept of the discursively constituted subject” (p. 12) and adoption of a “resistant sensibility” that allows for conceptualizing an Indigenous “postcolonial legal subject” (p. 5). This sensibility “seeks to position the legal subject within aboriginal narration of oral history understood as legal discourses grounded in ontology as distinct from the epistemological basis of dominant legal discourses. . . . it recognizes that each culture, through narratives that constitute statements of normativity, sets itself the task of defining subjectivity and determining the legal subject, whether this be through a rights-endowed individual or through an obligation-bearing member of a collective bound by reciprocity” (p. 5).

29 See FIMI (2006) for a discussion of how mainstream human rights discourse perpetuates the false dichotomy “rights” vs. “culture,” pitting “modern” (individual) cultural practices against “traditional” (collective) ones (p. 22).

30 Addressing a world conference of Indigenous women in 1990, Trask (1999) states, “We are here to build women’s organizations focused on the needs of other women and/or as intellectuals and scholars. There is in mainstream Canadian and American feminist writings a decided lack of inclusion of our experience, analysis and perspectives” (p. 67).

31 R. Bourgeois, personal communication, September 2010.


33 The assertion that hierarchical gender relations in North American Indigenous nations are partially if not largely a colonial imposition is widespread. Here is a partial list of texts by Indigenous women in chronological order: Gunn Allen, 1986; Johnson et al., 1993; Turpel, 1993; Monture-Angus, 1995; Jaime Guerrero, 1997; Stevenson, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Ladner, 2000; DeWechild, 2003; Miheuah, 2003; Grande, 2004; Horn-Miller, 2005; Lawrence and Anderson, 2005; Smith, 2005a; Bourgeois, 2006; Maracle, 2006; McGowan, 2006; Henning, 2007; LaRocque, 2007; Stewart-Harawira, 2007; Suneri, 2008; Million, 2008; and Smith and Kauanui, 2008.

34 Furthermore, Indigenous feminists such as Kuokkanen (2012) point out that Indigenous traditions that presumably respect women “do not necessarily protect women’s individual rights or advance women’s leadership, but instead have been employed to re-inscribe domination and patriarchal structures” (p. 239).

35 St. Denis (2007) writes, “Most if not all Aboriginal people . . . living in western societies are inundated from birth until death with western patriarchy and western forms of misogyny. I am joined by an increasing number of other Aboriginal women who are also claiming that we have not escaped these social and political structures and ideologies at all” (p. 44).

36 For example, Indigenous women as well as women of colour have long rebuked the mainstream (white) antiviolence movement for its ethnocentric perspectives on and strategies to combat violence against women (Beads with Kuokkanen, 2007; Maracle, 1996; Monture-Angus, 1995; Smith, 2005a; Turpel, 1993; Vickers, 2002).

37 I do not review studies of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in the colonial past, as do David A. Nock and Celia Haig-Brown (2006). In Chapter 3, however, I do discuss Euro-Canadian settler feminists and the Canadian nation-building project.
The concept of social solidarity is most often associated with Emile Durkheim’s sociological theory. While my thesis is concerned with some of the same issues taken up in theories of social solidarity—e.g., individualism, social relations—it does not share these theories’ central concern with the matter of social cohesion (or its breakdown). See Graham Crow's (2002) *Social solidarities: Theories, identities and social change*. 

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38 Nine out of 24 chapters are case studies of alliances with specific Indigenous communities or around fishing/environmental issues. Six case studies discuss alliances vis-à-vis a range of topics, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the National Secretariat against Hate and Racism in Canada, academia, cyberspace and arts activism. The remaining articles consist of reflections by various individuals on their interpersonal experiences with alliance building and/or on what principles can be used to best approach the work. Other chapters of some relevance include those by Laura Reinsborough and Deborah Barndt; Lily Pol Neveu; and Beenash Jafri.

39 The other barriers to alliance building identified by Barker (2010) are empty apologies with no substantive measures to redress wrongs; the “Free Tibet” syndrome (Corntassel, 2006) when an ally engages in token acts to end oppression elsewhere, which “allows the release of pent-up guilt over opulent and privileged lifestyles through the contribution to ‘some good end’” (p. 322); and relying on “those in power to ‘fix’ oppression” (p. 327).

40 The Alliance Project consisted of “three interview-based case studies of the Coalition for a Public Inquiry into the Killing of Dudley George; the Coastal First Nations’ Turning Point Initiative; and a community study of a [West Coast] First Nation” (Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010, p. 335).

41 Borrowing from Moreton-Robinson (2000), I use the term “self-presentation” to refer to “how one represents oneself through interpretation as opposed to how one is presented by another” (p. xxii).

42 Before interviewing anyone, I consulted with several Indigenous scholars and community members about the project, using the term “neo-colonial” as a matter of course. I decided to stick to “colonial” after one particularly memorable conversation in which the interlocutor reacted strongly to my use of “neo-colonial,” arguing that there is little new about the colonial process in Canada, i.e., Indigenous peoples remain dispossessed of their land.

43 Emma LaRocque (2010) highlights the commonalities of “Native experience” to discuss “Native resistance discourse” as a literary genre: “I have taken, perhaps perilously, a panoramic view, largely because both the Euro-Canadian textual dehumanization and Native response to it have been broadly, if not sweepingly, expressed. Colonial time has collapsed some fundamental differences among indigenous peoples in areas such as resources, economies, technologies, education, parental and kinship roles, governance, language, religion, and land base. The Indian Act has determined identity and locality, defining margins and centres even within the Native community. . . . Native peoples’ persevering resistance to colonization has also bonded them and provided them with similarities, similarities intricate in their cultural and political workings. . . . Native peoples’ colonial experience is not unidimensional or inflexible. But it is there, as Native writers across many demarcations expressively reveal” (p. 10).

44 I am referring to the designations of “status” and “non-status” as defined by the Indian Act.

45 Alfred (2005) notes that “the label of ‘aboriginal’ . . . is a legal and social construction of the state [. . . ] Within the frame of politics and social life, Onkwehonwe who accept the label and identity of an aboriginal are bound up in a logic that is becoming increasingly evident, even to them, as one of cultural assimilation—the abandonment of any meaningful notion of being indigenous” (pp. 23–24). See Linc Kesler (2009) for a discussion about “the various ways in which Aboriginal peoples in Canada self-identify and are defined by the state—and the ways in which these two systems of definition, one based in law and legislation, the other in family tradition and community practice, are frequently in conflict.”

46 At the same time, I am intrigued by LaRocque’s (2010) use of “re-settler” to refer to non-Indigenous inhabitants of Canada and her persuasive argument for the Indigenous appropriation of the term “settler”: “I take the view that Native peoples were the original settlers, in the sense of being a deeply rooted and settled indigenous presence on this land we now call Canada; therefore, I refer to all other state-created Canadians as immigrant ‘re-settlers.’ Europeans cannot own the notion of ‘settler’ and ‘settlement.’ These words (and their kissing cousin ‘civilization’) represent a perniciously colonialist phraseology that Europeans have always assumed and from which they have justified the conquest and dispossession of peoples native to their lands. There are obviously many ways of settling” (pp. 7–8). Such a move could be a step toward “unsetting” (Regan, 2010) colonial narratives of entitlement.

47 The concept of social solidarity is most often associated with Emile Durkheim’s sociological theory. While my thesis is concerned with some of the same issues taken up in theories of social solidarity—e.g., individualism, social relations—it does not share these theories’ central concern with the matter of social cohesion (or its breakdown). See Graham Crow’s (2002) *Social solidarities: Theories, identities and social change*. 
What Barbara Smith (1983) calls “the concept of the simultaneity of oppression [remains] one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” to feminist praxis (p. xxxii). Similarly to Dua (1999), I do not conflate “Black feminist thought” with the broader category of anti-racist feminist thought. bell hooks (2000) also points to the danger of recognizing only cultural differences. While important, doing so does not guarantee an acknowledgement of power differences or alter the material, exploitative consequences of “Othering.” Razack (1998) writes, “Encounters between dominant and subordinate groups cannot be managed simply as pedagogical moments requiring cultural, racial, or gender sensitivity. Without an understanding of how responses to subordinate groups are socially organized to sustain existing power arrangements, we cannot hope to either communicate across social hierarchies or to work to eliminate them” (p. 8). Following Ahmed (2012), I feature Indigenous participant insights into how to move forward precisely because of their location as subjects who have been “held up”: “When we are stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit, then the terms of habitation are revealed to us. We need to rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world. In *Queer Phenomenology* I called for a phenomenology of ‘being stopped,’ a description of the world from the point of view of those who do not flow into it” (p. 176).
Chapter 2
Approaching Solidarity: The Research as Encounter

This study undertakes a qualitative, auto/ethnographically-informed analysis of the “solidarity encounter” between Indigenous women/feminists and white women/feminists in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in order to explore its constitutive intersubjective relations.¹ For the purposes of this study, I define the solidarity encounter as a site of colonial encounter or “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991, 2008) where discursive meaning making and power relations among differently positioned women quite literally take place (see Chapter 3). That is, I analyze how colonial relations between Indigenous nations and the Canadian settler state manifest themselves in a particular “ethnographic moment” (Agar, 2004). In short, I theorize the solidarity encounter as a microcosm of wider Indigenous–settler relations in a context of ongoing colonialism, that which renders attempts at solidarity necessary in the first place.

The study combines complementary elements of Indigenous/feminist² and auto/ethnographic³ methodological approaches to research, including self-reflexivity as method—the act of “engaging in an ongoing process of reflecting ideas and experiences back on oneself as an explicit acknowledgement of one’s locatedness in the research” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 42). Following this integrated methodological approach (its feminist tenets in particular), I aim to render visible the knowledges and concerns of differently positioned women. Incorporating an Indigenous/feminist sensibility into the mix, I seek to take into account the (socially constructed) specificity of Indigenous women’s positionality and centre colonialism as an analytic. For this, I draw on the work of feminist scholars Gaile Cannella and Kathryn Manuelito (2008) who blend “Native epistemologies and marginalized feminisms” to engage in what they call anticolonial, egalitarian social science. Finally, I adopt an auto/ethnographic stance throughout the study both to locate myself as researcher and to shed light on the dynamics of the solidarity encounter. More broadly, by adopting this blend of methodological approaches, I endeavor to adhere to certain methodological imperatives in this study: to view the “researched” as active participants endowed with subject status; to integrate participant concerns into the investigative agenda; and to incorporate an explicitly activist component in the research. In short, with this amalgam of methodologies, I ascribe to the position that academic research should ultimately further a social justice agenda for the community or group in question.
While I theorize the solidarity encounter per se in subsequent chapters, in this chapter I discuss the *research as encounter*—an encounter of differently positioned subjects that likely involves intersubjective dynamics that mimic those of the solidarity encounter. Put differently, the research process functions as a microcosm of the encounter I attempt to theorize, presenting me with a particular methodological challenge: How do I, as a white settler woman researcher, avoid reconstituting the colonial encounter via the study’s design or implementation? In fact, the very act of providing an autobiographical sketch of why I chose to do this study is fraught with the related risk of re-centring the white settler subject. Nonetheless, a feminist, anticolonial study such as this one demands that I consider my subject position and relationship to the research. Thus, I write with/in tension—alert to the necessity of discussing my subject position and also of the possibility that I will re-centre whiteness and reproduce white settler privilege in the process.

By risking the fall into solipsistic, confessional tales, I hope to impart a sense of how my involvement as a white feminist activist (and subsequently, scholar-activist) in social justice and human rights initiatives in the US, Central America and Canada has shaped my approach to scholarship and the direction of this study. To quote Nestel (2006), “I have not occupied the role of distanced and ‘objective’ researcher in this project. My anxieties, both potential and real, have shaped these pages in innumerable ways” (p. 16). For one, many of my research questions emanate from my work as an ally member of No More Silence (NMS), a group of Indigenous women and allies dedicated to raising awareness about the disproportionate numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women across Turtle Island. More fundamentally still, my lived experiences inevitably infuse the lenses through which I “see” solidarity work. This study bears the imprint of my life history and reaffirms my unabashed commitment to a social justice agenda. However, it is equally if not more important to contextualize my anxieties, motivations and desires as not uniquely my own, but rather reflective and productive of the collective social relations in which I am ensconced. Thus, I also discuss how these “personal” experiences have brought me *beyond* the self to consider how a subject’s structural positionality overdetermines (but never absolutely or seamlessly) the contours and possibilities of her political commitments.

In this examination of the research as encounter, first I draw on key autobiographical moments to explore how my subject position and life experiences have shaped the research. Second, I outline the study’s design as well as lines of inquiry, and identify some of the persistent
methodological challenges of the project, in particular the risks of pursuing research as a white settler woman. Third, I describe the methodological approaches I adopted from the outset to render as transparently as possible my subject position and relationship to the research and also to mitigate hierarchical power relations in the research process. Fourth, I discuss data analysis, beginning with the conceptual framework of subjectivity that underlies my reading of the data. I conclude by considering the extent to which the very hierarchical relations that the study examines (i.e., the gendered, racialized and colonial relations of the solidarity encounter) might infuse the study itself—despite methodological designs to mitigate this risk.

**Reflections of a White Settler Woman Researcher**

*Every research project has a story, which is the story of an arrival.*

—Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 2)

How have I arrived at this particular point of departure? In what ways have my investments in solidarity work as both a white feminist activist and scholar affected the research? To answer necessitates “reflecting upon the ways in which [my] own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research” (Willig, 2001, p. 10). In what follows, I explore how this study’s subject matter reflects my personal and professional journey of over three decades, its concerns springing directly from my solidarity work as a white woman feminist. In the process, I underscore my commitment to understand and undo the various matrices of power relations in which I figure. I also interrogate how my desire to be a “good white settler ally” (discussed at more length in Chapter 6) has figured centrally in my life and scholarly work. To do so, I rely on memory “as a form of personal, intellectual and political work,” which enables, as Ahmed (2000) notes, a return to “‘unsettling encounters’ that one may have had in ‘public life’ (Goffman 1972); those moments when one is faced by others (especially others that have a relationship to the law such as parents, teachers or the police) in such a way that one is ‘moved from one’s place’” (p. 189).

Unsettling colonial encounters were uncommon for a child like me living in rural upstate New York in the 1970s. Only well into adulthood would I wonder about growing up in Fort Plain, the site of what a bluish-black metal sign with yellow lettering bluntly referred to as a “Mohawk Town. An Indian Village occupied top of this hill.” The signification of what was supposed to be an historical marker was profoundly unintelligible to me for many years. In light of such
beginnings, this study represents a certain culmination in self-reflexivity, the result of a gradual and intensifying recognition on my part of the “oppressive logic of colonial modernity” (Lugones, 2010), i.e., the logic of erasure that rendered the reality of violent conquest and ongoing colonialism of/in my “home” quite unremarkable to me as a white settler on the land of the Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk). In the following pages, I describe key autobiographical elements that define me as a white settler woman researcher and that are hence pivotal to the study’s framing, e.g., questions asked to generate and lenses used to read the data. More specifically, I track the gradual emergence in my own life of what I have identified and analyzed in retrospect (in this study) as an “impulse to solidarity,” replete with white settler guilt, a competitive spirit and desire for exceptionalism (as the “good white settler ally”), self-serving motivations and the fear of exposure—many of which became principle themes of investigation in this study.

**Class ceilings/white colonial privilege**

I grew up in a working-class Italian American family, my father the quintessential immigrant who instilled in his children a belief in the power of education to lift them out of poverty and into the expansiveness of American upward mobility. The youngest of eight, I absorbed this unspoken message and headed off to university. No one had prepared me for what would ensue—the indelible forging of my working-class identity spurred on by the particularities of US class stratification. I took note of, but did not share, the sense of entitlement that comes with (white) class privilege. As Ruth Behar (1993) writes, “We cross borders, but do not erase them; we take our borders with us” (p. 320).

While my commitment to social justice cannot be ascribed neatly to any one factor, or to any static combination of factors, a working-class identity is nonetheless central to my engagement in solidarity work and interest in ending oppressive and marginalizing systems. In this, I relate to the genesis of Nestel’s (2006) research into the movement to legalize midwifery in Ontario. Her experience of occupying contradictory subject positionings (a Jewish woman, yet able to benefit from structural white dominance) parallels (although not exactly) my own as a woman who grew up “poor” while enjoying white privilege. I also detected vestiges in my own life of “how deeply committed we who enjoy race privilege are to versions of racism that allow us to refuse being implicated in the racialized order of things” (Nestel, 2006, p. 13), in my case by embracing a working-class identity. One of my goals here is to point out these contradictions.
Six months after graduation, I became a Rotary International post-graduate scholar at Melbourne University. Having left the US for the first time, I was immersed in a foreign, yet familiar environment; my increasing awareness of the violent colonization of Australia’s Indigenous peoples (eerily similar to what I would later learn about Canadian residential schools) drew into sharp relief the racist and colonial realities of the place I had always called home—upstate New York. Citing an example from her journey into “the messiness of solidarity and responsibility” (p. 2), Richa Nagar (2014) attests to the power of embodied exposure to different sociopolitical settings to shift and deepen one’s analysis: “Rethinking and articulating the dreams and struggles of SKMS while breathing and moving in the sociopolitical spaces of the United States reshape[d] our understandings of race and caste, of belonging and citizenship, or borders and border crossings” (pp. 9–10).

Throughout my time in Australia, I deepened my knowledge of Indigenous peoples and settler colonial realities, and had an epiphany of sorts: How could I not have seen the oppression of Native Americans and African Americans in “my” own backyard? After this “unsettling encounter,” to evoke Ahmed (2000), I distinctly remember taking a silent oath to not make things worse, even if I couldn’t make them better. My growing awareness aside, however, I had not yet learned that invoking class is often a way to sidestep thorny questions about race and white privilege (Grillo, 1995; Grillo & Wildman, 1991). It would take a series of other encounters for me to better grasp how white privilege and settler status interlock and my own location within that nexus.

**Un/becoming a (white) gringa**

My involvement in solidarity work began in earnest in San Francisco, when I worked with a grassroots group to end US military aid to El Salvador. Two years later, a six-month stint to learn Spanish morphed into a seven-year stay in Central America. One of my more formative (i.e., unsettling) encounters in the region was as a human rights observer with MINUGUA, the United Nations Mission in Guatemala. My cumulative experiences with Indigenous peoples in Guatemala marked another pivotal moment in the maturing of my commitment to social justice and to what I would come to see as a deeply personal and simultaneously collective matter—decolonization. In Guatemala, I was forced to reckon further with the hierarchical and white supremacist thinking of Western societies. As I reached a “point of white racial incoherence” (Noble, 2009), my academic and activist interest in anticolonial praxis started to coalesce.
Bobby J. Noble (2009) describes instances of white racial incoherence that transpired in a graduate seminar on masculinities that he taught in 2007: “Such unthinkabilities function as a moment of destabilizing unknowingness that whiteness cannot endure knowing” (p. 160). In my case, my white Northern self was challenged by the realities of a North–South racialized, imperial encounter, my working-class positionality having lost its redeemable value. In retrospect, I am able to read my response to this “self-unhinging” as rather common, i.e., as a fallout of my subject position. I wanted to be (seen as) exceptional—a good foreigner who was different from the other gringos/as—a desire that would resurface in me and, not incidentally, also in the data analyzed in this study.

This is a prime example of how much my subjectivity has shaped the research. My journaling is replete with allusions to the spectre of the researcher in the research. As I wrote in May 2011, “I am left wondering about this entire project. How much of it is motivated by a desire on my part to be a better person? Is this the same as desiring to be absolved of white guilt?” Was I not only predisposed to ask questions about white guilt in the interviews, but also to see evidence of its existence in the data? In one sense, the answer is undeniably yes; the study has been intimately shaped—and limited—by my life experiences and social location. However, my “personal” experiences also provided a window into the collective dimension of discursive formations such as the “good white settler ally,” alerting me to their ubiquity in participant narratives.

At OISE: towards activist scholarship (and self-reflexivity)

I entered the MA program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE) already oriented towards activist scholarship—“the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and in the serve of, progressive social movements” (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009, p. 3). I attempted to theorize my “real-life” experiences in Central America, the years I had spent working with diverse cross sections of Guatemalan and Salvadoran societies including Indigenous women. In the process, I became more acutely aware of my white, liberal subject positioning and the ways in which I had/have tried to negotiate and, at times, erase it in Central America and since. I began to formulate a new question, which appeared in this journal entry of January 2011: “What gave me the authority to identify with Indigenous peoples when I, as a white person, was undoubtedly part of the problem? Was my concern ‘real’ or was I a fake, just another white gringa trying to assuage a guilty conscience?” As I mentioned earlier, I also sought refuge in the knowledge that I had
grown up working-class. At the same time, I began to examine more critically my role as a human rights observer in Guatemala.

During my doctoral program at OISE (and parallel activist activities in NMS, which I discuss below), my presumption of having earned an affinity with Indigenous “Others” (in Central America in particular) continued to be challenged. With a refined conceptual schema, I was able to better articulate and critique my experiences and role as a white settler woman with good intentions, whether in North America or beyond. Take this journal entry from 2008:

Radhika Mohanram (1999) addresses theories of nationhood and belonging. Are my longings somehow reflections of Western modernist influences, which simultaneously construct the “Other” as inferior and something to be coveted? Am I searching for a home, a place of belonging, because at some level I have come to understand my tenuous settler status on Turtle Island? Do I recognize within me the legacy of the wandering, disembodied imperialist subject who needs to establish a meaningful connection to place at the expense of the “Other?” Is this search a way to erase myself and what I have come to learn about the colonial reality in which I am implicated?

I considered anew how my attraction to (the plight of) Indigenous peoples was/is linked to how I negotiate my social location as a working-class, white settler woman. By identifying with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous women in particular, was I seeking exemption from my settler status, looking for redemption or forgiveness? (Later, in what is now this study, I would conceptualize that desire in terms of proximity.) To reiterate, in important inescapable ways, this study is about me—my need to grapple with how racialized colonial processes in North America have shaped me, endowing me with a degree of white settler privilege notwithstanding my working-class roots. At the same time, as I hope to make apparent, this study is decidedly not (only) about me, but rather concerns the reproduction of individual and collective subjectivities under colonial conditions of inequality. As Chris Crass (2013) notes in his activist memoirs,

I grew up believing that I was a lone individual on a linear path with no past . . . just a person, doing my own thing. Then I started to learn that being white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, mostly heterosexual, and a citizen of the United States meant that I not only had privileges but was rooted in history. . . . part of social categories embedded in and shaped by history. (p. 122)

My own thinking has followed a similar trajectory; while not male or (born) middle-class, I have been seduced by the figure of the “lone individual on a linear path with no past,” i.e., the purportedly autonomous liberal subject (see below and Chapter 3). My seemingly personal experiences of white guilt and the desire for (white) settler exceptionalism, for example, while
not shared by all white settlers, must be contextualized and historicized, that is, understood as comprising part and parcel of the liberal subject’s discursive repertoire in a colonial context.

**No More Silence**

As mentioned, my work with NMS predates this study, and has directly shaped my experience of solidarity’s tensions, challenges and possibilities, and thus the parameters of this study. Any hunch I may have had about my own desire to be (seen as) the “good whitey,” in the words of one NMS member, was confirmed in that work. And, what might have remained an intellectual quest to examine white settler colonial relations (and my structural position therein), became a more practical endeavour. While I had not yet acquired the scholarly language to express myself in these terms, I wanted to be able to explain how colonial power relations, including white privilege, are actually reproduced at the micro level of intersubjective relations.

In fact, concerns about how the proverbial elephant in the room—inequitable colonial relations—might have taken up residence in our group (and what to do about it), became central to our discussions. Not without strained relations among different members (between and across the categories of “Indigenous” and “white”) at different times and of varying intensities, we openly negotiated the ways in which allies could (and should) “take up the work” without “taking over” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012). As we temporarily morphed into a mostly white group, we seriously questioned our central role in organizing the annual February 14 strawberry ceremony to honour the murdered and missing Indigenous women in Ontario. (I refer to these deliberations in subsequent chapters.) As a scholar-activist midway through her PhD program, yet to submit a research proposal or formally initiate fieldwork, I was nonetheless taking stock of the questions being raised about solidarity relations among differently positioned women. I remember, for example, being deeply troubled by the insistence of some white allies that we should no longer organize the ceremony. I struggled to articulate to myself and others why this was the case. I understood (and agreed with) the reasoning behind the position—no one wanted to risk a rehearsal of white settler colonial power. But, I also did not want to abdicate my responsibility as a white settler woman to organize around the issue of violence against Indigenous women—a violence in which I was complicit by virtue of my settler status. That tension—between acting on one’s responsibility and overstepping the bounds into domineering behaviour—crystallized in my mind as something to be explored further.
At the same time, I eventually was gripped by two interrelated concerns. First, as I became more and more immersed in graduate school and the scholarship on white guilt (and the desire for innocence) (see Chapter 6), I began to doubt my commitment to the political aspects of solidarity work. Just as I interrogated the self-serving function of my identification with Indigenous peoples in Guatemala, I began to wonder about what “I” was getting out of volunteering with NMS—a self-righteousness that mitigated the guilt I had begun to feel about my white settler status? Second, I began to ask to what extent my involvement in NMS had become more about the research and less about a political commitment to raising awareness about violence against women. I had been involved with NMS for a few years when I began to consider making the group the focus of my doctoral research. Soon after, and well before submitting my research proposal, in the spirit of ethical transparency I approached group members both individually and as a group: Would they be ok with me doing such research and becoming a participant observer or scholar-activist? Receiving an overwhelmingly enthusiastic, positive response, I began to consider the possibility in earnest. However, niggling doubts surfaced about my ulterior motives: Was I now involved in NMS primarily to get a degree?

In hindsight, it is clear to me that I was in the process of identifying the “impulse to solidarity” that had progressively surfaced in my own life (and that I had witnessed in some others), an impulse with multiple facets, including white settler guilt and the related desire to be the exceptional (good) white settler ally. With this backdrop—a cursory look at how my hypotheses on intersubjective relations in solidarity work are entangled in my subjectivity—I turn to my methods and methodological approach.

**Designing the Study**

While I initially planned to do a case study of NMS, I expanded the study’s parameters to include Indigenous women and white women who had done solidarity work with or without an organizational affiliation. In this way, I decided to look at the “solidarity encounter” as a phenomenon in itself. Though I extended the scope of the research, I retained a commitment to infusing an autoethnographic sensibility into the study’s design, data gathering and write-up, therefore also retaining a certain centrality for NMS. I collected and analyzed data in the form of field notes, journaling and participant interviews. In total, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2006) from April through July 2011 with 13 self-identified Indigenous women and 11 self-identified white women. Prior to the formal start of the research, I had
attended community events and various organizational activities explicitly positioned as a white feminist activist (including the annual February 14 ceremony organized by NMS). Upon becoming a doctoral student, I continued to attend such events and publicly divulged my identity as a scholar-activist when it seemed appropriate (i.e., at smaller meetings as opposed to larger scale events such as rallies), and was more systematic in my self-reflexive journaling.

Throughout, I broadly adopted what Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2008b) call critical qualitative “interpretive research practices,” which aim to

> turn the world into a series of performances and representations, including case study documents, critical personal experience narratives, life stories, field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. These performances create the space for critical, collaborative, dialogic work. (p. 5)

In my reading, “interpretive research practices” so described are the mainstay of much qualitative research, my work being no exception, as it relied especially on field notes, interviews and memos to the self. While I had originally intended to include a “personal experience narrative” in the form of a separate chapter, I opted instead to weave selective elements of my story throughout the chapters to accomplish two things: to retain an acknowledgement of my social location and privileged role as researcher throughout the study (and not entirely bracket it off to one chapter); and to minimize the possibility of solipsistic self-representation that effectively re-centres the white researcher subject (see below discussion).

I also drew on what in retrospect became a pilot project for this doctoral research. In the spring of 2009, after consulting with other NMS members, I submitted an abstract for an article, which was accepted for publication in a collection about feminist pedagogy (Manicom & Walters, 2012): “When approached about the possibility of an article about NMS, members agreed that it represented a chance to reflect together and gain direction for the future. We then held a series of [seven] one-on-one interviews during which members shared their understandings of NMS’s vision and internal dynamics” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012, p. 43). NMS co-founder Audrey Huntley and I then co-authored the chapter.  

This undertaking, which provided an opportunity for deep reflection for many group members, directly influenced this study. It pointed to salient issues relating to what I would later call the solidarity encounter (e.g., perceptions of and measures to mitigate white colonial privilege, such as adopting anticolonial political strategies; the effects of colonial trauma; balancing white settler over- and under-engagement in solidarity
work) that warranted more extensive research. These earlier interview schedules became a departure point for developing the interview schedules for this study.

As mentioned, I expanded the study’s focus beyond NMS to include women who self-identified as Indigenous or white, and who had been involved in solidarity work regardless of any formal affiliation with a particular social justice group.\textsuperscript{11} I opted not to make NMS the sole case study, despite its relative uniqueness as a “mixed” organization of Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women with no self-identified men, for several reasons. First, while not exhaustive, our examination of NMS (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012) had uncovered a variety of themes that I felt could be better explored beyond the group’s confines. In fact, we had attained a level of familiarity between us as group members that I think would have disallowed a more critical exploration of these themes. Additionally, I felt that my own “insider” status in relation to NMS was limiting, in particular when it came to challenging my own assumptions about the perils and possibilities of solidarity work. As David Butz and Kathryn Besio (2009) note, “insiderness” both enriches and complicates any research project:

> Although it may seem that [an insider position] would increase access, rapport, and analytical insight in relation to a social setting, much scholarship indicates that insiderness can make it more difficult to interact with and get information from research subjects, and limits researchers’ ability to develop insights that get beyond the taken for granted. (p. 1670)

This consideration relates to my status within NMS, but also to my status within the solidarity world more broadly. On the one hand, my relatively long-standing involvement with NMS and solidarity activism familiarized me with the terrain of research and its protagonists. More to the point, as a member of NMS, I had achieved a certain insider status in the solidarity world (qualified and complicated by my position as a white woman to be sure), which in turn facilitated my access to research participants, both white and (especially) Indigenous, as I explain below. At the same time, my familiarity with NMS group members had certainly created blind spots, thereby accentuating the difficulty of seeing past what had become the “taken for granted” of solidarity work. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) (Maori) relates this issue to (insider) researcher arrogance. Her advice, although meant for Indigenous insider researchers, is apropos:

> The comment, “She or he lives in it therefore they know” certainly validates experience but for a researcher to assume that their own experience is all that is required is arrogant. One of the difficult tasks insider researchers take is to “test” their own taken-for granted
views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories. (p. 139)

It would have been an error to assume that my experiences and understandings of solidarity, or those of NMS group members, would be representative of all solidarity encounters. My decision to research the solidarity encounter per se was largely an effort to mitigate the limitations of “taken-for-granted” understandings of solidarity—both challenges and possibilities. Broadening the study would enhance my ability to “test” my assumptions (and those of other NMS group members) about solidarity that had developed in a particular context. Thus, I used my own experiences “primarily as a point of departure” (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 12).

Perhaps most perniciously, my familiarity via proximity to other NMS members—Indigenous and white—had likely shielded me from recognizing my own relative privilege in the group and my overall complicity vis-à-vis the colonial encounter. One such blind spot was exposed in the process of analyzing interviews from the NMS pilot study. In listening to an interview I had conducted with another NMS member, Audrey Huntley (who had not been present at the time) noted an exchange in which I expressed relief at having been misidentified as a woman of colour by the interviewee. I then recognized this incident as an example of the “identificatory mobility” of whiteness (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012; see also Chapter 6). As a settler researching Indigenous/non-Indigenous solidarity, I remain somewhat of an “outsider” (notwithstanding a focus on white settler subjectivity). It remains paramount for me to recognize (and hence guard against) my own “fantasy of innocence” as a non-Indigenous researcher (Razack, 2002, p. xi)—something that become clear to me in that instant.

The participants

Although researching the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women also involved participant observation and self-reflection, I owe the most gratitude to the 24 participants whose interviews constituted the bulk of the data. I use pseudonyms (first names only) for 21 of the 24 participants. Three self-identified Indigenous participants—Zainab Amadahy, Lee Maracle and Wanda Whitebird—waived their right to anonymity and asked that their names be used in the write-up. Consequently, I refer to them by their first names throughout the study. For clarity, I indicate whether a particular participant self-identifies as Indigenous or white with each mention. While the majority of these women lived, worked or attended university in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), there were five exceptions: three
women resided in London, Ontario (two Indigenous and one white); and two women lived in Peterborough, Ontario (one Indigenous and one white). The participants in both London and Peterborough had connections with individuals and solidarity networks in the GTA. In fact, I had established contacts in both places through my involvement with NMS and also my studies at OISE. In my Call for Participants (CFP), I specified three criteria for involvement: potential participants had to identify as an Indigenous woman or white woman; be 18 years of age or older; and have done alliance/solidarity work for at least six months “around topics including (but not limited to) violence against Indigenous women, Indigenous land reclamations and environmental justice” (see Appendix A). In recruiting participants, I relied exclusively on participants’ self-identification as Indigenous women or white women rather than apply any external definition for Indigeneity or whiteness. I decided not to use the term “mixed” as an identity marker in the recruitment material in light of historical and ongoing settler state regulation of Indigenous identity and status (Lawrence, 2003) where “mixed” (or mestizo/a in the Latin American context) can be conveniently misinterpreted by government authorities and the broader settler public as “inauthentic.” As Morgensen (2011) notes, “Native identities of mixed blood Native people are invalidated by their racialization as white or black through the policing of Native status and the redrawing of the color line” (p. 20). Although I did not include “mixed race” as an identity category in my CFP, six (of 13) Indigenous participants noted at some point in our interview that, while they identified as Indigenous women, they also acknowledged their “mixed” (Indigenous and European) ancestry. While only one (of 11) white participants mentioned having Indigenous ancestry, several discussed their “mixed” European ancestry. Admittedly, however, the absence of “mixed race” as a possible identity in my CFP likely had the effect of excluding women who identify as such from participating in the study.

As I infer in my Introduction, I crafted the CFP with a purposively broad understanding of “political solidarity” in mind, describing the project as “research on the limits and possibilities of political alliances or solidarity between Indigenous women and white women.” Although I did not impose a definition of solidarity on participants, I did confirm that participants’ conceptions of solidarity work met my broad criteria. These criteria centre on the embodied, material practices commonly associated with political protest and mobilization for social change and less visible practices of groups such as NMS (e.g., behind-the-scenes lobbying, group meetings and/or social events, email exchanges and, increasingly, the use of social media). When using the term solidarity in this study, I am referring to this broad spectrum of practices.
I pursued typical avenues for circulating my CFP and identifying potential interviewees: wide internet distribution of my CFP to community- and university-based groups; the mobilization of existing personal contacts; and the snowball method. The majority of white women (six of 11) were unknown to me prior to the study; they had heard about it through internet postings or word-of-mouth and contacted me to participate. I approached the other five white participants, because they were either known to me through my involvement with NMS or had been recommended by other participants.13

While internet postings were extremely useful for recruiting white women, my insider position in the solidarity world (and NMS in particular) proved invaluable for recruiting the majority of Indigenous women. Shortly after issuing the CFP, four Indigenous women I did not know asked to take part in the study. As time elapsed and I did not hear from others, I mobilized personal contacts to actively seek out Indigenous participants, speaking with Indigenous women either known or recommended to me. Taking these measures, I identified nine (out of 13) Indigenous women who agreed to become participants in the study. Although I had initiated contact in these cases, my overtures were met with much enthusiasm. I firmly believe that had it not been for my insider status in solidarity circles, this research as such would simply not have been possible.

Participants were quite diverse in terms of age, ranging from 20 to 65 years of age. However, beyond that, neither the Indigenous nor white participants constitute representative samples of their respective groups. There were a disproportionality high number of women in both groups with post-secondary education. Also, given the fact that I conducted the study in urban centres (primarily downtown Toronto, but also London and Peterborough, Ontario) meant that there was an overrepresentation of urban dwellers (though most Indigenous participants had ties with rural communities, whether a nearby reserve or Indigenous community outside the province). The vast majority of participants did not explicitly mention their sexual orientation, although two women (one from each group) self-identified as members of an LGBTQ community.

Another facet of participant involvement needs highlighting. Given that they had all committed at one point to engage in solidarity work, the participants in this study constitute a self-selected group likely predisposed to seeing the benefits of (attempting) solidarity between Indigenous peoples and (white) settler populations.14 This possible predilection would make the critical views of solidarity relations that emerge from the study all the more potent. Moreover, a high percentage—over half of Indigenous participants and just under half of white participants—had
ten or more years of experience in political organizing. This combined knowledge is reflected in the narratives, which present a remarkable level of comfort and self-reflection in discussing the perils and promises of solidarity work. As well, a number of participants are fluent and fluid in their use of activist and academic discourse, perhaps best described as scholar-activist discourse. This thesis attempts to track some of the more striking discursive patterns in these narratives.

**Lines of inquiry: reversing the gaze**

I came to this research with two general questions in mind: How do white women/feminists grapple with our dominant structural positionality in the solidarity encounter, i.e., in a context of ongoing colonial relations? And, how could we negotiate our subject position in a way that minimizes the reproduction of colonial relations? Taking my cue from Sunera Thobani (2007), I sought to explore the re-enactment of white settler supremacy “at the level of daily life” in the intersubjective interactions of the solidarity encounter. From there, I developed two goals and lines of inquiry: first, to map the tensions and challenges of solidarity work between Indigenous women and white women, specifically in relation to the operation of gendered colonial subjectivity; and second, to explore how such tensions or challenges could be mitigated to create the conditions for non-colonizing solidarity and more effective political alliances between the groups. In summary, I sought to shed light on both the perils involved in and potential for building political solidarity between Indigenous women and white women in a context marked by colonial inequities. My broader purpose remains to add to our collective thinking about how to fashion non-colonizing forms of encounter between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

In elaborating the first line of inquiry, I was compelled by Indigenous women’s/feminist and postcolonial literature to consider what had become of the colonial roots of Western feminism (see Chapter 3). Therefore, many of my questions revolve around how white settler women are constituted (by themselves and Indigenous women) as subjects in the solidarity encounter. Are white settler women still apt to see ourselves as superior “helpers” of more “oppressed” Indigenous women? Are we still evasive about our complicity in settler colonialism and resistant to adopting an anticolonial imperative in solidarity work? Do we universalize our particular experiences and elide differences in identity, belonging and power in the process? As Moreton-Robinson (2000) contends, do we knowingly or otherwise insist in seeing ourselves as “autonomous independent individuals”? In short, what discursive practices typify, reproduce
and/or reconfigure (feminist) solidarity relations in general and white settler woman/feminist subjectivity in particular?

To investigate my second line of inquiry concerning the possibilities for non-colonizing solidarity, I posed the following interrelated questions: Are white women allies more aware now (than in the past) of our complicity in settler colonialism, due in part to the feminist turn towards self-reflexivity? What is the role of self-reflexivity in moving towards the practice of non-colonizing solidarity? Are there white women who consciously try to disrupt white supremacy and colonial relations? What happens when we confront/are confronted with our settler status? How can we avoid becoming consumed by white settler guilt, or the “stigma of white privilege” (Kowal, 2011)? In short, how could colonial scripts be (or how are they being) re-written, and what would be (or are) the corresponding practices of non-colonizing solidarity, even in the midst of a colonial encounter? Aware of the paradox—seeking non-colonizing solidarity while immersed in broader colonial relations—I sought to advance the theoretical and political project of “identifying the conditions for the production of a new kind of subject” (Razack, 1998, p. 5)—a new kind of white settler woman/feminist ally subject who would attempt such a feat. Finally, I wondered, (how) could changes in intersubjective dynamics at this micro level change social relations at the macro level?

I developed interview schedules to elicit responses that would shed light on these lines of inquiry, drawing on the one used for the NMS pilot study. In analyzing the interview transcripts, I draw on a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis (see below), paying special attention to the “discursive formations” that emerged in the interviews, including around participant understandings of colonialism as related to solidarity tensions or challenges. In this way, I attempt to map the discursive practices of the solidarity encounter through which intersubjective relations are reconstituted. In Chapter 4, for example, I evaluate participant responses to questions about their definitions of political activism/solidarity; reasons for engaging in political activism/solidarity; and understandings and examples of solidarity tensions or challenges. I consider women’s self-presentations of their solidarity trajectories as well as their perceptions of other women’s motivations for engaging in the work. Borrowing from Moreton-Robinson (2000), I use the term “self-presentation” to refer to “how one represents oneself through interpretation as opposed to how one is presented by another” (p. xxii). In sum, I ground my
analysis in participant depictions of the solidarity encounter, that is, participants’ self-presentations alongside their analyses of what is at stake for other women.

The risk of re-centring whiteness

Reversing the gaze to rest on the white (settler woman) subject is not without peril, most significantly that of re-centring whiteness and erasing other racialized positionalities. Engaging in white solipsism, what feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1979) describes as “the tendency to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world” (p. 299), remains an important caveat for any researcher interested in critiquing white privilege. As Scott Morgensen (2011) explains, this tendency is also operative in the logic of white settler colonialism, where a white settler Indigenous binary effectively erases non-Indigenous people of colour from the equation:

This context suggests that the relationality of “settler” to “Native” in a white settler society has the effect of excluding non-Native people of color from the civilizational modernity that white settlers seek when they appear to eliminate Native peoples only to elide the subjugation of non-Native people of color on stolen land. (p. 18)

To risk re-centring whiteness in this particular project, therefore, is to risk perpetuating white settler colonial logic. Heron (2007) aptly depicts the paradox facing (particularly white) researchers of whiteness and of dominance more generally: “This [disappearance of the Other] is a hazard of deconstructing dominance: at the moment it is challenged, it reclaims centre stage and makes its issues the ones that count. Yet if not challenged, relations of domination will continue” (p. 20). But, is it counterproductive to focus on white settler women’s subjectivities for insights into the subversion of Indigenous/non-Indigenous colonial relations?

I look to Indigenous, antiracist and postcolonial feminist scholarship for answers. There are useful parallels between my study and Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993) ground-breaking work on white women and race. Just as she saw white women’s lives as “sites both for the reproduction of racism and for challenges to it” (p. 1), I see white settler women’s lives as sites for the reproduction and possible contestation of colonialism and colonizing forms of solidarity. Like Frankenberg (1993), I agree with the now widespread indictment of Western scholarship as a site for “the production of an unmarked, apparently autonomous white/Western self, in contrast with the marked, Other racial and cultural categories with which the racially and culturally dominant category is coconstructed” (p. 17). Frankenberg’s (1993) choice to study white women responds to the tendency of Western scholarship to turn “Other, marked subjects” into
objects of study, and to the fact that “whiteness and Wester ness have not, for the most part, been conceived as ‘the problem’ in the eyes of white/Western people, whether in research or elsewhere” (p. 18). It is also problematic, as Morgensen (2011) notes, to assume that all settlers share the same experience, a move that effectively universalizes white settler experience:

White radicals often fail to note the racial specificity of their settler colonial inheritance. If they project their experience into theorizing the responsibility of non-Natives to demonstrate Indigenous solidarity, they may reproduce white supremacy by not considering how people of color negotiate settler colonialism—perhaps within Indigenous solidarity that white people will not share. (p. 20, emphasis in original)

In short, it is also risky not to focus on the specificities of white privilege in a colonial context.\(^{20}\)

Lest we think this argument passé given the proliferation of literature on whiteness in the ensuing years, we need only look to Moreton-Robinson (2000), Belinda Borell (2009) and Grande (2004), all Indigenous scholars who suggest that whiteness and white privilege, either in the context of colonial relations or more generally, remain under-examined—particularly by white people themselves.\(^{21}\) Moreover, as Denzin and Lincoln (2008b) note, much qualitative research remains colonizing in its effects: qualitative research “in many, if not all, of its forms (observation, participation, interviewing, ethnography) serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power and for truth. . . . In colonial contexts, research becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned other to the White world” (p. 4). I therefore adapt Frankenberg’s methodological starting point by intentionally carrying out “an investigation of self rather than of other(s) . . . a study of whiteness and women [and colonial subjectivity] undertaken by a woman who is white [and a settler]” (p. 18). Like Heron (2007), I see interrogating whiteness as part of “my ethical responsibility as a white person” (p. 20).

My decision to focus on the subject position “white settler woman” also finds echo in the work of Moreton-Robinson (2000), who explores the ways in which white privilege is reproduced in mainstream (white) Australian feminist scholarship and practice through attempts to include the cultural difference of non-white Others. White feminists, she claims, continue to “seek Indigenous women’s ideological reconstruction as middle-class white woman feminist, despite their theorising of difference and incommensurability” (p. xxiv) and consequently, the dominance of whiteness as a subject position remains under-theorized. To remedy this, Moreton-Robinson (2000) compares and contrasts “the self-presentation and representation of the subject positions ‘middle-class white woman’ and ‘Indigenous woman’ . . . [to] provide a
context for different bodies of knowledge to meet and disrupt each other” (p. xxii-xxiii).

Distinguishing between self-presentation and representation is crucial to her methodology, which is grounded in the assumption that “Indigenous women’s life writings unmask the complicity of white women in gendered racial oppression” (p. xxiii). I apply a similar approach in a different context: I put white women’s self-presentations into conversation with Indigenous women’s representations of white women’s comportment in the solidarity encounter.

Although not the emphasis of my study, Indigenous women’s self-presentations (and hence, a recognition of their subject status) figure into my methodological approach in important ways, most notably in relation to how they position themselves as actors in the solidarity encounter. In shining the theoretical spotlight on dominant subjectivity, I do not intend to disregard the agency of Indigenous women—nor “leave the impression that subordinate groups are simply erased by the violence of the white gaze” (Razack, 1998, p. 16)—but rather to uncover the colonial scaffolding that upholds contemporary relations between Indigenous women and white settler women. To reveal the extent of this scaffolding, again following Moreton-Robinson’s (2000) lead, I feature Indigenous women’s scholarship and participant narratives on solidarity encounters with white women/feminist allies. Moreton-Robinson (2000) asserts that little or no “engagement with an Indigenous critical gaze” would be tantamount to “methodological erasure” (p. xxiii-xxiv). Mohanty (2003) similarly sees the necessity of “analytically inclusive methodologies,” arguing that “beginning from the lives and interests of marginalized communities of women, I am able to access and make the workings of power visible—to read up the ladder of privilege” (p. 231).

A focus on the workings of white settler woman/feminist subjectivity, then, requires that I centre my research in Indigenous participant narratives and Indigenous/feminist scholarship. Nestel’s (2006) reasoning resembles my own; she explains her decision to draw heavily on racialized women’s narratives in her study of midwifery in Ontario:

Official norms of antidiscrimination and multiculturalism guarantee that whites do not normally admit to discriminatory practices. . . . These practices must instead be accessed through the accounts of the racialized minority people who have experienced their impact. . . . If, as Aida Hurtado and Abigail J. Stewart (1997, 308) have observed, “People of Color are experts about whiteness, which we have learned most whites are emphatically not,” then these peoples’ testimonies are critical to any attempt to describe how white domination works. (p. 9)

In relation to my study, Indigenous women would be the experts on white settler colonial domination, as among those subjects who most keenly feel its effects. By privileging Indigenous
women’s voices and (feminist) scholarship in my analysis, I am adhering to a central directive of Native feminist research (Arvin, Tuck & Morril, 2013) as discussed below.

**Methodological Matters**

To undertake this study of the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in the GTA, I drew on a combination of Indigenous/feminist and auto/ethnographic methodological approaches. These approaches all highlight the value of acknowledging, and mitigating to the extent possible, power relations between researcher and researched. The related principle of decolonizing research is central to Indigenous feminist methodologies. Feminist researchers Cannella and Manuelito (2008) explicitly combine these two goals in offering up an “anticolonialist feminist social science,” which “requires an orientation that is radically activist and does not support a false separation between academic research and transformative actions in the contemporary world” (p. 49). This brings me to a third common tenet: these methodological traditions allow for research that is transparently political. The logic behind adopting this particular blend of research methodologies was to enable strategies for identifying and thereby potentially curbing (although not erasing) power relations among women in not only the solidarity encounter (what I investigated) but also the research process itself (how I investigated). I begin with what I call “auto/ethnography.”

**An auto/ethnographic approach to solidarity encounters**

My methodological approach merges elements of classic ethnography and autoethnography. In classic terms, I seek to describe “the distinctive social life and activities” of a “bounded group of people” (Emerson, 1983, p. 19): Indigenous women and white women engaged in solidarity. As a methodology whose focus is “to present or represent the local meanings and contexts of complex human actions” (Emerson, 1983, p. 26), ethnography is well suited to the task. Also describing her dissertation as ethnographically-informed and using narrative analysis to make sense of interviews she conducted with women development workers, Heron (1999) states that “ethnography is the study of lived experience and hence examines how we come to construct and organize what has already been experienced” (p. 42). I focus on how Indigenous women and white women respectively “come to construct and organize” their experiences of solidarity.

My research unfolds from one end of James P. Spradley’s (1980) ethnographic spectrum in that it illuminates “a single social institution,” solidarity, by examining “single social situations,”
instances of Indigenous women and white women actually doing solidarity work. However, for Thomas H. Schram (2006), a primary challenge of any ethnographic study is to contextualize or “bring into focus the encompassing milieu” (p. 97) of a particular set of social relations. In relation to my research, this means interpreting solidarity encounters through a theoretical lens that sees colonialism as a structure and not an event (Simpson, 2009; Wolfe, 2006; see Chapter 3). As discussed below, it also means “identifying and analysing discourses within texts” (Bacchi, 2005, p. 199). Thus, rather than view instances of solidarity as merely “single social situations” or a series of discrete interactions, I view them instead as constituting a relationship over time—the solidarity encounter. To accurately relay this perspective, I attempt to engage in “thick description” (Geertz, 1983) where “actions are not stripped of locally relevant context and interconnectedness, but are tied together in textured and holistic accounts of social life,” and where context is “not an obstacle to understanding but a resource for it” (Emerson, 1983, p. 25). In her work on racism and diversity in institutions, Sarah Ahmed (2012) applies Gilbert Ryle’s (1971) related idea of “thicker descriptions” in a way that is perhaps even more apropos to my methodology. For Ahmed (2012), to engage in thicker descriptions would “require more than describing an action; it would locate an individual action in terms of its wider meaning or accomplishment” (p. 8). Thus, I adopt the consequent method of appraising the literature on historical encounters between Indigenous women and white settler women to contextualize the contemporary power relations between them (see Chapters 1 and 3).

I adopt an ethnographic approach in two other important ways. First, mine is a “hypothesis-oriented ethnography” (Spradley, 1980, p. 31) in its postulation that colonial power relations are reproduced at/through the solidarity encounter, with the aim of exploring this reproduction as well as its disruption. Second, I am emboldened by Andrea Smith’s (2008a) work on “intellectual ethnographies.” Whereas Smith looks at “the theories and approaches that emerge from Native women’s organizing” and their engagement in “unlikely alliances” with US-based Christian Right activists (p. xxiv), I explore the knowledge arising out of solidarity work between Indigenous women and white women in Canada. I find especially useful Smith’s (2008a) point that activists—and not only academics—“do theory.” I similarly view Indigenous intellectual production as a potential counter to “the ‘ethnographic imperative,’ which would strive to make Native communities more knowable to non-Natives” (p. xxiii). My study stands in contrast to this imperative by seeking Native participant (along with white participant) views on political solidarity and also by focusing on white settler women’s subjectivities. In short, I
share her commitment to avoid “rendering Native people as objects of my study” and to instead “position them as subjects of intellectual discourse about [for example] the relationships between spirituality, political activism, and gender identity” (Smith, 2008a, p. xxiii).

Finally, I approach this study with an autoethnographic sensibility whose broad antecedents include the “reflexive turn” in anthropological ethnographic research noted by Kamala Visweswaran (1994). Butz and Besio (2009) define this sensibility as “academics’ systematic efforts to analyze their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena; [and] researchers’ reflective ruminations on their fieldwork encounters” (p. 1660). An autoethnographic sensibility requires critical self-reflexivity, or “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994, p. 82, emphasis in original), and becomes a useful strategy for making explicit how researcher subjectivity shapes knowledge production. The goal is not simply to tell one’s story, but to do so in a way that sheds light on broader structures of power and meaning making.

Rather than make my life the central focus of investigation, I draw judiciously on my experiences of solidarity work to ask what they might indicate about white settler women’s collective investments in solidarity. In this sense I engage in “narrative ethnography” and not “personal experience narrative”—the former being “a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyze how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying” (p. 1666). For example, I describe a telling moment from my own life to attend to one of the study’s major lines of inquiry—the desire for proximity. By explicitly positioning myself as a solidarity practitioner, my intent is to glean insights that might help in “understanding a parallel experience of those studied” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 12). Moreover, my study is autoethnographically-informed in a more general sense, as I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: my lived experiences inevitably infuse the lenses through which I “see” solidarity work.

By bringing the self (however temporarily or occasionally) to the fore, autoethnographic approaches to research are particularly prone to contributing to the “communicative dead-end of solipsism” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660)—or, in this case, white solipsism (see above). In other words, conveying one’s personal story to understand broader social and political processes “is quite different from analyzing and writing about one’s own experiences when the purpose is only to tell a story that illuminates those experiences. Such stories run the risk of being read as self-indulgent and even narcissistic, or of being dismissed as sociologically uninteresting”
One way to counter such “navel-gazing” tendencies is to conceptualize field work as intersubjective and to see “the field as an autoethnographic space” comprised of “research participants, reflexive subjects whose self-narrations and indeed identities are constituted in relation to [the researchers’] own in a field that encompasses and entangles both parties (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1668). In this light, the researcher’s story (and subjectivity) is always part of an entangled web of stories (and subjectivities). Such a shift in perspective requires researchers to reflect on the interrelatedness of their voice with others, that is, on the ways that self and other are mutually constitutive. In such a move, a defining feature of all forms of autoethnography becomes readily apparent: “they all strive in some way to collapse the conventional distinction between researchers as agents of signification and a separate category of research subjects as objects of signification” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1671).

Anticolonial feminist approaches to research

As Davies (2000) implies, autoethnographic and feminist (poststructuralist) approaches to research share a comparable belief in the usefulness of reflecting on and rendering transparent how discursively produced subjectivities affect (and are affected by) research. Why the need for such a rendering? Feminist methodologies stress the need to problematize assumptions about “scientific” and hence researcher objectivity, i.e., the need to understand knowledges (and knowledge producers) as situated (Haraway, 1991), where knowledge producers are seen as imbricated in the research process, not neutral observers who yield impartial findings. Feminist researcher Helen Johnson (2000) discusses “the difficulties of conceptualizing, let alone, enacting, a dispassionate, impartial research project” (Discourses, dialogues, and research, para. 7; see also Pilcher & Coffey, 1996). In fact, feminist methodologies require researchers to be explicit about how their positionality (in my case as a white, university-educated, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman27), attendant perspectives on the world and life experiences (in short, their subjectivity) have influenced their research concerns, analytical approaches and
ultimately, research conclusions. Moreover, feminist researchers are asked to engage in ongoing self-reflexivity to locate themselves in the research over time (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

I have designed and carried out my research in other decidedly feminist ways. As I mention in the introductory chapter, I locate my examination of the solidarity encounter within an extensive feminist scholarship on “work across difference” that recognizes the existence of hierarchical relations between women based on their location in multiple, interlocking systems of oppression including heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and capitalist relations (Davis, 1983, 1989; Fellows & Razack, 1998; hooks, 2000; Reagon, 1983; Mohanty, 1984, 1991, 2003; Smith, 2010). To work respectively and effectively across difference requires feminist researchers to apply the methodological principle of making visible “untold stories” (Code, 1995), including the knowledges and concerns of, and power relations between differently positioned women; in the words of feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1995), “such vigilance for traces of the untold story is central to many feminist research and activist methods” (p. 32). In fact, as Sara Ahmed (2012) reminds us, “feminism has generated a body of knowledge of gendering as social process. . . . In reflecting about gender as a relation, feminist theorists offer critical insight into the mechanisms of power as such and, in particular, how power can be redone at the moment it is imagined as undone” (p. 13). However, as I clarify above, by using the phrase “women/feminists” I mean to highlight two stances. On the one hand, I do not presume that women in the solidarity encounter necessarily self-identify as feminist. On the other, feminist thought and practice has been indispensable to my research methodology as described here, regardless of whether or not a particular participant defines herself as feminist. In fact, in line with Ahmed, I would argue that these solidarity encounters are, among other things, spaces of feminist struggle given their concern with how (colonial) power structures materialize in, for instance, the wide array and disproportionate levels of violence facing Indigenous women.

Feminist/antiracist researchers have increasingly incorporated an anticolonial stance in their scholarship and research methodologies. In this arena, Smith’s (1999) ground-breaking work Decolonizing Methodologies “has profoundly influenced [a] generation of critical researchers” in providing “an anticolonial lexicon of research, and an ethics of making space and showing face” (Tuck, 2013, p. 365, emphasis in original). A noteworthy addition to this lexicon, Cannella and Manuelito’s (2008) “anticolonial, egalitarian social science” has as its goal “to make visible, center, and privilege those knowledges that have been placed in the margins because they
represented threats to power, while avoiding the creation of new power hierarchies or the objectification of those knowledges or people associated with them” (p. 56). Importantly—and located in the feminist tradition identified above by Ahmed (2012) that imagines how “power can be redone at the moment it is imagined as undone” (p. 13)—Cannella and Manuelito’s (2008) bid to “generate visions of egalitarianism and social justice” also recognizes “the intersection of new oppressive forms of power created even within attempts to decolonize” (p. 47).

Noteworthy for this study, Cannella and Manuelito’s (2008) proposed feminist anticolonialist social science involves “an alliance of feminist, Native, and womanist worldviews that would provide a radical rethinking of the purposes, methods, and interpretations of research applicable to the construction of social justice in contemporary hypercapitalist patriarchy” (p. 46). Along these lines, “Native feminist theories” as envisioned by Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morril (2013) provide just such an alliance, leading to richer analyses of hierarchical relations between women. Native feminist theories, according to these scholars, challenge the academy’s common modes of disciplinarity [and] exhort ethnic studies and Indigenous studies, as well as gender and women’s studies, to address the erasure of Indigenous women and Native feminist theories in ways that are not simply token inclusion of seemingly secondary (or beyond) issues, but rather shift the entire basis of how disciplines see and understand their proper subjects. (p. 14)

A Native feminist research paradigm would require that I apply a decolonizing or anticolonial analysis in my work by centring the voices and scholarship of Indigenous women (Arvin, Tuck & Morril, 2013). Far from being a move to essentialist identity politics, as Smith (2008a) explains, centring Indigenous women’s analyses is a reminder of “the strategic importance of the way groups that are typically marginalized within social movements, such as people with disabilities, interact with social justice struggles beyond a politics of inclusion” (p. 219). I tailor these scholars’ approaches by combining Indigenous/feminist methodological approaches with an autoethnographic sensibility in order to analyze how power gets discursively and hence materially reproduced through solidarity encounters, with the ultimate aim of fostering “transformative solidarities that can generate unthought possibilities for us as human beings who care for each other” (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008, pp. 46–47).

Before turning to the data analysis process, I would like to reiterate that not all of the Indigenous women scholars I reference necessarily locate their work as feminist scholarship. Moreover,
although I do not undertake Indigenist research per se, I share the decolonizing agenda at its core (Bishop, 1998) and at the core of Indigenous women’s scholarship, feminist or not. Finally, by relying on Indigenous women’s/feminist scholarship to frame my research, I am countering the patronizing tendency in some whitestream feminist circles to invite “others” into the movement. As Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005) note with respect to antiracist praxis, “dialogue between antiracism theorists/activists and Indigenous scholars/communities requires talking on Indigenous terms” if the former aim to support Indigenous struggles (p. 137).

I now describe my approach to reading the data, beginning with a discussion of the conceptual framework of subjectivity that underlies my use of discourse analysis.

On power, discourse and the (liberal) subject

As do many scholars, I work with a Foucauldian notion of the subject as socially/discursively constructed and of intersubjective power relations as reproduced through discursive means (Foucault, 1980, 1981). As feminist scholar Susan Strega (2005) nicely summarizes, “The relative power or powerlessness of different subject positions is structured in and through discourse and the social or power relations inherent in it” (p. 225). That is, subjects are “interpellated” (Althusser, 1971), subject to and subjects of social, economic and political forces and power dynamics in society. I conceptualize interpellation as always fluid and unfinished, but as an avenue for the consolidation of power among subjects (see Ahmed, 2000, p. 23).

Consequently, subjectivity can be defined as the sum total of processes, thoughts and behaviours experienced as and undertaken by the subject. As Lisa Blackman, John Cromby, Derek Hook, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Valerie Walkerdine (2008) write, subjectivity is the “experience of being subjected . . . the experience of the lived multiplicity of [subject] positionings. It is historically contingent and is produced through the plays of power/knowledge and is sometimes held together by desire” (p. 6). The necessarily unfinished business of becoming a subject is evident in this definition. Organizing my research around the concept of subjectivity, I join Blackman et al. (2008) in an effort to “re-prioritize subjectivity as a primary category of social, cultural, psychological, historical and political analysis” (p. 1) and “transformation” (p. 16).

Subjectivity can also be defined as “what we think of as the core of what constitutes human persons, in an ideal, abstract sense. . . . We are constituted by conceptions of how we relate to each other, and the shape that such relational-self-conceptions can take may be almost
unlimited” (Boyd, 2004, pp. 5–6). For Dwight Boyd (2004), human beings have understood themselves in different ways across place and time, however there has been an ascendancy of liberal individualism in Western societies over the past 500 years—a vision and enactment of subjectivity typified by a “tendency to focus on all forms of social interaction through the lens of the discrete individual” (p. 6). Boyd (2004) crystallizes liberal subjectivity into four aspects: ontological uniqueness, symmetrical positioning, intentional rational agency and capacity for transcendence (pp. 9ff). This notion of subjectivity limits peoples’ ability to fathom the existence of hierarchically-positioned groups, let alone see themselves as members of a dominant group and complicit in systems of oppression. This study is an inquiry into the potential ideological blind spot of gendered colonial subjectivity as liberal subjectivity. As I explore in Chapter 3, white settler women have relied on Western liberal notions of subjectivity to “enter” modernity.

This study also sees a correlation between the individual and collective elements of subject constitution, which Boyd (2004) depicts in his theory of group-embedded subjectivity:

A social group does not have ontological status on its own, nor do its individualized members. Rather, it must always and necessarily be understood in terms of some other social group that constitutes a Difference. One “finds oneself” in some particular social group as and insofar as one “finds” the other in a particular contrasting social group. (p. 16, emphasis in original)

Along with Boyd (2004), I take subjects to be constituted simultaneously and inextricably as members of groups and as individuals. Subject formation processes are always intersubjective, as subjects are produced in relation to other subjects via discursively-mediated interactions. The question of precisely how the individual subject “finds oneself” (mechanisms of interpellation) has been long-debated in broader discussions about the relationship between Foucauldian (i.e., discursive) and psychoanalytic accounts of the subject/subjectivity—and lies beyond the scope of this study. However, I conceptualize a point of articulation between individual and collective subjectivities, or a kind of “relation between the discursive and the psychic” (Hall, 1996, p. 15). For my purposes, Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s (1998) account of the collective process in which fantasy and desire operate in the constitution of the Western subject in/as colonial relation is an important theorization of this articulation: “One ‘becomes’ and is made Western by being subjected to a process called Westernizing and by imagining oneself in the fantasy frame of belonging to a specific culture called the ‘West’” (p. 4). In other words, there are psycho-
affective\textsuperscript{37} dimensions to the discursive production of subjects. But, like Yeğenoğlu (1998), “in introducing the concepts of [unconscious] fantasy and desire,” I am “aware of the risk of psychologizing structural processes by reducing them to individual psychological motivations, [but instead] use these concepts to refer to a historically specific construction and to a collective process” (p. 2). In short, I retain a sense of the collective nature of subject formation processes.

Importantly, this study rests on a notion of subjectivity as embodied\textsuperscript{38} in that the socially-mediated processes that reconstitute the subject over time are enacted in/by/through the body.\textsuperscript{39} My approach also accords with feminist phenomenological understandings of subjects as socially constituted, holding that the “concrete experiences of real persons” (Larrabee, 2000, p. 384) occur in relation to other embodied subjects. Aligning with the more phenomenological rather than psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity, I centre a subject’s descriptions of her conscious perceptions and experiences of the world.\textsuperscript{40} This is in step with Yeğenoğlu’s (1998) theorization of “colonial or Orientalist fantasy” not as “biologically or psychologically innate individual characteristics, but [as] a set of discursive effects that constitute the subject” (p. 2).

I use “subject position” to refer to the socially constructed or discursively derived (and hence impermanent, although often deeply entrenched) roles into which subjects are interpellated in varying ways and degrees, roles that are geographically, temporally and materially contingent.\textsuperscript{41} Subject positions are inflected with power along socially constructed axes of difference (e.g., class, race, sex, gender, age, ability), an inflection that happens through an interlocking of oppressions (Razack, 1998, p. 13). Subjects can be said to occupy “unequal structural location[s]” that reflect the power configurations of any given society (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 66). Empirical work by feminist postcolonial scholars has explored how subject positions reflect and bestow differential degrees of power (see Anne McClintock, 1995).

From the above, I extrapolate a theoretical premise essential to this study: subject positions are discursively and historically produced \textit{structural} positions, which endow subjects with varying degrees of power and privilege regardless of an individual subject’s intentionality or behaviour. As Boyd (2004) argues, subjects are always already embedded in power relations, and are “implicated in relations of ruling” irrespective of their individual sociopolitical stances:

The fungibility of social group members enables . . . what I call “proxy agency.” In contrast to individualized “liberal” agency, mob members \textit{act through} each other and \textit{as} each other. A “proxy” is a person authorized to act for another . . . Any given member
need not perform a particular act for it to be undertaken in his/her name, as his/her agent. Even stronger, it is their unavoidable action by proxy that is partly constitutive of this kind of subjectivity because the authorization is itself largely independent of the intentions of particular members of the social group. (p. 18)

Thus, subject positions are altered along with the structures of power from which they derive. An understanding of the links between power and subject position is critical in order to take seriously the assertion that what occurs in intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter is connected to the institutionalization of white settler power. Perhaps this is Moreton-Robinson’s (2000) problem with the concept of “multiple subject positions”: it has “the effect of equalising subject positions. It fails to connect subjectivity to relations of ruling whereby white racial difference shapes those on whom it confers privileges as well as those it oppresses” (p. xxi).

Following these scholars, I assert that subject positions are not, and cannot be, abstracted from structures of power, but rather are constitutive of and often re/produce them. In short, I take an interdisciplinary approach, which includes critical race, Indigenous and postcolonial feminisms, to theorize power relations between individual subjects as reflecting and often reconstituting the particular power structures in any society. Subject positions can endow and/or strip their bearer with/of power and privilege. With these theoretical notions in place, I proceed from the starting point that Indigenous women and white women enter the solidarity encounter as subjects hierarchically positioned in historically determined, discursively mediated social relations. Similarly to Moreton-Robinson (2000), I attempt to assess how intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter reflect and reproduce “the structural relationship between white society and Indigenous society” (p. xxv). I ask if/how white women in solidarity encounters attempt to reinstatiate themselves as atomistic, autonomous Western liberal subjects. Moreover, I also evaluate white women’s capacity to do so in terms of privilege—the privilege to see oneself as an individualistic subject (as opposed to a member of a settler collectivity) (see Chapter 4).

**Beyond the compliance–resistance binary**

My understanding of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter relies on demystifying the (possibility of an) autonomous subject. As Saba Mahmood (2004) writes,

Despite his attention to the individual’s effort at constituting herself, the subject of Foucault’s analysis is not a voluntaristic, autonomous subject who fashions herself in a protean manner. Rather, the subject is formed within the limits of a historically specific set of formative practices and moral injunctions that are delimited in advance—what Foucault characterizes as “modes of subjectivation.” (p. 28)
In other words, subjectivity is highly circumscribed, which exposes the unfettered, autonomous subject as a fiction. Moreover, Mahmood (2004) clarifies that “an inquiry into the constitution of the self does not take the personal preferences and proclivities of the individual to be the object of study, but instead analyzes the historically contingent arrangements of power through which the normative subject is produced” (p. 33). (Mahmood notes that this assumes the self to be “an effect of power rather than the progenitor of its operations,” [2004, p.33]). Likewise, Moreton-Robinson (2000) insists that subject positions are part of broader power structures: “There are dominant subject positions in society that are implicated in relations of ruling. These subject positions are historically constituted and are represented in discourse through and beyond the activity and experience of individual subjects” (p. xxii). I apply these insights in my reading of participants’ motivations (as expressed in the interviews) for entering into solidarity work. I interpret these discursive renderings as revelatory of the structural power relations at work and not of women’s “personal preferences and proclivities.”

At the same time, I draw on several feminist scholars to retain a complex notion of subject agency that would at least allow for the possibility (without guarantees) of subject engagement in non-colonizing solidarity. I see subjects not as passive vessels merely acted upon by discourses, but rather active in the reformulation of their subjectivity; they inhabit (Mahmood, 2004), comply, resist and transgress the subject positions into which they are interpellated to varying degrees and at varying moments, sometimes contradictorily. That is, subjects exercise agency in the continual re-enactment of their subjectivity (which is not to say that their resistance or transgression necessarily alters structural power relations, as I infer below).

For example, Lois McNay (1992) forwards the Foucauldian notion of agency embedded in the idea “technologies of the self,” defined as those “practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion their own identities . . . [which] explain how individuals may escape the homogenizing tendencies of power in modern society through the assertion of their autonomy” (p. 3). Nicole Gavey (1989) presents a more qualified view of agency, describing a “discursive battle for the subjectivity of the individual” wherein (women) subjects must position ourselves in relation to the discursive field in which we are ensconced: “Women can identify with and conform to traditional discursive constructions of femininity or they can resist, reject, and challenge them (to a greater or lesser extent)” (p. 464). Similarly, Carol Schick (1998) understands her participants’ agency as contingent upon discursive context and thus understands
their language not as “transparent, but . . . productive of and produced by social relations, including participants own histories and those of the nation” (p. 19).

I ultimately ascribe to the feminist perspective that refrains from conceptualizing agency in terms of a compliance–resistance binary (Mahmood, 2004). As Tine David and Karin Willemse (2014) write,

If we resist considering people as either cultural dupes, who only act in accordance with dominant discourses, or as the opposite, namely as revolutionary characters who constantly and completely resist these discourses, we can start to recognize the effort people put in to fitting into these discourses as part of their agency. The conceptualization of agency thus needs to capture both compliance and subversion as part of the processes of negotiating dominant discourses. (p. 2)

They go on to discuss the “space for maneuvering” and “the different styles that individuals in diverse contexts employ to integrate and perform different subjectivities within and beyond existing power hierarchies” (David & Willemse, 2014, p. 2). My reading of the data attempts to elucidate the ways in which white women participants in particular, myself included, grapple continuously with our location as white settler subjects.

**Reading the data**

*[A Foucauldian] framework does not preclude us from addressing hegemonic forms of power; it simply forces us to address the fact that struggles for state or economic power are not sufficient to shift prevailing power practices if we do not address how power relations are simultaneously enacted on the microlevel of everyday life.*

—Andrea Smith (2008a, p. xx)

As previously noted, this study combines standard ethnographic methods of data gathering (i.e., participant observation, interviews, field notes and journaling) with an autoethnographic sensibility, which enjoins academics to “perceive themselves inevitably . . . as part of what they are researching and signifying” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1671). In what follows, I discuss my approach to interpreting the interviews, field notes and journaling that comprise the data. The bulk of the analysis involved a careful reading of interview transcripts juxtaposed with field observations. Following Smith’s (2008a) injunction to focus on how power works at “the microlevel of everyday life” (p. xx), I applied a Foucauldian-inspired approach to discourse analysis with its underlying, characteristic “epistemology of critique” (Hook, 2005, pp. 6ff). My reading of the data, to reiterate, is infused with an understanding of the subject as constituted in discourse. In noting how “discourse structures our understanding” (Mills, 2003, p. 56), I seek to
render power relations in the solidarity encounter more visible and to open up the possibility of new modes of thinking about solidarity.

As feminist scholars such as Carol Bacchi (2005) point out, “available theory on the various traditions of discourse is immense” (p. 199) and discourse analysis is practiced in any number of ways and across many disciplines. Thus, to clarify, in this study I rely on (Foucauldian-inspired) feminist poststructural approaches to discourse analysis, in particular the work of Gavey (1989). Her formulation of discourse analysis is concerned with the gendered power relations that are enacted through the discursive reproduction of subjectivities. For Gavey (1989) this “involves identifying the social discourses available to women and men in a given culture and society at a given time. These discourses provide subject positions, constituting our subjectivities, and reproducing or challenging existing gender relations” (p. 466). While some scholars tie discourse analysis to a more precise notion of discourse-as-text and stress semiotic evaluations of textual features (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448), I use discourse analysis in a broader sense, as “a theoretical framework concerning the nature of discourse and its role in social life” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 175). That said, following Gavey (1989), I also aim to identify “discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies” (p. 467) in the data. Or, as Sara Mills (2003) explains, a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis requires tracing the operation of certain “discursive formations . . . which are often associated with particular institutions or sites of power and which have effects on individuals and their thinking” (p. 64). Schick (1998) takes a similar approach to study the performances of whiteness among white-identified pre-service teachers; their interviews “can be read through a discourse analysis which traces the functional aspect of language to perform subject identifications,” given that participants “rely upon normative constructs of their social, economic, historic locations” (p. 19). In my analysis, I undertake a similarly careful reading of texts (primarily interviews followed by scholarly literature, field notes and journal entries) to detect discursive patterns related to solidarity practices.

I also take a broadly Foucauldian genealogical approach to discourse analysis as discussed by Maria Tamboukou and Stephen Ball (2003): “Genealogy refers to subjectivities rather than subjects and conceives of human reality not as an originary force, but as an effect of the interweaving of certain historical and cultural practices which it sets out to trace and explore” (p. 10). My analytical focus is thus on the discursive “realization-point” of white settler woman
ally subjectivity in the solidarity encounter (Hook, 2001, p. 353). At the same time, a genealogical approach to discourse analysis requires me to contextualize the production of ally subjectivity in the solidarity encounter within Canada’s colonial history.

I also adhere to the Foucauldian insistence on “discourse-as-event,” which implores researchers to “tie discourse to the motives and operations of a variety of power-interests beyond the level of the individual text” (Hook, 2005, p. 9). I attempt this by identifying recurring discursive practices and discourses as defined by Bacchi (2005): “institutionally supported and culturally influenced interpretive and conceptual schemas . . . that produce particular understandings of issues and events” (p. 199). Bacchi’s (2005) definition dovetails with the Foucauldian notion of “discourse-as-knowledge,” that is, “a matter of the social, historical and political conditions under which statements come to count as true or false” (Hook, 2005, p. 9).

Finally, Smith’s (2008a) work on “prolineal genealogy” (p. xxvii) has also been instructive. For her, a prolineal genealogy is a method of theorizing that would provide glimpses into what a set of discursive practices—Native studies, to cite her example—could do, as opposed to what it has done or is doing. This method involves “generative narratology,” a process in which, as Smith (2008a) explains by citing Audra Simpson’s (2004) work on Mohawk nationalism, the “text does not simply describe Mohawk nationalism; rather, the narration itself becomes a moment of nation building. It is a text that invites a collective participation in what could be rather than a description of what is” (p. xxvii). In my concluding chapter in particular, I propose a framework for imagining what solidarity practices could be and do. Rephrased through the lens of genealogy as method, my analysis explores some of “the [discursive] processes, procedures, and apparatuses whereby truth and knowledge are produced” in the solidarity encounter (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p. 4). More tangibly, I explore the discursive practices that constitute (reproduce or contest) subjects and power relations in the solidarity encounter.

**The coding process**

In broad terms, I took a non-positivistic and qualitative approach to data analysis, using a software program (NVivo) to facilitate an inductive reading of “higher order” themes. Lynn Lavallée (2009) accurately describes the software’s function and benefits: “[It] allows the researcher to select blocks of text and name them based on what is described by the participants. These blocks of text are described as units of meaning and are called nodes” (p. 34). The
researcher then formulates sub-nodes as desired. Reading the data in this way, I identified a number of nodes and sub-nodes, including a mass of interrelated points I would subsume under the umbrella of a desire for proximity—a major strand of ideas that traversed participant narratives.

I adopted what could be considered a less regimented reading of the data. Instead of grouping and analyzing together all the answers to a particular interview question, I coded for themes regardless of the question being asked. (I coded journal entries and other relevant texts similarly). This method allowed for themes and issues to emerge that exceeded my framing of the study as reflected in the interview schedule. At the same time, my reading of the data was also deductive and in this way evocative of my subject position and lived experiences. Recall, for instance, that this study was inspired in large part by the questions generated by the NMS pilot study (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012). I had clear suppositions about which discursive formations were likely to be prominent in the solidarity encounter—e.g., those relating to colonialism, solidarity, (white women/feminist) ally, work across difference and anticolonial, feminist practices—and had written the interview questions accordingly. Like Schick (1998, p. 21), I attended to the construction and mobilization of these (and other) discursive formations.

One particularly important discursive formation I did not anticipate prior to analyzing the data relates to what I call the white desire for proximity to the Indigenous Other (see Chapter 4). Had I coded only according to question, this particular discourse might not have crystallized for me as it did. In fact, none of my questions were about proximity nor did it emerge as a topic perse in my discussions with the interviewees. Rather, the notion of proximity emerged as constitutive of participant responses to primarily two sets of questions: what brought them to engage in solidarity (which I coded as “motivations/investments”) and what were their experiences of the major tensions and challenges of solidarity work (which I coded under several nodes including “white or colonial inter-subjectivity” and “challenges”). As I explain further in Chapter 4, I contend that discourses of proximity saturate white participant narratives.

I also did not anticipate the particular ways in which Indigenous women would describe their experience of the solidarity encounter as invasive (read: colonial). I was able to “map” the parameters of this invasiveness, however, not by comparing and contrasting participant responses to the same questions, but rather by juxtaposing Indigenous women’s descriptions of
the tensions and challenges of the encounter with the motivations provided by white women for their own engagement in solidarity. What struck me was the extent to which white women did not perceive their own investments in solidarity work as problematic in contrast to Indigenous women’s often vivid depictions of these investments in negative terms.

This brings me to issue two caveats. First, in identifying discursive formations and practices in participant narratives, I do not make claims about the subjectivity of a particular participant, but rather point to discursive patterns across participant narratives as do Schick (1998) and Heron (1999, 2007) in their respective studies. On this matter, I quote Schick (1998) at length:

In this research I am looking at how discursive practices are used to organize and inscribe subject positionalities; I am not interested in making definitional claims regarding the participants’ individual identities. Although subjects are created in discourse, I am less interested in examining the specific subjective positions of the interviewees than in the organization, construction and uses of their discourses. . . . How do discourses construct subject positions which are not equally open to everyone? How are subjects invested in racialized discourses within a racist society? (pp. 16–17)

At the same time, I also do not want to suggest a false homogeneity for either group (white women or Indigenous women). In Schick’s words (1998), “I am very concerned to represent the words of the participants in a way which neither values nor valorizes them, nor treats their words as if they are all the same and speak with one voice” (p. 30). In other words, even as I highlight the discursive construction of subject positions as opposed to individual identities, I retain the theoretical plausibility of subject agency: the making of the self as a contingent process of grappling that occurs within certain discursive constraints. Mahmood (2004) reminds us of the Foucauldian notion that subjectivity should not be seen “as a private space of self-cultivation, but as an effect of a modality of power operationalized through a set of moral codes that summon a subject to constitute herself in accord with its precepts” (p. 28).

This brings me to the second, related caveat, which concerns the oversimplification of the data. For example, in discussing proximity as a discursive pattern across white participant narratives, I artificially disentangle white women’s complex motivations and investments for engaging in solidarity work. Such motivations are rarely described (or lived) in discrete terms; they co-exist with or are constitutive of other motivations that do not necessarily involve or infer a desire for proximity. In actuality, each woman describes a complex, interrelated bundle of reasons for doing solidarity work. For example, the white desire for proximity might coexist with a sense of responsibility or accountability to Indigenous peoples as well as a desire for social justice. Or,
the white desire to be included in a Native community might be linked to a desire to gain a sense of purpose in one’s life. Likewise, the white attraction to Native culture, tradition or spirituality is often linked to a desire for acceptance. (That being said, a hierarchy of motivations often seems to exist, meaning that certain individuals describe some reasons for engagement as more relevant or primary than others.) I do not speculate on the particular connections between the desires of any one participant with the exception of myself.

This account of the more (or less) straightforward aspects of the data analysis process omits the more fraught and vexing parts of the process. In what follows, I discuss some of these critical moments and self-reflexively explore what I think they convey about the ways in which my subject position shaped the study in general and the data analysis portion in particular. But first, I present a cautionary note on (white) self-reflexivity.

**A cautionary note on white/settler self-reflexivity**

As noted, my methodological approach demands explicitness about the co-constitutive relationship between my social location and this study. It is also commonplace in social justice circles (in and beyond the academy) to call on those with privilege—along race, class, and gender, but increasingly other axes of social differentiation—to acknowledge it (Smith, 2013a). Self-reflexivity is often explicitly named or implicitly assumed to be the methodological guarantor of these processes.

Take, for example, Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair’s repeated assertion that residential schools are a “Canadian problem” and not just an “Indian problem,” which implicitly calls for collective self-reflexivity on the part of the (settler) population. As a white anthropologist, Jeff Denis echoes Justice Sinclair to state unequivocally that his research on Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Northern Ontario requires a focus on the “white problem,” not the “Indian problem.” My own research puts the theoretical spotlight on white settler woman/feminist subjectivity. In all three cases, white settlers are called to acknowledge—through self-reflexivity—their complicity in racist and colonial frameworks.

Self-reflexivity, however, is a fraught technique for grappling with one’s privilege. Smith (2013a) disrupts assumptions about the inherent value of self-reflexivity in social justice enterprises by exposing its quotidian conspiratorial role in reproducing privileged subjectivities:
Anti-racist/colonial struggles have created a colonial dis-ease that the white settler/white subject may not in fact be self-determining [i.e., legitimate]. As a result, the white settler reasserts her or his power through self-reflection. In doing so, his or her subjectivity is reaffirmed against the foil of the “oppressed” people who still remain “affectable” others [such as Indigenous peoples and people of color] who provide the occasion for this self-reflection. (p. 268)

What Smith (2013a) calls the self-reflexive white settler/white subject—or more vividly, the confessing subject—is “frequently on display at various antiracist venues in which the privileged subject explains how much she or he learned about her complicity in settler colonialism or white supremacy because of her exposure to Native peoples” (p. 266). Ahmed (2004) links the self-reflexive turn to a “mode of declaration” in Whiteness Studies that often leads to the reproduction of that which it is designed to acknowledge. (It would be valuable to explore the same contention with respect to the relatively new field of settler colonialism studies.) As Ahmed (2004) explains, a politics of declaration also saturates state apologies and processes of reconciliation meant to address histories of colonial domination.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the non-performativity of such speech acts (Ahmed, 2004) and the white desire for proximity that is arguably in play, but for now highlight self-reflexivity as a possible tool for the reproduction of the (white/settler) autonomous liberal subject (see Chapter 3). Self-reflexivity becomes an instrument of privilege, a modality for ensuing declarations that in turn “become the political project themselves” (Smith, 2013a, p. 263). While Smith (2013a) is primarily focused on activist circles, I suggest in this chapter that her insights apply to the realm of research. She provides a compelling explanation as to why well-meaning privileged individuals often seem to capitulate to (white) solipsistic tendencies: they remain stuck in the act of reproducing their own privilege as autonomous individuals, albeit individuals with more insights into their subject position.

In delimiting the liberatory potential of a scholarly focus on subjectivity, Blackman et al. (2008) allude to this and other risks:

Subjectivity as any other concept is seen as an active agent that shapes and is shaped by prevailing social, cultural and political spaces: The concept of subjectivity not only serves as a way to understand and tackle neo-liberal [and neo/colonial] power relations and inequalities but it could in a paradoxical way be reinforcing them. This because neo-liberalism establishes a social order not primarily through liquidating otherness, inferiority or subjectivity, but by fabricating and regulating otherness and subalternity through the multiplication and assimilation of subjectivities that are created by one’s own reflexivity of one’s own positionality. (p. 14, emphasis added)
This caveat invokes my own about the perils of a misguided focus on the white settler subject, which could reproduce inequalities among differently positioned subjects. It also pertains to my work in implicitly acknowledging the potentialities and limits of self-reflexivity as a mechanism for the achievement of non-colonizing subjectivity. With this caveat in mind, I conclude with some revelatory moments of my biography as well as the data gathering and analysis processes.

**Reaching (beyond) the Limits of Subjection**

To reiterate, I share the widely-circulated premise in qualitative research that the researcher’s subject position matters to research design, assumptions and outcome. As Schick (1998) writes,

> The problem lies, of course, in not being able to think outside the limits of even [especially] large categories of possibility . . . The inability to think outside the limits of categories is surely one of the dilemmas in conducting research on identity formation in which hierarchical relations are normalized and inevitably reproduced by those doing the investigating. (p. 52)

In articulating the limitations of critical thinking in research, Schick (1998) aptly describes how researchers are in fact bound by the discursive fields in which they are embedded. For Davies (2000), however, autobiographical writing can allow the researcher to understand “oneself as discursively constituted and at the same time . . . [push] at the boundaries of one’s own subjection. One explores the limits of subjectivity in order to find the ways of moving beyond such limits” (p. 9). My efforts in this chapter—to describe how my subjectivity as a white settler woman scholar-activist from the Global North has led to many of the questions posed in this study—certainly qualify as such self-exploration. Here, I contemplate the outer limits of my subjectivity as a Western liberal subject.

At all stages of this project, I have been concerned with engaging in ethical work that would have significance beyond my own immediate circles. My anxieties about achieving this goal have ranged from minor to acute. For example, I agonized over the questions I asked . . . were they eliciting “meaningful” answers? I ended up revising my interview schedules as I went along—refining, combining and even omitting questions (that seemed superfluous)—concluding that the modifications were acceptable and did not alter the overall gist of the study. Other methodological concerns, however, were not so easily mollified.

In my third interview of the study, I asked an Indigenous participant to recount if they had seen any “little bursts” of the “colonial story repeating itself” (Reinsborough & Barndt, 2010, p. 175)
in the solidarity encounter, in an attempt to get at participant perceptions of the tensions and challenges of solidarity work. I had asked the question only twice before, and it “worked” well enough in that it seemed to evoke participant memories of tensions or challenges related to colonial relations. However, this participant’s response gave me pause: “I see [the colonial story] everywhere. I don’t see it as bursts; it’s constant [laughs]. Maybe there’s bursts of awareness of it, but it’s always there!” In that moment I realized the extent to which my location as a white settler filtered my worldview and (lack of) understanding of just how much colonialism overdetermines Indigenous people’s lives as well as Indigenous–settler relations. Despite intellectual knowledge of this fact, I had conceptualized the question as a reference to moments of exception, as had the white women activists I was quoting. (To reiterate, the exception, according to this Indigenous participant, would be those intersubjective moments that challenge the colonial nature of the encounter.) As I noted aloud at the time, “The question itself is coming from a non-Native worldview.” I would remember this exchange whenever in doubt about the validity of a central contention of my theoretical framework—that the solidarity encounter is firmly enmeshed in broader colonial relations.

This example in particular imparts a sense of how I came to grapple with the ways in which my subject position constitutes the content and tone of the research. This self-reflexive process, as I recall above in telling the story of how I came to the research, had begun even before starting fieldwork, finding expression in the form of anxiety, doubt and insecurity. More specifically, I doubted my political commitment to NMS . . . was it to get a degree? Immersed in graduate studies and the literature on white guilt (see Chapter 6), I questioned my reasons for engaging in solidarity work in the first place . . . was it to be (seen as) an exceptional white settler ally?

Once I started my fieldwork, the disquiet I felt about the relationality between my subject position and the study intensified, as did my insights into that relationality. As I theorized the existence of a “fantasy of transcendence”\(^5\) (Ahmed, 2004, para. 16) in some white participant narratives, I became more acutely aware of my yearning to transcend my status as settler. I wondered if by telling my story, I was (or am) engaging in solipsistic self-reflexivity, despite knowing the risks. If so, how could I break the cycle of trying to reconstitute myself as the exceptional “good white settler ally”? Has this entire study and the activism from which it stems been driven, if only in part, by a quest for redemption? I gave way to a less individualistic reading of “my” desires through reading the work of Ahmed (2004); desires derive meaning and
acquire force as part of a “cultural politics of emotion” (Ahmed, 2004), collective phenomena that inform individual subjectivities and hence motivations for telling our stories. Writing about the Australian context, Ahmed (2004) explores how public expressions of shame can fulfill a collective white settler desire for transcendence:

Such public expressions of shame try to “finish” the speech act by converting shame to pride: *it allows what is shameful to be passed over in the very enactment of shame.* . . . [declarations of shame] may even assume that the speech act itself can be taken as a sign of transcendence . . . The presumption that saying is doing—that being sorry means that we have overcome the very things we are sorry about—hence works to support the racism in the present. Indeed, what is done in this speech act, if anything is done, is that the white subject is re-posited as the ideal. (para. 27, emphasis in original)

Viewed in this light, white settler fantasies of transcendence are systemically forged, becoming collective instruments of nation building. It therefore would be more surprising if I had managed to sidestep these fantasies that work to disavow white settler status and privilege.

I conclude with a final conjecture about how my social location as a Western liberal subject inevitably informs this study. My sense of the depth to which the spectre of the liberal subject might haunt my work came early on. About midway through my third interview, which happened to be with an Indigenous participant, I asked: “Can you talk about what it means to be an ally?” Her response: “As a white person or as a Native person?” The question took me aback, leading to a proverbial “ah-ha” moment; I realized from this brief exchange that I had been conceptualizing allyship in unidirectional terms, that is, assigning white women the role of helper and by extension Indigenous women the role of beneficiary. My journaling from that point on is replete with reflections on what this exchange indicated/indicates about my understanding of solidarity (power) relations. Had I unwittingly framed the study to be an exploration of a one-way or unidirectional flow of “solidarity” where white women “allies” were the providers of support and Indigenous women the recipients of that support? Despite the general nature of my call for participants, which did not stipulate what the focus of the solidarity work should be, had I subconsciously assumed that it would be around an *Indigenous* issue? Furthermore, I asked myself, had I so far conducted the interviews in a way that would tend to elicit responses positioning Native women on the receiving end of any solidarity encounter? Was I re-enacting the “stereotypical, classic colonial move, ‘we-think-we-have-something-to-offer-you,’ but not the other way around” (journal entry, December 2011)? In other words,
would my study end up reproducing the very hierarchical relations I had set out to trouble? Thus began a prolonged agonistic period in my fieldwork.

Given the structural inequalities between the two groups, it is a logical conclusion that the focus of solidarity work would more likely be around so-called Indigenous (women’s) issues. However, the fact that this is the only framing that occurred to me until that particular exchange is significant. At the least, it says something about my own assumptions about solidarity work and the respective roles of Indigenous women and white women therein. Or, is something else in play—a collective naturalized assumption on the part of many white women, and possibly even some Indigenous women, about the nature of solidarity and allyship as unidirectional or a one-way street?

In subsequent interviews, I took pains to ask questions that would not presume a flow of solidarity from white woman ally (as subject) to Indigenous woman (as object). Another pivotal conversation occurred in a later interview with a different Indigenous participant. Despite having written pages of journal reflections on the matter, it seems in retrospect that I remained “stuck”—unable “to think outside the limits of categories,” as Schick (1998, p. 52) puts it. Following my remark that “it’s kind of interesting that we don’t have a word to contrast with ally,” the woman responded “that’s because allies are, I thought, equal—so there shouldn’t be anything to contrast with ally.” Only when one sees solidarity work as charity, she clarified, would there be a contrasting concept: “the poor person, the injured, the grievance seeker, the person who has been aggrieved, the wounded, the victim, the helper versus the victim in the most classic patronizing way of doing solidarity.”

I foreshadow my findings here to highlight certain salient aspects of my methodological process. First, these conversations heightened my awareness of what appears to be one of my most deeply-held orientations toward solidarity work. This awareness in turn sparked modifications in how I conducted the research. For example, from that point forward, I added a question specifically about the role of Indigenous women as allies (see Appendices B & C). Second, my framing of solidarity as unidirectional points to a possible limitation of this work. Did I tailor my questions in a way that assumed the existence of an autonomous liberal subject (the white woman settler ally) capable of assisting the forsaken, downtrodden (Indigenous woman) other? A highly beneficial dislodging of ideas occurred in those moments. I experienced insights into my own assumptions about solidarity that pushed me “beyond the boundaries” of my own
subjection. For example, I took note of and was induced to explain the relationship between two seemingly contradictory impulses on the part of some white women allies—the desire to “help” and the desire to “be helped” through solidarity work (see Chapter 4). In short, I was moved to ask what was at stake for the white settler woman subject.

Taking seriously the premise that I am embedded in structural power relations leaves me to keep considering what my personal drama might say about power relations in the solidarity encounter. Do my assumptions reveal the existence of a default modality of solidarity as unidirectional, which is collectively shared by other settlers and in which the very language of solidarity works to eclipse the hierarchies embedded therein? Is this default mode a consequence of the encounter of differently positioned subjects? More specifically, do white women entering the solidarity encounter see themselves as autonomous individuals and how does this manifest in the encounter itself? Taking this idea further, is the liberal subject only capable of unidirectional solidarity? These are just some of the questions I take up in the following pages.

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1 As I state in the Introduction, I use the phrase “women/feminists” to indicate my lack of presumption that women in the solidarity encounter necessarily self-identify as feminist. I provide a more fulsome account of the feminist elements of my research methodology in this chapter (see “Anticolonialist feminist approaches to research”).

2 I use the term Indigenous/feminist with a forward slash to indicate my use of two overlapping bodies of scholarship: feminist methodologies and Indigenous feminist methodologies.

3 As I explore below, I use the term “auto/ethnography” to indicate that my methodological approach merges elements of classic ethnography and autoethnography.

4 As noted in the Introduction, NMS is a Toronto-based group co-founded in 2004 by an activist and documentary film-maker of mixed Indigenous/Euro-immigrant ancestry and a feminist educator ally of European ancestry. In NMS usage, the term “allies” is associated with those non-Indigenous women who chose to work in solidarity with Indigenous women around the issues of violence against Indigenous women. However, we opted to refer to those of us in the group who were/are not Indigenous as simply “allies” (and not “non-Indigenous allies”) to counter the implied lack of identity of the prefix “non” and thereby to acknowledge our complicity in the colonial process.

5 Perhaps unsurprisingly, my mother, also a second-generation Italian immigrant, was and is sidelined in this narrative, despite her constant encouragement in relation to the education of all eight of her children.

6 As Richa Nagar (2014) explains, SKMS (Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan) is a movement based in the Sitapur District in rural India “that now comprises several thousand workers and peasants, both women and men, over 90 percent of whom are dalit” (p. 7).

7 As Tina Grillo (1995) writes, “It is dangerous at the least to expect that experiencing one oppression means that one understands the others. In fact, to expect so is disrespectful in that it wipes out the true, lived experience of that group in exchange for one’s own, self-serving fantasy” (p. 27).

8 I worked with MINUGUA for a three-year period between 1995 and 1998. The UN Mission was established to verify compliance with a series of Peace Accords signed in December 1996 between the Guatemalan Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The Accords touched upon civil and political, socioeconomic and indigenous rights, as well as the demobilization of the URNG, reform of the Armed Forces and the creation of a Truth Commission.

9 By integrating my experiences into the analysis, I compensate for any ostensible imbalance in the number of Indigenous participants relative to the number of white participants in the study.

10 At that time, although enrolled in a doctoral program, I had not yet formulated a research proposal. Thus, I undertook the research and writing of the book chapter as part of my activism, not academic program.
That being said, most participants—whether Indigenous or white—had participated in a number of social justice groups throughout what they considered to be their solidarity experience. Many people also participated as individuals in particular solidarity encounters (in single actions or in a series of prolonged activities/meetings).

The three women in London, Ontario had been part of the same coalition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Although the coalition was primarily comprised of women, there were some men in the group. That being said, all three participants had had other solidarity experiences with women. For this reason, I decided to include them in the study. Additionally, at one point I had contemplated a comparative case study of NMS and this London-based group, but decided against it for two main reasons: first, it would have been hard to account for the difference in gender composition between the two groups; and second, the London-based group had disbanded just prior to the interviews, which made approaching the coalition as a whole unfeasible.

In lieu of honorariums and in the spirit of reciprocity (Lavallée, 2009), I compensated participants by reimbursing for travel expenses and by providing beverages, light snacks or a meal depending on the hour. While originally intending to offer all Indigenous participants tobacco (recognizing that this would not be a protocol practiced by all Indigenous participants), I ultimately opted not to do so given my lack of clarity around the protocol. Instead, I discussed my concerns with most Indigenous participants and received diverse responses—some women would have preferred me to have offered tobacco, whereas others not. However, I was told consistently that because I didn’t understand the deep significance of the protocol, it was understandable that I hadn’t offered tobacco. I was advised to learn more about this protocol (and others) and follow it (them) when appropriate in the future.

That said, whereas some participants (more often white women) deliberately chose to engage in solidarity, others (more often Indigenous women) were drawn to political organizing and once active, became amenable to working with women from the “other side” of the colonial divide (see Chapters 4 & 5).

This is an adaptation of the title of Himani Bannerji’s (1993) edited collection Returning the gaze.

Although focusing on a different site of social relations, my research question bears a striking resemblance to that of Barbara Heron’s (1999), who asks “How do Canadian women development workers negotiate and understand our positions in relations of power in developing countries?” (pp. 41-42).

Thobani (2007) argues that white supremacy as a feature of the Canadian “collective sense of selfhood” in the initial phases of nation building “had to be constantly defended and reproduced at the level of daily life” (p. 83).

In fact, I have been reminded of this risk throughout the course of this research. One instance in particular stands out for me. In June 2010, I was presenting my preliminary research design at an academic conference. After the presentation, an Indigenous woman asked, “Why is it always about whiteness?” And while a dialogue proceeded that included other opinions about the limits and merits of my proposed research, the moment is indelibly etched in my mind as a reminder of the inherent tension that exists in the examination of white privilege.

For more on the colonial underpinnings of and consequent damage wrought by Western research methodologies in particular see Bagele Chilisa (2012) and Smith (1999). See also Mohanty’s 1984 seminal article on the discursive colonization of Western feminist scholarship vis-à-vis the construction of the “Third World woman,” which she later reconsiders, clarifies and reconfirms in Feminism without borders (2003).

In this study, I do not discuss the distinctive intersubjective relations of the solidarity encounter between Indigenous peoples and diverse groups of non-Indigenous people of colour in Canada—a subject of increasing scholarly attention (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Jafri, 2010; Kaur, 2014; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Mawani, 2009; Miles & Holland, 2006; Morgensen, 2011; Sehdev, 2010; Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Thobani (2007) suggests, there is a complex relationship between people of colour and Indigenous nations in Canada that deserves to be queried: “Can a citizenship conceived in, and maintained by, a genocidal violence leave untainted any group which comes to be included in its orbit, no matter how severe the forms of their own previous exclusions or how tenuous their subsequent inclusion?” (p. 95). Neither do I take up debates about the relevance of the term settler for non-Indigenous people of colour. Like Morgensen (2011), I recognize that “to say that all non-Natives are settlers may fail to explain how settler colonialism conditions non-Natives by ‘race’ or migrant/immigrant status, while stymieing efforts to link Native, diaspora, and critical race studies in defending Native decolonization” (p. 19).

A telling statement in the Preface of the Handbook of critical and Indigenous methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008a) suggests that white women often remain the unmarked norm, even in potentially progressive texts. Note the first entry in the long list of oppressed persons: “Because of their liberatory commitments, we believe critical methodologies can, in concert with Indigenous methodologies, speak to oppressed, colonized persons living in postcolonial situations of injustice: women, women of color, Third World women, African American women, Black women, Chicana and other minority group women, queer, lesbian, and transgendered, Aboriginal, First Nation, Native American, South African, Latin American, and Pacific and Asian Islander persons” (p. x, emphasis added).

For my rationale, I draw on Sherene Razack’s (1998) work on the subjectivity of the dominant, where “the question What do the eyes of the dominant group see when they encounter subordinate groups? is raised both to name the epistemic violence of this vision and to interrupt its consequences” (p. 16).
Drawing on Stuart Hall (1996), I understand interpellation as the ongoing constitution of persons *qua* subjects into subject positions through normative social relations that involve socially constructed categories of difference. Hall describes interpellation in general terms as “the hailing of the subject by discourse” (p. 6) or “the ‘summoning into place’ of the subject” (p. 7).

Heller, Sosna and Wellbery (1986) note the staying power of this particular view of the subject and subjectivity: “Some form of individualism—broadly conceived as the view that the individual human subject is a maker of the world we inhabit—has been a key factor in the life of the West for the last five hundred years. Modern definitions of the self and psychology, of ethical responsibility and civic identity, and of artistic representation and economic behavior all rest on the notion of an individual whose experience and history, whose will and values, whose expressions and preferences are essential constituents of reality” (p. 1).

23 Mohanty’s (2003) commitment to centre the knowledge of marginalized communities “draws on the notion of epistemic privilege as it is developed by feminist standpoint theorists” (p. 231). Rebecca Clark Mane (2012) argues compellingly in favour of such privileging while embracing a non-essentialist view of the subject. While agreeing that this epistemic privilege is often a consequence of having “both to critically navigate dominant worldviews and to make sense of...alternative and marginalized experiences,” she also acknowledges that “[critical] standpoint is achieved (and contested and constantly under revision and historically contingent) ...[and thus] is not guaranteed” (p. 76). See also Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Sandra Harding (2004).

24 A promising avenue of further research would be to articulate the merits of Indigenous social and political thought for understanding how to fashion non-colonizing modes of subjectivity. Coulthard (2007) sees the potential for Indigenous cultures/scholarship to exemplify non-imperial relationships or modes of being “within and amongst peoples and the natural world” (p. 456). See also Garrouxe (2003) and Smith (2008a).

25 Visweswaran (1994) writes, “the third moment in articulation between autobiography and ethnography emerges in the sixties and seventies, loosely correlated with a ‘reflexive’ turn,’ and might roughly be termed ‘experimental ethnography’” (p. 7).

26 Butz and Besio (2009) use the phrase “personal experience narrative” to describe the work of “scholars who focus intensely on their own life circumstances as a way to understand larger social or cultural phenomena” (p. 1665). The lines between these genres often can become blurred, as Butz and Besio (2009) point out: “In striving to write themselves into narrative ethnography, researchers may begin to constitute themselves more fully as objects of knowledge, in a move that brings narrative ethnography closer to personal experience narrative” (p. 1667).

27 I identify as cis-gendered (as opposed to transgendered) given that my self-ascribed gender (female) matches the gender I was assigned at birth.

28 Notably, although I did ask participants to define feminism and their relationship to the term, I do not focus on this theme per se (i.e., how participants define feminism and whether or not they self-identify as feminists) in my data analysis. Issues around feminist designation were not of particular concern to Indigenous or white participants.

29 George Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf (2006) identify the central assertion of “contemporary anticolonial thought” as follows: “that colonial constructions affect knowledge production with profound material consequences” (p. 13).

30 Cannella and Manuelito (2008) stress the dangerous possibility of “the creation of new power hierarchies” even by self-professed anticolonialist researchers: “Anticolonialist research perspectives would, themselves, require continued examination as positions from which new forms of power could be emerging” (p. 50).

31 In fact, some Indigenous scholars upon whom I draw such as Sandy Grande (2004) explicitly do not identify as feminist. Other scholars, such as Bonita Lawrence and Andrea Smith, would likely define themselves irreducibly as both Indigenous and feminist in their approach to research.

32 Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2007) distills an “Indigenist research paradigm” in 11 principles, which include doing research 1) “[with] respect for all forms of life as being related and interconnected”; 2) “in a spirit of kindness and honesty [and] compassion”; 3) “that brings benefit to the Indigenous community”; 4) that “lie[s] within the reality of the Indigenous experience”; 5) that “recognize[s] that transformation within every living entity participating in the research will be one of the outcomes of every project”; and 6) that “recognize[s] that the languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples are living processes and that research and the discovery of knowledge is an ongoing function for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group” (p. 195).

33 Lawrence and Dua (2005) detail how the erasure of Indigenous peoples and decolonization from theories about race and diaspora often work to position people of colour as “innocent” in white settler colonial projects: “Left unaddressed is the way in which people of color in settler formations are settlers on stolen lands. It ignores the complex relationships people of color have with settler projects. Although marginalized, at particular historical moments they may have been complicit with ongoing land theft and colonial domination of Aboriginal peoples. It distorts our writing of history; indeed, the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the project of antiracism erases them from history” (p. 132).

34 Drawing on Stuart Hall (1996), I understand interpellation as the ongoing constitution of persons *qua* subjects into subject positions through normative social relations that involve socially constructed categories of difference. Hall describes interpellation in general terms as “the hailing of the subject by discourse” (p. 6) or “the ‘summoning into place’ of the subject” (p. 7).

35 Heller, Sosna and Wellbery (1986) note the staying power of this particular view of the subject and subjectivity: “Some form of individualism—broadly conceived as the view that the individual human subject is a maker of the world we inhabit—has been a key factor in the life of the West for the last five hundred years. Modern definitions of the self and psychology, of ethical responsibility and civic identity, and of artistic representation and economic behavior all rest on the notion of an individual whose experience and history, whose will and values, whose expressions and preferences are essential constituents of reality” (p. 1).

I understand the term psycho-affective to refer to the indeterminate ways—social, emotional, psychical and physical—in which subjects invest in social interactions to reproduce a stable sense of self.

Boyd (2004) also sees subjectivity as embodied, that is, as “a form of self-awareness and sense of agency that is constituted by the interaction of embodied persons and their interpretations of that interaction” (p. 4).

Although I do not properly incorporate affect theory into this study, I am increasingly interested in how it might lead to a different (perhaps richer) understanding of the interface between discourse, embodiment and subjectivity.

“Affect theory,” states Donovan Schaefer (2013), provides “the possibility of sliding together analytical tools used to pick apart both highly individuated and highly social contact zones—bodies and histories—as incarnated realities” (para. 2). I could begin with Schaefer’s (2013) review of Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness and Laurent Berlant’s Cruel Optimism (two prominent texts in the field). For Schaefer, affect theory is “about how systems of forces circulating within bodies—forces not necessarily subsumable or describable by language—interface with histories. It is about how discourses form ligatures with pulsing flesh-and-blood creatures” (para. 3).

That said, phenomenology as a discipline is arguably concerned with more than “overtly conscious phenomena”:

“Conscious experience is the starting point of phenomenology, but experience shades off into less overtly conscious phenomena. . . . [A]s psychoanalysts have stressed, much of our intentional mental activity is not conscious at all, but may become conscious in the process of therapy or interrogation, as we come to realize how we feel or think about something. We should allow, then, that the domain of phenomenology—our own experience—spreads out from conscious experience into semi-conscious and even unconscious mental activity, along with relevant background conditions implicitly invoked in our experience” (D. W. Smith, 2013, Section 2, para. 9).

Rather than assert a reified understanding of subject positions as outside of socially constructed meanings, or achievable as permanent, unchanging states of being, I see them as collectively constructed over time through subjects’ varying attempts to “occupy” or “perform” them. In this sense, Renée Bergland’s (2000) theorization of the “American mind” (see Chapter 5) is analogous; rather than posit the existence of “an American mind that can be psychoanalyzed., instead, [she uses] psychoanalytic and historical approaches to analyze the ways that individuals have tried to create an American mind, and, equally important, tried to make their own minds American” (p. 15).

Gary Gutting (2005) clarifies Foucault’s conception of the discursive limitations to a subject’s thought processes:

“At any given period in a given domain, there are substantial constraints on how people are able to think” (p. 32). Gutting continues, “Foucault’s idea is that this level of [archaeological] analysis, of what is outside the control of the individuals who actually do the thinking in a given period, is the key to understanding the constraints within which people think. . . . [Foucault] thinks that individuals operate in a conceptual environment that determines and limits them in ways of which they cannot be aware” (p. 33).

Bacchi (2005) writes, “Distinct disciplinary understandings of the term discourse can be found in linguistics, anthropology, social psychology, sociology and politics. Discourse traditions include: conversation analysis, Foucauldian research, critical discourse analysis and critical linguistics, discursive psychology, Bakhtinian research, interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking. There is also internal dispute about the meaning of the term discourse within some of these traditions” (p. 199).

For an overview of the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), see Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen (2000), who conclude that “CDA is still burdened by a very ‘linguistic’ outlook, which prevents productive ways of incorporating linguistic and nonlinguistic dimensions of semiosis (apparent, for instance, in the very partial interpretation of Foucault’s ‘discours’ in Fairclough’s work)” (p. 461).

While a more in-depth description of Foucault’s genealogical method is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note here that, according to Derek Hook (2005), “Foucault’s turn to genealogy stems largely from what he takes to be the inadequacy of other systems of [discourse] analysis” (p. 8).

Proximity-related discourses were among five transversal discursive formations that I identified as relating to women’s motivations for entering into solidarity. These five discourses, which both thread through and subsume a number of themes, are as follows: desire and emotion more broadly (desire is a thoroughly transversal discourse that marks other discourses; e.g., the desire to achieve social justice or proximity); proximity-related narratives; responsibility/accountability; shared political analysis and social justice inclinations; and practical/strategic motivations. Importantly, these discourses themselves are often co-constitutive in participant narratives.

I gleaned additional insights into white women’s motivations for and investments in solidarity by evaluating responses to the question of whether or not they had been transformed (individually or collectively) by the work.

I include a broad range of intertwined desires and sub-discourses under the umbrella of proximity. Starting with the most frequently recurring, these sub-discourses are as follows: the desire to be accepted by or included in a Native community (including desires for forgiveness or validation); the desire to be healed or empowered, to be
valued or gain a sense of purpose; an attraction to or appreciation of Native culture, tradition and/or spirituality (sometimes coupled with a scathing critique of Western societal lack); and the desire to learn or be challenged. 49 I have heard Justice Sinclair make this assertion in person on two public occasions (in 2010 and 2011). Since, I have heard him make similar statements in the media (primarily CBC Radio).

50 This was a central message in Denis’s job talk that I attended at the School of Social Work at the University of Toronto on February 14, 2011.

51 In Chapter 3, I elaborate on my use of Ahmed’s concept of the fantasy of transcendence.
Chapter 3
The Gendered Colonial Subject

In this chapter, I draw on a range of literatures including postcolonial feminist, Indigenous feminist and critical race scholarship\(^1\) to advance a theoretical grounding for an analysis of intersubjective relations in the contemporary solidarity encounter. This study rests on the theoretical premise that solidarity encounters are colonial encounters, their intersubjective relations are overdetermined, although neither absolutely nor seamlessly, by colonial power relations. Consequently, I hold that settler colonial relations in Canada necessarily infuse the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women. I also argue that a central dynamic of settler colonial relations—a deeply entrenched (white) settler desire for legitimate (liberal) subject status—is in turn operationalized by a desire for proximity to the Indigenous Other. In light of the historical production of white women as the saviours of Other women, I suggest that the settler desire for proximity is also gendered. Importantly, an understanding of the (settler) colonial subject as modern liberal subject underpins my entire theoretical framework.

First, I turn to the historical production of the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist subject in (hierarchical) relation to her Indigenous Other. I provide a condensed review of the literature on white women’s participation in settler colonial/imperial projects from the nineteenth century onward. To reiterate, my main goal is to explore the ways in which white settler women/feminist subjects are constituted through the production of gendered colonial difference (inflected with other social differentiations such as class)—that is, as the saviours or helpers of Other women. I contend that this subject position, which is configured by casting white women as simultaneously subordinate and dominant, is extremely difficult to transcend. I also touch upon some of the specificities of the Euro-Canadian\(^2\) settler woman/feminist subject and/in the Canadian nation-building project. I end by taking up the relevance of Sara Ahmed’s (2000) notion of proximity as one mode of colonial encounter for exploring gendered colonial intersubjective relations at the micro level: the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in Canada.

In exploring how the subject position “white settler/imperialist woman” was taken up by women/feminists\(^3\) in the colonial era (perhaps, more accurately, proto-feminists\(^4\)), I set the stage for an analysis of the ways in which white women/feminists in the contemporary solidarity
encounter comply with, resist and/or transgress the parameters of their subject position as settlers. This study’s central concerns are legible within this analytical framework: What have been the roles scripted for white women/feminist allies in the colonial encounter? How do white women/feminist allies negotiate these roles (i.e., subject positions) in the contemporary solidarity encounter? What happens when white women, through involvement in solidarity work, are confronted with the colonial foundations of their status as universal subjects and the hierarchical conditions of their feminist birthing—all based on their supposed superiority to more oppressed female Others? How can colonial scripts be re-written, and what would corresponding practices of non-colonizing solidarity look like?

As mentioned, my research relies on a sketch of the settler colonial subject as modern liberal subject, which coalesce around certain conceptualizations of freedom, autonomy, transcendence, self-consciousness and hierarchy (Saldaña-Portillo, 2003; Spivak, 1985; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). Thus, a starting point for my analysis is that white settler women allies are “always already” positioned as liberal (read: self-determining, individualistic) subjects prior to entering the solidarity encounter. In this sense, I adhere to the supposition that colonialism and modernity are mutually constitutive projects, a connection described by Yeğenoğlu (1998):

Enlightenment reason, resting on the belief of the irreconcilability of non-modern ways of life with Western models of progress, serves as the connecting tissue between colonial and modernist discourses. The signifiers of the project of the Enlightenment and humanism such as progress, modernization, and universalism have also functioned as legitimizing categories in the civilizing mission of colonial power. (p. 95)

I argue that in “colonial modernity” the colonial subject is a modern liberal subject by default. It follows that the modern liberal subject’s quest for autonomy, or “intense desire for self-production” (Schick, 1998) is laced with the colonial desire to control self and Other. And so, I begin with/in the “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004).

**Solidarity Encounters in the “Colonial Present”**

Sara Ahmed (2000) emboldens my premise that the solidarity encounter is a microcosm of broader colonial relations. The same asymmetrical power relations permeate both Canadian society in general and the solidarity encounter in specific. The particular, in other words, must be understood in relation to the general and vice versa:

I want to consider how the particular encounter both informs and is informed by the general: encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of
Ahmed’s framing suggests that the solidarity encounter “always carries traces” of broader, historically-produced colonial relations. Moreover, the solidarity encounter can aptly be considered part of the “contact zone,” defined by Mary Louise Pratt (2008) as the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 7). The idea of the contact zone establishes that unequal power relations can remain long after any such initial encounters between two (or more) societies. I join a plethora of scholars such as Derek Gregory (2004) who speak not in terms of aftermaths, but rather in terms of the “colonial present” where “the constellations of power, knowledge, and geography . . . continue to colonize lives all over the world” (p. xv). This seems even more clearly the case in settler colonial contexts. Citing Arif Dirlik (1999), Grande (2004) stresses that US colonialism is still salient:

“Today Native Americans struggle not only with colonial histories but also with postmodern and cultural critics who take for granted that nations are ‘imagined,’ traditions are ‘invented,’ subjectivities are ‘slippery’ (if they exist at all), and cultural identities are myths.” While such theories rightfully call attention to the myriad “collisions” between the once discrete worlds of the “colonizer” and the “colonized,” their facile reasoning ultimately serves to occlude the brutal reality that twenty-first-century America fosters internal colonies. (p. 5)

Along similar lines, Bird Rose (1996) refers to the “deep colonizing practices” that occur in a context of ostensible equality under Australian law (i.e., where formal inequalities have been purportedly undone). Canadian-based scholars also emphasize the ongoing nature of settler colonialism (see Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Coulthard, 2014). Thielen-Wilson (2012) shows how Canadian jurisprudence does not even dispute the fact of ongoing colonialism, but instead uses liberal accounts of human rights, and truth and reconciliation as strategies for balancing competing (racialized economic) interests in the face of two facts recognized by law: first, the fact that the sovereignty of Indigenous nations pre-existed European arrival and continues today, and second, the fact that Europeans (the British/Canadian Crown) (merely) asserted sovereignty over Indigenous lands. (p. 310)
By stressing the continuity of colonialism into the present, I join an interdisciplinary scholarship that insists “earlier periods of history continue to deeply influence how we understand who we are individually and together, and indeed what it means to be a ‘we’ to begin with” (Szeman & Kaposy, 2011, p. 418). I conclude, therefore, that solidarity encounters between Indigenous women and white women occur in a *white settler colonial* contact zone, replete with historically-derived and ongoing structural power disparities between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settlers. Given contemporary colonialism’s deep historical roots, to explore the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women requires reflecting on how collective gendered (and racialized) colonial subjectivities have been fashioned over time.

In *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*, Ahmed (2000) develops two interrelated ideas that have proven vital to this research: “stranger fetishism” and its operative mechanism, the desire for proximity. She theorizes social relations (and hence intersubjectivity) in terms of embodied encounters both metaphorical and literal. For Ahmed (2000), as for Pratt (2008), intersubjective encounters in the “contact zone” are not discrete, one-off occurrences, but rather connected phenomena marked by relations of force and contestation: “The face-to-face meeting is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is antagonistic. The coming together of others that allows the ‘one’ to exist takes place given that there is an asymmetry of power” (p. 8). The concept of stranger fetishism accounts for how asymmetrical power relations between subjects are obscured in these encounters and thus perpetuated in the present. Moreover, the related notion of proximity contributes to our capacity to think about the solidarity encounter as a spatialized encounter of embodied subjects and also of desiring subjects along the lines described by Yeğenoğlu (1998). I develop this argument at greater length below.

**The Gendered Colonial Subject**

My next task is to map the historical production of the white settler/imperialist woman subject as a way towards mapping the contemporary production of that subject in relation to her Indigenous Other. I seek to contextualize contemporary encounters within historical power inequities and thus to make transparent or “reopen [those] prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8). With that aim, I discuss the casting of white women as simultaneously subordinate (as women) and as dominant (as the
white saviours of Other women)—the “split” subject who yearns to acquire modern liberal subject status.

The “double positioning” of white settler/imperialist women

For several decades, feminist postcolonial scholars such as Anne McClintock (1995) and Ania Loomba (2005) have identified a major limitation of postcolonial theory as initially postulated: the neglect of gender as a constitutive element of imperial/colonial projects (see also Lewis, 1996; Ray, 2009; Razack, 1998; Stoler, 1995; Ware, 1992; Woollacott, 2006). This study has benefited from the insights of this literature, which brings the complexities and heterogeneity of women as subjects on both sides of the colonial divide—and those who by intent or accident straddled that divide—into focus. With regard to white women in particular, Loomba (2005) states that “within colonial spaces, white women participated with varying degrees of alienation and enthusiasm in imperial projects; as teachers, missionaries, nurses, and the help-mates of colonial men, their roles varied both structurally and ideologically” (p. 144). This depiction suggests the importance of resisting the simplistic conclusion that white settler/imperialist women were in unequivocal positions of power vis-à-vis colonized women at all times. Certainly, life in the “contact zone” (Pratt, 2008) was (and is) rife with contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities in terms of power relations, particularly at the level of personal day-to-day interactions (McClintock, 1995). Following these scholars and others who write on the Canadian context (see below), I recognize the importance of avoiding essentialist approaches that can obscure power differentials among colonizers, reify subjects and/or contribute to recreating the violent, hierarchical binary relationship of colonizer–colonized (L. T. Smith, 1999). There is also the importance of acknowledging the agency, however proscribed, of Indigenous women in colonial/imperial encounters. In short, I see the need to complicate understandings of how subjects are interpellated into and implicated in neo/colonial processes, i.e., to displace an “either/or” depiction of the pure, unwilling female colonial agent versus the “self-conscious [male] oppressor” (Lewis, 1996, p. 21).

That being said, the recognition of complexity, ambivalence and even transgression at the level of individual subjects, and vigilance about the limits of binary thinking and homogenized categories should not lead to a denial of the structural power imbalances between subject positions that infuse ongoing colonial relations. After all, as I explain more fully in Chapter 2, “dominant subject positions are implicated in relations of ruling” (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p.
The reality of structural power differences between subjects/subject positions suggests the need to retain “settler” as an analytical category of difference; Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson (2000) argue, “the ‘settler’ subject cannot be made to disappear in this project of [acknowledging] difference [in postcolonial cultures]” because it “emerges from the material and textual enactments and enunciations of imperial power as a crucial site for the investigation of colonial power at work” (p. 368). Retaining “settler” and by extension “Indigenous” as contingent subject positions helps account for the workings of power in white settler colonial nation-states such as Canada.

McClintock (1995) rejects “a commonplace, liberal pluralism that generously embraces diversity all the better to efface the imbalances of power that adjudicate difference . . . . [Because] power is seldom adjudicated evenly—different social situations are overdetermined for race, for gender, for class, or for each in turn” (pp. 8–9). For example, and importantly for this study, the ascendancy of racial discourses often overdetermined the colonial encounter for women (and men) in that those who could lay claim to whiteness enjoyed a greater degree of power, however circumscribed, than those who could not. As I discuss more fully below, patriarchal constraints notwithstanding, white settler/imperialist women were conferred power through their assertion of racial difference (Lewis, 1995; McClintock, 1995; Mohanram, 1999).

In fact, there is a consensus in postcolonial literature that bourgeois (colonizer) subjects in both the metropole and colonies were produced in relation to the colonized Other “through a language of difference that drew on images of racial purity and sexual virtue” (p. 10). Importantly for this study, white women settlers/imperialists were interpellated into a “double positioning” where socially constructed differences around race and gender interlock: “Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated. Their relationship to colonial discourses is mediated through this double positioning” (Loomba, 2005, p. 135). How would this have unfolded in a white settler context? Johnston and Lawson (2000) describe the ascendancy of the (male) settler’s contradictory self-perception as “colonized and colonizing.” In other words, because presumably white settlers were “subject to greater constraints upon their freedom and their ability to participate in governance than the citizens of the ‘home’ country [they had] the feeling of being colonized” (p. 363). It stands to reason that white women’s double positioning would have caused an intensification of this effect. Subjected to British
patriarchal constraints, white women would have had a greater sense of “being colonized.” This study considers if/how the historical double positioning of white settler women as both subordinate and dominant matters to the solidarity encounter: Do white settler women conceptualize our subject position in such dualistic terms, and if so, does one or another identity prevail at any given time?

Ann Laura Stoler (1995) argues that colonialism in the mid- to late nineteenth century “was not a secure bourgeois project,” but rather a tenuous and contingent one in the making (pp. 98–99). Given their double positioning as embodiments of empire’s “porous frontiers,” (Loomba, 2005), white women had a prescribed role in solidifying that project, which was “the reproduction of Empire—biologically, culturally, and politically” (Johnston & Lawson, 2000, p. 372). Imperialist/colonialist narratives of the time depicted colonies and metropole as under threat by the “degenerate” forces of both the “lower” classes and “lower” races (McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995; Valverde, 1992; Burton, 1994). An illogical fear of the “spectre of miscegenation” was the logical result (Loomba, 2005, p. 134). It was hoped that the influence of proper white bourgeois femininity would thwart the impulse toward miscegenation and stem the tide of degeneracy. White women were to be the reproducers of empire and secure this status by modeling racialized thinking and “middle-class morality, nationalist sentiments, bourgeois sensibilities, normalized sexuality, and a carefully circumscribed ‘milieu’ in school and home” (Stoler, 1995, p. 105). Put differently, in their main role as “mothers of the race” (Valverde, 1992), white women were to abide by the “cult of domesticity,” which infused the racialized, classed and gendered dictates of colonial/imperial projects, according to McClintock (1995):

The mission station [in nineteenth-century Africa] became a threshold institution for transforming domesticity rooted in European gender and class roles into domesticity as controlling a colonized people. Through the rituals of domesticity, increasingly global and more often than not violent, animals, women and colonized peoples were wrested from their putatively “natural” yet, ironically, unreasonable state of “savagery” and inducted through the domestic progress narrative into a hierarchical relation to white men. (p. 35)

“Domestication,” therefore, became a central feature of imperial/colonial projects and of the split status of white women therein: they were cast as the agents and objects of domestication, i.e., among those who would control and who would be controlled. White women were to take on a particular role and place in imperial/colonial hierarchies—subordinate to that of white men.
In this sense, domestication discourse signaled the “intricate overlaps between colonial and sexual domination” (Loomba, 2005, p. 135) and was part of the broader colonial practice of analogizing putative differences, particularly between white women and colonized men:

In the language of colonialism, non-Europeans occupy the same symbolic space as [white] women. Both are seen as part of nature, not culture, and with the same ambivalence: either they are ripe for government, passive, child-like, unsophisticated, needing leadership and guidance, described always in terms of lack—no initiative, no intellectual powers, no perseverance; or on the other hand, they are outside society, dangerous, treacherous, emotional, inconstant, wild, threatening, fickle, sexually aberrant, irrational, near animal, lascivious, disruptive, evil, unpredictable. (Carr cited in Loomba, 2005, p. 135)

The workings of analogy make the interlocking nature of sex/gender-based and race-based oppression in the colonial/imperial enterprise readily apparent. White women’s double positioning in the colonial landscape was partly achieved through such analogies. For example, colonial scientific writing in particular presented a combined construction of race and gender that would maintain white male supremacy: “In short, lower races represented the female type of the human species, and females the ‘lower race’ of gender” (Loomba, 2005, p. 136). It is crucial to remember that analogies were never straightforward and always contingent upon the needs of empire (Stoler, 1995). Summarizing the complex discursive operations that normalized bourgeois white rule in metropole and colony, including the roles of white settler women, Stoler (1995) writes: “[The] discourse on bourgeois selves was founded on what Foucault would call a particular ‘grid of intelligibility,’ a hierarchy of distinctions in perception and practice that conflated, substituted, and collapsed the categories of racial, class and sexual Others strategically and at different times” (p. 11). In other words, differently situated populations, and segments thereof, were constituted in relation to and through one another.

This discursive fluidity helps explain the formation of multiple, sometimes conflicting roles, in terms of subordination and domination, for the white settler/imperialist woman—(domestic) servant and/or wife, mother of home and nation, and moral reformer. I now discuss how white women/feminists would have negotiated their double positioning in the pursuit of (liberal autonomous) selfhood and entrance into modernity as universal, rights-bearing subjects.

**White women/feminist liberatory aspirations in modernity**

The white settler/imperialist woman subject enters the global stage at a particular historical moment—when the post-Enlightenment individual is being consolidated along gendered and
racialized lines through the colonial/imperial project. Scholars across a range of disciplines discuss the array of material practices and discursive techniques involved.\textsuperscript{21} Andrea Smith (2013a) points to an aspect of autonomous subject production that is relevant to this study:

The post-Enlightenment version of the Subject as a sole self-determined actor exists by situating itself over and against “affectable” others who are subject to natural conditions as well as to the self-determined power of the Western subject. In essence, the Western subject knows itself because of (1) its apparent ability to exercise power over others; and (2) the inability of others to exercise power over it. The “others” meanwhile, are affected by the power of the Western subject (and hence are “affectable”) but they cannot effect power themselves. (p. 265, emphasis in original)

In other words, as Smith (2013a), Denise da Silva (2007) and others emphasize, hierarchical constructions of racial difference are fundamental to Western liberal subject constitution.

Like that of Clare Midgley (2007), this study specifically concerns the subjectivities of “white middle-class women . . . [among whom] a consciously modern and Western feminist movement emerged” (p. 9). Thus, I am led to pose this question: How was racial difference mobilized by the white settler feminist subject as doubly positioned in the colonial/imperial project?\textsuperscript{22} As so positioned, what strategies would she have employed to oppose patriarchal subordination?

Inderpal Grewal (1996) suggests the validity and importance of such questions:

If . . . masculine ideology is central to imperial discourse, what then is the relation of those who oppose patriarchy to imperial structures, to colonization, and to English imperial nationalism? . . . For it is only by looking at the discursive spaces that feminisms occupy, spaces that are imbricated within other discourses of state and nation, that we can see feminisms not as orthodoxies, but as ongoing practices of locational politics. (p. 58)

In providing a brief sketch of “the discursive spaces” in which white feminism/feminists would have emerged (and contributed to), I recognize the ever-present danger of oversimplifying what were complex social and political movements and people (Midgley, 2007). However, consensus in the literature strongly suggests that this negotiation relied on white women activists’ embrace of their racially-superior, white status—alongside an identification with (and rejection of) their subordinate status as women (Grewal, 1996; Lewis, 1996; Loomba, 2005; Valverde, 1992).

Admittedly, the ability and desire of white women (proto-) feminists to embrace or resist the racist and imperialist inclinations of the time and their assigned role as the moral custodians of whiteness would have been affected by class position as well as political proclivity. While acknowledging the existence of transgressive or “self-consciously oppositional” white women
(Lewis, 1996, p. 3), these scholars conclude that the “colonial realm and imperial habitus” of the day (Grewal, 1996, p. 80) overdetermined the perceptions and actions of English suffragists, female travelers and the more progressive abolitionists of the time, inclining them to believe in their racial superiority vis-à-vis colonized women.23 Even Vron Ware (1992), who is more tentative in her assertions, concedes that “it was not yet possible to comprehend what feminism’s most effective response to different forms of imperialism should be, by which I mean feminism’s contribution to the downfall of Empire and the liberation of colonized peoples” (p. 163).

Others more conclusively state that white feminism contributed to the solidification of empire, and used racialized, patronizing discourse to further its liberatory aspirations. Despite the critiques of individual feminist intellectuals, Mariana Valverde (1992) writes, “feminist evolutionism not only failed to question the racist presuppositions of evolutionary thought, but produced a profoundly racist form of feminism in which women of ‘lower’ races were excluded from the specifically Anglo-Saxon work of building a better world through the freeing of ‘the mother of the race’” (p. 8).24 This process of exclusion was effectively a process of othering. As Antoinette Burton (1994) explains, in order to “undermine the Victorian construction of woman as Other,” British feminists strategically aligned themselves “with the Self of nation and empire” and constructed “non-Western females as recognizably non-British [Indian] Other” (p. 35). A pattern was established: to secure their collective political rights in the metropole, British feminists would collectively position themselves as superior to a more oppressed female Other, and act “as social reformers of Empire” to “save” more oppressed (inferior) Indian women (Burton, 1994). As implied above, the tendency for white women to assume a superior positioning over Other women conforms to the contours of nineteenth-century evolutionary thought. Even the most radical of white middle-class women would have “felt they were better educated than women elsewhere” (Ware, 1992, p. 128) and therefore justified in imparting this “superior knowledge” to less fortunate women elsewhere.25 It would seem that, notwithstanding their paradoxical status as “the inferior sex in the superior race” (Burton, 1994), white feminists benefited from and sustained a faith in white supremacy.

In short, somewhat ironically, patriarchal formations of empire assisted white women in Europe to fight patriarchy at home.26 For example, Grewal (1996) notes how English suffragists used Orientalist discourse to argue that “the evils of purdah, the harem, and sati” were the eventual
results of denying women their political rights and freedom: “The stereotype of women’s seclusion in the Middle East and Asia suggested the need for women to be employed, vote for their rights, and participate in public, and not merely domestic, matters” (p. 82). However, a “double positioning” in terms of race and gender led to white women being “interpellated” into a particular role in the colonial/imperial encounter: as “saviours” of “inferior” other women.

In relation to colonial Canada, Jennifer Henderson (2003) tethers white settler women to the broadly liberalist and racist terms of empire: “[Settler women’s] narratives tell a story about the recuperation of feminist thinking about freedom on settler terrain, a terrain that was constructed as a space bereft of human history, and appropriated as the ground for race-making projects” (p. 12). With Henderson’s observation, I arrive at one of this study’s central theoretical contentions about the foundational contradiction of “universality” in post-Enlightenment modernity: “The imposition of modernity in colonial conditions was predicated on the denial of freedom and autonomy of native cultures” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 96). Applied to the settler colonial context, this would mean that the “freedom” of the white (proto-) settler woman/feminist would ultimately depend on the dispossession and effacement of the Indigenous female (and male) Other. In what follows, I draw on scholars such as Yeğenoğlu (1998) to explore white women/feminist negotiations of their double positioning (as simultaneously marginalized and dominant) in terms of modernity.

Poised to save: The gendered colonial move to universal status

Yeğenoğlu (1998) sheds light on the stakes involved for Victorian-era (proto-) feminists in clinging to various forms and degrees of racist thought and behaviour. It is nothing short of the successful quest for universal subject status when one is simultaneously and paradoxically rendered as the inferior female subject who is racially superior, but only along masculinist lines. Recall the foundational move of “universal” Western subject status noted by Smith (2013a):

This separation is fundamentally a racial one—both spatially and temporally. That is, the Western subject is spatially located in the West in relationship to “affectable” Third World others. It is temporally located in modernity in relation to “primitive” others who are never able to enter modernity. The Western subject is a universal subject that determines itself without being determined by others. (p. 265)

But how could “the symbolic inferior other at home” (Lewis, 1996, p. 18), that is, the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist achieve universal status when she herself was associated with primitivism? In answer, Yeğenoğlu (1998) describes white Western women’s efforts to simulate
“sovereign masculine discourse” (p. 107) with respect to Other women. Unable to secure an authoritative selfhood at home vis-à-vis white men, they turned to the colonies. Grewal (1996) provides the example of Englishwomen who availed themselves of imperialist travel culture:

As liminal spaces, [colonies] can be proving grounds for Englishwomen’s attempts at equality with Englishmen, their superiority to colonized men, and their ability to be a part of the project of empire conceived of as a heterosexual and masculinist project. . . . [Such spaces] show the vulnerability of English masculinity and the attempts of Englishwomen to control and share this masculinity that is essential to the English family and nation. (p. 63)

In this way, the colonial terrain proved to be as much ideological as geographical for English women, opening up the possibility however tenuous of universal “masculine” subject status.

Because one of my central concerns in examining the solidarity encounter is to see if, how and when white settler women attempt to claim universal subject status, it is important to understand what this involves. Yeğenoğlu (1998) explains that beneath the universalizing gesture of colonial modernity is the establishment of hierarchical difference along racial, gendered and classed lines:

The command of the universal . . . is a consequence of an oppositional and hierarchical ordering of the universal and the particular. . . . This is a process which not only establishes a standard to exclude those who are different by defining them as other-than the norm, but operates first and foremost as a means of registering the relationship of difference and thereby as a means of securing sovereign status to the subject of representation in a relation of contrast. It is a process that allows setting the self off from the particular and this is nothing other than centering oneself as universal. (p. 103)

According to the dualistic logic of colonial modernity, the particular (e.g., Muslim women) is contrasted with the universal norm (Western women) and found wanting, rendered as lack in what Grewal (1996) calls the “binary of freedom and unfreedom” (e.g., Muslim women as not free, not modern and not civilized). By aligning themselves with patriarchal, racialized, imperialist practices, white women could secure entrance into modernity as universal, rights-endowed subjects. Their participation in these practices would allow (bourgeois) white women to inhabit the freedom side of the binary, as paragons of female freedom and personhood—this notwithstanding the oppressive material conditions of many of their lives in their respective nations. (As Uma Narayan [2000] and Grewal [1996] point out, the exploitation and abject poverty of working class white women in metropole and colony are often obscured by this move.) The modern liberal subject and imperial/colonial subject collapse into one:
Both share the sovereign subject status of authorship, authority, and legitimacy. Thus, to set up its boundaries as human, civilized, and universal, the Western subject inscribed the history of its others as backward and traditional, and thereby placed cultures of different kinds in a teleological and chronological ordering of history. (Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 95)

Scholars such as Sunera Thobani (2007) note the continuation of this ordering into the present:

Orientalist constructs of racialized gender have for centuries fed the assumption that the lives of non-white women are to be understood in terms starkly different from those that account for the experiences of white women, meant to represent the norm of the modern, forward-looking and flexible female gender identity. (p. 167)

It is worth recalling Stoler’s (1995) depiction of the complex discursive mechanisms at work in colonial/imperial subjectivities, where “a hierarchy of distinctions in perception and practice . . . conflated, substituted, and collapsed the categories of racial, class and sexual Others strategically and at different times” (p. 11). In jostling for universal subject status, Western white (proto-) feminists would have availed themselves of all discursive means at their disposal, including a temporalizing logic whereby the West (by extension, Western women) constructs itself as the universal subject of history, advanced in relation to tradition-bound, stagnant Others (Fabian, 1983). As Yeğenoğlu (1998) writes, “Enlightenment thought has also supplied Western liberal feminism with a whole battery of discursive strategies to know and understand its ethnographic other, and thus to secure the integrity of its own identity vis-à-vis its dark and uncanny double” (p. 97). Because the universalizing gesture becomes available to Western women in the moment of colonial modernity, Yeğenoğlu (1998) and others see Western feminism as colonial at its root.30

Over a decade earlier, Gayatri Spivak (1985) coined the term “worlding” to describe the imperialist machinations of British literary criticism, which promoted “the emergence of the ‘Third World’ as a signifier” with “distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized in English translation” (p. 243). Scholars read her work as describing “how [worlding] occurs through the whole of the colonial apparatus” (Martin, 1986, p. 93). For Grewal (1996), the concept provides a useful way to conceive of the broader discursive operations whereby Western women in particular and Westerners in general are constituted as modern subjects in relation to “Others”: “By this term [Spivak] means the ignored and imperial use of colonized people for the formation of the Western subject” (p. 64).31 Worlding is thus the process of “re-inscribing” the colonial
peripheries in relation to a centre, and necessarily entails “the European subject’s differentiation from colonized subjects” in the Age of Imperialism (Saldaña-Portillo, 2003, p. 64). The concepts of worlding and Othering together provide powerful conceptual tools for understanding colonial designs “to naturalize and legitimate Western dominance” over time (Graves, 2010, para. 1).³²

Maria Saldaña-Portillo (2003) elaborates on how Spivak weds the concept of worlding to the civilizing/missionary impulse of colonial ventures: the “messianic colonizer” is duty-bound to bring colonized Others “into the family of (Christian) humanity” (p. 64). However, once these Others are “placed outside humanity in the realm of ‘nature,’” Saldaña-Portillo (2003) notes, they “‘may be used merely as means’ toward the greater project—toward the end of making (Western) man and his world/empire” (p. 65). This analysis complements the ideas of scholars such as Richard Dyer (1997) (see below) who explore how imperialism is entwined with notions of Christianity, race and capitalism: spiritually-endowed white people were/are seen as uniquely positioned to ensure the proper civilizational development of themselves and Others.

Spivak (1985), however, presents a gender-specific analysis of imperial subjectivity, breaking down the imperative of female subject “interpellation”—that is, the formation of feminists as individuals/individualists via imperialism—into two parts. Given the importance of this theoretical concept to my study, I quote Spivak (1985) at length:

What is at stake, for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and “interpellation” of the subject not only as individual but as “individualist.” This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul-making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as “compassionate love”; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social mission. As the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the “native female” as such (within discourse as a signifier) is excluded from any share of this emerging norm. (pp. 244–245, emphasis in original)³³

Spivak’s “not-quite/not-male” female individualist subject is the doubly positioned white settler/imperialist subject discussed above, a subject who is charged with the reproduction of the race in both literal and figurative terms. The role of civilizing the Other becomes her preserve, as the “native female” is considered devoid of subjectivity/selfhood and agency.³⁴ The latter becomes a vehicle for constituting the imperial/modern subjectivity of English middle- to upper class white women, including and perhaps especially feminists, who are in turn defined largely
in terms of their specifically gendered role as “helpers” of these more oppressed women (Grewal, 1996, p. 73). The Western female/feminist subject, then, is consolidated in large part through the feminized act of civilizing Others.  

What has become of this apparently deeply entrenched dynamic? To what extent do white settler women in the contemporary solidarity encounter engage in helping behaviour? Can we detect links between such behaviour and an even deeper desire to retain the status of modern liberal subject? In other words, (how) are white settler women/feminists in solidarity work engaged in self-serving or self-making pursuits? Before considering the usefulness of Ahmed’s notion of proximity for taking up such questions, I look a bit more closely at the paradoxical positioning of white settler women in Canada.

**Euro-Canadian Settler Women and Canadian Nation Building**

As many scholars have discussed, white settler women in the Canadian context were also simultaneously and paradoxically positioned as both colonizers and colonized (Carter, Erickson, Roome, & Smith, 2005; Erickson, 2005; Pickles & Rutherford, 2005; Roome, 2005). Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherford (2005) invoke Pratt’s “contact zone” (2008) to highlight the complexity of roles and interactions between Indigenous women and white women in this history:

> Women’s raced and classed bodies were a vital “contact zone” in the Canadian colonial past. During colonization, women and bodies mattered and were bound up in creating and perpetuating an often hidden, complex, contradictory, and fraught history. Women occupied the spaces of colonial encounter between Aboriginals and newcomers as both colonizers and colonized, transgressing restrictive boundaries and making history. (p. 1)

Power relations among women in this milieu were complex. For example, take the fact that white Anglican missionary women in British Columbia, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century relied heavily on Indigenous women for survival even as the former sought to impose “civilizing” modes of dress and comportment on the latter (Rutherford, 2005). Additionally, some women came to occupy transgressive positions of “betweenness,” having flouted aspects of the gendered, classed and racialized discourses and attendant subject positions to which they were subjected (Pickles & Rutherford, 2005). Like their counterparts elsewhere, however, middle- to upper class white women played a central role in securing the bourgeois project of empire. Moreover, most of the relatively few studies to date on interactions between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous
women in colonial Canada focus on the west.36 In what follows, I review aspects of the literature most salient to this study.

National castings: white settler women and Indigenous female Others

As elsewhere, white settler women in Canada were to be the “mothers of the race” (Valverde, 1992). Scholars such as Patricia Roome (2005) note an important strategy of British Empire building—the displacement of Aboriginal women “on the Canadian frontier” with white women (p. 49). In her study of mid- to late nineteenth-century colonial British Columbia, Adele Perry (2001) notes an elite turn to “the well-worn imperial panacea of white womanhood” (p. 139) to manage the issue of a “racially diverse resource frontier” (p. 166) where whites were outnumbered:

White women . . . would, colonial discourse promised, encourage white men to conform to normative standards of whiteness and masculinity, meet the needs of the local labour market for servants, and help resolve demographic distortion in Britain, and compel white men to reject mixed-race relationships and in doing so, help save British Columbia from imminent moral peril and imperial disgrace. (p. 165)

As if lifted from the “feminist individualism in the age of imperialism” playbook, white women’s roles were to accord to the dual mandates of childbearing and soul-making (Spivak, 1985). It is no wonder local elites found most of the young, primarily working-class women arriving aboard the “brideships” of 1862–1863 (part of the government-backed “white female assisted immigration project”) wanting in their imperial duties (Perry, 2001).

As several scholars have noted, racial tensions became more marked with the influx of white settler women—and after two major rebellions by Indigenous populations, the 1869–1870 Red River Rebellion and the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. Thobani (2007) sums up what followed increasing white settlement: “The boundaries of the nation became ideologically delineated most strongly in relation to Native women” (p. 84). Anti-Indigenous rhetoric was ratcheted up and most fiercely directed against Indigenous women, who came to be perceived as “dissolute, dangerous and sinister” (Roome, 2005, p. 49).

Captivity narratives emanating from Canada’s Prairies from the mid-1800s to the early 1920s became part of this ideological arsenal. Such narratives circulated throughout the British Empire and varied across time and place, but generally depicted white settlers (particularly white women) as the innocent victims of Indigenous (male) aggression (Carter, 1997; Simpson, 2009).
Whereas white women were cast as the moral and cultural custodians of the new nation who were responsible for reproducing the white race, Indigenous women were deemed the dangerous menaces or immoral agents of destruction who instigated violence in their men. These narratives, replete with stereotypes about Indigenous women in particular, sustained the material conditions of empire. Reflecting British imperial discourses more broadly, they contained distinctive representations of “whiteness” and Indigeneity that served to spatially and socially segregate Indigenous peoples and settlers (Carter, 1997). As Carter insists (1997), despite their often exaggerated or outright false nature, captivity narratives depicting white women’s piety and virtue under siege “became a pretext for suppressing and controlling the Indigenous populations” (p. 15) and for erecting boundaries between peoples in the name of Canada’s nation-building project, particularly after the Métis (and Cree) uprising in 1885. According to Renisa Mawani (2002), narratives of the Indigenous woman as immoral and dangerous prostitute circulated from the mid-nineteenth century onward to consolidate the economic and geographic boundaries of whiteness in British Columbia, providing a pretext for the ramped up social and spatial separation of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations therein: “By defining all Native women as prostitutes, authorities ensured that white men could continue to access the bodies of Indigenous women while ensuring that these women and their children could never make ‘legitimate’ claims to Euro-Canadian property, identity, and privilege” (pp. 63–64). The discourse of Indigenous women as prostitutes led to the insertion of a series of anti-prostitution laws into the Indian Act between 1879 and 1887, after which came the 1886 Supreme Court ruling of Jones v. Fraser that reversed decades of legal precedent whereby the “validity of mixed marriages according to the ‘custom of the country’ had been upheld” (Carter, 1997, p. 191).

At the same time, white settler women also became the targets of surveillance. As Perry (2001) points out in reference to colonial British Columbia, this was not least due to an inevitable “disjuncture between colonial discourse and colonial practice” (p. 167). Colonial social relations and subject categories were much messier and unsavory than allowed for by colonial discourse, which gave rise to the monitoring and regulation of subjects, both settler and Indigenous. Working-class white women in particular were willing to “test the limits of colonial discourse” (Perry, 2001, p. 184), and were thus more often the target of this regulation:

To be sure, white women rarely overtly or systematically challenged the politics of colonialism or racial separation or hierarchy. Yet their individual divergences were
enough of a problem that British Columbia developed a series of institutions designed to manage and regulate white women. Girls’ schools, female charities, campaigns against “immoral” work, and efforts to protect individual white women all suggest the deep ambivalence that lay behind the faith in white women’s colonial prowess. White women were proclaimed a natural imperial force, yet careful regulation and specific intervention were required for them to be so. (Perry, 2001, pp. 184–185)

Perry notes that regulatory efforts to keep white women in their place invoked the narratives of the “dangerous Aboriginal women” as well as the “sexually threatening man of colour.”

These collective works suggest that white settler femininity in Canada as elsewhere was historically constructed in relation to non-white femininity or the supposed lack thereof (Ware, 1992). Even so, representations of women were malleable depending on the needs of those in power. For example, prior to the mid-1880s before elites began to perceive Canada’s newly confederated nation as imperiled by an Indigenous presence, Indigenous women were often portrayed as passive, abused “squaw” drudges, not dangerous menaces. Notably, racial/colonial difference remained a constant in colonial discourse, as Daniel Francis (1992) explains in relation to the shift from Noble to Ignoble Savage by the mid- to late nineteenth century: “the image of the Other, the Indian, was integral to the process of [Canada’s] self-identification. The Other came to stand in for everything the Euro-Canadian was not” (p. 8). As white women “on the Canadian frontier carried the banner of purity and spirituality as civilizers and reproducers of the [white] race” (Roome, 2005, p. 49), Indigenous women were the Ignoble female Savages responsible for the uncivilized state of their nations. Always in contrast to white women, they were depicted in any number of negative ways, including as “lewd and licentious,” as “squalid and immoral squaws” who spread disease, as “idle and gossipy,” as negligent/indifferent mothers, or as subordinated victims of pagan societies (see Carter, 1997, pp. 160–162).

These negative images of Indigenous women “became deeply embedded in the society of the most powerful socioeconomic groups on the [Canadian] prairies and have proved stubborn to revision” (Carter, 1997, p. 160). Dawn Martin-Hill (2003) concurs that such images have had lasting power up to and including the present. She argues that the colonially-derived Noble/Ignoble binary has taken the form of a She No Speaks/Villainous Woman binary at times wielded by Indigenous peoples. Both are stereotypes “born from the tapestry of our colonial landscape” (p. 108). 39 Janice Acoose (1995) also explores the lasting negative impact of stereotypes such as “Indian princess” and “easy squaw,” not least of which is the rationalization of violence against Indigenous women. As anti-violence activists insist, to position these women
as dangerous to white eurocanadian-christian-patriarchy/matriarchy is to justify the extreme acts and degrees of violence they still endure under settler colonialism.

Of relevance to this study, Acoose points to the implicatedness of white settler women in this dynamic: “Stereotypic images also function as sentinels that guard and protect the white eurocanadian-christian-patriarchy (and now to a limited extent the same kind of matriarchy) against any threatening disturbances that might upset the status quo” (p. 55). The construction of Indigenous women as threatening to the status quo relies on and upholds its antithesis—the construction of white women as pure, innocent and virtuous victims. In effect, the violence directed against Indigenous women is partially sustained by the idea that white women are innocent, virtuous and in need of protection, a discourse that immensely complicates relations between women. This study considers the implications of these constructions for the contemporary solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women, asking, for example, how do white women retain a sense of ourselves as virtuous and innocent subjects?

Towards “self-consciously oppositional” white settler feminism

The Canadian colonial project was part of a broader global imperial project. Remarking on that project and its impact on Canadian colonial “Indian” policy, Mary-Ellen Kelm (1998) notes,

Canadian government officials, medical practitioners, and elements of settler society never forgot their part in expanding the frontiers of Anglo-European ascendancy. They were imbued with the collective experiences of empire-building and looked for models in Oceania, Asia, and Africa when dealing with their own so-called subject races. Canadian Indian policy did not develop in a vacuum, and the intellectual air of Canadian colonization was infused with the fragrance (or stench) of imperial relations around the world. (p. xix)

In this light, Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome and Char Smith (2005) describe white women in Canada’s west after Confederation (1867) as “diverse, yet unexceptional in a global, comparative perspective” (p. 8). As Valverde (1992) suggests, European and Euro-Canadian women involved in (proto-) feminist movement at the time would have influenced one another. She locates Canadian feminism within what was, from its inception, an international women’s movement, and claims that “the vast majority of English-speaking first-wave feminists were not only ethnocentric but often racist” in a way that was “integral to the movement as a whole” (p. 3). They too would have advanced the prevailing racially-tinged discourses of
hegemonic “imperial feminism . . . so characteristic of the later nineteenth century” (Midgley, 2007, p. 6).

Therefore, Canadian “first-wave” (maternal) feminists were likely among those who saw themselves as “expanding the frontiers of Anglo-European ascendancy” (Kelm, 1998, p. xix). They would have both endorsed the idea of an imperilled white “race” and also their ameliorative role in stemming the so-called “degeneration” process as discussed above (Valverde, 1992, p. 8). In short, as Pickles and Rutherford (2005) suggest, over time most Canadian settler feminists (and missionaries) took up, albeit in variably complex ways, the subject positions of “mother of the race” and/or Christian evangelizer; they attribute this to the consolidation of the project of white settler colonialism, or “the way in which spaces for negotiating sexuality, race, gender, and class were gradually circumscribed by an increasingly harsh and pervasive white, elite colonial system” (p. 11). Likewise, in studying Canadian nation building, Thobani (2007) asserts that Canadian women’s groups, including those of the “first wave” feminists, “largely shared the goal of Canadian men to ‘Keep Canada White’” (p. 84). For Henderson (2003), as touched upon above, settler feminism in Canada was ultimately about the incorporation of white women into the broadly liberalist (and racist) terms of empire.

The gendered and racialized interventions of middle-class white women into Canadian nation building is evident in the numerous religious, reform and/or feminist organizations they founded such as the National Council of Women (NCW), the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Young Women’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Girls Friendly Society, the Dominion Order of King’s Daughters and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) (Thobani, 2007, p. 307 note 40; see also Pickles, 2002; and Woollacott, 2006). Citing Veronica Strong-Boag (1977), Thobani (2007) identifies a self-conscious embrace by Euro-Canadian maternal feminists in the late nineteenth century of their duty to protect family and nation:

That maternal feminists valorized women’s role as mothers is well recognized in the historical record, as is the recognition that they did this in an overtly racialized manner. Most of them participated in the colonial and anti-immigration campaigns of the day. . . . The growth of organizations such as the National Council of Women [of Canada] demonstrated the “growing national self-confidence” of the women who participated in its activities, and the association of “homes and nations,” of “family and state,” was the “leitmotif” of these “feminist-nationalists.” (pp. 306–307, note 40)

If the life of Henrietta Muir Edwards, one of the “Famous 5,” is any indication—Edwards was in the WCTU and the Ottawa YWCA, and a co-founder of the NCW in 1893 (Heritage
Community Foundation, 2004)—“feminist nationalists” were involved in any number of overlapping causes and organizations. Thobani (2007) cites the NCW and the WCTU as specific examples of women’s groups that employed discourses of racial supremacy to further their own agendas.

There were arguably also “self-consciously oppositional” (Lewis, 1996, p. 3) settler women in Canada, among them Amelia McLean Paget (1867-1922), the daughter of an elite Hudson’s Bay Company fur-trader in Fort Simpson (present-day North West Territories). While Paget “defied and complicated [Canadian] colonial categories and divides” in part because of her distant Aboriginal ancestry, Sarah Carter (2006) ascribes to Paget a racial thinking of sorts, exemplified not least by an unwillingness or inability to take a direct stand against colonial designs (p. 199). To her credit, Paget challenged many of the derogatory stereotypes about Indigenous peoples in mid- to late nineteenth-century Canada. In particular, she decried many misperceptions about Indigenous women, describing them as gifted healers, industrious workers and attentive mothers rather than as oppressed drudges—and never used the term “squaw” (Carter, 2006, pp. 216–217). Nonetheless, as Carter (2006) notes, “Paget’s understanding of Plains people was filtered through prevailing ideas about the ‘vanishing race’” (p. 218). Paget also employed the rhetoric of tolerance in her opaque “critique of government policy and parsimony” vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples (p. 219).

The members of the Famous 5, whose activism resulted in the 1929 British Privy Council decision to declare women persons before the law, were among the most well-known self-consciously oppositional “feminist-nationalists” in Canada. Based on an assessment of “first-wave” Euro-Canadian feminism protagonists such as Emily Murphy, Thobani (2007) concludes:

> These women’s concerns about the quality of the race and the nation shaped their advocacy for the extension of citizenship rights to white women, such that even as they confronted their gendered inequalities, most did so in the name of furthering the national interest by stressing the importance of [white] women to family and nation. (p. 85; see p. 289 n51)

Likewise, Henderson (2003) explores Emily Murphy’s (1868–1933) racist ideology and role in the Canadian race-making project, while noting “the paradoxical combination of the settler woman’s functions as an emblem of sexual vulnerability and an agent of the government” (p. 6). Roome (2005), however, critiques Henderson for “extend[ing] these assumptions to other first-wave feminists” (p. 49). Drawing on Janice Fiamengo (2002), she warns against a simplistic
reading of a “monolithic racism” on the part of Euro-Canadian settler feminists. Her own research attempts to show how another of the Famous 5, Henrietta Muir Edwards (1849–1931), “occupied an ambiguous position between colonized and colonizer, one riddled with contradictions” (p. 51). Roome (2005) distinguishes Edwards from other settler feminists because of Edwards’s “tolerant and benevolent” (p. 63), if condescending, attitude towards Indigenous women. Nonetheless, Edwards embraced “motherhood and religion, the two pillars of Christian feminism” (p. 68) and tried to instill these beliefs in Indigenous women within her sphere of influence. Edwards retained a (liberal) faith in the Canadian nation-state building project and embodied a constrained feminism that did not fundamentally challenge the status quo: “She never attacked Christianity or blamed the colonial process: she was optimistic that her ‘reformed’ Canada could provide a welcoming home for everyone, regardless of race or gender” (Roome, 2005, p. 70).

Roome (2005) notes an unresolved “paradox of equal but different” in Edwards’s logic around gaining legislative equality for Indigenous women as part of a “reformed” Canada: “[Her] concept of equality in its assumption of universality never addressed White privilege adequately” (pp. 71–72). I would argue that this paradox brings us full circle to the broader colonial/imperial discourses in circulation at the time, and exemplifies Yeğenoğlu’s (1998) theory of Western feminist subjectivity—that its roots are steeped in hierarchical notions of gendered and racialized difference. A similarly revealing contradiction regarding white privilege is found in the reformist tendencies of the WCTU, who on the one hand pronounced that “despite Canada’s mixed genetic inheritance, a pure and Christian nation could be produced through hard work” and “all people, whatever their race, potentially [made] useful members of society—as long as they followed Christian morality” (Valverde, 1992, p. 18). On the other hand, the paradox is sustained in that the WCTU’s rhetoric and practice ultimately hinges on white “purity”:

Although an evangelical perspective differs from a genetic-deterministic one in not automatically precluding black women or children from being “pure,” the fact that purity was equated with whiteness, and hence indirectly with European culture, made it difficult if not impossible for Canada’s women of colour to identify with the brand of feminism elaborated by the WCTU, and in general by the overwhelmingly Protestant women of first-wave Canadian feminism. (Valverde, 1992, p. 20)

These examples lend credence to Uma Narayan’s (2000) contention that the discursive (and hence intersubjective) workings of colonial expansion have been marked by a continual tension
between an “insistence on Sameness” and an “insistence on Difference.” I now turn to Sara Ahmed’s (2000) work on stranger fetishism and proximity for insights into how to theorize the actual unfolding of these workings in the solidarity encounter.

**Pursuing Liberal/Colonial Subjectivity: Desires for Proximity and Transcendence**

As discussed, feminist scholars such as Yeğenoğlu (1998) and Smith (2013a) provide rich explanations of the universalising gesture that constitutes post-Enlightenment Western liberal subjectivity. And, of particular note for this study, Yeğenoğlu (1998) discusses the ways in which this gesture is performed by Western women/feminists and the “crucial implications for the subject status these women occupy” (p. 102), namely as ostensibly emancipated (white) women tasked with ushering Other women into (colonial) modernity. As Yeğenoğlu (1998) points out, the power of this discursive or ideological mechanism lies precisely in its hiddenness: “The effacement/erasure of the particularity of Western women in the name of universality has the effect of legitimizing the colonial feminist discourse as an act of generosity and as an act of conferring upon Middle East women the privilege of participating in Western women’s universalism rather than a denial and negation of difference” (p. 102). In my analysis, I assert that a similar discursive mechanism is operating in (white) settler subjectivity.

As a particular expression of Western liberal subjectivity, (white) settler subjectivity is characterized by a desire for legitimacy fulfilled through the simultaneous establishment and occlusion of hierarchal power relations between Indigenous and settler subjects. In Chapter 5, in fact, I elaborate on the specificities of subject production in settler colonial contexts, arguing that they present distinct socio-political and historical contexts “characterised by a persistent drive to ultimately supersede the conditions of [their] operation” (Veracini, 2011, p. 3). In sum, I argue that the materiality of permanent settlement requires settlers to “naturalize their presence on Native land as rightful, final occupants so that the question of conquest can appear to be ‘settled’” (Morgensen, 2011, p. 16). To set the stage for this and other discussions, I turn to the work of Ahmed (2000); her interrelated concepts of stranger fetishism and proximity contribute to our capacity to think about the solidarity encounter as a spatialized encounter of embodied, desiring subjects of the sort described by Yeğenoğlu (1998). In other words, her work helps us to more fully explore how the universalizing gesture of the white settler woman subject operates at the micro level of colonial encounters—in my study, the solidarity encounter.
**Stranger fetishism**

For Ahmed (2000), colonial encounters are strange encounters that “involve, at one and the same time, social and spatial relations of distance and proximity” (p. 12). The (typically racialized) “strangers” of strange encounters become so only when coming “too close to home, that is, through the proximity of the encounter” (p. 12). Stranger fetishism is both a process and an effect of strange encounters; racialized, classed and gendered power differences between subjects are at once recreated and concealed, and colonial spatialities reaffirmed, when dominant subjects fail “to consider how the stranger is the effect of [historical] processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 6). Ahmed (2000) adapts Marx’s conception of commodity fetishism to explain this: “strangers” (Others) are produced as “figures” with bodily integrity and a “life of their own,” and thus become cut off “from the social and material relations which overdetermine their existence” (p. 5).

Reminiscent of Yeğenoğlu’s (1998) Western female subject, those (who become) positioned as dominant learn to know themselves only by deeming Others as (inferior) strange/strangers. The normative “we” of a community is constituted through coming to “know” Others as strangers: “knowledge is bound up with the formation of a community, that is, with the formation of a ‘we’ that knows through (rather than against) ‘the stranger’” (p. 55). But, these historical and context-specific “processes of social differentiation” or “relations of social and political antagonism” remain opaque, and the dominant subject retains a sense of always already “knowing” Others as strangers. As in the above-imagined scenario, the dominant (white settler) subject is afforded a sense of innocence (and reaffirmed dominance) in relation to her role in (colonial) power relations when Others are fetishized and hierarchical relations thus obscured. And, as I discuss in relation to the data, in the case of white settler colonialism, it is not only the colonial relation that is rendered invisible, but so too the subject’s status as a member of the settler collectivity: only an autonomous, individual subject remains in view.

Ahmed’s (2000) goal is to provide an epistemology-*qua*-methodology for revealing the power-laden social relationships that “constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities, including communities of living (dwelling and travel), as well as epistemic communities” (p. 6). Her concern with boundaries, and specifically with linking boundaries of body, community and nation, is shared by Mishuana Goeman (2003, 2013). Goeman (2013), in fact, theorizes Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in terms of how inequality among subjects is produced.
through relations of proximity and distance. She “question[s] the very acceptance of colonial
spatialities that . . . look at distance and closeness in terms of dichotomous differences” (p. 7),
thus alluding to the hierarchical production of subjects in colonial modernity discussed above.
The relevance of Ahmed’s theory of stranger fetishism (2000) to Indigenous/non-Indigenous
relations becomes clear when Goeman (2013), who is Seneca, describes a “spatial schema” from
her childhood: “At play here was more than the material location or even more than the present
material social relations; instead evident here was the idea of Indians as criminals already, in a
long history of colonial/Native relationships” (p. 9). Goeman (2013) also aspires to revealing
that which has been concealed by colonial encounters: she uses Native women’s concepts of
space to “unsettle settler space,” that is, to expose the “violent history of erasure” (p. 2) effected
by a colonial mapping of North America, and to engage in a (re)mapping of that terrain.

In short, strange encounters are deceptive in that they allow dominant subjects in particular to
remain oblivious as to how power relations in the present are produced out of the past.45

It is our task to think through the different modes of proximity we may have to strangers
in contemporary contexts without assuming that the stranger was distant in the past. We
need to ask how contemporary modes of proximity reopen prior histories of encounter.
In Strange Encounters, I analyse globalization, migration and multiculturalism as
particular modes of proximity, which produce the figure of “the stranger” in different
ways and which, in doing so, reopen such prior histories of encounter as the historical
(that is, partial) determination of difference. (Ahmed, 2000, p. 13, emphasis in original)

Drawing on Ahmed, I define the solidarity encounter as another mode of proximity (and
distance) wherein the “prior histories of encounter” that produce differences (inequalities) are
concealed through the techniques of stranger fetishism.

**Operationalizing the desire for proximity**

To reiterate, Ahmed (2000) defines colonial encounters in terms of the material and discursive
effects of proximity and distance between subjects. Morgensen (2011) corroborates this thinking
when he writes about a desire for intimacy as inherent to the settler colonial project:

In a settler society, then, the very demand upon settlers to replace Natives
simultaneously incites white settler desires to be intimate with the Native authenticity
that their modernity presumably replaces. Indigeneity’s civilizational replacement thus is
complementary to the settler pursuit of primitivism. Impersonating indigeneity and
believing in colonial modernity are noncontradictory acts, given that settlers preserve
Native authenticity as a history they must possess in order to transcend. (p. 17)
Put another way, the settler’s quest for legitimacy as a modern (i.e., self-determining, universal) subject requires a certain intimacy with/proximity to Native Others and the transcendence of its relation to those Others. Paradoxically, the settler/universal subject must (attempt to) forget the conditions of its own production. Ahmed (2000) greatly enriches this discussion by explaining just exactly how proximity is mobilized in the production of the white settler/liberal subject.

In line with Yeğenoğlu (1998), Ahmed (2000) observes that “contemporary Western culture is imbued with “fantasies” or “narratives of becoming” (p. 119)—numerous iterations of the quest to attain (and retain) the status of universal, self-determining subject. For Ahmed (2000), central to these fantasies or narratives is the fantasy of transcendence. It is this fantastical element of stranger fetishism—the desire and belief of dominant subjects that power relations can be overcome or equalized, and thereby autonomy and innocence attained/retained—that I find potentially revelatory for understanding intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter. Dominant subjects employ a number of “techniques” to sustain the fantasy of transcendence and their reinstallation as (all)-knowing subjects. These techniques, as reflective of the desire for transcendence, often present in combination and involve formulations of proximity or closeness: calls for friendship or collaboration; the acquisition of knowledge of “strangers” or “strange” communities; and the promise of self-discovery or transformation wherein “the ‘stranger’ is the object of desire” (p. 115). The last category, self-discovery and transformation, involves consuming, becoming and passing, the “three key modalities of going strange, going native” (p. 115) through which the Western subject is constituted as having the “agency to become different, rather than simply be different (the authentic stranger, or the authentic spice)” (p. 118). In this way, Ahmed (2000) draws on a wealth of literature by feminist, postcolonial and Indigenous scholars such as Anderson (2000), Renée Bergland (2000), hooks (1992) and Yeğenoğlu (1998), who have theorized the desire to consume/become the Other as a classic colonizing move.

It is important to note that in her work, Ahmed (2000) assumes (and critiques) the operative hegemony of a liberal model of subjectivity, whose quintessential form is the (propertied) white male individualistic subject endowed with reason, the capacity to know the (inferior) Other and unrestricted movement through social and geographical spaces—in short, the self-determining, authorial “I.” Likewise, and as I discuss in Chapter 2, Boyd (2004) distills liberal subjectivity into four characteristics: ontological uniqueness; symmetrical positioning; intentional rational
agency; and capacity for transcendence (pp. 9ff). In the paradigmatically liberal approach to subjectivity, an individual’s ontological uniqueness—or discreteness—assumes the ability of that individual to transcend social relations, importantly, through exercising the “muscles of rational choice and intentionality” (p. 10). It is worth reviewing Boyd’s (2004) efforts to derail the plausibility of a purely atomistic liberal individual:

Within liberalism, for all kinds of recognizable groups, the individual is ontologically prior to the collectivity. . . . However, in the case of social group membership the group is ontologically prior to the individual: it “constitutes” individuals *qua* members of the groups. From the perspective of social groups, embodied persons are ontologically embedded in pre-existing relationships (and always in several at the same time), and thus need to be understood as having a kind of subjectivity quite different from the idea of the “liberal individual.” (p. 14)

It is precisely this liberal individual who is implicated in Ahmed’s (2000) theory of stranger fetishism.

Given Ahmed’s (2000) concern with the material and discursive effects of proximity (and distance) between subjects, I want to hone in on the aforementioned sense of entitlement that typifies the liberal subject. Critical whiteness scholars such as Shannon Sullivan (2006) theorize this sense of entitlement (to move freely) as constitutive of *white* subjectivity per se. With an implicit nod to the racial underpinnings of colonial subjectivity, she writes,

> One of the predominant unconscious habits of white privilege is white ontological expansiveness. As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish. Ontological expansiveness is a particular co-constitutive relationship between self and environment in which the self assumes that it can and should have totally mastery over its environment. (Sullivan, 2006, p. 16)

The *white* liberal subject’s desire for proximity, then, is quickly followed by the desire for mastery or dominance. In his work on representations of whiteness, Richard Dyer (1997) ties this desire (and presumed capacity) for mastery directly to imperialism. He explains that white embodiment has come to be understood as “involving something that is in but not of the body” (p.14). Therefore, being endowed with “whiteness” enables the white subject to transcend her/his body (and by extension, social relations). In this sense, Dyer (1997) explains, white embodiment merges notions of race and Christianity with imperial expansion: white people are endowed with an enterprising spirit or dynamism lacking in Others, rendering the former capable of ensuring the proper civilizational development of themselves and Others. Dyer
(1997) argues that so far “the most important vehicle for the exercise and thus the display of this dynamism, this enterprise, is imperialism . . . This gave to enterprise an unprecedented horizon of expansion, of dangers, to face, of material—goods, terrain, people—to organise” (p. 31).

As discussed, Ahmed (2000) sheds light on how dominant liberal subjects perform their desire for mastery and dominance, performances that are otherwise at risk of remaining hidden from scrutiny. She explores the complex workings of stranger fetishism and the production of subjects therein through different techniques, formulations or “modes of proximity.” Threaded throughout is the desire (and belief in one’s capacity) to “know” Others. In the same way that settler subjectivity relies on, but is forever called into question by the presence of the Native Other (see Chapter 5), Ahmed (2000) claims that “it is by ‘knowing strangers’ that the ‘we’ of the epistemic community is established, even though that ‘we’ is called into question by the very proximity of ‘the strangers’ through which it comes to know [itself]” (p. 16). As discussed, the very histories of determination that have created contexts where some people are authorized to know (and speak for) Others (and where those Other are not so authorized), remain concealed.46 That is, the relations of social and political antagonism that have conferred authority on some (for example, the white researcher), while fixing others (for example, Native informants) firmly in place as objects (to be known), are at once concealed and reproduced by stranger fetishism.

A related discursive technique used by dominant subjects to negotiate their privileged subject position involves what I will call the logic of equalization. Ahmed (2000) cites an example of this, the “democratization of ethnography” (supposedly achieved through the self-reflexive turn in anthropology): “To argue that there has been such a shift [wherein ethnographer and informant are co-authors of knowledge] in the relation between ethnography and authority is to presuppose the possibility of overcoming the relations of force and authorisation that are already implicated in the ethnographic desire to document the lives of strangers” (p. 63, emphasis in original). In other words, the desire to know the Other is already a consequence of historical “relations of force and authorisation.” Ahmed (2000) argues not only that power relations cannot be overcome through such a gesture, but also that “the narrative of overcoming the relations of authorisation in traditional ethnography constitutes another form of authorisation” (p. 64). In other words, the epistemic authority of the dominant subject is reaffirmed while power relations are concealed.
Ahmed details “the Bell controversy”—a salient case for this study given that it involves a white ethnographer and Indigenous woman, but in the Australian context—to further make her point:

Bell [the white ethnographer] is implicated in the postmodern fantasy that it is the “I” of the ethnographer who can undo the power relations that allowed the “I” [the authorial subject] to appear. Such a fantasy allows the ethnographer to be praised for her or his ability to listen well. So it remains the ethnographer who is praised: praised for the giving up of her or his authority. (p. 64)

Ahmed (2000) notes a similar fantasy of overcoming structurally inequitable power relations, but in a very different scenario and through an analysis of a film, Dancing with Wolves. The fantasy is apparent in the actions of the main protagonist Dunbar, who exudes an explicit and quite literal desire for proximity in a “narrative of becoming.” Ahmed (2000) describes various techniques of stranger fetishism working in tandem in this passage, in effect summarising her entire theory:

The narrative of becoming allows the agency of the white masculine subject to be re-established through the proximity of the bodies of some strangers. Through becoming (like) them, he is able to undo the history of violence which fixes the Indians into the bodily life of strangerhood. Such a narrative of becoming the stranger or “going native” offers itself as a rewriting of a history: it deals with the shame of the colonial past by the very fantasy that getting closer to strangers can allow the “white man” to live for and as the native. Just as the multicultural narrative of the past reimagines violence as cooperation and the mutuality of difference . . . so too the narrative of becoming reimagines violence as the opening out of the possibility of friendship and love. The possibility of love is tied to a liberal vision of the white self as always open to others (“if only we’d get closer, there would have been love, we would have lived as one”). Not only do such multicultural fantasies of becoming involve releasing the Western subject from responsibility for the past, but they also confirm his agency, his ability to be transformed by the proximity of strangers, and to render his transformation a gift to those strangers through which he alone can become. (pp. 124–125, emphasis in original)

In this deconstruction of Dancing with Wolves, Ahmed’s (2000) analysis of white settler subjectivity renders transparent the role of the desire for proximity in the colonial relation—a desire, it turns out, that is inextricably embodied and discursive. Confronted by his illegitimate subject status as a member of the white settler collective, Dunbar’s fantastical desire is to be exonerated for any wrongdoings vis-à-vis Indigenous Others, which remains impossible while he remains a settler. The (equally fantastical) solution rests on his ability to transform himself by displacing the Indigenous Other, a move that only confirms his (superior) status as agentic Western liberal subject. In sum, proximity as a mode of colonial encounter (Ahmed, 2000) is a
useful way to think about how the colonial subject’s desire for confirmation of its autonomous and self-determining status is operationalized, that is, how colonial desire is actualized.

I take up the applicability of Ahmed’s (2000) ideas, including her account of Dunbar’s “narrative of becoming,” in Chapters 4 and 5 in particular. For example, I ask, what about gender? To what extent is the analysis of Dunbar’s subjectivity as a white settler man transferable to that of a white settler woman? What would an explicitly gendered account of the desire for transcendence indicate about the latter? In my considerations, I also draw on scholars such as Bergland (2000) and Morgensen (2011) who theorize the specifics of settler colonial subjectivity.

**White Settler Women in the “Colonial Present”**

In the introductory chapter, I discuss Indigenous women’s critical assessments of their encounters with mainstream feminism and white women/feminists, assessments which, when taken together, signal the importance of considering what has become of the colonial roots of Western feminism. In the ensuing chapters, my overarching goal is to do just that. Locating my analysis of the solidarity encounter within the theoretical contours described above, I ask questions about the contemporary workings of gendered colonial/liberal subjectivity in modernity and its foundational desire for transcendence and/through proximity.

Based on this theoretical framework, I argue that Indigenous women and white women enter and engage in the solidarity encounter as differently positioned subjects in historically determined, hierarchical power relations. I then attempt to illustrate how “the structural relationship between white society and Indigenous society” (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. xxv) is detectable and potentially reproduced through intersubjective relations in a particular site of colonial encounter. Presuming that settler colonialism overdetermines the contours of the solidarity encounter, I ask to what extent intersubjective dynamics in that encounter enable the reproduction of the Western liberal subject as autonomous/self-determining.

The theoretical framework I propose renders legible the central concerns of this study, providing avenues for a more substantive inquiry into the legacies of the colonial impulse: Does the colonially-derived impulse to “help” the colonized female Other persist in solidarity work between Indigenous women and white women despite any professed desires to mitigate this impulse on the part of the latter? What about the historical double positioning of the white
settler/imperialist woman? Do we still position ourselves (or, are we still positioned as) both dominant in relation to Indigenous women (and men) and marginalized in relation to heteronormative patriarchy? If so, what are the repercussions for solidarity work? There are several possible, and not mutually exclusive, scenarios. On the one hand, this double positioning could impede attempts at solidarity with Indigenous women by facilitating a seamless slippage into over-identification with the oppressed/colonized, thereby obscuring/negating the power derived from being a white woman in the contemporary colonial encounter. Such slippage could well constitute a colonial manifestation of the “race to innocence” (Fellows & Razack, 1998), a strategy for maintaining white settler privilege. On the other hand, might some white settler women who are engaged in solidarity work, particularly to redress violence against Indigenous women, be ready to reckon with our assumptions of superiority and paradoxical (self-) positioning as innocent, virtuous settlers? Or, does being doubly positioned set off our latent colonial desire/need to reestablish ourselves as superior to, less oppressed than and the benevolent “helpers” of purportedly more oppressed Indigenous women? What is at stake? Is it (still) the revalidation of the white Western feminist subject qua modern liberal subject?

I seek to better describe the workings of intersubjective dynamics in the solidarity encounter between differently positioned women. Turning to Ahmed (2000) for assistance, I ask what discursive means white settler women may employ to reposition ourselves as “all-knowing subjects.” To what extent do assumptions about the right of access to Native communities figure into white settler women’s solidarity work? Does the idea of “white ontological expansiveness” help to make sense of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter? Is there a white settler desire for proximity operative therein?

To summarize, I draw on postcolonial feminist scholars such as Yeğenoğlu (1998) to situate my analysis of the solidarity encounter in relation to the historical production of the white settler woman/feminist subject as the superior helper of the inferior/colonized Other woman. I then apply Ahmed’s (2000) notions of stranger fetishism and proximity to evaluate more precisely how gendered colonial subjectivity operates in the solidarity encounter. I consider if and how the desire for proximity may be operating in/as the solidarity encounter. In effect, I use Ahmed’s (2000) theory about the techniques of proximity—e.g., calls for friendship; the acquisition of knowledge of the Other; and the promise of self-discovery or transformation—as a methodology for revealing more precisely how the desire for proximity as a set of discursive techniques works
in settler colonial encounters to reproduce the gendered settler colonial subject. In sum, I combine the insights of Indigenous/feminist scholars such as Moreton-Robinson (2000) with those of Ahmed (2000) to consider the extent to which white women in the solidarity encounter exhibit and struggle with the impulse to reinitialize ourselves as modern liberal subjects.

In the next several chapters, I hope to convey the “messiness” of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in a Canadian context. Even as I identify some prevailing tensions in that encounter, I recognize these intersubjective relations to be layered, ever-changing and ultimately defiant of neat theoretical description.

1 I do not dedicate discreet sections per se to these literatures, but rather structure the chapter according to topics of inquiry. I do not draw heavily on critical whiteness studies in this theoretical framework, primarily because much of this literature does not explicitly take up colonialism as a central category of analysis. However, in my analysis (Chapter 6 in particular), I refer to the ideas of select critical whiteness theorists that are relevant to my work.
2 Following Thobani (2007), I use the term “Euro-Canadian” to include all white women living in (what would become) Canada who originally hailed from a European country, often Great Britain in the case of Canada.
3 Following Clare Midgley (2007), I am mindful of using an anachronism when labeling anyone a feminist prior to the late nineteenth century. For her part, Midgley (2007) carefully considers the difficulty of “coming up with a definition of feminism that does justice to its diversity across time, across cultures and even at a particular time and in a particular place” (p. 7). Following Midgley, I use the term feminist rather broadly to refer to women activists who “held a range of positions on the ‘woman question’” and undertook a “variety of forms of activism through which women collectively asserted their agency and power” (p. 8) throughout the extended colonial period.
4 See Nancy Cott (1987) and Karen Offen (2000) for more about the term proto-feminist.
5 Yeğenoğlu (1998) builds on the “many studies” that have revealed “the interlocking relation between the political rationality of colonial power and modernity. . . . As Sartre notes, this relationship was more than a mere historical or conjectural coincidence: the formation of universal humanism’s ideal is predicated upon a racist gesture, for, in order to be able to proclaim its humanity, the West needed to create its others as slaves and monsters” (p. 95).
6 Colonial modernity has acquired wide usage across disciplines, though I cannot provide an exhaustive account of the term here. In discussing Chinese feminism, Tani Barlow (2004) uses it to highlight that “by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most of the vast plane of the earth’s surface had been colonized or partly colonized, and because of this spatial extension of the colonial project, colonial knowledge circulated through the colonial capitals” (p. 88).
7 While Gregory’s (2004) work focuses on the colonial realities of Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, he situates these realities within broader global power relations.
8 For Sangeeta Ray (2009), this critique is still valid: “Feminist postcolonial practice was and is a subdivision of postcolonial studies in general . . . The idea that gender should undergird all of one’s critical assumptions was assumed [at a recent Modern Languages Association session] to be passé, even retrograde” (p. 11).
9 A contribution of postcolonial, post-structuralist and feminist theories has been to reveal the “binary logic of imperialism [as] a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary opposites. A simple distinction between centre-margin; colonizer-colonized; metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000, p. 24).
10 Referencing the need to moderate the overuse of binary oppositions to avoid their reification (and concomitant relations of domination) as well as to reveal power differentials amongst colonizers, L. T. Smith (1999) writes: “These two categories are not just a simple opposition but consist of several relations, some more clearly oppositional than others. . . . The binary of colonizer/colonized does not take into account, for example, the development of different layerings which have occurred within each group and across the two groups” (p. 27).
11 Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) explores the importance and relative power of Aboriginal women in the Canadian fur-trade. Building on that, Rutherford and Pickle’s (2005) edited collection shows “that, far from being invisible, without agency or voice, Aboriginal women in Canada expressed their responses to colonization in ways that centred on the body, from dress to performativity” (p. 5). See also Carter, Erickson, Roome and Smith (2005).
of a racial hierarchy” (p. 144).

abolition of slavery and in initiating colonial reform, even these progressive roles were often premised on the idea of a racial hierarchy” (p. 144).

See Johnston and Lawson (2000) for a concise discussion of settler colonialism, the settler subject and the uses to which settler postcolonial theory has been put.

See Colin G. Calloway (2008) for a discussion of the ways in which many formerly disenfranchised Scottish Highlanders came to enjoy white privilege and its material benefits after, in some cases, having been forcibly relocated to North America during Britain’s colonial expansion. See also Thobani (2007) on the “exaltation as preferred races” (p. 83, emphasis in the original) of otherwise non-desirable settlers, i.e., the integration of white women and the working classes into the Canadian nation on the basis of race.

Affirming just this point, Stoler (1995) brings up Foucault’s four “bourgeois objects of knowledge” (the masturbating child, hysterical woman, Malthusian couple and perverse adult) to ask: “Did any of these [European] figures exist as objects of knowledge and discourse in the nineteenth century without a racially erotic counterpoint, without reference to the libidinal energies of the savage, the primitive, the colonized—reference points of difference, critique, and desire?” (pp. 6–7).

On this same note, Loomba (2005) points to McClintock’s notion of the “porno-tropics,” which refers to the connection between the construction of non-Europeans, particularly women, as sexually deviant or “libidinally excessive and sexually uncontrolled” (p. 131) and European imperialist desire in its multiple dimensions.

See Carter, Erickson, Roome and Smith (2005); Erickson (2005); Pickles and Rutherford (2005); and Roome (2005) for detailed historical analyses of the ways in which white women were simultaneously constituted as both colonizer and colonized in Canadian colonial processes.

Loomba (2005) points to the staying power of this fear: “The spectre of miscegenation most graphically brings together anxieties about female sexuality and racial purity, and, as colonial contacts widen and deepen, it increasingly haunts European and Euro-American culture” (p. 134).

McClintock (1995) defines the cult of domesticity as an ideological tool for the consolidation of the middle class and separation of private and public spheres in eighteenth century Britain and its colonies: “The cult of domesticity was crucial in helping to fashion the identity of a large class of people (hitherto disunited) with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values—organized around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation, classification, quantification and regulation—the values of liberal rationality through which the disunited middling classes fashioned the appearance of a unified class identity” (pp. 167–168).

As domesticating agents in need of domestication, white women were an “important colonial index” (Perry, 2001, p. 188) of success; as such, they, particularly single, working-class white women, were the objects of significant surveillance in the colonies. And, as Ware (1992) notes in her study of the historical construction of Western white femininity, “in any colony, the degree to which white women were protected [read regulated] from the fear of sexual assault was a good indication of the level of security [or lack thereof] felt by colonial authorities” (p. 38). She cites two “major rebellions”—one in India (1857) and the other in Jamaica (1865)—by colonized populations, which would have set off a wave of panic “reverberating across the colonies” (pp. 38–39), including Canada. In Gender and Empire, Angela Woollocott (2006) writes, “Taken together, the narratives of interracial sexual assault that characterized these crises reveal a remarkable shift in imperial gender ideologies towards racialized notions of white feminine virtue and colonized men’s barbarity. They show how racialized narratives of sex and gender lay at the core of imperial politics, and how they were invoked to explain the appropriation of land from indigenous peoples in white-settler colonies as well as extreme measures of reprisal in colonies of rule” (p. 8). Woollocott (2006) reminds us of the materiality of the circulation of these gendered and racialized narratives throughout the British Empire.

See Loomba (2005) for an overview of the ways in which colonial discourse advanced “equivalencies . . . between women, blacks, the lower classes, animals, madness and homosexuality” (p. 135).


I do not mean to imply that only white women were involved in feminist movement (leaving aside questions of self-identification and term usage). Rather, my focus is on a particular group of women—white women—who became self-consciously involved in women’s struggles.

In examining the role of white European women as cultural agents in nineteenth century Britain, Lewis (1996) concludes, “As I had feared, the dynamics of imperial discourse could not but enter and structure their work—even if their relationship to some racialized ideologies was self-consciously oppositional” (p. 3). She concludes, imperial ideologies had “pervasive effects . . . on female subjects and their particular, gendered, interpellation into imperial discourse” (Lewis, 1996, p. 14). Loomba (2005) similarly notes: “While white women played important roles in the abolition of slavery and in initiating colonial reform, even these progressive roles were often premised on the idea of a racial hierarchy” (p. 144).
Valverde (1992) notes that some feminist intellectuals critiqued aspects of Social Darwinism. They “participated in the debate about who was responsible for degeneration and who was to take a leadership role in ‘regeneration,’ elaborating complex theories of women and evolution countering the misogynist assumptions of male-stream evolutionists” (p. 8).

Ware (1992) cites white women’s roles in anti-lynching campaigns in nineteenth-century Britain and the cases of two British feminists (Ackroyd and Butler) as examples. According to Lewis (1996), Josephine Butler endorsed the “proto-feminist concern for ‘native’ women . . . frequently structured by the same assumptions of white superiority and civilization (Indian women are more oppressed by their backward menfolk and must be liberated by their more advanced white sisters) that drove imperial policy” (p. 22). Annette Ackroyd also believed in the primacy of gender over class or race, but came to distinguish herself from Butler by her intense, racist dislike of Indian men and Indian culture: “Her sympathy continued to lie with Indian women, but she was convinced that they were victims of a form of enslavement which British rule seemed powerless to disrupt” (Ware, 1992, p. 147). McClintock (1995) discusses a third example, South African white feminist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920): “All too often, Schreiner’s views on Africans are blotted by condescension and a patronizing pity” (p. 294).

For example, as Grewal (1996) notes in relation to English suffragists, for these women, “the stereotype of women’s seclusion in the Middle East and Asia suggested the need for women to be employed, vote for their rights, and participate in public, and not merely domestic, matters. The evils of purdah, the harem, and sati, so obsessively described by English travelers and so much a part of Orientalist knowledge, were seen as an example of not giving women the vote and as the result of a despotism that denied freedom to women” (p. 82).

Grewal (1996) explores the discursive function of the harem in enabling British “female subject formation”: “Notions such as companionate marriage are formed in relation to oriental despotism and the harem, and this form of marriage suggests new ways for women to position themselves in English society within the domestic space. The construction of the harem as a space of female incarceration within ‘traditional’ and ‘unprogressive’ ‘Eastern’ societies uses a contrast with the ‘freedom’ of European women. New strategies of disciplining societies through knowledge and surveillance rather than through domination are evident in the binary of freedom and unfreedom that marks colonial discourses on women in India and that enables female subject formation in England” (pp. 60–61).

Lewis (1996) draws essentially the same conclusion about the consolidation of the Western woman subject in modernity when referring to the “humanist project”; she notes that women authors such as “Bronte and Eliot couched their demands for female emancipation precisely through the Orientalizing of a structural other” (p. 29).

Noting the historical construction of “East” vs. “West,” Narayan (2000) argues, “an ‘insistence on cultural difference’ was even more characteristic of the colonial project than gestures towards ‘sameness,’ an insistence that helped to cover over the sad similarities of ethnocentrism, androcentrism, classism, heterosexism, and other objectionable ‘centrisms’ that often pervaded both sides of this reiterated ‘contrast’ between ‘Western culture’ and its several ‘Others’” (p. 95). For her part, Grewal (1996) writes, “Such attitudes toward ‘native’ women worked, in some instances, to disguise and, in other instances, to bring to prominence problems in women’s conditions in England, while promoting the discourse of colonialism as a civilizing venture” (pp. 73–74).

Yeğenoglu (1998) writes, “Such a gesture provides the ground for the production and legitimation of a normative discourse where the West and the ‘free’ and ‘liberated’ condition of its women are taken as the norm. If the position of the Orient and its women are represented within such a dualistic logic, then it follows that the colonial nature of this ‘feminist’ discourse is not an exception but rather part of a system that requires the representation of difference as negativity to be able to posit the positivity of the norm” (p. 104). Along these lines, Loomba (2005) writes, the “emergence of the articulate Western female subject and her entry into individualism . . . [was] inflected, indeed made possible, by the expansion of imperialism” (p. 139).

Grewal (1996) identifies worlding as “also an intrinsic part of the English movement for women’s suffrage, which started around 1860, over a decade after the publication of Jane Eyre, in 1847, when women in England fought for their rights with frequent references to the subordination and incarceration of Asian women” (p. 64).

Benjamin Graves (2010) finds parallels between Spivak’s concept of worlding and Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish: “Spivak suggests that the Third World, like the commodity fetish, becomes a sign that obscures its mode of production, thus making Western dominance appear somehow given or natural” (para. 3).

Grewal (1996) seems to invoke Spivak’s double registers (childbearing and soul-making) in her study of the tropes of home and harem, if by “home” she means the domestic responsibilities of the British bourgeois female in relation to actual domiciles and the English nation, and by “harem” the colonial spaces wherein that same female self could assume the role of superior traveler or missionary.

In fact, as Grewal (1996) points out, Native women are largely an absent presence in imperial discourse in general and in feminist or female travel narratives in particular: “Few women, travelers or feminists . . . mention meeting women from these countries. If they do, they present them as ‘natives,’ never by name nor as personalities
who differ from each other. Empire remained a place to send indigent women and a dumping ground for what had no place in England, and the Orient became a symbol of female seclusion and oppression that Englishwomen were believed unable to live under and that suggested the need for their emancipation" (p. 79).

Interestingly, even the feminized helping imperative could be said to retain a masculinist bent, as made apparent in Woollacott’s (2006) appraisal of British missionary women in nineteenth-century colonial India: “Women missionar1es cast themselves in masculine terms as the chivalrous savours of these unfortunate captives [i.e., elite Indian women’s seclusion in zenanas], able as they were to ‘penetrate into the recesses of their dwellings’ to bring them news of salvation that could help them throw off their barbarous shackles” (p. 96).

Feminist historian Cecilia Morgan (personal communication, 2010) also notes that there are fewer historical studies on interactions among women in Canada compared to other white settler societies. Existing studies on gender and coloniality in Canada include Barman and Hare (2006); Carter (1997, 2006); Carter et al., (2005); Henderson (2003); Franca Iacovetta and Valverde (1992); Perry (2001); Pickles (2002); Rutherford (2002); Veronica Strong-Boag (1977); Valverde (1991, 1992); and Van Kirk (1980).

For a concise theoretical treatment of the relationship between social and spatial segregation, see Razack (2002), who proposes that spatial theory affords a way to “see the operation of all the systems of domination as they mutually constitute each other” (p. 6). She reviews four core ideas of spatial analysis engaged by contributors to the edited collection: 1) space as a social product (Lefebvre); 2) the body in space (Foucault, Kirby, Mohanram); 3) gender, transgression, and journeys through space (Phillips); and 4) space and interlocking oppressions.

Carter (1997) ties captivity narratives directly to broader discourses of white settler nation building that justified the takeover of Indigenous lands. She corroborates a point made earlier by Patricia Limerick (1987): “The idea of captivity organized much of Western sentiment . . . It was an easy transition of thought to move from the idea of humans held in an unjust and resented captivity to the idea of land and natural resources held in Indian captivity—in fact, a kind of monopoly in which very few Indians kept immense resources to themselves, refusing to let the large numbers of willing and eager white Americans make what they could of those resources” (p. 46).

According to Martin-Hill (2003), the image of She No Speaks “emerged from our darkest era, similar to the infamous ‘end of the trail’ warrior—defeated, hunched over, head down and with no future” (p. 108). Her opposite is found in “[Villainous Woman], a master manipulator with a golden tongue who has malicious intent against all Native people. This stereotype was advocated by missionaries, Indian Agents and those in colonial agencies that felt threatened by the leadership that Indigenous women demonstrated” (p. 111).

Maternal feminists dominated the Canadian women’s movement in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (Strong-Boag, 1977). In her research on white Protestant middle-class women in early nineteenth-century Britain, Midgley (2007) describes a central tenet of maternal feminism: “Women activists of the period, in common with later feminists, combined arguments based on equality, variously defined, with those based on difference—their moral superiority to men or the importance of women’s role as mothers, for example—in asserting claims to fuller participation in the life of the nation” (p. 8).

The Famous 5 Foundation website (n.d.) describes the group of five women as follows: “Emily Murphy. Nellie McClung. Henrietta Muir Edwards. Louise McKinney. Irene Parlby. Five Alberta women drawn together by the tides of history and a shared idealism. Each was a true leader in her own right: one a police magistrate, another a legal expert who founded the National Council for Women. Three served as Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta—among the first female elected officials in the entire British Empire. And they did all this before they were even fully defined as persons under Canadian and British law.”

See Eva Mackey’s (2002) fascinating work on the construction and maintenance of Canada’s national mythology and the functioning of liberal concepts such as pluralism, diversity and tolerance. For Mackey, the “heritage of tolerance” is the predominant myth. Examples include the Benevolent Mounties (tied to peaceably settling the West through the application of superior forms of British justice); the Benevolent State treating its Indigenous peoples better than the US treats “theirs”; and, the multicultural tolerance of difference. Mackey pitifully captures the problem with tolerance: “The power and the choice whether to accept or not accept difference, to tolerate it or not, still lies in the hands of the tolerators” (p. 16).

Apparently, Edwards would become a “feminist ally” only later in life after her husband’s death: “Like the female missionaries in Canada and the British activists in India, [Edwards’s] relationship with Aboriginal women often situated her as cultural mediator and missionary, sometimes as maternal imperialist; only occasionally, after the death of her husband, did she act as a feminist ally” (p. 55).

Ahmed (2000) clarifies her meaning with this example: “The good citizen [of British Neighbourhood Watch discourse] is structured around the body of the dominant (white, middle-class) man, who protects the vulnerable bodies of women and children from the threat of marginalized (black, working-class) men. However, these differences are concealed by the very modes of recognition: the figure of the stranger appears as ‘the stranger’ precisely by being cut off from these histories of determination (= stranger fetishism). That is, the recognition of
strangers involves the differentiation between some others and other others at the same time as it conceals that very act of differentiation” (pp. 31–32).

45 Jacqui Alexander (2005) makes a related point with her notion of palimpsestic time where pasts, presents and futures are co-constitutive. Elsewhere, I elaborate upon its positive connotations by exploring theoretical affinities between Alexander’s work and Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty (D’Arcangelis, 2010). If for Indigenous peoples, the “past, present and future are understood to be inextricably connected” (Anderson, 2000, p. 15), reclaiming past traditions is by definition relevant to future incarnations of nationhood. Similarly, Smith (2006) argues that “Native ceremonies can be a place where the present, past and future become co-present . . . a racial remembering of the future” (p. 17). Alexander’s (2005) palimpsestic time as related to tradition and the Sacred gestures towards the conceptual mechanism of rekindling traditions, which would facilitate inclusive, relational and non-hierarchical forms of sovereignty. Palimpsestic time means “the imperfect erasure, hence visibility, of a ‘past’” (p. 190); it counters assertions that Indigenous peoples and their traditions are defunct and indicates why the recovery of traditions is possible. As subjects, we can never excise ourselves from the “past,” but can work to discard its oppressive and embrace its liberatory aspects. Alexander (2005) not only believes memory work to be possible, but, in accordance with Indigenous feminist assessments of decolonization, sees “memory as antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that domination produces” (p. 14).

46 Ahmed (2000) reframes Spivak’s (1988) seminal question “Can the subaltern speak?” to explain the development of a privileged epistemic community. She discusses a particular form of the desire to “know” Others: “It is this question [‘who is knowing here?’] that brings the ethnographic desire to know more about strangers into contact with the post-colonial concern with the politics of representing others. . . . We need to ask, what knowledges are already in place which allow one to speak for, about or to a ‘group of strangers’? In other words, we need to move our attention from the production of otherness to the (re)production of strangerness” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 61).
Chapter 4
The “Impulse to Solidarity”:
White Women, Proximity and Settler Self-making

In this chapter, I describe the parameters of the white settler woman’s desire for proximity to Indigenous women, and the subtle and not so subtle ways in which it can operate in the service of liberal self-making. Drawing on the work of Ahmed (2000) in particular, I locate a host of interrelated desires and discourses under the umbrella of proximity, ranging from the longing to be accepted into an Indigenous community to the desire to have a purposeful life. Through a careful reading of participant narratives, I argue that the reproduction of gendered colonial subjectivity—and the quintessential helping behaviour at its core—is often operationalized through this pursuit of proximity. By “getting close” (figuratively or literally) to Indigenous women, the white settler woman can re-create the fiction of equal power relations between the two groups and (attempt to) transcend her location in colonial power relations, thus maintaining a sense of legitimacy/belonging. A central feature of white settler liberal subjectivity is the shared desire among settlers to transcend social relations, disavow our dominant status and reconstitute ourselves as legitimate national subjects who belong here. Such discursive moves can exacerbate solidarity tensions, and obscure and uphold inequitable structural power relations.

At the same time, I highlight the fraught nature of this endeavour: the reproduction of the white settler liberal subject in solidarity encounters never proceeds seamlessly or without contestation. Most white participants grapple with our historic positionality as settlers, but find it exceedingly difficult to thwart the reproduction of our liberal subjectivity. Despite varying degrees of awareness of what to avoid—prototypical colonial helping behaviour—at one point or another most of us exhibit behaviours and attitudes characteristic of the gendered colonial subject. In other words, the colonial desire of the white settler/liberal subject to be transcendent, innocent, moral/good and capable of knowing and helping the Other, appears extremely hard to give up. I suggest that the staying power of settler colonial subjectivity can be attributed in large part to our collective location in the inescapable “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004), and the conundrum this presents: how can hierarchically-positioned subjects work together to foster equitable relations in a context of ongoing inequity? In this chapter, I look more closely at the effects of living in the “colonial present” on solidarity relations.
To lay the groundwork for my analysis, I begin with the observation that Indigenous participants and white participants respectively describe (and display) different modalities of entry into political activism/solidarity: the former tend to emphasize their identity and location as members of a collectivity whereas the latter tend to describe a more individualistic involvement. This suggests not only the effects of structural positioning on a subject’s engagement in solidarity, but also the ways in which Western individualism marks white women’s subjectivities. It also asks the question of how liberal subjectivity may hinder ongoing anticolonial political struggle. This chapter considers if and how white settler women are bound by a default liberal location.

After a more in-depth discussion of the workings of proximity discourse in white women’s narratives, I turn to Native women’s narrations of the solidarity encounter and of white women’s comportment therein. I argue that the potentially colonizing effects of the white desire for proximity to Native women are most detectable in these narrations. While clarifying that all white women do not display the most extremely problematic behaviours all or even most of the time, Indigenous women emphasize the inevitable presence of the white woman who exhibits “needy do-gooder” behaviour, which Indigenous women often experience as invasive/colonial. In describing white settler “neediness,” in other words, Indigenous women are vividly describing various manifestations of the white/settler liberal (individualistic) desire for proximity.

I conclude the chapter by discussing the “impulse to solidarity,” my characterization of the (latent) operationalization of proximity desires/discourses. I theorize this impulse as a complex nexus of the seemingly contradictory white desires to help and be helped by the Indigenous Other, whose presence facilitates white settler women’s self-making projects. I use the phrase “to be helped by” to highlight the constitutive underside of “helping” behaviour—an assortment of self-serving or, more accurately, self-making reasons why white/settler people in general and women in particular might engage in solidarity with Indigenous Others. To better reflect the specificities of intersubjective dynamics in solidarity work here (as opposed to there, i.e., abroad), I distinguish the solidarity impulse from the similarly fraught “helping imperative” (Heron, 2007). I infer throughout that un-interrogated solidarity impulses often generate tensions among women in the solidarity encounter.
A Methodological Note

In this chapter, I draw from participant responses mainly to questions addressing three broad themes: definitions of political activism/solidarity; reasons or motivations for engaging in political activism/solidarity; and understandings and examples of solidarity tensions. I also examine answers to questions posed in a specific way to white participants, including, what does it mean for you to be a non-Indigenous person/white settler in relation to Canada’s colonial past and present? Do you use the term white settler to describe yourself? Overall, I consider women’s self-presentations of their solidarity trajectories as well as their perceptions of other women’s motivations for engaging in solidarity work. Borrowing from Moreton-Robinson (2000), I use the term “self-presentation” to refer to “how one represents oneself through interpretation as opposed to how one is presented by another” (p. xxii). To reiterate, I ground my analysis in both Indigenous and white participant depictions of the solidarity encounter, that is, participants’ self-presentations alongside their analyses of what is at stake for other women.

As noted in the Introduction, I bring a purposively broad (and material) understanding of “political solidarity” to this study, and use the phrase with a loose set of practices in mind. In short, I mean to evoke the image of people engaged together in the pursuit of a political project. I crafted the Call for Participants also in broad terms, describing the project as “research on the limits and possibilities of political alliances or solidarity between Indigenous women and white women.” In the interviews, I confirmed that all participants felt that what they were doing (or had done) met my broad criteria of political solidarity work. When asked, however, most said they generally use other terms (in addition to solidarity) to describe their involvement with Indigenous or white women respectively, such as relationships, alliances, collaborations or, simply, work. (This signals a possible avenue for further research: to tease apart the nuanced differences between these terms and the implications for solidarity practices.) In this study, my use of the term remains sufficiently broad so as to encompass the host of meanings that participants ascribe to the term. When quoting participants directly, I use their preferred phrase.

In analyzing participant interviews—more precisely, by juxtaposing white women’s and Indigenous women’s respective narratives—I was struck by how often the latter experience white women’s behaviours in (and motivations for) doing solidarity work as problematic, even invasive. Although they do not depict Indigenous–settler relations within the solidarity context in entirely negative terms, Indigenous women do identify white practices and attitudes that they
experience as colonial and that they find compromise the effectiveness of political solidarity. In short, some of the desires/needs of white women doing solidarity work are often experienced by Indigenous women as colonial in nature and as sources of tension and conflict. However, these behaviours are not necessarily seen as problematic (let alone invasive) by white women.

Thus evolved a particular method for reading the data—the correlation of Native women’s descriptions of solidarity tensions with white women’s statements about the motivational factors that led them to the encounter. This analytical strategy led me to coin the phrase, “impulse to solidarity.” My presentation of the data follows this analytical strategy: I first discuss the desires for proximity evident in white women’s narratives; I then look to Indigenous women’s narrations of the solidarity encounter to shed light on Indigenous readings of these discourses as colonial.

The Importance of Solidarity

I would like to pre-empt an overly pessimistic and, I would argue, inaccurate reading of my analysis of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter. Following LaRocque (2010), when I discuss the “negative,” I do so only to hasten the arrival of the “positive”:

And can we ever move past colonization, especially when it remains as an active toxin in the lives of Aboriginal peoples? Is it not better to try to understand its workings than to deny its existence or to judge its analysis as being necessarily “negative”? . . . Is it possible that in our peculiarly Canadian haste to find the positive (often confused with “avoiding the negative” or expressed as “two sides to a story”), we short-circuit our understanding of our history and our assumptions? (p. 6)

My goal is to shed light on the more subtle ways in which colonization remains “an active toxin” in Indigenous and settler lives alike. I would also like to reiterate that Indigenous calls for non-Indigenous allies to support their struggles are increasingly audible. Indigenous participants in this study are no different; despite the ongoing challenges, they not only ask white settler women to engage in solidarity, but often laud white women for their efforts:

I think a lot of work being done together is non-colonizing. I’m not saying that it’s not without its contentiousness . . . [or] that there’s never any colonizing behaviours in that context. But most of us get together to do something that is non-colonizing, like the solidarity with Aboriginal women on the West Coast. I think if you do nothing, that’s a colonizing behaviour. I think if you participate, that’s a non-colonizing behaviour. Even if you try to speak for us, it’s still a non-colonizing behaviour with an appropriation spin on it which can be a bit problematic. But the behaviour itself, of going out and stopping some kind of injustice, is a non-colonizing behaviour in this [colonizing] country. (Lee)
Lee Maracle, while aware of the complexities of solidarity, stresses the importance of *attempting* it. Further, she thinks that non-colonizing solidarity is not only possible, but already underway, and that to *not* attempt solidarity is in itself a colonizing behaviour. Her message highlights the simple fact that non-colonizing solidarity won’t happen if people don’t take up solidarity of any kind.

Many Indigenous participants do not vilify or dismiss the motivation “to help” that seems intrinsic to some white women’s decision to work in solidarity with Indigenous women:

I think [wanting to help is] just compassion, empathy and need. I don’t think it’s a dirty thing or a bad thing. I think it’s a beautiful thing. I think it’s terrible when people try to spin it into a bad thing. I mean isn’t that just something we innately do, is want to nurture and care for one another? . . . [But, helping can be destructive] if [white women] haven’t critically reflected on how their helping may actually hurt . . . You really have to do your own work if you’re interested in genuinely helping. (Lydia)

Lydia’s outlook is encased within a practical analytic: the work of solidarity has both positive and negative latent potential. (In the concluding chapter, I return to what a white woman ally’s “own work” might entail.) Teresa believes some women, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, join movements out of political passion and a sense of urgency around the collective need to act:

It doesn’t matter whether you’re a white woman, but I think it’s got more to do with spirit and heart, and the reason why you want to join in solidarity towards a movement is because you feel passionate about the cause . . . As women, we’re all matriarchal, so we all have this nurturing sense about us, whether we’re mothers or not. We want to take care of things. We feel community’s important. . . . There’s this sense of urgency that we need do something for the sake of humanity and the protection of earth.

While both of these passages raise the issue of sex/gender essentialism, I’d like to highlight a different, and very significant, undercurrent of both—Indigenous women sometimes have a positive view of white settler women’s decisions “to join in solidarity.”

A white settler woman’s commitment to solidarity is also seen as a tangible sign of “caring” about Indigenous women, Lee’s broad point in a remark about solidarity and transformation:

I think always when people work together . . . [transformation] can be really limited or quite profound depending on the nature of the work together. I think the [white] women who are working with bringing attention to the murdered Aboriginal women, I think that transformation’s quite profound, because you’re fundamentally saying “We care about these women.” It requires that you care. So the people who are not caring are saying, “It’s appropriation” or “it’s this” or “it’s that,” they have a lot of reasons for not going, but the main one is they’re very scared to care. If you care about us, then it changes
things. And I’ve talked with a lot of those women on those little marches. . . . They’re deeply caring people. . . . I think that change is the most important change . . . Because apathy is what got us killed. Apathy is a killer. So the caring is more important than anything to me.

What some call a healthy fear of appropriation, Lee considers no less than a pretext for settler colonial inaction. On that note, Teresa says, “I think a white woman who comes to the table in an attempt to work in solidarity towards an Indigenous issue is not complacent, and that’s why they’re there.” Belinda responds likewise when asked what it would mean to be a white ally:

I guess really you care, that’s why you’re there, right? You want to do something even if you don’t know what it is you should be doing, but you want to engage somehow. You are open and willing to learn how to be a helper and you don’t necessarily have to have all the answers. You don’t have to be the expert; just your presence makes a big difference. . . . And just to show that people do care . . . in particular, what’s happening to a group of [Indigenous] women that maybe don’t show they care in the same way, but just can’t afford that time, maybe not be able to come to all these meetings.

For Belinda, white women have a responsibility to work in political solidarity around the issue of the murdered and missing Indigenous women, especially in light of the economic barriers that constrain many Indigenous women’s (and men’s) political activism.7 While unequivocal in her position that white women should “care” about violence against Indigenous women, Belinda also sets parameters around that involvement: the white woman should be present as a peer, not an expert, and demonstrate a willingness to learn how to help. Indigenous leadership should be centred to mitigate the possibility of ally domination in the solidarity encounter.8 Importantly, these passages lack much of an analysis of how the white woman’s decision to “help” or “care” is risk-laden. My aim in this chapter and beyond is to elucidate this risk: the setting in motion of the liberal subject’s individualistic quest for legitimate (good/innocent) status. The white settler woman’s objective too easily veers away from the political one of dismantling colonial structures and towards the personal one of settler self-making.

The complexities of the fluid desire to “help” Others are perhaps most amply discussed by scholars writing on the sociopolitical, ethical dilemmas of international development.9 For instance, in line with several of the Indigenous participants cited above, Gada Mahrouse (2009) maintains that the inclination to help, when carefully and continuously examined, is warranted by the political exigencies of our times.10 In this chapter, I draw specifically on Heron’s (2007) analysis of the “helping imperative,” which she defines as the “desire for other people’s development” (p. 6) that drives white/Northern middle-class women to do development work in
the Global South. Heron calls into question the prevailing notion that development is inherently good, and instead exposes the self-serving, self-making processes often at its core. The desire to help becomes a vehicle for the fulfillment of “a moral imperative in processes of white feminist identity formation” (p. 16). Tracing the historical contours of helping, she notes four discursive “colonial continuities” that persevere in the subject formation processes of such development workers: planetary consciousness, self-affirmation through racialized comparisons, a sense of obligation and entitlement to do the work, and a fascination with Others. She highlights the gendered dimension of these processes: “The operation of colonial continuities can also be detected in constructions of gender, which position middle-class white women as simultaneously subjects and non-subjects who may enhance their hold on bourgeois subjectivity through the performance of ‘goodness’” (Heron, 2007, p. 7). As I discuss in Chapter 3, white settler women have been doubly positioned as both dominant and subordinate, leading to our particular interpellation as subjects: helping is what white women “are socially mandated to do” (Heron, 2007, p. 44). Building on these ideas, through a careful reading of participant narratives, I tease apart the site-specific complexities of intersubjective dynamics in the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in Canada, which coalesce in what I call the impulse to solidarity.11

**Positioned for/in Encounter**

The saliency of the solidarity encounter and its subjects being embedded in broader colonial relations cannot be overstated. To sideline this fact leads to ignoring the hierarchical positioning of subjects within the encounter, which, as Ahmed (2000) reminds us, is “to refuse to recognise the constraints that temporarily fix subjects in relations of social antagonism” (p. 127). How are hierarchical relations between Indigenous women and white women brought to bear initially in the solidarity encounter? Do women in each group express correspondingly different reasons for engaging in political activism/solidarity in the first place? At first glance, there seems to be little difference; for instance, social justice is a central motivating factor for most participants, and several Indigenous women and white women (although fewer) talk about the existential importance of living and working together for all peoples. In looking more closely at the data, however, I noted a divergence between the two groups: Indigenous women typically position themselves as members of a collectivity and discuss their foray into political activism or solidarity as a matter of their responsibility to ensure the survival of that collectivity; in contrast,
white women tend to position themselves as individuals and their involvement in political activism or solidarity as more of a personal matter. This suggests that participants’ stated reasons for entering into political activism/solidarity flow in part from their structural locations. In this chapter, I analyze white women’s narratives in this regard and turn to Indigenous women’s tendency to position themselves as members of a collectivity in the next chapter.12

Why might white women be more apt and able to present themselves as individuals who make a personal choice to do solidarity work as opposed to members of a white settler collectivity who are obliged to do so? For Moreton-Robinson (2000), white women’s social location affords them a certain invisibility (the option to not see oneself as a member of a privileged collectivity), which enables a subject to preserve a sense of individualism: “Having a place in the centre of white culture confers privilege and the capacity to be able to make choices about one’s identity that is not accorded those positioned in the margins” (p. 147). Drawing a similar conclusion in her study of white pre-service teachers’ rehearsals of whiteness when performing Canadian national identity, Carol Schick (1998) comments on the regulatory forces forestalling such awareness: “Such are the sanctions against certain kinds of racialized discourse that elaborately circuitous routes are available to keep subjects from saying anything that would cause them to confront directly their own complicity and racial privilege” (p. 172). Both scholars suggest that given the structural power relations of the colonial encounter, one would not expect a sustained level of awareness among white women of their membership in a white settler collectivity. The data in this study also suggests that it is hard for white women to imagine ourselves as members of a collectivity because to do so would mean acknowledging our implication in colonialism. Despite our awareness of this difficulty, or perhaps because of it, many white participants are swayed towards seeing themselves as individuals standing outside of colonialism.

When asked if Indigenous women have a role to play as allies in the struggles of other women, Teresa contrasts her communal orientation to political struggle as an Indigenous woman with what she sees as the Western tendency towards individualism:

I think that with the birth of Protestantism and capitalism and that sense of individual gain, a lot of Western women have isolated themselves from community struggles. And it’s become more of an “I” thing. [Another] student . . . asked me how I would define success, and it’s not a personal thing, really, at all. Success for me is sovereignty for our nations and other nations, the freedom to have access to their own ideology in academic institutions, freedom to access information, clean drinking water, proper housing. On an
international [level] would be ideal. First we have to struggle for that for our own communities, but at the same time try and draw those parallels of international struggles.

To what extent are white participant narratives consonant with Teresa’s observations? How do white women depict their involvement in political activism/solidarity work?

For starters, no white woman describes her involvement in solidarity work directly as a matter of collective survival. Also unlike several Indigenous participants, white participants rarely talk of having found themselves propelled into solidarity work. Instead, they speak of having had the choice or the privilege of engaging in the work, as demonstrated in the following two narratives. Alicia notes a similarity between her entry into political activism with Indigenous women and the activism of second wave white feminists more generally:

Maybe . . . it’s a matter of me being spoiled that I have the luxury of time to be able to care about these things. Because I think that’s a criticism of feminism is that it was spearheaded by white middle-class women who had the privilege to go out and fight for something. They weren’t struggling with a baby on each arm and scrubbing a toilet at the same time and didn’t have other constraints that would stop them. . . . They were educated; they had relative affluence and so they had this privilege. In a sense, I see it for me as—maybe it’s a privilege that I have the opportunity to care about an issue.

In this passage, especially when read in the context of our overall exchange, Alicia clearly seems to see herself exercising her relative structural privilege as a white woman in choosing to “care about” Indigenous women’s issues and do solidarity work. But, even so, her tone comes perilously close to that of “helping” the less fortunate Other. As theories on the limits of white/settler self-reflexivity (Smith, 2013a, 2013b) suggest, admitting one’s privilege can amount to a “confessional,” individualizing act and not necessarily to a sustained grasp of one’s location in a white settler collectivity. The white woman subject who recognizes her privilege in individualistic rather than structural terms is apt to see Indigenous women as underprivileged rather than oppressed, and perhaps more likely to adopt a saviour mentality as opposed to an anticolonial critique. Wanda Whitebird, an Indigenous participant, recalls a white woman activist who did not appear to see Indigenous women as allies in struggle, but rather as in need of help: “I think she’d be surprised that [Indigenous people] live on the Queen’s Quay [in downtown Toronto]. I think that she thinks that we’re people who don’t say anything, and we’re all victims and we need saving.” The language of (individual) privilege and personal choice (as opposed to collective responsibility) can keep the white settler subject centred and lead to a politics of saving.
Another white participant correlates choice and solidarity, but without inference to structural privilege. For Eve, alliances or coalitions do not constitute examples of political solidarity absent the element of choice. She contrasts her current experience of solidarity-like relations with Indigenous women with her past experiences of solidarity work:

It could be [that I’m doing solidarity work now]. I just don’t call it that and I feel different about it because it was something that I have to do, as opposed to I chose to do. That for me feels like a pretty fundamental difference. . . . So it’s not like I don’t enjoy it; it’s not like I’m not learning from it or I don’t want to be there, but it was not something that we created together. It was something that I was brought into, in a way.

I think, just like in any activist organizing, I think you should have the choice of who you want to work in solidarity with. In a coalition, it’s much more difficult, but I would just make sure that I would have a choice in that. I think that’s really important. I would also make sure that there is a basis of unity, or common understanding, or basis of solidarity around the fundamental reason why you’re together, regardless to what that reason is.

For Eve, one should always be able to choose with whom to work in solidarity and presumably make that choice based on political conviction. In fact, NMS as a group took this same position (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012). However, more striking is what Eve leaves unexamined, and what Indigenous participant narratives do not—the structural privilege that enables that choice in the first place. Both Alicia and Eve centre choice as a defining feature of their solidarity work in contrast with Indigenous women’s descriptions of solidarity as sometimes a default outcome or requisite aspect of political activism—whether because, as Belinda notes with ironic humor, there are “always white people involved, they always get in,” or because Indigenous people out of necessity seek white allies for viable political action. As Ardra notes, “We just don’t have the numbers to do it on our own anyways.”

Citing an example of Indigenous women’s entrance into political struggle, Wanda alludes to how Indigenous peoples have always had to negotiate their structural positionality: “We had to go to university to become lawyers. It’s always an education in another system that taught us to do that.” Moreton-Robinson (2000) speaks to this contrast in subject positions and corresponding subjectivities in the Australian context:

Indigenous women are the ones who have to negotiate and deploy different subject positions in processes of inter-subjectivity with white women irrespective of their class. There is no such imperative for white women in their relationships with Indigenous people. The marginal position of Indigenous people in Australian society means that white knowledges and cultural practices always circumscribe our subjectivity. (p. 21)

For this reason, Moreton-Robinson (2000) concludes there is a limited likelihood that white women will critically reflect on their structural positionality in white settler colonial processes.
White women’s narratives also tend to present a more personal sense of responsibility as a motivating factor for their engagement in solidarity. Of course, it is as individuals that both Indigenous women and white women “choose” to engage in solidarity work, if under different structural constraints. The difference, I argue, lies in the degree to which one invokes one’s membership in a broader collectivity. Admittedly, white participants vary in this regard. But, only a minority of white participants explicitly cite their settler positionality as the factor that propelled them to do solidarity work. When participants do make this link, they tend to be explicitly attentive to colonialism, which suggests that an anticolonial politics can foster in white settler subjects a sense of responsibility and accountability as members of a white settler collectivity. Even so, as I hope to make evident in this and forthcoming chapters, the discursive act of locating one’s self in power relations is always an ongoing and fraught process.

Peggy is among those participants who link their settler status to their solidarity work. A veteran white woman activist and ally, Peggy’s trajectory into solidarity is reminiscent of my own; she too had an experience abroad whose profound impact altered her perception of “home”:

> It just made me look at Canada in a different… see Canada much more clearly. And that just felt like, that was… Colonialism with Indigenous people is Canada’s original sin. It’s just like where it starts from. . . . But I do see North American colonialism against Indigenous people as kind of the foundation for a lot of other oppression. And for a certain structure of the state that has to be changed.

She has long acknowledged her settler status, together with that of her ancestors:

> My ethnic background is predominately British Isles—Scots-Irish, English, Welsh, there’s a little bit of Dutch, but it’s mainly English. But my father’s family at any rate arrived in North America in the 1600s, at least some branches of it. Some branches of my family have been here for a long time, 13 generations.

In her early twenties and already with several years of solidarity experience, Carla also cites her lineage, and then correlates her settler status with her solidarity work with Indigenous women:

> I think that people who benefit from the privileges from a history of colonialism and ongoing colonialism owe it to themselves and the general population to try and make things better. And part of making things better is being in solidarity with people and trying to make radical change. . . . My Mom’s side . . . is fourth generation Canadian; on my Dad’s, I’m closer to seventh or eighth. And I do know he had relatives who came with the Hudson’s Bay Company a couple hundred years ago. So dealing with Native issues for me is in direct relation with me knowing my background, my ancestry, my family’s lineage.
There is also Evelyn, who thought it imperative to educate herself extensively on Canada’s colonial history before doing solidarity work. She remarks on the current state of colonial affairs:

I’m living in a society… my existence is predicated on oppressing other people, oppressing all sorts of people, globally as well as locally, domestically. [. . .] And, there’s lies, politicians are lying. It’s an omission; it’s lying by omission, not telling the whole story and not redressing past wrongs. Verbally… ‘cause I think [politicians are] playing a very… they’re playing an interesting game. . . . I think they’re still trying to wipe Indigenous people out. The reason that the Truth and Reconciliation thing took so long is because they wanted more of the generations to die off, so they didn’t have to make retribution financial or otherwise. I think the agenda is, “Okay, just shut them out, shut them out, shut them out” and it will all go away. People will get assimilated. So they’re still hoping that the assimilation will happen, and then it won’t be a problem anymore.

After becoming involved in solidarity work, she adopted the term settler to describe herself:

I always identify myself, particularly online, as a settler so that people know exactly where I’m coming from. I think that’s a term that most people are aware of now. And it situates me in people’s minds. . . . It lets people know that I know that I’m a newcomer, you know, that no matter if I’m third-generation Canadian, I’m a newcomer. I don’t necessarily belong here. And I’m gonna, I’ll accept that. I don’t know how to redress that issue, but...

Even as Peggy, Carla and Evelyn situate themselves, and their respective family histories, in relation to the colonial project, the “problem with ‘privilege’” (Smith, 2013b) is also insidiously present. Personal narratives of this sort (in which a family’s generations of “settlerhood” can be easily invoked) are not equally available to all settlers, which begs a question—to what extent is settler responsibility/accountability (perceived to be) due to one’s personal family history and/or structural location?

Another white participant, Julia, locates herself as a white person who has benefited from the colonial dispossession of Indigenous people and who has a consequent responsibility in the current political moment, among other things, to educate herself and other white people:

My interest in that group was really around, as a white person, how do I benefit from that colonial experience of [Native] people and how do I perpetuate that and how is it that I’m responsible to make some positive change in that regard? As white people, how do we continue to perpetuate that colonialism now? It’s our responsibility to educate ourself [sic] on that and to educate others. It’s not the responsibility of the Indigenous folks to educate us. They’ve done enough of that.
When asked about the role of white women as allies in Indigenous women’s struggles, she is just as forthright: “I think first and foremost, it’s that piece of understanding my unearned privilege. . . . I sit on this land, I sit as somebody who can walk in and not be criticised.” As among those white participants who most freely and repeatedly grapple with their status as members of a white settler collectivity, Julia’s narrative is also complicated at times when she seems to position herself as the exceptional white ally (see Chapter 6).

Another white participant, Sarah, also mentions colonial land theft:

The land that we live on now is not our land. I really believe that that land was stolen, and there are all sorts of agreements that weren’t honoured. So now we’re living on stolen land, so when people come to this country from other countries, they’re also living on land that is not theirs. . . . At the same time, these are people who are experiencing racism and violence in their own way, but are they...can you say that they’re participating in the colonization? I don’t know. That’s what’s so interesting to me about the way that people can embody power and be victimized at the same time . . . can both wield power and be powerless.

Having the wherewithal to name the “elephant in the room”—the unresolved matter of stolen land—is surely a move in the right direction in considering one’s structural privilege.

However, Sarah arguably sidesteps her positionality by quickly turning to a current conversation underway in solidarity circles about how best to theorize the status of racialized peoples (e.g., some refugees, second-generation Canadians with ancestors from the Caribbean) vis-à-vis the Indigenous Other. While other white participants such as Dawn may mention colonialism, as I discuss below, it is not necessarily in connection with their membership in a white collectivity.

As I mention above, Indigenous and white participant motivations for doing political/solidarity work are not entirely divergent; for example, virtually everyone mentions directly or infers the pursuit of social justice as a main reason for their political engagement. Participants in both groups express anger, passion and a desire to act. A more complicated story is told, however, when one accounts for how emotions can be wielded to different (political) effect by differently positioned subjects. Over half of white participant narratives contain intertwined evocations of emotion (anger, passion) and notions of “caring,” often followed by a stated urgency to act. Like Heron (2007), whose study participants also expressed a desire “to go and do something” (p. 39), I find such passages particularly indicative of the complex layers of white settler investments in solidarity work. They reveal the propensity and risk of conceptualizing one’s implication in colonialism as (merely) personal: one’s structural location in an oppressive
collectivity recedes from view. And, analytical critique and genuine outrage can easily slide into the desire to “help.”

In an astonishing parallel to my own story (see Introduction and Chapter 2), Alicia recalls being “totally floored” when she found out about the high rates of violence against Indigenous women:

> I thought, “How could I have never learned this before now? How could this be that it’s such a pervasive problem according to this pamphlet, yet I’ve never learned about this, no one’s spoken about it?” I’ve realized that there was a huge issue in my back yard, in my own country and I had no awareness of it. . . . It was almost like my own ego, huge ego: “How can I possibly not know about this? I know about things, I’m aware, I’m with it. I get the whole social justice scene.” I read [the pamphlet] and I was shocked.

Julia notes an increase in her consciousness about Indigenous issues when children from a nearby Native reserve were bussed into her school in Grade 3: “Suddenly they were blamed for everything that had ever gone wrong.” After commenting on the injustices she saw to a teacher, as she remembers, “I got smacked.” Noting this “pivotal moment” in her life, she adds, “And I’ve always been somebody who questions things and didn’t take things for just whatever was sitting on the surface. Anti-racism and that sort of thing is a big part of who I am as a person.”

Darcie echoes these participants’ (and my own) passion in explaining why she was drawn to solidarity work with Indigenous women:

> I think that that’s what solidarity means to me. It’s having a real desire to try and better the world. [. . .] I don’t really know if there’s one factor that really drives me [to work in solidarity with Native women]. I just know I get really upset or I respond very passionately to the lack of awareness among most of the Canadian population, most of settler society, of what I see as a fundamental injustice and I just think that needs to be addressed if we’re ever going to move forward as a society.

Alongside a highly developed anticolonial critique, Sarah describes her emotional response to the situation of Indigenous women in Canada:

> So already racialized peoples in this country are subject to brutal racism and violence, but with Indigenous women, there’s this added genocide. The colonization that is still continuing to happen—not “sort of,” it is. When I’m looking at and thinking about that in my country there are children that don’t have access to water—that’s genocide, that’s continuing. That’s a whole other level to me. It’s something that I feel, when I look at injustice, that seems to be the greatest injustice of all, and it makes me angry.

First, I agree that the desire to redress social injustice “can and should be read as conscious resistance to social injustice” (Heron, 2007, p. 41). Second, the white participants I quote here
have certainly taken great strides in understanding the “relationship between knowledges, social responsibility and collective struggle which one would expect to find in anti-racist pedagogy” and, I would add, anticolonial praxis (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 131). However, personal outrage can keep the white settler woman subject in the realm of the personal, individualizing her engagement in solidarity work. Rubina, an Indigenous participant, helps clarify my point. She calls on white women to be emotionally engaged, which is not to be conflated with emotional:

> It’s different to be emotionally engaged than to be emotional. Does that make sense? Like, when [white] people hear about the residential school system for the first time, the “Indians” have to caretake the emotions again. When people hear about the missing and murdered, for us it’s like, “Yeah, 500 of my sisters are missing or murdered. What the fuck’s wrong? Whatever. Let’s move on. Forward ahead!” We have to stop and turn around and comfort the… Oh, my god! I’m sick of having to hand the tissues.

The problem, as Rubina points out, when personal outrage overshadows the white settler woman’s political analysis, her self-interests are at risk of taking centre stage (see also the below section “Indigenous women and white desire”). Just as angry as Darcie or Sarah, in responding to why she does this work, Indigenous participant Wanda appears better able to retain the focus on Indigenous women “who died [and who] need not be forgotten. [My involvement in solidarity work is] about those women. . . . Native women are being exploited in this country and they need to be heard.” As Heron (2007) explores in relation to development work, even when social justice figures centrally as a motivating factor, the white subject does not necessarily develop/sustain an anticolonial critique or avoid typically colonial behaviours. Social justice motivations do not guarantee effective (non-colonizing) solidarity, but can instead serve a charity mode of solidarity and white settler subjects’ desires to reproduce themselves as innocent and self-determining (see Chapter 6). Despite, or perhaps because of, how they emphasize their personal location in colonial history, many white participant narratives reveal individualistic modes of investment that can lead to solidarity tensions.

I conclude this section by discussing the narratives of two other white participants—Dawn and Chloe. Dawn’s description of Canadians’ collective responsibility vis-à-vis violence against women in general and violence against Indigenous women in particular leads to a starker example of the complexities—and contradictions—of white settler woman subjectivity:

> We’re doing a very bad job [of preventing violence against women], and you might say that the failure to address things at an early stage then escalates into a murder. So when
you look at the Aboriginal women issue, that’s sort of like the worst of the worst. But you know what? Overall, it’s not so hot. It gets back to your issue of partnerships. So whose problem is that? It would be ours, because it’s the effectiveness of an essential institution [police and justice systems] in democracy, it’s the effectiveness of your security and protection, and how well is that working. So it’s not their problem. It’s our problem.

In this passage, Dawn accepts that the problem of violence against Indigenous women, indeed against all women, is the collective responsibility of (white) settler Canadians. She is also committed to doing her part to ensure Canadian democracy for all. In the next breath, however, she rejects the usefulness of colonialism as a term of political struggle. When asked if she had encountered power dynamics in solidarity work that she would define as colonial, she replies,

I guess any time one assumes, which I think we all do, that our perspective is more informed than the other guy’s, that’s a form of colonialism. . . . My sense of colonialism is that if you read history, people are continually whacking people. . . . There is no race or group that has ownership of that thing. It embeds the “them” and “us” thing and it undermines really what you need when you talk about partnerships. Your partners can happen anywhere. This happened when I was very involved with women’s issues a long time ago. At that time, the women didn’t want the men involved. . . . If you are focused on an outcome, you find your partnerships wherever they are, and trust yourself to be able to identify them. [The term colonialism] has a lot of baggage to it. It’s them and us, and “All those guys did it to us, and we have to watch those guys.” And you do watch those guys. Why not? Watch them, but some of them are the ones who can be your allies. Any good warrior always figures out where your allies are.

Dawn not only eschews colonialism’s positive utility as an analytic, she implies that using it impedes partnerships (her preferred term for solidarity). To make her argument, Dawn uses the tactic of false equivalences; she attempts to establish distinct sets of social and political relations (temporally and thematically) as equivalent, an action that, as Ahmed’s (2000) theory of stranger fetishism suggests, would serve to conceal the specific histories of determination that constitute Indigenous/settler relations in Canada.19 Chloe registers a more striking refusal to acknowledge the complicity of white women in colonial processes, highlighting instead how white women should benefit from the solidarity encounter:

You’re asking the white woman to do that and say [“I did this wrong and I did that wrong”]; that has no value to her. You’ve got to give her something for herself. And that’s not doing it. So she comes and talks to you and she talks to a Native woman. She is maybe able to help or suggest or even to listen to the Native woman, sit down and talk. Suddenly her life becomes… she starts telling her stories. And it’s really all about telling your stories. And that gives her value. It lessens her load and she has more energy to do work with you too. Sometimes this nonsense about guilt (I hope we’re not getting to that) . . . and who’s the bad guys and who’s not the bad guys. We’ve all been bad guys at
one time; we’ve all been good guys at another time. . . . Let’s tell our stories, listen to each other and get on with what we have to do together to make it better. I just don’t see any point in [guilt]. . . . You’re going to tell some people who are nasty to Indians in Canada whose ancestors came from some place where they were starving to death in Europe. . . . There’s no value in doing that type of thing. It’s good to listen to everybody’s story though. Because you learn where they’re coming from and where you’re coming from.

Chloe’s insistence that “you’ve got to give [the white woman] something for herself” provides a perfect segue into my analysis of the self-serving/self-making aspects of solidarity for white women, aspects that I argue often involve the mobilization of discourses of proximity. And while Dawn’s and Chloe’s are minority responses in their at times blatant dismissal of the relevance of colonial relations to contemporary solidarity encounters, their sentiments align with other white women’s more subtle attempts to relativize histories and power differences through discourses of proximity, as we shall see. The alignment occurs along the same fault line, namely that the white collectivity recedes from view as critical white *individuals* take its place.

**Proximity at Work: Reinstalling Colonial Logic/Colonial Selves**

*Thank you for making me feel welcomed.*

—White woman at film screening

This rather ordinary statement takes on greater significance when understood in a settler colonial context. Lingering around after a film screening about violence against Indigenous women, I overheard this remark made by a white woman (who I had met before in passing) to two of the Indigenous women organizers of the event. After she’d gone, and after some mutual eye rolling, we talked about what had transpired. Left a bit confused myself, I was struck by the Indigenous women’s immediate clarity in response; they shared the interpretation that here was another white settler woman who wanted to feel welcome in what she saw as an Indigenous space. Far from being an isolated incident in their minds, this exchange represented something quite typical of the solidarity encounter. How do we make sense of the white settler woman subject’s desire to feel welcome? What anxieties underpin her desire? Why do Indigenous women find that such momentary expressions of white settler anxiety/desire undermine collective political struggle?

In what follows, I suggest that such desires are indicative of a deeper longing for legitimacy that haunts the (white) settler/liberal subject, a longing that by definition is never permanently
satisfied in a settler colonial context. White settler women, therefore, enter into solidarity encounters as subjects haunted by the same longing. Although an aspect of collective settler subjectivity, this anxiety is often experienced by the liberal subject in individualistic/personal terms—rather than as arising out of structural power relations, i.e., as both personal and political. Further, the liberal subject pursues this seemingly individualistic desire for legitimacy through proximity to Others. Thus, I include statements such as “thank you for making me feel welcomed” under the broad rubric of proximity discourse, which can be deployed by white settler women in our quest to do away with inequality and recuperate a sense of ourselves as good, moral subjects. In pursuing proximity, we seek to sustain the “fiction of reciprocity” (Pratt, 2008) or equal power relations between ourselves and Indigenous women, and gain legitimacy.  

In my analysis, I ask to what extent this move to establish reciprocity is underwritten and enabled by the white woman’s historical, paradoxical gendered colonial position as both oppressor/colonizer and oppressed/colonized, together with her quest for liberal subject status. Is the white settler woman in the contemporary solidarity encounter similarly interpellated? In other words, do we (still) seek to establish ourselves as the (relatively) liberated helpers of more oppressed women even as we sustain a belief in fictional reciprocity and our own innocence? True reciprocity after all would negate the possibility of “helping” in its hegemonic colonial form—hierarchical relations between a dominant helper and subordinate recipient of help. Also, how does the pursuit of proximity assist the white settler woman subject in this endeavor? Drawing mainly on Ahmed (2000), I explore if and how proximity discourses operate in white women’s narratives. I also draw on Heron (2007) and others who address the reproduction of white/Western privilege in various contexts. For example, Mahrouse (2009) describes white/Western citizen journalists’ attempts to perform themselves as the dominant subjects of racialized, hierarchal encounters with Others in the Global South. Directing her concern to the Canadian context, Schick (1998) describes white pre-service teachers’ investments in attaining closeness to Native bodies as “a modern day version of [the] colonialist presumption [wherein] the purpose of Native bodies remains in their service to dominant populations” (p. 184). First, however, I provide a brief overview of the contours of proximity in the solidarity encounter (see also Chapter 3).
Defining proximity in the solidarity encounter

My fundamental argument is that the colonizing relationship persists through the pursuit of proximity or closeness. That is, the (white settler/liberal) autonomous subject needs proximity to reproduce itself as such. In colonial contexts, to desire closeness (figurative or literal) reflects and maintains an individualistic standpoint. In making my assertions, I begin with Ahmed’s (2000) theory of colonial encounters as strange encounters that “involve, at one and the same time, social and spatial relations of distance and proximity” (p. 12). Strange encounters between subjects must be contextualized in terms of historical power inequities; encounters yet to come “also reopen prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference.

Encounters are meetings, then, which are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 8, emphasis in original). “Others” are constituted as such through ongoing social and spatial relations of proximity (and distance) marked by historical relations of force and contestation. I define the solidarity encounter as one such mode of proximity where “regimes of differences” (power inequalities) are concealed through stranger fetishism.

Through stranger fetishism, the existence or impact of such “prior histories of encounter” goes undetected, or rather, is obscured in/at the very moment of encounter, which then can fuel the fantasy (primarily on the part of the dominant subject) that power relations do not exist or can be equalized and/or transcended. It is this fantastical element of stranger fetishism that I find potentially revelatory for understanding intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter.

Dominant subjects employ various discursive “techniques” that serve their reinstallation as autonomous, (all) knowing subjects by re-concealing how “the stranger” and the “I” come into being. All techniques hinge on the “I’s” mobility vis-à-vis Others who are fixed in place:

The very techniques of consuming, becoming and passing are informed by access to cultural capital and knowledge embedded in colonial and class privilege which give the dominant subject the ability to move and in which “the stranger” is assumed to be knowable, seeable and hence be-able. In the end, “the stranger” becomes “the truth” insofar as it exists to confirm the ability of the Western self to find the truth. (Ahmed, 2000, p. 133, emphasis in original)

These techniques, as reflective of the desire for transcendence, often present in combination and involve formulations of proximity or closeness: calls for friendship or collaboration; the acquisition of knowledge of “strangers” or “strange” communities; and the promise of self-discovery or transformation wherein “the ‘stranger’ is the object of desire” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 115). The last category, self-discovery and transformation, involves consuming, becoming and
passing, the “three key modalities of going strange, going native” (p. 115) through which the Western subject is constituted as having the “agency to become different, rather than simply be different (the authentic stranger, or the authentic spice)” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 118).

In my analysis, I note the operation of similar techniques/discourses of proximity in the solidarity encounter. In fact, desires for proximity (and hence the discursive renderings that I call proximity discourses) appear to saturate white participant narratives. I use proximity as a container concept to refer to a spectrum of self-making behaviours (in service of liberal subject reproduction) from quite subtle to more blatant. I include a host of intertwined desires/discourses under the proximity umbrella: the desire to be accepted by or included/welcomed into an Indigenous community (which incorporates desires for forgiveness or validation); the desire to be healed or empowered, to be valued or gain a sense of purpose; an attraction to or appreciation of Indigenous culture, tradition and/or spirituality (sometimes coupled with a scathing critique of Western societal lack); and the desire to learn or be challenged. Another common feature of proximity discourses is the expectation of self-improvement or gain via engagement with the Other. In light of Ahmed’s (2000) observation that “contemporary Western culture is imbued with fantasies of becoming” (p. 119), I identify some of the “fantasies of becoming” (or fantasies of self-making) that imbue white participant interviews wherein seeking self-betterment is often at the core and which constitute a particular iteration of the quest to attain the status of self-determining subject.

By way of caveat, I’d like to clarify that proximity discourses are often co-present and/or co-constitutive in any one narrative. In my analysis, however, I artificially isolate discourses for heuristic purposes. In actuality, each participant describes a complex, interrelated bundle of reasons for doing solidarity work—bundles that would need to be kept intact to get a sense of any given person’s subjectivity. (That being said, in many cases, a hierarchy of motivations appears, meaning that some reasons for engagement seem more relevant or primary than others for a particular person.) Thus, I make no claims about a particular participant’s investments in solidarity, but rather identify discursive patterns across participant narratives in much the same way as do Schick (1998) and Heron (2007) in their respective studies.
Desiring proximity—telling (about) autobiographical moments

I begin the discussion with an anecdote from my own life. Among many statements that gave me pause while conducting the interviews, one by Ardra, an Indigenous participant, stands out. While discussing the parameters of white women’s roles as allies, she speculated about their motivations for doing solidarity work with Indigenous women:

I just questioned whether it was actually more of an opportunist reason meaning that the [white] allies are in [the group] more because they want to work with Native women than because they really want to work on these issues. So if there’s no more Native women, than they’re not getting what they really came to the group for and so it’s motivated by that rather than a commitment to what we say we are doing.

Our conversation and Ardra’s insights ignited a chain reaction in my own thinking, which conjured up, among other things, a prior interview with the white participant I call Darcie:

There’s only one Indigenous woman in [the program]. I know we had . . . an Aboriginal history class and there were no Aboriginal people in it. I don’t know; it’s an interesting phenomenon that there’s seven white people learning from an Aboriginal woman . . . but she’s the only one who can speak from that experience. So, I mean, it could be a good thing because it shows some white people are interested in learning about it; but then it’s also, like, it feels like maybe there’s something missing there.

What could be missing? Avoiding the temptation to state emphatically what Darcie must have meant, I can state with certitude what I took from her words. In the moment, I experienced an unmistakable and discomfiting sense of identification with Darcie. After the interview, I recalled various times in my life—before and during my involvement with No More Silence—when I had felt “something missing” in an encounter that I hoped would consist of interactions with Indigenous women (or men). Schick’s (1998) reading of the white desire for proximity to Indigenous people is particularly relevant here, as it also invokes a classroom environment:

Desiring the other [for white people] is a way of disassociating from the revulsion of genocide and colonization and feeling good about themselves in the process. Sometimes the desire is for Natives themselves to be available in cross-cultural classes—embodied and present—as cultural guides and Native informants to describe their experiences of the everydayness of being the other. (p. 186)

In the following excerpt from my journal, I consider the possibility that my solidarity work has been motivated by the prospect of “feeling good about” myself. I reflect on finally having felt accepted/recognized as a “good ally” by an Indigenous woman with whom I’d worked for years:

There’s something nice about this “new found fame,” but also something discomfiting. Is this what I’ve been seeking? Is this why I’ve been involved in solidarity work? I
remember years ago seeing a white woman on a panel speaking articulately about being a settler. I had quietly, internally vowed to attempt to walk this path. Have I for years been trying to arrive at the point of the good ally? Was that the end of the road for me, as opposed to Indigenous sovereignty or an end to violence against Indigenous women?

It is clear to me (now) that as a white settler woman I retain the hope of distancing myself from colonial processes and logics. I continue to understand how this is so: have I attempted to keep this “distance,” as Ahmed (2000) suggests, through seeking proximity to Indigenous women? Do I reproduce hierarchical Indigenous/settler difference by placing Indigenous women on a pedestal of sorts? In answer, I’d say that solidarity work for me remains in part a personal, that is, self-making journey, regardless (or perhaps because) of my efforts to acknowledge my privileged subject position. My own desire to be the good ally is never permanently assuaged.

I could also ask, had/have I been looking for a contemporary version of the noble savage, as LaRocque (2010) suggests is still the case for some non-Native Canadians? Consider this 1899 passage by Charles Mair, secretary to the Halfbreed Scrip Commission for northern Alberta:

There presented itself a body of respectable-looking men, as well dressed and evidently quite as independent in their feelings as any like number of average pioneers in the East. . . . One was prepared, in this wild region of forest, to behold some savage types of men; indeed, I craved to renew the vanished scenes of old. But alas! One beheld, instead, men with well-washed unpainted faces, and combed and common hair; men in suits of ordinary store-clothes, and even some with “boiled” if not laundered shirts. One felt disappointed, even defrauded. (cited in LaRocque, 2010, p. 129, emphasis added)

Mair’s 1899 longing to have his stereotypical notions of the noble savage affirmed, as LaRocque (2010) explains, is striking and, in contrast with the impulse to solidarity, decidedly not well-intentioned by twenty-first century standards. Nonetheless, I am struck by the white settler desire for proximity that seems to spill out across temporal, spatial and political spectrums, and more so by the opaqueness of my thinking around this: Darcie’s comment—and my emotive responses to it—would have remained unremarkable to me save for Ardra’s observation. Only after the interview was I able to render these incidences intelligible as indicators of my own desire for proximity, and to more fully recognize the need to historicize that desire.

**Becoming/overcoming and transformation in the solidarity encounter**

Here, I draw from selected white participant narratives (primarily those of Alicia, Evelyn, Chloe and Peggy) to provide an in-depth reading of the operation of proximity discourse. I begin with
a lengthy quote from my interview with Alicia. This particular passage usefully exemplifies the multiple layers of and interconnections between the proximity desires (and perceived benefits) that suffuse many white participant narratives to varying degrees:

Obviously people get something out of the work they’re doing or else they probably wouldn’t be doing it. Whether they’re aware of it or not is another story. I like being in the community, I like being in the culture, I feel at home, I feel like it’s a happy time for me to be in the community, to see community people coming together. I think a sense of community is an important part of mental health and wellness, and among the general population of regular Western Canadian people I don’t necessarily feel that there’s a community of people. So there’s a sense of community there that has drawn me in, that I feel a part of. I feel aligned with, as I said, the beliefs and values and the spirituality of it almost as if I was a spiritual person in a past life or something. There’s some kind of thing going on. I’ve spoken with lots of spiritual leaders and elders who’ve said to me, I’m thinking of one woman in particular who’s a healer who said to me, “I think that you were a Native woman in a past life.” . . . Maybe she meant metaphorically that there’s something in you spiritually that is driven or aligned. . . . Of all my siblings why am I the only one who’s into any activist work, who has a ton of gay friends, who has lived abroad? . . . I don’t know why that’s different for me . . . I feel a bit like a citizen of the world. I don’t feel very aligned with being Canadian. . . . But I don’t feel entirely Western in my mind either because I’ve been exposed to different cultures and peoples.

Alicia’s narrative conveys a heightened awareness of her positionality as a white settler woman, as well as how she has pursued proximity to Indigenous women (and men) through both activism and (we later learn) academic research. Recall that the pursuit of social justice is central to Alicia’s initial involvement in solidarity work (she was outraged upon learning about the disproportionately high levels of violence experienced by Indigenous women and girls). (Elsewhere, she notes that she has been continually encouraged along the way by Indigenous women to get/remain involved with Indigenous issues.) At the same time, she is forthcoming about a host of other reasons that caused and sustained her interest in solidarity. In fact, this passage touches upon nearly my entire spectrum of proximity discourses: the desire to be accepted by or included in a Native community (coupled with mentioning Western culture’s lack of communal sensibility); the desire for self-improvement (e.g., to gain a sense of purpose and to learn other ways of knowing); and an attraction to and identification with Indigenous “beliefs and values and the spirituality.” On this last point, Alicia later cites respect for women and a “non-oppositional” blending of spirituality and political activism as attractive features of the Indigenous cultures with which she is familiar. Additionally, there is the distinct but related desire to render herself as exceptional (as cast differently from her siblings and most Canadians; see Chapter 6). This passage is underscored by a sense of white ontological expansiveness
— the sense that the world is/should be available and Alicia free to move through it and be enriched by Others (hooks, 1992). Finally, her desire to be a good person is palpable.

Perhaps more significantly, Alicia’s entire narrative is indicative of white participants’ struggles to come to grips with our historic positionality as settlers and consequent desires for proximity. For one, she expresses some awareness of why doing solidarity for self-interested reasons might be problematic. After referencing a “laundry list” of colonial laws and practices including the Indian Act, residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, she states,

> You kind of have to empathize with where [Native people] are coming from. . . . I know I sound hypocritical because I just said I was carrying around that baggage, but to some extent you can’t take things personally all the time. If you really get the context of what the work is, then you really shouldn’t take things personally. If you really take things personally all the time, then maybe you’re still too caught up in the self, the ego self.

She also expresses ongoing and profound reservations about her right of access into Indigenous community contexts: “I have all these doubts that I second guess my work in the area as a white woman.” Rather than dissuade her, these doubts have led her to think more carefully about how to be an ally: “The only way I’ve made peace with it so far is to say that I see myself as someone who is here to help. It’s not someone setting the agenda. I’m here as a tool with certain skills and resources. Please use me if I can be of service.” Importantly, she understands “help” to mean someone who does not dictate the terms of the encounter. Alicia is also aware that “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (L. T. Smith, 1999, p. 1) and that lingering suspicions remained about her role as a researcher in the community:

> I worked with . . . [an] Aboriginal woman and she was wonderful to me. Open arms, “great-that-you’re-interested-in-this-let’s-get-to-work” kind of thing. I’ve had mixed reviews as a white woman coming into work in this community and I understand why. There’s a legacy of a lot of negative behaviors by white researchers, etc. coming in and trying to do the work. Some people were not okay with me being there. I’d say the majority of my story has been pretty positive. I think for the most part people have said, “Thank you for giving a shit. You didn’t have to. A lot of people don’t who are non-Native. But you seem to, so thanks for caring to some degree.” There were some people who were very suspicious of my motives and what I was doing and that kind of thing. With [this Aboriginal woman] I didn’t just get the Masters [degree], I got involved.
In “giving a shit,” Alicia can be seen as answering the aforementioned Indigenous calls for settlers to take up issues of colonial inequity. And much to her credit, she repeatedly questions her role and effectiveness as a white settler woman working in Indigenous communities.

Alicia is not alone in voicing self-reflexive misgivings about her role as white settler woman ally, including about her entitlement even to do the work. Evelyn, who I also mention above, is also “still trying to find [her] place” as a white settler woman ally to Indigenous women:

I just know I want to be on that side, and not the side I’ve been given or privileged to have been born into. That sounds weird, kind of odd. I’m not negating who I am. I haven’t figured that one out fully yet. […] I’m still trying to figure that out, is there a purpose for me to be aligned with Indigenous women? Whether I do have anything to offer because... It’s probably minimal. I don’t have the education behind me; I don’t have prospects ahead of me that... I have very minimal... I can do a few things at work. . . . But, I don’t have any leverage so in that way I’m not of much use to anybody. That’s like saying my life is useless. I think there’s a minimal amount that I can offer. That’s what I’m willing to give.

Setting aside her focus on individualistic formulations of purpose, Evelyn does not assume a capacity on her part to effect change. In fact, she seems to understand her solidarity work in self-making terms when pointing out, “I haven’t figured [myself] out fully yet.” However, the liberal desire to renounce privilege and in this case switch sides (as if it were possible) is evident. It would seem that white settler women’s moves to reinstall ourselves as (all) knowing subjects are “invariably haunted by a sense that [our] position is a precarious one ethically speaking.”

Some of what is depicted in Indigenous participant narratives as white settler self-serving behaviour is more often presented in white participant narratives as a desire for (or account of) self-improvement. Certain renditions of the story, for example, include gaining a renewed sense of self-worth through involvement in solidarity. For Chloe, solidarity work gave her life value and enabled her to heal from difficult experiences:

It helped me get over the anger I had felt from my treatment as a separated woman in Canada. It helped in the healing I had to do; it helped by doing things and meeting people who not only valued my help and understood it, but who basically appreciated it . . . and to a certain extent my life was of value then. And everybody wants to feel that their life is of some value.
Foreshadowing the discussion in Chapter 5 on so-called Western societal deficiencies, Evelyn contrasts the respect she is given as an older woman in “non-hierarchical” Indigenous contexts with the lack of respect towards feminists and the women’s movements in mainstream settings:

It’s the first time that as an older woman where my grey hair is showing gave me some level of respect without even garnering that respect. I got to eat first. By virtue of being a woman I got some respect. That harkens back to where feminism kind of failed. . . . If not everybody was onboard with [feminist ideology], it didn’t work because you’re the only one thinking you were important. If the rest of your co-workers, female or male . . . didn’t think it was important, it didn’t matter whether you were a feminist or not. In this [Indigenous] group, in these teachings, there’s a sense of everyone’s important, every voice needs to be heard, the non-hierarchal aspect of it, everyone’s valuable.26

These scenarios illustrate the role potentially played by gender in white settler self-making processes in solidarity work (and beyond). For both Chloe and Darcie, the solidarity encounter is a place where their subordinated status as women can be challenged and redressed, but where their dominant status as settlers might go (temporarily) unnoticed.

Echoing Chloe in particular, Alicia describes having acquired “an element of purpose” through working with Indigenous women (and men):

I feel in a sense that I’ve been enlightened a little bit to some of the issues. I think that’s an important area to be in. I think we’re all looking for something to drive us in our lives, to feel passionate about. Something that we feel is important. This is something I feel is important and gives me an element of purpose in my life.

A sense of fulfillment imbues all three women’s narratives: their personal self-worth has been positively reinforced through solidarity work. These examples demonstrate how the pursuit of proximity to the Indigenous Other can serve the individualistic (self-making) aspirations of the white settler woman subject.

The recuperation of self-worth is but one element of the “narratives of becoming” that mark and enable the liberal subject’s desire to be reconstituted as autonomous and (yet) dominant. In her analysis of the film Dancing with Wolves, Ahmed (2000) describes the main character Dunbar’s attempts to transform himself via his encounters with the Sioux nation on the American frontier:

Hybridisation becomes, not a means of transgression [of self], but a technique for getting closer to strangers which allows the reassertion of the agency of the dominant subject. The story remains organized around [Dunbar’s] ability to move and to overcome differences (his “difference” from them). (p. 123)
The white settler man cannot abide his “difference”—illegitimate settler status—which he must overcome. As Ahmed (2000) notes, the fantastical (il)logic of stranger fetishism allows for that:

The way in which this narrative of becoming Indian most clearly involves fantasy is in the very assumption that the structural relations of antagonism between Indians and white men can be simply overcome through the act of getting closer. [Dunbar’s] agency is central to this fantasy of overcoming; not only can he make but he can unmake the border between self and other, between natives and strangers. (p. 124, emphasis in original)

I would argue that a similar “fantasy of overcoming” what Ahmed (2000) calls “the structural relations of antagonism between Indians” (p. 124) and white women is found in some of the white participant narratives of this study. To do so, however, requires a gendered reading of the solidarity encounter, since Ahmed’s focus is on the operation of colonial masculinity.

As evident in their narratives, Chloe and Darcie clearly get something out of their encounters with Indigenous people, namely an increased sense of their value and respect as women. Their gain, in other words, is gendered in a specific way, a consequence of their positioning as white settler women. The question remains if there are other ways in which white settler desires for proximity and the attendant “narratives of becoming” are gendered. Recall the passage above in which Alicia expresses her desire for a sense of community/acceptance, something that Dunbar in fact shares. As Ahmed writes, “The shift from confrontation to becoming emerges through [Dunbar’s] desire for company; his desire for access to the multiplicity that he lacks” (p. 121). Alicia, like Dunbar, has been “drawn in” by “a sense of community” that she lacks: “I think a sense of community is an important part of mental health and wellness, and among the general population of regular Western Canadian people I don’t necessarily feel that there’s a community of people.” In this case, is there a (gendered) difference between Alicia’s and Dunbar’s respective interpellation as settler subjects? Had I also interviewed self-ascribed settler men, my response would be more fulsome and less tentative than it is here. Nonetheless, I propose that at least a partial answer can be gleaned in the following quote from Alicia’s narrative: “I started to cry because I felt so… bad that my intention was to help. And the fact that another woman was telling me that I was wrong, that I was pathologizing, that I wasn’t helping was just so deflating for me ‘cause I wanted to help so much. And to find out I had hurt someone in some way…” This suggests that (white) settler women are interpellated into the colonial context as helpers in a way that (white) settler men are not. I bracket “white” to highlight the difference that gender
and race make to settler subjectivity, e.g., analyses of settler man subjectivity should apply a race analytic.

Returning to the topic at hand—the white settler woman’s desires for and techniques of transformation, I look to the narrative of Peggy, a white participant who describes her (subject) status as “in-between” as a consequence of having spent extended periods of time working with Indigenous women (and, more recently, men):

In political organizing . . . we can get these ideas that are useful. But if you just construct them as binaries and there’s nothing in-between—and I’ve been in-between a lot of the time, all the time. . . . I was not trying to be Native [in the dream]. I was not doing any of that, but the spirit world spoke to me; according to [a Native friend] that was what happened. . . . I’ve been so deeply influenced after all these years of working with Indigenous people in various ways that I can’t say I only work from a Western perspective. And yet I can’t say that I write from a Native perspective. . . . But what is it? And it’s not just appropriation; it’s also engaging really deeply and fully and respecting Indigenous concepts, teachings. We don’t really have a word for that yet or we don’t have an acknowledgement of who we [white people] become when we’re changed through this process.

Peggy’s narrative—and subjectivity—is laden with complexity. She is clear about the political nature of the solidarity encounters in which she has been engaged. She is also concerned about (being mistaken as) misappropriating Native ideas. At the same time, she notes having been transformed by “working with Indigenous people in various ways.” Like Alicia, Peggy has gained from her encounters, in her case, a Native perspective. Are there comparable fantasies of becoming and/or overcoming harboured in their stories? Does either woman hope to supersede structural power relations through self-transformation? Peggy herself asks what transformation (of the white settler woman subject) without appropriation would look like or be called. But, why focus on transformation? To reiterate, my aim is not to make a definitive judgment about their particular cases. Without collapsing the narratives into one, I want to highlight the “narratives of becoming” that each woman articulates and the ongoing inter/subjective negotiations such narratives point toward, i.e., the need to grapple—explicitly and continually—with the structural dominance of the subject position white settler woman. Importantly, like Dunbar’s, each woman’s “narrative of becoming” presumes the possibility (if not probability) of movement in their respective identities in that they can be altered or transformed by their encounters.
Alicia subsequently confirms that her solidarity experiences have led to her self-discovery. Here she describes her participation in and reaction to an Indigenous community research forum:

It was totally different from any other academic forum I had been in. Everything was done in a circle formation and we did a really long check in. Everyone cried, people sang and did drumming. I started to realize that this work wasn’t just about yet another white woman swooping in and wanting to help; this was also a good opportunity for me as a person to expand my ways of knowing and my ways of being for the better, that I had lived a life that was relatively cognitive in nature up until then just as a virtue of the culture that we’re in. Yet here was a group of people who were being emotionally expressive . . . who were shedding a tear about whatever was moving them at the moment . . . who had a spiritual connection. These other dimensions opened up to me that I hadn’t really been exposed to prior to that . . . Here I was in a space where there was drumming and singing and smudging, and people were speaking differently about things and they were thinking differently about things. I was very intrigued as the little scientist, but I was very moved emotionally by this new sort of forum to be in.

Once again, Alicia’s account of an eye/soul-opening experience resembles my own. In this passage (from my journal circa 2008), I recall my time with MINUGUA in the 1990s. More specifically, I reflect on my memory of a hike with two Indigenous Guatemalan men:

At that moment, something shifted in me; I was struck by the power of the land beneath me, its living essence, its spirit, indeed its sadness at having borne witness to so many years of anguish and trauma. There was no explaining the slaughter of hundreds of Indigenous people, forever etched into the memory of the land beneath my feet. [. . .] Having been an avid hiker since my youth, through this particular interaction with two Q’ekchi’ men I was able to rekindle in myself a respect for the sacred, the sacredness of “Mother Earth.” At the same time, this and other experiences served to demystify for me the image of the “noble savage,” a figure who I had learned to imagine, by virtue of having dutifully consumed Western ideology, as the quintessential inferior “other.”

In employing the use of discourses around the “sacred,” my story paints a similar picture to that of Alicia’s although in a different context: I had been spiritually (and politically) transformed through my “interaction with two Q’ekchi’ men.” (I discuss some Indigenous references to sacredness below.) While not a solidarity encounter with Indigenous women in Canada, my tale of transformation merits inclusion given its striking parallels with that of Alicia’s; in both cases, it would seem that our structural dominance as settler/extranjera overdetermined our “strange encounters” with the Indigenous Other.

In the above passages, both Alicia and I describe our transformation as an opening up of a previously underdeveloped emotional/spiritual side. We again appear to resemble Dunbar from
Dances with Wolves: our respective self-discoversies are “mediated as a discovery of the truth about the Indians” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 123) where the “Indians” remain Other:

Although the narrative involves his becoming other, it does so by positioning the Indians as a means to his self-discovery. The Indians remain other—they remain at the service of a white, masculine story of (self)-discovery. Rather than being annihilated as a threat, they become reincorporated to provide what is lacking in him self. . . . Becoming could be read as the de-forming and re-forming of the white masculine face through the absorption of the other. . . . The story of transformation could be read differently—as the story of the ability to transform oneself. (p. 123)

Once again, the role of gender in constituting white settler subjectivity is not entirely clear in these examples. However, read in their entireties, Alicia’s interview and my journal suggest that the difference lies in the white settler woman subject’s residual doubt about her transformation. The question becomes, is she a more or differently haunted settler than her male counterpart?

I want to hone in on the final part of Alicia’s passage where she says, “I was very intrigued as a little scientist.” Despite her transformation for the better (through proximity), Alicia retains a distance from the Other or, perhaps better said, puts the Other at a distance—what Ahmed (2000) describes as the “distancing perspective of the masculine, colonising gaze” (p. 120, emphasis in original). I am reminded of Dawn’s response when asked about her motivation for working on the issue of the missing and murdered Indigenous women: “There’s two aspects to it. One is, it has a face for me, and that face, really, is my [non-Indigenous] sister.” Earlier in the interview, Dawn spoke about the impact of this sister on her own social justice leanings:

My sister had a difficult life. I don’t think she worked the [Vancouver] Downtown Eastside, but she definitely got involved with shady characters. She wasn’t an alcoholic, she wasn’t a drug user, but she hung out with people like that because she felt that that’s as good as it got for her. [. . .] That’s sort of all women in a sense, who are seeking to make it in the world, and there’s just a lot of pitfalls out there waiting for us in many, many ways. So there’s that. Then there’s another aspect, is I love... It’s fun to pick an issue, for me, that is stuck and say, “How do we unstick this?” . . . It’s a challenge to say, “How do we move this sucker?” I enjoy that. . . . It’s like, “Oh my god.” It’s an edge for me.

Initially, Dawn makes no distinction between the circumstances of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, which could be problematic in and of itself, as I discuss above. However, she keeps Indigenous women at a distance in much the same way as Alicia when describing how she loves a challenge (also included in my proximity rubric). Not coincidentally, both narratives invoke the liberal subject’s rationale capacity and discernment. What sustains this persistent
distancing of Indigenous women (and men) as Other? Moreton-Robinson (2000) provides insights in her analysis of white feminist academics’ intellectual engagement with racism:

Here the person’s relationship to racism is one through which she enhances her transformative potential as a feminist. Her intellectual engagement with racism inspires her and enhances her personal development. However, racism here too is treated as something public and external to the subject position middle-class white woman; it is something that one gets involved in by choice. (p. 142)

Through distancing, Moreton-Robinson explains, white feminist academics perform themselves as disembodied (i.e., rational), individualistic subjects who remain outside of power relations. As I discuss above, white settler women subjects seem predisposed to seeing our involvement in political struggle/solidarity (including as academics) as a matter of personal “choice,” which in turn can “enhance [our] personal development” (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 142).

I suggest that this distancing has an historical predecessor—what Yeğenoğlu (1998) calls the “simulation of sovereign masculine discourse” (p. 107) performed by the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist subject, also theorized by scholars such as Burton (1994), Grewal (1996), Lewis (1996) and Spivak (1985). Doubly positioned as both colonizer and colonized, unable to secure authoritative selfhood in the metropole, this subject turned to the colonies where she could simulate sovereign masculine discourse, but primarily with respect to Other women. By aligning herself with patriarchal empire—and performing a masculinized, universalizing gesture—the white woman could secure entrance into modernity as a universal, rights-endowed subject. Perhaps this explains the partial transferability of Ahmed’s (2000) treatment of white settler masculine colonial subjectivity—the white settler woman subject models her Self after the masculine subject, a subject who has yet to have his hierarchical status removed.

To summarize my theorizing thus far, the white settler woman sometimes mobilizes discourses of proximity to re-instantiate herself as the autonomous subject, the “I” whose liberal agency is exercised and confirmed through its capacity to access, observe, know and/or become like the Other. Ahmed (2000) explains, “Narratives [of becoming] which enable the one to get closer to the many . . . are premised on epistemic authority” (p. 125), which is concealed and thus re-solidified through various techniques such as the strategy of claiming false equivalences. As an example, Ahmed (2000) cites academics’ efforts to re-designate informants as co-authors, as happened in the “Bell controversy” (see also Chapter 3):
But to say that ethnographers should rename their informants as co-authors would be to conceal how this debt also involves forms of appropriation and translation: it would conceal that the ones who are known have not authorised the forms of writing and knowledge produced by ethnographers, but have been authorised by it. To say that Nelson was not a co-author in any “equal” sense of the term, is to point to the way in which Bell’s debt to her informants does not mean an overcoming of the power relations that allow the ethnographer to transform others into strangers, in order to mark out “a field (of knowledge).” (pp. 63–64)

This brings to mind a scenario described by Lydia, one of the Indigenous participants in my study:

When [a white woman] organizes an event in collaboration with other people, with [Native] women, I find that sometimes what the white women are doing is they’re working with a [Native] woman who will acquiesce to them . . . so it’s not genuine ally collaboration. . . . [a woman who will] cave to their needs, let them take the lead. [Native women] don’t have the same amount of power as that other person. Actually, that person has power over them. . . . Also, selecting abstracts with an Indigenous woman, where [the white woman has] power over her does not make it ally theory. You’re still exercising your power in selecting abstracts and who gets published in your book. Just because they have a body beside them that is an Indigenous woman, doesn’t mean it’s truly collaborative.

Here, Lydia renders hollow some white women’s claims of non-hierarchical collaboration attained through proximity—i.e., “they have a [Native] body beside them”—whether in event organization or academic publishing. Such claims work similarly to the ways in which statements of co-authorship can conceal the “forms of appropriation and translation” endemic to many academic/activist projects. Such claims can work to conceal preexisting power relations that establish the terms of the encounter.

To continue with my analysis, I turn to Chloe, who positions herself as a white woman in her response to my CFP and who when interviewed shares her life story with little prompting. Her “narrative of becoming” seems particularly suggestive of how the desire to transform the settler Self through the Indigenous Other can unfold, and is replete with the kind of fantastical elements described by Ahmed (2000) in her analysis of Dances with Wolves:

The tale of becoming . . . involves fantasy at the level of the fascination with the “strangers” that the subject enters a relationship with through becoming. It involves fantasy at a more structural level in terms of the organization of the narrative itself by a particular self–other dynamic. In other words, the story of becoming involves not just a deconstructing of white masculinity, but its restructuring in relation to the other, who ceases to be a stranger, but instead becomes one’s “native self.” (p. 122)
The structure of Chloe’s narrative is indeed organized by a “particular self–other dynamic,” which includes both a de- and restructuring of white femininity, in this case. About a third into the interview, Chloe makes repeated mention of her “Native self,” explaining that she moved to her current location in part to be closer to her distant “Native roots”:

I’m not an outsider working with [Indigenous women]. [. . .] I’m one who got by all the doors, through all the doors. I’m a little ahead of them in progression, in the good things of life. I’m trying to help. Again, it’s something that we’re trying to help people who we, where we’re related to them, there’s blood ties, get ahead too. It’s not a social service.

When we gender Ahmed’s theory, we find an example of the doubly positioned white settler woman subject “becoming” a “helper” of Other women through proximity. This “particular self–other dynamic” is further layered, however. When pressed, Chloe explains that she thinks of her work with Indigenous women as neither solidarity nor charity, but as a process of reconnection with extended members of a family. Chloe describes her desire and efforts to change what she considers her estranged status in relation to a specific Indigenous community:

I feel that it’s more a family feeling than solidarity. I feel that they are relatives. [. . .] We’re not going [to the upcoming celebration in a nearby Native community] to stay strangers; we’re going there to see distant relatives. [Solidarity] is not the feeling I have towards Native people because I’m aware that there’s this link, family link.

Invoking (only to reject) the concept of “strangers,” Chloe seems to claim the status of Other, taking her out of the political and into the personal realm. In the process, she appears to perform a blend of the “three key modalities of going strange, going native: consuming, becoming and passing” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 115). Even as she appears in these passages to blur and thus level the Indigenous/non-Indigenous hierarchical relation, not unlike Alicia and Dawn above, she ultimately retains the distinction and her superior position therein: “I’m a little ahead of them in progression, in the good things of life.”

Chloe manages to occupy two seemingly contradictory subject positions at once, bringing us back to the paradoxical positioning of the white settler/imperialist woman/feminist subject. How is this accomplished? Ahmed (2000) identifies passing as one of the techniques employed by the dominant subject to retain her superior position: “The difference [between self and other] is disavowed in the assumption that the subject has assumed the place of the other; and yet in assuming the place of the other rather than simply being the other, the difference is perpetually reaffirmed. . . . Passing is here the fantasy of an ability (or a technique) to become without becoming” (p. 132). In claiming Indigenous ancestry, Chloe comes perilously close to glossing
over “the processes whereby [Other] subjects come to be seen as ‘having’ a prior and fixed identity” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 128). The question remains, is Chloe attempting to level the social antagonisms of colonial history that mark her as a privileged white settler subject?

A closer look at the “consuming” modality of “going strange, going native” is useful here. Drawing on hooks’ insights into the racialized dynamics of intersubjective relations, Anderson (2000) discusses her experience of being Othered as a Cree/Métis woman in a colonial context: “Sometimes people glow all over you about your heritage; others want to use you as some kind of showpiece. It is a sexualized identity, which, in my case, has, for example, resulted in the humiliating experience of being called ‘my little Indian’ as a measure of affection” (pp. 106–107). “This syndrome,” Anderson (2000) says, is encapsulated by hooks’ (1992) seminal notion of “eating the Other,” a phenomenon whose central logic involves the desire for proximity:

People with a desire for “eating the Other” do not see themselves operating within a racist framework; rather, they think they are progressive in their desire to make contact. hooks suggests that relations of this nature may further be used to assuage guilt and “take the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection.” (p. 107)

There is a strong parallel between the “defiant gesture” of “eating the Other” and Ahmed’s (2000) depiction of “going strange, going native”: proximity is the vehicle for concealing historical relations of domination and subordination, and for re-establishing the autonomy and innocence of dominant subjects in both. Here too, I suggest, a gender analytic is needed. Given the hegemony of heteropatriarchy, the white settler woman subject may be more likely to want to “befriend the Indian” (and then help her) rather than possess her sexually. Either way, two common denominators persist: “a desire to cross some kind of frontier [and] to be transformed by the experiences” and the hope that getting closer “is proof that we have all transcended the racism [including its colonial forms] that plagues the Americas” (Anderson, 2000, p. 107).

To make definitive conclusions about any one white participant’s “narrative of becoming” would be speculative (not to mention overly positivistic). I cannot know, for example, if Chloe or any other white participant is “consuming, becoming or passing” as Other in order to assuage their white settler guilt (in fact, Chloe flatly rejects the insinuation that guilt has been operative in any way in her own solidarity endeavors). Moreover, as I discuss in Chapter 3, a subject’s individual intentions are not always (or, often) relevant; by virtue of being structurally positioned, a subject is endowed with a certain privilege and role in power dynamics. That said,
a generalized desire for proximity clearly traverses participant narratives, and one white participant, Peggy, clearly corroborates a main theoretical supposition of this study—that a desire for legitimacy undergirds settler subjectivity, notwithstanding settlers’ struggles to come to terms with that desire. Peggy has many decades of solidarity work under her belt and speaks articulately to her own desire to be accepted by the Indigenous community:

I will never be… I don’t think in my life time I will ever be completely accepted within an Indigenous community, not fully. And yet that could be my only community, if I moved in, lived there, whatever. . . . I understand. But, that’s the complexity of belonging and not belonging; being part of, not being part of. And I think we all have a yearning, certainly I find it in myself, for unity, for being one, for resolving the differences, for being fully accepted. And it’s hard to accept the limitations on that. And yet they’re real.

As noted earlier, Peggy has a social justice bent and clear understanding of her structural positionality as a settler, which is a large part of what has led her to solidarity work. Peggy poignantly describes the personal stakes that, for her, stand alongside the political stakes of an anticolonial project—a sense of belonging. As to whether or not most white settlers in solidarity work feel similarly, she answers,

I really don’t know. I shouldn’t say that’s what all people feel. I don’t know… But certainly I know a lot of white activists have that desire [to be part of a Native community]. And I think it’s partly wanting to belong here on this continent; wanting to feel like you can be here legitimately, ethically, fully. And that also you can be proud of who you are, what your heritage is and what your ancestors did. I’d like to feel that.

In Ahmed’s (2000) lexicon, attaining such complete belonging would constitute the ultimate transformation for the settler subject. And Peggy comes close to, but stops just short of recognizing the degree to which this seemingly personal desire of white activists to belong—“legitimately, ethically, fully”—is in fact indicative of and undergirds collective settler subjectivity. When asked if she thought she would always have this desire, in particular, the desire “to not be one of those bad settlers,” Peggy responds without hesitation:

Yes, of course! The way that you want to be part of [Indigenous struggle]. And you just want to be part of that excitement and positive change and creativity. But then it’s not quite yours. Or you think, “Oh this culture; I like this about this culture or I like that about the culture; it’s so much better in this or that way than my culture.” It’s really easy to feel this way. And if these people are your friends—some of these people are my best friends, and yet I can never fully join them in certain things. That’s painful.

Once again, Peggy recognizes, but can’t quite give up, her desire to belong. Her focus on cultural difference, as opposed to the structural imbalances in Indigenous/non-Indigenous power
relations, keeps the liberal subject pursuit of proximity in motion. What would happen if white settler subjects acknowledged and then gave up this desire; (how) might intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter then unfold? In Chapter 7, I take up these and other questions related to the possibility of non-colonizing solidarity. In Chapters 5 and 6, I continue to unpack Peggy’s statement both to further discuss white settler women’s mobilization of proximity discourses for the purposes of national belonging, and to take up the interrelated mobilization of exceptionalism discourse. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze white settler women’s individualistic self-making practices from a different angle by looking to Indigenous women’s narrations of the solidarity encounter.

**Indigenous Women and White Desire**

Turning to Indigenous participant critiques of white settler women’s individualistic investments in solidarity, I’d first like to reiterate the position taken by many Indigenous participants: non-Indigenous solidarity is necessary, important and possible. What’s more, several Indigenous participants find that extreme cases of blatant colonial attitudes or behaviours, while they exist, are not the norm. Nonetheless, they recognize ever-present patterns of self-serving desires among some white women that they describe in terms of “neediness.” Moreton-Robinson (2000) found a similar observation “in the life writing of Indigenous women, [in which] white women are represented as being impersonal, individualistic and egocentric with interests to protect” (p. 19). In what follows, I point to how both the spectre of the liberal subject and notions of proximity figure into Indigenous participant critiques of some white women’s comportment in the solidarity encounter.

Among the less flattering phrases used in their critiques is the “needy do-gooder.” Several Indigenous participants note the invariable presence of the white woman “needy do-gooder,” a subject whose personal reasons (need/wish to do good) overshadow or displace any political reasons she might have for engaging in solidarity work. As Lydia puts it, “If you think about it, there are probably going to be some non-Indigenous women who feel compelled out of guilt and sympathy and empathy [to engage in solidarity]. I think that’s great, as long as you’re not a leech about it. As long as you don’t suck out of us, whatever that is.” When read in light of the intersubjective dynamics discussed above, it seems clear that Lydia is alluding to the act of settler self-making in relation to and at the expense of the Indigenous Other.
This brings me to what I consider a profound message to emerge from Indigenous narratives: white settler women’s behaviours in the solidarity context (and beyond) are colonizing when they are invasive in either metaphorical or literal terms. In this way, Indigenous participants not only invoke the concept of proximity when describing white women’s “needy”/self-serving attitudes and behaviours, they also render its problematic aspects more comprehensible. Lee invokes the sacred in defining any attitude, belief or behaviour that transgresses the bounds of the “cherished space” between us as colonizing:

Well, [there’s colonizing] when there’s invasion involved and the other person has to push back to get a space. [Carol Lynne: Whether that’s in a solidarity encounter or…] Exactly, or anywhere else. So there’s a space between us that’s the cherished thing. In my language, this is the home of the breath that we share. Both our breath is here. Not just my breath, not just your breath, but our common breath. The sound we make here is going to go around the world. It’ll take a hundred years. It’ll come right back to this spot. That’s sacred. You can’t get more sacred than that. So this is what we cherish. So when you come too close and take up this space, then the cherished thing is gone. So [solidarity] requires non-invasive behaviours.

I do not intend here to compare or contrast my use of “sacred” with that of Lee’s, but rather to provide a sense of how her use of the concept fits within a broader Indigenous literature. For example, Lee’s reference to breath can be situated in what Goeman (2008) calls “the intergenerational philosophy of the breath,” which, in her study of Native women’s literature, “connects all living entities to each other as relatives” (p. 298). Shawn Wilson (2012) conveys a similarly relevant message of connection in describing the “spaces between things” (e.g., between people, or between people and concepts) as sacred. In his words, “when bridging that space,” we are “entering the sacred.” Within such a paradigm, our intersubjective performances as subjects in the shared, mutually constructed space of the solidarity encounter or contact zone (Pratt, 2008) matter, and ineluctably so. The task for white settler would-be allies becomes how to strive for ethical relations in a space always already marked by colonial power differences.

In what follows, I recount how white women’s deportment and practices in the solidarity encounter, particularly when overdetermined by do-gooder “neediness,” are often read by Indigenous women as invasive, that is, as embodying the desire to “come too close and take up” the sacred space that is “our common breath” (Lee). By taking into account the Indigenous woman subject’s experience of the white desire for proximity as “neediness,” I make visible the constitutive underside of the white settler woman’s desire “to help,” which is the desire/need to “be helped” by Indigenous women in her process of self-making.
Adamant in their assertions, Indigenous participants perceive some white women as entering into the solidarity space to pursue their own agenda, however defined, at the expense of Indigenous political goals. White women are seen as pursuing their personal interests in both blatant and subtle ways. When asked about what causes tension in the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women, Lydia mentions a range of behaviours on the part of white women who seem to be in solidarity primarily, if unconsciously, for personal/individualistic reasons:

White women not being able to handle it, and they run to the patriarchy, or they have their own agenda, and so they know that there’s too many layers of lateral violence to deal with women, so they go to the men, so they push a patriarchal agenda. Again, they’re not standing in solidarity. They’re not being collaborators. They’re not genuinely being allies. They’re not standing behind us and saying, “What do you want us to do? And we’re willing to deal with all the oppression that you have . . . We know you’re going to be angry towards us. We know you’re going to even possibly be racist towards us, but we’re going to stand behind you instead of running away from what you’re going to do to us to a patriarch.” . . . That’s, I think, my most crucial analysis of what white women are doing to us. It’s because they’re not coming to us to be true allies and collaborators. They’re coming to us to see what they can get. . . . Academic gain, economic gain, political gain. A lot of them have their own issues, and they feel like they need to be Indigenous people’s saviours. A lot of them, I think, are spiritually disenfranchised, so they run to Indigenous people to get their spiritual enfranchisement. . . . I find they’re impinging on us, and we don’t have the resources to help them with their issues. . . . They shouldn’t be coming to us for help. But that’s no better than academics who come to us for a topic.

Importantly, Lydia’s comprehensive portrayal of the self-interested white settler woman ally in solidarity work—in pursuit of academic, economic, political and spiritual gain—involves the concept of proximity: “I find they’re impinging on us, and we don’t have the resources to help them with their issues.” Lydia is the only participant to note a gendered moment of encounter where white women “run to the patriarchy” and then “push a patriarchal agenda.” Lydia’s observation suggests that privileging the political stakes of solidarity work (over the personal) would assist white settler women to withstand personal criticism and stay engaged.

For three other Indigenous participants, Danielle, Kellie and Gabriela, the composite figure of the “needy do-gooder” personifies misguided white settler investments in solidarity work with Indigenous women. According to Danielle, this (usually, but not exclusively) white settler ally often appears arrogant and egotistical; they “need to have a cause; they need to do good; they need the attention; they need the power; they need the control.” This subject resembles Heron’s (2007) development worker in that they both embody the need “to construct a sense of self in
moral terms” (p. 34). Also noting do-gooder arrogance, Kellie describes a case of solidarity gone wrong wherein a self-ascribed white woman ally is spurred on by a sense of entitlement:

[The two Native men] were saying, “Do you know how disrespectful this looks?” And she was like, “But I’ve got every right to own this because this is the feather that I have and I’m studying in the shaman school and you’ve got no right to criticize me and my ability to be a shaman.” [They went on,] “But you understand that you’re trying to make this a welcoming solidarity space, but the first thing a Native person sees is that? They’re going to want nothing to do with you. . . . You don’t even deserve to own this [feather].” . . . The worst part is . . . maybe if she was like, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know”—[but] she just didn’t care. . . . It was her damn right as a white person to do whatever [she] wanted. . . . She’s claiming she’s in solidarity . . . [that this is] a solidarity space.

Kellie’s observation provides a glimpse into a local manifestation of the colonial continuity that Heron (2007) calls “planetary consciousness”: “Both as individuals and as national subjects, white middle-class Canadians and other Northerners continue to construct through the prism of a planetary consciousness a sense of self in moral terms that expresses the entitlement and obligation bourgeois subjects feel to ‘help’ Others” (p. 34). As Danielle, Kellie and Heron (2007) point out, the liberal subject feels both entitled and obliged to engage in activities that would establish her moral rectitude. Such feelings of entitlement and obligation conjure up a related aspect of liberal subjectivity—the arrogant belief that we, as individuals, have the power (and hence must act) to effect change. To clarify, I found little indication of such a brazen approach among white participants in this study, which suggests either that they are exceptional or more likely, that entitlement in the contemporary solidarity encounter is nuanced in its manifestations (see also Chapter 6). Moreover, as noted above, most white participants seem to remain troubled about having an entitled role in solidarity work.

Reflecting on her coalition work with non-Indigenous women in particular, Gabriela uses strong imagery to describe the ultimately debilitating effects of the need to do/be good on solidarity efforts: “There are [non-Indigenous] people . . . who are really needy and want to engage with you in a way that you want to really move away rather than toward . . . well, kind of like a succubus, the ones who are kind of . . . You know what a succubus is? It sucks the blood out.” Gabriela hones in on a central feature of the gamut of needy behaviors described by Indigenous women: its invasiveness, whether metaphoric (e.g., draining Indigenous women’s psychic or emotional energy) or embodied (e.g., taking up too much physical space). Long-time Indigenous activist Lee also identifies a settler desire of proximity that can interfere with solidarity efforts. While this passage does not include a gendered analysis of the solidarity encounter (which Lee
provides elsewhere in the interview), it suggests two things: the existence of a generalized settler desire for proximity that takes specifically gendered and racialized forms; and that colonialism is indeed an over-determining factor in Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations:

The Oka Crisis required a higher level of engagement, and nobody I worked closely with saw themselves as anything but a settler in that moment, because it required that kind of deeper understanding of what the relationship was, a deeper understanding of what we were doing, a higher level of commitment. All of that sort of looking inside and looking outside, and understanding history, and understanding what the future...all of this. . . . But to do a project that’s got an anticolonial outcome, you don’t have to have a view of yourself as a settler. But I will tell you that you will run into difficulty working with Aboriginal people unless you’re clear about that. Because I think the expectation is that they’ll get close to us. People who don’t have an understanding of the colonial relation want to be close to us. That’s been my experience. And that doesn’t happen and then they’ll be disappointed.

In this passage, Lee raises the intriguing idea that (white) settler investments in solidarity happen along a continuum, a point to which I return in the final chapter. She also touches on several key arguments of this chapter and overall study. First, she notes the desire for proximity that infuses settler solidarity work, especially among those who do not have a solid grasp of their historic subject position as settlers. She also identifies the disappointment of some settler allies when they do not achieve closeness, a scenario which resonates with my experience of solidarity work recounted above. Finally, Lee corroborates the importance of anticolonial analysis. She implies that a “higher level of engagement” in solidarity work is sustained by “that kind of deeper understanding of . . . the [colonial] relationship.”

Another common feature of Indigenous narratives on white desire is the undue burden it can place on Indigenous individuals or groups to assume a caretaking or educative role in the presence of white subjects. Indigenous women are asked to educate, take care of, cede space and/or take a back seat to white women (and men) in meetings or events. Indigenous women describe these particular white pursuits as a major limitation to the solidarity encounter that is temporarily overcome in rare instances—where the burden is lifted, where Indigeneity doesn’t have to be explained or where whiteness doesn’t “matter.” To be clear, the issue is not whether or not Indigenous women are up to the task. This articulation of the problem risks reproducing the Indigenous subject as damaged and inferior—and in need of helping/saving. Rather, the point is not only that such demands are experienced by Indigenous women as invasive/colonial, but that they can impede solidarity efforts. Further, as manifestations of the white desire for
proximity, these demands can set in motion, as discussed above, the reproduction of the white settler woman as autonomous subject.

According to Indigenous participants, certain white settler comportments in the solidarity encounter can “hijack” what should be a space dedicated to Indigenous political concerns. In what follows, some participant narratives refer to “mixed” spaces of women and men. As with the above examples, however, they provide valuable articulations of generalized white settler desire. I begin with Kellie:

The meeting was over, essentially. He hijacked it with his own pain. . . . That’s where I think it becomes, not cultural appropriation, but there’s a boundary that’s been crossed which you haven’t been invited over. Because suddenly it wasn’t about the meeting, it wasn’t about that one woman sharing her pain or why she felt the word genocide was important and her story and her collective cultural story she was telling. Once again a white man has hijacked the whole space. [As someone said], “Now, again, we have to stop what we’re doing in our own healing to make sure you’re okay. Even though you’re our oppressors, we have to make sure you’re okay?” . . . What a waste of energy that is.

Rubina, quoted earlier, reacts to a similar scenario: “It’s that settler people and white people, white people specifically, get to cry about [Indigenous oppression]. Why the fuck do they get to cry about it and I don’t?” For her part, Lydia mentions having “to moderate my emotions about what colonization has done because it’s offensive to a lot of people, but I feel like I’m extra burdened.” Ursula provides one last example in recalling a workshop on decolonization during which a white woman stood up and said “something like . . . ‘I just feel so bad.’ And then she would start crying, ‘But it’s not really my fault because I was born into this.’ . . . Then having to tiptoe around really naming things or calling people out because we don’t want to hurt people’s feelings.” In these scenarios, Indigenous women are once again impinged upon, as Lydia puts it, by the personal investments and corresponding self-making processes of white settler subjects—women and sometimes men—at the expense of the political agenda on the table. Further, the onus is on Indigenous women not only to control their emotive responses (e.g., anger) to Indigenous dispossession, but also to comfort the emotive reactions of white settlers to the same.

A subset of Indigenous women mentions how they are repeatedly asked to teach (white) settlers about Indigenous peoples and/or their struggles. Zainab Amadahy, while recognizing that white settlers will likely need guidance in some form at some point to engage effectively as allies, draws parallels with the similar, long-standing critique of women of color in North American feminist circles:
Take your supports where you can find them. I know you need healing, but I’m not going to heal you. I’m not here for that. It’s kind of like that whole question African Americans used to say, “I don’t want to be your anti-racist teacher.” So it’s kind of like, “I don't want to be your healer. Deal with that. I understand you have to go through it. . . . Come to me when you’re ready to deal with it.” That’s how I feel about it.

Relatedly, Indigenous women are commonly asked to frame ideas in white settler terms. Rubina associates the demand that Indigenous women speak in terms palatable to white settler audiences with colonial subjectivity more broadly: “So much of my world, I find, is that. We’re not listened to until we can put ourselves in the ideas of the colonizer. That happens no matter where we are, be it solidarity, be it . . . Very rarely have I found that my experience as an Aboriginal person can stand as just that unless it’s equated to something the settler can understand.” Mahrouse (2009) traces a similar tendency on the part of citizen journalists:

Furthermore, if one pays attention to how the activists described their political and moral commitments . . . it becomes evident that some understood themselves to be arbiters of trustworthiness and automatically assumed the role of judge or truth arbiter. Their determination to obtain the truth, however well-intentioned, resulted in an “investigative tenor” . . . insofar as they often doubted what they were being told and felt the need to discern the authenticity of the personal stories they heard. Most helpful for the purposes of understanding this dynamic is Said’s (1978) observation that racialized binaries “naturally” set up the Westerner not only as a spectator, but also as a judge of the Others’ behaviour (p. 109). In this sense, the activists’ presence is imbued with a racialized function of surveillance and a measure of accountability. (p. 667)

Despite being the learner seeking knowledge, the Western citizen journalist adopts a doubtful, “investigative tenor” and positions herself as capable of judging (knowing) the Others’ truths. Both Rubina and Mahrouse are not alone in alluding to a seeming paradox in white settler subjectivity that nonetheless adheres to colonial logic: the dominant (white settler’s) need to learn from the Other can often coexist with an unrelenting desire to re-constitute oneself as the one-who-knows (in contrast to the unknowing Other). 31 Echoing Rubina, Zainab explains how the need to retain the ethnocentric parameters of white settler knowledge production and white Western supremacist identity can be linked to the practice of tokenizing Indigenous people:

I think that there’s been a difference for the most part . . . in working with people of colour, because I think people of colour kind of understand the position that I’m in and the nuances and the complexities and the contradictions of the position that I’m in [as Native to Turtle Island, but not Ontario]. That’s a generalization, because it’s not true with everybody. With whites, I kind of felt like they were looking at me through a set of lenses that said “Indian.” So if they needed a token, or a representative, or an interpreter, or a door-opener, I was the go-to person for a very long time for many, many people because they didn’t know any other Indians, or they didn’t like the other Indians that
they knew, or they didn’t think that the other Indians that they knew were competent, or could function in their world and could understand their analysis or share their analysis.

Writing about Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations on a broader scale, Janet Conway (2011) similarly posits that Indigenous movements, especially smaller-scale, rural-based movements, are less intelligible or even unintelligible as political movements to non-Indigenous movements unless they can negotiate their participation on Western terms:

The diversities and particularities arising from place-based, cultural, cosmological and linguistic differences among the political discourses and practices of indigenous movements render some of them more intelligible and recognizable as “political” movements and groups of civil society, including to the leadership of the [World Social Forum]. Some indigenous movements’ discourses are more articulated to those of major non-indigenous/Western/modern political traditions. (p. 25)

Noting the depth of decolonization work awaiting white settlers, Ryah speaks to the extensive temporal and contextual reach of Western (white) thinking that seems to mark Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations: “I really over-simplify things sometimes, but it’s such a deep level of white supremacist thinking that their reality is the only reality that could possibly exist in the universe. . . . Everyone goes through their own process [of decolonization] where they’re in denial for a bit.” She cites repeated displays of white settler guilt as a typical scenario:

[White settler guilt] impacts [the solidarity encounter] because if somebody who’s non-Native reveals an aspect of their guilt too much—I mean, you could do it once and we can all help and talk through things—if you continue to have the same mental block, where the Indigenous person has already explained to you once why they might feel this way, or why it should be done this way . . . then I think that will stop further conversation. The Indigenous person’s not willing to invest even more time because it’s your issues. . . . When I say “you,” I mean non-Indigenous or white women. You need to have your own journey. . . . It’s like white people, they want you to prove to them something, prove to them the impacts of colonization. (Ryah)

When asked to define what would constitute a colonial dynamic, Teresa also alludes to white supremacist thinking and ties this thinking to the host of personal/individualistic desires that can accompany white women into the solidarity encounter:

Whenever there is a [colonial dynamic], it comes from that . . . learned place: the need to be the authority when they’re not the authority, or the need to be heard and to be recognized when usually you’re the only one who is heard and recognized. Well now’s the time to be a bit complacent in that need. . . . Yeah, it’s always, always coming from that place. The other stages of colonization that Burgess talks about are surface accommodation and tokenism. I think that happens a lot in circles. There’s only a token understanding of what’s going on. Indigenous women are only accommodated on the surface, but when it comes to Indigenous women delineating any type of structure of
solidarity, it’s not easily understood by a Western woman, because the structure is so completely opposite. Like the structure of the medicine wheel versus the patriarchal, capitalist structure of the pyramid. It’s a process of thought that needs to be undone in order for solidarity to really work well.

In Teresa’s theorization, white women are bound by the dictates of a Western authoritative mentality to re-centre themselves as agentic, knowing subjects. In citing “the need to be the authority,” she also broadens the field of characteristics that can be embodied in the figure of the needy do-gooder. Such references to the arrogance and ethnocentrism of white settler subjects are consistent across Indigenous women’s narratives.

The constitutive link between desiring to learn from the Other and asserting one’s status as superior (white) knower is not always easily discernible. The link becomes less opaque (and the paradox lifted) when understood in terms of Heron’s (2007) colonial continuities, more specifically “the interrelated pulls of dread and desire, and fear of and fascination with racialized difference which has marked white engagement with the Other from the era of empire” (p. 34). She describes how imperial subjectivity operates to maintain hierarchical relations:

The desire to know the Other takes various forms: romanticizing, identifying with (being “at one with”, caring for, saving, being seduced by, and being transformed through this relationship. Nevertheless, binary relations remain unchanged throughout: it is a question of “them” being known by “us,” and being assessed by and understood through “our” standards. (Heron, 2007, p. 34)

Ahmed (2000) further clarifies how the desire to “know” the Other constitutes, rather than breaks down, the binary relationship between the “we” and those constituted as “strange/strangers.” In fact, the constitutive link between white settler superiority and the desire to learn from/know about the Other became evident during my fieldwork. I was at a public event organized primarily by Indigenous women when the MC, given the short time remaining, invited one final question/comment from the audience. Without hesitation, a white woman took the floor and proceeded to ask a question only tangentially related to the event’s topic. After getting an initial response from the panel, she asked a follow-up question, whereupon the MC intervened and gave the final word to an Indigenous woman. In my recollection of the event, the tension in the room was palpable and left me wondering about Indigenous women’s reactions to the white woman’s words, which included a declaration of her self-ascribed status as ally.32 When asked about this event that she too had attended, Indigenous participant Wanda shared her
thoughts on the colonial nature of the exchange. First, she felt that the white woman asserted her own agenda (asking a question not central to the topic) and her will to be heard: “We were down to the last five minutes. [Her] question should take 20 minutes to answer . . . and it had nothing to do with the film.” Wanda continued as if speaking directly to the woman, “We weren’t here to educate you on our issues. We’re here to get support on our issues.” For Wanda, “that’s a woman who wanted to be heard.” Second, in Wanda’s assessment, the white woman made a judgment veiled as a question, which was in turn laced with the desire to instruct in the proper ways of being—a behavior associated with a much unchanged historical, and gendered, missionary impulse:

I guess it’s that she was trying to change us. Or she was trying to blame us. So blame us for being on the highway, blaming the women for being raped and murdered. . . . We were savages. We didn’t know any better. So when [the missionaries] got here, they had to change us. We don’t know any better. We don’t know what we’re doing, so you need to change it. . . . “So you can do it my way, because I know what I’m doing, and it’s better than you, and it’s what we’re going to do.”

Last, Wanda took issue with the white woman’s self-ascription as an ally to Indigenous women, explaining that an ally is “somebody that I don’t have to educate every day of the week about who I am. They just understand and get it and respect that. That I’m not always defending myself or who I am and why I think the way that I think.” For Wanda, as for Ryah and Rubina, the white settler woman ally’s need to learn from Indigenous women often—although, importantly, not always—is accompanied by the desire for confirmation of one’s own knowledge/superiority, i.e., an affirmation of her liberal/colonial self. Wanda’s comment suggests that learning about Indigeneity should not be the focus of solidarity work, a point to which I return in Chapter 5.

Indigenous women launch firm critiques of white settler desires to be healed by and/or to learn from Indigenous women, desires that can lead to invasive, parasitic behaviour through the depletion of resources (time, energy, physical space) that would otherwise be controlled and directed in Indigenous terms. At the same time, several Indigenous participants are sympathetic to the challenges of negotiating the dominant positionality of white settler woman. In pointing out the immensity of these challenges, Lydia suggests that it is difficult to operate with a solely analytical understanding of allyship/alliances:

You can have the intellectual understanding or the critical capacity to understand what it is to be a good ally, but at the level of practice you’re not manifesting it. . . . I think
embodied knowledge is hard to change, even if you have a critical awareness of it, because what you are beneath the surface is so much greater than what you are intellectually. It’s gigantic.

While Indigenous women recognize the potentially paralyzing effects of white settler guilt, for example, they ask that white women find the appropriate venues, people and occasions for meeting these personal needs. In this passage, Lydia falls just short of conceptualizing these personal desires as expressions of collective white settler subjectivity.

In my reading, the majority of Indigenous (and white) participant narratives do not explicitly make this connection, which risks limiting discussions to healing or appropriate/inappropriate settler desire and behaviour, instead of to what drives that behaviour in the first place—the white settler desire for legitimacy/belonging via the reproduction of the liberal subject. For example, Ardra refers to one man’s display of white settler guilt: “For me it’s also about time and place. I guess that would have been a repeat of the colonial story if he had done that in an inappropriate setting, say at a public event, and he had taken up a bunch of space and dominated the discussion.” Teresa reinforces the distinction made by Ardra about appropriate and inappropriate times and spaces for white women to seek assistance. That said, Teresa begins to address this as an issue of collective white settler subjectivity by adding, “It’s kind of like [white] women come into the circles in order to find a prescription for their own guilt, which we recognize, and I don’t think they recognize.” (In Chapter 6, I look more closely at intersubjective dynamics involving white settler guilt.) In other words, white women often seem to lack an awareness of the self-serving/self-making reasons that may propel them to seek solidarity encounters. The next step is to explicitly highlight that these so-called individualistic reasons emerge out of deeply embedded collective practices (see Chapter 5). In a post-interview conversation, Teresa adds that, despite the fact that as a white woman, you may well need “to process what you’re feeling and what you’re going through,” she has gotten increasingly tired of dealing with this scenario: “I find [Indigenous women] struggle too much to be able to take on another’s burden and sickness and when I lived in Toronto I tried assisting non-Indigenous women and I just became too burnt out.” What we should be doing, concludes Teresa, is “giving precedence to the Indigenous cause” for which people are organizing. In the concluding chapter, I elaborate on how white settler women allies might approach solidarity in a way that would more effectively do just that.
The Impulse to Solidarity

In discussing their perceptions of white settler desires for proximity, Indigenous participants hone in on the constitutive other side of the desire to help, which is the desire to be helped, a relation most vividly encapsulated by the phrase “needy do-gooder.” The white settler woman’s desire to help Indigenous women often seems accompanied by the need to be helped; that is, the white settler woman subject needs to “do-good” for one central self-serving/self-making reason—to ensure her transformation into the legitimate, autonomous subject who belongs. As Heron (2007) infers in her exploration of the subjectivities of Western/Northern development workers, this seeming paradox has been a permanent fixture in the lives of “helpers” of the less fortunate:

Development work still is, as it has been from its inception, axiomatically assumed to be altruistic. It is [also] touted as a “life-changing” experience for us, and its constitutive effect on Canadian and other Northern development workers’ identities is considered indisputably laudable. The enduringness of these understandings about what it is to do development work is an effect of discourse circulating in Canada about the “Third World”/“developing countries,” “development,” and what “we” are doing to “them” over “there.” (p. 2)

Heron’s observation invites us to think about the specific intersubjective desires—in her example, the desire for affirming yet life-changing experiences—that may propel solidarity work “here” in Canada as opposed to development work “there” in the Global South.

To capture the specificities of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter, I use the term “impulse to solidarity.” By this, I am referring to a latent or operationalized bundle of white settler desires (including to desire/need to “help” and “be helped by” the Indigenous Other) that when materialized often result in problematic white settler investments and intersubjective tensions in the solidarity encounter. The solidarity impulse, as reflected in white participant narratives, is realized through the mobilization of discourses of proximity (and sometimes in terms of exceptionalism as I discuss in Chapter 6).

In coining the phrase solidarity impulse, I make an analytical distinction in relation to Heron’s helping imperative to highlight how the decision to engage in solidarity as opposed to, for example, development work (both of which involve a desire to help), turns on a somewhat distinctive constellation of intersubjective dynamics. That said, there are important parallels between Heron’s (2007) development workers and the white settler women allies in my study:
Longing for relationships with the Other and experiences of Otherness are implicit in participants’ acknowledgement of wanting adventure, the experience of living in another culture, of “something different.” However, the encounter with the Other that is sought—that seems to count—can only be obtained by going to the spaces of the Other. The same Othered people on our home ground do not satisfy our need for these engagements with difference. . . . To some extent this is a craving for a fictional space, but it cannot be separated from a longing for a fictional/fantasy Other. (p. 51)

Despite Heron’s own assertions to the contrary, the solidarity encounter that takes place “on home ground” as it were, does seem to “satisfy our need for these engagements with difference.” In other words, even as it occurs “here” (in Canada) and not “there” (in the Global South), the solidarity encounter provides a site for the construction by white settler allies of just such a fictional space filled with fictional/fantasy Others. This begs some important questions: Does “here–there” logic operate within the boundaries of what is now called Canada? Do “we” (non-Indigenous settlers) constitute as “there” those spaces in which Aboriginal peoples predominate? My study of the solidarity encounter would suggest that it does and that we do.

There is a way in which Heron’s (2007) “here–there” distinction does apply to the solidarity encounter, however, although perhaps not in the way she might imagine. White settler allies “here” are obliged to reckon with their illegitimate status as settlers in a way in which Heron’s development workers “there” are not. This crucial fact—that the solidarity encounter occurs “here” on contested land—makes all the difference, rendering Heron’s (2007) comprehensive analysis incomplete in terms of its applicability to the solidarity encounter.

In short, whereas the helping imperative denotes the archetypal colonial desire to help/save the Other, the solidarity impulse arguably connotes an inclination among settlers to disassociate from such stereotypical behaviours by placing themselves in the supposedly non-hierarchical position of exceptional (innocent) allies, a point I develop further in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the function of proximity discourses in white participant narratives, identifying the ways in such discourses are mobilized by the white settler woman subject in her pursuit of liberal subjectivity—that is, to achieve a transcendent position beyond structural power relations. In other words, I reveal the white settler woman subject’s self-serving/self-making processes at work in the solidarity encounter. My argument rests on the premise that the desire for transcendence, which is central to white settler/liberal subjectivity, insinuates itself
into white women’s negotiations of the solidarity encounter and remains stubbornly resistant to disruption in the colonial present. When the self-serving aspects of white women’s participation in solidarity are left unexamined, invocations of social justice notwithstanding, the effectiveness of the political work being attempted can be overshadowed and undermined. In effect, I suggest that through mobilizing proximity discourses, the white settler woman subject seeks to maintain the default (purportedly) individualistic positioning she enjoys prior to the solidarity encounter. Importantly, to offset an overly pessimistic interpretation of my research on intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter, I emphasize Indigenous participants’ calls for and their appreciation of allies.

I begin the chapter with this point—that as white women we tend to position ourselves as individuals who have made a personal choice to enter into solidarity relations, rather than as members of a (white) settler collectivity with the obligation/responsibility to do so. At the same time, I highlight the fraught nature and complexities of white settler women’s subjectivities in solidarity work, pointing to the ways in which we struggle with our historic settler positionality and complicity in colonial relations. Even so, at every turn, the white settler woman’s objective veers too easily away from an anticolonial political project and towards the self-making project. I discuss the workings of a range of proximity discourses, from desiring acceptance by an Indigenous community to desiring a challenge. I also explore how the white woman’s historical double positioning as both oppressor and oppressed facilitates her paradoxical rendering as superior helper. I also suggest that, while experienced as personal, proximity desires are better thought of as (in part) arising out of one’s precarious position as white settler/liberal subject.

The problematic, invasive nature of white women allies’ desires for proximity becomes clear when reading Indigenous women’s depictions of the solidarity encounter. Reflecting a deeply analytical attentiveness to power relations, Indigenous women note that white desires for proximity often manifest as the desire to “do good,” but also as the desire to be cared for or healed by Indigenous cultures—but in ways that preserve settler dominance. For several Indigenous participants, the composite figure of the “needy do-gooder” personifies misguided white settler investments in solidarity work with Indigenous women. In describing white settler “neediness,” in other words, Indigenous women are vividly describing various manifestations of the white/settler liberal (individualistic) desire for proximity. By making this analytical connection (“needing” to “do good”), Indigenous women point squarely to the self-making
imperatives bound up in the white settler woman ally’s desire to “help,” that is, the white settler subject’s desire for autonomy. Importantly, Indigenous participants clarify that extreme manifestations of “neediness” are not the norm, but that there is invariably a needy do-gooder present in solidarity settings.

Drawing on Heron (2007), I note a number of striking parallels in the “colonial continuities” manifest in the (Western) subjectivities of both development workers and the white participants in my study—primarily that women from both groups (then and now) desire to reaffirm our standing as good/moral individuals and to reassert ourselves as intact, agentic subjects. In both contexts, the desire to help or “do good” is readily apparent. However, I argue that the solidarity encounter turns on a distinctive constellation of intersubjective relations, encapsulated by the phrase the “impulse to solidarity.” I suggest that this specificity is derived from two main factors: the discourse of solidarity (as opposed to development) and the geographical location of the solidarity encounter (“here” as opposed to “there”).

First, solidarity discourse presumes the goal of securing non-hierarchical, decolonized relations between Indigenous women and white women. In fact, I would argue that most white participants actively avoid stereotypical helping/saving behaviours, and are more likely to note the perceived benefits for them/us of doing solidarity work. In this sense, while not necessarily recognizing these motivations as problematic, many white participants openly acknowledge the more personal aspects of why they/we engage in solidarity. Moreover, many white participants struggle one way or another with their dominant positionality and proceed to question their role as allies. (Notably, however, this move would not necessarily disrupt a unidirectional understanding of solidarity, but rather, induce settler allies to exit the work.) In fact, I would suggest that many of us experience a heightened sense of our precarious status as settlers through participating in solidarity work. (This raises a question for further study: Does a clearer understanding of one’s settler status intensify the white settler/liberal desire for legitimacy?) The very tendency to trouble one’s role as ally can mask the invasive, colonial aspects of the white woman subject’s comportment in the solidarity encounter. Awareness of one’s dominant subject position and colonial realities notwithstanding, the white settler woman ally who acts on the impulse to solidarity can reproduce the very relations solidarity is intended to dislodge.

Second, geography matters when discussing the particular constellation of intersubjective dynamics that constitute the solidarity encounter. Because the solidarity encounter occurs “here”
(on Indigenous land in the context of ongoing settler colonial relations) as opposed to “there” (somewhere in the Global South) (Heron, 2007), there is much at stake for the white settler woman subject ally. Directly confronted by colonial inequalities and her complicity therein (although with varying degrees of awareness), the white settler ally’s deep-seated desire to attain legitimacy/belonging via proximity to the Indigenous Other acquires unique dimensions. She must negotiate competing desires: the desire to belong “here” on Indigenous lands on the one hand, and the desire to pursue decolonized Indigenous/non-Indigenous solidarity relations on the other. The result is a fraught subjectivity where desires for proximity abound. Indeed, as Indigenous participant Ardra notes, the desire for proximity seems most intense among “radical” solidarity activists: “The people who see it as a good thing to be liked by Native women, who see that as giving them more cred, those are usually more radical people than people who are helping in a paternalizing… those people don’t really want to be friends with Indians, they want to be seen as helping Indians, right?” It would seem that one of Heron’s (2007) core contentions—that “Othered people on our home ground do not satisfy our need for these engagements with difference” (p. 51)—needs revision. The data suggests otherwise—that solidarity encounters do provide a setting for engagement with difference, a point to which I turn in the next chapter.

1 See Chapter 3 for more on how I theorize the solidarity encounter as one possible space where the self-making needs of white settler women subjects are met, and thus our liberal (autonomous, self-determining) status re-solidified. I also make a distinction between the solidarity encounter and other sites of colonial encounter such as development or missionary work.
2 As I discuss below, Heron (2007) defines the “helping imperative” as the “desire for other people’s development” (p. 6) that drives white/Northern middle-class women to do development work in the Global South.
3 I asked about participant reasons for doing solidarity work in various ways: What lead (or personally motivated) you to work in solidarity with Indigenous or white women respectively; Why did you get involved in solidarity work; and/or Why do you see the need for solidarity? All permutations rendered quite similar responses. See Appendices B and C for a look at the complete interview schedules. About one-third of white participants offered up narratives describing their reasons for doing solidarity work without any prompting—what Schick (1998) describes as an “unbidden” response (p. 162) and significant in that it could indicate, in the case of my research, a desire on the part of white women to perform themselves, and be “seen” by the interviewer, in normative ways.
4 To explore the power dynamics of the solidarity encounter, I rephrased what was essentially the same question at different junctures during a given interview—asking about challenges, tensions, power dynamics and/or colonial dynamics to better elicit participant understandings of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter.
5 When interviewing, I incorporated the preferred term of the participant in question alongside the term solidarity.
6 See Chapter 2 (methodology) for a more detailed description of what I mean by this juxtaposition.
7 Other Indigenous women mention the structural constraints on Indigenous women’s (and men’s) participation in political activism, however defined. Ardra, for example, refers to “the crisis management and business that most Indigenous lives are filled with” (personal communication, October 14, 2011).
8 In Chapter 7, I discuss further the parameters of what I call non-colonizing solidarity.
9 A thorough review of this literature is beyond the scope of study. For more information, see Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (2008); Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield (2011); Melanie Bush (2004); Heron (2007); Mahrouse (2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011); Debra Mindry (2001); Saldana-Portillo (2003); and Randall Williams (2010).
10 Mahrouse (2009) critically appraises white/Western citizen journalist practices of international solidarity with people from the Global South. Even as she illustrates how racialized hierarchies are reproduced through the “witnessing, documenting and reporting practices” of white/Western citizen journalists who travel to areas of conflict in the Global South, she also “refutes the simplistic resolution that people with Western privilege must not participate in such practices. Instead, in examining up close some of the contradictions that arise in citizen journalism efforts, [the article] aims to identify some of the nuanced ways in which relations of racialized power might be better negotiated in specific circumstances” (Mahrouse, 2009, p. 670).

11 Heron (2007) acknowledges that the helping imperative would have different contours depending on context. In her work, she attends to “the larger forces that produce a bourgeois or white subjectivity with a particular desire for development, and the stake that white middle-class women have in this particular helping imperative” (p. 8).

12 More specifically, I discuss the ways in which discourses of survival, responsibility and choice figure (or not) into Indigenous women’s and white women’s narratives.

13 One other Indigenous participant explicitly mentioned entering into relations of solidarity for strategic or practical political reasons.

14 In the concluding chapter, I also use the term “fraught” to describe the difficult task of locating oneself as a member of the white settler collectivity without, as several Indigenous women put it, taking things personally, which I read as a call to avoid self-referential thinking/behaviour that would reproduce the liberal subject.

15 As I elaborate in Chapter 6, both Julia’s and Alicia’s acknowledgements of their positionality as white settler women are somewhat dampened by the way they simultaneously position themselves as exceptions—i.e., different from most white settlers and/or uniquely situated to act as a liaison between white and Native peoples. As noted in the Introduction, Leanne Simpson referred to the unresolved matter of stolen Indigenous land as the “elephant in the room” during a public talk on May 13, 2014 in St. John’s, Newfoundland.

16 As I explain in my methodology chapter, a consideration of the subject position of people of colour in white settler societies is beyond the scope of this research.

17 For methodological purposes, I draw a distinction between motivations and investments in solidarity work, although the difference in practical terms is rather murky. When interviewing participants, I did not ask about their investments in solidarity work. In my analysis, however, I refer to investments as the various ways in which (mostly white) women describe the stakes involved for them in doing solidarity work, gleaned from responses to questions about motivations and tensions/challenges in the solidarity encounter.

18 See also Clark Mane (2012) on how a “syntax of equivalences” leading to the “flattening and proliferation of difference” (p. 81) is mobilized in third wave feminist texts to reproduce white privilege. Citing Patricia Hill Collins (2000), she writes, “Through the deprivation of history, a syntax of equivalences is enabled: all differences and marginalizations become theoretically equivalent and thus interchangeable. As a result of this flattening of difference, Hill Collins . . . notes that ‘socially constructed differences emerging from historical patterns of oppression’ are ‘submerged within a host of more trivial differences’” (Clark Mane, 2012, p. 81).

19 Richard Milligan and Tyler McCreary (2011) note how the fiction of reciprocity is sustained through the settler institutional practice of museums: “With this placard, the museum attempts to establish a version of national origins based in a shared history between Indigenous peoples and colonizers. It offers a story free of gross inequities of power, violence, and dispossession. . . . The museum uses this passage [about Hearne’s whiteness] from the exploration literature of colonization to encourage its visitors to remember a past of mutuality, to embody an ideal of reconciliation but not to acknowledge the vast disposessions of a continent and the racial motivations that justified and enabled this violence” (pp. 147–148).

20 Mahrouse (2009) writes, “Despite the activists’ good intentions, as Westerners who are inscribed with authority and neutrality, they easily and frequently slide into a position of dominance. Undeniably, the ascendancy of whiteness keeps activists in the centre of the reporting and documenting efforts in which they engage. Furthermore, they maintain a hierarchical positioning as experts and as objective truth-tellers, in ways that reproduce power relations rather than challenge them” (p. 671).

21 As I mention in Chapter 3, scholars whose work is associated with critical whiteness studies link assumptions of access to white privilege (Sullivan, 2006).

22 These groupings reflect the main ways in which I understand participants to be describing their desires or others’ desires involving proximity. Notably, the separation of groupings is artificial in that they are often mutually constitutive. For example, the desire to be included in an Indigenous community could be linked with a desire to gain a sense of purpose in one’s life. Likewise, an attraction to Indigenous culture, tradition or spirituality is often linked to a desire for acceptance. I do not speculate on the particular connections between the desires of any one participant (with the exception of myself), but hope that participant narratives speak for themselves in this regard.
The desire for acceptance was not necessarily an initial motivator for those white women who expressed such a desire; but rather, it became operative for them at some point once working in solidarity. However, the desire for acceptance often came up in both implicit and explicit ways in participant responses to any number of questions.

S. Razack, personal communication, April 2013.

The theme of respect for women surfaces in a number of participant narratives—Indigenous and white. Teresa (an Indigenous participant), for example, argues that non-Indigenous women have been drawn to solidarity work with Indigenous groups precisely due to a desire to achieve respect for women, “I think people who want to join in solidarity are also attempting to fill the gaps in their own community. There’s a gap in respect of women, and so they wanted to join our communities somewhat in order to learn how to fill that gap with respect.”

I was admonished a number of times by Lee about the dangers of imputing meaning to someone’s behaviour or words outside of the words one has been given by that person. In agreement with Lee’s interpretation of such moves as invasive, I have tried to raise questions rather than provide definitive answers.

I do not mean to suggest that same sex desire is not operative in the solidarity encounter. In fact, one white participant discussed her attraction to an Indigenous woman with whom she was working in solidarity.

Extranjera is Spanish for female foreigner.

I am paraphrasing from a public presentation Wilson gave at Ryerson University in 2012. Wilson (2008) is perhaps best known in the academy for his explorations of research as a sacred endeavor, hence his point that research is scared, i.e., that scholars must enter into ethical/accountable relationships with ideas.

This seeming inconsistency is addressed by Ahmed (2000) in reference to producing an anthropological text: “But what of the possibility of the stranger, who is the object of knowledge and recognition, coming to know? . . . If the stranger is admitted as possibly knowing differently, then the document and the ‘who’ would lose the easy identification that allows the stranger to be figurable as the ‘what’” (pp. 73–74). She suggests why the Other must remain unknowing, even, for example, in exchanges where that Other is nominally seen in an instructive capacity.

See my discussion in Chapter 6 of discourses of exceptionalism for a more detailed assessment of the subject-making aspects of these (unilateral, self-ascribed) and other types of declarations.

S. Razack, personal communication, May 2014.
Chapter 5
Romanticization, Resistance and National Subjects

In this chapter, I discuss a particular manifestation of the white desire/pursuit of proximity to Indigenous women: the romanticization and possible appropriation of Indigeneity in the interests of white settler self-making. To do so, I trace participant constructions of Western and Indigenous cultural “difference.” While a minority discourse in white participant narratives, a nostalgic, romanticized admiration for Indigenous values/cultures can all too easily slip into an invasive, appropriative mode. This slippage, I argue, is akin to the self-making dynamic of “going strange/going native” (Ahmed, 2000), which works to consolidate the white settler’s sense of legitimacy as national subject at both the individual and collective levels. The liberal subject’s capacity to “know” the Other and “master” difference is reinforced. My analysis highlights the striking role of white settler critiques of “Western lack” in this discursive move.

In the second half of the chapter, I identify a complication in the dynamic: the tendency of some Indigenous women to also idealize Indigeneity (and to vilify so-called Western values), although for a distinct purpose, i.e., to further the political aspirations of Indigenous peoples. I explain this convergence as partly a consequence of the colonial encounter; Indigenous women (and men) are pressured to meet “the white need for certainty about Indian difference” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 23), i.e., to demonstrate their “authenticity” in order to advance their collective political aspirations. However, the risk of reproducing essentialized or romanticized notions of Indigenous cultural difference is great, and the unintended consequences many, including the facilitation of collective white settler subjectivity that thrives on the romanticization of Indigenous peoples. Here I am reminded of Razack’s (1998) work on storytelling and our responsibility as differently positioned subjects to “pay attention to the interpretive structures that underpin how we hear and how we take up the stories of oppressed groups” (p. 37). In that vein, I draw on LaRocque (2010) and Lawrence (2003) to read the discursive moves of Indigenous participants as part of a broader pattern of resistance to ongoing colonialism. I end with a question for consideration in the concluding chapter: Given the colonial discursive parameters and tightly scripted roles that circumscribe all participant subjectivities (although with uneven benefits), what steps can be taken to mitigate this particular manifestation of white settler/liberal subjectivity?
Interestingly, I was able to detect a convergence between Indigenous and white participant discourses (shared references to Western social dysfunction and Indigenous social cohesion) only after noting the divergence in Indigenous and white respective modalities of political activism/solidarity (see Chapter 4). To restate here, white women tend to position themselves as individuals (as opposed to members of a settler collectivity) who choose to engage in the solidarity encounter. Their narratives indicate, however, that a desire for proximity fuels this decision: they are in part drawn to solidarity work in order to pursue the status of self-determining, legitimate (white settler woman) subject. As I take up in this chapter, Indigenous women are more apt to present themselves as members of an oppressed collectivity compelled by their positionality to take up political struggle. Accordingly, Indigenous participant narratives generally do not indicate the same desire for proximity that suffuses white participant narratives.

To reiterate, despite their divergent takes on political subjectivity, participants from both groups access similar discourses about Indigenous–Western (non-Indigenous) difference: signified as cooperative, non-hierarchical and embracing sustainability, Indigeneity is favourably contrasted with “Western” competitiveness, hierarchy and unsustainable consumerist practices. Discursive convergences such as these attest to how differently positioned subjects (in the solidarity encounter and beyond) make meaning within the same discursive field of settler colonialism. At the same time, taking into account that “our different subject positions [are] borne out in how we know, tell, and hear stories” (Razack, 1998, p. 51), I note potentially significant dissimilarities in the meaning and deployment of these discourses by white and Indigenous participants respectively. For instance, white participant narratives place equal emphasis on critiquing “Western” cultural values and praising “Indigenous” ones, whereas Indigenous women’s narratives feature appraisals of Indigenous values as superior. Does this difference in emphasis reflect a distinction between Indigenous and settler political interests, with the former steeped in resistance and the latter in hegemony? Do seemingly similar invocations of Western lack and Indigenous difference have the paradoxical effect of bolstering both Indigenous and white settler nation-building processes? While exceeding the scope of this study, I raise such questions as possible avenues for more research. In this chapter, I attend to the observations that brought me to such questions, chief among them the persistence in both Indigenous and white participant narratives of a framework of cultural (and not necessarily power) difference for understanding Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in the solidarity encounter (and beyond).
Revisiting the Colonial Logic of Western Subjectivity

Let us return to Peggy’s frank admission in Chapter 4 of her own settler desire to “belong here on this continent.” Her acknowledgement recalls a central aspect of the logic of settler colonial subjectivity described by Morgensen (2011), the need of “settlers [to] both supplant and incorporate indigeneity to attain settler subjectivity” (p. 17). While Morgensen writes about the US context, contributors to Audrey Kobayashi, Laura Cameron and Andrew Baldwin’s (2011a) *Rethinking the Great White North* hint at a parallel logic in Canada. Bruce Erickson (2011) traces Archibald Belaney’s (a.k.a. Grey Owl) performances of Indigeneity (which is assumed to be permanently on the brink of disappearance) to discuss the historical production of Canadian wilderness via “Indian surrogacy,” thereby providing a prime example of how white subjects “supplant and incorporate indigeneity” in the production of Canadian settler subjectivity:

In this case, it is possible to see the loss and surrogacy as mutually constitutive; white North American subjects acted in place of the disappearing Indian (both symbolically and geographically, as Aboriginal people were moved onto reserve land) and helped legitimize that disappearance. The act of surrogacy acknowledges the wounds of loss with the hope of establishing something that can replace the item that was lost. (p. 27)

For Razack (2011), Erickson’s case study suggests that “playing primitive . . . is an integral part of modern identity; settlers must take the place of the Indian, however fantastic a story or violent a dispossession this requires” (p. 270). In the same volume, Richard Milligan and Tyler McCreary (2011) argue “that Canadian identity relies on the abjection of Aboriginal others to construct settler entitlement to the land” (p. 280 note 1), which reminds us as does Razack of the subordinate status visited upon the Indigenous Other when white subjects “play primitive.”

In her expose of modern Western subjectivity, Bergland (2000) illuminates settler colonial logic more fully in explaining how the desire for national belonging works through a desire for proximity as conceptualized by Ahmed (2000)—replete with fantasies of becoming, overcoming and transformation. Although her analysis is site-specific (like Morgensen, she focuses on the US), Bergland (2000) situates American subjectivity in a broad theoretical frame that would apply to Canada. She defines modern Western subjectivity with its characteristic assertion of autonomy as a historically specific concept emerging out of the Enlightenment:

When people began to define themselves as subjects, they embraced both their own individuality and their status as representatives of all humanity. At this specific historical moment, each subject internalized both the human collective and the [historically contingent] transcendent laws that govern the human collective. As subjects, individuals
see themselves both as the ones who know the law, and also as the ones who are accountable to the law. Therefore, as Balibar explains, each subject “performs his own subjection.” The great political freedom of the late eighteenth century is the freedom for each subject to rule over him or herself; that is, to internalize his or her own subjection. Balibar characterizes this as “a new degree of interiorization, or, if you like, repression.” . . . The enlightened subject, then, is a self that rules itself. Further, it is a self that must constantly deny its own submissive subjectivity in order to assert its authoritative subjectivity. (Bergland, 2000, pp. 9–10)

Bergland (2000) goes on to discuss this as “haunted rationalism”—a subject’s internalization of the political (national identity) and the spectral (collective ghosts)—which she argues is particular to modern Western subjectivity. What is the internalization of the political? “Freed” from subjection to the monarch, the Enlightenment subject becomes its own authority or establishes self-ownership, which becomes experienced as (an illusory) autonomy. To maintain the illusion of freedom and universal status through autonomy—as Yeğenoğlu (1998) notes, “It is the assumption of autonomy which gives the subject a universal status” (p. 5)—the subject must repress knowledge of the paradoxical move towards self-ownership. Because attempts at repression are by definition unsuccessful, the modern subject is forever haunted by feelings of subjection or powerlessness.

Bergland (2000) tethers modern Western subjectivity in the Americas to a “colonial geography,” thereby incorporating haunted rationalism’s other component—the internalization of the spectral—into her analysis. She theorizes that Euro-Americans must “become” Native American (through consuming the Other in Ahmed’s terms, or eating the Other in hooks’ terms) in order to justify their residency on Native land (i.e., the appropriation of land, resources and cultures in nation-state building processes). By noting the omnipresence of the “discursive technique of removal” in much American literature (i.e., the representation of Native Americans as ghosts), she argues that haunted rationalism is at work in the formation of modern American subjectivity when non-Native US citizens consign the Other (Native Americans) to the “imagination spaces” of their Euro-American psyches: “As Indians are made to vanish into the psychic spaces of the American citizen, the psychic space within each citizen is itself transformed into American territory, and each citizen comes to contain an America, to be *homo Americanus*” (p. 5). (Ghostly) Native Americans—as part of non-Native American citizen subjectivity—are now subject to non-Native (self) rule. And, non-Native Americans “become” Native. However, as Bergland (2000) notes, “The Indians who are transformed into ghosts cannot be buried or evaded, and the spectre of their forced disappearance haunts the American nation and the
American imagination” (p. 5). In other words, settler subjectivity rests rather shakily on a sense of precariousness. In my study, I point to some of the moments in which white participants appear to wrestle with their precarious role as settlers and hence settler allies.

For Bergland (2000), the discursive removal of Native Americans corresponds to their material dispossession and an appropriation of Indigenous cultures broadly defined. Writing about settler subject-making processes in Canada, Erickson (2011) also tethers settler internalization of Native “ghosts” to the material dispossession of Native peoples, “justified” by the perceived-as-inevitable advance of capitalism and disappearance of Native peoples:

The inevitable disappearance [of Canadian wilderness and hence Native peoples] is heralded by modern capitalism, and the phantasy in white in a dead world—the creatures of wilderness and the night—were ghosts created by the advance of capitalism. Grey Owl’s literature invites his audience to ingest those ghosts and adopt them as their own, and thus begin to feel better about the changing nature of the world around them (along with their role in benefitting from that change). (pp. 26–27)

The result, as Morgensen (2011) puts it, is that “Native disappearance haunts settler subjectivity and illuminates all cultures and politics in a settler society” (p. 22). In short, modern Euro-American subjectivity, with a colonizing move at the core, is driven by (and drives) the materiality of the colonial project through/in discourse.

Given participant passages such as Peggy’s that suggest a widespread (white) settler desire to live “legitimately, ethically, fully” on Indigenous lands, my analysis of the various manifestations of proximity discourse assumes the relevance of haunted rationalism for understanding white settler Canadian subject formation. In this way, I explore an aspect of the impulse to solidarity likely not unique to activist settings, but shared by non-Native people regardless of political affiliation—what Razack (2011) refers to as “the compulsion to perform the colonial fantasy” (p. 266). This compulsion “suggests that the settler’s crisis of identity is an ongoing one, born of the psychic and material need to emplace himself. Where the land is stolen, when entitlement to it must be performed over and over again in anxious repression of those indigenous to it, emplacement is the most urgent of tasks” (p. 266). In other words, I pursue the idea that (white) settler Canadians attempt to satisfy (however partially and temporarily) their desire for “emplacement” through mobilizing the colonial relation that Bergland (2000) and others argue is at the core of modern Western subjectivity in the Americas (and perhaps beyond).
Before proceeding, I want to reiterate an important aspect of the colonial relation: the internalized Other does not gain equal footing upon being internalized. As Colin Calloway (2008), LaRocque (2010) and others have assiduously pointed out, prevailing ideas about so-called civilized and uncivilized/savage peoples both facilitated and were facilitated by this transposition of modern subjectivity into the colonizer/colonized binary: “they” were uncivilized and thus deserved to be colonized by “us.” As Ahmed (2000) suggests in her discussion of the discursive effects/limits of “becoming the Other,” as Euro-Americans we retain a (troubled) sense of superiority vis-à-vis “our” internalized Native American Others—the “deep level of white supremacist thinking” noted by Indigenous participant Ryah (see Chapter 4). Assertions of Native heritage aside, Chloe displays such thinking when positioning herself “a little ahead of [Native women] in progression, in the good things of life.” It is worth considering if Chloe retains a belief in, as Ryah puts it, “notions of progress, this evolution within a Western lens, that whole myth that colonization was inevitable because Indigenous people were just hunter-gatherer primitive groups and Europeans had evolved further along, [that] Indigenous people’s lives were ‘nasty, brutish and short’ [and that colonization] was an evolution of humanity.”

In using this famous phrase from Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Ryah effectively captures the nonsensical, hierarchical thinking and superiority complex that defines colonial subjectivity and justifies settler emplacement. To what extent are such patterns identifiable in white participant narratives? What might deep appropriation and reproduction of hierarchal relations of the sort theorized by Bergland (2000) and Morgensen (2011) look like in the Canadian context? How might one describe in a more precise way some of the intersubjective paths to Canadian national belonging that are available to (white) settlers? For Morgensen (2011), it boils down to processes of (white) settler colonial naturalization:

Settler colonialism is naturalized whenever conquest or displacement of Native peoples is ignored or appears as necessary or complete, and whenever subjects are defined by settler desires to possess Native land, history or culture. Settler colonialism must be denaturalized not only in social and political spaces, but also in definitions and experiences of subjectivity. (p. 16, emphasis added)

Morgensen’s (2011) understanding of the naturalization of settler colonialism (and his call for its denaturalization in all realms including subjectivity) complements Ahmed’s (2000) theorising of the ways in which stranger fetishism works to conceal “histories of determination.” Viewed in this theoretical light, proximity discourses that manifest as “settler desires to possess Native land, history or culture” are clearly implicated in the naturalization (or “concealment” in

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According to several Indigenous participants, the white settler woman ally’s desire to “do good” (as personified by the emblematic “needy do-gooder”) manifests itself in many ways, including as an attraction to Indigenous culture or spirituality (e.g., for healing purposes) that can become appropriative, however unintentional. The corresponding discursive thread in white women’s narratives is often positively expressed as an appreciation for/identification with Indigenous culture, spirituality and/or values. This particular form of proximity discourse is strongly evident in a minority of white participant narratives (but implicit in more), and often incorporates a scathing critique of Western society and a sense of lack—a sense that something is missing in the non-Native/Western individual and/or collective. The appreciation of Native culture becomes appropriative, however, when it facilitates the settler subject’s sense of legitimacy/belonging.

To reemphasize a main point of this study, the making of white settler subjects is an ongoing, fraught endeavor by definition. The complexity of the process and ambivalence of white settler subjectivity is apparent in Evelyn’s narrative:

See now, I’ve never been very national minded, but I do think that Canada is one of the greatest countries in the world. I don’t really want to travel anywhere else. I’ve been a lot of places in Canada, going to different places when I was a kid. I just think that there’s such a wealth here that we’ve lost. I mean, our government is completely destroying our country, completely dismantling it. I might have been blind to things as a child and a teenager, but now I’m more aware. It’s probably been happening all that time, but it’s on a massive scale. I’d like to stop it.

Evelyn is simultaneously critical and proud of Canada as “one of the greatest countries of the world.” When the passage is read in context, we understand that Evelyn is largely referring to a more sustainable environmental ethos linked to Indigeneity when she mentions the “wealth here that we’ve lost.” Other white participants express a similar ambivalence when asked if and how solidarity work has affected their attitude toward Canada or being Canadian:
I think growing up you hear this, I would say, very one-sided view of Canada, not that Canada isn’t a great place to live. You hear from newcomers too, you know, it’s peaceful, you don’t have to worry, we’re very privileged to grow up here, to live here. I’m always aware of that, but at the same time, there is a population at whose expense we’re having this great upbringing and this very privileged life. So, my view has kind of changed from being, from when I was younger seeing Canada in a completely positive light, and you’re instilled with the national anthem and all those patriotic things, I think, that I’m right now—I’m obviously very thankful to live here because I can’t really think of anywhere else that I would have the life that I do, but at the same time acknowledging that there are problems. This country isn’t perfect; there’s a lot of things that need to be improved and that it’s ok to be critical of it. That’s necessary if we’re ever going to improve things . . . if we improve things for Indigenous populations or whichever populations at whose expense we’re benefiting, it will be better for everyone. (Darcie)

Like Evelyn, Darcie vacillates between praise and critique in a no longer “one-sided view of Canada.” She even acknowledges that “we’re benefiting” at the expense of the “Indigenous population or whichever populations.” How can her contradictory embrace of Canada be explained? Are Evelyn and Darcie made uneasy—or forever “haunted” (Bergland, 2000)—by the knowledge that being (a good) Canadian rests on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples?

**The colonial logic of invoking “lack”**

I propose that these seemingly contradictory stances toward Canada by white settlers are broadly sustained by (and reflect) the colonial logic encapsulated in Bergland’s (2000) notion of haunted rationalism, and the attendant dynamics of becoming, transformation and transcendence discussed in Chapter 4. We can see this logic in operation when white participants set in motion a four-step discursive pattern with lack as its lynchpin: articulating a critique of Western society; contrasting Western society with Native society; outlining the deficiencies of the former and the wisdom of the latter; and finally, adopting/appropriating Native identity or culture.

I suggest that, when they occur, discourses of lack are a distinctive component of the impulse to solidarity in white settler woman subjectivity. Invoking lack, for example, is not the usual discursive strategy deployed by Heron’s (2007) white/Northern women development workers. They tend to reproduce their agentic selves “by erasing the agency of local peoples who are Othered in these processes, and by presenting ‘our’ (read white, middle-class Northern) knowledge, values, and ways of doing things as preferable and right, since the North, especially Canada, appears orderly, clean, and well-managed in comparison” (p. 3). In my study, however, a vocal minority of white participants state the exact opposite: rather than extol Canadian virtues, they excoriate certain beliefs and behaviours associated (by them and others) with the
mainstream Canadian polity. My analysis converges with Heron’s (2007), however, in that both discourses serve the same goal: to re-centre the white/Western self as self-critical and thus moral.

Following Erickson (2011), I note the production of Native/non-Native hierarchical difference as a defining feature of this discursive pattern of lack. In his study of how the concept of wilderness works in “preserving the whiteness of the nation” (p. 22), Erickson (2011) explains that the notion of “absolute difference” is essential to colonial regimes in general and to (white) settler impersonations of “Indians” in particular:

In the modern enactment of playing Indian, whether it be Grey Owl, the use of Indian names at summer camps . . . or in professional sport cultures . . . the surrogate Indian, rather than illustrating a common bond between cultures, works to provide a distinction between white and Native. (pp. 29–30)

Erickson (2011) goes on to say, “Key to understanding the signifier ‘Indian’ in these cases was the difference it articulated between white and Indian, modern and primitive” (p. 30). In other words, in these discursive constructions of difference, the white settler enjoys a privileged modern standing, while the “Indian” is relegated to an inferior, primitive status, forever marked as “vanishing.” The following select passages from white participant narratives illustrate how such discursive patterns can unfold—often in a seemingly benign way.

Alicia is among the most sharply critical of white participants when it comes to identifying what’s wrong with Western society:

I don’t think growing up in Western culture that [humility is] a value that’s really imparted. I think it’s the opposite: be the first to the finish line, be the first to put your hand up, be the first to get an A on everything. Compete, compete, compete for everything. Sell yourself. Say why you’re great. . . . That’s part of that capitalist competitiveness of white Western culture in Canada, I think. I learned from Aboriginal cultures and from elders to be quiet, to be humble, to listen . . . to be open to other ideas; to not enforce your values [or] to shove your ideas down their throat. Do not insist on being right.

Alicia pits putatively Western cultural traits/values such as competition, consumerism and lack of humility in stark contrast to Indigenous cultural traits/values such as attentiveness and humility. In another passage, she more directly employs the discourse of lack: “Among the general population of regular Western Canadian people, I don’t necessarily feel that there’s a community of people” (see Chapter 4). Depicting North American society as “completely
dysfunctional,” Evelyn is another white participant who contrasts Native and white society. Her statement is most telling when viewed alongside a candid iteration of her desire to be accepted by Native activists. This is part of her email response to a post-interview request for clarification about “the awkwardness and sense of loss” she felt at “not being a part of something”:

This [desire for acceptance] is not so much [for] inclusion in a Native community, but rather [for] an identifiable role or status in relation to Indigenous struggles, [which has] multiple meanings—it’s really an internal struggle for me. I am getting to feel more comfortable, gaining some niches. But when I attend a speaker’s night . . . I’m not an academic; [Native women’s] marches, I’m not “working” in any Indigenous agency, educational institute, community centre. I have no status, so to speak of; I’m a learner/observer, mostly. The loss refers to how I feel separate from my own culture (white, Canadian, mainstream) or the Canadian mindset/values of consumerism, etc. It (the Canadian public) does not take the destruction of land seriously enough. It does not recognize the struggle most women still have being safe and respected. [The] murder of Native women/the environment is a non-issue to most people. The loss also refers to my envious joy of the Anishinaabe bringing back their culture of inclusiveness, land, creation in their daily lives; in my community this has no place. I could go on and on.

In this excerpt, Evelyn’s tone is strikingly reminiscent of the narratives of becoming I discuss in Chapter 4. Her precarious sense of self/belonging, which she reveals in wanting “an identifiable role or status in relation to Indigenous struggle,” becomes enmeshed in her feelings of “envious joy of the Anishinaabe bringing back their culture of inclusiveness.” Through repeated allusions to what she lacks (most evident in her use of “no status,” ironically, a term associated with both Indigenous and immigrant struggles), Evelyn consistently positions herself as vulnerable. She thus exemplifies the neediness/self-serving desire that, according to many Indigenous women, always marks some (but, importantly, not all) white settler women allies in the solidarity encounter. To what extent is Evelyn poised to appropriate Indigeneity in the name of belonging?

At the same time, Evelyn clearly sees herself as a settler and struggles with her historic positionality as such. How can we read her “internal struggle”? It is at least partly legible within the framework of an “absolute difference” between two worlds (Erickson, 2011). She positions herself as an outsider in relation to two spheres which she posits as largely separate: mainstream white Canadian culture versus Anishinaabe culture. Her inability to belong, or to be emplaced, as Razack (2011) might say, is contingent upon what she sees as her tenuous relationship to both contexts. Importantly, in contrasting Native and Western cultures, Evelyn does not invoke the myth of the vanishing Indian (in fact, she sees Anishinaabe culture as undergoing a process of revitalization); however, she highlights Indigenous cultural difference (and her desire to access
it) as opposed to colonial structures and their impact on Indigenous social and political systems.

I turn to one final example to illustrate the white critique of Western society through identifying, in varying ways, an “absolute difference” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Dawn calls on “all of us Canadians” to deal with the fact that “we are profoundly imbalanced”:

One of the possibilities in addressing the issue [of violence against Indigenous women] and respecting and honouring Indigenous culture is that we, all of us Canadians, can start connecting with that as well; so not only recognizing it in this, but actually understanding that we are profoundly imbalanced. If you look at Indigenous spiritual practices, [mainstream Canadian society] is not just beating up human women; we’re destroying Grandmother Earth. We are destroying the feminine on almost every level . . . . To think that we can just overpower, have everything our way . . . [and] take what we want with impunity.

Dawn issues what has become (in activist circles and perhaps beyond) a common contrast between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies: an imbalanced, overly rationale, masculinized and violent-prone Canadian culture on the one hand, and a harmonious, spiritual, feminized and respectful Indigenous one on the other. Her statement can be read as contradictory, however, in that she simultaneously recognizes the colonial tendency to “take . . . with impunity” while arguably condoning more of such behaviour through references to not only “respecting and honouring,” but also “connecting” to (her rendition of) Indigenous culture. Moreover, as we shall see, consequent with colonial logic, the process of claiming legitimate national subject status (“all of us Canadians”) hinges on the white subject’s ability to simultaneously romanticize and internalize Indigeneity, which in turn relies on the positing of two separate spheres.

There is another aspect of Dawn’s statement that merits closer attention—the “present absence”**^4 of whiteness that can be discerned in her allusion to “all of us Canadians.” Baldwin, Cameron and Koyabashi (2011) contend that hegemonic “Canadianness” as a sense of national belonging is always spatialized and racialized—a social construction made with recourse to place and race wherein “whiteness in all its historical-geographic variability is fundamentally concerned with spatializing racial difference in ways that allow for its spatial practices to pass unquestioned” (p. 6). For these scholars, the nation-state is not “the exclusive formation through which race, nature, and whiteness articulate”; in fact, there are a “host of other geographies—the urban, the rural, landscape, place” in which “national discourses find spatial [and racial] expression” (p. 7). I add the “solidarity encounter” to that list and trace in Dawn’s statement, together with those of
other white participants, the white settler subject’s use of critique (of the West) and embrace (of Indigeneity) to stake a claim as the legitimate “Canadian” national subject.

**Appropriation and national belonging (settler gain/Indigenous loss)**

I now consider the possibility of the following discursive flow in white participant narratives: a critique of the Western self/culture; the praise, elevation and potential appropriation of (romanticized versions of) Indigeneity; and the disavowal and (fantastical) transcendence of white settler colonial relations. Recall Ahmed’s (2000) analysis of Dunbar, the main white (and masculinized) protagonist in *Dances with Wolves*:

Dunbar’s transformation relies on a very precise imaging of the Indian as more in tune with nature, as more in tune with each other, and as “prior” to the alienations of the outpost. . . . The fascination with the Indians and the fascination with the wolf inhabit a similar terrain; the wolf and the Indian come to “stand for” what is lacking in the white man’s face, the desire, movement and closeness of nature itself. (pp. 122–123, emphasis added)

Ahmed (2000) sheds light on how, ironically, in settler colonial contexts such as this, to invoke what is lacking in the dominant subject/culture can become a discursive strategy for the re-making of the white settler subject/culture. Toni Morrison (1993) tells the story of a different, though similarly positioned Dunbar (both are white men), lest we forget that “the quintessential American identity” was/is made possible by “wielding absolute power over the lives of others,” by which she primarily means a “rebellious but serviceable, black population against which Dunbar and all white men are enabled to measure these privileging and privileged differences” (pp. 44–45). As Morrison (1993) explains, white settler men are made anew in the Americas against a backdrop of “rawness and savagery” (p. 44). Both authors add to our understanding of the transformative dynamics of white settler subjectivity through proximity—Ahmed (2000) especially captures the appropriation of Indigeneity that is involved, and Morrison (1993), the sense of newness (read innocence) that predominates. But neither adequately accounts for its gendered dimension. For example, does the “fascination with the Indians” of Ahmed’s (2000) Dunbar take a different form among white settler women? Recall Dawn’s rationale for respecting and honouring Indigenous culture—to correct an imbalance that has led to violence against all women, and Indigenous women disproportionately so. What is lacking in Western society for Dawn has everything to do with her double positioning as a white settler woman: “If you look at Indigenous spiritual practices, we’re not just beating up human women; we’re destroying Grandmother Earth. We are destroying the feminine on almost every level.” Put
simply, Dawn’s interest in Indigenous culture is bound up with a desire to reinstate respect for “the feminine.”

In the following excerpt, Evelyn focuses on the lack of a spiritual relationship to land in Western culture, something that is shallowly incorporated, if at all, by mainstream environmental groups:

Certainly there’s an element of transformation happening for me. I’m now free to… it’s kind of odd because Native spirituality has… I’ve always felt that nature was special—flora, fauna, our kind of connection to it. But, there’s no room for that in Western culture, except for in the environmental movement, and it doesn’t go beyond protecting species and ancient seeds and the land. It doesn’t go beyond that; it doesn’t animate nature into something that is part of us. That’s allowed me a little bit more freedom in my comfort in feeling connected [to Native people].

Like both Dunbars, Evelyn experiences “an element of transformation.” According to her, two things permit this: her solidarity work with Native women (and men) and her predisposition to a spiritual relationship with the land. Is Evelyn’s interpellation as a white settler woman subject of importance here? Might this account for her “fascination” with flora and fauna and not, for instance, wolves? Importantly, Evelyn’s interest in nature extends to “Native spirituality,” which does not seem to hold much appeal for Ahmed’s (2000) Dunbar. Both Dawn’s and Evelyn’s respective “fascination with the Indians” seems bound to the gendered role of helper, their desire to help return balance—gender, ecological and spiritual—to Western society.

At the same time, Evelyn’s (and mainstream Canadian society’s) transformation, like Dunbar’s (Ahmed, 2000), depends on “a very precise imaging of the Indian as more in touch with nature” (p. 122), or what Anna J. Willow (2009) calls the “ecological Indian.” While doubly positioned as dominant and subordinate, Evelyn, Dawn and Alicia still invoke lack at the individual and/or collective levels when establishing relationality to Indigeneity; that is, they remain taken by Indigenous peoples’ presumably more balanced, harmoniously complete existence. How does this attraction facilitate the constitution of a legitimate Canadian national subject? Does it feed into what Razack (2002) describes as the “quintessential feature of white settler mythologies . . . the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of colour” (p. 1)? How can we explain the move from fascination to disavowal? Whose interests can be served when white settlers critique Western lack and praise Indigenous wholeness?

Morgensen’s (2011) analysis of white settler subjectivity in US-based non-Native queer
liberation movements is helpful in this regard: “White Americans associate marginality and resistance with the Indians as an internal antagonist to settler society, which then lets them impersonate indigeneity when they launch social critiques that reconcile them to settler society” (pp. 5–6). Read in this theoretical light, the white participant narratives cited above take on a different, possibly less benign meaning. Morgensen (2011) suggests that settler ally critiques of Western society, especially when based on essentialized visions of Indigeneity, I would add, occur along a slippery slope. Such subjects can easily slide from identifying with the “Indians” to identifying as “Indians,” thus positioning themselves to gain a sense of belonging through innocence. Margery Fee and Lynette Russell (2007) describe a similar shift in white anti-racist subjectivity as “identificatory mobility,” the tendency of “self-acknowledged anti-racist white people to think themselves emphatically ‘Other’, and thus [to be] able to identify with the disempowered and marginalized without ever having to try and understand their [white] difference” (p. 188). I do not claim that Dawn, Evelyn or Alicia engage in a dynamic of identificatory mobility, but rather raise this as a possibility given their location as white settler subjects. It is also plausible that the white settler desire for emplacement (Razack, 2011) gives rise to (and is satiated) by identificatory mobility. Morgensen (2011) explores this possibility in his analysis of a text by gay rights activist Judy Grahn:

Her first sense of belonging to indigeneity arose . . . from the “thoroughly ‘queer’” experience of being exiled from white settler society and then taking comfort in imagining her own indigenized emplacement. White settler heteropatriarchy creates queers who resolve their exile through land-based relationships to disappeared Native people. . . . Her book narrates Native peoples as part of a disappeared past that white settlers inherit, and grants queer exiles solace and a means for them to come “home.” (p. 6)

Following such theories, it is certainly conceivable that white settler women allies stand to gain a sense of “indigenized emplacement” by critiquing through an “indigenized” lens.

There are historical precedents of juxtaposing “utopianized” Indigeneity (LaRocque, 2010) and Western dystopias, which suggests the effectiveness of invoking lack in settler colonial subject-making processes. LaRocque (2010) ties these juxtapositions back to the European primitivist tradition and its central figure, the noble savage, ushered in by key thinkers from the Renaissance to the Romantic periods:

As a critic of European society, the culturally “raw” Indian was dichotomized from the Old World overgrown with conventions. . . . Berkofer [1978] points out that while there were variations in emphasis at different periods, European ideas regarding the noble
savage remained largely the same. It was thought that human freedom was inherent in the raw state of nature. What was human-made was artificial and untrue, what was “unspoiled” and (thought to be) natural as found in earliest “primitive man” was inherently good. Finding such a world promised a new social order for Europeans. The European idea of the noble savage was abstract; it was meant as a tool for social criticism. The ennobling of the Indian was almost accidental, and Native peoples as human beings were largely inconsequential to European (and later White American) concerns. Intellectual idealization was one thing, understanding or acceptance of real Native life was quite another matter. (pp. 127-128)

LaRocque (2010) reminds us that the white settler desire for proximity is more often a desire to be close to an imagined Native (see Francis, 1992). Similarly, in his study of the remarkable prestige garnered by Grey Owl in the eyes of the Canadian public, Erickson (2011) connects “the elevation of a primitive way of life” to the anti-modernist movement:

Anti-modernism developed in the face of the changing economic and social structures, including increased consumerism, immigration and racial diversification in urban environments, and the rationalization of the workforce. Nostalgically looking to the past, Indian masquerade imagines the possibilities of life for the white subject outside these constraints. (p. 27)

Somewhat ironically, anti-modernism provided a platform upon which the modern liberal subject could stand. Bringing us full circle back to the contemporary moment, Willow (2009) charges mainstream environmentalists in particular with “recasting the noble Indian”:

If Western society is viewed as hopelessly corrupted by consumerist greed and competitive individuality, for instance, Native society becomes a symbol of contrasting tendencies, including ecological enlightenment and communal harmony. It is not surprising, then, that the environmental movement has played a central role in recasting the noble Indian in an ecological guise. Environmentalists, Kay Milton . . . suggests, want to believe in the existence of viable alternatives and paths to sustainability. (p. 39, emphasis in original)

Identifying this genealogy of the discourse of Western lack allows a more critical view of white settler ally praise of Indigenous societies/cultures to surface; we become more aware of what that praise can accomplish—namely, the reproduction of colonial hierarchies. It allows us to scrutinize seemingly complimentary views of Indigenous values (preceded by the denigration of Western society) for traces of all that is entailed in the white desire for proximity to the Other.

As implied above, there is usually a degree of romanticism or “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo, 1989) involved in the dynamics of white settler ally subjectivity that can abet the appropriation or internalization of Indigenous identity. Morgensen (2011) proposes that romanticism or
nostalgia is tied to the settler desire to secure (Native) authenticity for themselves. He explains the seemingly paradoxical yet essential role of nostalgia in settler subject-making processes:

In a settler society, then, the very demand upon settlers to replace Natives simultaneously incites white settler desires to be intimate with the Native authenticity that their modernity presumably replaces. Indigeneity’s civilizational replacement thus is complementary to the settler pursuit of primitivism. Impersonating indigeneity and believing in colonial modernity are noncontradictory acts, given that settlers preserve Native authenticity as a history they must possess in order to transcend. (p. 17)

The settler desire for intimacy—i.e., proximity—is built into the logic of settler colonialism (see Chapter 3); the settler must get close to or intimate with (often a stereotypical, romanticized rendition of) Native peoples and cultures (“the settler pursuit of primitivism”) in order to replace and transcend those cultures (an exhibition of the subject’s belief in colonial modernity). Schick (1998) describes how imperialist nostalgia in the Canadian context permits a more subtle manifestation of colonial hierarchies, one that is arguably found in the solidarity encounter:

Whereas the contemporary version of colonialism would disavow the overt desire for dominant/subordinate roles, rather, in the present day, the other is required for the production of nostalgic and salvific benefit to the [settler] subjects. Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls the [settler] subjects’ desire “imperialist nostalgia” in which they regret and mourn the passing of that which their culture has helped to destroy. In spite of the imperialist connections in which this nostalgia is rooted, subjects’ expressions of this desire are offered as something positive, as proof that subjects value and are conscious of those good things the indigenous other has to offer. (p. 185)

Settler subjects can appear virtuous (and innocent) in their appreciation of Indigenous culture. But, as I have shown, settler subject-making processes are nothing if not fraught—and many white participants struggle with their historic positionality. And, to be fair, the majority of white participant narratives do not conform neatly to the logic of imperialist nostalgia; they recognize and lament the devastating impact of ongoing colonialism on contemporary Indigenous communities and traditions, while also noting a resurgence in Indigenous cultural practices. In other words, their statements depart from the most clear cut form of imperialist nostalgia wherein the Indigenous Other is vanishing/has already vanished. However, it is worth considering the possibility that salvific benefits are also sought. To reiterate, Alicia, Dawn and Evelyn issue their critiques of Western society—its lack of spirituality, of community and of concern about violence against (Indigenous) women and environmental destruction—alongside their valorizations of (sometimes essentialized) notions of Indigenous alternatives that could be accessed to make up for Western individual and collective lack. In fact, it is possible that these
participants interpret and adopt discourses used by Indigenous activists (discussed below) as a way to demonstrate (to these activists) their capacity to be “good” allies (see Chapter 6). Given the complex ways that discourse circulates and subjectivities are constituted, it is conceivable that these objectives are sought simultaneously.

Mahrouse (2011) describes in different terms the path to salvific benefit (if/when it is) paved by the white settler woman ally’s “appreciation” of Native culture/values/spirituality, arguing that such an appreciation facilitates the dominant (settler) subject’s ability to reconcile her relative privilege vis-à-vis the Native Other. In studying the world of “alternative” socially responsible tourism, she found that Western “tourists” frequently mention “the non-material wealth of the locals and the idea that ‘we’ westerners stand to learn from ‘them’”; she contends “that such discourses of reversal and equation provided the tourists with a means to reconcile the inequity they are participating, and being complicit, in” (p. 376). In other words, the desire for reversal and equation can partially explain why white settlers invoke the “social, emotional, and spiritual wealth” (Mahrouse, 2011, p. 382) of those whose materially subordinate structural position in society cannot be disputed. This may be happening in a small minority of white participant narratives. Take Alicia’s interpretation of the film Avatar relative to her own life:

The Indigenous people were the ones who defended themselves. They actually rescued the white guy from his shitty culture that had him after greed and money and things like that. Maybe that’s the same case with me. “I’m not here to rescue you.” Aboriginal people have rescued me from a life of consumerism, competition, greed, self-centeredness. Other people reach spiritual enlightenment through Buddhism, I learned through Aboriginal elders, things like respect.

It is plausible to suggest that Alicia employs “discourses of reversal and equation” in drawing a parallel between herself and the white guy (his “shitty culture” in particular).

Viewed through the theoretical lenses provided by Mahrouse (2011), Morgensen (2011) and Schick (1998), among others, these white participant narratives, though few in number, suggest a relationship between reconciling one’s privilege and appropriating Indigenous culture for individual and collective self-making purposes: the settler’s need to emplace herself (i.e., to be/come legitimate; recall Peggy’s statement on the desire to “be here legitimately, ethically, fully”) can be accomplished by reconciling inequity, which is facilitated by proximity to the Other (what “they” can teach “us”). In this sense, narratives of lack can be precursors to appropriation and comprise one strand in a complex web of narratives of becoming (see Chapter
4). I also submit that there is a constitutive connection between the invocation of lack at the individual and collective levels. If we extend, for instance, Schick’s (1998) idea that “the [Indigenous] other is required for the production of nostalgic and salvific benefit” (p. 185) to apply to white subjects as a collectivity, her analysis attends to why Alicia, Dawn and Evelyn seem compelled to make a connection between their individual lack and that of “white Western culture in Canada,” and between the benefits promised to them (as individuals) and those promised to “white Western culture” (as a collective) via an embrace of Indigenous culture. Put differently, there is a (typically unrecognized) link between the desire to reconstitute the “I” (the autonomous subject) and the desire to formulate a “we” (the legitimate Canadian citizenry).

Morgensen’s (2011) description of the naturalizing logic of settler colonialism is useful:

Settler colonialism is naturalized not only in Native people’s seeming “disappearance” from a modern, settler landscape, but also in indigeneity’s recurrent appearance within and as settler subjectivity. Whether erasing or performing indigeneity, omitting or celebrating it, settlers practice settlement by turning Native land and culture into an inheritance granting them knowledge and ownership of themselves. (p. 18, emphasis in original)

Adopting this view, we can situate discourses of lack, and the sometimes quite subtle dynamics of appropriation they serve, within the logic of settler colonialism; ostensibly individuated narratives of becoming are collectivized to constitute narratives of national belonging wherein white settlers especially are “turning Native land and culture into an inheritance granting them knowledge and ownership of themselves” (Morgensen, 2011, p. 18) While explicit mentions of Canadian nation building are rare in white participant narratives, they indicate that the solidarity encounter is not immune to broader discursive patterns of Canadian nationalism. Dawn, also cited above, directly invokes Canadian nationalism when asked about transformation at the personal and/or collective level. She cites a memorable occasion—a Native ceremony in honour of a long-time Native woman activist—to explain how doing solidarity has transformed her:

I—this is very true in the honouring ceremony—can see and experience . . . some of the culture and see what an opportunity it is for Canada when they begin honouring that culture, the contribution that that can make. . . . I really think that [Native culture] is one, like I said, of the treasures that Canada has. It thinks that it has just got mineral resources and stuff. No, no, no. It has got an incredibly rich spiritual core, that if it connects with that, some other things, like harmony and balance with the environment will start falling into place, the honouring of women in general. It’s all part of the same piece. We will become a stronger nation.
Dawn’s appreciation of Native ceremony can be interpreted as “something positive,” to recall Schick (1998), a sign of her knowledge of Canadian colonial history. We could similarly interpret Alicia’s more implicit reference to the superiority of non-Western (i.e., Indigenous) ways: “There’s a different way to be living on this planet: to be more in tune with themselves, to be more in tune with nature, to understand colonization, to try some decolonizing work, to get back to our roots, to know what a community means.” Alicia appears to cross the line, however, between appreciation and appropriation by suggesting that “we” get back to “our” roots. Dawn performs a similarly appropriative move when claiming “Native culture” as Canada’s treasure, its rich spiritual core. Both narratives suggest the ease with which settlers, even or perhaps especially through celebratory means, can “turn Native land and culture into an inheritance granting them knowledge and ownership of themselves” (Morgensen, 2011, p. 18). Perhaps most problematically, both narratives, by placing an inordinate emphasis on culture, steer us away from a more difficult conversation about the very colonial structures that have dismissed the value of Indigenous cultures in the first place.

Chloe’s narrative sheds more light on the potential problems with white settler admiration of Indigenous peoples in the solidarity encounter and beyond:

Eventually you get back to the core thing, and I think if you get back to that, most Canadians realize their great respect for Native tradition and it goes back to our feeling… the first settlers in Canada like Champlain, he respected the Native people. Why? Because they had a classless society, they had a way of doing things: they produced healthier children, nobody starved to death, they were courageous, they were hard working. He admired the people that they met when they first got off the boat. And I think some of that is still within our heritage. I’m hoping it’s all across Canada. I think it is.

Chloe is confident that most Canadians across the country share her respect of “Native people and tradition.” She seems to have borrowed directly from John Ralston Saul’s *A Fair Country* (2008), which I suggest represents a certain strand of Canadian national belonging discourse. He rests his argument—plain in this bold opening sentence, “We are a métis civilization”—on a characterization of Canadian society (deemed by Saul a “civilization”) similar to that of Chloe:

When I dig around in the roots of how we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together in communities—how we treat one another . . . what I find is deeply Aboriginal. Whatever our family tree may look like, our intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European or African or Asian. (Saul, 2008, p. 3)
According to David MacDonald (2013), Saul (and Chloe, I would add) argues that Canada “is actually based on a long history of Aboriginal–settler partnerships, which created forms of ‘métissage’—political and social cultures that amalgamate many ways of knowing and being. The key to a successful future, Saul holds, is for Canadians to rediscover and celebrate this shared past” (p. 61). While not disputing the importance of acknowledging the historical and ongoing contributions of Indigenous peoples to Canadian society, I want to highlight Saul’s seamless slippage into using “we,” the third person plural (a move also made in Alicia’s narrative). On the one hand, Saul could be lauded and considered virtuous (Schick, 1998) for his knowledge of colonialism and Indigenous social and political processes; on the other, his main claim arguably does the work of reversal and equation (Mahrouse, 2011) and is of nostalgic and salvific benefit (Schick, 1998). MacDonald (2013) hones in on a core problem with nostalgia—its often strong links to historical revisionism, that is, the white-washing of Canada’s colonial history and invalidation of Indigenous historiography and contemporary political struggle:

Saul’s vision of the past . . . is tinged with nostalgia and romanticism. His desire to forge a common society, for example, is premised on a “return to the balanced relationship that had developed through the first centuries of our shared history” (Saul, 2008, pp. 23–24). This romanticism elides much of the negative history of Canada, and tacitly undermines and invalidates Aboriginal critiques of the continued colonization of Turtle Island, or critiques that posit that the relationship was never that particularly close. (p. 62)

Speaking directly to Saul’s work, LaRocque (2010) stipulates the need for a “microscopic examination” (particularly by postcolonial scholars) of the CIV/SAV (civilized–savage) doctrine at the heart of the colonial enterprise if there is to be respectful recognition by non-Native Canadians of the multifaceted contributions of real (as opposed to spectral) Indigenous peoples to Canada’s “Métis civilization”:

It is not enough to simply make a nodding acknowledgement of the CIV/SAV’s radioactive lifespan; this would be the place and time to redirect the colonial gaze, and give it a microscopic examination. It is incumbent on us all to understand its twisty workings in our cultural productions. There is no “metis civilization” for Canada otherwise. (pp. 15–16)

As an Indigenous participant, Danielle’s take on the pulse of mainstream Canadians also counters that of Chloe and Saul. She not only cites high levels of ignorance and arrogance on the part of most Canadians, she calls into question the legitimacy of the Canadian state itself:

It’s like, “Just because we say it’s so, it’s so.” I find that with the government. I find that with the whole foundation of Canada, that for 300 years, they’ve been saying this, so then it must be true. For 300 years, it’s been this lie in place, so . . . it must be true, when
we know the truth because we have an oral tradition and we keep telling the story over and over and over.

Following Danielle and MacDonald (2013), one might ask how the material realities of Native people in Canada—such as unresolved specific and comprehensive land claims—figure into equations like Saul’s. As members of a Métis civilization, do we all enjoy equal rights to these lands? What unites the statements of Dawn, Chloe and Saul is a resolute belief in the following ideas: contemporary Canadian society owes much to its Indigenous inhabitants; we should honour this legacy; and we can rightfully claim it as our own. Danielle has committed to combating the 300-year-old lie about the “foundation of Canada” and the ignorance of many mainstream (white) Canadians by “telling the truth” in as many public “speaks” as possible.

**Indigenous Women on Political Activism/Solidarity, Collective Survival and Responsibility**

Philip J. Deloria (1998) explores those US identity-making practices wherein white Americans in particular perform and create myths of national belonging around “Indianness”: “Tracing the different manifestations of American Indian play invariably requires following the interlocked historical trajectory of native peoples as well” (p. 8). The same assertion grounds Morgensen’s (2011) argument that “Native and non-Native queer politics [and subjectivities and modernities] formed their relationship in the spaces between them produced by settler colonialism” (p. x). Like Morgensen, I aim to interpret such “intimately relational and power-laden conversations” (p. 28) at a different site—the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in a Canadian context. I proceed in that spirit by looking at Indigenous women’s self-presentations in relation to white settler subject-making processes. And like LaRocque (2010), I am also interested in “what will emerge . . . from the contested ground upon which we, the Canadian colonizer-colonialist and Native colonized, have built our troubled discourse” (p. 3).

In what follows, I shift my focus to Indigenous women’s subjectivities in order to consider what I find to be an interesting moment of discursive convergence in settler–Indigenous relations.

Indigenous women’s self-presentations (of themselves or their communities) appear to dovetail with two key aspects of the white participant narratives discussed above: a critique of Western social values and practices, and simultaneous praise of alternative Indigenous ones. Indigenous women often embed such critiques of the West in their self-presentations, i.e., in self-depictions of women upholding their responsibilities to family, community, nation and Creation. They represent Indigenous peoples as inclined towards tolerance, inclusion, respect and
thoughtfulness in contrast to Western tendencies toward intolerance, exclusion, intrusiveness and impatience. How do we read these discursive overlaps? Do Indigenous women also deploy discourses of nostalgia and romanticization, and what might this say about the discursive roles that Indigenous peoples have played and continue to play in contesting or even reproducing stereotypical representations of themselves? LaRocque (2010) suggests some answers in her study of Native scholarly and literary texts, which she insists must be situated within a colonial framework. Read in this light, Native knowledge production is a resistance response to the colonial “vilification of Native peoples” and simultaneous “hero-ification of the White man” (p. 36):

Native people have had to punctuate cultural differences to counter the portrayal of themselves as uncultured, unregulated savages. In this defending and repositioning, we have, inevitably perhaps, utopianized our culture(s). The noble savage has been an ideal image—and tool—for this pursuit. Again, this process has not necessarily been conscious; the enduring image has been there for us to internalize. Or to use as fodder for our art or research. (LaRocque, 2010, p. 130)

Drawing on LaRocque (2010) and other Indigenous feminist scholars such as Anderson and Lawrence (2000), I consider how Indigenous participants’ discursive self-presentations can be read as acts of resistance in the context of historical and ongoing colonialism.

I was able to identify this discursive convergence through first noting a general divergence in Indigenous and white participants’ respective views on political activism/solidarity and selfhood, a point I initially raise in Chapter 4. To be sure, there are resounding similarities in their understandings of these concepts: equal numbers of Indigenous and white women define activism in broad terms (as opposed to the more narrow terms of protest politics) and report having come to political activism through a variety of avenues including the academy or the arts. Moreover, roughly half of both groups eschew the activist label—albeit with distinct rationales. However, there are also important dissimilarities. One of the most striking relates to Indigenous participant notions of political subjectivity or selfhood, which include a unique weave of political activism, individual/collective survival and communal responsibility. For example, unlike any of the white participants, several Indigenous women spoke about their political activism in terms of inextricable individual/collective survival—statements indicative of a departure from common ground when it comes to the stakes of political struggle for differently positioned subjects. But, these relatively divergent modalities of political activism/solidarity come full circle in at least two important ways: a number of Indigenous and
white women both are invested in critiquing Western social norms and practices, and simultaneously in praising Indigenous ones as a viable alternative.

**Politically positioned: Indigenous women and collective survival**

*This book is an extension of my communal responsibilities; I am representing an Indigenous standpoint within Australian feminism.*

—Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000)

Moreton-Robinson’s (2000) declaration on the front cover of *Talkin’ up to the White Woman* exemplifies a growing consensus in scholarly literature by and about Indigenous women that being positioned as an Indigenous woman carries with it certain responsibilities in relation to a range of collectivities—from families to communities, nations, future generations and ultimately Creation (Anderson, 2000; Lawrence & Anderson, 2003; Miller & Chuchryk, 1996; Monture & McGuire, 2009). Most Indigenous participants identify in inextricable terms as Indigenous women and explain their engagement in politics/solidarity in terms of an embrace of this subject position (and the respect and sense of responsibility it is accorded). Moreover, they often present themselves as principled actors dedicated to solidarity work for politically strategic reasons. In this way, participant narratives reflect widely-circulating discourses about Native women’s role as the caretakers at the centre of their families, communities and nations. For instance, in the above passage where she explains her dedication to “telling the truth,” Danielle traces her political activism back to her positionality as an Indigenous woman in Canada. In emphasizing their concern for the collective welfare of Indigenous peoples as a main motivation for engaging in solidarity work, do these women, however inadvertently, romanticize, essentialize and/or homogenize Indigenous womanhood or Indigeneity more broadly? Why risk re-entrenching stereotypical notions of the “authentic Indian” that could then be incorporated into/by settler subjectivities? I begin with Indigenous participant perspectives on political activism/solidarity.

Some Indigenous participants characterize the subject position Indigenous woman as inherently political. For example, Teresa says, “I think we’re born as Indigenous women into political positioning, whether we like it or not.” In this statement, Teresa depicts political engagement as an almost unbidden consequence of being “born as Indigenous women”: to be born Indigenous is to be born political regardless of one’s political inclinations (or lack thereof). Similarly, Indigenous philosopher Anne Waters (2004b) argues that “American Indians [in the US] are political beings, as all tribes share in the struggle against the continuing genocide perpetrated
against our people and our nations” (p. 167). LaRocque (2010) speaks directly to the toll exacted at the individual and collective levels by the Canadian state’s genocidal policies vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples: “I too carry ‘the 400 years pain,’ a ‘pain’ that is part of this land; I too carry the pain of my mother, my father, my sister, my brothers, my nieces and nephews, my grandfathers and mothers, my aunts and uncles. And I carry my own pain” (p. 33). Traces of LaRocque (2010) and Waters (2004a, 2004b) are found in Belinda’s and Lydia’s respective redefinitions of activism in survivalist terms—political acts that invoke the sustained efforts by Indigenous peoples as Indigenous peoples to resist centuries of colonial onslaught:

But when I think back on it, you know, I realize that everything is political. I mean just staying alive as a Native woman is political; just deciding that you are going to live and be well and go to university and write is political. Deciding that you are not going to end up in jail and be on welfare and lose all your kids. You know, that’s political . . . in the sense that I’m not going to be crushed and fall under all the crap that gets thrown at you all the time. . . . [It’s about] taking your own power, deciding to live in a good way. (Belinda)

I think some people would label me an activist. Some people would say I’m a warrior. In my bio, I don’t use the title [activist] because I don’t think I’ve made a conscious [decision that] I’m going to become involved in activism. I’m just trying to uncover the layers. That’s more what I’m doing. I think if that’s what people call activism, that’s okay, but I think that might be an inadequate label. It’s more I’m trying to survive and do what I need to do. Maybe I’m being a good role model versus an activist. (Lydia)

Belinda’s statement especially echoes LaRocque’s (2010) characterization of political resistance:

A simple assertion of one’s (Native) humanity is a form of resistance, given the magnitude of dehumanization over a span of 500 years. In this overarching history of colonization, Native peoples have developed a collective sense of relationship to the land and to each other, and to the common cause of decolonization. In this sense, every politically aware Native teacher, scholar, writer, artist, filmmaker, poet, or activist is ultimately a producer of resistance material. (p. 23)

As suggested by these passages, politically aware Indigenous women (and men) have felt and indeed have been compelled to “produce resistance material” by the colonial circumstances that engulf us all, although in quite distinct ways. That is, their subordinate positionality within the colonial encounter writ large figures prominently in their decisions to take political action, however defined. For Moreton-Robinson (2000), it is precisely this subordinate positionality that induces Indigenous women to become consciously astute political actors in their everyday lives: “What women anthropologists have failed to understand in their desire to represent Indigenous women are the complexities Indigenous women face in a world under conditions not
of their choosing. Where they must translate and interpret whiteness, while being ‘Other’” (p. 89). Thus, while both white women and Indigenous women choose to be politically involved, Indigenous women do so by highlighting what they see as their politically charged social location as members of a particular dispossessed and marginalized collectivity.

It is in this sense that Rubina refers to her responsibilities as an Aboriginal woman when asked if she considers herself to be an activist or part of an activist community:

I would say I’m upholding my responsibilities as an Aboriginal woman to this land. If that’s what you call activism, so be it, but I’m not really going to label myself that. I’m going to insure that I uphold Guswenta, the Two Row wampum. . . . If that’s activism, well, then it’s activism; but for me, it’s just being who I am. It’s the responsibility.

In other words, her responsibilities “as an Aboriginal woman to this land” require her to engage in what others might call political activism. Lydia also upholds a Native woman’s responsibility to her community as an indelible component of engaging in political activism or solidarity:

When any Indigenous woman takes on something, she has communities, a reserve community, whether the whole nation, behind her. Like Sharon McIvor, she has a whole nation of Indigenous women that she’s caring for, same as Jeannette Corbiere-Lavell. When a white woman comes in and makes a decision, she doesn’t have those responsibilities. People like Sharon and Jeanette and Sandra, when they take on their...even women in the reserve communities trying to establish, let’s say, a shelter or a food bank, they have a community of people that they’re caring for. White women don’t have that. Sure, white women may have kids at home, but they don’t have a whole country of oppressed people . . . that they’re caring for, and so they have a privilege that Indigenous women don’t have. They don’t have the same pressure. I think that’s the biggest thing . . . they seem to not understand that this is not just activism.

To Lydia, her political responsibility as a Native woman is “not just activism,” but rather derives from her subject position in historical context and is in contrast to white women who “don’t have a whole country of oppressed people . . . that they’re caring for.” In this way, she highlights the power structures that position and constrain Indigenous women differently with respect to political engagement and by extension solidarity work. Although in agreement that Indigenous women have a particular role in (and awareness of the need for) fostering positive societal change, Danielle sees this as a responsibility extending to all people. In explaining why she does political activism/solidarity work, she consistently links political mobilization to “our [Native and non-Native] principal duty and responsibility to all of Creation”:

As I stood there, I thought about . . . how I was lining up with the earth and the moon and the sun and stirring the ashes and saying, “I can do this. I know I can handle this...”
Because what it’s about is ensuring that the cycles of life continue. And what it’s about is respecting all of Creation. And what it’s about is doing our principal duty and responsibility to all of Creation, and that’s to be kind and to care. . . . What we’re experiencing today is a pretty mean and nasty come-around—when we’re dealing with earthquakes . . . and fires and . . . floods. We’re the ones that bombed the shit out of Tora Bora. We’re the ones that made war. We’re the ones that are starving our people. We’re the ones that are letting Aboriginal people live in conditions that are rated 74th in the world while we enjoy conditions that are eighth. . . . So I like to put in that bigger perspective of why I do the work. I do the work so that when I go across that sky and I take my place back up there with my ancestors, and I get to see my Great Grandmother Moon, I don’t want her to be ashamed of me.

She continues,

Fifty-four percent of our [Native] population is under the age of 27. I say to people, what does that look like in 50 years—my lifetime—what does that look like? For me, I choose to think that it looks like a pretty rosy picture. It’s not so rosy if we don’t do anything. It’s real damn rosy, though, if we meet the needs of those kids, if we stand them up and give them what they need, and we feed them properly, and we connect them to their role and their responsibility and their duty. That’s a huge army. That’s a huge army for peace and kindness and tolerance and understanding, and all those things that we know we have to get to if we think we’re going to end violence against women.

Although broad in its parameters, Danielle’s definition of activism centres her responsibilities as an Indigenous woman vis-à-vis her Indigenous ancestors (Great Grandmother Moon) as well as future generations, that is, in collective terms. Danielle’s message about how “we’re going to end violence against women” recalls Dawn’s above on the same topic when she (as a white woman) suggests all Canadians should be “respecting and honouring Indigenous culture” as a way to mitigate the destruction of “Grandmother Earth” and “the feminine on almost every level.”

Alongside rendering the Indigenous woman subject as inescapably political, many Indigenous participants highlight their dedication to collective political struggle (as opposed to the more self-serving, individualistic needs they ascribe to many white women) as the primary motivating factor in their decisions to do solidarity work. Their engagement in solidarity would result from, and not cause, their political activism (whereas they would claim the opposite to be the case for some white women). In short, achieving solidarity per se is not the main goal of Indigenous women’s political (or solidarity) work; solidarity becomes a means to a political end. Moreover, some Native women describe ending up in solidarity encounters without having chosen to be in them. Take Wanda—a seasoned, self-ascribed Indigenous activist: only recently has she purposely worked in a mixed Native–white organization:
I don’t know if it’s a conscious decision [to work in solidarity]. I didn’t step out of the world to do it. My world is basically most of the time filled with Aboriginal people. To be honest with you, I don’t use the term “solidarity” and all those other kinds of things. That wasn’t something that we used, except for in the Leonard Peltier movement. . . . I mean, I’ve been involved in different protests and those kinds of things, and it’s never been an issue whether [people] have been white or not white. The issue was what was the matter. I think this is the first time I’ve been involved in a [mixed Indigenous/non-Indigenous] group. And it was really good for me to be a part of that. I’ve seen some things that I probably needed to see in my life.

In hesitating to call her decision to work with white women a conscious one, Wanda minimizes the centrality of solidarity in her political work; in her experience, “the issue” is what has mattered most to Native women (and, Wanda suggests, men). Lee, who corroborates Wanda’s point, adds this nuance: “I like the Indigenous sensibility about, we’re on a journey of exploration, that we’re trying to understand each other in the process of doing this work, and that the more important thing is the work, but we are struggling to understand each other” (emphasis added). Positive cross-cultural intersubjective relations, Lee argues, are important, but should figure as a consequence of the greater goal or “more important thing,” which is the work itself. This is not to say that the Indigenous women with whom I spoke did not ever seek solidarity or see it as vitally necessary. Danielle in particular is emphatic about the need to “create allies, informed allies, who aren’t working out of the ignorance, who have the proper information and the truth. . . . That’s why I go and do any talk that I’m invited to do . . . because what I’m doing is creating allies and I’m informing people.” As a Native organizer, Ryah has also sought non-Native allies for specific projects and offers this account of one such coalition:

There was an urgency to [the activism] because this was specific legislation that we did not want put in place and so we were calling on a coalition. So it was great that non-Native people joined the coalition, but it turned out that many needed so much educating, you spent all your time educating people, and they’re at various levels of their education. And then you hear the white guilt that comes out of them, and then you realize, “I don’t want to invest so much time into this.”

In sum, these Indigenous participants state that, to the extent that they seek solidarity with white women, they generally do so for a specific cause or project. In contrast to white participants’ narratives of their solidarity trajectories (and Indigenous participants’ readings of white women in solidarity work), which I discuss in Chapter 4, Indigenous participant narratives do not contain obvious allusions to the desire for proximity with white women.
When pressed on the question of choice in relation to solidarity work with white women, Wanda clarifies that “for me [this last time] it was a conscious decision; but a lot of times you’re absolutely right, it’s not. I don’t have a choice. It’s already in place, and they’re already there.” Complicating matters further, Wanda distinguishes between acknowledging the need for allies and expressly desiring them. That is, while seeing allies as essential in political struggle (she notes the alternative as “standing at Parliament Hill by myself with a sign”), Wanda admits, “I would still say I don’t want to work with white women. . . . It would depend on what it’s going to be that we’re doing or the white woman who wants to be involved with us.” At that moment in our conversation, I had deliberately veered away from an open-ended interview style in order to corroborate two impressions I had developed by that point in the data collection: that solidarity is represented as a means to an end by many Indigenous women; and that, while recognizing the need for allies, they do not always want (or want to actively recruit) them.

Zainab, another Indigenous woman with decades of activist experience, much of which has involved solidarity encounters with white women (and men), shares Wanda’s view:

It takes a lot out of me. I used the word “re-traumatized” before and I’m not kidding about that. . . . I walked into a room at one point where I was one of two Native women in the room and everybody else there was white. . . . I felt like I was surprising people when I spoke or made suggestions about things because I just had this sense people had low expectations of my ability to think, to organize, and I just felt like every time I made a suggestion, people were like, “Wow, she’s got a brain” kind of thing. I just got sick of it. . . . So it’s not my priority. If white people are there and they’re supportive and stuff, it’s fine. If they’re included, it’s fine. It’s not like I avoid them, but . . . my priority, in terms of relationship-building, would be with racialized people.

Zainab ends by describing her engagement in solidarity with white people as “just hard work.”

**Indigenous romanticization as re-affirmation and resistance**

*Reconstruction entails both deconstruction and romanticization. For Native academics, especially, because of the ideological complex of our dehumanization, we have woven our idealizations throughout our deconstructive argumentations. However, the fabric of our weaving is anything but simple. We carry the weight of “the colonizer’s model of the world” (to borrow Blaut’s phrase): in our case, specifically, we remain shadowed by the savage, both the noble and the ignoble. Our resistance is our reconstruction, which does remain textured with idealization and internalization.*

—Emma LaRocque (2010, p. 120)

LaRocque (2010) theorizes that Native scholarly and/or literary texts (read as resistance discourse) are inescapably inflected by the colonial figure of the ig/noble savage. LaRocque’s
thesis is relevant for the solidarity context—in describing their roles in and experiences of political activism/solidarity, many Native participants in my study go to significant lengths to depict themselves and their communities as deeply human/e. In the above narratives especially, Indigenous women emphasize certain aspects of their involvement in political struggle and solidarity, namely, prioritizing the collective welfare of Indigenous peoples and the specific project at hand. In synch with the above white participant critiques, Indigenous women also embed negative appraisals of Western social values and practices within positive depictions of themselves and their communities or nations. For example, what they describe as the Native affinity to listen and deliberate is contrasted with the Western tendency to interrupt, argue and be impulsive in communicative interactions. Wanda cites an example—a white woman’s unsuccessful attempts to control the agenda for a meeting:

She wants to control everything, which means a list of questions. And the list of questions came from her perspective, not the people’s perspective. That’s another thing about us: we think about everything behind us and ahead of us when we speak. Non-Native people don’t think like that. White people don’t think like that.

In agreement, Lee explicitly names colonialism and patriarchy as the underlying culprits of what she calls invasive behavioral practices:

This would never happen in [our Native] community. Someone wouldn’t cut you off before you finished your thinking, and they would actually think about what you said, especially if they disagreed. They would really play with what you said. . . . because it doesn’t need to get solved today. What needs to happen is you have to give weight to that person’s words. . . . When someone is doing this argumentative thing and cutting me off, I don’t get to be me, so it’s very annoying. So some differences actually rob your ability to be yourself, and the person doesn’t realize it, but the differences are the invasive behavioral practices that come from a colonial and patriarchal society, and I don’t think that everyone that’s non-Native or non-colonized have analyzed that enough and . . . looked at the cultural practices that arise out of that. Because those aren’t just differences, you see. They’re colonizing behaviours.

Danielle also implicates patriarchy, but in fostering a racist divisiveness in Western society:

I think it comes down to a European mentality and kind of patriarchal way of thinking—that everybody believes that we have these colours on us. We see that circle, the four colours of man, as one. It’s not our analysis, it’s not our way of looking at things, that you’re white and I’m brown, and somebody else is yellow and someone else is orange and somebody’s got pink polka dots. That’s not our way. We look at each other as human beings. We look at each other as Onkwehon:we, carriers of water here on land . . . . That was really what we saw when Christopher Columbus come bopping across. They looked at him as a human being and extended their friendship and their kindness, because that’s our duty and our responsibility, to work together with all of Creation.
That’s the oldest law. That law supersedes Canadian law. I think that’s what they tried to wipe out, that real protocol and the medicine and the strength that comes from working together and accepting each other and tolerating each other as individuals.

Belinda accesses a similar discourse in her description of Indigenous ways of relating:

Native people, they don’t close the door on anybody. They don’t say, “You can’t come here because you’re not this or too that.” Well, maybe they do in some situations, like with traditional ceremony; there are certain rules. But I mean in organizing groups they don’t leave anybody out, especially when there is food when someone’s hungry. . . . And they tend to tolerate a lot more than white people do because they realize that some people just don’t know any better and maybe they’ll learn. And, you know, kindness is the most human thing you can do. . . . It was one of those things that made us so vulnerable, that kindness and openness and generosity, that made them exploit us.

Whereas both Danielle and Belinda associate divisiveness and exclusion with Western ways of being, they associate unity, cooperation, inclusivity and respect with Indigeneity. Both argue, in fact, that it was because of Indigenous societies’ capacity to do, in Belinda’s words, “the most human thing you can do” that they were targeted for exploitation. Teresa, another Native participant, maintains that the same predisposition toward inclusivity can render Indigenous communities vulnerable in the contemporary solidarity encounter: “I think that it’s really important in working in solidarity that we do a profile of the people that come into our circles. . . . I think our communities are a bit too welcoming to people who come in. There might be violence issues, abuse issues, addiction issues.” Danielle would concur with Teresa, as is evident in her example of a “needy” ally’s behaviour:

She just needs to be listened to and heard and have attention because she’s lonely and living alone, and her family never comes to see her. And here are these Indians, always so kind and so caring and welcoming and tolerant. “Put up with me and give me attention and don’t correct me when I’m offensive and monopolizing the meeting, and talking and talking so no one else gets to express anything. I’m just talking for the sake of talking.” Meanwhile . . . [she] should have had respect for that elder. Don’t waste his energy, because he doesn’t have a finite supply, and neither do I. I’m happy to do the work. I’ll work hard, but I won’t waste my time. I don’t have time to waste.

Kindness, tolerance, the generosity of spirit with which Indigenous peoples greeted Europeans—as much as these attributes may be in part idealizations of Indigenous culture and subjectivity, they are also strong reaffirmations of the humanity of Indigenous peoples. As LaRocque (2010) points out, “Because of the ideological complex of our dehumanization, we have woven our idealizations throughout our deconstructive argumentations” (p. 120).
Native spirituality (often the target of much idealization or romanticization) is not a significant reference point for the Indigenous participants in my study, at least not in the same way that it is for the white participants quoted above. Most Indigenous participants who bring up the issue of spirituality do so not in relation to their own spiritual/religious beliefs, but in relation to white women—citing the latter’s need for healing and the consequent appropriation of Indigenous religious beliefs or practices that can ensue, and the measures Indigenous and white women can take to mitigate that appropriation. There are several possible explanations for this, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. First, Indigenous women’s religious or spiritual beliefs were not the focus of this study, nor did I ask direct questions about them. Indigenous participants may have determined simply that their religious or spiritual beliefs were irrelevant to the topics under discussion. Second, it cannot be assumed that spirituality or religion is always a significant factor in the lives or solidarity practices of all (or even most) Indigenous women. This would be to essentialize and/or tokenize Indigenous women, and to leave little room for atheism or secular beliefs on their part. Third, given my subject position as a white woman, Indigenous participants may have been hesitant to discuss certain beliefs with me (recall Belinda’s comment regarding restrictions that can be placed on non-Indigenous access to some ceremonies). That being said, spirituality does come up in a personal way for Kellie, a participant who identifies as Indigenous from beyond Turtle Island. She describes the benefits she has attained from engaging in Indigenous political activism in a way that evokes Evelyn’s personal transformation as a white woman doing solidarity work:

It’s been really great because it’s allowed me to become more in touch with my spiritual roots. Because I find with mainstream white culture, there’s not a spiritual element to their activism. I think that leads to all the burnout that we see, and anger and aggression, and people just going to a demonstration and yelling at the police because they’re pissed and they’re angry. . . . you know, the smart thing to do is to be the intellectual activist who’s agnostic and who’s very rational, linear-minded, right? . . . That’s what I mean . . . activist culture for First Nations is very different than when it comes to mainstream white culture, even when it comes to the heroes. Definitely my life has improved, not just in activism, but in general, being more open to allowing spirituality to be part of my activism and see how they belong together. It’s unnatural to separate them. . . . Not to say that spirituality cures everything, but it definitely keeps you on your centre.

Kellie’s response is reminiscent of white participant narratives such as Alicia’s and my own (see Chapter 4), and raises at least two important points that remain unexplored in this study. First, some Indigenous women, like their white counterparts, may be driven to solidarity work in part because of their own spiritual/cultural disenfranchisement that is a consequence of colonial
oppression. It is conceivable that, especially as an Indigenous woman from beyond Turtle Island, Kellie has found it important to access commonly-circulating discourses about Indigeneity for her own self-making purposes. Second, Indigenous women (and men) may face varying pressures to meet Indigenous communities’ own requirements for authenticity (Lawrence, 2003).

**Deconstructing the “Indigenous woman subject”**

Indigenous participants (including some of the ones I cite above) offer more nuanced narratives of their political activism and of the figure of the solely communally driven Indigenous woman activist and/in a homogeneous Indigenous collective. That is, Indigenous participant voices offer deconstructions of their own romanticized and essentialized depictions of Indigenous peoples as inclusive, respectful, etc. (and Indigenous women as single-mindedly concerned with their communities’ well-being). For example, Danielle’s sarcasm, evident in her comments about a white woman’s attraction to “these Indians, always so kind and so caring and welcoming and tolerant,” is an acknowledgement of the caricatured nature of this depiction—especially in the minds of who she calls “needy” allies. Adding to this view, Lee reminds us that we all swim in the same colonial waters and that Native people can also exhibit colonial behaviours:

> The thing is, you can’t compensate for [the massive inequity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations]. And some [white] people try to by being overly generous and all that sort of stuff, letting Aboriginal people behave badly is another example. So that’s not going to help. . . . We all have colonial patterns of behaviour. Europeans generally have a bigger sense of entitlement, are generally more invasive and all that, but it doesn’t mean that we don’t find the reverse to be the case, too. Sometime white people are more humble than they need to be, and sometime Native people are more arrogant than they should be. So we have to take care of it all. We have to be on the lookout for some basic sense of decency and understanding.

According to Lee, Native people who “behave badly” can be enabled in their bad behaviour by the white desire to “compensate” for the massive inequity that defines settler colonialism (see Chapter 6 on the related white desire to vindicate oneself as a “good” settler). While distinguishing Indigenous and Western societal organizing principles, Lee would reject the existence of a rigid dichotomy between the two (see also Waters, 2004c).

Lee’s view of solidarity also debunks simplistic visions of the Native woman as the un-individuated subject dedicated solely or selflessly to her Native community/nation. This is accomplished when Lee acknowledges the personal advantages/aspects of solidarity work:
You have to figure out how to get the job done without your various cultural and personal differences getting in the way, too. So really doing work with someone outside of family makes you a broader and more accepting person. So I try to do things with other people besides family for that reason, because it’s going to help me grow as a human being. In the end, I’ll be a better grandmother, a better friend, a better sister, a better aunt. . . . I’ll be happier spiritually; I’ll have more connections; I’ll be more loved. I think that all of these efforts we make... so I think it’s way more than solidarity for me.

Lee highlights components of individual growth and well-being in her view of solidarity, albeit components she sees as bound up with the primary goal of solidarity encounters for many Native women—“to get the job done.” Lee’s approach to solidarity also invokes what is arguably an underlying tenet of Indigenous philosophies—the indivisible interconnectedness of the “I” and the “we”—as explained by Viola Faye Cordova (2004). Indigenous ontological understandings of the world hold that individual and collective subjectivities are inextricably co-constituted and that, therefore, individual autonomy must be respected and individual gifts enhanced to ensure the benefit of the collective (see also Anderson, 2000). Simpson (2011) makes a similar point about the individual–collective dynamic in discussing Nishnaabeg resurgence:

The performance of our “theories” and thought is how we collectivize meaning. This is important because our collective truths as a nation and as a culture are continuously generated from those individual truths we carry around inside ourselves. Our collective truths exist in a nest of individual diversity. (p. 43)

In short, the individual should not be eclipsed by the collective; instead, individual diversity (or, I would add, individuality, not individualism) comprises and finds meaning in the collective.

Cordova’s (2004) work is part of a burgeoning literature on Indigenous social and political thought that explores Indigenous epistemological and ontological precepts sometimes, though not always, in comparison and contrast with Western philosophical belief systems.16 Anderson (2000) is among the many notable Native women scholars in this literature.17 In her treatise on “Native womanhood,” she touches on many of the same points made by the Native women in my study, particularly about Native women’s traditional responsibilities to their nations. However, as if to outline the risks of romanticizing Native women and/or burdening them with too much responsibility, Anderson (2000) includes a conversation with Bonita Lawrence as the book’s final chapter. In it, Lawrence takes issue with the discourse of Native women’s responsibility that circulates within what she calls “urban traditionalism”: 
I worry about this urban traditionalism, and when I hear this constant emphasis on the responsibilities of women, it bugs me. How many responsibilities are most Native women already saddled with? Especially single mothers with the lowest income and the largest families. Native women know more about responsibility than any other group in this whole society! [laughs] And yet all the urban teachings keep going on about the “roles and responsibilities” of Native women, in ways that I think are about creating this image of womanhood which gives us pride in our nations. And this is problematic. (quoted in Anderson, 2000, p. 270)

Lawrence’s statement is part of a broader conversation among Indigenous women (often, but not always, within debates about Indigenous feminisms) about the merits and pitfalls of “tradition,” particularly as related to Indigenous women’s roles in Indigenous nation-building struggles. Lawrence gestures at how Indigenous women/feminists are redefining Indigenous philosophical traditions in empowering ways—reconfiguring the tenet of interconnectedness between the “I” and the “we” to delineate a respectful relationship between Indigenous women and their nations:

I’d gotten an impression from the first Elder I worked with that following traditional ways simply meant giving of ourselves endlessly for the needs of our people. So I would do that until I was ready to drop, was so stressed and worn out. And then sometimes I’d just want to back away from that and say “I just need to look after myself”—but feeling guilty, like it’s a selfish “white” thing to do. I like how you [Kim Anderson] challenge this way of thinking—especially that analogy about how the European approach has been to treat Mother Earth like something to use up—and that this was how women have been treated as well. I like the idea that caring for ourselves is part of caring for the earth—but not in a “new age” sense—in a sense that we are an important resource which needs to be called upon respectfully. (quoted in Anderson, 2000, pp. 261–262)

Complementing Lawrence’s point, Simpson (2011) explains the importance of decolonizing “our conceptualization of gender as a starting point” for any discussion of Indigenous resurgence, nation building and sovereignty, adding that “for Nishnaabeg people there was fluidity around gender in terms or roles and responsibilities” (p. 60). This is to say, Native participants’ allusions to their identity and responsibility as Indigenous women to foster and protect the well-being of self, family, community, nation and Creation have Indigenous philosophical foundations and historical reference points, and are the subject of ongoing contemporary debates about Native “tradition” as it relates to Indigenous women in particular—and must be seen in this light.

Native participants’ self-presentations are complex in other ways. While understanding that inclusivity and interconnectedness are features of many Indigenous philosophical traditions, Indigenous participants note the possible negative repercussions of such values for Indigenous
women’s political struggles. Zainab, for example, notes that the culturally sanctioned move toward inclusivity can be counter-productive when it comes to organizing around violence against Indigenous women. Her point emerged in our discussion about a conference call that took place (and in which I participated) to organize the annual February 14 events to honour the missing and murdered Indigenous women across Turtle Island. Invoking inclusivity as an Indigenous value, some organizers’ wanted the events to broaden their focus to include all women, and to be publicly advertised as such. I broached the subject with Zainab to make sense of what had been my intensely negative reaction to the idea at the time. This prompted Zainab to talk about a unique tension facing Indigenous women who organize around the issue of colonial violence against Indigenous women.

It still bothers me that that type of thing [opening up the struggle to honour women from all nations who have been victims/survivors of violence] happens, because [violence against Indigenous women] is a very specific struggle, and you lose the specifics. . . . Indigenous women, yes, they are victimized by violence, and so are white women and so are black women, but we’re victimized in very particular ways, and that means the solutions are different. And if we lose that and we just say, “We’re all victims of violence, and let’s just try and work on it with the same strategies and the same groups . . .”; it still kind of irritates me when it comes out of that place, but I understand that, again, from the mindset that people have, and the interconnected... like, if you’re aware of the interconnectedness and you have to acknowledge and understand that we want to stop all violence against all women, because it doesn’t matter if it’s happening to me in my community or not... if it’s happening to any woman, it affects me.

Since then, I have seen the matter of how to frame activism around violence against Indigenous women come up repeatedly in different settings. I suggest that this is indicative of the broader issue facing Indigenous peoples of when (and when not) to stress Indigenous specificity in political struggles. The point I want to highlight is this: Indigenous women recognize the need to strike a balance between following “traditions” (especially in abstracted and de-contextualized ways) and veering from those “traditions” so as, in this example, to ensure that an understanding of the specificity of colonially-derived violence against Indigenous women is not eviscerated.20

The allure of the “authentic Indian”

As I suggest above, Indigenous women can also be drawn to solidarity work by the prospect of personal benefit, whether in the form of spiritual enfranchisement or personal growth (recall Kellie’s and Lee’s respective narratives). Indigenous participants further demystify the image of the selfless Native woman by describing another reason that Indigenous women (or men) engage in solidarity—to attain or retain “authentic Indian” status. Again, however, it is vitally
important to contextualize these subject-making processes and, more specifically, to foreground the colonially induced conundrum in which many Native people find themselves. As Thomas King (2012) explains, Native people in North America today (who he calls “Live Indians”) live in the constant shadow of the “Dead Indian,” a “simulacrum” defined by “the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears” (p. 53).21 “Live Indians” who fail to meet white expectations of Native authenticity are deemed “inconvenient” (“an unpleasant, contemporary surprise”) by the dominant society (King, 2012, p. 66). LaRocque (2010) describes the challenge facing Native artists and intellectuals when called upon to demonstrate what has become “fetishized” Native difference:

There is tremendous pressure today for all Native artists and intellectuals to produce works expressly or manifestly different from the dominant culture. In a continuing attempt to find a culture unspoiled by contact, difference has been fetishized, so much so that a notion of the authentic necessarily different (or alternative) native is very much in vogue. This puts Aboriginal peoples in an untenable situation: we are wrapped in stereotypes and yet are expected not only to produce “authentic” material . . . but even to look authentically different. (p. 135)

Indigenous participant narratives suggest that Indigenous women can face a comparably untenable situation in the solidarity encounter if they are expected (or expect themselves) to act the part. Wanda reacts with offhanded humor and irony to the vogue status “Native” has attained in some solidarity circles, suggesting her disdain for anyone, non-Native or Native, who would contribute to this fetishizing of Indigeneity in the current socio-political environment: “I have a bumper sticker that says, ‘I was Native longer then it’s been cool.’” For her part, Zainab admits with remarkable honesty to having “enjoyed my celebrity status . . . in white activist circles”:

There was a time when I really quite enjoyed my celebrity [status] . . . in white activist circles . . . I really enjoyed being the go-to person . . . being in a position of telling people off and saying, “Your politics need work” and that kind of stuff. I’ve been manipulative. . . . My story isn’t unusual in the sense that I’m a person who was raised outside of the Native community, outside of Native culture, who’s trying to relearn that and reclaim it. . . . So it’s really nice to be actually seen as someone who has skills and wisdom and is put on that leadership pedestal; whereas in my community, it was very clear that people appreciated me, like I say, for the skills that I had, but they knew the learning curve I was on. There are roles that I could never have taken on within the community that I could take on outside of the community. So I think that was a part of it.

At least in part, solidarity work for Zainab was a way to bolster her self-worth. As Zainab remarks, however, her story is not unusual—it is part of the colonial story. The tactic she
employed in response to colonial dispossession and cultural loss—donning the role of “authentic” Native “go-to” person (into which she was eagerly slotted by white solidarity activists)—is also not unusual.

Similarly, Danielle critically remarks on the phenomenon of the “celebrity Native”—the Native (often male) person who is well-known in non-Native contexts and who relishes being in the public spotlight as a representative of the Native community. She also implicates the uncritical reverence of some settler activists in the enabling of such “celebrities” or “superstars.”

So then, if [a non-Native activist] were going to call on somebody to do a ceremony, you would ask the Aboriginal people, “What elder do you want to come and do the ceremony?” And they’ll all say, “This [person], because he’s traditional and he speaks the language and he knows the ceremony.” And if you ask the [non-Native] activist community who they want to do the ceremony, they’ll say this guy who they’ve seen all the time, who has the media attention . . . So the one that’s doing the real work on the ground is left out in the dark in the cold, and here’s this guy who’s willing to be on the camera all the time, and willing to monopolize everything and willing to talk and talk and talk, whether or not he’s got anything to say at all. He’s just got the attention. . . . I’ve seen this more than once, where you have that celebrity elder, whoever’s on TV all the time, and you see all these white people sitting around their feet. They’re working with the eagle feathers and they’re putting the medicines together, and when it comes to taking the smudge around, it’s them: “I’ll do it! I’ll do it! Auntie, auntie, I’ll do it!” So then they’re taking the feather, and it’s like this big show . . . and you can just see the feather going and they’re like, “He big elder told me its gotta go this way, so then its gotta go this way.”

Importantly for Danielle, the “celebrity elder” does not necessarily have extensive ties to his/her community. As an Indigenous woman from beyond Turtle Island who therefore considers herself an ally with Indigenous struggles in Canada, Kellie would agree:

They were looking for a Native speaker, and all they saw on the horizon was [so and so] doing his posturing and stuff. I had to take them aside and say, “You know, there’s other First Nations speakers in Toronto who are equally or more competent than [him] to speak on the issues.” But they’re not the ones pounding their chests and standing at the front. . . . But they’re more reserved, or they’re too busy doing their work, so they don’t have time to be pounding their chest on TV. . . . I support First Nations issues . . . but my support isn’t a blanket statement thing.

For Ursula, an Indigenous woman who describes herself as having experienced light-skinned privilege, what is at stake is ultimately the success of Indigenous political struggle. In her analysis of the untenable situation of having to prove one’s “authentic Indian” status, she cites the political pitfalls for activists of focusing extensively on colonially imposed differences:
In [“mixed” Indigenous/non-Indigenous] activist circles, all we think about is our differences. I think we should think more about our commonalities, because we get stuck on our differences sometimes, even among Native peoples: Are you on reserve, are you off-reserve, are you status, are you non-status, are you real, are you authentic, are you dark, are you light? . . . What makes you more Indian than not? This is colonial. All those questions are colonial. I mean, [it’s] important to consider . . . our privileges, but they’re created by the colonial system, if you think about it. Status and non-status, light and dark, whatever. I think more importantly, what nations, and how do we respect our differences in a way that will encourage stronger solidarity, because [focus on differences] is such a block. . . . We have to break it down and then move on, because if we’re all there, committed to doing this one thing, say a fundraiser, let’s just do it, instead of getting stuck.

Far from presenting a romanticized vision of Indigenous (political activist) communities, Ursula reveals the colonially wrought internal complexity of Indigenous political struggle.

How else do Native women (and men) negotiate their narrowly circumscribed subordinate subject position in a white settler colonial society? In a candid moment resembling that of Zainab, Belinda divulges her desire to occupy a “special place” as a Native person in solidarity circles. In contrast with other Native women in the study, Belinda talks about seeking primarily white-dominated spaces for her political and professional work:

The [solidarity] work that I did there was mostly white women and men, white people. You know you’re always the odd Indian . . . I guess I’m used to being the minority. I don’t know what that’s about really, but I’m sure there’s a reason. Well, I think I have a lot of distrust of my own people. That may be the reason I am not doing as much solidarity work with them. Or could it be that I don’t see them as having something to offer me? Possibly I feel above them. I don’t know for sure, but this seems to be a recurring theme in my life. I am isolated either by consciously choosing to be on my own and away from other Native women or… Am I more comfortable being the minority? Being “the Native person” might have its special place?

Belinda’s distrust of her “own people” provides a fleeting glimpse into the flip-side of Indigenous peoples’ efforts to reaffirm their collective humanity: the internalization of negative stereotypes. LaRocque (2010) describes the “internalization of the grotesque, ignoble savage:

We must come back to the savage, with its polarizing spectrum of images. We struggle mightily with these images, whether we are trying to debunk them, rehabilitate them or whether we are (unconsciously) internalizing them in our everyday lives or in our intellectual pursuits. . . . The internalization of the grotesque, ignoble savage is perhaps the most damaging. This savage leads us to a sense of shame . . . and self-rejection, which often leads to the rejection of what I call the “same-other.” By same-other, I mean that one’s sense of racial shame is projected onto those of the same race or grouping, who are then unconsciously cast as other. (p. 121)
For LaRocque (2010), the internalization of such negative stereotypes by Indigenous peoples is an enduring colonial legacy of incalculable harm that emerges out of the “Columbus narrative.” Simpson (2011) describes her embodied experience of coming to grips with the “legacy of colonial abuse, the unspoken shame” that Native people carry collectively:

It is a shame rooted in the humiliation that colonialism has heaped on our peoples for hundreds of years and is now carried within our bodies, minds and our hearts.... This colonial shame felt like not only a tremendous burden to carry, it also felt displaced. We are not shameful people. We have done nothing wrong. I began to realize that shame can only take hold when we are disconnected from the stories of resistance within our own families and communities. I place that shame as an insidious and infectious part of the cognitive imperialism that was aimed at convincing us that we are a weak and defeated people, and that there was no point in resisting or resurging. I became interested in finding these stories of resistance and telling them so that our next generation would know. (pp. 13–14)

Simpson’s (2011) and LaRocque’s (2010) analyses of colonially induced shame—and ongoing Indigenous efforts to resist that shame—help to further contextualize what might otherwise be critiqued or dismissed as romanticized invocations of Indigenous collectives (and of Indigenous women as the caregivers of those collectives) on the part of Indigenous participants in this study.

**Conclusion**

> If we problematize what the limits of our knowing are, based on our different subject positions, I think we end up realizing that storytelling serves various groups differently and that it should never be employed uncritically in mixed-race groups.

—Sherene Razack (1998, p. 52)

In this chapter, I juxtapose the storytelling practices of differently positioned subjects to highlight one form of the white desire of proximity—the romanticization and possible appropriation of Indigeneity. I argue that disrupting this particular aspect of the impulse to solidarity (that is, of white settler/liberal subjectivity) is complicated by the fact that some Indigenous women (and likely men) also sometimes romanticize Indigeneity, although for collective resistance purposes. I show that Indigenous and white participants alike access discourses around Western lack/social dysfunction and Indigenous plenitude/social cohesion, if for distinct reasons. In this way, a potentially limiting framework of cultural difference persists across Indigenous and white participant narratives. The problem, I argue, is that an inordinate focus on cultural difference occludes a focus on colonial power differences. When invoked by white settlers, “Indigenous difference” too often reproduces colonial subjectivities and
hierarchical power relations. In other words, a focus on cultural difference too easily instigates the white settler/liberal subject’s desire to reproduce itself as autonomous/self-determining, i.e., as the “knower” of difference. In contrast, when invoked by Indigenous peoples, “Indigenous difference” can become a tool of resistance that potentially reveals hierarchical power relations.

White participants in the solidarity encounter are not immune to the (white) settler Canadian polity’s collective quest for legitimacy. That being said, blatant moves to romanticize and appropriate Indigeneity, as manifestations of the white desire for proximity, are relatively rare in the solidarity encounter. However, those examples that do exist in a minority of white participant narratives are striking. My analysis attempts to tease out how discourses of critique and praise (of Western lack and Indigenous values respectively) combine in participant narratives to further their bids for legitimate Canadian subject status. This involves tracing the often convoluted path from appreciation toward appropriation that white settlers risk traversing when we uncritically pursue our attraction to (often essentialist, romanticized notions of) Indigenous cultural difference. This suggests that a default colonial mentality will govern white settler collective subjectivity (within and beyond the solidarity encounter) unless we make a conscious effort to thwart our desires for proximity (in this and other forms) to the Indigenous Other.

I then turn to Indigenous participant narratives, which testify to the difficult task Indigenous women (and men) face in negotiating the questions of identity, representation and power that derive from their subject position as “the colonized” in colonial relations. Drawing heavily on LaRocque’s (2010) work on Native resistance discourse, I note that Indigenous participants position themselves as “Indigenous women” (i.e., as members of a collective) when describing their involvement in political activism/solidarity, sometimes in ways that evoke essentialized and/or romanticized notions of Indigenous women, communities and nations. As apparent from their narratives, however, Indigenous participants are aware of how Indigenous stereotypes can mark their performance in the solidarity encounter. Moreover, building on Razack (1998), I suggest that storytelling—in this case, the meaning and function of references to cultural difference—must be read in relation to the subject positions of the storytellers. Perhaps, if we were to see Indigenous emphases on cultural difference as part of Indigenous strategies of resistance (to colonial oppression), white settler women allies (among others) would be less likely to essentialize, fetishize and appropriate Indigenous difference. That is, we might be
better able to curb a misguided focus on cultural difference in solidarity work and instead focus on the anticolonial project of redressing power differences.

This approach to the making (and potential unmaking) of Canadian national subjects, especially when taken by a white settler, is not above contention or controversy, not least due to some unsettling questions that emerge about the discursive roles that Indigenous women (and men) can unwittingly play in reinforcing a framework of difference: Could Indigenous women’s portrayals of themselves or of their nations facilitate the appropriation involved in white settler subject-making processes and Canadian nation building, and thus their subordinate collective location as Other? Again, I raise this as a question that deserves more fulsome exploration in future research. Rather, my intent was to accomplish several things with this approach: first, to demonstrate that identity-making processes at the micro/individual and macro/collective levels are always intersubjective enterprises (i.e., white settler subjectivities are constituted in relation to Indigenous ones and vice-versa); second, to underscore the importance of contextualizing Indigenous narratives within a settler colonial context; and, third, to reveal the somewhat ironic possibility that similar discourses about Indigeneity can work to bolster both Indigenous and white settler nation-building processes—a topic that warrants further investigation.

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1 See Robert Berkhofer’s (1978) early scholarly treatment of how “the White image of the Indian developed over time” (p. xiv), especially Part II “From religion to anthropology: The genealogy of the scientific image of the Indian.” For a Canada-focused discussion, see Nock and Haig-Brown (2006).

2 In Erickson’s (2011) words, “I want to examine the production of wilderness through the life of Archibald Belaney, better known as Grey Owl, an early-twentieth-century Canadian writer who achieved national notoriety in the 1930s as a proponent of wilderness conservation. . . . He provides a vivid example of how wilderness is coded through the figure of the Imaginary Indian (Francis, 1992). The use and acceptance of Indian surrogacy in Belaney’s life and legacy to help us understand and preserve wilderness connects the discourse of whiteness, and the field of visibility that race relies upon, to the iconic wilderness of Canada. This image of wilderness is not only a matter of preserving ‘nature’; it is also complicit in preserving the whiteness of the nation” (pp. 21–22).

3 See Emma LaRocque (2010, pp. 125ff) and Susan Dion (2009) for discussions by Indigenous scholars of the myth of the “Vanishing Indian” and the damage it has wrought on Native peoples. For earlier works by non-Native authors, see Berkhofer (1978), Francis (1992) and Terry Goldie (1989).

4 Baldwin, Cameron and Kobayashi (2011) note such a present absence in pianist Glenn Gould’s ruminations on “The Idea of North,” which is also the name of his Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio program: “The shuddering absence of Inuit or First Nations voice in Gould’s contrapuntalism baldly illustrates a point now well established in cultural analysis: meaning is generated as much through presence as absence, as much through what is said as through what remains unsaid and silenced” (p. 3). See also Toni Morrison’s (1993) now classic work on the present absence of Africans and African Americans in the US white literary imagination.

5 Robyn Wiegman (1999) uses “identificatory mobility” to denote an understanding of anti-racist white subjectivity developed by critical whiteness scholar David Roediger (1995). It refers to the ability of white people to develop progressive political positions despite their identity as white people. As Wiegman points out, this capacity not only relies on differentiating (white) identity from (white) identification, but also on the immobility of the non-white subject: “Casting whiteness as the burden that prevents working-class whites from identifying their real interests, Roediger differentiates identity from identification in order to redirect the ‘possessive investment in whiteness’ toward political allegiances with those designated as ‘nonwhite.’ Such identificatory mobility is central to the social
constructionist project, countering what we might think of as the political and theoretical immobility of an essentialized subject. For when looking white and being white are collapsed, white identity becomes saturated with, if not wholly indistinguishable from, political identifications with white supremacy. To pry apart this essentialized relation, Roediger emphasizes the mobility of political identifications, and, in doing so, he claims economic marginality as the political location for the production of the antiracist subject.” (p. 138)

6 A prime Canadian example of this desire for proximity to an imagined Other is found in the life and times of Archie Belaney, better known as Grey Owl. As Erickson (2011) points out, despite acquiring first-hand knowledge of Ojibway, Cree and Métis cultural practices, Grey Owl “was reluctant to abandon the images he had formed as a child [in England], including that of First Nations dancing” (p. 24).

7 Erickson (2011) explains Grey Owl’s popularity in terms of securing the solvency of the Canadian nation: “Like Atwood, who suggests that we be more like Grey Owl, Attenborough, Sheridan, and many others see the space Grey Owl inhabits as part of a moral message that speaks to the heart of the nation of Canada. Indeed, this message helps justify Belaney’s complete transformation into Grey Owl. In these celebrations, the wilderness he produced becomes a necessary part of Canadian life. Its meaning depends upon the same logic of race embedded within Indian surrogacy, where Canadians look to it as a palliative space against the destabilizing effects of capitalism. Like Grey Owl’s cabins, wilderness exists as a vacation spot to reflect back the whiteness of the nation to itself” (p. 37).

8 According to David Rosner (2013), “Anti-modernism [is] a conservative reaction to Europe’s spiritual disintegration in the period between the World Wars. . . Because it reflected a longing for the traditions and certainties which held true before the advent of modernity, just as it sought a futile return to a lost world, the anti-modernist movement will be analyzed in this essay particularly as a discourse of melancholy.”

9 Willow (2009) sets out to “examin[e] the Ecological Indian image as a construction of Western society, and the cultural and political consequences that follow from its use” (p. 59, note 6). Her main point is that by romanticizing Indigenous peoples’ relationships to the land as inherently environmental/ecological, we fail to appreciate the ways in which Indigenous environmental activism is linked to broader struggles of Indigenous sovereignty.

10 Thank you to my colleague Arie Molem for his insights on this matter.

11 Champlain seems to be an integral player in this discourse; Saul (2008) writes, “Champlain said, ‘Our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people.’ I can’t think of a European governor—French, British or other—making such a policy statement in any other colony from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. With this sentence, he reveals the nature of the First Nation/European relationship—at the very least one of equals. His masters in Paris sent him constant instructions to subject the locals to French control, to assert European racial, cultural and political superiority. He was on the spot. He knew better. He knew what reality required. That he made such a declaration suggests that he felt his colony’s position to be weak. But it also suggests that he believed such a mix of the two civilizations could work” (p. 10).

12 The issue here is the disproportionate numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada. Interestingly, while solidarity per se was not the goal, interpersonal friendship played a crucial role in cementing Wanda’s participation in the group: she joined at the behest of a close Indigenous woman friend. Wanda’s appeal to friendship as a motivating factor for her involvement in solidarity must be distinguished, however, from friendship as a technique of knowledge (Ahmed 2000). Ahmed contrasts a white ethnographer’s (Bell’s) use of friendship with that of a Native informant (Nelson) to illustrate the difference: “Bell calls for friendship in general, as a new agenda for research that can overcome the barriers of strangeness. In contrast, Nelson is describing a particular friendship that exists which led her to want Bell to write ‘this story for (her)’” (p. 65). In Chapter 6 I discuss the role that the notion of friendship can play in the white desire for proximity.

13 See also Chapter 6 for a discussion about the role of guilt in white women’s impulses to exceptionalism, which is often sought through/as proximity.

14 Yah, for example, counsels white women to familiarize themselves with their own ancestry and traditions before seeking knowledge about particular Native religious cultural practices: “Everyone has to do their own work. I think that’s that subtlety, when people are like, ‘Teach me, show me.’ You have to do it yourself, too, look at your own life. How are you impacted by colonization, your family? The dynamics between you and your own mum, your parents, the roots of your ancestry. Who are you? Once you figure that out...not figure it out, but explore that before you just go to something else. Explore it, because that’s who you are. Then we can share aspects of our spirituality and philosophies with each other.”

15 Tokenism was an issue at one point in NMS: “We have grappled with how to incorporate (or not) Indigenous ‘traditions’ and worldviews into our work. But, what happens when there are differences in interpretation among Indigenous women? Do allies tend to deny heterogeneity among Indigenous women[?] . . . What about Indigenous secular activism? In fact, an Indigenous former NMS member who did not identify strongly with Indigenous spiritual traditions expressed discomfort with having to be an ‘expert’ on Indigeneity. The extent to which NMS
could accommodate Indigenous women not necessarily empowered by reclaiming Indigenous traditions remains unclear” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012, p. 49).

16 Simpson’s (2011) work on Indigenous resurgence is among this literature. She reminds us that it is only one iteration of Indigenous intellectualism and theory that has existed apart from Western academic practices and been developed by “Elders, Faith-Keepers, Clan-Mothers, traditional leaders, Grandmothers, Grandfathers, language-keepers and Knowledge-Holders, [and] non-western-trained academics” (p. 27, note 19).

17 Other texts authored or edited by Indigenous women scholars in the Americas, not mentioned in earlier chapters, include Winona LaDuke (2005); D. Lavell–Harvard and Jeannette Lavell (2006); Barbara Alice Mann (2000, 2006); Grace Ouellette (2002); Michelle Pesantubbee (2005); Cheryl Suzack (2010); and Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (2005).

18 Indigenous feminists especially are mindful of the complex interplay between colonially-imposed patriarchal Indigenous “traditions” relating to Indigenous women; struggles for Indigenous sovereignty or nationalism; and Indigenous women’s cultural revitalization efforts, sometimes referred to as “re-traditionalization” (FIMI, 2006). See Joyce Green’s (2007a) edited collection for chapters on these and related issues; Kiera Ladner (2000) on the inaccuracies of interpreting Indigenous nations’ understandings of nationalism (and the historical role of women therein) in Western academic terms; Andrea Smith (2008b) on Indigenous feminist understandings of the nation/state; and Lina Sunseri (2000) on “an anticolonial feminist perspective on Aboriginal liberation struggles.” See also my article on Indigenous feminist relational sovereignty (D’Arcangelis, 2010).

19 In retrospect, I came to understand this intense reaction as a sign of my own investment in being (seen as) the exceptional/good white ally. Having signed up to address violence against Indigenous women, I experienced the idea of broadening the focus to all women as threatening. I felt the ground shift beneath me as my purpose in the work seemed (to me) to be evaporating. In Chapter 6, I discuss in more detail the white desire for exceptionalism.

20 Several years later, I had a conversation with a Toronto-based Indigenous activist about the precise language used by organizers to frame the disappearances and murders of women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES). It is understand that a disproportionate number of these women are Indigenous. And, notably, Indigenous women are at the helm of the organizing of the February 14 memorial march. In fact, the event is organized around Indigenous ceremonial principles. However, the language of the Women’s Memorial March Organizing Committee has remained inclusive, i.e., they honour all the women who have gone missing or been murdered in the DTES. I cite this as an example of how it is possible to acknowledge specificity while also being inclusive.

21 The full quote reads as follows: “But the Dead Indians I’m talking about are not the deceased sort. Nor are they all that inconvenient. They are the stereotypes and clichés that North America has conjured up out of experience and out of its collective imaginings and fears. North America has had a long association with Native people, but despite the history that the two groups have shared, North America no longer sees Indians. What it sees are war bonnets, beaded shirts, fringed deerskin dresses, loincloths, headbands, feathered lances, tomahawks, moccasins, face paint, and bone chokers. These bits of cultural debris—authentic and constructed—are what literary theorists like to call ‘signifiers,’ signs that create a ‘simulacrum,’ which Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist and postmodern theorist, succinctly explained as something that ‘is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none’” (King, 2012, pp. 53–54).

22 Wanda cites a deadly example of appropriation: “I’ve been following the trial of the man in Sedona that had a sweat lodge, one of those new age life coaching things they have now, that he put people into a box, and heated that box, and four people died. They keep calling it a sweat lodge, that wasn’t a sweat lodge, it was a death box. We get the fall-out from that. What has changed now is that we organize sweat lodges, we have to have a release. So if you get hurt, you know you’ve been given one of those things. During that trial, that man said he wasn’t responsible for anyone in his so-called sweat. One of my first teachings was that I was responsible for anyone who goes in that door. I’m responsible for their life when they go in there. I don’t take that lightly. How do you invite someone into a ceremony and not be responsible?”

23 Indigenous feminists have been raising and addressing the question of how romanticized notions of Indigenous “tradition” can perpetuate (often colonially-imposed) patriarchal notions of Indigenous womanhood that can in turn inform or fuel patriarchal visions of Indigenous nation building. See Rauna Kuokkanen’s (2007) formulation of the debate in relation to Sami society.
Chapter 6
Making Exceptions: The “Good White Settler Ally”

I’m not shopping for culture... from the point in that I don’t want to be seen as somebody who’s trying on a culture and trying on different things. That’s not why I was [in the group].

—Julia (white participant)

In this chapter, I examine the discursive operation of claims of exceptionalism such as Julia’s in white participant narratives. I argue that the settler quest for legitimacy is reflected in how the white settler woman ally subject positions herself as exceptional (outside of colonial power relations) through, for example, recourse to a good/bad settler binary or notions of “friendship.” Put simply, the white settler woman subject hopes to position herself as the exceptional “good white settler ally.” My argument here (and throughout the study) rests on the idea that moves to exceptionalism are fostered by an individualistic understanding of solidarity work: it is the white settler woman subject (who thinks of herself as) entering solidarity as an autonomous individual, rather than as a member of a white settler collectivity, who can sustain the fantasy of overcoming colonial power relations. An individual can conceivably be/become exceptional and overcome power relations, whereas a member of a collectivity cannot—at least not without fundamental structural change.¹ In short, I argue that exceptionalism is part of the liberal subject’s arsenal of strategies to deny/transcend structural white/settler privilege.

Put differently, I theorize the move to exceptionalism as yet another manifestation of the white settler desire for legitimacy. I look to the insights of critical race scholarship to suggest that white subjectivity itself is constituted through claims to exceptionalism/innocence, drawing on theories about “white disaffiliation” (Wiegman, 1999); “White stigma” (Kowal, 2011); white moral agency (Applebaum, 2010); and friendship (Thompson, 2003). I also consider the role of declarative statements (Ahmed, 2004) and self-reflexivity (Smith, 2013a) in the micro-workings of exceptionalism discourse. Finally, I refer back to the fraught promise of self-reflexivity for tempering this particular facet of the impulse to solidarity (see also Chapters 2 and 7).

My analysis begins with considering the role of white settler guilt in these dynamics. I ask to what extent exceptionalism discourse is an attempt by white participants to alleviate this guilt by positioning ourselves outside of colonial power relations. I also explore the notion of friendship (through proximity) as a discursive strategy to achieve exceptional status. I then describe the following common moves in exceptionalism discourse—the white settler woman subject’s
efforts to prove her superior worth as an activist-ally relative to the average Canadian and/or to other activist-allies. The first move typically involves describing herself as more knowledgeable than the average Canadian about colonial history. The second could involve positioning herself as exceptional in any number of ways, including in her willingness to acknowledge her settler status and complicity in colonial relations; her capacity to be/become friends with Indigenous women; or, even her ability to identify the problem with unilateral (ally) declarations of allyship. Moreover, the pursuit of exceptionalism can crystallize as competition among white settler women allies, with self-righteousness and a sense of entitlement often comingled therein. In more theoretical terms, moves to exceptionalism involve the white settler woman subject’s attempts to demonstrate how she has (worked to) “become” different from most settlers.

While this overall study looks at the interlocking effects of race, gender and colonial relations on intersubjective dynamics in the solidarity encounter, in this chapter I focus on the central role of whiteness and white guilt in exceptionalism discourse. Therefore, my analysis frequently draws on critical race/critical whiteness scholarship, which does not necessarily employ colonialism as a central analytic. By the same token, I also rely on scholarship that centres colonialism but not gender. Therefore, I attempt to make conceptual linkages between race, gender and colonial relations in my analysis whenever possible. I also try to identify the relevance of a particular idea for understanding intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter. I begin with the notion of whiteness as exceptionalism.

**Whiteness as Exceptionalism**

The data is peppered with examples of and commentaries on what I call white settler exceptionalism discourse, which I propose is bound up with the white settler desire to achieve the status of “good white settler ally.” Participant interviews further suggest that white settler guilt can infuse the impulse to exceptionalism (and the intertwined desires for legitimacy and transcendence arguably at its core) in amorphous ways. None of these suppositions would likely surprise scholars who have theorized whiteness in various social and historical contexts.

For example, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998) develop the concept of the “race to innocence” to encapsulate how and why hierarchical relations among women are too often sustained in feminist political solidarity work. The race to innocence refers to
the process initiated by competing marginalities. . . . Women challenged about their domination respond by calling attention to their own subordination. The impasse that results depends on the idea that if a woman is subordinate herself, she cannot then be implicated in the subordination of others. (p. 339)

According to Fellows and Razack (1998), dominant subjects (such as white settler women in the solidarity encounter) engage in a race to innocence in order to keep a “toehold on respectability,” i.e., normative subject status, but at the expense of Others marked as degenerate. Following Fellows and Razack (1998), striving for exceptionalism can be theorized as a move towards respectability, and reflective of a deeper desire to transcend and/or dissolve inequitable power relations (requiring a move to innocence). To recall Loomba (2005) and others (see Chapter 3), the white settler woman subject embraces the subordinate aspect of her “double positioning” within settler colonial/imperial relations. Writing about the settler colonial context in Australia, Moreton-Robinson (2000) contends that the ability of the white woman/feminist subject to thus reposition herself rests on a misunderstanding of white race privilege:

White race privilege is not perceived [by white academic women feminists] as being inscribed on white bodies. Here one’s personal relationship with racism is through a moral position that allows one to put distance between oneself and other members of the dominant group who are evil and racist. By implication one is not an evil person, therefore one is not racist. One can deploy the subject position middle-class white woman to signify virtue and purity, because racism is perceived as racial hatred, not as racial supremacy in which all members of the dominant group are systemically implicated. (p. 143)

Moreton-Robinson (2000) suggests that the fantasy of exceptionalism—defined as residing at a “distance between oneself and members of the dominant group,” which assumes one can operate as an unfettered liberal subject—is conceptually achieved only by failing to understand the embodied, collective nature of structural white privilege.

Although colonialism is not one of its central analytics, Robyn Wiegman’s (1999) notion of white disaffiliation also has relevance for my study of the solidarity encounter. Like Moreton-Robinson (2000), Wiegman (1999) notes a delinking of white privilege and white embodiment in the constitution of “liberal whiteness” in the US. She writes,

Integration, no matter how failed in its utopian projections of a nation beyond race division, nonetheless powerfully suspended the acceptability of the public display of white supremacy, so much so that the hegemonic formation of white identity today must be understood as taking shape in the rhetorical, if not always political, register of disaffiliation from white supremacist practices and discourses. (Wiegman, 1999, p. 119)
That is, the vast majority of white people in the post-segregationist US fashion their identities by distancing or disaffiliating from white supremacy. Wiegman’s (1999) analysis, however, does not necessarily address the nuances of self-styled white progressive subjectivities.

This is more precisely the aim of Emma Kowal’s (2011) work on “White anti-racist” subjectivity in the Australian settler colonial context, a focus that resonates with my own on the solidarity encounter, despite its lack of gendered analysis. Kowal (2011) argues that white anti-racist subjects experience a “voluntary stigma” upon acknowledging their role in colonization and are then prompted to employ strategies of stigma management in an attempt to diminish their agency/power and assume a “proper” role in a “post-colonial” space—i.e., “a space where there is an attempt to invert colonial power relations” (p. 4).² By this definition, the solidarity encounter would certainly qualify as a postcolonial space. Moreover, for Kowal (2011), white stigma is only produced through the Indigenous–settler encounter, that is, through proximity:

For White anti-racists, the colour of their skin marks them as “colonisers.” If we are to see this ascription as a stigma, it is a stigma of a special, highly contextualised form. It is a voluntary stigma, applying only to those White people who accept responsibility for the effects of colonisation on Indigenous people. It only takes effect when these White people are engaged in Indigenous issues, usually in the context of paid employment, but also through activism, education and personal encounters. . . . Only upon entering post-colonial spaces such as the Institute or remote communities does the stigma of Whiteness come into play. (p. 8)

Following this line of reasoning, the white settler woman subject’s move to exceptionalism in the solidarity encounter becomes a strategy to manage the discomfort of white stigma, which is generated by the encounter itself.

While it may not be apparent to many white settler subjects, the embodied, collective nature of white settler privilege is unmistakable to Indigenous subjects (Moreton-Robinson, 2000), a fact of which I was reminded at a public film screening I attended on violence against Indigenous women. A prominent Indigenous organizer critiqued the general belief among white settlers that, as she puts it, “I couldn’t possibly be part of genocide or racism [because] I’m good and want to help.” As if responding to us directly, she said, “You do represent [colonialism] until you show me something different.”³ Indigenous women observe that these sorts of claims (of not being a part of structural colonialism or racism) are unfailingly linked to the desire to be “good.”
In fact, critical whiteness scholars theorize goodness as a “sincere fiction” or defining feature of white subjectivity: “Sincere fictions’ and ideological constructions lead to self-characterization as a ‘good person’ or ‘non-racist’ or ‘colorblind,’ all the while individuals hold beliefs and support positions that presume an assumption of white superiority” (Bush, 2011, p. 17). Barbara Applebaum (2010) notes that white subjects maintain a characteristic belief in our “white moral agency,” a firmly cemented “conviction in regard to [our] moral innocence or goodness” (p. 17) and our beneficence. In fact, Applebaum (2010) argues, “White denials of complicity are an illustration of whitely ways of being” (p. 18). Referring to the Canadian context, Razack (2002) conceptualizes whiteness as innocence as a “quintessential feature of white settler mythologies,” which manifests as “the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of colour” (p. 2). White claims of innocence—i.e., of exceptionalism—would appear to be the rule. To begin to describe the workings of exceptionalism discourse, I first take up the discursive role of white settler guilt in participant narratives.

**White settler guilt**

In their article “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” Tuck and Yang (2012) identify settler guilt, and the settler moves to innocence made to alleviate it, as a relentless/haunting and inevitable outcome of settler colonial systems: “Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 10). Importantly, while they do not provide a specifically gendered account of settler guilt, they do note that settlers are racially diverse and may enact different moves to innocence. Postcolonial feminist scholars Lewis and Mills (2003) highlight the racialized component of white settler guilt, historicizing it as a collective white response to nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial exploits:

“White guilt” has developed as a term to describe white inertia in the face of the problematic of race. . . . This white guilt developed from an awareness that Western powers within the nineteenth century had subjugated a large portion of the world and exploited these territories and their populations for material gain, and that white people had benefited directly and indirectly from that exploitation. . . . The link between past exploitation and present affluence, and indeed the deeds of past colonialists and oneself, is one which white people have found difficult to deal with in constructive ways. White guilt is one of the least productive responses to this history. (pp. 7–8)

As Lewis and Mills (2003) suggest, while often thought of as a personal feeling, “white guilt” is better explained as part of a historically constituted white collective subjectivity. In other words,
although often experienced by white subjects on the individualistic register, white guilt is one possible facet of white settler subject interpellation.

Lorde (2007) makes the different, but complementary point that white guilt is an almost inevitable outcome of the persistence of hierarchical difference in social relations:

Many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences [between themselves and women of Color]. For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex. (p. 118)

Recognizing difference in such a context is to recognize inequity and one’s complicity therein, hence the guilt. Elaborating on Lorde’s (2007) work, Ahmed (2004) explores how guilt then becomes the narcissistic performance of whiteness, pointing to “how feeling bad about racism or white privilege can function as a form of self-centeredness, which returns the white subject ‘back into’ itself, as the one whose feelings matter. . . . Guilt certainly works as a ‘block’ to hearing the claims of others in a re-turning to the white self” (para. 32).

The centrality of guilt in white subjectivity (and the desire to alleviate it) posited by such theorists and the substantial space it occupies in participant narratives suggests the possibility, if not probability that guilt is operative in those moments when a given white ally strives to prove her exceptional status. In fact, the data suggests that white settler guilt can infuse the impulse to exceptionalism (and the desires for legitimacy and transcendence arguably at its core) in amorphous ways. Indigenous and white participants alike note the propensity of some white women to engage in solidarity out of guilt, knowingly or otherwise. Given the white settler/imperialist woman subject’s historical interpellation as “helper” of the less fortunate, guilt could well have gendered manifestations, although I do not glean this clearly from the data. 5 Recall the composite figure of the needy do-gooder (often with a penchant for appropriation) in Indigenous participant narratives such as Ardra’s, who depicts the global appeal of white settler guilt (at least in Western countries such as Germany and Canada):

[Solidarity work] can just be a place for people to appropriate, romanticize and project their wishes on others. I think what [Bonita Lawrence] is talking about is how people will use Indigenous struggles in particular as this utopia, this idea of this place to project their deepest desires . . . especially white feminists in Germany who just eat that stuff up, but then they go pay for a sweat lodge; then they want their Indian name; they want [Indigeneity] to give them something; they want it to give them healing; they want it to
make them better people. I kind of had that suspicion about people in [the group] sometimes. . . . Like this desire to work with Native women is about wanting to be better people and be seen as better people: “I’m a better person because . . . I’m being validated by these Native women as a good ally,” you know? “That makes me feel better about myself and alleviates my white guilt” and that ends up not being very transformative at all . . . if that person doesn’t ever question or become aware of that dynamic happening to them—*if* that’s what is happening.

Ardra makes clear how the white settler woman’s desire to be “a good ally” materializes in and can be satiated through the desire for proximity. Ardra explains the allure of solidarity for some white women in terms of their desire to alleviate white guilt—the desire to be validated as a “good ally” and comparatively “better person” who is then assuaged of her white guilt. (Notably, Ardra leaves open the possibility that guilt may *not* be what is happening.) Another Indigenous participant, Teresa, also ties solidarity work to guilt, adding that white women often seem to fail to make this association: “I understand that Western women have a sense of needing to do [solidarity work] for themselves as well. . . . It’s kind of like women come into the circles in order to find a prescription for their own guilt, which we recognize, and I don’t think they recognize.” Both Ardra and Teresa question white women’s powers of discernment when it comes to white settler guilt. Wanda, another Indigenous participant, emphatically states, “It just bugs the hell out of me” when she finds guilt to be the main motivator for white women to do solidarity work. Like Lewis and Mills (2003), Wanda sees guilt as ineffectual in political activism, an unproductive response to colonial inequity:

They’re there because they think they understand that we’ve been done wrong and they want to change it, right then and there. They can’t change it. They can’t change history. You can come with all the guilt you like, but you can’t change that. What you can do is, like I said, stand with us as an ally. That’s how you can change it. Don’t come to try to appease your own guilt. So you’re feeling bad about, “Oh, I read about how you were put on reserves, and my ancestors did that.” . . . The only thing we can do is go forward. One of the things is [to] accept that it’s happened and change it.

Wanda also astutely identifies the unfettered liberal subject lurking behind the scenes—the “I” who wants and conceives of herself as able to “change it, right then and there.” For Wanda, this guilt often arises out of the non-Indigenous person’s newfound “understanding that [Native people] have been done wrong” by one’s ancestors. While careful not to speculate about the role guilt plays for any particular settler, Lee, another Indigenous participant, sees guilt as resulting from a combination of religious influence and non-Indigenous people’s recognition at some level of the illegitimate conquest of Indigenous land: “I think that the guilt in this country is
from having acquired a continent from the people that don’t have access to it.” In explicitly
ascribing guilt to settler awareness of colonial land theft, Lee lines up with Tuck and Yang
(2012) in suggesting a fundamental way in which settler colonialism overdetermines white
settler–Indigenous relations across genders and sociopolitical contexts.

Some white participants are attentive to the role white guilt can play in solidarity encounters.
Carla, for example, alludes to a white desire to be “let off the hook” that may be attributable to
guilt. She writes, “I think some [white] people do solidarity the wrong way, like they think
they’re doing solidarity, but they don’t really know what they’re doing and they think very
problematic things: ‘I want to work on Native issues therefore I’m scot-free.’” Applebaum
(2010) theorizes the relative ease in which some “well-intentioned white people”\(^6\) shift to
deeming themselves “off the hook” as a consequence of three discourses that inform white
subjectivity: white moral agency (noted above), the conflation between direct guilt and
complicity/responsibility, and a belief in the white capacity for transcendence (of structural
injustices/social location). Applebaum (2010) describes these beliefs as mutually reinforcing:

Many accounts of complicity in the philosophical scholarship rely on a notion of
responsibility that emphasizes causality, knowledge, control, choice and/or intention.
Such notions of responsibility, however, when applied to white ways of being whose
ethical relationship to systemic racism can be disputed not only cannot capture how such
ways of being are connected to the perpetuation of structural injustice but also focus on
whether guilt or blame is attributable to particular individuals. The consequence is that
well-intentioned white people are able to effortlessly let themselves off the hook since
they can honestly claim they did not intend to perform anything wrong, and they were
ignorant of or had no control over the wrongful outcome. (p. 7)

Based on Applebaum’s (2010) analysis, it is more accurately an express lack of guilt (when guilt
is defined as direct culpability) that allows some white subjects to claim a position of innocence.
As an Indigenous woman, Gabriela has witnessed such posturing by white activists (women and
men) and calls for the same detangling of guilt and complicity as Applebaum (2010). She
responds with ironic humor when asked about the existence of white guilt among settler allies:

I can say that I know a couple of people, but that’s it. [Carol Lynne: Okay, what do you
mean by that? Do you want more people to feel guilty?] Absolutely. Not Jewish guilt or
something. . . . Catholic guilt isn’t what we want either. But it’s realizing that you’ve got
to get beyond the guilt too, in the sense of moving beyond that because you don’t want
to be stuck in it, but it’s recognizing that you’re part of the problem, even if you’re not a
bad person, you know what I mean, or somebody who’s racist. A bad person is racist. So
I think there are a whole bunch of people—non-Aboriginal people—who either tell you
to just get over it, “This is where we are now, and you don’t have such a bad deal, we’re
not doing that anymore,” or you have people who want to be in [the group] but they don’t really see themselves as being part of the problem.

These narrative excerpts suggest that Carla and Gabriela converge in their thinking. They identify both a white predisposition toward claiming innocence—for Carla, the ally tendency to think of oneself as “scot-free”; and for Gabriela, the ally tendency to not see oneself as part of the problem—and the need to thwart that disposition by foregrounding the structural privilege of all white settlers, even “good” white settler allies.

Other white participants point to the range of reactions that white settler guilt can elicit—from complete withdrawal or paralysis to feeling awkward or self-silenced to an overzealous impetus to take action. After admitting to having felt guilt, when asked how this has affected her activism, Alicia notes her variable responses: “It has probably made me a little bit more shy to reach out all the time. It has also forced me to be more engaging then I would have otherwise been, because I’m trying to make up for something.” What’s notable is not precisely what “that something” is or could be (defining it would be speculation), but rather that Alicia felt compelled by guilt to be either “more shy” or “more engaging.” Another white participant, Julia, notes her own vulnerability to feelings of guilt. She is nonetheless alarmed when white guilt is assumed to be operating in the solidarity encounter. Below is an exchange that follows Julia’s depiction of having been “raked over the coals” by an Indigenous woman for asking about the correct terminology to use to refer to Indigenous peoples. Julia notes that after this, the atmosphere in the group changed for her, and she no longer felt comfortable posing such questions.

Carol Lynne: What impact do you think white guilt has had on the solidarity encounter?

Julia: I think the biggest piece is that, for me, trying to push the envelope a little bit, asking the tough questions, being vulnerable to ask that question, and then the response was so abrupt. So that when you go, that white guilt really kind of becomes a filter for the questions that you’re going to ask, the critique that you might give, and that sort of thing. I think that comes into play. Yet being very conscious of, that’s not what I want this to be. That will have a life of its own, but that’s not what I want this to be about.

Carol Lynne: You don’t want it to be about assuaging your white guilt?

Julia: No, what I don’t want is for that guilt to be a filter. . . . I don’t know that it’s necessarily that you feel white guilt, but it was like, “God, if I ask that question, is it going to look like white guilt? Is it going to look like that’s where it’s coming from? Or will it be taken for what it truly is: me asking a question, wanting to be better, to do better and to learn?” Not that it’s anybody’s responsibility to teach me. I’m taking
responsibility for that. I’m trying to figure out this piece, and I want to—with you, in solidarity—tease that out. What is that?

Julia’s concern—taken together with my discussions about guilt with other participants—suggests that Indigenous and white participants alike perceive white guilt as influencing intersubjective dynamics in the solidarity encounter. Certainly white settler women’s motivations for engaging in solidarity cannot be reduced to the existence of guilt or to the desire for its alleviation. My working supposition in this analysis, however, is that white guilt, to the extent that it exists in the solidarity encounter, can also be a factor in the impulse to exceptionalism.

**Making Exceptions to the/Settler Rule**

In addition to the question of what drives the move to exceptionalism (e.g., white settler guilt), there is also the matter of its operationalization. In my analysis, I attempt to trace the workings of at least two such mechanisms in participant narratives: non-performative declarations (Ahmed, 2004) and what I call white solipsistic self-reflexivity (Rich, 1979; Smith, 2013a). To set the stage for my analysis, I provide a brief overview of these ideas, starting with Ahmed (2004) on the “politics of declaration” and the discursive role therein of white guilt/shame.

Ahmed (2004) describes the use of the declarative mode in speech “as a way of doing something, [which] involves a fantasy of transcendence in which ‘what’ is transcended is the very thing ‘admitted to’ in the declaration: so, to put it simply, if we admit to being bad, then we show that we are good” (para. 54). In this way, seemingly harmless (and individualistic) declarations can function in decidedly political ways to perpetuate a collective fantasy of transcendence on the part of dominantly positioned subjects. In summary, certain “utterances” or “speech acts” have political effects. A “politics of declaration” is enacted when institutions or individuals “‘admit’ to forms of bad practice, and . . . the ‘admission’ itself becomes seen as good practice” (Ahmed, 2004, para. 11). By way of example, Ahmed (2004) notes six types of “non-performative” declarations by the white subject seeking anti-racist status, where each declaration of whiteness is assumed to put in place the conditions in which racism can be transcended, or at the very least reduced in its power. Any presumption that such statements are forms of political action would be an overestimation of the power of saying, and even a performance of the very privilege that such statements claim they undo. (para. 54)
Through the conflation of “saying” with “doing,” such declarations are non-performative. Along with other scholars, Ahmed (2004) implicates the field of critical whiteness studies in these politics in facilitating the birth of the “anxious white subject” who openly acknowledges and frets about her white privilege.\(^7\)

The claim of the progressive “race traitor” as theorized in whiteness studies is similarly (and complexly) non-performative. As explained by Wiegman (1999) the “race traitor” claims whiteness as “a racialized particular” that she can then reject:

This is, it seems to me, the performative force of the race traitor question, “What makes you think I am white?” which simultaneously and paradoxically refuses the position of the universally unmarked by ultimately claiming to be no longer marked by it. In asserting the particularity of white racial identity as a preamble to refusing it altogether, the race traitor passes through both the universal and the particular in order to found a new minority of former white people. (p. 143)

In the final analysis, Wiegman (1999) would likely agree with Ahmed (2004) who concludes that “putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist” (para. 12).

Ahmed (2004) uses an example from the Australian settler colonial context to explain how non-performative declarations can employ shame at the level of the collectivity to great effect. Non-Indigenous (white) Australians were asked by their government to acknowledge the forced removal of Indigenous children from Indigenous communities:

Those who witness the past injustice through feeling “national shame” are aligned with each other as “well meaning individuals”; if you feel shame, then you mean well. Shame “makes” the nation in the witnessing of past injustice, a witnessing that involves feeling shame, as it exposes the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. But this exposure is temporary, and becomes the ground for a narrative of national recovery. . . . The transference of bad feeling to the subject in this admission of shame is only temporary, as the “transference” itself becomes evidence of the restoration of an identity of which we can be proud. (para. 23)

Through admissions of “national shame,” settlers are constituted as legitimate members of the body politic, cleansed and inoculated against further “bad feeling” in the process. Ahmed’s (2000, 2004) broader point here is that “non-performative” declarations are mechanisms of stranger fetishism; they can work to conceal the histories of determination that have placed subjects in hierarchical relation in any and all configurations (see Chapter 3). Following Ahmed
Applebaum (2010) elucidates the “complex and thorny” ways in which white subjects deny complicity in structures of inequality, and like Lee above, notes the religious overtones of the process: “Confessions of whiteness, therefore, constitute a form of pleasurable relief because what has produced the discomfort of learning about complicity is removed and one is purged of wrongdoing” (p. 19). My research tracks the narratives deployed by a subset of the Canadian body politic—well-meaning white settler women allies in the solidarity encounter. And though the narratives I examine do not always contain utterances of the exact sort evaluated by Ahmed (2004), I apply her theory when relevant to shed light on exceptionalism as a discursive tactic.

Smith’s (2013a, 2013b) work on self-reflexivity complements Ahmed’s (2004) on the non-performativity of certain (anti-racist) utterances. As in social justice circles more generally, there are widespread calls in the solidarity encounter for those with privilege to acknowledge it. In this study, participants across the board agree that it is important for white settler women allies (and for all settlers) to acquire knowledge of colonial history. And, self-reflexivity is often assumed to be the methodological linchpin for guaranteeing that settlers will concede their privilege.

Smith (2013a, 2013b), however, explores why self-reflexivity is not guaranteed to function in this way (see Chapter 2). She argues that self-reflexivity, enabled by proximity to the Other, can result in the reproduction of “white settler/white subject” structural privilege. A circular logic is at work: the same self-reflexive gesture through which the dominant subject comes to know and “confess” her privilege “proves” her status as a self-determining subject capable of self-reflection. These are “rituals of confessing privilege . . . that rest on a white supremacist/colonialist notion of a subject that can constitute itself over and against others through self-reflexivity” (Smith, 2013a, p. 278). The self-reflective mode and the declarations it facilitates must be interrogated as productive of power relations, so as not to “become [or be mistaken as] the political project themselves” (Smith, 2013a, p. 263). When such confessions stand in for political practice, they become examples of non-performative speech acts (Ahmed, 2004). In my analysis, I suggest that moves to exceptionalism consisting mostly of acknowledgements of settler status and little else, risk becoming nothing other than manifestations of “white solipsistic” self-reflexivity (Rich, 1979). These theories help to explain why (white) social justice activists are frequently charged with navel-gazing—they often remain stuck in individualistic acts of self-reflexivity.
My analysis of moves to exceptionalism in white participant narratives begins with the notion of friendship. As a strategy of exceptionalism, it involves a blended formula of self-reflexivity and proximity—the capacity to open oneself up, “to go in with a good mind, an open mind and an open heart,” as white participant Darcie says, in order to learn from/about the Other.

**Making friends**

The use of friendship as a strategy to establish oneself as exceptional (in the solidarity encounter and beyond) is relatively rare among white participants, but important for two reasons: the powerful attraction it seems to have for those who use it and the way in which it involves the pursuit of proximity (e.g., seeking access into or the acceptance of an Indigenous community).

To set the stage for the discussion, I begin with Audrey Thompson’s (2003) work on the discursive role of friendship in constructing white antiracist subjectivity in the US. Fittingly for my research, Thompson (2003) alludes to colonial history to explore how seeking friendship can be both a manifestation of the desire for proximity and a strategy for demonstrating white exceptionalism:

> We [white people] have embraced the idea that whites can be “friends of people of color.” It is not a new idea; Custer himself declared that the white man was “the Indian’s best friend.” But we mean it differently, not that way. We mean that we are supporters of people of color, that we understand about white racism and that we are against it. We are not that sort of white; we are good whites. . . . It is because whites are uncomfortable with the implications of acknowledging white racism that (whether or not we use the term) we are tempted to position ourselves as “good whites.” Although we can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves. (pp. 7–8)

While *white* resistance and *settler* resistance to acknowledging complicity in structural racism and structural colonialism respectively are not collapsible, they are arguably hard to disentangle in the white settler colonial context. Thompson (2003) herself notes the historical construction of white settler desire (that would later be disavowed by “good whites”). Further, since racism and colonialism are historically co-constituted, it follows that white settler “moves to innocence” would involve the inextricable disavowal of racism and colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 4; see also Silva, 2007). Tuck and Yang (2012) note that in settler colonialism “Indigeneity prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety” (p. 9), which leads to a “relentless” desire to reconcile on the part of the settler subject. I propose that friendship is a particularly
conducive form of reconciliation for the (apparently) individualistic white settler woman subject.

Similarly to other white participants, Darcie discusses her solidarity experiences (mostly from a university context) in transformative terms. Moreover, her “narrative of becoming” seems to presume the right to access and learn from Indigenous communities. And, despite (or perhaps because of) her substantial knowledge of colonization acquired in various contexts such as Native studies classes, Darcie can think of no examples of power relations in solidarity work that have involved her personally. Unlike Alicia, who admits to having been negatively received by some Indigenous women, Darcie reports only positive experiences:

> When I first got involved [with a Native students group], I wanted to learn; so, I went there . . . feeling like an outsider and sort of being apprehensive about that, but then realizing that if you go in with a good mind, an open mind and an open heart and you’re sincere, people respond to that very well, and you can become a part of that community. . . . I think just having the ability to listen and exchange ideas when that needs to happen. . . . If I wanted to get involved in the Indigenous community, I’m not Indigenous, I don’t have that background, so I need to learn to try and understand. Because you can read books about what’s happening and what needs to be done, but until you actually talk to people from those communities, then you actually find out. . . . It’s sort of like going to the source to try and figure out what is best.

Later in the interview, Darcie explicitly ties friendship (along with knowledge of and acceptance by Indigenous communities) to engaging in effective, meaningful solidarity:

> I think it’s hard for people to be involved in work around Indigenous people without really getting involved in the community. You can do it, but for me I don’t feel that that’s right. I wouldn’t be comfortable doing that. That’s why I’ve always tried to make friendships and get to know people and get involved in [Indigenous interest] groups when they’re available. So, that was kind of frustrating this year to try and encourage [non-Aboriginal] people to come out, especially people who are doing work around Aboriginal people. It’s like, “You should come be part of this group,” not just for their own…but also to support the group. Because if we can expand and get more members, then it will increase visibility on campus—all those sorts of things. Plus all the people who are participating will learn things.

In summary, Darcie approaches solidarity work in terms of achieving proximity, i.e., she emphasizes the importance of establishing friendships and getting involved in the community. And, she establishes herself as exceptional in this regard. However, by adding that “non-Aboriginal people” should get involved “not just for their own [sake],” she complicates the
narrative by acknowledging that there are political reasons for settler allies to do solidarity work.

Darcie’s consistently uncomplicated account of her solidarity relations harkens back to Thompson’s (2003) work on the antiracist claims of some white academics and graduate students in the US, herself included: “Indeed, we often take it for granted that our studied antiracism is the standard to which other whites should be held; at the same time, however, we may anxiously try to prove our antiracist credentials by positioning ourselves in unproblematic solidarity with scholars of color” (p. 10). Thompson’s (2003) insights seem especially applicable to Darcie’s situation given that they concern an academic setting. Does Darcie’s unproblematic account of solidarity indicate the persistence of her settler anxieties (Tuck & Yang, 2012)? Despite her “studied” anticolonialism and ability to make friends with Indigenous people, does she remain what Ahmed might call “the anxious white [settler] subject?”

Ahmed’s (2000) work on the role of friendship in radical feminist ethnography also sheds light on this particular aspect of intersubjective dynamics in the solidarity encounter. Ahmed (2000) proposes that “the ethnographic desire to know the stranger” is often “rearticulated as the transformation of strangers into friends” (p. 65). While Darcie is not a “professional stranger” (ethnographer), she aspires to learn about Indigenous realities and ultimately, through engaging with a good mind and heart (i.e., making friends), to be accepted by an Indigenous community. Another white participant, Alicia, has in fact acted in the capacity of “professional stranger” and also explicitly refers to friendship to describe an encounter with Indigenous women (and men):

I definitely appreciated when I was at the . . . language camp, and they referred to us as [Native people] and friends of [Native people]. It made me feel that sense of solidarity. That there was a place for me, not as a [Native] person, but as a friend—someone they saw as aligned, someone in solidarity, someone who was not hurting them. . . . I felt like there was a place for me in that construction of this kind of work. That really felt nice.

In this passage, Alicia’s seemingly personal stake in the experience of solidarity is transparent; she acknowledges feeling accepted by the Indigenous people in the encounter. The white women settler subject’s desire to attain the status of good “helper” is also palpable. Alicia’s later response to a question about decolonization is also telling:

I think [decolonization] is part of the experience of participating in community events, doing spiritual events, learning the language, learning about other cultures, not just Indigenous cultures here. I went [abroad] and met some Indigenous peoples there. . . .
You totally reorient to a different world view that’s not rooted in West-is-best and Eurocentric values... It’s like learning to walk in more worlds. I feel comfortable walking into a Native community event. I understand the protocol, the cultural constructs. Likewise I’m comfortable being around white people. I understand. I grew up with a lot of black friends; I’m comfortable going to my black friends’ homes for family events and the dynamics of their families too.

In describing the steps she has taken to decolonize, Alicia comments on her remarkable skill in making friends with strangers; decolonization (and solidarity work) for Alicia is suffused with the desire for proximity. My aim is not to state definitively that Darcie or Alicia are acting on the assumption that Indigenous–white power relations between women can be neutralized through friendship. Rather, I highlight the centrality for both women of establishing friendship (through proximity) with the Indigenous Other as a primary means of achieving solidarity. In this sense, there is a near conflation of (individual) friendship and (group) solidarity in both narratives.

Wiegman’s (1999) work supplements my analysis of friendship as a technique of exceptionalism in the solidarity encounter. To recap one of her main points, post-civil rights challenges to white supremacy in the US have forced “liberal whiteness” to remake itself in opposition to less acceptable, ostensibly more egregious acts of white supremacy. Through disaffiliating from segregationist forms of white supremacy, the white liberal subject disavows the ways in which it continues to enjoy white privilege. Wiegman’s (1999) theorization of disaffiliation, while not wholly transferable to the settler colonial context, suggests that white participants like Darcie would not lose a sense of white settler privilege as much as gain a sense of exceptional status—the progressive white settler able to engage in friendly, “unproblematic solidarity” (Thompson, 2003). I suggest that a comparable desire to disaffiliate underwrites white settler subjectivity, a desire which is pursued through proximity in a number of ways, including the desire for friendship. For Darcy, by interacting “sincerely” with a “good mind, an open mind and an open heart,” the white settler ally can successfully engender friendship, solidarity and exceptional (individualistic) status. Notably, Darcie extends the invitation of exceptional status to other settler allies.

Do white settler subjects (attempt to) convince ourselves that colonial power relations cease to matter when we meet certain conditions, including the establishment of friendship and trust? Peggy’s narrative on the question is insightful. In the interview, Peggy continually wrestles with her status as a white settler woman in the solidarity encounter and beyond. She has developed
lasting friendships with Indigenous women through her activism, a point she emphasizes when asked how her solidarity work with Indigenous women has changed over time: “I have deeper more trusting relationships with [Indigenous women]. They’re complex, deep rich relationships that aren’t just working as allies, they’re friendships. We love each other. That’s what it comes down to. That’s taken time to build.” Recall also her affirmative response when asked if she would always not want to be “one of those ‘bad’ settlers.” She explains that her sense of being a “bad settler” would remain since she cannot “fully join” her Indigenous friends:

> And you just want to be part of that excitement and positive change and creativity. But then it’s not quite yours. Or you think, “Oh this culture, I like this about this culture or I like that about the culture, it’s so much better in this or that way than my culture. It’s really easy to feel this way. And if these people are your friends? Some of these people are my best friends, and yet I can never fully join them in certain things. That’s painful.

Peggy acknowledges the deep-seated desire of the settler subject to belong (she does not want to be “one of those bad settlers”). Further, she acknowledges her inability to give up that desire: her longing to shed bad settler status and attain good settler status will continue because she can “never fully join” her Indigenous women friends. By assuming and lamenting the impossibility of belonging (something that may or may not be possible, I would argue), Peggy inadvertently upholds the good/bad settler dichotomy. Her narrative implies that if she were able to “fully join” her friends, she would no longer be/feel like a “bad” settler. By extension, this implies that colonial power relations would be eradicated. In other words, her narrative links the status of bad settler to not-belonging, and by extrapolation, good settler to belonging, instead of conceptualizing settler status full stop as a consequence of her structural position in a white settler collectivity. In other words, we remain settlers complicit in colonial relations irrespective of our ability to connect to individual Indigenous people or communities. In what follows, I consider other examples of exceptionalism discourse that uphold the good/bad settler dichotomy and therefore the white settler/liberal fantasy of transcendence.

**Competing declarations**

As expressed in participant narratives (and in my self-reflections), the white settler ally move to exceptionalism often combines two components: an impulse to highlight the fact that we are generally more informed than the “average Canadian” about colonial legacies and contemporary manifestations thereof (which may or may not be true); and a tendency to compete for the status of more/most progressive ally in relation to other white settler women (or men) allies in the
solidarity arena. In fact, the latter desire—to be (considered) better than other solidarity activists—seems more pronounced than the desire to distinguish oneself from the so-called average Canadian as the “good settler *cum* ally.” While noting the possibility that a sense of entitlement (to be in the solidarity space) and self-righteousness can underpin these tendencies, I also suggest that these often coexist alongside a sense of responsibility to engage in the work.

I begin with an instructive excerpt from Alicia’s narrative, which is part of her response to being asked about her responsibility as a non-Indigenous woman to do solidarity work:

> With respect to what’s my place within this work, I had a bit of an epiphany once. This last winter I was struggling with my place in this work and as a white woman, and would I continue this kind of work . . . Should it kind of be left to Indigenous folks to sort out where they want to go? Am I kind of interfering? . . . I was at this nature camp. I was doing what they call a night walk through a forest. . . . When I was in that forest I kind of had this moment where I felt like I had just as much right to care about these important issues relating to Indigenous cultures—globalization, Westernization, environmentalism. . . . I have just as much right as a child of this world to care about these things and it doesn’t matter that I’m white. And that there is a role for me to play, even if it’s just helping other white people learn, get out of their bubble, get out of their Western construct, their narrow construct of “I need to get a job, get a car, buy a boat, go to the cottage.” There’s more to life. There’s a different way to be living on this planet, to be more in tune with themselves, to be more in tune with nature, to understand colonization, to try some decolonizing work. To get back to our roots. To know what a community means. . . . I feel I’ve been given this gift of awareness from the Aboriginal cultures or communities that I’ve been a part of, and maybe there’s a role for me in sharing that same awareness with other non-Native people who continue to be Westernized and colonized in their way of thinking.

This passage along with others in Alicia’s narrative demonstrates the complexities of white settler woman subjectivity. She is rightly concerned about globalization, Westernization and environmental sustainability as issues that affect all peoples; she see herself as responsible for “helping other white people learn,” something long called for by marginalized communities. She is mindful of “interfering” and questions her “place in this work and as a white woman.” At the same time, she answers a question about her responsibility as a non-Indigenous woman in Canada with commentary on her *right* to do solidarity work, suggesting an attempt to mollify her own doubts about her “place in this work.” Does this suggest Alicia feels entitled to do solidarity work? Let’s consider the applicability of Heron’s (2007) insights into the role of entitlement in white/Northern women’s decisions to do development work in the Global South:

> Not only do participants feel morally obliged to intervene, and through planetary consciousness see the world as our field of action; not only do we position Others as
amenable to our intercessions; but we take for granted that we can go to, live in, and be active in other people’s countries—and lives—if we choose to do development work. In a sense, our altruism becomes our passport to the South, and we think this is as it should be. (pp. 45–46)

On the one hand, Alicia’s arguably defensive posturing suggests that her approach to solidarity is rather fraught or infused with settler anxiety (Tuck & Yang, 2012). On the other hand, Alicia’s claims to entitlement cannot be divorced from the broader narrative of becoming (Ahmed, 2000) that frames her solidarity work. She considers herself a privileged person who has been bestowed the “gift of awareness” (an achievement of proximity), rather than as a white settler woman who developed an anticolonial analysis. Enabled as an autonomous subject, she then positions herself as uniquely poised to bridge the Indigenous–settler gap and to teach other settlers about the perils of “their Western construct.” Despite an admittance (earlier in the interview) of ignorance about Indigenous issues in the not-so-distant past, Alicia now emphasizes that she is different from the general Canadian public, whose lack of awareness remains a source of anger to her. Unlike some of the more involved claims of anti-racist non-performativity discussed by Ahmed (2004), Alicia’s anticolonial claims constitute direct appeals to exceptionalism.

When asked the same question about what responsibilities come with being a white woman in Canada, Rachel provides a strikingly similar response. She cites her elevated levels of awareness and understanding of Indigenous issues relative to most of her (white) friends, and alludes to the educative role (raising awareness of “interesting events”) she has taken upon herself to assume:

In a way I’m almost an interesting bridge for you. I’m guessing you have talked to a lot of people with a strong sense of responsibility. Or at least they have chosen to commit a part of their life to work or alliance in that way. When I look at myself I am unusual within the context with the friends I have from a variety of contexts. They would perceive me as more socially and politically engaged than themselves. “You work, do good work, work with a soul. We work in marketing, publishing, law, business.” . . . It’s interesting because I don’t think that 99 percent of the people that I know in this world think that they have any responsibility to do with the context of Canada’s colonial history. I know people who would say, “You know what, Native people need to get over it.” I know people who would say that. I know people who would say, “I’m an immigrant to Canada. Native people don’t know or care what I went through.” In a really distorted way, that’s like a settler. I don’t even know how paradoxical and complicated that statement is. I think in all of those contexts I’m one of the voices of “that’s an interesting event, maybe we should hear about this Indigenous speaker from Burkina
Faso about what traditional knowledge is.” I’d go with a few friends and we’d have an interesting experience.

Like Alicia, Rachel positions herself as exceptional in relation to “99 percent of the people that I know in this world [who do not] think that they have any responsibility” when it comes to Canadian colonial history. Rachel’s focus, however, as portrayed to her friends, boils down to an interest in learning about cultural difference rather than structural oppression (see Chapter 5).

In presenting what Wiegman (1999) might call an example of white disaffiliation, Schick (1998) notes a parallel tendency to that of Alicia’s and Rachel’s among white pre-service teachers, who describe themselves as having exceptional levels of cultural awareness. In the following, Schick (1998) explains why she considers such statements to be “positive”:

These are “positive” statements . . . not because I either disapprove of or admire them, as they stand as claims irrespective of how I judge them. Neither are they positive because they actually convince the listener/reader of their intent as purposed by the subjects. These are the credibility claims or warrants which participants call upon to construct for themselves a sympathetic, positive identity with regard to racial and cultural awareness. By these claims, subjects show that they are agents in the production of their own identity—and not objects, not one of “them.” (p. 174)

Ironically, such “positive” statements, presumably meant to differentiate the subject from other white people, reveal an aspect of collective white subjectivity: the pervasive desire to present oneself as an atypical, individualistic agent capable of resisting negative societal influences, i.e., the “I” who remains distinct from “them,” the “evil and racist” members of one’s own group (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

When asked if her relationship with an Indigenous woman (an outside advisor on a work project, described as “the ally” below,) has transformed her organization, Rachel answers:

When [a co-worker] and I talk, she sees value in the way the ally and I have constructed our relationship. . . . I think that there are other people who don’t necessarily have a direct relationship with my ally who have seen the way that I’ve modeled partnership development within the project and will borrow from that in having a broader awareness in their way of maybe interacting with people particularly from maybe marginalized communities, whether that would be Indigenous or immigrant or otherwise.

As previously noted, in Rachel’s narrative, interpersonal friendship is collapsed into solidarity. To be fair, Rachel describes her experience of political solidarity as limited and had doubts about its applicability to my research. Nonetheless, her story provides a window into how a less
experienced ally might conceptualize solidarity on individualistic terms that facilitate the move to exceptionalism.

What is accomplished by such claims to exceptionalism? How might such claims reflect and enable the (white) settler desire for and pursuit of innocence (i.e., the transcendence of structural power relations)? Exceptionalism discourse is perhaps most clearly demonstrable in participant responses to questions around the acknowledgment of settler privilege and usage of the term settler. Here are two white participant responses to the question of how they would position themselves in relation to colonialism. When asked if she identifies as a settler, Peggy answers:

I would say yes, I’m a descendant of settlers, and a member of that culture. I would say at this point I don’t see myself only as a settler through my activism. Definitely still embedded and implicated, but I’m trying to create an alternative, as opposed to someone who’s unconsciously a settler, who has made no effort to change the dynamic.

In this excerpt and others, Peggy presents a nuanced understanding of her positionality as a settler. And while she recognizes and resists the risk of claiming transcendence (she acknowledges being “definitely still embedded and implicated”), she nonetheless seeks to differentiate herself from “someone who is unconsciously a settler who has made no effort to change the dynamic.” Whether or not Peggy is different is not the point; what I want to highlight is the desire and act of claim-making. To recall Schick (1998), “By these [credibility] claims, subjects show that they are agents in the production of their own identity—and not objects, not one of ‘them’” (p. 174)—“them” in this case referring to the average settler.

Another white participant locates herself in Canada’s settler-colonial relationship as follows:

That’s a good question. Well, obviously I’ve benefited from settler colonialism and I’m aware of that, so I think that maybe places me on the fringes of that? I don’t know. Because, you know, a lot of people aren’t aware or don’t want to be aware of the ways they’ve, everything that they’ve gained from that system, because a lot of negative things have happened and it brings up these feelings of guilt and nobody really wants to feel guilty. But I think that doing the work that I do and just trying to be the person who I am and working towards alliances with not just Indigenous people, but other people as well, and trying to bridge that if I can. I try to educate my family and friends about those sorts of issues. So I’m hoping to try and be a positive influence or a force for good.

(Darcie)

The white settler woman subject’s gendered desire to be “a force for good” is clearly evident in Darcie’s narrative. It also provides a more straightforward example of exceptionalism discourse as a white settler strategy to overcome one’s implicatedness in colonial relations. Her discursive
moves correspond in sequence to those of other white participants. First, like Alicia, Rachel and Peggy, she cites her awareness of settler colonialism as the factor that distinguishes her from “a lot of people” and that (possibly) places her “on the fringes of” colonial power. Darcie also claims to be exceptional in not having succumbed to “feelings of guilt.” Second, she describes herself as “trying to bridge” Indigenous–white settler difference (while adding a third category, “other people”). Like Alicia and Rachel, she describes the educative roles she has assumed, including “trying to educate my family and friends about those sorts of issues.” In “just trying to be the person who I am,” Darcie credits herself with moving to the fringes of settler colonialism, a fantasy that could only be sustained by the subject who imagines herself as autonomous.

Further, Darcie’s claim to exceptional status initially rests on the same declarative logic that Ahmed (2004) finds is often reinscribed through whiteness studies:

The argument that we must see whiteness because whiteness is unseen can convert into a declaration of not being subject to whiteness or even a white subject (“if I see whiteness, then I am not white, as whites don’t see their whiteness”). Perhaps this fantasy of transcendence is the privilege afforded by whiteness, as a privilege which disappears from sight when it has itself in view. . . . When whiteness studies becomes a declaration about whiteness, then it constitutes its subject as transcending its object in the moment it sees or apprehends itself as the object (being white). (para. 16, emphasis in original)

In this case, Darcie transcends her privilege at the moment it comes into view. Given the slippery nature of privilege, it is unlikely that Darcie would recognize her utterance as a fantasy of transcendence. Eve, however, speaks to this paradoxical rendering of privilege in our exchange about the extent to which the term settler is used in activist versus social service contexts:

I feel like that language really comes out of activist communities . . . I think it’s quite common language that doesn’t necessarily have a negative... well, I guess it does still have a negative connotation to it. But not negative in a bad way. Do you know what I mean? [Carol Lynne: Yes. You’re supposed to acknowledge your settler complicity.] Exactly. So it’s kind of bad that you’re a settler, but it’s good that you acknowledge it. Whereas I think that in [a] more social service context, [Indigenous people] don’t want to piss off the white people who are their funders, right?

As became apparent in our ensuing conversation, Eve and I agree on two points: first, there is the general expectation that as white settlers (women and men) we will declare our status as such in the solidarity encounter; and second, a certain street cred is seen to flow from that declaration—one’s enhanced status as progressive settler ally (if only among other settler allies).
This practice does not seem to be gender specific, but may well take gendered forms. Ahmed (2004) explores the paradoxical rendering of such an achievement with relation to racism:

The paradoxes of admitting to one’s own racism are clear: saying “we are racist” becomes a claim to have overcome the conditions (unseen racism) that require the speech act in the first place. The logic goes: we say, “we are racist,” and insofar as we can admit to being racist (and racists are unwitting), then we are showing that “we are not racist,” or at least that we are not racist in the same way. (para. 20)

Based on a shared analysis, Eve and I agree that a similar non-performative logic operates in the solidarity encounter between women and in mixed gender groups, although perhaps differently. We have each learned in our respective settings to declare our dominant status (be it white, settler, middle-class or combination thereof) and to recognize the moral importance attached to such declarative practices.

Speaking as an Indigenous woman from elsewhere, Zainab hones in on the discursive limits of such declarations while not completely dismissing their importance:

I think it’s what you do with that acknowledgement that matters to me. I acknowledge it, too. I’m a settler here, too. This is not my land. I’m benefiting from the genocide as well. It’s what you do with it that matters. And I’m not interested. I don’t really care. I’m tired of people saying, “I’m a settler” and doing the whole [Carol Lynne: Confession thing?] Yeah. I don’t care about that. Tell me what you’re prepared to do to fix things.

Combining the insights of Ahmed (2004) and Smith (2013a), I suggest that such declarations are perhaps best classified as non-performative confessions—frequently, though not inherently or inevitably, leaving a disjuncture between speech and action in their wake.

Eve and I also both register an awareness of competing declarations of allyship (and hence of transcendence) among white women activists in the solidarity encounter. In fact, Indigenous and white participants alike depict a propensity toward competition in this ambit as fairly common. As Kowal (2011) suggests, white anti-racist strategies to manage white stigma include “criticising other Whites, including other White anti-racists” (pp. 8–9). As an Indigenous woman, Rubina has sometimes found “that solidarity work [among white women allies] is a competition of ‘I am so much better an activist than you,’” noting this to be particularly the case in academic activism. When asked about the origins or purpose of such competition, Rubina answers without hesitation: “Oh, it’s about the guilt. If I can be a better activist, obviously, I’m not doing as bad stuff.” Rubina’s response (common among Indigenous and white participants) corroborates the theorizations of white settler guilt/white stigma reviewed above. It also speaks
to Ahmed’s (2004) theory about what white people “do” (make declarations) with/about “bad feeling.”

A long-time ally working with Indigenous communities, Peggy speaks to the layered nature of non-Indigenous activists’ discursive attempts (counting her own) to show “I’m not one of them”:

Peggy: You can’t take off your whiteness, your privilege, the benefits you’ve inherited—it’s stuck to you. You’re fooling yourself if you think you can leave it behind. I think a lot of people think that when they first become activists, that there’s this denial, this appropriation of a Native identity, because it’s painful. You’d much rather be able to identify with the oppressed. [There’s] a certain self-righteousness that you can’t have as one of the oppressors…You can see it in some activists in the way they really denounce and shun other non-Indigenous people that don’t have quite the same politics.

Carol Lynne: Could you give me an example of that?

Peggy: It doesn’t just happen in this context, in any sort of activist politics. People consider themselves the vanguard. The best analysis, the most radical, everyone else is a sell-out just reinforcing the colonial agenda. Personally, I don’t like that binary thinking; I don’t think it’s accurate. I think that there are many ways to be an activist, to contribute to decolonization. It can be really small, it can be quiet, it can be loud, it can be visible. I’m wary of people who are extremely judgmental in that way. It’s one thing to say “I don’t agree with what they’re doing,” but there’s a degree of put down and condemnation. I think it’s part of the same dynamic that “I’m not one of them.”

Carol Lynne: You’re denying the fact that you can’t take off that colonial imprint?

Peggy: Yeah, you will discover at one point that you still have it.

Peggy begins by noting “a certain self-righteousness” that comes with identifying with “the oppressed,” a self-righteousness she has seen across activist circles that enables the settler ally subject to feel superior to and be judgmental of other activists who (in solidarity encounters with Indigenous people) are seen as “sell-outs just reinforcing the colonial agenda.” The settler-activist who depicts herself as part of “the vanguard” with the “best analysis” and “most radical” politics resembles Ahmed’s (2004) “learned white” subject who makes a specific kind of declaration of whiteness—“I/we have studied whiteness (and racist people are ignorant)”: If learning about whiteness becomes a subject skill and a subject specific skill, then “learned whites” are precisely “given privilege” over others, whether those others are “unlearned whites” or learning or unlearned non-white others. Studying whiteness can involve the claiming of a privileged white identity as the subject who knows. (para. 40)
The better settler-activist (the “atypical” settler) is (one who considers herself) more informed, having acquired a sophisticated analysis of colonialism, which can include a process of cultural appropriation. Applying Ahmed’s (2004) lens to this example reveals a belief on the part of settlers that colonial status/power, like white status/power, can be shed or at least mitigated through becoming the “subject who knows.” Peggy’s insights also provide an example of how discourses of exceptionalism (vanguardism) and proximity (appropriation) are co-constitutive.

Competition can reach an even more disturbing level, according to long-time Indigenous activist Zainab, who notes that “[white] supporters often compete with each other to impress each other as well as Native people about how much they know, how involved they’ve been, who they know in Native struggles.” Her sketch of what took place during the organizing of a political action in Toronto that involved Indigenous groups from outside the city illustrates the potential fallout of white ally competition. By “white interpreters” she is referring to representatives of non-Indigenous solidarity groups (also based outside of the city) who had established relationships with the affected rural Indigenous communities:

So here we had urban Native people wanting to talk directly with the [rural-based Native] activists . . . who had to go through these white interpreters. So the white interpreters were always kind of competing with each other: “Well, I spoke to the elder . . . and she said this.” “Well, I’m sorry, but I spoke to someone in [another place] and they said that.” So the whole conversation was kind of like that. It was very “my Indian says this” and “my Indian says that.” This kind of stuff. Yeah, they like to compete with each other about who they know, how much they know, how long they’ve been doing this, how respectful are their relationships, and whether “their Indians” are taking more leadership than “your Indians.” It’s like, holy fuck.

In their self-appointed role as intermediaries between the rural Indigenous communities and urban-based Indigenous activists, Zainab’s “white interpreters” essentially claimed ownership over Indigenous individuals and communities. This provides us with a stark reminder of the insidious ways in which colonial dynamics can be reproduced despite the good intentions of non-Indigenous people who see themselves as supporters of Indigenous political struggles. Unlike in most examples I cite, men (by which I mean any male-identified person) were predominant in number among Zainab’s “white interpreters,” which leads to other questions about the gendered dimension of white settler ally competition. Does it manifest differently in mixed gender groups, particularly in its public dimensions? How might patriarchal relations unfold? Not having broached the topic with participants, I raise these as questions for future research.14
Some participants’ narratives dovetail even more directly with Ahmed (2004) in the way that they hone in on the non-performativity of public declarations of allyship. For example, Carla analyzes the work done by the self-congratulatory declarations of some white allies:

Carla: But that as an ally means never allowing yourself to say that you’re off the hook, that you can’t do and appropriate things because you’re an ally. And knowing that it’s a constant process your whole life. That it’s something you have to consistently self-reflect on and be conscious of your actions. . . . So for instance, there’s a guy I know who is white, who would always see himself as a good ally to people of colour groups. And he was in a relationship with one of my friends who was a woman of colour, and at one point said to me: “You know my girlfriend is a woman of colour; I’m off the hook—I can’t be racist.” I think that can be really damaging to say to someone who wants to think that because of an association you are sort of guilt free. It eases your conscience.

Carol Lynne: What is the danger of having an eased conscience?

Carla: Well, you know racism and all forms of social discrimination can replicate themselves in intimate relationships, in friendships, in activist circles, so I think it negates that. I think it says, “I am a lefty, therefore I am absolved of any harm.” You could actually still be doing things that are quite harmful and actually use it as a shield to say like “You can’t attack me, I am not racist because...”

Carla’s analysis provides another example of how discourses of friendship as proximity can constitute the move to exceptionalism. The “lefty” subject’s eased conscience also reminds me of Ahmed’s (2004) work on white subject attempts to do away with “bad feeling” (Ahmed, 2004):

One wonders again what happens to bad feeling in this performance of good, happy whiteness. If bad feeling is partly an effect of racism, and racism is accepted as ongoing in the present (rather than what happened in the past), then who gets to feel bad about racism? One suspects that happy whiteness, even when this happiness is about anti-racism, is what allows racism to remain the burden of non-white others. Indeed, I suspect that bad feelings of racism (hatred, fear, pain) are projected onto the bodies of unhappy racist whites, which allows progressive whites to be happy with themselves in the face of continued racism towards non-white others. (para. 34)

The problem with this, as with all moves to exceptionalism, is the manner in which it can sustain the white settler subject’s fantasies of autonomy and transcendence.

In exploring what solidarity means for her as a white woman, Eve builds on Carla’s critique of the use of public declarations and self-congratulatory language in the quest to be (seen as) a good settler ally:
I think solidarity and allyships are really similar in a sense. It’s language that has to be given to you, not that you can take. I think I would never call myself an ally of a particular community unless the community has called me an ally. . . . Because most of my work now . . . is around sex work politics, I see a lot of people calling themselves sex work allies, and they’re not. They’re really, really not. It’s the thing that the community has to give you that language in order for you to be able to claim it.

For Eve, the act of declaring oneself an ally involves a certain level of appropriation. Perhaps not as extreme as the pitched battles over “my Indian” described by Zainab, unilateral claims of allyship nonetheless are examples of the white ally taking something that has not yet been given or earned. As an Indigenous woman from elsewhere in the Americas, Ursula would agree:

I consider myself Indigenous, but I’m not from this territory, so I also work in solidarity and I’m an ally as well to the Haudenosaunee people and Anishinaabe people of this territory. I also think that you need to be careful when talking about allies. A lot of people can say “I’m an ally,” but I think you need to be named as an ally by the Native community themselves, not just call yourself an ally willy-nilly. So that’s like an honoured title.

Recall also Wanda’s conclusion about the hollowness of one white woman’s declaration of allyship made at the end of a public film screening (see Chapter 4): “By the tone, by the question, she’s not an ally . . . because she doesn’t understand what that means, and she has her own agenda, obviously.” Unilateral self-ascriptions do not lay claim to Indigenous individuals or communities to precisely the same degree as the competitive posturing of Zainab’s “white interpreters,” but they are still expressions of colonial subjectivity. As such, they are nuanced manifestations of both the settler/liberal subject’s sense of entitlement to engage in solidarity, and the pursuit of proximity that serves, as Wanda says, the white settler ally’s “own agenda.”

**Exceptional struggles (with the politics of declaration)**

My analysis of discourses of exceptionalism has relied up to this point on participant observations mostly of others. In fact, white participants rarely self-disclose moves to exceptionalism and/or competition they might have made. Most white participants do not comment one way or the other on any desires they might have had (or continue to have) to attain exceptional settler ally status. Are such omissions indicative of a lack of self-reflexivity? Or, do they themselves constitute moves to exceptionalism? It appears that white settler women sometimes go to great lengths—and take circuitous paths—to prove our exceptional status. By limiting our observations to the actions of other settler-activists, are we claiming superior status to those who declare themselves exceptional? To consider these questions, I turn to the minority
of white participants who raise the matter of their own exceptionalism and/or competitive
impulses or, to make matters more complex, the lack thereof.

In the following exchange, Julia reflects on why she had not used the term solidarity to describe
the work she does around Indigenous issues. The excerpt begins with my question:

    Carol Lynne: You answered the call for participants, and it said “solidarity” in the title,
    so why don’t you use the term?

    Julia: I don’t know.

    Carol Lynne: Does it have negative connotations for you?

    Julia: No, it’s really a benign…

    Carol Lynne: So, if it’s not solidarity for you, what is it?

    Julia: Oh, it is. If I were to think about it, it absolutely is. It’s just not if I refer to... I
guess maybe now that I’m talking about it and I’m saying it out loud, I think it seems if I
used the word, whether it be within my own social circles or if I’m talking to Indigenous
guys, “Aren’t you a good little white lady, working in solidarity. Isn’t that good for
you.” That’s not what it is for me. I don’t need to make a public declaration.

    Carol Lynne: What’s wrong with a public declaration of solidarity for you? What is it?

    Julia: I don’t want it to be seen as self-serving for me. I am really okay with a public
declaration around anti-racism work and political activism and that sort of thing, for the
cause and for the reason that I’m there. I don’t need to be congratulated for that. So I
guess maybe when I say, “working in solidarity,” then it becomes about me.

    Carol Lynne: Have you seen that happen?

    Julia: Yes . . . That’s a big piece for [the anthropologist], is that she’s seen as working in
solidarity. But I think for me, a lot of what she does is... I don’t ever want to be seen as
an expert on Indigenous culture. I’m not Indigenous. I’ve lived a white life. I worry that
for some white folks, they see themselves as experts on Indigenous experiences and life
and culture. I’m the expert in my own life and that’s about it. . . . I’m the expert of
nobody else.

Julia’s concern about being misread as someone seeking recognition and validation as “a good
little white lady” suggests not only the ubiquity of such a desire, but also of the measures taken
by some white settler women to quench it—issuing public declarations about one’s solidarity.
Julia’s utterances at first seem to depart from Ahmed’s notion of non-performative speech acts
wherein one admits to being racist or white in a bid to assert the contrary. Julia does not confess
to a desire to be seen as “a good little white lady.” However, in asserting the opposite, she
makes a series of declarations about whiteness and the potentially flawed practice of some white people who claim to be “Indigenous experts.” Julia’s assurances about her difference (i.e., that she does not seek recognition as an ally nor consider herself an expert on anything but herself as a white woman, assurances she issues repeatedly during the interview) evoke Ahmed’s (2004) notion of the anxious white subject who “would come into existence in its very anxiety about the effects it has on others, or even in fear that it is taking something away from others” (para. 7). Julia is clearly worried about practicing the “wrong kind” of solidarity, just as some scholars in critical whiteness studies worry about doing “the wrong kind of whiteness studies,” (Ahmed, 2004, para. 8) which explains their deployment of the term “critical.” Is the discursive effect of Julia’s worrying to “evoke the promise of” her anticolonial status (Ahmed, 2004, para. 7)?

Julia is not alone in struggling to position herself vis-à-vis the “politics of declaration” in solidarity activism, nor to express a “lingering unease” (see Heron’s analysis of Carol below) with how colonial relations can be reproduced via speech acts. Like Julia, Eve notes a generalized desire among settler-activists to be/feel like a “great white ally.” She also points out the non-performativity of some declarations, in this example, related to “decolonizing”:

Reading as much as you can. Taking people’s advice. Trying to listen, trying to be silent. All of that is really important decolonizing work, if that’s how people are understanding decolonizing. Those are obviously so significant, but they are also so insignificant compared to the kind of decolonizing work that needs to happen in Canadian society. So me listening to some Aboriginal women and saying, “I’m decolonizing myself” makes me feel like a great white ally, when it fact what I probably should be doing is struggling against the Indian Act or supporting people trying to change the reserve systems—things that are maybe a bit more significant than me just listening.

Eve’s vision of a more substantive act of decolonization goes beyond the individualized steps of any one person, i.e., it includes, yet does not remain focused on the liberal subject. When asked soon after about the role white guilt might play in the desire to feel like a “great white ally,” Eve repeats her point that declarations of decolonization can be non-performative:

Maybe that’s part of why I say [great white ally] mockingly, because I don’t feel like I’m a great white ally. I don’t feel that’s an important part of my struggle. . . . The impetus for me being an ally to Indigenous communities is not to feel like I’m a good white ally. It’s for social justice reasons, for feminist reasons, for anti-racist reasons, for a bunch of stuff. But it’s not to appease my own self. Maybe that’s the question, when you were asking about, have you done decolonizing work, it’s very easy for white people to say, “Oh, I’ve decolonized myself because I read a few books.” It’s like, “Well, that’s kind of bullshit.” It’s an easy out. That way I don’t have to deal with my white privilege.
I think I’d rather just deal with my white privilege and keep that in check, rather than say I’m decolonized because I read a few books.

Eve does not appear as worried as Julia about being misidentified as someone seeking the status of “great white ally.” But, in critiquing the “easy way out” taken by some white activists involved in decolonizing work, does she position herself as exceptional, as embodying the bonafide activist who takes action as opposed to one who makes empty declarations?

“So, ‘Why are you into solidarity?’ is the thing you should be struggling with throughout this work you’re doing right now.” Directives such as this one from Lee, a seasoned Indigenous activist, have kept me vigilantly self-reflexive in this research, giving me pause to ask, for example, to what extent my own solidarity efforts have involved attempts to prove my exceptional status vis-à-vis other white women/feminist activists. The irony of making declarations about my own competitive impulses to be the better, most exceptional (white) settler ally does not escape me. Will they constitute non-performative utterances designed to exonerate me for committing acts of competition in the solidarity encounter? I risk this in the hope that my self-reflections will provide insight into the nuanced nature of competition among allies.

I begin with the telling reaction that Zainab’s story about the “white interpreters” elicited from me: “At least my competition is mostly in my head. I don’t do that shit out loud, which makes me superior, of course.” Attempts at ironic humour aside, the kernel of competitiveness that has consistently germinated in my own activist practices is clearly detectable in this statement. And, despite keeping it to myself, my indignation has put me in league with the “left-wing intellectuals” critiqued by Alfred (2005):

They claim the right and privilege of indignation and the power to judge those cruder colonizers among them and attempt to use this rhetorical posture to release themselves of their own responsibility for the colonial enterprise, both historically and in the way it has affected their own lives, their families’ privileges, and their communities’ formation. (p. 105)

In other words, judging others becomes a “rhetorical posture” for attempting “to release” the self. The research process—in particular, interviews such as the one with Zainab during which I was able to share experiences and hypotheses—has presented me with ample opportunity to note the constancy, depth and complexity of my own impulse to competitiveness and the ways in which it springs (or not) from guilt. Another of Zainab’s statements, which links guilt to what
she describes as a reactionary overzealousness that can accompany competitive behaviours among white women, rang true for me: “If someone does make an ignorant comment in public, it’s really interesting to me how sometimes the white people will be angry, more impacted than the [Indigenous] people who the comment’s directed at.” I was immediately brought back to my reactions to two different situations: a meeting at which a white woman took the lead during an Indigenous women’s singing circle and a public symposium on Native/non-Native reconciliation. I mention both in my exchange with Zainab:

Even though I don’t vocalize it, I’ve been that person . . . getting more upset about that white woman taking the lead on the song than anybody else seemed to, for example. . . . Or at the . . . symposium on reconciliation, and I just felt like a lot of the Native people there—not all of them, by any stretch—the people who were speaking and the sort of main message being conveyed was not critical enough in terms of naming colonialism. It was all about looking forward. There was one Native man who came and spoke who was really critical of the land claims process, and the negotiation process that was going on, and he named names, and some of the people were there in the room. Afterwards, I heard these two guys talking, two Native people . . . saying things like, “Oh, that doesn’t help anybody. Two steps back. He didn’t need to be like that. He didn’t need to be so critical.” I found myself getting angry, like, why wasn’t the bad stuff talked about more?

My intention is not to evaluate the white woman (did she transgress some boundary?) or the symposium’s focus (how do discourses of reconciliation circumscribe political debate?), but rather to reflect on the extent to which competition and self-righteousness have played a role in my disproportionately intense negative reactions to each moment. As an important aside, while I do not remark here on the usefulness or veracity of critiquing discourses of reconciliation, I would insist on the importance of maintaining a critical stance.¹⁶

In journaling about my reaction to the symposium, I raised a host of questions: “Why do I feel more radical than ‘the Natives’? Why is it so important for me to hold onto my anger [about colonialism]? Am I romanticizing Native peoples? What has white guilt got to do with this if anything?” (February 2011) Upon (further) reflection, I suspect that my desire to embody and, perhaps more importantly, be seen as embodying the “good settler ally” was operative in both moments. The salience for political change of critiquing reconciliation discourses notwithstanding, it remains important to identify what was/is at stake for me in my self-righteous embrace of a more “progressive” path than others, including Indigenous people. If reconciliation can be about making white settlers feel better (Ahmed, 2004), could an overzealous attachment to critiques of reconciliation be a way for me to differentiate myself
from the average settler-ally? Mahrouse (2009) identifies a similar move by a white/Western citizen journalist to present himself as an exceptional reporter given his progressive politics: “What enabled [him] to differentiate himself from professional journalists were his ‘activist’ intentions. He believed that because he was explicitly anti-war, he was able to transcend the seduction of sensationalism” (p. 668). By claiming to see through the function of white feelings of regret, guilt or shame in un-interrogated discourses of reconciliation (i.e., to seek absolution/forgiveness and a demarcation of past from present), am I claiming an ability to “transcend the seduction” of such discourses and thereby secure an exceptional status? Writing as does Mahrouse (2009) about a context beyond North America, Heron (2007) discusses how white/Northern women struggle to be exceptional vis-à-vis other development workers:

Carol’s attempt to distance herself from the more overtly altruistic, helping/saving motivations expressed by many participants actually serves at this point to place her further up on the moral high ground in her accounting to herself. Carol, however, works her way through a number of justificatory moves, which are significant because they speak to an apparently lingering unease with the ethics of her decision to go overseas, especially in light of the racism she recognizes as inhabiting development work. (pp. 47–48)

The role of exceptionalism discourse in my own performance as a white settler woman subject is clear to me only in retrospect. By ardently critiquing the limitations of reconciliation discourse, I strive to establish myself as superior to those who embrace it. In this way, I demonstrate my desire to overcome the white guilt that has in part fueled my solidarity work. I seek to overcome white inertia/white guilt (Lewis & Mills, 2003) through establishing myself as a self-determining white settler woman—the exceptional, more politically astute ally. In reviewing Object Lessons (Wiegman, 2012), Ahmed (2012b) connects investments in “objects as part of social justice projects” to a sense of institutional precarity:

Institutional precarity is what can generate a struggle over terms: you have to struggle to reproduce the conditions of possibility for your own existence. It is possibly this background sense of precarity that is at stake when we become invested in objects as part of a social justice project: the sense that we have to become persistent if the object is to persist; that if our objects are hopes, they are fragile and depend on us for their future. (pp. 347–348)

Despite being about institutional precarity, Ahmed’s (2012b) analysis helps explain my angered investment in more progressive discourses of reconciliation. In the face of my own precarity as an activist-ally, I cling to the fragile hopes of counter-hegemonic discourses of reconciliation (and assume that effective political struggle against colonial relations depends on my efforts).
My struggle—to reproduce the conditions of possibility for my own identity as an activist, a self-determining agent of social change—is evident. As Wanda reminds us, some white women are deeply invested in their capacity to “change [colonial history], right then and there.”

I end this section with one last short reflection on my own settler anxieties. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in the early stages of designing the study, I became consumed by the fear that my political commitment to NMS would become overshadowed by an arguably more self-serving end—earning a doctorate. My decision to extend the research beyond NMS now seems to me to be in part a strategy to mitigate this possibility (by separating my research from my participation in the group). In retrospect, and notwithstanding the validity of such concerns, I recognize this fear as a sign of my own settler anxiety (Tuck & Yang, 2012). What I feared most was becoming or being seen as the “bad” settler, a fear that reveals my own good settler fantasy (and upholds a good/bad settler binary). Put differently, I was caught up in a strategy to manage my own white stigma; I did not want to be (seen as) one of those researchers who “‘builds their careers’ . . . while hiding their selfish motives by ‘cloaking what we do in good intentions’” (Kowal, 2011, p. 322). This anecdote highlights my positionality and multiple investments in the solidarity encounter, as well as the centrality I give to self-reflexivity in research and political activism. On that note, I turn briefly once more to the topic of self-reflexivity.

**Self-reflexivity Revisited**

In what follows, I draw on participant narratives to revisit both the pitfalls and promise of self-reflexivity for white settler women allies in particular. In the same vein as Smith (2013a) and Ahmed (2004), Indigenous participants like Lee valorize self-reflexivity, but divest it of too much significance and power. For Lee, solidarity occurs along a spectrum where non-Indigenous allies demonstrate (and are required to have) varying degrees of self-reflexivity about their subject position and knowledge of colonial history. The degree to which settlers recognize their status as such correlates with the profoundness and effectiveness of their solidarity work:

[White women] don’t have to call themselves settlers ever. They are. It’s sort of like saying . . . [Spadina St. in Toronto] is always going to be Ishpadinaa. You can call it Spadina if you want, but it’s Ishpadinaa. It knows itself as Ishpadinaa. . . . So they can call themselves anything they want. Dipsy-doodle. Don’t care. [Laughs] They’re settlers. Now, when they recognize that they’re settlers, their work will become more profound, and of course, more effective. And they’ll realize the goal of decolonizing that is in the interest of Indigenous people. Otherwise, they’re [just] helping us with a project.
For Lee, the white settler woman remains a settler subject irrespective of her capacity to self-reflect; she is not transformed by reflecting on her positionality, although she may well become a more effective ally (and less likely to position herself as a “helper”). In other words, the white settler woman can neither relinquish her complicit status nor dismantle colonial power structures with an enhanced understanding of her settler status, although she can, as Lee states, do more “profound” and “effective” solidarity work.

Also an Indigenous participant, Lydia notes that one’s full awareness of being a settler does not always (have to) predate one’s involvement in solidarity:

> What are we going to do, take all the allies and put them to settler-ally school, and say, “Once you graduate from being a settler-ally then you can go and be a settler-ally?” [Laughs] They should be critically reflecting on what their role is, and that would mean a good settler-ally, but they might not use that term, is what I’m getting at. They might have a better term that works for them.

Darcie, a white participant, would agree that awareness doesn’t necessarily precede solidarity work, but rather, can emerge out of it. Darcie also depicts this relationship in terms of praxis, taking us beyond (or perhaps broadening) the solidarity encounter:

> I just think [working to improve things for Indigenous peoples] would increase people’s understanding and awareness and maybe make people, particularly settlers who have been here for a couple generations or more, aware of the privilege that they have. And then I think that would make people more compassionate or more, I don’t know, just like that awareness I think really needs to happen because, like I said before, you can hear people complain: “My air conditioning is broken” and it’s like, “Really? If that’s your biggest problem, it’s a pretty good life.” But a lot of people maybe aren’t aware of that and I think if we really work to try and improve things across the board then maybe that can approach that transformative moment that we kind of need.

For both Lydia and Darcie, greater self-reflexivity about one’s settler status can be induced by solidarity work. That said, neither vision would necessarily disrupt the white settler desire for innocence: Lydia urges white settlers to strive for “good ally” status, while Darcie invokes a reform discourse that does not necessarily call for the dismantlement of colonial structures.

As discussed by Smith (2013a), self-reflexivity is fraught—the same self-examination that would expose structurally derived privilege and accountability can instead serve their evasion. This risk is evident in the narrative of Peggy, an experienced solidarity activist who has continually reexamined her white colonial privilege over the years. In the following passage, she recounts the impact that learning about her own family’s historical record has had on how she
understands her positionality vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples:

I think I used to feel a more amorphous guilt. I think it has played out in my relations with Indigenous people. I think that changed when I did my research . . . I think it’s because I didn’t know what really happened, how I was implicated, what my ancestors did. I felt guilty in those situations. When I actually did the research and found out what they did . . . “That was them, this was me.” Sorting it out a little bit more, acknowledging the history, it changed my relations with the people I’ve been trying to work with. I can fully acknowledge the situation. Before the research I thought they were exaggerating, making it up.

In one way, Peggy’s statement testifies to the value of understanding the specificities of one’s settler subject position in Canada’s colonial past and present. In another, it shows the pernicious desire to differentiate oneself from other settlers. Does Peggy unintentionally slip back into the role of liberal subject at precisely the moment when she is criticizing herself and her family (or community)? Despite (or perhaps because of) her understanding of (her) colonial history, Peggy seems to seek release from the past, a desire reflected in her declaration “that was them, this was me”—a desired impossibility, according to Ursula (Indigenous participant):

But I think it’s important to look at your degree of settlerhood, or whatever, especially for white people. There needs to be an honouring of your own history and your own...how you came here. It doesn’t just go away after that person died, like after your great-great-grandfather came over here, it doesn’t just go away. So I think that’s important to look at, your relationship to the territory which you’re on and how you came to be there, and your participation in colonialism, and your grandfather’s or great-grandfather’s participation in colonialism . . .

Peggy’s move to bracket off her family’s history from her own reveals a central risk of self-reflexivity—it can bolster the white/settler subject’s quest for autonomous status (Smith, 2013a). For a white woman to learn about colonial history and then disassociate herself from it, leaves open the possibility for the desire of proximity and the fantasy of transcendence to take hold.¹⁸

With Peggy’s final sentence (“Before the research I thought they were exaggerating, making it up.”), I am reminded of a point made by Ryah (Indigenous participant): “It’s like white people want you to prove to them something, prove to them the impacts of colonization.” In their seminal piece on the race to innocence among women, Fellows and Razack (1998) discuss the tendency of dominant group members to doubt/deny the validity of another group’s oppression: “In essence, we view other women through the lenses of our own superiority and utilize dominant explanatory frameworks to explain to ourselves the meaning of our lives” (p. 340). As
Razack (2011) and others have said, the central fantasy of white settler colonial subjectivity—its own innocence—always requires Indigenous peoples to provide proof of their subordination. This raises a crucial point—despite our concerted efforts to grapple with our subject position, as white settler women allies we remain susceptible to settler fantasies of innocence.

Ryah explains how self-reflexivity can be enlisted to understand Canadian colonial history as Western colonial history more broadly. As an Indigenous woman, she imagines that self-reflexivity would lead to a deconstruction of and shift in colonial power relations. I asked her how she would respond to being asked by a white settler, “I’m from here. I’m from Canada. That’s my history. What do you want me to do? Go back seven generations to Scotland?”

Yes, definitely, that’s what we’re talking about, is going back, knowing who you are in Canadian history. . . . Non-Indigenous people are the people who need to go back the most, because their history has led to where we are today. . . . They need to go back to their creation story, deconstruct it. You see right within that interpretation of it is the separation from nature, the dominion of man over animals, the dominion of man over women, disempowerment of women [and] how that has evolved to patriarchy, the history of witch burnings, of all this attack on women. That’s not a long history in the history of humanity . . . [and] they see it as reality now and it’s not. Because not-Native people, or white people, have so much power, if they were to deconstruct it, that would be the biggest change . . . If they were to alter their ways of thinking, that would create the most change.19

Ryah infers that for self-reflexivity to be a viable part of non-colonizing solidarity and facilitate a shift in Indigenous/non-Indigenous power relations, it must include a collective component. This is precisely what Thielen-Wilson (2012) imagines as the function of settler anticolonial agency:

To bring about the dismantling of colonial institutions, a redistribution of power and a return of land and resources to Indigenous nations. But the shift in consciousness required for genuine decolonization, hinges upon the settler’s ability to understand that he/she (individually and as a collective) does not rightfully belong here. (p. 312)

In short, self-reflexivity retains its utility for facilitating non-appropriative involvement in solidarity as long as the focus does not remain exclusively on the (white/settler) self and instead takes a double turn back towards the societal structures—state, religious, socioeconomic—that require dismantlement (Ahmed, 2004; see Chapter 7).

As critical race feminists have long pointed out, the person occupying the privileged position has a responsibility to self-educate and self-reflect on historical and ongoing practices of racial
hierarchies. Smith (2013a) reminds us that the original purpose of calls for self-reflexivity was “for individuals to recognize how they were shaped by structural forms of oppression” (p. 264). Given self-reflexivity’s individualistic turn, Smith (2013a) asks how we can “collectivise individual transformation” (p. 264). The beginnings of an answer, for her and some of the participants in this study such as Zainab, Wanda and Eve, lie not in the confessing of privilege but in the “doing” of activism/solidarity. Smith (2013a) quotes one of her “activist mentors, Judy Vaughn, ‘You don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking’” (p. 264). In short, the white/settler subject must grapple with the illegitimacy at the core of her self-constitution, but not get “stuck” in the process (Zainab’s term). She must ultimately commit to the work of dismantling white settler colonialism in Canada. This last step has never been a given, as LaRocque (2010) points out through a review of “Native-positive White constructions” in the historical records: “Even those who spoke against European cruelties or European thefts did not call for an abandonment of colonial projects” (p. 6).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explore the white settler woman subject’s attempts to negotiate a more legitimate subject status in the solidarity encounter (and beyond) by claiming the status of exceptional activist-ally. The desire for and pursuit of exceptional “good settler/ally” status reflects and sustains the settler/liberal subject’s fantasy of transcendence—the belief that it is possible (through awareness, hard work, progressive politics, friendship, etc.) to be innocent, i.e., positioned outside of colonial power relations. I argue that exceptionalism discourse ultimately upholds the good/bad settler dichotomy and the white settler/liberal fantasy of transcendence. Put differently, moves to exceptionalism are fostered by an individualistic understanding of solidarity work: it is the white settler woman subject (who thinks of herself as) entering solidarity as an autonomous individual, rather than as a member of a white settler collectivity, who can sustain the fantasy of overcoming colonial power relations.

Further, moves to exceptionalism involve/require the pursuit/attainment of proximity to the Indigenous Other. I also note the pervasive mentions in participant narratives—Indigenous and white—of white settler guilt as a central part of white settler women’s subjectivities. While I recognize the difficulty (if not impossibility) of ascertaining the degree to which white settler guilt is operating for any particular participant (without an explicit explanation by the subject
herself), I confidently reflect on the role that white settler guilt has had in my own pursuit of exceptional status.

I review two common ways in which the white settler subject claims exceptionalism—vis-à-vis the general population and/or vis-à-vis other (white) settler activists. To make such claims, which tend to cluster around the theme of settler status, the white settler subject deploys declarative statements often, though not always, in the non-performative sense discussed by Ahmed (2004). Declarations about one’s settler status and complicity in the colonial past and present, while not entirely misguided, risk remaining just that—non-performative declarations decoupled from any meaningful action that serve to reproduce the white settler/liberal subject as self-determining (Smith, 2013a). Put differently, self-congratulatory posturing about our status as good (among the best) settler allies leads to letting ourselves “off the hook”—i.e., less mindful of our position as members of a white settler collectivity. Moreover, unilateral declarations of allyship can be construed as colonial acts where the settler takes what has not yet been given or earned. Notably, participants’ descriptions of these moves to exceptionalism were not always gender or even race specific, leaving the impression that the desire for exceptional status is something pursued by settler subjects writ large, albeit in different ways and in different times. I suggest that more research—along the lines of Tuck and Yang’s (2012) on the race-specific nature of settler moves to innocence—is needed to better understand the gendered dimensions of exceptionalism.

In short, I conclude that white settler subject susceptibility to the impulse to exceptionalism seems almost unavoidable—we can attempt to position ourselves as distinct or exceptional in the very process of critiquing the non-performativity of declarative statements of other settler-activists. We bump up against the limits/risks of self-reflexivity (Smith, 2013a, 2013b). As Ahmed (2012a) warns, along with an increased awareness of one’s settler positionality can come “presumptions of our own criticality [which] can be a way of protecting ourselves from complicity” (p. 5). There is, however, another way to read Julia’s, Eve’s and other white participants’ respective critiques of the non-performativity of certain speech acts. Their critiques also indicate a willingness to trouble the desire that may be lurking behind such declarations—i.e., an impulse to prove one’s exceptional—that is, ethical or legitimate—status as a settler.

I also examine how a minority of white participants resort to the discourse of friendship to establish themselves as exceptional settler-allies. Drawing on Thompson’s (2003) work on anti-
racist subjectivities, I note a tendency among some white participants to collapse friendship into solidarity—in this scenario, for solidarity to work, proximity in the form of friendship must be attained. I end the section by suggesting the importance of distinguishing friendships (or belonging) from solidarity, the conflation of which is yet another indication of white settler/liberal subjectivity. Perhaps if white settler/liberal subjects can see political solidarity as not necessarily bound to friendship or belonging, we can disrupt the impulse to proximity and the “individualistic” self-serving/self-making processes it serves.

One step towards facilitating this is to re-conceptualize the seemingly personal desires for friendship, belonging and legitimacy for what they are—a reflection and consequence of our structural positionality as members of a white settler collectivity. In other words, we must continually remind ourselves that we remain settlers complicit in colonial relations, irrespective of our ability to foster relationships or bonds with individual Indigenous people or communities. Self-reflexivity, in this case, would propel the white settler ally to do the research and locate herself in colonialism past and present, not as either guilty or innocent, but rather as a settler whose privileged structural positioning in a settler collectivity persists regardless (Applebaum, 2010). How else might white settler women trouble our desires to be (seen as) the “good white settler ally”? Are there instances or emergent practices cited by participants that model (the road to) non-colonizing solidarity or allyship? I turn to such questions in the concluding chapter.

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1 As Smith (2013a) notes, “Essentially, the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we become different peoples in the process” (pp. 264–265).
2 Kowal (2011) clarifies what she means: “This term is predicated on the ‘post-colonial’ as a contingent process, emerging at times and in places where colonial power relations previously or usually prevail” (p. 4).
3 It is worth considering if and how this Indigenous organizer’s statement is contradictory in the sense of upholding the good/bad settler dichotomy that she also seems bent on interrogating. Does she hold open the possibility that, by “showing something different,” the white settler woman ally would no longer represent colonialism? As I mention throughout this research, Indigenous women and white women co-exist in the colonial present and share a common discursive field of meaning making, although as differently positioned subjects vis-à-vis structural power relations. As I suggest in Chapter 5, Indigenous women may well, however inadvertently, access and deploy commonly circulating discourses that reproduce the very same colonial relations in which they are structural subordinate.
4 Tuck and Yang (2012) write, “Because of the racialized flights and flows of settler colonial empire described above, settlers are diverse—there are white settlers and brown settlers, and peoples in both groups make moves to innocence that attempt to deny and deflect their own complicity in settler colonialism. When it makes sense to do so, we attend to moves of innocence enacted differently by white people and by brown and Black people” (p. 10).
5 The data does not allow me to say much more about the gendered aspects of white settler guilt, i.e., if differently gendered subjects experience different propensities for guilt. This would make for interesting future research.
6 In their edited collection With good intentions: Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal relations in colonial Canada, Nock and Haig-Brown (2006) take up the limitations of white settler good intentions in an historical context. They consider the life circumstances and complex interventions into Indigenous–white settler relations of notable colonial era Euro-Canadians who, in varying ways and degrees, flouted the norms of their times by developing and
acting upon views that “ran counter to an increasing commitment to biological racism and what came to be called social Darwinism on the part of many people of European ancestry” (p. 2).

Ahmed (2004) uses the work of Dyer (1997) and Frankenberg (1993) to lay out some of the by now well-articulated risks of critical whiteness studies as a field: the reification of whiteness into “an essential something”; the re-centring of whiteness in overall research; and a refueling of the “narcissism that elevates whiteness into a social and bodily ideal” (para. 5).

In Chapter 2, I discuss Rich’s (1979) concept of white solipsism—“the tendency to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world” (p. 299)—as it relates to my methodology.

As an Indigenous woman with “light skin,” Kellie similarly sees herself as a translator of worldviews: “I can support [Indigenous people] because I understand them. But also, because of my light skin, I can also... and because my skill, my gift is writing, communicating, I can actually explain to some white people, ‘Look, this is how we’re seeing it.’ I’m able to translate what the worldview is, to make it more understood for you who have never encountered anybody who ever thinks that way before.”

I asked all participants the following question: How necessary is it “for white women to acknowledge their status as settlers and complicity in the colonial past and present in order to engage in non-colonizing solidarity?” It is retrospectively telling (of my desire to reproduce my status as liberal subject) that I would have asked the question in this way, an indication of having been duly schooled in the confessional sessions described by Smith (2013a).

Depending on the conversational flow and familiarity factor (how well I knew each interviewee), I phrased my query about a given white participant’s understanding of her relationship with/in/to colonialism in different ways. When asking someone to locate herself in Canada’s colonial history failed to elicit much of a response or when speaking to someone with whom I had a greater familiarity, I would ask directly if she identified as a settler. It is worth noting that exceptionalism as a strategy emerged most clearly when I asked direct questions about the participant’s views on her positionality as a white settler.

The data suggests that the content of the white settler woman’s declaration might emphasize the desire to help or be friends. I suggest this as another fruitful avenue for future research.

Interestingly, as an Indigenous woman from another part of Turtle Island, Zainab feels obliged to claim settler status even as she like others ascribes limited power and meaning to such statements.

A related issue that has come up in NMS indicates the likelihood that competition between differently gendered allies would take distinct forms. In practice, NMS has remained a women-only group since our inception. Men have been welcome to stand in solidarity with women at the February 14 ceremony, but not expected to do crowd control or, barring exceptional circumstances, to speak. (Men are welcome to speak at the post-ceremonial feast.)

Indigenous men have also been included in specified roles such as food preparation and service for the feast. The role of men resurfaced in 2011. After a long consensus, we reached consensus: our aim remains to guard against patriarchal tendencies. As one member put it, “A lot of times, though, for the man it becomes about taking control. And this [day] should be about our time to honour the women. This is a time for women to get their message out. Men should respect that and not interfere.” Extrapolating from this scenario, I suggest that the patriarchal tendency to (attempt to) dominate would also operate in a mixed gender group of settler allies.

Such worries are not exclusive to self-ascribed white participants. Recall Kellie, an Indigenous woman with “light skin” who worries about being misidentified as a “white do-gooder”: “I like my hair blonde. I don’t want to be dying my hair to think that I’ll get an easier ride. I deserve to be called on my privileges. . . . But I’m afraid of being considered one of those white do-gooders who actually ends up doing more harm than good.”

A growing body of critical scholarship is concerned with how Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations are framed within mainstream reconciliation discourses. Simpson (2011), for example, argues that as reconciliation has become “institutionalized,” the risk of neutralizing Indigenous resistance has increased: “If reconciliation is focused only on residential schools rather than the broader set of relationships that generated policies, legislation and practices aimed at assimilation and political genocide, then there is a risk that reconciliation will ‘level the playing field’ in the eyes of Canadians. In the eyes of liberalism, the historical ‘wrong’ has now been ‘righted’ and further transformation is not needed, since the historic situation has been remedied” (p. 22). In Dark Threat, Razack (2004) argues that discourses of reconciliation are at risk of constituting the Indigenous subject as dysfunctional, traumatized and in need of healing (the “colonization as disease” model). Indigenous discourses of healing are at risk of being appropriated by mainstream Canadian institutions, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Despite Indigenous peoples’ insistence on how reconciliation should occur (e.g., redressing material inequality including the settlement of land reclaims), mainstream institutions and politicians use the language differently (i.e., without the intention to redress injustices). In her keynote address at a symposium, Marlene Brant Castellano said as much. The question is how to foreground Indigenous meanings and practices of reconciliation.

In this passage, Kowal (2011) is quoting her research participants, all of whom were employees at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health in Australia. She describes “the vast majority of employees [as] non-Indigenous,”
noting that “most would comfortably identify with the label ‘White anti-racist’ and its common associations with a middle-class background, tertiary education, and progressive political views” (p. 316).

18 See also my discussion in Chapter 5 of the way that this fantasy can take hold, particularly as evidenced in the narratives of white participants Dawn and Chloe.

19 See Kay Anderson (2007) for an overview of the development of humanist thought, i.e., of “people’s sense of distinction from other creatures . . . marking out a tale of change, complexity, contradiction, doubt, denial and assertiveness (and never a simple story or conviction of superiority)” (p. 5). A key development in this distinction, Anderson (2007) argues, is the belief that humans are not only different, but also separate and emancipated from “nature” and the “nonhuman.” Starting with this premise, she tasks herself with a “rethinking of the historicity of colonial racisms in Britain’s white settler colonies” (p. 2) through applying a post-humanist perspective that problematizes changing ontological notions of the “human.” Her goal is to “re-narrate” the “rise of racial determinism [‘innatism’ or biological determinism] by the mid-nineteenth century” (p. 1). She concludes that a racialized understanding of human difference emerges out of a crisis of humanism’s foundational tenet (human as separate from nature) and not as a “continuity of Enlightenment Othering” (p. 17) as was presupposed by much Foucauldian-inspired colonial discourse analysis.

20 See bell hooks (1984) and Audre Lorde (2007) for classic articulations of the work white women need to do in reflecting on their privilege.
Chapter 7
Towards Non-colonizing Solidarity

There’s a massive inequity between being Indigenous and being Canadian. And the massive inequity is just that we have no country and Canadians have our country. And the bottom line is they get to decide what happens to us and what doesn’t. That’s the nature of colonization. So that’s the massive inequity, and that’s where we begin.

—Lee (Indigenous participant)

The solidarity encounter is inescapably entrenched in the broader colonial inequalities that constitute Canadian society. In the preceding chapters, I demonstrate how political solidarity under these circumstances is a fraught endeavour. I expose the cracks and fault lines along which the reinstallation of the white settler liberal self happens/is attempted, and thus along which solidarity happens/is attempted. In particular, I explore the ways in which a deep-seated desire for legitimacy appears to undergird white settler women allies’ subjectivities, with its mutually constitutive desires for improvement/transformation, innocence and exceptionalism that are in turn expressed and operationalized through the desire for proximity. Moreover, the white settler subject’s pursuit of legitimacy, as Morgensen (2011) and others explain, requires appropriation both material and figurative, along with the negation of structural inequality or the manner in which differently positioned subjects are complicit in that inequality. Following scholars such as Thielen-Wilson (2012), I suggest that settlers can grapple with that complicity only by keeping front and centre an understanding of ourselves as subjects structurally positioned as members of a settler collectivity. While acknowledging that many (if not most) white participants do grapple with their/our historic subject position as settlers, however fleetingly and incompletely, I note a strong psychic underpinning (see Pratt, 2008 on “anti-conquest man”) to the desire for legitimacy that even the most self-aware white settler woman seems unable or unwilling to permanently give up. Where does this leave the practice of non-colonizing solidarity? How might an understanding of proximity (and distance) help settler allies to develop and engage in such practices?

Humbled by Smith’s (2013a) reminder that “there is no simple antioppression formula that we can follow” (p. 275), in this chapter, I propose a framework for attempting non-colonizing solidarity. I suggest that this framework, while not erasing colonial power imbalances, might bring us one step closer to “identifying the conditions for the production of a new kind of [non-colonizing] subject” (Razack, 1998, p. 5). I base my proposal on a synthesis of participant
narratives, which, while not entirely unproblematic, provide a “pro-lineal genealogy” (Smith, 2008) of non-colonizing solidarity. Following Ahmed (2012a), I feature Indigenous participant insights into how to move forward precisely because of their location as subjects who have been “held up”:

When we are stopped or held up by how we inhabit what we inhabit, then the terms of habitation are revealed to us. We need to rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world. In Queer Phenomenology I called for a phenomenology of “being stopped,” a description of the world from the point of view of those who do not flow into it. (p. 176)

To “rewrite the world” in this way is to bring into view the structural barriers that “remain invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions” or to those who “inhabit a category of privilege” (Ahmed, 2012a, p. 175; p. 176). I argue that Indigenous participant narratives present us with a phenomenology of the solidarity encounter such that we can begin to conceptualize political struggles and political subjects differently—and in particular, white settler women’s roles as allies in political struggle with Indigenous women.

In other words, I flesh out the contours of what might constitute non-colonizing solidarity (and the subjectivities it would produce) and the various paths we, Indigenous peoples and settlers, might collectively take to get there, even as we interact under decidedly colonial circumstances. I start and end the framework with the premise that, for the white settler woman ally, negotiating an ethical position in solidarity work is a never-ending project. In the process, I address some of the questions raised in this study: How can white settler women recognize and retain a sense of our complicity in colonial relations without capitulating to white settler guilt? What should we do alongside or beyond confronting our complicity in colonial processes and illegitimate subject status as settlers? How can we invest in solidarity in ways that keep the focus on the political project at hand—the dismantlement of settler colonial structures? In sum, how can we recognize and disrupt the desire to reproduce ourselves as autonomous liberal subjects?

In what follows, I propose that if the problem with colonial subject production is the desire for proximity (and concomitant invasiveness and creation of racial hierarchies), then the solution is distance or, more accurately, a shift into non-dominating intersubjective dynamics that produce subjects in non-hierarchical relation (see Lorde, 2007). More specifically, the white settler woman subject is called upon to identify those moments when, spurred by a deep-seated desire for legitimacy, her self-interest takes centre stage, when individualistic desires (for acceptance,
inclusion or forgiveness; for healing, empowerment or purpose) require her to “come too close” (Lee) and therefore diminish the collective political work of solidarity.

The Space of Solidarity: “Step Back, but not Out”

My framework for non-colonizing solidarity incorporates a spatialized understanding both of the problems of solidarity, and of their mitigation. I propose that theorizing the solidarity encounter in spatialized terms (as an embodied encounter taking place in space over time) facilitates the conceptualization and creation of “the conditions for the production of a new kind of subject” (Razack, 1998, p. 5).

The centrality of space to colonial encounters in general, and solidarity encounters in particular, is corroborated by scholars such as Yeğenoğlu (1998) and Ahmed (2000), who contend that modern liberal subjectivity has at its core a colonizing dynamic that rests on relations of proximity (and distance) to the Other. The solidarity encounter can be seen as a microcosm of the colonial encounter, which shares this central feature: the potential disregard and transgression of Indigenous–settler material and intersubjective boundaries (Bergland, 2000; Morgensen, 2011) and subsequent domination of socio-spatial relations within a particular terrain (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999).² The solidarity encounter can be read as a space in which Indigenous/non-Indigenous intersubjective boundaries or parameters (and their transgression) must be continuously problematized, negotiated and even guarded. Furthermore, I suggest that through attending to the colonizing moves that constitute such socio-spatial relations, settlers may well be “enticed to acquiesce in the process of our own re-making” (Thielen-Wilson, 2012, p. 312).

Indeed, the centrality of place/space, spatial metaphors and spatialized understandings of the solidarity encounter are found throughout participant narratives. Recall Lee’s assertion that solidarity is colonizing “when there’s invasion involved and the other person has to push back to get a space.” She continues, “So there’s a space between us that’s the cherished thing. . . . When you come too close and take up this space, then the cherished thing is gone” (see Chapter 4). In my reading, Lee and other Indigenous participants do not contest the intersubjective constitution of the subject, but rather point to the built-in colonizing move of colonial/liberal subjectivity (which does deny that intersubjectivity). Such an analysis does not disavow the relational aspect of subjectivity, but rather calls for a non-domineering refashioning of the settler subject.
Reminiscent of Yeğenoğlu (1998), Indigenous participants demand (and describe the beginnings of) an intersubjective relationship that sees difference without hierarchizing it.

Moreover, spatial allusions abound in Indigenous participant recommendations about the most effective role for white women in solidarity work. I contend that the abundance of such allusions speaks not only to the embodied ways in which Indigenous women (and likely men) experience the colonial encounter, but also to the importance of setting boundaries in solidarity work. While sharing a broad spatial referencing and general approach to solidarity, Indigenous participant statements also present different emphases and particular strategies for solidarity. Here is a sampling of such statements (emphases added):

They should come to us and ask us, “What do you want? What can we do to help? We want to stand behind you. We want to take direction from you.” (Lydia)

As an Indigenous woman, as an Aboriginal woman, I don’t want you to save me. I want you to stand beside me. And standing beside me does not mean that you’re there to help me. We’re there to help each other. We’re working in partnership. I think a lot of solidarity work in quotations is, “I’m going to stand beside you and never share.” (Rubina)

There were more white women, but the speakers were 100 percent Indian, if you recall that event . . . and that was okay with people, and I thought that [the white] people at that meeting . . . were really taking a backseat. They were really interested in learning. They were really interested in Native people speaking for Native people and taking leadership. They were not there to take any kind of leadership role. They were there really clearly as support people at that time, and that was fine with me. (Zainab)

An ally could create the space through your power, like, “Okay, I got this room here. I’m affiliated with this university. . . . Let’s create a space where we can organically come up with the ideas of what we’re going to do, because we’ve [white people] controlled everything historically”—the narrative of this story—“We’ll just take a backseat here and learn from you, because actually you have a lot to say that’s gonna change this.” (Ryah)

Importantly, although each passage describes in slightly different terms how we as white settler women should position ourselves in relation to Indigenous women’s struggles, every passage also denotes an interest on the part of Indigenous women for white women to remain present.

As I highlight in Chapter 4, despite the challenges, the Indigenous participants in this study are open to working with white settler women; they also mention that the relatively low or dwindling numbers of Indigenous women in any mixed group (such as NMS) could be due to several factors, including the financial constraints many Indigenous women face. Admittedly,
given the parameters of my study, this is a self-selected group whose amenable approach to solidarity work is not shared by all Indigenous women (it would be patronizing to assume a shared position were possible). For example, several participants mention other Indigenous people they know who will not work with white women (or men). Several Indigenous participants also emphasize that lack of trust would keep them and other Indigenous women they know from working in a predominantly white group. And others, as I discuss in Chapter 5, admit to needing white settler women allies, not necessarily wanting them. All told, however, I find Ardra’s take on the matter to be fairly representative of Indigenous participants in this study and also consistent with my experience of solidarity work:

Well, I just think that groups should be mixed because we all live in this world together and I’m never going to be a believer of segregation. . . . We are at a crucial time in terms of the planet environmentally and that isn’t going to be solved unless people work together. . . . There may have been a time where I was… I chose to work only with [one category of women] . . . That doesn’t make it an exclusive strategy. It may just be a temporary, necessary phase or a necessary moment in time, but at the end of the day people are going to have to work together so groups are going to have to be mixed I think. We just don’t have the numbers to do it on our own anyways.

Ardra’s position depicts Indigenous women as politically discerning and eminently practical, as does Danielle’s when she says, “We’re in this together. We breathe the same air, we drink the same water, we eat the same food.”

I provide two more examples to illustrate the view of many Indigenous participants that “we’re in this together.” First, I draw on Lee, who reproaches those white women who, for fear of appropriation, would not take up the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women:

Lee: [ Appropriation] involves stealing. So if you’re working on an issue to stop someone from getting killed, where’s the theft? That’s what I want to know. What the fuck is being stolen—those guys’ right to kill? And isn’t that the point? It’s the white boys that are killing us that you’re stealing from, not me.

Carol Lynne: What about the classic critique that you’re speaking for Indigenous women.

Lee: No, you’re not. You’re speaking for yourself. Don’t try to speak for me. Yeah, never speak for me. “This is my issue, I’m a white woman, and I don’t want guys to go killing Indian women. This is my issue.” [. . .] When you start speaking for me, that’s ridiculous. It’s comic. It’s a white woman’s issue. It’s a woman’s issue. So every woman should be up there speaking against it.
Here, Lee makes explicit the importance that gender often makes to the solidarity encounter under examination in this study. Indigenous women and white women are (or should be) brought together because of a common political project as women. When asked about Indigenous women’s roles as allies in the struggles of other women, Wanda states,

> Well, I think what we have to realize is that we are all women. We’re definitely allies because we are women. So there’s the fight that all women have, and then there’s the fight that Indigenous women have, and there’s the fight that Black women have. So we all fight as women. Equality, we fight for that.

In her answer, Wanda also argues for the importance of women working together against violence, and provides a nuanced sense of how such solidarity work can be conceptualized.

However, Indigenous women demand in no uncertain terms how solidarity should and should not happen. The aforementioned spatialized references, as I flesh out below, contain a host of directives for how white women should be present and engage respectfully, ethically and meaningfully in solidarity work. In other words, they suggest some ways in which the white settler/liberal subject can disrupt the impulse to reproduce itself as innocent and autonomous, i.e., as beyond the reach of power relations.

What emerges above all is the familiar demand for white women to refrain from taking over, from controlling or dominating the solidarity space in any manner of ways. Several white participants appear to ascribe to both this message and the metaphor with which it is conveyed. Eve, for example, echoes Lydia in conceptualizing her role as an ally in terms of taking direction:

> So shutting up is one [way to deal with white privilege], obviously. It’s having compassion, listening, being open. It’s trying to build the trust and solidarity. It’s trying to do all of that kind of work. . . . It includes taking direction. It includes not necessarily leading. It includes being anti-vanguard, not vanguard. It includes all that kind of stuff.

Alicia, another white settler ally, also understands the solidarity encounter in terms of space:

> The identity politics around being a white woman have been an issue for me. I’ve struggled a lot with my place. “What is my place? Should I be doing this? What do I know? I didn’t grow up on a reserve. Do I have a right to have an opinion on these things? These folks know best. I don’t know what I’m talking about.” There’ve been a lot of issues and things like that.
Throughout this study, in fact, I suggest that white women allies varyingly struggle with their “place” in solidarity work.

Gabriela is among those Indigenous participants who most frequently invoke the spatiality of the encounter—and the consequent need for boundary-setting. She gives similar directives about the appropriate position for white women allies to assume in relation to Indigenous women in the solidarity encounter: “It’s really important [as a white ally] to step back rather than step forward . . . when the struggle is around Aboriginal issues. So at the core of all of it should be Aboriginal people who are coming forward. You work together, but it’s like a boundary thing.” Despite her rather scathing critiques of “needy do-gooder” behaviour (see Chapter 4), Gabriela believes that ethical relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—women and men—can and do occur. She describes the solidarity encounter as “a liminal space” replete with possibilities:

Again, using the “space” word here—creating a space to negotiate understandings, I guess, is kind of one way to say it. To negotiate understandings that really reflect an understanding of Aboriginal ways of being in the world and the major issues that we’re dealing with, and that if we can have partners in a coalition, we’re moving something forward. And it wasn’t easy. It’s never easy, that kind of space, to create, because of all that everybody brings to it. I always look at it as a little place of tension and conflict. There’s a word for that—liminal, liminal space, right?—which has a possibility of going in a really positive way or a negative one. It depends on what you do with it.

Gabriela’s use of the term liminality resonates with how it is used in cultural studies “to refer to border zones and peripheries of dominant discourses, where the contestation of cultural symbols takes place” (Calhoun, 2002). She calls on subjects to negotiate meanings in the solidarity encounter “that really reflect an understanding of Aboriginal ways of being in the world and the major issues that we’re dealing with.” On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter 5, Gabriela’s evocation of “Aboriginal ways of being in the world” is potentially risky; it could result in the reification of Indigeneity and Indigenous subjects as trans-historical, pre-discursive subjects. Further, a focus on Aboriginal cultural difference—rather than on the structural power differences with which Indigenous peoples contend—risks setting in motion the white desire for proximity to the Other and all that that implies. On the other hand, Gabriela mentions the importance of negotiating meanings that prioritize “the major issues that we’re dealing with.” Recall LaRocque’s (2010) argument that “the Native emphasis on cultural difference reflects a strategic decolonizing response to the problem of Western intellectual dominance” (p. 138), that
is, an act of resistance (see also Weaver, 1997). Read in this light, Gabriela’s passage is a comment on political struggle: a directive for how (white) settler allies can cede space to Indigenous knowledge claims and political choices, which may include cultural reclamation as a resistance strategy.

Gabriela again uses a spatialized metaphor to respond to questions about white allyship in general and No More Silence (NMS) in particular.5 (I want to recall here my personal stake in her answer given NMS’s protracted discussion about whether or how to continue to organize Toronto’s February 14 vigil.) Much like Ryah (above), she calls on white women to assist in cultivating Indigenous-led spaces of dialogue:

[Allies] should step back, but not out. I think that’s the metaphor that works. Not step out of the picture, but step back. What [NMS members] do, what you did do, you have some key people who are connected, who are Indigenous people who you know in the community. Even if those people are not in your coalition, if those are people you’ve developed a relationship with, it’s not just a front. It’s saying, “What we want to do is we want to help here. We don’t have a lot of Aboriginal people right now, but we’re still doing this. Will you play these parts and be the people who come forward?”

Like most Indigenous participants, Gabriela would not preclude a mostly white group from organizing around this issue provided certain conditions are met. She suggests “stepping back, but not out” as a metaphor for how members of any primarily white group could respectfully position themselves in the solidarity encounter.6 Also using a spatialized metaphor, Wanda reminds white women of their responsibility as settlers to resist imposing their own (self-serving/self-making) agendas in doing solidarity work with Indigenous women:

Then there’s the ones that I consider to be the allies, [those] are the ones that just let us be. . . . When I look at No More Silence, you guys don’t make a decision unless you come to the Native women who are involved. I mean, you do. . . . but you don’t have your agenda. So I guess an ally is someone who stands with me, beside me, but doesn’t try to change me, and that I don’t have to defend myself to them all the time, and is going to be there just to hold me up when I can’t hold myself up. (emphasis added)

Wanda alludes to the fact that white settler agendas can take myriad forms and remain impervious to “unsettlement” (Regan, 2010) despite concerted efforts by settlers themselves to disrupt those agendas.

What would it mean to “step back, but not out”? Can non-invasive forms of ally investment in solidarity transpire without the reification of Indigenous difference and therefore of
Indigenous/non-Indigenous hierarchical relations? How can white settler women allies comprehend our “place”—to perform a supportive, yet accountable and agentic role in the solidarity encounter? How do we invest in solidarity wholly, as Rubina says, without kick-starting the desire for proximity and the reproduction of the innocent, autonomous settler self? Put differently, how can white settler women fully commit to solidarity work without invasion, without transgressing the “sacred space” between subjects? How might we curb the self-serving aspects of the impulse to solidarity, the desire “to go and do something” (Heron, 2007, p. 39)?

**Solidarity at a distance**

In this chapter, I elaborate on the glimpses provided in participant narratives of how non-colonizing (white settler women ally) subjectivities could be fashioned in the solidarity encounter, even as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples interact under decidedly colonial circumstances. Indigenous participants in particular suggest a reorientation of white settler women allies in the space of the solidarity encounter, a reorientation that would bring collective white settler privilege—that which is hidden or forever receding from view—(back) into view (Ahmed, 2012a). More specifically, stepping back would involve pause and attentiveness to Indigenous perspectives on the recurring invasiveness of many of our performances as white settler women ally subjects. In what follows, I draw critically on these perspectives to discuss more precisely how white settler women allies could “step back, but not out.” The modalities on offer embrace relationality while delineating certain (intersubjective) boundaries. I argue that this requires striking a certain balance between proximity (too much of the wrong kind of investment on individualistic terms) and distance (too little or no investment at all), what Lee might call resorting to “any colonial excuse not to do something.” Perhaps Pat Parker’s (1990) eloquent summation of the balance that must be struck when negotiating racialized power differences is equally apropos for negotiating colonial power differences: “The first thing you do is to forget that I’m Black. Second, you must never forget that I’m Black” (p. 297). I begin with the merits of exercising white ally agency through distance.

As I discuss below in the section “The fraught promise of self-reflexivity,” Indigenous participants call on white women to acquire a knowledge of colonialism in its historical and ongoing forms as a way to (begin to) grapple with their structural position as members of a white settler collectivity (see also Chapter 6). Certainly part of this education might involve access to Indigenous groups, communities and cultural events. However, as I argue in Chapters
4 and 5, the white settler woman as autonomous liberal subject can be reproduced when her desire for proximity proceeds unimpeded (e.g., when seeking acceptance by “the Native community” becomes the foremost goal). In Danielle’s opinion, the common assumption that potential allies should seek the friendship or acceptance of Indigenous people or communities constitutes the “wrong reason” for involvement in solidarity: “No, you don’t [have to become friends]. . . . I think an ally is that person that isn’t in conflict of interest, and once you take that emotional investment, then you’re in conflict. Why would you [try to be/come Indigenous]? Why would you be something you’re not? You can’t.” Instead, Danielle calls on allies not to “lose their objectivity.” Having observed situations in which she felt white settler women sought to appropriate activist spaces (a transgression of Indigenous–settler boundaries), Indigenous participant Wanda says,

I think [a non-Native ally has] to understand the plight. I don’t think you have to [experience] what it is. What [some white women] are saying is you almost have to become Native to become involved in the Native community. And to me, that’s wrong, because we’re fighting the exact opposite of that in our lives, because non-Native people get involved. When we had woman’s circles, when we first started, we decided that only Native women could go because what we found when non-Native women came, when white women came, they took over.

Some white participants seem to recognize, however fleetingly, their desires for proximity, as when Evelyn describes the need to maintain boundaries between her and the Indigenous people with whom she is engaged in solidarity: “I think I need to prove myself. I think I need to step up my involvement and actually have some boundaries around that too: recognizing that I do have to make my own living . . . I have to watch over my health because I know that some of those people are just burning themselves out.” The question remains as to how a white settler woman ally would move from recognizing that desire for proximity in whatever form (e.g., a desire for approval, acceptance, forgiveness, healing, etc.) to actually disrupting it.

Once the white settler woman ally’s desire for proximity takes hold and her personal issues take centre stage, she becomes, in Danielle’s framing, entangled in a “conflict of interest” and a less effective ally. Referring to the same problematic desire for proximity, Belinda goes further to provide a mechanism for its resolution—creating distance, or what she calls being neutral:

It’s important to have an outsider or a neutral person, if they can be neutral. If they don’t get their stuff confused with our stuff; if they just know what their place or role is, those are the most effective allies because they don’t get pulled into all the conflict. They don’t
get confused. They know what’s really playing out here; they know the colonial history. . . . They have to have that piece, and uh, not to take things so personally eh?  

Belinda defines the neutral white settler ally as someone who does not “get pulled into all the conflict,” that is, someone who maintains a particular kind of intersubjective distance or boundary. For Belinda, as for Danielle, it is a problem when white settler women allies forget “their place or role” in Indigenous political struggles and “take things personally.” Belinda’s intricate portrait of white ally neutrality links the capacity “not to take things so personally” with the wherewithal to acquire a knowledge of colonial history and the ability to listen or observe. This also reminds me of what Wanda calls the ability to “just let us be” (see above). Extrapolating from these messages, I suggest that white settler women are more effective allies when they not only understand colonial history (including the damage wrought to the fabric of Indigenous nations), but also their positioning in that history as settler subjects. This would likely require constant vigilance and reorientation on the white settler woman ally’s part. 

Belinda provides a specific example of how white settler allies “get confused” and “get pulled into the conflict” that warrants mention. She cites the colonially derived struggle between Christians and Traditionalists that goes on in some Indigenous communities (and by extension in solidarity circles): “But how do you be an ally in that? Well, definitely you can’t take sides and say Christians are right or Traditionalists are right. Yeah, just don’t get pulled into it. I don’t know, it’s challenging to be a neutral party.” She goes on to say that white settlers who “don’t know their place” prolong such conflicts and “perpetuate” division. Belinda’s example highlights the tendency of some participant narratives—Indigenous and white—to re-centre Indigenous (cultural) difference as opposed to structural oppression, even when struggling with how to disrupt colonial relations. (Recall Gabriela’s statement about Aboriginal ways of knowing.) At the same time, I suggest that the reorientation she and others call for just might lead to greater awareness about the risk of centring Indigenous difference (see Chapter 5). The reorientation I call for in this framework for non-colonizing solidarity—while not refuting the existence of cultural difference, revitalization or resurgence, or their import to political struggle—insists that our collective focus turn away from difference understood in terms of culture and towards difference understood in terms of structural power relations. That is, our focus should always return to settler dominance and the anticolonial political project.
As I state repeatedly, white participants do struggle with their “place” in solidarity work, some even speaking of the need to negotiate the kinds of “internal” conflicts mentioned by Belinda. In the following passage, Peggy recounts not wanting to be drawn into such conflicts. In the process, she echoes other participants’ calls for distance or boundary maintenance between Indigenous women and white settler women. Despite knowing the importance of developing a “tough skin,” however, Peggy struggles to navigate the terrain of solidarity:

Some of the most radical [Native] people wouldn’t have anything to do with me, even if I wanted to work with them; I’m not radical enough in their eyes. Where do you find your place? Who you can ally with? What can you most productively do, who do you listen to? . . . You have to be clear at what you’re doing and why. You need a tough skin. There’s also that phenomenon that you see amongst oppressed people particularly, which is this viciousness to each other. We [non-Native people] become embroiled in that dynamic, and you can be used in that way to attack somebody else or get caught up in it. Then what?

Peggy’s message (“you need a tough skin”) is a prescription for ameliorating white settler desires for proximity. Yet, by intimating that viciousness is a “phenomenon that you see amongst oppressed people particularly,” could she inadvertently be reproducing the framework of hierarchical difference? Taken together, the passages of Belinda and Peggy suggest it is equally important that we engage in a persistent examination of the ways in which difference rather than dominance remains the framework for much political solidarity work (Fellows & Razack, 1994).

For these Indigenous women, effective ally support comes by way of boundary- or parameter-setting, which is reflected—and effected—in the ability to take a neutral or objective stance, but importantly, a stance nonetheless. Put more colloquially, effective allyship involves not confusing “their stuff” with “our stuff”—that is, establishing mechanisms that will prevent the acts of appropriation and domination (of ideas, political struggle, land and resources) that define the colonial encounter. In making the case for neutrality, objectivity and other distancing techniques, these participants provide a (partial) corrective for the misguided focus on the (white) settler self in the solidarity encounter. In a sense, they suggest that the settler subject position can be positively brought to bear on subjective investments in political struggle. To do so would require that the white settler woman see herself as such—a member of a privileged collectivity and not an autonomous, self-determining actor who is free to access, “know,” “help” or “become” the Other. Put differently, white settler women must learn to recognize the ways in
which they/we are interpellated in the colonial project, the particular moments when they/we feel the need to “do good.” Taking seriously Indigenous directives regarding the establishment of boundaries—or, in Ahmed’s (2012a) terms, heeding Indigenous women’s descriptions of the colonial “wall” that they “come up against” (p. 175)\(^{10}\)—might just enable white settler women to invest in solidarity encounters without turning these encounters into self-servicing occasions for liberal subject formation.

I suggest that conceptualizing solidarity encounters (and ally investments therein) in terms of proximity and distance creates fruitful ground for the production of non-colonizing subjectivities. On the other hand, I do not claim that such boundary-setting would eradicate white settler desires for proximity. I do suggest, however, that recognizing the need for distance has the potential to disrupt, however temporarily, the expression of such desires and, by extension, forestall the reproduction of the white settler/liberal subject.

**Curbing the impulse to solidarity: the mitigation of healing discourse**

White settler women’s interventions in solidarity work can often assume patronizing proportions and work to reinstall the autonomous liberal subject who is endowed with the capacity to rescue or intervene on the Other’s behalf (see especially Chapter 4). The risk of white settler ally domination is ever-present. How might this particular aspect of the impulse to solidarity be mitigated? In what follows, I provide a brief overview of how hegemonic healing discourses can refuel white settler women’s desires for proximity and reproduce subjects in hierarchical colonial relation—the emotional (wounded) Indigenous woman and the rational (superior) white woman helper. Drawing on Dian Million (2013) and selected participant narratives, I then suggest how healing discourses might be negotiated through the notion of boundaries.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Indigenous women are decidedly not immune from deploying the hegemonic discourses in which they are interpellated. Take Ursula and Teresa, who respectively describe the emotional difficulty of organizing around missing and murdered Indigenous women:

> When I go to the [NMS] rally, they just start crying. I can’t spend my...I can’t drain my energy in that group, because that’s all I would think about. It would consume me. So it’s good to have [white] women who can do that work. Like I said, who keep checking in, for sure, but who can lend their energy to the really hard stuff like that, the white women, because oftentimes Native women, it’s too close to home for them. (Ursula)
I joined that listserv for her website and it was all these women. They may have had dreams or visions about our sisters who had gone missing, but they were doing research. And honestly, I couldn’t last on that list for longer than two years, because I wasn’t strong enough at that time to see those and hear those stories. (Teresa)

Danielle describes a similar scenario:

There are times when we as the Indigenous people are too close to speak, to touch the fire. . . . It’s hard to touch the fire, because it touches you here [in your heart]. You’ve got to go to your core and you experience that, and it’s painful sometimes. [Patricia] Monture used to call it a boundary warrior: somebody who has to live in both worlds to interpret the one world for the other.

Even as she calls attention to hierarchical colonial relations and settlers’ responsibility to learn about colonial history (and engage other settlers in that process), Danielle’s narrative risks reinforcing dominant discourses of Indigenous women as wounded and emotionally fragile instead of structurally oppressed and politically strong subjects. In this final example, I discuss NMS. Soon after the group’s founding, we noted the emotional, psychical, spiritual, and physical toll—at both the individual and collective levels—of our work around missing and murdered Indigenous women. We also noted for the public record that this work is “particularly difficult for Indigenous women, who bear an unequal burden of the hurt, sorrow, and trauma inflicted by colonialism” (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012, p. 46). The idea that structurally marginalized groups bear the brunt of political struggle (or bear it differently) is a feminist idea stemming at least as far back as the Combahee River Collective’s seminal statement (1997). However, given the hegemony of healing discourses that position Indigenous women as emotionally damaged subjects needing help, our stance risks repositioning white settler women as rational subjects able to help more damaged Indigenous subjects.

The misuse of healing discourses (resulting in the production of the traumatized Indigenous subject) has been taken up by Million (2013). Positioning herself as a Tanana Athabascan woman, she contextualizes the recent uptake of “the therapeutic language of trauma” by both Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada to discuss “‘the Indian problem,’ the euphemism for Canadian colonialism’s systemic violence” (p. 81), and the intergenerational effects of residential schools through the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008. Million (2013) provides a historicized account of how a healing discourse in relation to Indigenous peoples emerged globally out of a post-World War II liberal human rights
framework. She summarizes the risks and possibilities of Indigenous peoples’ foray into this “affective discursive space” (Million, 2013, p. 78), identifying the major risk as follows:

While Canada bypassed or ignored the substantive Indigenous political empowerment called for in the RCAP report, Truth and Reconciliation reaffirms the people’s systemic inequality and endemic social suffering as pathology, a wound that is solely an outcome of past colonial policies. This is a complex move, where healing encompasses Canada’s dialogue with Indigenous peoples, moving the focus from one of political self-determination to one where self-determination becomes intertwined with state-determined biopolitical programs for emotional and psychological self-care informed by trauma. (p. 6)

In this scenario, the reinstallation of Indigenous (cultural) difference takes a particular form: the healing of individual Indigenous women, men and children becomes divorced from collective struggles for Indigenous self-determination. Applied to the solidarity encounter, Million’s (2013) analysis reveals the risk that white settler women, when reading Indigenous women as the “wounded” subjects of this discursive landscape, would default to their historically produced subject position of “helper.”

Also relevant to this study, Million (2013) describes alternative conceptualizations of healing—individuals, communities and nations—that emerge out of Indigenous women’s praxis. She devotes significant energy to “contrast the human development vision of healing with that of Indigenous women’s activism in Canada, a movement that presents a sense of community wellness that goes beyond trauma” (p. 81). NMS’s decision to implement “a decolonizing politics of collective care” can be read in this light (D’Arcangelis & Huntley, 2012). Our intent was to re-politicize the caretaking aspects of our work and resist the false dichotomization of emotion (caretaking) and rationality (political action) (Combahee, 1997; Hanisch, 2006). To counter the specific risks of caretaking in a colonial context (its paternalistic, appropriative potential), however, we stressed an equally important second guiding principle: an “anticolonial imperative,” which insists on centring the leadership of Indigenous women and recognizing the white settler status and privilege of the allies in the group.

A few participants in this study uphold a similar approach to caretaking, which would integrate emotional and political labor while striking a balance between colonizing forms of caretaking and the re-dichotomizing of emotion and rationality. They suggest a re-conceptualization of healing or caretaking work that could enhance political struggle while mitigating the invasive tendencies of the white settler impulse to solidarity (see Chapter 4). First, there is the allocation
of specific spaces for white women allies to grapple emotionally with their position as settlers, thereby safeguarding solidarity encounters as spaces where the collective concerns of Indigenous women (and men) are not “hijacked” (Kellie). Teresa’s thinking on the matter is illustrative:

We understand that that’s a reason why many Western women are coming to the table. . . . But when it comes time to organizing a National Day of Action, or something that’s obviously giving precedence to an Indigenous cause, like there’s a direct mandate and it’s not necessarily for giving room, time or space for Western healing at that table.

As an Indigenous participant, Teresa calls for the establishment of parameters around when, how and where healing work is done, and by whom. Admittedly, this may not trigger a radical grappling by white women of their illegitimate status as white settlers. However, enacting such boundaries would advance the de-centring of the individualistic white settler self and the re-centring of Indigenous peoples’ collective political concerns in the solidarity encounter.

Indigenous women also advise white settler women allies to “just let people cry . . . [and] not be panicky and jittery or run for the Kleenex box” (Belinda)—again, an invitation to retain a certain intersubjective distance in the solidarity encounter. In short, as white settler women we must curb the overzealous (patronizing) impulse to comfort/help/heal Indigenous women. Lee seconds Belinda’s point:

To be well, to be healed is to be entitled to express. Now, someone gets triggered . . . All you need to ask is, “Are you okay” and “Do you need something?” . . . It’s in the moment that you take care of stuff like that. I think we need to take care of each other as much as we can without trying to be therapists. . . . It’s part of the whole invasiveness that goes with being part of the colonial country, and that somehow you’re responsible, too. Part of the patriarchy. That women are responsible for somebody else’s well-being is part of the patriarchy. And then the colonial thing gets you invading.

Alluding to the spatialized nature of the solidarity encounter, both metaphorical and literal, Lee reminds us of how gender and race interlock to produce white settler woman subjectivity: in the contemporary (white) settler colonial context, white settler women will feel compelled to help Indigenous women and must thwart that impulse. Million (2013) provides one possible path for achieving this, which involves re-politicizing healing discourse and culture talk more generally. As Million (2013) highlights, “culture” and its imagined therapeutic effects in the contemporary healing ethos are easily depoliticized; therefore, instead of suturing it to “individuals/community
therapeutic practice,” culture (and by extension, healing) must be re-imaginable “as relational practices that inform governments, ways of living in places” (p. 116).

**The fraught promise of self-reflexivity**

How can we as white settler women allies disrupt our individualistic needs (e.g., desires to be accepted by Indigenous communities and/or to attain the status of “good” settler) and stop them from taking precedence over the political needs of Indigenous women? How might we strike the right balance between too much (of the wrong kind of) and too little engagement—whether in emotional/psychological, spiritual, intellectual or material terms? Or, as Thielen-Wilson (2012) might ask, how can “settlers too be enticed to acquiesce in the process of our own re-making, an ‘ontological revolution’ which aims to ‘get rid of the settler problem’” (p. 312).\(^12\)

In offering Guswenta as a model for equitable Indigenous/non-Indigenous social and political relations, Indigenous participant Rubina implies the value of self-reflexivity for all settlers in and beyond the solidarity encounter:

Guswenta means that we walk beside each other. We travel the same road. When people say, “It shouldn’t be about the settler,” I’m like, “but Paulo Freire says you can’t deal with oppression unless the oppressor also understands and decolonizes.” So how can it not be about the settler as well, as problematic as that may be for some [Indigenous people in particular]?

Rubina’s passage reminds us that self-reflexivity is a fraught technique for grappling with one’s privilege, and raises this paradox: How can engaging in political solidarity be about the settler and not about the settler at the same time? And what role should self-reflexivity have in this process? Can it be enlisted in the formation of a non-dominating subjectivity that respects intersubjective boundaries in the ways described by Indigenous participants? What sort of self-reflexivity would assist white women settlers in assuming our responsibility to tackle colonial inequities while not “taking things personally”? How could self-reflexivity help us to “check” our power and privilege (Eve), to curb our invasive, appropriative, self-serving/self-making behaviours that create challenges and sustain tensions in the solidarity encounter? How could self-reflexivity be mobilized as part of a settler praxis that disrupts, rather than reproduces the autonomous liberal subject imagined as capable of transcending structural power inequalities? How could it lead to “the shift in consciousness required for genuine decolonization, [which] hinges upon the settler’s ability to understand that he/she (individually and as a collective) does not rightfully belong here” on this land (Thielen-Wilson, 2012, p. 312, emphasis added)?
There are various conceptualizations in participant narratives of what could be called self-reflexivity, all of which suggest in distinct ways that self-reflexivity is a necessary—though partial—element of the perpetual task of negotiating an ethical position as a settler in a colonial system. I highlight those narratives in which self-reflexivity is depicted neither as an act per se nor as a guarantee for achieving non-colonizing solidarity, but rather as a potentially radical aspect of a broader non-colonizing framework/process. Self-reflexivity in these narratives is more akin to critical analysis (rather than unadulterated self-discovery), which when combined with self-reflection can assist the ally in being responsible and accountable as a member of the white settler collectivity to dismantle colonial structures. I use the term radical in this sense: to denote the fundamental structural change on whose behalf self-reflexivity is or should be enlisted. Thielen-Wilson (2012) puts it well: “Settlers cannot change who we are—that is, we cannot begin to engage in human behaviour towards the other—without first recognizing and addressing how land (and its usurpation justified by a rational desire for accumulation) is central to white settler collective identity” (p. 312). What I call radical or critical self-reflexivity is thus comparable to the autoethnographic notion of self-reflexivity as methodology (see Chapter 2); both require an examination of our subjectivities as a window into the operation and potential alteration of societal structures in which we are fully ensconced and implicated. I submit that we perform self-reflexivity as a “double turn,” as Ahmed (2004) proposes in her analysis of whiteness studies:

Whiteness studies should involve at least a double turn: to turn towards whiteness is to turn towards and away from those bodies who have been afforded agency and mobility by such privilege. In other words, the task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others. This “double turn” is not sufficient, but it clears some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of work. We don’t know, as yet, what such conditions might be, or whether we are even up to the task of recognizing them. (para. 59)

Building on Ahmed (2004), I hold open the possibility that a “double turn” in the white settler/liberal subject’s self-reflexive process might “clear some ground, upon which the work of exposing [white settler colonialism] might provide the conditions for another kind of work” (para. 59) and hence “the production of a new kind of subject” (Razack, 1998, p. 5). In Smith’s (2013a) words, it may well allow us to “think not only beyond privilege, but beyond the sense of self that claims privilege, [and thereby] open ourselves to new possibilities that we cannot
imagine now for the future” (p. 278). A double turn in self-reflexivity promises to see both the trees and/in the forest—to hold in tension the individual and/in the collective—and thereby to keep in view the white settler woman ally as a member of a privileged collectivity.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis, I examine the problem/paradox of solidarity in the “colonial present” (Gregory, 2004) between Indigenous women and white women in a contemporary Canadian context. I conclude that political solidarity under such circumstances remains fraught. Honing in on intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter, I map the myriad ways in which the reinstallation of the white settler liberal self happens/is attempted. More specifically, I signal the existence of a deep-seated desire for legitimacy that appears to undergird white settler women allies’ subjectivities as they engage in solidarity work. This liberal/colonial desire is expressed as and operationalized through the desire for proximity, which is in turn imbued with the mutually constitutive desires for improvement/transformation, innocence and exceptionalism. I also highlight that the settler pursuit of legitimacy requires material and figurative appropriation along with the negation of structural inequality or the manner in which differently positioned subjects are complicit in that inequality. At the same time, I underscore the fact that white participants (including myself) do grapple with our historical positionality as settler subjects, however predisposed to imagining ourselves as autonomous liberal subjects and thus pursuing proximity by default. I return to a key point, however—the tenacity of the settler/liberal subject’s desire for legitimacy is such that even the most self-aware white settler woman seems unable or unwilling to permanently give it up.

Above all, in this study I carefully detail the pernicious operation of liberal/colonial subjectivity in the space of the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women. This means demonstrating the often subtle, yet potent and manifold manifestations of the white settler woman ally’s desires for proximity to the Indigenous woman Other—to achieve acceptance, inclusion, forgiveness or validation; to be healed, empowered, or given purpose; to access (and possibly appropriate) Indigenous cultural difference; and to learn or be challenged. In this way, I point to the moments of white settler woman subject reconstitution that most require our vigilance. Moreover, I reveal the specifically gendered ways in which these colonial dynamics can unfold in solidarity work, perhaps best encapsulated in the phrase the “impulse to solidarity.” Here, the constitutive underside of the white settler woman’s desire to help is made
visible—the desire to be helped by the Indigenous woman Other, that is, to be provided the means through which to accomplish legitimate settler subject status as the innocent/superior helper of the less fortunate/inferior Other. (In the process, I raise a question: Is a unidirectional understanding of solidarity on the part of the white woman ally subject paradoxically facilitated in these moments?) What some Indigenous women call white women’s “neediness,” I reinterpret as a manifestation of the liberal/colonial subject’s desire for legitimacy, a desire which in turn demands proximity to Indigenous women for its (impossible) resolution.

I also offer a broad framework for re-conceptualizing political solidarity and re-imagining settler subjectivities in non-colonizing ways. It rests on reconfiguring intersubjective boundaries among subjects in the solidarity encounter, and hence on reconfiguring white settler women’s subjectivities. Based on Indigenous participant narratives in particular, my framework “gestures toward a beyond the colonial order” (Smith, 2013a, p. 374) even as it remains constrained by a colonial discursive context (e.g., the hegemony of healing discourses). Following Smith (2013a), I read participant insights into how to thwart the white liberal/colonial impulse to proximity in light of, but not reduced to colonial terms (p. 274).

If one starts with the premise that the problem with colonial subject production is the desire for proximity, then the solution is distance—more accurately, a shift into non-dominating intersubjective dynamics that produce subjects in non-hierarchical relation, where power differences are neither created nor sustained. In other words, this shift requires the reconfiguration of boundaries—material, discursive and hence intersubjective—in the solidarity encounter. And so it begins with disrupting the white settler woman ally’s impulse to solidarity, the kick-start of that subject’s quest for legitimate (autonomous and hence good/innocent) status.

I also propose a circumscribed role for self-reflexivity in achieving this shift and for engaging in the perpetual task of negotiating one’s settler status. Self-reflexivity as critical analysis, rather than unadulterated self-discovery, would assist white settler women allies to keep in full view our structural positionality as members of a white settler collectivity.13 To accomplish this, settler self-reflexive processes must take a “double turn” (Ahmed, 2004), moving towards and away from the Self in continual succession. This mode of self-reflexivity could conceivably disrupt the impulse to solidarity (and the liberal self-making processes it serves). In other words,
a critical mode of self-reflexivity could assist the white settler subject in heeding Indigenous participants’ calls for boundary maintenance in the solidarity encounter.

I conclude with a final overview of what non-colonizing solidarity might look like in practice. As white settler women we must curb our complexly layered impulse to solidarity, which means recognizing and disrupting the co-constituted desires to “help” and “be helped” that Indigenous women find invasive. More concretely, we must interrogate any exaggerated sense of entitlement we may have to “do/be good.” We must question the right (we may think we have) of unfettered access to Indigenous spaces, our capacity to “know” the Other and “fix” things and perhaps above all, our ability to claim the status of exceptional (read autonomous) “good settler” who has earned an exemption from complicity in colonial relations. In short, white settler women allies are called upon to identify those moments when our self-interest takes centre stage. We must learn to recognize our deep-seated desire for legitimacy as arising in large part out of our structural positionality. Acknowledging the roots of this desire might help us curb the pursuit of proximity (for acceptance, inclusion and/or forgiveness; healing, empowerment or purpose) that leads us to transgress boundaries and diminish the collective political work of solidarity. All of this rests on continually reminding ourselves (and other white settler women in particular) of the structural nature of colonial inequality and of the intersubjective dynamics it sets in motion.

1 A full discussion of Indigenous feminist theorizations of forms of governance that do not rely on the nation-state structure (see Smith, 2008b) is beyond the scope of this study, as is an in-depth analysis of Indigenous women’s critiques of patriarchal forms of “Aboriginal nationalisms” (Million, 2013). Nonetheless, Indigenous participant narratives appear to be informed by these theorizations. Also, the calls for radical relationality that underscore some of these narratives are consistent with Indigenous feminist notions of relational sovereignty (D’Arcangelis, 2010).

2 In using the term socio-spatial relations, I am influenced by the seminal thinking of feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) and Linda McDowell (1999). McDowell in particular discusses the “social relations of power and exclusion” that constitute place.

3 While these statements share a certain spatial referencing as well as a general approach to solidarity, they at times present different emphases and particular strategies for solidarity. For example, Rubina uses “beside,” while Lydia uses “behind” to denote how white settler women should orient themselves in relation to Indigenous women’s struggles.

4 I would argue that the contestation of cultural symbols in cultural studies (and beyond) is most often theorized as a socially constructed, discursive process—the same socially constructed discursive processes in which subjects themselves are reproduced in relation to other subjects.

5 I also used a spatial metaphor in broaching the subject, which highlights the pervasive use of spatial metaphor in participant narratives to understand the solidarity encounter: “I think some people were very cautious and concerned and wanted to step away because of this fear of appropriation or speaking for or all that kind of stuff.”

6 Alyssa Rosenberg (2013) makes a similar point in writing about a very different context—when white celebrities make public pronouncements about racism: “Can white people speak about racism without silencing or speaking over people of color? Is it a gesture of respect to acknowledge the death of Trayvon Martin on social media, or horribly trite, especially in a medium where context can get detached from an individual tweet? How do you
balance commercial and social imperatives, especially when commercial success is the thing that means you might be able to have a political impact in the first place? . . . The easiest answer to this set of inquiries is to drop back and drop out in the name of deference to other people. The harder, but more correct one, is to try to determine where your voice fits, knowing well that you’ll be opening yourself up to criticisms both of what you say and on the grounds that your decision to speak rebounds to your own benefit” (para. 6).

Rubina calls for white settler allies to invest wholly. (Or, wholistically, as she puts it: “There’s a ‘w’ in front of holistic meaning ‘complete,’ ‘whole.’ Have you seen that spelling of wholistic, the Indigenous spelling?”) Such investment for her indicates an acknowledgement of settler responsibility and serves as a counter to the superficiality of appropriation and non-performative declarations (Ahmed, 2004): “I think that for a lot of activism, it becomes almost like, ‘I did a smudge. I’ve got to a sweat lodge. I’m sorry.’ Indians don’t brag about our spirituality. You know what I mean? It becomes like, ‘I’ve tried it. I’ve tried sushi. I’m in solidarity with Japanese people. I’ve tried sushi.’ You know what I’m saying?”

Evelyn’s perspective on distance has a prominent personal dimension. She tempers her desire to “prove herself” by having “some boundaries around” her involvement in solidarity—as a way to stay healthy and avoid burn-out.

In referencing the potential for white allies to be “pulled into all the conflict,” Belinda is alluding to the injurious power dynamics and horizontal violence that can erupt in Indigenous groups due to internalized colonialism. Other Indigenous participants, Danielle, Lydia and Gabriela in particular, also mention the damage wrought by internalized colonialism in Indigenous organizations and communities.

Ahmed (2012a) writes, “When you don’t quite inhabit the norms, or you aim to transform them, you notice them as you come up against them. The wall is what we come up against: the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can flow into the spaces created by institutions” (p. 175). Although Ahmed (2012a) is writing about diversity workers in educational institutions, her theorization is transferable to the site of solidarity in the colonial context. Indigenous women (and men) by virtue of the particular position they “inhabit” (and the positions that they do not “inhabit”), are continuously bumping up against colonial power structures.

Here is a telling excerpt: “The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women’s psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist” (Problems section, para. 3).

Thielen-Wilson (2012) draws on Milloy’s (1999) research into Indian Residential School (IRS) policy: “My wording here is meant to mirror John Milloy’s . . . characterization of the goal of IRS policy as the ‘ontological revolution’ of Indigenous peoples, the re-making of Indigenous peoples in the settler’s image (assimilation), in order to ‘get rid of the Indian problem’” (p. 336).

My search for a way out of the conundrum that is self-reflexivity has cultivated an interest in Indigenous social and political thought, much of which I have not taken up here. In my future research, I plan to delve further into Indigenous feminist and Indigenous social and political thought more broadly to evaluate alternatives to the reproduction of colonial discourses and power relations in the Indigenous/non-Indigenous solidarity encounter. Might this burgeoning body of literature contain insights into how we could formulate collective subjectivities that avoid the kinds of fabrication and regulation of Otherness described by Blackman et al. (2008)?
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Are you an Indigenous woman who has worked in political alliances or solidarity with white women around any topic/issue?

Are you a white woman who has worked in political alliances or solidarity with Indigenous women around any topic/issue?

Have you encountered tensions or challenges in this work?

Do you have ideas about how relations of solidarity can be improved?

If so, I would like to speak to you about YOUR EXPERIENCES . . .

- My name is Carol Lynne D’Arcangelis and I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto in Adult Education and Community Development.
- I am studying the limits and possibilities of solidarity between Indigenous women and white women, around topics including (but not limited to) violence against Indigenous women, Indigenous land reclamations and environmental justice.
- I am interested in talking to you if you are 18 years of age or older; identify as either an Indigenous or white woman; and have done (or are doing) such alliance/solidarity work for at least six months or longer.
- My focus is on how colonial power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in general play out in this “solidarity encounter.”
- If you travel to meet me, I will reimburse you for your transportation costs.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at: cl.darcangelis@utoronto.ca

I look forward to hearing from you . . .
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Indigenous Women/Feminists

PLEASE NOTE: I am interested in looking at relations among women activists across race, age, class, gender, sexuality, physical or mental ability, etc. I am also interested in how colonialism shapes interactions in what I am calling the solidarity encounter. I would like to hear how you think about these topics. As you will note, many questions overlap, but for clarity’s sake, I have underlined what I see as the main questions.

Interest in study and personal biography

1. Can you tell me about your background? (where and when you grow up; socioeconomic and educational background, etc.)

2. Why are you interested in the study?

Description of activism and (personal) motivations for solidarity

3. In broad terms, can you talk about the political activism that you’ve been involved in?

4. How has your political activism included solidarity with Indigenous women? What is involved in the work? (e.g., in a group, attending events)

   Were/are you in a group? If so, what was/is its main goals and composition (i.e., “mixed” with Indigenous/non-Indigenous members; women-only, etc.)?

   Do you use the term solidarity? Why or why not?

   In thinking about the experiences you’ve described, how would you define solidarity?

5. What has personally motivated you to do “solidarity work” with white women?

6. Have you noticed an increase of late in attempts at solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women? If so, around which issues?

For those working on violence against Indigenous women

7. What brought you to work on the issue of violence against Indigenous women?

   What is your analysis of violence against Indigenous women? How is this analysis different from (or similar to) an analysis of violence against other women?

8. How would you describe any links between the GTA activist community working on violence against Indigenous women and similar communities/groups in other parts of Turtle Island?
Negotiating the “solidarity encounter”

NOTE: I’m wondering how a person’s social location affects solidarity work. By social location, I am referring to race, ethnicity or nation; age; class; sexual orientation; physical or mental ability; being a survivor of violence; level of education; etc.

9. How do you locate yourself in this solidarity work?

Which aspects of your identity are most apparent in your solidarity work—in a positive or negative way?

10. Can you talk about your experiences working in solidarity with white women? Can you describe in detail a moment or situation that stands out for you?

What feelings come up for you?

How has it been empowering or disempowering; positive or negative?
What are some of the challenges obstacles you’ve encountered—personally or otherwise?

What has worked and what hasn’t? What has made it harder or easier?

11. Can you describe an example where you noticed the power dynamics between Indigenous and white women, among white women or among Indigenous women?

Would you describe any of these power dynamics as colonial—“little bursts” of the “colonial story repeating itself” (white woman activist in Reinsborough & Barndt, 2010, p. 175)?

How do you define colonialism? Do you use the term in your activist work?

12. Have you found that many white women experience “white guilt”? How does this shape the solidarity encounter in your view?

13. What, if any, major differences in terms of positions have emerged between Indigenous women and white women on [. . . fill in with your issue]? Is it harder to work in solidarity with white women around some issues more than others?

E.g., prostitution/sex work; abortion; violence against Indigenous women; reclaiming Indigenous traditions/religions (re-traditionalization); immigration/migration; role of men in Indigenous women’s struggles; land reclamations

14. How do your experiences with white women compare or contrast with your experiences working in solidarity with racialized women/women of colour?

Towards non-colonizing solidarity: lessons learned stratégies to meet challenges

15. What have you learned about the role white women can play as allies in Indigenous women’s struggles?
What about when white women are faced with political or personal differences between Indigenous women?

Can you talk about one thing you would do differently?

16. Is No More Silence (NMS) relatively unique in its composition? If so, why are there so few groups like NMS? If NMS remains mostly white, what should it’s role be in terms of the Feb 14 vigil?

17. What is the role of Indigenous women as allies in the struggles of other women?

18. What steps have you personally (or your group) taken to meet the challenges of fostering solidarity with white women?

   Does decolonization play a role in these efforts? What does decolonization mean to you?

19. How have your experiences working with white women changed over time?

   Are you still involved in solidarity efforts? What keeps you involved, or what made you stop?

20. What would make non-colonizing solidarity possible?

   Would it be helpful for white women to acknowledge their status as settlers, and also their complicity in the colonial past and present? What is involved in this acknowledgement?

   What is a settler in your definition?

21. Can/should solidarity work be done in a way that promotes healing? If so, how?

**(Indigenous) Feminism**

22. What does feminism mean to you?

   Do you have a different understanding or appreciation of feminism because of your participation in this work? (E.g., are you more critical?)

23. Have feminist ideas helped or hindered the practice of solidarity in your experience?

   More specifically, are you familiar with Indigenous feminisms? How have they influenced how you think about and practice solidarity?

**Transformations, personal and collective**

24. How has solidarity work transformed you? How has it transformed others? How has it transformed your group?
Describe any transformative moments you’ve had through working with Indigenous women?

25. Do you think solidarity work always transforms people, personally and/or collectively?

► Is there anything else you’d like to add about what you have learned by working in solidarity with white women? Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix C: Interview Guide for White Women/Feminists

PLEASE NOTE: I am interested in looking at relations among women activists across race, age, class, gender, sexuality, physical or mental ability, etc. I am also interested in how colonialism shapes interactions in what I am calling the solidarity encounter. I would like to hear how think about these topics. As you will note, many questions overlap, but for clarity’s sake, I have underlined what I see as the main questions.

Interest in study and personal biography

26. Why are you interested in the study?

27. Can you tell me something about your background? (your identity; where and when you grow up; your socioeconomic and educational background, etc.)

Description of activism and (personal) motivations for solidarity

28. Can you talk about the political activism—as you define it—that you’ve been involved in?

   For example, describe the main goals and composition (i.e., “mixed” with Indigenous/non-Indigenous members; women-only, etc.) of any group(s) you’ve been involved in.

   Do you consider yourself part of an activist community?

29. What is solidarity for you? According to this definition, how have you come to solidarity work with Indigenous women? What is involved in the work? (e.g., in a group, attending events)

   Do you use the term solidarity? Why or why not?

30. What has personally motivated you to do “solidarity work” with Indigenous women?

31. Have you noticed an increase of late in attempts at solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women? If so, around which issues?

For those working on violence against Indigenous women

32. What brought you to work on the issue of violence against Indigenous women?

   What is your analysis of violence against Indigenous women? How is this analysis different from (or similar to) an analysis of violence against other women?

33. How would you describe any links between the GTA activist community working on violence against Indigenous women and similar communities/groups in other parts of Turtle Island?
Examining the “solidarity encounter”

34. What has it been like for you to work “in solidarity” with Indigenous women (empowering or disempowering aspects)? What feelings come up for you?

NOTE: I’m wondering how a person’s social location affects the way that they engage in solidarity work. By social location, I am referring to one’s nation, race or ethnicity; age; class; sexual orientation; being a survivor of violence; level of education; etc.

35. How do you situate yourself in relation to Canada’s colonial past and present? Do you use the term settler? Why or why not? What responsibilities come with being a non-Indigenous woman in relation to Canada’s colonial past and present?

36. How does being a non-Indigenous, white woman affect the way you interact with Indigenous women in a solidarity setting?

For example, in these interactions, are you always conscious of being white?

Which other aspects of your identity seem to matter in your solidarity work with Indigenous women—whether in a negative or positive way?

37. What challenges or obstacles have you encountered—personally or otherwise?

Can you describe in detail a tense moment or situation that stands out for you?

Can you talk about anything you would do differently?

38. Can you talk about any power dynamics you’ve noticed—not only between white women and Indigenous women, but also among white women or among Indigenous women?

Would you describe any of these power dynamics as colonial—“little bursts” of the “colonial story repeating itself” (white woman activist in Reinsborough & Barndt, 2010, p. 175)?

How would you define colonialism? Do you use the term in your activist work?

39. Have you experienced “white guilt”? If so, what affect has this had on your solidarity efforts?

40. Is it harder to work in solidarity with Indigenous women around some issues more than others?

E.g., prostitution/sex work; abortion; violence against Indigenous women; reclaiming Indigenous traditions/religions (re-traditionalization); immigration/migration; role of men in Indigenous women’s struggles; land reclamations
Towards non-colonizing solidarity: strategies to work through tensions/meet challenges

41. How do you define ally, and what role should white women allies play in Indigenous women’s struggles?

What about when you are faced with political or personal differences among Indigenous women?

42. Is No More Silence (NMS) relatively unique in its composition? If so, why are there so few groups like NMS?

If NMS remains mostly white, what should its role be in terms of the Feb 14 vigil?

43. Is there a role for Indigenous women as allies in the struggles of other women?

44. What steps have you personally (or your group) taken to be a better ally with Indigenous women?

Have you tried to decolonize in the process? What has this meant to you?

How important has it been to educate yourself about Canada’s colonial past and present?

45. How have your experiences working with Indigenous women changed over time?

Are you still involved in solidarity efforts? What keeps you involved, or what made you stop?

46. Is non-colonizing solidarity possible? What would make it possible?

47. Can/should solidarity work be done in a way that promotes healing? If so, how?

(Indigenous) Feminism and other theories

48. What does feminism mean to you?

49. Do you have a different understanding or appreciation of feminism because of your participation in this work? (E.g., are you more critical?)

Have feminist ideas helped or hindered the practice of solidarity in your experience?

More specifically, are you familiar with Indigenous feminisms? How have they influenced your engagement in solidarity work?

Transformations, personal and collective

50. How has working with Indigenous women personally transformed you? How has it collectively transformed your group?
More specifically, how has your view of Canada and/or being Canadian been altered by this work, if at all?

51. Do you think solidarity work always transforms people, personally and/or collectively?

52. What else have you learned by working with Indigenous women?

► Is there anything else you’d like to add? Do you have any questions for me?