

Lighting Fires:

Re-searching Sexualized Violence with Indigenous Girls in Northern Canada

by

Anna Chadwick

Bachelor of Science, University of Victoria, 1996

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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### **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I reflect on the ethical and theoretical foundations of researching (and *re-searching*) sexualized violence with Indigenous girls in remote communities in northern British Columbia, Canada, through a project called Sisters Rising, an Indigenous-led, community-based research study focused on centering Indigenous teachings related to sovereignty and gender well-being. Through an emergent methodology drawing from witnessing and borderland feminisms to conduct arts- and land-based workshops with girls and community members, I sought to unsettle my relationships as a diasporic frontline worker to the communities and lands I work with. To disrupt traditional hegemonic discourses of settler colonialism, I look to arts-based and collective witnessing, reflecting on how alternative, safer spaces for Indigenous girls can be created for resistance and (re)storying connections to land and relationships.

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## Chapter 1. Witnessing Unknowability

Compared to other groups, Indigenous girls in Canada experience the highest rates of sexualized violence, exploitation, and sex trafficking (de Finney et al., 2018; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011; National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2017). Sexualized violence against Indigenous girls is interwoven with generations of relations who have faced systemic violence and racialized ideologies (de Finney et al., 2018). Research by the Legal Strategy Coalition on Violence Against Indigenous Women (2018) indicates that while there is agreement about the underlying causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls, responses to address the crisis have been inadequate. Transformative change in dialogues, systems, and communities is critical and long overdue (de Finney, 2016; Sikka, 2009).

This thesis comes out of my work as a research facilitator with the arts-based research project Sisters Rising (<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/sistersrising/>), an ongoing collaboration with Indigenous girls, youth of all genders, and community members from urban and rural Indigenous communities in British Columbia (BC), Canada, to address the issue of sexualized and gendered violence against girls and youth of all genders. In this introductory chapter, I describe the Sisters Rising project and my own research in northern BC.

### Sisters Rising

Sisters Rising is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the International Development Research Centre of Canada as part of the International Partnerships for Sustainable Societies initiative. It is also a research partner with the project Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-Led “From the Ground Up” Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa (<http://www.networks4change.ca/>).

“Networks4Change,” led by the Participatory Cultures Lab at McGill University, is a larger international study that includes dozens of community and university partners across Canada and South Africa.

Sisters Rising has worked with over ten communities in BC and hundreds of participants. With the intention to (re)story colonial violence, Sisters Rising incorporates art- and land-based materials and teachings into workshops and collective activities. Activities have included circles with Elders, walks on the land, art-making, working with wool, stone, hide, and cedar, digital storytelling, painting, mask making, and traditional felt and beading work. The researchers and participants of Sisters Rising have produced several outputs, such as knowledge mobilization forums, collective art making, and publications.

The Sisters Rising project takes an Indigenous approach to community and land-based research “to ensure self-determination, consent, and dignity at every step, and to honour the connection between our stories and our relations” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 26). Sisters Rising “challenges the victim-blaming climate of racialized gender violence by re-centering Indigenous values and linking body sovereignty to questions of decolonization and land sovereignty” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 24). The framework of Sisters Rising is an Indigenous anti-violence movement that links kinship making and place interconnectedness with self-determination. Participants in the Sisters Rising project discuss topics such as dignity, sovereignty, intergenerational trauma, consent, decolonization, land-based healing, teachings from Elders, lateral violence, the colonial roots of violence, responses to racism, hetero- and two-spirit phobia, and gender wellness and well-being. Participants are asked: What do young women / young people need to create safe space in their communities to talk about sexualized violence?

What does dignity look like? What contributes to wellness? What do girls and youth need from their homelands, ancestors, families, and communities to support self-determination?

### **Sisters Rising in Northern British Columbia**

As part of the Sisters Rising project, I worked as a research facilitator and hosted group and individual arts-based workshops and interviews in a remote<sup>1</sup> Indigenous community in northern BC. Some participants in this study expressed concerns about publicly disclosing their stories and asked that their names or the name of their community remain undisclosed. For this reason, I have chosen not to name the community or who contributed to this study in this thesis or publications.

Indigenous girls and youth in remote communities are affected by, in addition to the intergenerational consequences of colonial violence, circumstances of geographic isolation that increase their risk as targets of violence. Community organizations in isolated communities and “Indian reserves” identify a lack of appropriate services that incorporate the specific needs of rural areas and Indigenous frameworks (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011; National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, 2006). This service lack creates gaps in social supports, making youth more vulnerable to violence (de Finney et al., 2018; Hunt, 2007; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011). State-controlled justice systems are a glaring example of these gaps. Girls who come forward to disclose violence to authorities are the rare exception, and those who do endure challenging and sometimes insurmountable obstacles. Often, girls wait for months and sometimes years for “justice” to be carried out towards perpetrators of violence against them. As a Sisters Rising participant stated,

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<sup>1</sup> Although Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2006) identifies a First Nation community as remote if it is located more than 350 km from the nearest full-service centre and has year-round road access, as is the case for this

Nowadays when a girl gets sexually assaulted or something happens it takes so long for the cops to talk to the girls and the courts take a while, especially in this rez compared to other cities. Some natives have to wait for court for almost a year. Things need to change.

Many additional factors increase the vulnerability of youth in isolated remote areas such as the one where I conducted this research. Studies on the sexual exploitation of Indigenous youth in rural and remote British Columbian communities found that poverty, substance misuse, resource-based economies, lack of transportation, and challenges due to gender-ascribed roles are all factors that increase the risk of violence (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 29). Studies have also identified how denial and silence about sexualized violence in communities perpetuates cycles of abuse (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011). Because sexual exploitation is often interconnected within community and family, it is frequently undisclosed, meaning that sexualized violence “is often a taboo subject that is difficult to address” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, 29). When these factors intersect, as they do in communities along “the Highway of Tears” in northern BC, Indigenous girls are “targeted for violence” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 21). It is in this context of intersecting factors that promote silence and fear that I conducted my research, and why I have opted not to disclose the names of the communities and participants.

In the next sections of this introductory chapter, “*What Am I?*” and “Imagining Different Spaces,” I describe my positionality. Subsequently, in a brief literature review in the sections entitled “What Am I Witnessing” and “Building a New House,” I illustrate patterns of inquiry and research that are bound by fixed tenets of redress and reconciliation.

### ***What Am I?***

I moved to the northern community where I conducted this research fourteen years ago when I began working as an art therapist alongside children, youth, and families. I had originally

planned to stay for three years, but I found the quiet solace of northern landscapes a welcomed contrast to the bustle of urban life. I appreciate the simple everyday interactions of a small community—conversations in the local grocery store, community potlucks, and the camaraderie of shared experiences of small-town life. To an artist and mother like myself, the north offers endless spaces for creativity and time to wander on the land devoid of the pressure of time and busy schedules.

In my work and life in the north, I have witnessed on a daily basis the unforgiving inequities that adversely impact Indigenous communities. As I grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood in Victoria, British Columbia, these stark inequalities were erased by the boundaries in which I lived and by the textbooks I read. This research arises from my desire for urgent change and a need for the Canadian state to pay attention. However, I critically question how transformation can ensue and who initiates these necessary changes. My intention in this research is to convey, as an uninvited guest in this northern territory, the tensions of witnessing and giving testimony about gendered and sexualized violence, while engaging in this research with accountability to the community I work with.

Growing up in Canada I was often asked, *what* are you? This question fuels my resistance to being labelled. Refusing to be contained within a particular group or location, borderland-mestizaje feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) refutes rigid identity politics and instead moves within and among diverse worlds. As I describe my identity and location, I reflect on the words of Anzaldúa, who asks “You say my name is ambivalence? Who me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your label splits me” (p. 205). Although I have a mixed European and Indian background, I do not identify with the fixed labels of identity politics where I am categorized as being mixed, coloured, racialized, etc. Instead, I welcome the inherently divergent stories of a

mixed ancestry that flow through me. I prefer to celebrate my identity of multiplicity and embrace my lived experiences of cultural ambivalence. My mother's ancestors, who were indentured labourers from Southern India, migrated from their homeland to South Africa and Mauritius in the mid-19th century to work on sugar plantations. My father's ancestors are from northern Britain and Northern Ireland. My family of "multiplicity" immigrated to Canada in the 1970s to escape the racial policies of apartheid South Africa. My family and ancestors have been labelled and displaced for centuries because of racialized classifications; therefore, I refuse to describe my identity within rigid divisions. When my family immigrated to Canada, I inherited the privilege of becoming a Canadian citizen with rights—far more than First Peoples have had in this country. I found an affinity with Anzaldúa's borderland framework. She describes in her theory of borderland-mestizaje feminism alternative "third spaces" of living in-between boundaries, where contradiction and ambivalence are embraced. These unfixed hybrid spaces, in constant transition and transformation, invite the complexity and the lived experiences of cultural ambiguity.

Witnessing stories of sexualized violence in Indigenous communities comes with tensions of incommensurability, privileges of settler presence, and imbalances of power. Although I identify with living in the ambivalent interstices of borderlands, I acknowledge how my presence on colonized "Crown" land in the north intertwines in the tensions of this work. By way of my privileges of diaspora, social class, and education, I am not forced to navigate violence in the same way the girls I work with are. This is the reality of the inequality that exists in our Canadian state. As a service provider and someone who moved to this northern community by choice, I have the power to leave the community when I want, by virtue of not being rooted in this land ancestrally. By way of this privilege, I am safe to talk about and

construct knowledge about violence openly. I struggled ethically with embarking on this research topic in the community I work with. I did not want to be an outside researcher taking and benefitting from intimate stories from the community. I questioned how research that addresses violence could be achieved. This thesis therefore focuses, not on specific stories within the community, but on how I witness in this research.

I situate how I witness in this research as active, reflective, embodied, and relational. This theory of witnessing resonates with Indigenous scholar Sarah Hunt's (2014) practice of Kwagiulth witnessing. Hunt situates witnessing within the context of colonial violence with an understanding that witnessing is more than passive hearing or observing. She claims that witnessing is "inherently bound up in relations based on responsibility" (p. 39) and that witnesses are required to recognize the power relations inherent in acting as a witness. According to Dori Laub (1992), the listener has to be simultaneously "a witness to the trauma and a witness to him[her]self" (p. 58).

Laub (1992) also distinguishes the "unknowability" of violence, demanding that witnesses acknowledge the silences, trauma, and hidden voices inherent in atrocity. Hidden voices are akin to an impossible language, beyond narratives, and are similar to the silence that pervades the testimony of many survivors of violence. Anne Cubilie (2005) describes this testimony of silences and hidden voices as "speaking the language of impossible witnessing" (p. 251). According to Cubilie, ethics formulated by survivors of atrocity speak to the need for ethical, engaged witnessing that "opposes the disengaged, guilt-ridden viewing of atrocity as spectacle that many forms of spectatorship take. This includes negotiation of the unknowability of experiences" (p. 11).

As I research about violence within an Indigenous context, I consider the complexities of my identity and explore the tensions of how my privilege and power interplay in my relationships and this work. Witnessing as I live, work, and engage in this research in the north requires sifting through a Canadian history of untruths and silencing. Listening to the stories of Elders about their experiences in residential schools, the inhumane treatment they experienced when they spoke their language and practiced their culture, and the grief and loss they experienced when they were taken away from their families as young children is deeply unsettling. I am disillusioned by the Canadian state that repeatedly turns away from addressing these roots of the violence against Indigenous girls and women and their families that are centuries old. I am engaged in this research with a desire to witness and give testimony in a way that demands an ethical response to this violence, that opens the possibility for safer conditions for girls to be heard. I reflect on my witnessing with the hope that those who observe and work with Indigenous girls who experience sexualized violence (researchers, academics, frontline workers, etc.) take responsibility for what is being heard (or not heard) and invite another response. In my work, there is an urgency for change and a need for others to know about the impacts of sexualized violence against Indigenous girls. However, witnessing (and hearing) is mediated by representation and power. To discard the untruths I have been taught in textbooks and the hegemonic myths about Indigenous nations, I start by surrendering to an unsettling place of “not knowing” hegemonic Canadian history. As a witness, I commit to remaining in these tensions, knowing that the past, present, and future are never fixed or finished and that to attempt to redress violence is yet another form of violence.

### **Imagining Different Spaces**

I hear the rush of the wind in late summer, in the winter birch, and see the shadows hie over the shore in silence; and my shadows move with the light, the sources of remembrance. We are shadows,

silence, stones, stories, never that simulation of light in the distance. (Vizenor, 1999, p. 64)

How are we or how do we become conscious subjects rather than objects of these discursive strategies that have grievous outcomes in our daily lives? It is, perhaps, to be alive to the motion of it. (Million, 2011, p. 313)

Inquiring into sexualized violence against Indigenous girls requires dismantling constructs, policies, and practices of institutional, epistemic, and representational violence of colonization that uphold the current systemic violence against Indigenous women (Emberley, 2014, p. 53). As bell hooks (1989a) claims, “in the deep structure” (p. 17) of histories there is a need to reclaim fragments of the past to transform and illuminate present reality. In this research project, I look to disrupt fixed stereotypes of hegemonic discourses with active relational witnessing that requires critique but also imagining different spaces where Indigenous girls are heard and seen. As I work alongside Indigenous youth as an ally, a student researcher, and a therapist for children and youth who experience sexualized violence, I acknowledge that these spaces of witnessing require ongoing accountability and advocacy.

This witnessing requires untangling the threads that bind girls into existences they did not consent to. This unravelling includes questioning benevolent notions of healing and critiquing the ethics of how stories of violence against Indigenous girls are revealed and then heard. I reflect on the words of Sara Ahmed (2015), who questions benevolent notions of “healing” in colonized nations, writing, “The question of who is doing the healing and who is being healed is a troubling one” (p. 28). I am reminded by Ahmed to rethink assumptions of what this type of research can achieve. Ahmed cautions nations that, in this time and place in history, are sifting through the cruel legacies of colonial violence. She writes: “We have to attend to the way wounds enter politics” and “remember how the surfaces of bodies came to be wounded in the first place” (p. 33). As a researcher in this project, I refuse to be a passive onlooker. Instead, I

support action through art making, unsettling, retelling, renaming, contesting, advocacy, and active witnessing. Much of this active witnessing requires imagining transformed realities.

Leanne Simpson (2011) describes this visioning and imagining integral to spaces of storytelling where “dreams and visions provide glimpses of decolonized spaces and transformed realities that we have collectively yet to imagine” (p. 35). In my work as a therapist, frontline service provider, artist, and child and youth advocate in a rural Indigenous community in Canada, I ask: How do I witness? What do I imagine differently? What action do I commit to?

Relational, active witnessing is needed in this research and in my work as a therapist for children and youth when stories of pain and courageous voices emerge from the silences that bury sexualized violence. What does it mean to witness knowing that many stories of violence are silenced? This kind of “alternative” witnessing requires creating spaces for voices to be heard with respect and honour for all that has been survived and all that is envisioned. In this project, I explore how I witness and give testimony, knowing that Indigenous girls in our nation state have not been heard or seen with respect and dignity. According to Ahmed (2015), “the telling is about the witnessing, which makes demands on others to hear, but which does not always get a just hearing” (p. 83).

I express gratitude to the knowledge keepers and young women in the community where I live and work, who, wise and refusing to assent to violence, enact a compassionate presence. With fire in their hearts, they resist violence that has been inflicted on their communities for centuries. Girls bring, as their ancestors always have, on their land and in their lived communities in the north, “form to theory” (Clark, 2016a, p. 47) to enact resistance. Girls, youth, and the communities I work with are warriors in their struggles, and they express vital insights

for change and visions of nonviolent realities. I also acknowledge Indigenous girls who resisted but were stolen and continue to be lost in the depths of ongoing violence.

In my relationships in the communities I work with, I acknowledge the multiplicity of histories with which I share threads of difference and of connection. In our differences, I incorporate an ethic of incommensurability, reflecting on what is “distinct and what is sovereign for projects of decolonization” (Tuck & Yang, 2012a, p. x). Many times throughout this project and in forums with Sisters Rising, I was forced to look closer into how my relationship to the community and the girls I work with is intertwined, often in relationships of inequality. Looking into these depths requires resisting the comfort of being a neutral observer reaching to “resettle” (Tuck & Yang, 2012a, p. x) or “reconcile” my guilt and privilege as an immigrant to the Canadian state. This unearthing is essential to understanding why and how I do this work and provokes complex but welcomed conversations about colonial violence, decolonization, and privilege. (Re)connecting to my roots, I have been reminded of the ancestors in my family who experienced the colonial violence of racist and gendered policies, but I have also been reminded as an immigrant to this country of the tensions of my privilege as a diasporic frontline worker. How do I witness and give testimony in this research without reaching for the accepted tenets of reconciliation and redress? In my work and in this research, I look to ways to “make room for more meaningful potential alliances” (Tuck & Yang, 2012a, p. x). After research workshops and interviews, I reflected in the following narrative on the tensions of this incommensurability and the unsettling nature of decolonization and reparation in this research:

### *Fissures and Shadows*

*The borders of the reserve I cross to drive youth back to their homes after research workshops are deep fissures that were created to divide and displace. These chasms, recast as*

*Crown property, hold violent histories and silenced stories. Despite this history, and these divisions, there are also stories and visions of resistance and presence. As I sit with these stories and this tension, I imagine the shadows that move with the shifting light on the northern landscapes where I live—this (re)imagining breathes life into other possible futures.*

### **What Am I Witnessing?**

You know what they say. If at first you don't succeed, try the same thing again. Sometimes the effort is called persistence and is the mark of a strong will. Sometimes it's called perseveration and is a sign of immaturity. For an individual, one of the definitions of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again in the same way and expecting different results. For a government, such behavior is called . . . policy. (King, 2013, p. 23)

As I conducted this research and as I continue to work alongside Indigenous communities as a therapist for children and youth who experience sexualized violence, I recognize the need to unsettle how structures of settler colonial power repeatedly solicit social change with an aim of redress. I take issue with the misleading amity of national healing and reconciliation that has blanketed this topic in our nation state, and I feel the tensions of contending with the current politics of representation.

For decades, the Native Women's Association of Canada and Indigenous communities, activists, and researchers have made concerted efforts to bring to public attention the need to address violence against Indigenous women (de Finney et al., 2018; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). In 2013 the United Nations stated that Canada was facing an "epidemic" of gender-based violence against Indigenous girls and women (Anaya, 2013, as cited in de Finney et al., 2018). In the past five years, several reports have stated that Indigenous girls and women experience the highest rates of sexual and racialized violence and exploitation in Canada (Amnesty International, 2014;

National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2017; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). In April 2018, Dubravka Simonovic, the United Nations special rapporteur on violence against Indigenous women, stated that Canada has “unfinished business that requires urgent actions” (Bellrichard, 2018, para. 1). In her United Nations address, Simonovic expressed that Canada needs to address “serious and pervasive systematic” root causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls (Bellrichard, 2018, para. 2). The Interim Report for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2017) indicated that violence against Indigenous women in Canada goes beyond those who are murdered and missing. The rate of physical and sexual assault of Indigenous women is almost three times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Boyce, 2017). Furthermore, social marginalization, vulnerability, and the lack of concern by society puts Indigenous girls at higher risk for all forms of violence (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2010). According to Jillian Boyce (2017), “Simply being Indigenous and female is a risk” (p. 9).

These research statistics and Simonovic's urgent message to the Canadian state are not recent news. Sexualized violence against Indigenous girls intersects with centuries of colonial state violence of displacement and assimilation, as well as patriarchal gender and racial inequities. Borrowing the words of Anzaldúa (1987), I apply her question to this context: “Just what did she inherit from her ancestors, this weight on her back?” (p. 82). For centuries, Indigenous Nations have been forced to live on small parcels of land purported to belong to the Crown and were vanquished by selective “truths” of dominant pedagogies. Colonial policies displaced Indigenous women to federally “owned” reserves, removed them from political decisions, and took away their rights to land ownership (Hargreaves, 2017). Relegated to a

marginal existence, perhaps only visible if they served colonial exploits, women's vital connections to land and kinship were disregarded and devalued by the nation state (de Finney et al., 2018). Canadian government initiatives removed children from their families, prevented language and traditional knowledge from being passed down through the generations, and prohibited ceremonies and rites of passage that honoured and celebrated girls as vital contributors to their families and communities. Policies such as the Indian Act of 1875, a legacy of imperial and colonial legislation that continues to affect Indigenous communities, subjugated the vital matriarchal roles of women who traditionally held power over laws and decision making in their nations (Episkenew, 2009).

Multiple acts of dispossession and imposed colonial and patriarchal violence eradicated land and body sovereignty, subjecting Indigenous women to dehumanizing policies (Goeman, 2013). These dehumanizing policies marked women's bodies as objects of violence and extinguishment that constituted "a racial order of difference" (Emberley, 2014, p. 137). Policies outlined by the Indian Act, "reordered gender relations to subordinate women" (Suzack, 2010, p. 5). Under federal laws, women were designated to homes on "Indian reserves" that were created as subordinate territories of the state. Hauntingly similar to informal settlements in South Africa, the reserve was a zone of colonial incarceration. Julia Emberley (2014) writes that "the isolating spatiality of the reserve reified a racially encoded system of difference designed to install pure boundaries of noncontact" (p. 248). According to Emberley, as women were devalued and restricted to reserves, their homes became sites of violence in which "women were the primary victims" (p. 248).

### **Building a New House**

As Canadian governments sponsor initiatives such as the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) in what are considered to be "benevolent"

acts of reconciliation to redress the epidemic rates of violence in Indigenous communities, Indigenous girls and youth are bound to state-sponsored judicial systems and social movements that are often incommensurable with the contexts with which sexualized violence intersects in their lives (Hargreaves, 2017). Advocates for Indigenous sovereignty suggest turning away from discourses and structures of colonial power (Coulthard, 2007; L. Simpson, 2011). Leanne Simpson (2011) puts forth: “I am very concerned with how we rebuild our own house. I have spent enough time taking down the master’s house, and now I want most of my energy to go into visioning and building our new house” (p. 32). As I look to witness in alternative ways to build more meaningful alliances, I recognize the urgent need to look deeply into the complexity of how and why the Canadian state continuously pulls away from allowing Indigenous nations to “build their own houses.” My work and this research cannot be about appropriating this idea on their behalf.

Violence against Indigenous women in Canada has been approached with variable forms of inertia as well as liberal pluralistic government-sponsored initiatives (Dhillon, 2017; Hargreaves, 2017). In Western imperial academic institutions, humanistic and social science research initiatives are initiated to invoke social change. How have these initiatives changed epidemics of sexualized violence in Indigenous communities? As Tuck and Yang (2014) reflect on resistance and social change for youth, they question how state-sponsored initiatives for change will lead to “good and just things” (p. 243). These theorists challenge how social change with youth is theorized and ask Western researchers whether these are “theories of the changes *we want*” (p. 244, emphasis in original).

As Canadian government-sponsored state initiatives such as the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) inquire into gendered violence in

Indigenous communities—an issue that requires immediate redress—Indigenous theorists, advocates, activists, and communities are insisting on different tools to further social justice goals (de Finney et al., 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2014). While there is agreement about the underlying causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls, responses to address the crisis have been inadequate (Legal Strategy Coalition on Violence Against Indigenous Women, 2015). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), which took years to complete, created lists of recommendations for change and reconciliation, but did little to change the rates of violence against Indigenous girls in their communities (National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2017). Although some inquiries, such as the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), give a platform for girls and women to address concerns, many inquiries, initiated with the intention of state reconciliation, coopt and subsume the strengths, visions, and resistance of youth within ideals of settler benevolence and legitimacy (Dhillon, 2017; Hargreaves, 2017).

The experiences of Indigenous girls and their communities on this land are incommensurable with the settler state (de Finney et al., 2018). The various ways that Indigenous communities choose to enact resistance against violence cannot be collapsed into liberal politics of reconciliation. The proclivity of liberal theories of social change is to reach toward settling, reconciling, and formulating reasons to intervene in communities “at risk.” The topic of sexualized violence against Indigenous girls is not a place for research as usual in a nation that is predisposed to ensuring an equitable future for all through “adaptive inclusions of liberal multiculturalism” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 4) where Indigenous peoples’ resistance is consolidated into settler Canadian alliances. Transcending “incommensurability” (Tuck & Yang, 2012a) entails “a kind of violence in itself” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 4). Tuck and Yang (2012a) call for

radical shifts in power in colonial relations that account for Indigenous sovereignty and distinguish what sovereignty means for projects of decolonization that involve human-rights-based social justice projects. As a diasporic researcher whose family has also been deeply impacted by colonial forces, this is the call I take up in my thesis.

### **Thesis Organization**

This thesis is comprised of five chapters: this introduction; Chapter 2 on methodology and methods; Chapters 3 and 4, which were written as a book chapter and an article respectively, both for publication; and the conclusion, Chapter 5. Photographs of the land where I researched, as well as artwork I created, are incorporated throughout the chapters to demonstrate my own process of research reflexivity, for the purpose of research-witnessing outside of standard academic data analysis processes.

My intention to write articles for publication rather than a traditional full-length thesis was to make my research immediately available to diverse audiences. The publications foster knowledge mobilization about the issues of gender and sexualized violence against Indigenous girls in a way that a traditional thesis cannot. Given that individual sections were written for publication, it is inevitable that there will be some repetitiveness of project rationale, goals, methods and outcomes across the chapters in this thesis.

Chapter 3 is a book chapter (in press) entitled “Lighting Fires of Alternative Imaginings: The Ethics of Re-searching Sexualized Violence With Indigenous Girls in Rural Communities.” It focuses on the practical, ethical, and theoretical foundations of researching sexualized violence in a rural community in Canada. With the intent to reach beyond traditional ethics of what is “good” or “right,” I reflect on the tensions and ethics of my position as a witness and of honouring an ethic of refusal. At the time of writing this thesis introduction, the book chapter

was in the final stages of editing and had been accepted for publication in a book entitled *Ethical Practice in Participatory Visual Research with Girls and Young Women: A Focus on Rurality, Indigeneity & Transnationality* in the book series Transnational Girlhoods. This book is being published by South African and Canadian editors in conjunction with the SHHRC-funded project “Networks for Change and Well-being.”

Chapter 4, entitled “Imagining Alternative Spaces: Researching Sexualized violence with Indigenous Girls in Northern Canada,” focuses on the outcomes of researching sexualized violence with Indigenous girls in a northern community. In this article, I enact the position of witnessing and the ethic of refusal to take action in ways that unsettle how stories of violence are heard and circulated. At this time, this article has been accepted for publication and is in the final editing stages for a special issue of *Girlhood Studies* entitled “Resurgent Interruptions: Girls in Settler and Carceral States.”

The conclusion of this thesis (Chapter 5) focuses on the outcomes of this research, using artwork I created as a form of reflexive witnessing, photographs and activities from the larger Sisters Rising project, and a discussion of the implications of this research for professional practice and further research.

## **Chapter 2. A Methodology of Arts-based Witnessing: Walking on the Land, (Re)mapping, and Border Mestizaje Feminism**

### **Methodology**

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration . . . without the mandate of conquest. (Morrison, 1992, p. 3)

Place equates to structure, stasis, power, strategy, and a conceived, but un-lived, unlivable theory and panoptic mandate. On the other hand, space corresponds to movement, intersection, interaction, subversions, tactic, transmotion, and in short, the real way that humans experience and shape the shifting locations in which they live. (Vizenor, 2008, p. 224)

I walk on the land in the alpine and along rivers of vast landscapes gathering and creating with the objects I find from the land to reflect and witness differently. As I engage in preparing, tanning, and sewing hides with cultural leaders, I think about the stewards of the land who survived here and carried their stories forward for the girls I work with. The photo below (Figure 2.1) was taken while tanning hides with a friend and cultural leader in the community, a process imbued with stories of ancestors and connections to land.



**Figure 2.1 Tanning hides. Photo by the author.**

According to Tonawanda Band of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013), fixed colonial policies of dispossession “have set up gendered colonial structures that continue to dominate and enact violence at both the interpersonal and state level” (p. 19). These structures, such as the reserves to which Indigenous nations were relegated, require unsettling because hegemonic ideologies are still at play, upholding the systemic inequalities that sustain sexualized violence Indigenous girls did not consent to. This violence, attached to the bodies of Indigenous

girls, fosters indignity as it “construct[s] the subject of violence within an ontology of victimization” (Emberley, 2014, p. 2).

Visitors to this northern town often describe the north as pure and pristine. When one looks closer, amongst the trees, buildings from past Hudson’s Bay trading and gold prospecting, constructed to serve the economic ideals of the day, rot into the earth. These structures divided and claimed Indigenous communities for profit and exploitation. This land is not “untouched.”



**Figure 2.2 Trading post. Photo by the author.**

Inside these buildings (like the one in the image in Figure 2.2), small trees and moss grow through the floorboards, splitting the wood and shaky foundations of the buildings that were once staked as the Crown’s corporate pursuits. I witness this overtaking as a metaphor for (re)mapping and survivance. (Re)mapping, defined by Goeman (2013), looks to stories of survivance that sustain “geographies that do not limit, contain, or fix the various scales of space

from the body to the nation in ways that limit definitions of self and community staked out as property” (p. 11). The purpose of witnessing and imagining spatial sovereignty (Goeman, 2013) in alternative spaces in this project, where girls’ and community members’ art and words are grounded in their relationships to land and culture, is not to mythologize space with ideals of Native romanticism, but to (re)map constructs that address sexualized violence against Indigenous girls and women “while defining Native futures” (Goeman, 2013, p. 13). I use art and aesthetics in this project to witness in ways that resist fixed outcomes that extract and compartmentalize. I look to artful ways of doing that are rooted in embodiment and being in motion—the natural way that bodies and the earth move.

In addition to Goeman’s (2013) theory of (re)mapping, I also draw from borderland-mestizaje feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). Positioning everyday lives as vital sites of knowledge (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002), borderland theories interweave testimonials, interviews, narratives, and visual arts with discourses of traditional knowledge production (Elenes, 1997). The intended outcome of this interwoven knowledge is counter-discourses capable of generating transformational ideas and spaces of resistance (Brown & Strega, 2005). Inhabiting borderlands is akin to choosing margins to occupy where the “process of envisioning can occur” (hooks, 1989a, p. 145). Described by hooks (1989a) as “radical spaces of possibility” (p. 24), borderland feminist theorists challenge gendered and imperial violence to dislocate “the colonizing traversals of thresholds” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 142). To account for the complexities and tensions that imperialist borders generate, borderland feminism creates theorized thresholds as counter-hegemonic spatial locations. At these thresholds spaces shift, uncertainty is welcomed, and expectations are unfixed. In this research project, I used arts-based inquiry with Indigenous and feminist borderline theories to disrupt power differentials and

harness aesthetics to transform rather than contain (Finley, 2014). This framework alters conversations to include voices that have been silenced and bodies that have been regulated and erased (Elenes, 1997).

Traditional colonial inquiry, driven by a need to “traverse, know, translate, own and exploit” (Garneau, 2016, p. 521) is a hegemonic discursive practice of inquiry incompatible with researching sexualized violence in Indigenous communities. To challenge rigid inquiries, I look to what Indigenous researcher Margaret Kovach (2009) refers to as “methodologies from the margins” (p. 312). Researching with/alongside Indigenous communities requires nonlinear approaches to knowledge production that incorporate distinct ways of knowing independent of Western thought that are resistant to colonial confinement (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou Māori researcher and scholar, Linda T. Smith (2012), claims that Indigenous methodologies require researchers to “research back” (p. 7) to make claims for sovereignty, recovery, and renewal of Indigenous knowledge production. As social inequities and social injustices perpetuate, research in Indigenous communities has become “entangled with haughty theories of what is truth” (Kovach, 2009, p. 59). The stories of Indigenous women and their experiences of violence have been silenced for centuries. Michel Foucault (1980) referred to this silenced knowledge and these distorted experiences as “subjugated knowledges.” To disrupt these constructs, research methodologies that are “capable of grasping the messy complexities of people’s lives, especially the lives of those on the margins, are required to reclaim these [silenced] knowledges” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 11).



**Figure 2.3 Circles of witnessing. Photo by the author.**

I created the circle in Figure 2.3 from the stones that had been collected from the bank of a nearby river by participants in the project. I created a circle of stones and lit a fire in the middle stone to commit to my original intent in this research to witness with reciprocity and envision alternative relationships to inquiry that incorporate balance. As I witness, I feel the unceasing tension of trying to conduct this research with reciprocity, knowing how much has been taken away in the lives of the girls I work with and the generations before them. I look to witness in ways that give back to the girls and community members who courageously share their stories and artwork. I incorporate the value of reciprocity in the methods, methodologies, and testimony of this research to create collective contexts from which new possibilities for change can emerge, and to create space for relational accountability (Wilson, 2008).

I have been a witness in many circles with the Indigenous youth, Elders, and community leaders in the communities in which I work. In many of these circles, tears and stories of grief, trauma, joy, and hope are shared. In these circles, the tensions of lateral violence and silencing

also emerge, but I value the space that is created for honouring stories, presence, and voices. Leanne Simpson (2011), argues that “social transformation is a creative process of continual enactment, rather than a finite process spurred only by inquiry and critique.” Storytelling does not only critique colonization, but also requires “envisioning balance and modeling non-hierarchical social relations” (as cited in Hargreaves, 2017, p. 52).

Antithetical to the tenets of individualistic principles of Western research, I look to a methodology that is accountable to relationships between each other, families, and communities and incorporates respect, reciprocity, and relationality (Wilson, 2008). Research situated firmly in the nest of relationship requires listeners like me who have been invited into the community to support/witness this work and to find ways to listen to stories about violence with collective responsibility that honours dignity and resistance (Hargreaves, 2017). As an ally, I look to borderland feminism that incorporates these values to bridge the divides of relationships that have been split by the dominant tenets of Western patriarchy. Borderland feminism emphasizes the need for alliances among “women, genders, cultures, races and other social positions, material and nonmaterial worlds, humans and nonhumans” (Mody, 2017, p. 89). This theory of feminism foregrounds alliance making from a relational perspective and refuses perspectives that create oppositional identities (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Borderland feminism also refuses dominance and the fixed static theories of Western idealism in order to create alternative possibilities for the emergence of forgotten stories and histories. Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) defines this as survivance and transmotion—survival through resistance, and acknowledgement of that which has been survived to create space for revitalization. Survivance, in Vizenor’s use of the word,

means a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but

also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry. (p. 1)

Survivance and transmotion are fluid dynamic constructs that connect with the natural movement of land and bodies (L. Simpson, 2011; Vizenor, 2008). The methods of this research, using land-based materials and emergent methods, align with the intention to unsettle static inquiries and research. Survivance, an ethical response to histories of violence to restore self, family, and community, is “a spirited resistance, a life force, not just anger, negative or destructive. Survivance is a force of nature, a new totem, and it has to be expressed and imagined to create a sense of presence” (Vizenor, Tuck, & Yang, 2014, p. 233). To enact survivance is to “refuse negation” (Vizenor, 2008, p. 2) and an identity that has been constructed based on social eradication. Transmotion, a visionary sense of natural motion that achieves presence to restore self, family and community is “an active presence, a reciprocal use of mature, not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty” (L. Simpson, 2011, p. 88). It speaks to movement, change, and fluidity of groups, clan, and families on the land (L. Simpson, 2011).

## **Methods**

In contrast to traditional designs of qualitative and quantitative research, I did not follow prescribed research methods. The methods in this project were emergent. The purpose of this negotiated design was to commit to my ethic of honouring refusal (see Chapter 3) and incorporate values of dignity, consent, and respect. Stories of sexualized violence encompass feelings of stigma, shame, and apprehension. Emergent methods allowed participants to choose their level of engagement in the topic. This design was also intended to decenter and challenge traditional notions of objective control between myself as a researcher and the research participants (Jones & Jenkins, 2008).

## **Recruitment of Participants**

A relational framework was applied to the recruitment of participants in this project. Recruitment was flexible and included youth of all genders who were interested in taking part. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, youth were asked to participate directly in a casual way and were given the choice of participating with friends or participating individually with anonymity. If youth and community were interested in participating, they were given a copy of an invitation to participate with the Sisters Rising logo and information about how the research would be used (see Appendix A). At that time, they were also asked when they were available and where they would feel comfortable conducting the interview. I invited youth of all genders aged 13 to 18 who self-identified as on- or off-reserve First Nations, Métis, or Indigenous to participate in arts-based workshops and/or interviews. Community leaders and family members were also invited to participate because they hold significant insight into cultural history and connections to culture. The adult community members included two youth workers / mothers / cultural leaders and a father / community leader. Nine youth, eight who identified as girls and one who identified as a boy, aged 13–17, and three adult community members chose to participate in the project. Two youth chose to meet with me together as a group and the remaining participants chose to meet with me individually. A small cash honorarium was gifted to all participants.

Participants could choose individual or group activities and arts-based or interview formats to answer questions. They were given the choice to explore research questions using arts-based methods of their choice in ways that were flexible and organic. Some of the methods chosen by the individuals included sculpture, storytelling, painting, drawing, photography, and walks on the land. Using land-based materials such as bark, stones, feathers, or hide and bones that had been prepared by local artists and Elders, participants explored their visions for well-

being, leadership, connections to family and ancestors, and ideas about change to stop sexualized violence.

The interview questions were designed with a focus on participants' visions for girls in the future, what they need in their communities, where they find strength, and the personal connections they have to objects and places on their homeland. Although some participants focused on personal experiences, the design of the interviews was intended not to focus on the violence participants had experienced or on painful memories. A set of interview questions created by the Sister Rising research team was used in a semi-structured format. Some of the participants chose not to answer all of the questions and instead focused on their own ideas or interests. Participants could choose to create art from objects on a table in front of them as they spoke. Of the participants who chose to create artwork, some talked about the meaning of the artwork and others did not. Most of the interviews were audio-recorded. For three interviews where the participants chose not to be recorded, I took handwritten notes.

One of the participants did not want to answer questions and instead preferred to walk on the land and take pictures of objects that represented her strengths. Some of the questions I asked were these: What do girls and young women need to talk about in regard to sexualized violence? Who are important supports in your community? How do you connect to culture? What do girls and young women need to address the silencing that surrounds sexualized violence? What objects from the land do you connect to?

Most interviews were about 30–45 minutes long and took place in an office at a community agency or during walks on the land near town. Participants were given a full explanation of how the research might be used and were given the choice of how their interviews and artwork would be disseminated. They were told about the Sisters Rising website, the shared

Sisters Rising database, and the potential for publications that could include (with their consent) their names and artwork. They signed a consent form and wrote the details of their consent on the form (e.g., one participant wrote that she did not want to be publicly identified and did not want her voice recorded on the public database).

For the group workshop, we agreed to meet on a Sunday afternoon at the local community hall to create art and talk about the research topic. That day, there was a power outage, so the hall could not be used without lighting. Instead of meeting in the hall we gathered in a treed area near town. I could not contact participants to tell them about the change in plans. Fortunately, one of the participants lived a few houses down from where I lived, and she generously offered to go to their houses to inform them about the change in venue. I set up a small table with art supplies, objects from the land, canvases, and a picnic lunch. The participants painted on canvases and rocks as they talked about their visions for girls in their community and how they are perceived in the community. The workshop was audio-recorded and was also video-recorded by iPad.

### **Evolving Consent and Sharing Stories and Images**

Throughout each workshop/interview, participants were reminded that they had full choice in answering the research questions and were asked to discuss only the topics they felt comfortable sharing about. As well, at any time they could stop the interview or change how they were being recorded. Follow-up with each participant was done after the interviews to confirm their safety and well-being.

To ensure that the participants' consent and respect were safeguarded throughout the research process, permission to record and disseminate the research was treated as evolving. Participants were given choices about how their interview would be recorded, and after the interview, they were asked whether they wanted any audio or video recordings of them to be

kept in archives or erased. Participants were given a full explanation of how images and stories could be disseminated in public venues, such as the Sisters Rising website, and consent was obtained before any images were publicized. Participants at any time could stop interviews or refuse participation in the study. Over a time period of nine months, from the start of the research, none of the participants removed their names or changed their decision to participate.

A few of the participants in this study requested to be anonymous and chose not to have any of their art images or quotes displayed publicly. Some participants asked for their voice not to be recorded. To respect the anonymity of participants and community, I chose to not publish the name of the community or the names of the participants I researched with in this thesis or in any publications or websites. Looking back, there is nothing I would have done differently to increase the participants' engagement in this research study in a more public way. The topic of sexualized violence in the community where I researched is not talked about openly. In order for young people to share information in a public forum such as this one, where information and pictures are shared on a website, in publications, and this thesis, they require safe places in their community and social supports to address violence. In my position as a researcher, I deemed it necessary to conduct this research in ways that participants felt comfortable and to listen carefully to their resistance and protect their needs. I recognize the need for change in this issue, and for the topic of sexualized violence to be understood from the perspective of young people themselves. However, the need for participants to feel protected in this setting superseded my academic requirements to retrieve data for my graduate thesis.

### **Data Sources**

Initial data was gathered from the transcripts of interviews and artwork of participants. The artwork included objects from the land, photography, and paintings on canvases. My second source of data was based on the field notes I wrote in narrative or poetic form and the art I

created based on what I witnessed in the group workshop and interviews. The art I created sprang from my felt sense of feelings and thoughts I had during or after interviews. I describe a felt sense as embodied feelings that arise as I sense a shift in my perceptions. Some of the feelings I experienced in this research were sadness, shock, and overwhelm. These feelings were places of my own vulnerability and reflection. In Patricia Leavy's (2017) words, "the inscribed body serves as a site where social meanings are created and resisted" (p. 196). Elizabeth Grosz (1994) stresses that "the body is not outside of history, for it is produced through and in history" (p. 148).

Creating art from a felt sense, I had no preconceptions about what the art should look like. I surrendered to not knowing what the outcome might be. I created art about the expressions, pauses, hesitations, and cautious tones of participants as they talked about issues related to violence, as well as their expressions of resistance and resilience. Many of these shifts are expressed in my final artwork in the conclusion of this thesis. I asked myself: What am I seeing differently? What do I sense? What feelings arise out of the silencing I am witnessing? What do I notice about the resistance and resilience participants express?

The art I created to express this felt sense included assemblage art from objects from land in the north (stones, hide, feathers), data poems, paintings, and narratives. An assemblage is art that is created by assembling different elements, often everyday objects, found or bought by the artist (Tate Gallery, 2019). I documented this art through video and photographs to present it in this thesis. The data poems I created came from interviews with participants. I incorporated the poems into digital collages with photographs I had taken while tanning hides with a cultural leader and walking on the land in the north. I created these poems, not to (re)mythologize, but to

honour and acknowledge the words of the girls and women who spoke about the strength and resilience of women and their ancestors in their Nation.

As another source of data, I created art from feelings that arose as I walked on the land after the interviews and workshops. I use walking on the land and art making to incorporate my embodied connections to how I am witnessing on the land where I am situated in this research. Anzaldúa (1987) conveys the potentials land and body possess to amplify transformation through images; she writes that “for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil” (p. 97). Walking on the land in the north for me is way to feel embodied. Without the sounds of city traffic and cement beneath my feet, my senses effortlessly connect to the earth, the sounds of rushing water, and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

I use art in this research process to witness differently, to use my senses and body to shift my perceptions, to attempt to create different ways to hear the testimonies of Indigenous girls as they speak (or don't speak) about violence, and to challenge how knowledge in traditional research is constructed. For me, witnessing through art is not about promising a brighter future or displaying for an audience how I am using decolonizing objectives of reconciliation. Instead it is a way to stay in the intersubjective relationality of the tensions, vast complexities, and silencing that so often pervade the subject of violence.

Researching sexualized violence requires witnessing that is reflective, generative, embodied, emotional, relational, and reciprocal (Hunt, 2014). As David Simpson (2006) notes, witnessing violence is an intimate space that is not a place for impassive observers. In this art process I ask myself: What am I understanding, taking, hearing, giving in this space between myself and the participants? Is there something more generative and honouring that can be

created? Is there space in this exchange to create safer places for girls to tell their stories and to be heard?

I use embodied arts-based methods to redefine for myself, how I witness. Witnessing in this way incites alternative ways to listen, hear, and seek innovative forms of expression, not necessarily through speech or narratives (McCormack, 2014). In this research, I do not wish to be simply a spectator or, as David Simpson (2006) describes, “the person who simply notices but does not act” (p. 3). To shift from an engagement beyond a voyeur (Lindroos & Möller, 2017) requires feeling and embodiment of what is being heard (McCormack, 2014). I found using expression through art a particularly powerful perspective from which to witness. Creating art unsettled my perceptions in ways that allowed for alternative spaces of knowledge to be created where I could challenge the social or political constructs inherent in the complexity of this work. Grant Kester (2011) notes the “ability of aesthetic experience to transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions” (p. 11).

Witnessing differently requires methods that are fluid and imaginative and encompass a diversity of methods. Aesthetics in arts-based inquiry is not just a philosophy of art; it incorporates alternative ways to speak, hear, sense, and witness (Finley, 2008; McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research is an emotive, emancipatory research method that uses “artful” ways of knowing and experiencing the world. As a nonlinear mode of inquiry, arts-based research encompasses uncertainty and mystery and dissuades reliability and predictability (McNiff, 1998). Arts-based research is emergent and shifts according to place and relationship; therefore, it cannot be subsumed to a fixed set of methods or follow a standardized research methodology (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

I also created art in this thesis to disrupt what Julia Emberley (2014: x) refers to as “hardened irrefutable regimes of truth” in research and traditional academic knowledge. With “an agenda for radical cultural practice” (hooks, 1989a, p. 19), my practice is to create with the intention of initiating discussions and fostering a fluidity of perceptions as I research and reflect on the “outcomes” of sexualized violence in remote Indigenous communities. The art I create conveys emotional knowledge, a type of knowledge that is often undermined in scholarly and scientific literature (Million, 2009). This method challenges scientific ways of knowing in academic research and disrupts how “traditional” knowledge is created and disseminated. To use Finley’s (2008) words, using art and aesthetic ways of knowing in research is an “act of rebellion against the monolithic ‘truth’ that science is supposed to entail” (p. 77).

Arts-based methods also incorporate a decolonizing objective (Smith, 2012) independent of hegemonic Western thought. Arts-based methods emerged from a need to revolutionize “institutionalized classist, racist, and colonializing ways of experiencing and discoursing about human experience” (Finley, 2008, p. 77). (Re)envisioning knowledge requires emancipatory epistemologies that are unsettling and counter-hegemonic. To create alternate spaces for knowledge production, I am inspired by Leanne Simpson’s (2011) words and reflections on unsettling rigid conceptions of liberal solidarity and hegemonic fixity by “interrogating the spaces of empire and envisioning and performing ways out of it” (p. 98). Alternative spaces in academics and inquiries are required for Indigenous girls to be heard when they speak about the violence they experience.

### **Data Analysis**

Having situated myself in a borderland feminist and witnessing methodology, I looked to develop methods of analysis that incorporated data from art and narrative interviews of participants and an analysis of my own reflections on my own process throughout this research.

This analysis emerged for the purpose of acknowledging the intimate spaces of vulnerability and often unspoken silences inherent in researching sexualized violence. While my analysis of the interviews and artwork identified key themes and patterns, I did not follow a prescriptive thematic analysis process; instead my analytical process was more emergent and fluid, engaging multiple readings and viewings across interviews and artwork, constantly linking back to my own responses, and to the literature. I first listened repeatedly to the interviews and transcribed them in written format to identify key themes, currents, connections, and disconnections in each individual story, and across stories and artwork. I listened and looked deeply to identify pauses, hesitations, silences, refusals, and resistances to create a fuller sense of what was being expressed by the participants. I paid attention to what was not shared, and to the tensions and contradictions in and across each story and artwork. I considered the art on its own, but also in the context of what each participant shared verbally. After the interviews and art workshops, I created my own art to reflect on my thoughts and feelings about what had been shared and created by participants. Some of the interviews I conducted were deeply personal and participants shared with me intimate stories I refuse to allow academic “knowing” to intrude upon. There were many spaces of vulnerability in this research that included silences, expressions of shame, and requests for absolute privacy. In a way, many of our conversations served more a space of private connection than a process of sharing for dissemination. I struggled with exposing these places of vulnerability as items of analysis and outcomes to be published in academic or public spaces. Ultimately, I chose not to include some stories and observations for analysis in this research. I did not include details, observations, or narratives that were discussed when my recording devices were turned off, or topics that were not part of the research questions. I chose to distinguish these stories, outside the parameters of the research

framework, as private conversations and therefore chose to exclude them. What was most needed by participants was to be heard, honoured, and for their privacy to be respected.

I valued the spaces of analysis where I could reflect on my position as a witness. Analyzing my experiences through art allowed me to be engaged and aware in a creative way where I could interweave multiple perspectives into my own art expressions. I analyzed this art by writing words and narratives that emerged as I reflected on what I had created. In this analysis of personal reflections I incorporated literature knowledge, participants' experiences, feelings I experienced on the land, my personal subjective knowledge, etc. Arts-based research places value on this type of analysis because of the potential for different types of research practices to emerge that incorporate multiple meanings that open up to alternative questions and ways of knowing (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Springgay & Irwin, 2005). This type of analysis allows for meanings to emerge that would otherwise be obscured through more traditional forms of research (Springgay & Irwin, 2005).

The next two chapters of the thesis are pieces I wrote for publication. Therefore, some repetitions are necessarily included. Although the project rationale, methods and narratives across the chapters repeat, the publications are distinct in their focus. Chapter 3 entitled "Lighting Fires of Alternative Imaginings: The Ethics of Re-searching Sexualized Violence With Indigenous Girls in Rural Communities" focuses on the ethical framework of this research and Chapter 4, entitled "Imagining Alternative Spaces: Researching Sexualized violence with Indigenous Girls in Northern Canada," focuses specifically on the outcomes of the study and my framework of arts-based witnessing.

### **Chapter 3. Lighting Fires of Alternative Imaginings: Book Chapter for Publication**

#### **Lighting Fires of Alternative Imaginings: The Ethics of Re-searching Sexualized Violence with Indigenous Girls in Rural Communities**

High numbers of Indigenous girls in Canada and around the world are targeted for sexualized violence. Transformative change is essential and long overdue (de Finney, 2016; Sikka, 2009), but how might we take ethical, innovative action to ignite such change and establish safer spaces for Indigenous girls? Research provides one pathway, but both research and mainstream media tend to focus on the lives of Indigenous girls in terms of risk and crisis. The danger of this damage-centered approach is that girls are seen as “problems to be solved and subjects to be rescued” (de Finney, 2016, p. 21). Despite systemic barriers that undermine their agency and preclude community cultural continuity, Indigenous girls are not victims. (It is important to note here that to prevent the likelihood of this approach being taken and to maintain confidentiality, all participants in my research are anonymous in this chapter, including Elders, knowledge holders, and other community members.) A respected Elder once told me that his wish for girls in his community was to “feel dignity and see themselves as sacred” (name, personal correspondence, month, year). However, for girls and youth to see themselves as sacred requires “intimate spaces of witnessing” (Clark, 2016a, p. 56) with “on-the-ground practices of freedom” (Coulthard, 2007, p. 444). These practices are referred to as being on-the ground because they connect to land and community. They are interwoven with culture, relations, sovereignty, and resistance. For Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2007), “there are . . . many Indigenous families and communities who possess the ancient memories of another way of knowing that informs many of their contemporary practices” (p. 115). She writes, “When the foundations of those memories are disturbed . . . space sometimes is created for alternative imaginings to be

voiced, to be sung, and to be heard (again)” (p. 115). In my work as an art therapist, frontline service provider, artist, and child and youth advocate in a rural Indigenous community in Canada, I ask how spaces for Indigenous girls can be created for such alternative imaginings.

In this chapter, I reflect on the ethical and theoretical foundations of conducting research about sexualized violence with Indigenous girls and young women in rural Indigenous communities in Canada as part of a research project called Sisters Rising. Engaging with Indigenous and borderland feminisms (which I define below), I use reflexivity with visual-arts-based inquiry to unsettle my relationships with the communities with whom I work and the land on which I work, reaching beyond what is thought of as the *right* or *good* of traditional ethics. After providing a brief background and describing the research context and the Sisters Rising project of which my work was a part, I reflect on the ethics of my position as a witness, on the ethics of honouring refusal, on the tensions of disseminating visual stories of rural communities, and on the imperative to acknowledge Indigenous resistance.

In the context of the focus on transnational girlhoods in this edited book, I explore how traditional research ethics intersect with Indigenous girls who live in rural communities. This includes a consideration of how an ethical framework is influenced by Indigenous values and discussions by the girls themselves. Transnational feminism supports girls in speaking about issues in their communities to global policymakers and on the international stage. Stories about violence are sometimes unspeakable. How do researchers honour girls’ voices as well as their refusal to talk about sexualized violence?

Discussions about research ethics often focus on the dilemmas that researchers encounter with parameters outlined by institutional review boards, but these parameters are seldom informed by Indigenous values or community frameworks, such as the foregrounding of

connections to land. Incorporating land in ethics is vital, however, not only because it recenters body and sexual sovereignty (de Finney et al., 2018), but because, as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) insist in the very title of their article, “decolonization is not a metaphor.” It “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 1). Thus, my ethics and methodology are informed by the imperative that communities address violence against Indigenous girls, and by an equal imperative for communities to enact change on their own terms.

### **Background**

Sexualized violence against Indigenous girls in Canada has been perpetuated through centuries of colonial state violence of displacement and assimilation, patriarchy, and racial inequity (Clark, 2016a; de Finney et al., 2018; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011). As Julia Emberley (2014) reminds us, Indigenous female bodies “came to embody violence” (p. 152) as a result of patriarchal and colonial representations and policies constructed by the state. These representations dishonour Indigenous young women by constructing them “within an ontology of victimization” (Emberley, 2014, p. 2). As state-sponsored initiatives such as the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls investigate an epidemic of violence against Indigenous women, the strengths, visions, and resistance of Indigenous youth and women are often co-opted and subsumed within ideals of settler benevolence and legitimacy (Clark, 2016b; Hargreaves, 2017). Representational violence embedded in state-sponsored research, inquiries, social change movements, media, and public discourse stifles the embodied vitality of Indigenous girls (Clark, 2016a, 2016b; de Finney, 2016, 2017). In a nation in which tropes of reconciliation have become entrenched, unsettling them requires researchers to engage in active reflexive spaces that upset hegemonic norms (Ahmed, 2002) and address power inequities. These spaces may be circles of witnessing in which the

stories of sexualized violence against Indigenous youth and their actions are supported through renaming, contesting, retelling, and advocacy. Sisters Rising is one such circle.

### **Sisters Rising**

My ethics in this project are integrated with those of the arts-based research project Sisters Rising, an ongoing collaboration with Indigenous girls, youth of all genders, and community members from urban and rural Indigenous communities in British Columbia (BC), Canada. Sisters Rising is part of a larger Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)-funded international partnership of Canadian and South African researchers and community groups entitled “Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-Led ‘From the Ground Up’ Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa” (Mitchell & Moletsane, 2018).

The Sisters Rising project takes an Indigenous approach to community and land-based research “to ensure self-determination, consent, and dignity at every step, and to honor the connection between our stories and our relations” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 26). This project “challenges the victim-blaming climate of racialized gender violence by recentering Indigenous values and linking body sovereignty to questions of decolonization and land sovereignty” (p. 24). The project’s goals emerge from witnessing the significant will, dignity, and creativity Indigenous girls demonstrate despite sexualized violence (de Finney et al., 2018). The vision of Sisters Rising is to create an ethical framework for Indigenous anti-violence movements that focus on kinship making, place interconnectedness, and self-determination.

Participants engage in arts-based research workshops to explore topics such as dignity, safety, sexualized and gender violence, and land-based well-being. Multimedia methods are

employed, and many of the artworks created (such as photographs, videos, and digital collages) are displayed on the project website (<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/sistersrising/>).

The ethical and methodological commitment to body and land sovereignty in Sisters Rising is informed by the researchers “working in a good way” (Wilson, 2008, p. 24) to use their experiences “as mothers, aunties, cousins, community members, kin, and children of our homelands” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 26). The participants are asked a number of questions.

What do young women need to create safe space in their communities to talk about sexualized violence?

What does dignity look like?

What contributes to wellness?

What do girls and youth need from their homelands, ancestors, families, and communities to support self-determination?

### **Sisters Rising Project in Rural Northern British Columbia**

As part of the Sisters Rising project, I hosted group and individual arts-based workshops in a rural Indigenous community in northern BC.

#### **Research Context**

Indigenous girls and young people in rural communities, “with the weight of colonial history at their backs” (de Finney et al., in press), are affected by circumstances of geographic isolation that increase their risk and vulnerability to violence. Community organizations in isolated communities and so-called Indian reserves identify a lack of appropriate services that incorporate the specific needs of rural areas and Indigenous frameworks (Hunt, 2007; National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, 2006). This service lack creates gaps in social supports, making youth more vulnerable to violence (de Finney et al., 2018; Hunt, 2007; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011). State-controlled justice systems are a glaring example of how these gaps come about. Often, girls wait for months and sometimes years for

what is presented as justice to be carried out towards perpetrators of violence against them. As a Sisters Rising participant, stated,

Nowadays when a girl gets sexually assaulted or something happens it takes so long for the cops to talk to the girls and the courts take a while, especially in this rez compared to other cities. Some natives have to wait for court for almost a year. Things need to change.

Many additional factors increase the vulnerability of youth in isolated areas. Studies on the sexual exploitation of Indigenous youth in rural BC communities found that poverty, substance misuse, resource-based economies, lack of transportation, and challenges related to gender-ascribed roles are all factors that increase the risk of violence. Studies have also identified how denial and silence about sexualized violence in communities perpetuates cycles of abuse. Because sexual exploitation is often interconnected within community and family it is frequently undisclosed; sexualized violence “is often a taboo subject that is difficult to address” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 29). When these factors intersect, as they do in communities along what has been named *The Highway of Tears*<sup>2</sup> in northern BC, Indigenous girls are “targeted for violence” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 21).

## **Methodology**

Young people aged 13 to 18 who self-identified as on- or off-reserve First Nations, Métis, or Indigenous were invited to participate in arts-based workshops. Recruitment was flexible and included any youth interested in taking part. Community leaders and family members were also invited to participate. Using land-based materials such as bark, stones, feathers, hide, and bones,

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<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that from 1969 to 2006, 18 girls and women, many of whom were Indigenous, went missing and/or were murdered along Highway 97 and Highway 5. The latter is a 1500km section of highway in northern BC, Canada, that stretches from Prince George to Prince Rupert. This section of the highway was named “The Highway of Tears” after a vigil held in Terrace, BC to commemorate six women who went missing from this area (Carrier Sekani Family Services, 2019).

participants explored their visions for well-being, leadership, connections to family and ancestors, and ideas about how to stop sexualized violence. My methodology was emergent: using methods of their choice, including sculpture, storytelling, painting, drawing, photography, and walks on the land, participants explored the research questions:

What objects from the land do you connect to?

How do you connect to culture?

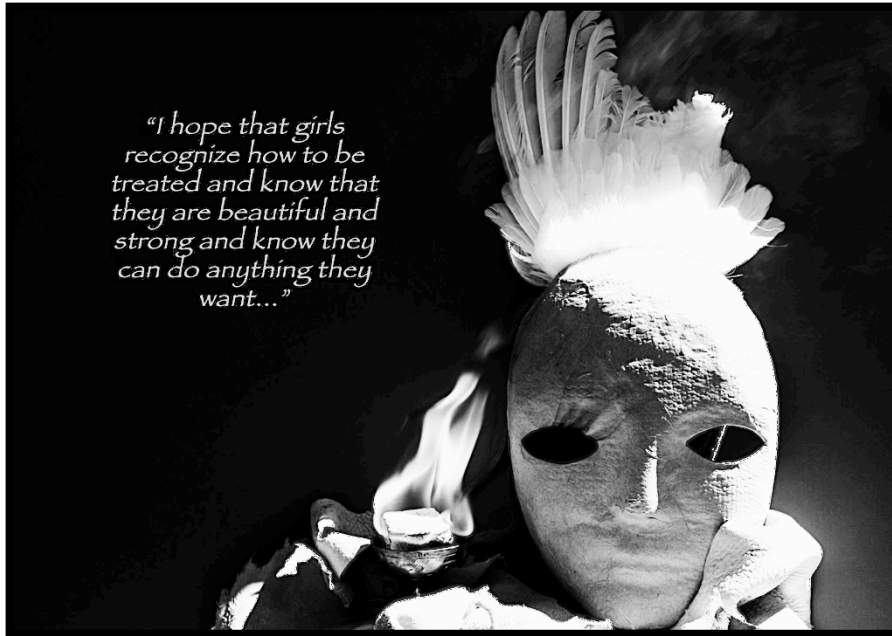
What do girls and young women need to talk about in relation to sexualized violence?

Who are important supports in your community?

What do girls and young women need to do or say address the silencing that surrounds sexualized violence?

### **Re-searching with Ethics of Land and Fire**

In my work, I look to decolonizing methodologies that re-evaluate what is represented in visual documentation and data. This approach involves “understanding art and expression as inextricably linked to spirit and land, and therefore to the need to use research as a process of *re-searching*” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 31, italics in original). Anticipating Western-style theoretical conversations about the ethics of this research, I foreground the “life and form” Indigenous girls “bring to theory every day” (Clark, 2016a, p. 47) through art. I center the words and art of a Sisters Rising participant (see Figure 3.1) as a reminder to readers/witnesses that at the heart of this research are Indigenous girls who experience sexualized violence, and the families, communities, and Nations who honour them.



**Figure 3.1 "I Have Fire!" Mask and text by Sisters Rising participant. Photo by the author.**

This mask, with a ptarmigan wing nested in moose hide, was created by a young participant to represent the culture and strength of women in her Nation. For her, fire represents her strength to "stand our grounds and put our foot down when anything is not okay."

Foregrounding this image is a deliberate move away from Western theory that focuses on facts and academic expertise as foundations of so-called truth. The purpose of this shift is not to invalidate the vital work of theorists, but to (re)center the vital presence of Indigenous girls and their communities. For centuries, generations of Indigenous women, immobilized by nationalistic colonial policies that incarcerated them on reserves, were bound to racialized and gendered spaces. For Indigenous scholar, Mishuana Goeman (2013), these enduring spatial structures, in geography and in constructed knowledge, constrict Indigenous vitality and pathologize Indigenous bodies. My foregrounding the image above is intended not to remythologize space but to (re)map knowledge that addresses "violent atrocities while defining Native futures" (Goeman, p. 13). Goeman defines (re)mapping as a means of continuing the

stories that Gerald Vizenor (1999) has described as “survivance” in the title of his article, that sustain vibrant futures that look towards “geographies that do not limit, contain, or fix the various scales of space from the body to the nation in ways that limit definitions of self and community” (Vizenor, 1999, p. 11).

### **(Re)mapping Space, (Re)mapping Relationships**

I am interested in interrogating ethics using reflexive narratives and arts-based inquiry in a process of unsettling space and relationships through Indigenous and borderland feminisms.

Toni Morrison (1992) writes,

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate of conquest. (p. 3)

I want to do the same in my work, (re)mapping, opening, and storying space and relationships. My existence is a borderland, an experience of living in-between geographical and metaphorical spaces. My ancestors, who came from a mix of cultures and diaspora, were indentured labourers who moved from many homelands to resist divisions of race, class, and colonial policies. To honour what they have survived, I resist identity politics that renounce the inherent fluidity of our lives and, instead, I consider spaces of co-creation. On a global platform, I appreciate the theory and coalition-building across borders (Mohanty, 2003) that transnationalism proposes, however with my relationships with the Indigenous communities with whom I work, I consider carefully our threads of both difference and connection. To our differences, I bring an ethic of incommensurability (Tuck & Yang, 2012a) to what I intend as a project of decolonization, striving to recognize within it what is “distinct and what is sovereign” (p. 1). I acknowledge that solidarity, even under the tenets of transnationalism requires difference to be “uneasy” and “unsettled” (Tuck & Yang, 2012a).

I enter this research space with “ideas of motion” (Grande, 2008, p. 236) and the “felt theory” of Dian Million’s (2009) article title by taking up Leanne Simpson’s project of “interrogating the spaces of empire and envisioning and performing ways out of it” (2011, p. 98). To interrogate ethical spaces, I (re)map this research through Indigenous and borderland feminisms that incorporate values of refusal and resistance. Borderland feminist theorists create “radical spaces of possibility” (hooks, 1989a, p. 24) and challenge gendered and imperial violence to dislocate what Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) name “the colonizing traversals of thresholds” (p. 142). Inhabiting borderlands, bell hooks asserts, is akin to choosing margins to occupy where the “process of envisioning can occur” (1989a, p. 145). To account for the complexities that imperialist borders create, borderland feminism theorizes spaces in which ambiguity and uncertainty are welcomed.

Borderland feminism allows for voices that have been silenced and bodies that have been regulated (Anzaldúa, 1987; Cruz, 2001; Elenes, 1997). Like transnationalism, this framework incorporates as vital sites of knowledge the everyday lives and knowledge of people whose homelands have been dispossessed by colonial subjugation (Cruz, 2001; Million, 2009; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). Intending to resist discourses of traditional knowledge production, borderland theories “utilize creative methodologies to interweave testimonials, interviews, narratives and visual arts” (Elenes, 1997, p. 366) of those who refuse imperial violence that has been inflicted on their bodies, communities, and land. The intention of this interwoven knowledge is to create counter-discourses that embody spaces of resistance (Brown & Strega, 2005) that connect to land. This intention is what I bring to my work of witnessing stories of sexualized violence in Indigenous communities. I have been invited to witness these stories by research communities and by girls in the community where I live and work. However, these

relationships contain tensions of incommensurability, privileges of settler presence, and imbalances of power. For example, my presence as a racialized settler in Canada is implicated in the ethical tensions of this research. In what might be seen as a neoliberal irony, I am a biracial immigrant spared from the injustices of apartheid in South Africa on land where the Canadian state was the architect of similar racist policies, and where I am undoubtedly privileged.

Photographer Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, reflects on the tensions in her position as she witnesses the adversity of the people and communities she photographs, saying, “My privileges are located in the space and land I occupy... located on the same map as their suffering and may—in ways we cannot imagine—be linked to their suffering” (2003, p. 80). As I leave the reserves where I have come to witness stories of sexualized violence, I am reminded that I have the power to leave whenever I want—by virtue of not being rooted to the land ancestrally—and thus I leave across uneven ground.

### **Assemblages**

In this section of the chapter, I incorporate what I think of as art assemblages, intended as aesthetic spaces of assembled knowledge. I integrate photographs, personal narratives, land-based materials, poetry, and the artwork of Sisters Rising participants with “an agenda for radical cultural practice” (hooks, 1989a, p. 19). These assemblages evoke a felt sense of the ethical tensions I encountered while conducting this research. They convey emotional knowledge of collective experience, a type of knowledge that is often undermined in scholarly and scientific literature (Million, 2009). In presenting them, I aim to disrupt what Emberley (2014) refers to as “hardened irrefutable regimes of truth” in research ethics. These assemblages are “testimonial sites” where “contingencies between texts” refuse the fusion of ideas but at the same time “encourage proximities in order to further collaboration and, even, contestations” (p. 9). I

envision them as points of discussion to foster a fluidity of perceptions and lived experiences in relation to the ethics of researching sexualized violence in rural Indigenous communities.

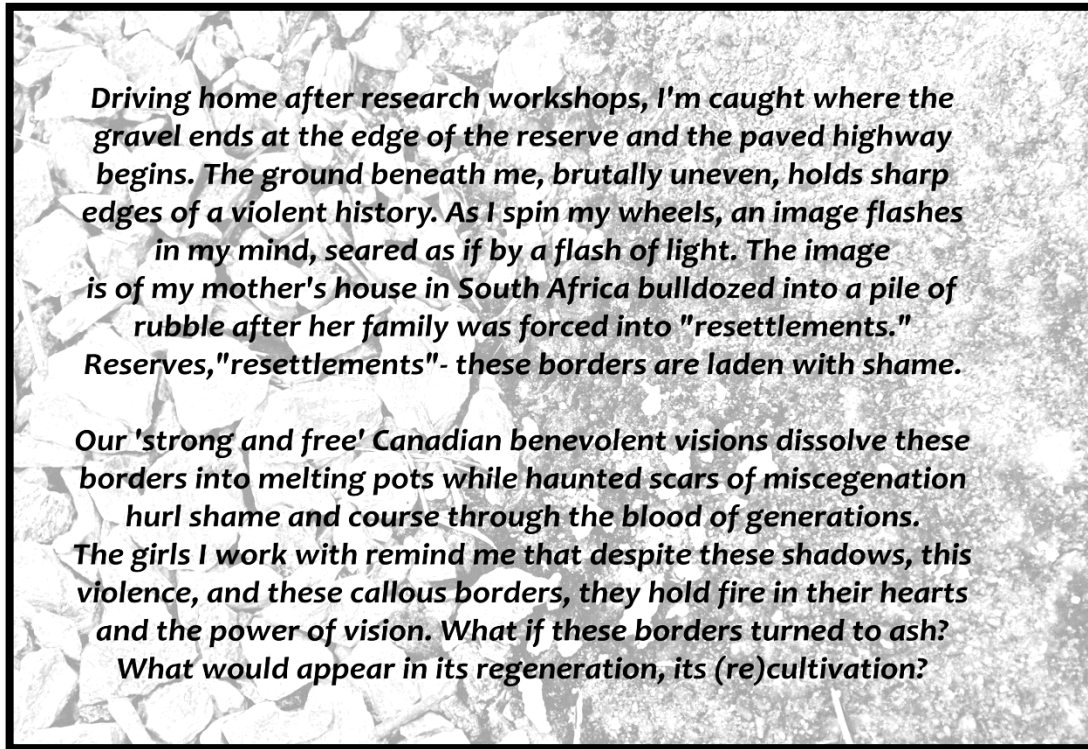


Figure 3.2 “Uneven Borders.” Text and image by the author.

In this narrative, I reflect on the feelings I experienced as I left a reserve after conducting workshops on sexualized violence. As I left to return home, I took a picture at the border of the community (positioned behind the text in Figure 3.2, Uneven Borders) where the gravel of the reserve meets the asphalt of the highway. In the rural north, there are places on the land that are breathtaking and places that are “haunted” (Tuck & Ree, 2013, p. 639) by history. As I conduct workshops and reflect on the words of participants, on the colonial history of reserves, and on my mother’s stories of forced resettlements in South Africa, the borders of this reserve emerge as specters of violence and embodied shame on the land where I research. Although many communities create vitality on reserves, these borders seem to “collapse time, rendering empire’s

foundational past impossible to erase from the national present metaphor of subordination” (Tuck & Ree, p. 629). As I create this assemblage, I feel the discomfort of these borders and consider the privilege of crossing them freely as I enter and leave. I experience this disquiet with a felt sense of lived knowledge that Dian Million thinks of as felt theory—a social discourse on how we “feel our histories as well as think of them” (2009, p. 54).

Left to the whims of colonial and patriarchal policies, the ancestral matriarchs of the girls with whom I work were forced to abandon unbound territories to live in demarcated reserves where state laws diminished their power and presence. Hauntingly similar to the subordinate territories of what are known as informal settlements<sup>3</sup> in South Africa, the Indian reserve in Canada was a zone of colonial incarceration where, as Emberley (2014) explains, “the isolating spatiality of the reserve reified a racially encoded system of difference designed to install pure boundaries of noncontact” (p. 248). Dehumanizing policies, such as the reserve system, bound women to state ownership that extinguished their land and body sovereignty and marked their bodies as objects of violence (Goeman, 2013). The narrative above (Figure 3.2) speak to how this study’s ethics require reflexivity to consider felt theory and the larger historical and contemporary discursive connections to community and land that this research encompasses.

### **Approaching the Topic of Sexualized Violence in Indigenous Northern Communities**

Many research projects have used visual arts-based methods as effective tools to engage children and youth in reflection and change (Malchiodi, 2015; Steele & Malchiodi, 2012). As an art therapist, I witness routinely the transformative and positive influences art imparts to the lives of

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<sup>3</sup> As a result of the shortage of affordable housing in South Africa, poor and low-income citizens live in informal settlements where they experience deficient housing, inadequate housing maintenance, and lack of access to basic services. The informality of informal settlements is indicated by scarce living conditions and social and economic exclusion (Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa, 2018).

youth. However, given the complex historical foundations of sexualized violence in rural Indigenous communities, I looked to the girls with whom I work when I was formulating ethics for this arts-based project and followed their lead.

Young people in rural Indigenous communities often talk about their fear of repercussions of talking about sexualized violence (Hunt, 2007; Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011)—they fear blame and sometimes further violence if perpetrators are identified and sexualized violence is disclosed. According to Sarah Hunt, “abuse is often intergenerational and is a topic that is silenced” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 31). As a frontline worker in an isolated community, I am aware of the “often serious repercussions of speaking out” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 30) and the shame and stigma that envelop abuse. When I ask young people to participate in workshops, I respect their hesitancy to engage in research on sexualized violence, as the following exchange demonstrates.

Sisters Rising participant (SSP): Will anyone hear my voice?

Anna: Do you want anyone to hear your voice?

SSP: (in a whisper) No. Is it okay if it’s just you [who hears my voice]?

Anna: Yes, I won’t let anyone hear this.

SSP: Okay, ya, that’s what I want.

During interviews with community knowledge keepers and youth, a pattern of silence and stigma about sexualized violence in the community emerged. As a participant expressed, “the silence [about sexualized violence] is deafening.” There is a reason for this fear, this urge to protect. As I continued with the workshops, participants expressed concerns about revealing their names publicly. In closed circles, I heard countless stories and witnessed many images created

through art that relate to sexualized violence. Bringing these stories into potentially public spaces through research in a rural community, however, is linked to fear.

In addition, girls and community knowledge keepers informed me of their concerns about how their stories of violence included others. As a participant in another research study expressed, telling one's stories of violence echoed the words of Marnina Gonick and her colleagues (2018) that this “would also mean telling the stories of my family members—my parents and extended family—and these are stories that are not mine to tell” (p. 244). The girls' concerns speak to the values of their collective community in which the ripples of violence affect everyone, not just individuals. Committed to ensuring self-determination and respecting participants' requests to remain anonymous, I choose not to disclose the real names of people or the name of the community in which I am researching, as I mentioned earlier.

### **Honouring Refusal**

The pain that emerges from researching sexualized violence is steeped in shame that pillages dignity. Intimately aware, as a visual storyteller, of the power art holds to move and reveal places of intensity and vulnerability, I consider the ethics of disseminating pain-filled discourses and images that are foregrounded in this research and could be circulated in communities. Despite the emancipatory possibilities of visual research, arts-based methods are also influenced by legacies of colonial inquiry that is driven by a need to “traverse, know, translate, own and exploit” (Martin et al., 2016, p. 521). Tuck and Yang encourage researchers to “take up a stance of objection, one that will interrogate power and privilege, and trace the legacies and enactments of settler colonialism in everyday life” (2014a, p. 814). In this project, I enact what they call an ethic of refusal, where refusal is not just a *no* but a starting place for other forms of qualitative research. For example, in an ethnographic study, Mohawk scholar Audra

Simpson (2007) enacts an ethic of refusal in her community, asking, “What am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?” (p. 77).

My ethics of refusal in this project is not about silencing or hiding traumatic experiences of violence. Instead, the intention is to refuse revealing details of violence that might reproduce stereotypes of marginalized Indigenous youth (like, for example, one-sided images of Indigenous girls as victims) for the purpose of feeding national myths that Indigenous girls and Nations are in need of rescue. With this ethic, I look for ways to honour the voices of Indigenous girls.

An ethics of refusal challenges change theories embedded in colonial research and inquiries during which individuals or communities collect evidence of damage to convince powerful organizations outside their communities to give up resources (Tuck & Yang, 2014b). “Such a theory of change,” Tuck argues, “is flawed for at least three reasons: it requires individuals and communities to depict themselves in a one-dimensional way as damaged; it locates power completely outside of communities; it rarely actually works” (2014b, p. 119).



**Figure 3.3 “Blanketing Stories and Honouring Refusal.” Photo by the author.**

In the image in Figure 3.3, I use art to think and feel through the theory of (honouring) refusal. The bowl in the photograph contains the art and words created by Sisters Rising participants who did not want their names or stories recorded or their art documented. I covered the bowl with objects from the land from the girls’ territory. The art the girls created is powerful, painfully moving, and visually amazing. I honour their refusal to reveal their stories of sexualized violence to the public. Covering the bowl also represents my refusal to reveal intimate stories to satisfy the curiosity of academia and the broader Canadian audience, including myself. As researchers, we want to *know* what is inside, to *know* about this violence. This desire to know

creates an imperative for girls to voice their experiences, but who does this knowledge benefit?

As Shawn Wilson (2008) asks, “What will this knowledge be used for?” (p. 34).

### **Speaking Pain**

As I mentioned above, my ethical commitment in this project is not to silence or to hide traumatic experiences of violence. The stories about sexualized violence I witness in community circles, art therapy sessions, and research workshops are painful, and this pain must be spoken, but as hooks (1989a) insists, speaking pain must be approached with careful awareness of who is asking to hear it.

We know what it is like to be silenced. We know the forces that silence us because they never want us to speak, differ from the forces that say, speak, tell me your story. Only do not speak in the voice of resistance. Only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain. (p. 24)

I am acutely aware that bringing these stories and images of violence into public spheres not only affects those who witness them but carries the risk of inviting victim blaming and victimization. These stories open Indigenous girls—and their communities—to public scrutiny and hegemonic interpretation. Disseminating stories to a Canadian audience takes place within an incommensurable discursive setting in which “the risks of co-option or suppression are high” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 132). As Million (2009) argues, mainstream Canadian society reads stories of Indigenous people through narratives thick with pathology. Such damage-centered research constructs spaces of knowledge that are “saturated in the fantasies of outsiders” (Tuck, 2009b, p. 412). How can researchers, including myself, refuse to exploit or commodify knowledge about sexualized violence in rural Indigenous communities?

As I research sexualized violence in my community, I ask: What am I hearing? What am I asking girls to create? Can we change violence by peering at the pain of others? According to

Sontag (2003), the pain-filled details of suffering are only meant for “those who can alleviate it . . . the rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be” (p. 42). Métis artist David Garneau (2016) insists that Indigenous wounds inflicted through systemic violence are not for public spheres of critique and theorizing; the pain of violence creates private spaces not meant for analysis by the general public or meant for transnational sharing. A Sisters Rising participant, angered by a researcher who based workshops on pain-based stories of youth, expressed this clearly: “I wouldn’t use their stories like that—it’s not honoring them, it’s exploitation.”

David Gaertner (2016) describes how Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore,<sup>4</sup> in her video installation “Apparition,” conveys her refusal to display her pain to the audience and simultaneously refuses explanation or closure. The intention of her piece is to “refuse to speak, to translate, to provide an explanation; it refuses assimilation into a settler-colonial narrative of reconciliation” in which “public display of private (Native) pain leads to individual and national healing” (Garneau, 2016, p. 149). In terms of transnationalism, expressing publicly the issues that affect girls in their communities may not be the place for this notion. Girls also require spaces to say no and refuse to speak. Binding pain in national tropes of reconciliation is ineffective in evoking change in communities because power imbalances remain. As Belmore’s work exemplifies, visual art has compelling potential to reveal inequities of power in violence, but the questions remain: to reveal what, and for whom?

### **(Re)mapping Resistance**

From an ethical perspective, (re)mapping resistance is required in an Indigenous context because state contexts overlook any Indigenous context as an effectual source of social change; Indigenous resistance challenges colonial stereotypes of Indigenous identity and draws on the

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Belmore is a multidisciplinary artist from the Lac Seul First Nation (Anishinaabe). Belmore’s work is rooted in the social and political realities of Indigenous communities in North America.

strengths of community, family, and connections to land and culture (Anderson & Lawrence, 2003; Brant, 1994; de Finney, 2017; L. Simpson, 2011). In the following exchange, a Sisters Rising participant conveys resistance as fire.

SRP: We need to stand our grounds and put our foot down when anything's not okay.

Anna: What helps girls put their foot down?

SRP: The fire!

Anna: Tell me about the fire.

SRP: Fire is my hope that girls recognize how to be treated and know that they are beautiful and strong, and they can do anything they want, and no man can bring you down.

According to Métis writer and Elder Maria Campbell, resistance is “the act of throwing a stone into the water” where “subtle waves of disruption echo out from where stones hit the water” (as cited in L. Simpson, 2011, p. 145). Women and their communities have always enacted resistance, Leanne Simpson (2011) says, and often alongside violence. “As long as there has been colonialism on our lands, there has been resistance” (p. 101). Clark conveys this resistance with the words of activist Beth Brant in saying, “Her voice echoes into me now. *We are not victims*. We are organizers. We are freedom fighters. We are feminists. We are healers. This is not anything new, for centuries it has been so” (Brant, 1994, p. 11, emphasis in original).

Sisters Rising research acknowledges the ethical requirement to create space for dynamic resistance that allows for girls to connect to land and body sovereignty. According to Leanne Simpson (2011), resistance includes “re/articulating legal systems, speaking traditional language, engaging in ceremonial and spiritual pursuits and creating performance-based traditions” (p. 17).

Liberal political movements often confine youth resistance in a public context to narrowly defined terms of measurable social change (Tuck & Yang, 2014b). In contrast, these

two scholars speak of resistance as profound acts of “deep participation, bone-deep participation, acts that would change the lives of participants and the lives of those around them” (p.14). They define this participation as small movements created in the daily acts of living, independent of state-sponsored initiatives. In other words, “resistance is resisting even when we think it is not doing anything, even when we’re not looking” (Tuck & Yang, 2014b, p. 42). They assert that youth resistance “offers other forms of survivance, decolonial possibilities, agnosticism with progress, and desires for dignity that would enrich the currently paltry discussion on theories of change” (p. 47). I have witnessed many forms of resistance in this Sisters Rising project that defy inconsequential discussions of liberal change. As Indigenous girls in rural communities throw stones in the water with their visions of change, how do these ripples expand?

### **Conclusion**

The ethics of this research on violence goes beyond what is considered right or good. Transnational feminists advocate for context-specificity and recognize that “girlhood” is specific to social and spatial intersections of history, geography, and methodological discourses. Research ethics must also take into account how the violence Indigenous girls experience intersects in these social and geographic margins. Ethics requires embodied reflexivity, entangled in the margins of colonial histories, to transform the pain of violence into experiences of empowerment. My reflections on the ethics of this project are offered as beginnings without endings, drops in the water, and a means to undo what we know. It is my hope as a Sisters Rising researcher that in witnessing girls’ stories of violence, however uncomfortable it makes me to do so, I leave behind my timelines, colonizing curiosities, and imperial benevolence to foreground the lives, relationships, and dignity of the girls with whom I do research. Researching sexualized violence with Indigenous girls in rural communities in Canada requires encountering and

(re)mapping my own relationships with land, however unsettling that might be. These encounters require connecting with the hauntings and the memories of land in which we and our participants are intimately entangled. Million (2009) insists, “Those whose subjective history this is must speak it, since the emotional resonance still lives through them; because we are who we are because of this history that continuously haunts our storied bodies and lands” (p. 72).

I leave the intimate, vital stories of the girls with whom I work to be witnessed in reciprocal spaces where the vitality of local traditional knowledge and the strengths of a collective community hold the potential to blanket youth in compassion and “relational and intimate spaces of witnessing” (Clark, 2016a, p. 56). I express gratitude to the knowledge keepers, and young people in Indigenous communities who contribute generously to the Sisters Rising project. With fire in their hearts, they resist violence that has been inflicted on their communities for centuries. Indigenous girls and their communities are powerful—in the words of a Sisters Rising participant, “My power is greater than what I’ve been through.” In their collective resistance, insight, and visions for change, they shatter outsider illusions that they are victims in need of rescue. It is my wish that girls create spaces in their communities, and in the Sisters Rising project, where violence does not speak for them. This is where girls weave together their visions and the ancestral stories that blanket them, creating presence, emergence, and resistance. These visions are always in motion, (re)mapping spaces uninhabited by dispossession or concealment.

## Chapter 4. Imagining Alternative Spaces: Article Written for Publication

### Imagining Alternative Spaces: *Re-searching* Sexualized Violence with Indigenous Girls in Northern Canada

Canada, in its current era of reconciliation with Indigenous Nations, has been envisioned as a “vibrant” nation in which “all peoples achieve their full potential and shared prosperity” (Reconciliation Canada, n.d., para. 1). Within this settler state imaginary (de Finney, 2016), the ongoing prevalence of sexualized violence against Indigenous girls has been glossed over. Taking up this violence as a pressing national issue would require confronting the foundation on which the country’s violent history has been constructed. As Kwagiulth (Kwakwaka’wakw) scholar Sarah Hunt (2010) states, “the roots of sexual violence in Canada are as deep as colonialism itself” (p. 27). Indigenous girls in Canada experience the highest rates of sexualized violence, exploitation, and sex trafficking (Hunt, 2010), yet, for centuries, violence against Indigenous girls has been silenced (de Finney et al., 2018). Recent state-sponsored inquiries aimed at addressing sexualized violence have subsumed the visions and resistance of Indigenous girls within ideals of settler benevolence (Hargreaves, 2017). Recent inquiries have also been inclined to construct the lives of Indigenous girls as “problems to be solved and subjects to be rescued” (de Finney, 2016, p. 21).

This article focuses on my reflections as a witness and research facilitator with an arts-based research project called Sisters Rising, an Indigenous-led research project with Indigenous girls, youth of all genders, and community members from urban and rural Indigenous communities in British Columbia (BC), Canada. Sisters Rising is part of a larger international partnership of Canadian and South African researchers and community groups entitled *Networks*

*for Change and Well-being: Girl-Led 'From the Ground Up' Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa*, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Sisters Rising incorporates arts- and land-based methodologies within an Indigenous framework. This approach involves “understanding art and expression as inextricably linked to spirit and land, and therefore to the need to use research as a process of *re-searching*” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 31, italics in original). The Sisters Rising project incorporates arts and land-based research “to ensure self-determination, consent, and dignity” and to “honor the connection between our stories and our relations” (de Finney et al., 2018, p. 26). The vision of Sisters Rising is to create an ethical framework for Indigenous anti-violence movements that (re)centers Indigenous values and challenges the victim-blaming climate of racialized gender violence (de Finney et al., 2018).

### **Witnessing, Borderlands, and Ethics**

My research in the Sisters Rising project intertwines with my overlapping roles as a child and youth therapist for survivors of sexualized violence, an artist, and a community member in a remote town in northern British Columbia. Also interwoven in this work is my journey of identity and privilege.

My family immigrated to Canada in the 1970s to flee the inhumane policies of racial division in apartheid South Africa. My mother was born and raised in South Africa during the height of apartheid. Her ancestors from Tamil Nadu, India, were employed as indentured laborers after the abolition of slavery in the mid 1800s to work on British owned sugar plantations in Mauritius and South Africa. My father and his family are from northern Britain and Northern Ireland. I bring to this research my family’s experiences of living in transnational “margins” (hooks, 1989b) and “borderlands” (Anzaldúa, 1987) shaped by the intersecting

impacts of the British empire's colonization of India, Africa, and Canada. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes the borderlands as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (p. 3). I have experienced, however, that "unnatural boundaries" are not marginalized places of victimhood; they are spaces where resistance and creativity flourish, and where I am called to task as a witness, as both an uninvited guest in Indigenous territories, and a racialized settler. It is from this vantage point that I witness, work, and research with Indigenous girls, youth and their communities with an ethic of incommensurability (Tuck & Yang, 2012) whereby I acknowledge the differential power embedded in my experiences as a marked, diasporic, immigrant settler, and those of Indigenous peoples in remote northern Canada. As I enter and then leave the reserves in the north where I live and work, I am aware that because I am not rooted in this land ancestrally, I come and go across an uneven ground shaped by my privilege. I bring recognition of this privilege to what I intend as a project of anti-colonization, striving to respect what is "distinct and what is sovereign" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1) in the stories of Indigenous youth and community members in this research. My accountability to my relationships to the community I have worked alongside with for years are central to my ethics in this project. I incorporate the practice of "consensual allyship" (Danforth, 2011, n.p.) in my relationships, which requires consistent dialogue and relationship building (Hunt & Holmes, 2015) within a framework of decolonization. As I engage and listen to stories, I also enact an ethic of refusal (Tuck & Yang, 2012) that discontinues the proliferation of research narratives that Indigenous girls are victims in need of rescue. Such refusal does not simply imply saying *no* to harmful research approaches, but also asking who research benefits, how it reveals issues, and what it contributes to a decolonial ethic (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

In this article, I reflect on the outcomes of this research and on the perspectives of the participants, including girls and community members, to find alternative ways to witness the complexities of this work. I also created my own reflexive data analysis process in response to these community perspectives; I used photography, narratives, art and installations to take action in ways that unsettle and (re)center how stories of violence are heard and circulated. My narratives field notes and art pieces, presented throughout this paper, engage my desire to witness in a way that demands an ethical response to colonial violence that opens the possibility for safer conditions for Indigenous girls to be heard. I reflect on my witnessing with the hope that those who work with Indigenous girls who experience sexualized violence (researchers, academics, frontline workers, etc.) take responsibility for what is being heard (or failing to be heard) and take action to invoke a different response. To frame my responses to what has been shared with me, I return to the lessons of borderland-mestizaje feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). This framework alters relational accountability among Indigenous and racialized diasporic women to include voices that have been silenced and bodies that have been regulated and erased (Elenes, 1997) across transits of colonial empire in the Americas, thus dislodging European hierarchies between north and south, and citizen, native and migrant. Positioning everyday lives as vital sites of knowledge (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002), borderland theories interweave testimonials, narratives, and visual arts with traditional knowledge production and storying (Elenes, 1997). The intended outcome of this interwoven knowledge is counter-discourses capable of generating transformational ideas and politicized spaces of resistance.

## **Sisters Rising in Northern British Columbia**

Having grown up bearing the weight of colonial history, Indigenous girls and youth in remote northern communities are made even more vulnerable to violence by their geographic isolation. Isolated northern communities lack appropriate services to meet the specific needs of youth in rural and remote areas (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011; Jiwani, 1998) which creates gaps in social and legal supports (Pascoe, 2003). State justice systems are a glaring example of these gaps. Often, girls wait for months and sometimes years for police investigations and legal proceedings to be carried out towards perpetrators of violence. As one of my participants—a young woman, aunty, student, and artist—expressed,

Violence is everywhere . . . Nowadays when a girl gets sexually assaulted or something happens it takes so long for the cops to talk to the girls and the courts take a while, especially in this rez compared to other cities. Some natives have to wait for court for almost a year. Things need to change.

Systemic factors heighten the vulnerability of Indigenous girls and youth in isolated areas. Studies on the gendered sexual exploitation of Indigenous girls and youth, Two-spirit and LGBTQ2+ youth, who live in rural BC communities found that poverty, resource-based economies, lack of transportation, and challenges due to gender-ascribed roles are all factors that increase the risk of violence (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011; Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2006). Studies also illustrate how denial and silence about sexualized violence in communities perpetuate cycles of abuse and how, as a result, sexual exploitation and violence are often undisclosed (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011). While youth of all genders, including LGBTQ2+ youth experience both related and distinct forms of violence that require attention, my study focused specifically on the particular ways that Indigenous girls are impacted by historical colonial violence. In communities where I live like those along “the Highway of Tears” in northern BC, a stretch of highway notorious for high rates of gender-based

murders and violence, these multiple factors intersect with fatal consequences: Indigenous girls are specifically “targeted for violence” (Hunt & Justice Institute of British Columbia, 2011, p. 21).

### **Methods**

In a remote community in northern BC, where I have been living and working for fourteen years, I invited youth of all genders aged 13 to 18 who self-identified as on or off-reserve First Nations, Métis, or Indigenous to participate in arts-based workshops and/or interviews. Community members were invited to participate in individual interviews as they hold significant insight into cultural history and connections to culture. Nine youth of all genders and three adult community members chose to participate in the project. All of the participants had ancestral ties to the First Nation of the northern region where the workshops took place. My methodology was deliberately co-created and emergent, a way of committing to my ethic of refusal and to incorporate values of evolving consent and respect for participants and local protocols. To address the stigma and shame often associated with this topic, emergent methods allowed participants to choose their level of engagement and safety in the topic; participants chose options including individual and group sessions, creating art from objects from the land (bark, stones, sinew, feathers, hide, bones), taking photographs outside, and/or walking on the land as a form of walking interview. For instance, two girls opted for a group workshop; they decided to meet together on a Sunday afternoon to create art and talk about the research topic. We meet at a nearby lake where I set up a small table with art supplies, rocks from a nearby river, canvasses and a picnic lunch. For the afternoon, the girls painted on rocks and talked about what needs to change for girls in their community.

The interviews and workshop were not designed to focus on the violence participants had experienced or on painful memories past. The interview questions focused on participants' visions for girls in the future, what they need in their communities, where they find strengths, and the personal connections they have to objects and places on their homeland. Participants were asked questions such as: What objects from the land do you connect to? What do girls and young women need if they are to talk about sexualized violence? What do girls and young women need to address the silencing that surrounds sexualized violence? What are your ideas for change?

Each participant in this study specified how they wanted their stories to be shared and remembered. Whether it was painful truths of sexualized violence or stories of strength and pride, I honoured how participants wanted their stories to be documented and circulated. Although many of the adult community members I interviewed were open to sharing their names, there were many girls who did not want to be identified in any way in the research. Wanting to support the participation of those most excluded from this kind of research, and well aware of how the stories I publish might affect them and those close to them, I honoured their refusal and have chosen not to publish names or identify the communities included in this study.

In developing my arts-based methods, I was inspired by the words of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011), who looks to artists to “interrogate the space of empire, by envisioning and performing ways out of it” (p. 98). Heeding this call for art making as a form of political research, throughout this paper I also draw on my own art-based research practice to reflect on my role in the study, to express what Milan Kundera (1982) describes as “a struggle for memory against forgetting” (p. 4). This struggle against forgetting has been brought to life by many political activists, artists, and writers who urge others to speak

about the past to transform realities and imagine more just ones. As Sara Ahmed (2002) insists, forgetting the past and its stories repeats violence. In circumstances of political oppression, forgetting the past undermines authentic memories and influences people to misremember their own stories and truths. Speaking about the past does not mean entrenching ourselves in the sites of injury. Rather, the task is to break the hold of the past (hooks, 1989a) through action in the present to create more honest futures. With these intentions in mind this article is not intended to sensationalize the despair confronting Indigenous youth in remote northern communities. Following Ahmed, I present the outcomes of Sisters Rising interviews and workshops to remember how “the surfaces of bodies (and their communities) came to be wounded in the first place” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 33).

### **“The Silence Is Killing Us”**

A young woman, aunty, and high school student in northern BC, afraid of speaking about the violence in her community, requested that her voice not be heard in audio recordings and her identity not be revealed in the research.

Sisters Rising participant (SSP): Will anyone hear my voice?

Anna: Do you want anyone to hear your voice?

SSP: (in a whisper) No. Is it okay if it’s just you [who hears my voice]?

Anna: Yes, I won’t let anyone hear this.

I focus on this exchange because the words and sentiments of this young woman impacted how I witness in this work. At the time of this interview, she was experiencing ongoing gender violence (which had already been disclosed and addressed in separate processes). Her hesitancy and fear speak to the palpable struggle many girls in her community face when speaking about sexualized violence beyond the confines of disclosures to authority figures. Bringing these

stories of violence into public spheres not only affects those who witness them but carries the risk of inviting retribution and victim blaming. In this exchange, stories of unspoken violence ebbed and flowed between us. I felt the gravity of this request to not be heard. After this exchange, we talked about violence in a way that felt safe for her. I turned off my voice recorder, put away my research questions, and we went for a walk alongside a nearby river. This exchange is about consensual allyship and refusal. It is not about saying *no* to this research, but rather acknowledging that violence creates intimate spaces and witnessing that requires researchers to “take on the responsibility for listening to the unspoken” (McCormack, 2014, p. 3).

In interviews and workshops, girls often talked about “the unspoken,” how violence is “hushed.” How do I witness the fear embedded in this silencing? “The silence [about sexualized violence] in our community is deafening. The silence is killing us.” These are the words of a participant, a dear friend of mine, who spoke in depth about the sexualized violence she experienced as a young girl. She specified that her story is echoed by many youths in her community. As we created masks adorned with ptarmigan feathers, a young woman talked about the women before her—aunties, mothers, and grandmothers—who bore black and blue marks of violence that were seen but never mentioned. One participant, a mother and youth worker, talked about what she witnessed when she was growing up: “Women being abused, it was hush hush, and it almost became like an acceptable behaviour because no one really, you know, you saw women with black eyes but nothing was really said.”

As I walk on the land in the north, the vast landscapes hold a tranquil silence—a welcome silence that amplifies the rush of flowing rivers and the beat of raven wings. In contrast, the silence that shrouded the topic of sexualized violence in this research was disconcerting, “haunting” (Tuck & Ree, 2013, p. 642); it wanders across this land and is felt in

the most unforeseen places. Hauntings are the persistent reminders of colonial violence that do not disappear with assurances of “innocence and reconciliation” (Tuck & Ree, 2013, p. 638).

Researching sexualized violence requires acknowledging the stories that lie silent but disquieted beneath the land I walk on. Unsettling what is deeply buried is a form of witnessing how these silences came to exist in the first place and recognizing that, as Toni Morrison (1990) expresses, “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’” (p. 210). In closed circles and kitchen conversations, women and community members voice their resistance to the atrocities they are forced to endure, but these stories are not spoken in public spheres. Stories like these, imbued with fear, as Ahmed (2015) reminds us, are still alive: “The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open to the present” (p. 33).

There is a belief among the youth I work with that silence protects, but I witness how it also hides, and a silence that conceals violence is a violent silence. Audre Lorde’s words speak poignantly to the silence that permeated this research: “Enforced silence, the inability to speak, the refusal to speak is a very violent silence, where you know there is a great deal happening but it is not spoken” (interviewed by Hammond, 1990, p. 18). We are constantly reminded in historical and present-day realities that silencing is built on unequal distributions of power. Rebecca Solnit (2017) asks, “Whose story gets told and believed, and who does the telling?” (p. 83). As I witness the silences, I wonder how girls can express their stories differently? Do they always have to *speak* their stories?

### **Witnessing “The Shame”**

#### *A Violent Silence*

*There have been many dark winter mornings when girls enter through the doors of the school where I work, surrounded by whirls of cold, whipping wind and blankets of silence. With the*

*shame they carry, these blankets of silence are violent. Silence smothers the hearts and mouths of the girls I work with, lodges in their throats and chokes their breath. This silence has the power to make them invisible. Deep inside their hoodies, the girls walk by and avoid my gaze, hiding their eyes and necks, sometimes marked with purple and blue. I never ask questions when they walk by. These cloaks of shame are heavy and densely layered with history. This kind of shame revealed too fast ignites, and these girls are already in ashes.*<sup>5</sup>

I created this narrative to give expression to the countless times I have witnessed the heavy coats of shame that veil girls when they experience violence. This shame cannot be deconstructed within individualistic frameworks of self-care—it is embedded in history. Girls expressed in this research that they felt “the shame” and sometimes blamed themselves for the violence they experienced. Some adults shared that by shaming and “blaming” individual girls rather than acknowledging that gender violence is structural and systemic, the message persists that “girls need to change” to avoid being victimized.

Shame about sexualized violence in Indigenous communities intersects with colonial and patriarchal histories of systemic dislocation and forcing Indigenous bodies into marginalized spaces on this land (Emberley, 2014). Leanne Simpson (2011) speaks poignantly about what it is like to carry the weight of historical shame:

If I am honest, the shame that I carry inside of me from the legacy of colonial abuse, the unspoken shame we carry collectively as Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg. It is a shame that is rooted in the humiliation that colonialism has heaped on our peoples for hundreds of years and it is now carried within our bodies, minds, and hearts. . . . To me, this colonial shame felt like not only a tremendous burden to carry, but it also felt displaced. We are not shameful people. We have done nothing wrong. (p. 14)

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<sup>5</sup> I wrote this narrative as part of the coauthored chapter “Sisters Rising: Shape Shifting Settler Violence through Art and Land Retellings” (de Finney et al., 2018).

According to Ahmed (2015), it is the “emotions that thrive that shape history” (p. 12) and “show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present” (p. 12).

Shame was palpable in our research activities. In one example, as the workshop participants and I sorted through sinew and hide to sew in a workshop, a young woman who describes herself as “a quiet leader” talked about how shame and fear prevents girls from talking about sexualized violence in her community: “It’s really hard to talk about why they really don’t talk about it [sexualized violence] is because they feel the shame and they are afraid.” A community leader who has worked with youth in his northern community for decades talked about the shame that he and his family experienced as a result of colonialism in northern Canada: “When you go back to our history . . . what was taught was to be ashamed of who you are.”

### **“Resettlements”**

*Driving home after a research workshop, I’m caught where the gravel ends and the pavement begins between the highway and the reserve. The ground beneath me, brutally uneven, holds sharp edges of a violent history. As I spin my wheels an image flashes in my mind, seared as if by a flash of light. The image is of my mother’s house in South Africa bulldozed into a pile of rubble after her family was forced into “resettlements.” Reserves, resettlements—these borders are laden with shame.*

*As I walk beside a surging river where I live, which has been described as “the lifeblood of the Nation,” and watch the rush of water carve pathways into this rugged landscape, I feel free. Many stories are told about this wild, benevolent river that shape-shifts the landscape as it transforms and creates life. However, like the edges of reserves, there are places on this land that constrict—where I feel the physiological effects of shame intersect with the physicality of*

*place. In this northern landscape, shame haunts, lingering in buildings abandoned after the fur trade and the last gold rush. It lingers in an old Hudson's Bay trading post close to town—a colonial edifice that has been left to rot in the earth. These places reach into the land where, to use Probyn's (2005) words, "the color, the place, the history of bodies all come alive in shame" (p. 40).*

In this narrative, I convey my feelings as I left a reserve after conducting workshops. As I reflect on the words of workshop participants, on the colonial history of reserves, and on my mother's stories of forced resettlements in South Africa, the imperial enforced borders of this reserve emerge as specters of colonial violence and embodied shame on the land where I research. Although many communities create vitality on reserves, these imposed borders seem to "collapse time," as Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013) write, "rendering empire's foundational past impossible to erase from the national present metaphor of subordination" (p. 629).

My integration of borderland feminism in this work emerges from an intimate understanding of what it is to be marginalized, which I have experienced as a challenging but generative journey. After the Group Areas Act of 1950 in South Africa was established, my mother's home was bulldozed to rubble and her family was moved to settlements outside of "white areas." When I was a child, my mother occasionally told me stories, like this one, of growing up as a young Indian girl in the era of apartheid. Her feelings of being shamed for her race and colour were always alive in her stories. The shame my mother experienced, like the shame Leanne Simpson expresses, is not the individualistic notion of emotions inherent in Western psychological theories. This echoes what I witnessed in this study: Heaped on women through actively architected racist and patriarchal policies, layers of displaced shame have deepened the silencing and concealment of sexualized violence.

## Witnessing Resistance and Testimony

Despite ongoing colonialism, the land where I live and carry out this research is imbued with stories of resistance and testimony of Indigenous youth, their Nations, and their ancestors. Power inheres in such stories (Goeman, 2013). As Leanne Simpson (2011) says, “storytelling is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality” (p. 33).

In my work and in this project, I witness the significant creativity and will of communities, girls, and youth of all genders, recognizing that they and the generations before them have always enacted resistance in the face of violence.



**Figure 4.1 “Power.” Photo by the author.**

A young woman chose the painted rock, moose hide, and mask in this photo (Figure 4.1) to represent her power. She said, as she assembled the objects together, “My power is greater

than what I've been through." I took this photograph of the mask, rock, and moose hide to honour her art and words.

I witness with an understanding that borderlands are spaces of regeneration and infinite possibilities. "Testimony" represents a discourse for "organizing the fragments of memory that traumatic histories leave in their wake" (Emberley, 2014, p. 1). Testimonies, according to Julia Emberley (2014), are not just memories of trauma that feed historical records of colonialism—they are the resistance in community stories that ignites the creativity to imagine different realities. Leanne Simpson (2011) says, "As long as there has been colonialism on our lands, there has been resistance" (p. 101). Drawing on the strengths of the community, family, and connections to land and culture, Indigenous resistance challenges colonial stereotypes that Indigenous girls are victims in need of rescue (Clark, 2016a; de Finney et al., 2018). As many of the girls and women I interviewed expressed, the strength and resistance of women in the north has always existed. As we sorted through rocks from a nearby river to paint, a Sisters Rising participant, a mother, aunty, language and cultural teacher, told me that rocks from the river in her homeland "tell a million stories" of the generations of women who "came before." She talked about how past generations are sources of strength: "I used to hear stories about my grandma and the strength she held when they were on the trails on this land and I always try to imagine that for us . . . there is strength in my blood . . ."

My work as part of this thesis has extended beyond my own interviews, to working with the Sisters Rising team to engage in broader collaborations among diverse communities. For example, I was a research facilitator and chaperone for three provincial and national forums where girls and community members from various communities met to share stories, engage in ceremony, and develop action plans. For instance, in October 2019, over a hundred Sister Rising

participants from Canada and South Africa—girls, youth of all genders, community members, elders, researchers, and practice and policy stakeholders—gathered in a three-day forum focused on centering community-rooted strategies to support Indigenous body and land sovereignty. During this gathering, I had the great honour of curating a living, walk-through art-ceremonial space that showcased art, stories and land-based medicines from participants from Canada and South Africa. The gathering included “calls to witness” and “calls to action” to shift audience and stakeholders out of a passive stance.



**Figure 4.2 “Cedar Figure.” Sisters Rising Art Exhibit. Photo by the author.**

At the center of the walk-through gallery was a cedar figure I created (Figure 4.2) to express the vital and healing connection of land to body and to honour the resistance of ancestors

before us. Girls, youth of all genders, and community members created art that focused on their intentions for action and placed it on or around the cedar figure. Messages such as “We are strong, hopeful, powerful, connected,” “Haisla. Let’s stand as one body, mind and our souls. Just like the strands of a braid, we will be strong and we’ll never break,” and “We are important. We are strong” spoke to imagining an existence where girls and youth of all genders are honoured—having this witnessed by stakeholders including service providers, researchers, community members, and policy makers—is perhaps one way to begin the process of creating a more just reality.

### **Creating Alternative Visions**

(Re)mapping is defined by Tonawanda Band of Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013) as creating stories of survivance that sustain “geographies that do not limit, contain, or fix the various scales of space from the body to the nation in ways that limit definitions of self and community staked out as property” (p. 11). The purpose of creating such “spatial sovereignty” (Goeman, 2013) in this project, where girls’ art and words are grounded in their relationships to land and culture, is not to mythologize space with ideals of Native romanticism, but to (re)map constructs that address sexualized violence against Indigenous girls “while defining Native futures” (Goeman, 2013, p. 13). According to Goeman (2013), colonial policies of dispossession “have set up gendered colonial structures that continue to dominate and enact violence at both the interpersonal and state level” (p. 19). These structures, such as the reserve system, the settler justice system and the Indian Act, require unsettling because hegemonic ideologies are still at play, upholding the systemic inequalities that sustain sexualized violence.

What would it take for our Canadian nation state to hear and believe Indigenous girls? According to McCormack (2014), “our ethical responsibility is to listen to what we cannot

understand. . . . In bearing witness to the unknown we open up knowledge to further questions and destabilize existing certainties and practices” (p. 164). Bearing witness to the unknown and unspeakable is a key component of this research and of my professional work as a sexual violence counselor. Witnessing the unknown requires reaching deep into the roots of histories and the systems I work with to reveal injustices—however uncomfortable doing so might make me—to centre generative action. I unsettle what I think I know about my profession and work in consensual allyship to envision a new reality where collective strength is centered. Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us, as she speaks of the power imbalances inherent in gender violence, that we have a “grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe” (p. 57). I am constantly reminded in the Sisters Rising project that consensual allyship is not a comfortable place with a promise of an easy fix or simple redress and reconciliation. Comfort in disquiet is required to find a different way forward.

The girls I work with remind me that despite the shadows and the violence in their lives, they hold fire in their hearts and the power of vision; they remind me of the truth-telling that girls bring to life every day. As Métis scholar Natalie Clark describes, “Indigenous girls . . . are bringing life and form to theory every day” (Clark, 2016a, p. 47). As we talked about the difficulties of speaking about sexualized violence in this northern community, a Sister Rising participant, a young woman and artist I have known for many years, told me, “no one can ever know what this is like.” I am humbled by these words. I refuse to claim to know what Indigenous girls experience. I refuse to recommend a quick fix to a violence that is centuries old. This would be violence in itself.

## Chapter 5. Art as Witnessing

In this final chapter, I focus on my concluding thoughts as a researcher-artist in this study. I include a reflexive analysis that incorporates my reflections on action-orientated witnessing through art. In this witnessing, I refuse to be an unreceptive observer. Rather, I support action through art making, unsettling, and (re)storying. The art and data I present in this chapter includes my own artwork as well as the collaborative pieces I contributed to through the Sisters Rising project.

The art I created in this final chapter reflects my “agenda for radical cultural practice” (hooks, 1989a, p. 19) to generate discourse and a fluidity of perceptions with the purpose of inciting action and creating different responses. The images I created are a “felt sense” of witnessing and finding ways to be with the tensions of how violence intersects on this land, in this context.

In the first section, “What I Heard,” and in the second section, “Researching Differently,” I present photographs of art assemblages I created part of my reflexive analysis to reflect on the deeper histories of colonial violence, often untold, that shape the context of the violence Indigenous girls, families, and communities experience.

In the next section, “Strength Runs Through my Blood,” I present more art and quotes of the girls I worked with in the northern community where I researched. As part of a larger action piece in the Sisters Rising study, I curated an art exhibition and created an installation to support action through witnessing and collective art making. I present photographs of this action in the section “Collective Action, Collective Witnessing.”

In “Creating Alternatives for Professional Practice” I offer ideas of how this research might contribute to the work of practitioners and reflect on possibilities for further inquiries into

violence against Indigenous girls and youth in northern communities from a perspective of active witnessing. In the final section, “What Could Come Next ?” I pose questions and reflect on what is required to move forward in this topic to transform these perpetual climates of gender-based violence.

## What I Heard



**Figure 5.1 “Brown Faces Bent Backs.” Photo by the author.**

*Car flowing down a lava of highway  
Just happened to glance out of the window  
In time to see brown faces bent backs  
like prehistoric boulders in a field  
so common a sight no one  
notices*

(Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 124)

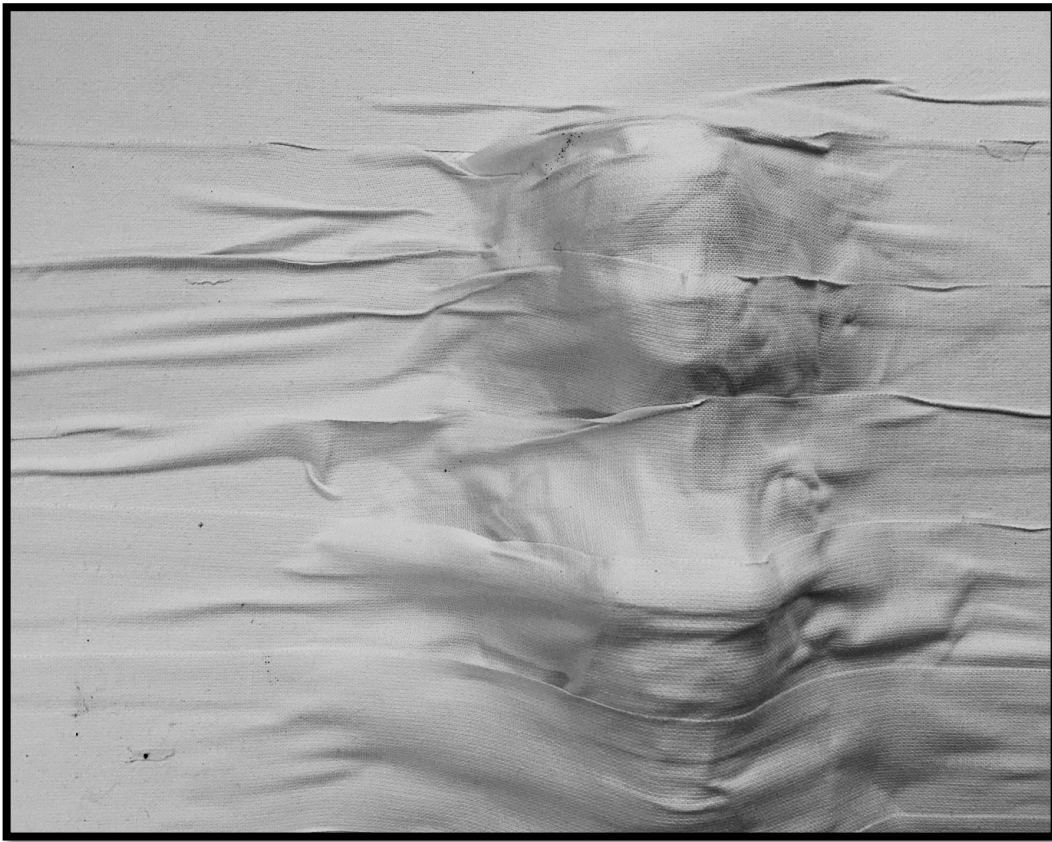
I created the image above (Figure 5.1) from clay, and as I sculpted it, I imagined two women bent over, hands calloused, bending and lifting in a field. When the clay was dry, I photographed the sculpture behind a plastic cover so the details of the women would not be seen. I positioned the figures in this way to invoke a feeling of indifference and invisibility about the “objects” in the image.

I created the image after reading Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) poem “El Sonovabitché” to express my initial reflections in this research as I sifted through literature on sexualized violence against Indigenous girls and women. I include this reflection because it was an opening point to my methodology of witnessing; Anzaldúa’s poem reveals how she actively uses poetry to witness the tension and rage she feels about the representation of Indigenous women in her country. In this poem she expresses: “the anger scorching me/my throat so tight I can/ barely get the words out” (p. 124). Her words are powerful and give expression to how Indigenous women have been (and are) represented in countries with histories of colonial exploitation. For her, the fields on the land she sees are sites of exploitation and the bodies of women are “prehistoric boulders” marked as objects of violence. Her rage emerges from her anguish that her country is indifferent to this violence. The assemblage I created in response to my research and to the poem represents the colonial exploitation that constructed women’s bodies as property to be owned. This violence of exploitation reaches deep into the histories of many women across the globe who have been marginalized for their race, gender, and sexuality. The violence participants speak about in *Sisters Rising* is shaped by heteropatriarchal and colonial representations and policies constructed by the state where, historically, Indigenous female bodies “came to embody violence” (Emberley, 2014, p. 152). Creating and moulding this image was a way to reflect on

the tensions of this work and give testimony to the injustice of how Indigenous women are symbolized and this violence discounted.

Representations that dishonour Indigenous young women, however, cannot be constructed solely “within an ontology of victimization” (Emberley, 2014, p. 2). The outcomes of my research shared throughout this final chapter incite questions such as these: How does this representation need to change? As this indifference towards violence against Indigenous girls is perpetuated in our country, what do I commit to? Why do these issues constantly fail to matter (Hunt, 2014)? What do I commit to as I witness?

## Researching Differently



**Figure 5.2 “Bound.” Photo by the author.**

### **Broken, in Need of Intervention**

A plethora of research focuses on the risk and crisis of violence against Indigenous girls (de Finney et al., 2018). I created the image in Figure 5.2 above to represent how women are bound to fixed representations, inquiries, and interventions by Canada’s hegemonic state. The violence girls experience is also shrouded by medicalized concepts of trauma. I used plaster and medical tape to fix the figure to the background to symbolize how Indigenous girls in these fixed representations are seen as “faceless and broken” (de Finney, 2016, p. 21). Extractive research practices that render girls and their communities as broken binds Indigenous girls into stereotypes that depict them as victims (Clark, 2012). According to (Tuck & Yang, 2014),

“victimry leaves native young people with nothing to imagine . . . Native young people have been hard pressed to find a referent for themselves, not one referent outside of victimry” (p. 233). The risk of this damage-centered approach in research is that Indigenous girls are seen as “problems to be solved and subjects to be rescued” (de Finney, 2016, p. 21). Indeed, hegemonic discourses of victimization and rescue are a curious attraction for the Canadian nation. According to Roger Simon (2017), the collective identity established in Canada related to Indigenous trauma reflects “idealizations of empathy, identification, and facile notions of solidarity that simply promote settler state citizenship” (p. 136).

According to Tuck and Yang (2012), damage-centered research operates within a theory of change in which injury must be proven in order to persuade outside audiences that amends are required. These reparations take the form of more resources, settlements, and other “material, political, and sovereign adjustments (p. 227). The result of this kind of research is that it requires marginalized communities to position themselves as flawed and incapable of creating change (Tuck, 2009b). In addition to systemic barriers that undermine their agency and preclude community cultural continuity, Indigenous girls are not seen as worthy of state funding and justice because they “do not fit the victim image that has been negotiated and sustained by societal discourses” (de Finney, 2016, p. 28).

These colonial discourses have contributed to a fixity of norms (Foucault, 1980) that reproduces systems and projects based on the perception that Indigenous communities are vulnerable and in need of outside conciliation and that individuals and communities are required to collect evidence of their brokenness to legitimize funding and sponsorship by organizations outside their communities (Tuck, 2009a). According to Tuck and Yang (2014b), “such a theory of change is flawed for at least three reasons: it requires individuals and communities to depict

themselves in a one-dimensional way as damaged; it locates power completely outside of communities; it rarely actually works” (p. 244). In this research project, I struggled with the tensions of these misrepresentations and asked, how do I inquire into sexualized violence without adding to these discourses of rescue and victimization?

With visions of good and evil, our gazes are focused on victims and perpetrators, with little attention paid to the systems that intersect in the lives of Indigenous girls. Within the depths of this benevolence are deep shadows. Stories about the pain of others involve complex relations of power (Ahmed, 2004). Although generosity and benevolence, our national character, show us to be sympathetic and giving, “the West gives to others only insofar as it is forgotten what the West has taken in its very capacity to give in the first place . . . So the West takes and gives and in the moment of giving repeats as well as conceals the taking” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 22). This quote speaks to the power and privilege inherent in nations who “give” to marginalized populations (such as Indigenous communities). Canada is epitomized as “good” and “benevolent” as it attempts to repair what it has already taken and damaged through colonial policies. Sherene Razack (2007) describes how a “politics of rescue” becomes another way of binding pain to create tropes of national healing with colonial benevolence:

We come to know ourselves as a compassionate people; indeed, trauma suggests that it is our very vulnerability to pain that marks us as Canadians. From our position as witness, we help to mark out the terrain of what is good and what is evil. Possessed of unique sensibilities, sensibilities that take us to the depths of grief and trauma, we can diagnose the trouble and act as the advance scout and the go-between. In this way, trauma narratives furnish middle power nations such as Canada with a homemade, that is to say a specifically national version of the “politics of rescue.” (p. 379)

### **“Strength Runs Through My Blood”—Sisters Rising Participant**

In this section and in the section entitled “Collective Action, Collective Witnessing,” I reflect on the art that was created by participants, beyond what has already been shared in the

two published papers. Indigenous girls, youth, and community members in the northern community where I conducted this research held tremendous insight, knowledge, and visions for change in their communities. As I have recounted throughout the thesis, I witnessed many stories of resistance, survivance, and testimony. As witness to the stories of young women in this project, I reflect on Clark's (2016b) words who writes about the resistance of Indigenous girls and states "I believe that all young women engage in daily acts of resistance" (p.10). She asks witnesses who work with Indigenous girls, "What strengths and resistance can you identify in their stories" (p. 11)?

In Appendix B, I have included images and quotes of the art and words of the girls and community members I worked with. These include data poems I created as a method of analysis from participants, juxtaposed with photographs I created from objects on the land participants connected to. As I created these images, however, I experienced the tension of (re)producing accounts of essentialized, colonial "Indigenous tribal culture" tropes that maintain what Jaskiran Dhillon (2017) describes as "statist, colonial modes of perception about who and what Indigenous peoples represent in the contested political space of settler sovereignty" (p. 193). These images are not intended to promote cultural awareness, nor were they created as static images to be coopted for evidence of change by a research intervention. I included these photos to express the complexity, resistance and strength girls express and "bring to theory" (Clark, 2016a, p.47). The intention of creating these images was also to create a space where violence does not speak for Indigenous girls. This is where they create different threads, woven by their visions and family stories that blanket them, creating presence, emergence, and survivance.

### **Collective Action, Collective Witnessing**

As part of this master's study, in collaboration with many diverse communities, I also worked as a research facilitator and chaperone for two provincial and two international forums

with the Sisters Rising team. In these forums, youth of all genders met together from different Indigenous communities across British Columbia, Canada and South Africa, to share stories and focus on community-rooted strategies to support Indigenous body and land sovereignty. In October 2019, over a hundred Sister Rising participants from Canada and South Africa gathered together for a three-day international forum that brought together girls, youth of all genders, community members, Elders, researchers, and policy stakeholders to develop action plans for change. During workshops and presentations, participants shared stories and artwork as “calls to witness” and “calls to action” to shift audiences and stakeholders out of a passive stance. As part of this gathering, I curated a walk-through art-ceremonial space to exhibit the art, stories, and land-based medicines of participants from Canada and South Africa (see Appendix C).

At the center of the gallery was an installation. I created a cedar figure (see Appendix C) for all who witness violence against Indigenous girls to commit to action. Girls, youth of all genders, and community members participated in making art for the figure and were asked “What are you witnessing?” and “What do you commit to?” The images of the art created and placed on or around the cedar figure by participants are shown in Appendix C. Messages such as “We are strong, hopeful, powerful, connected”; “Haisla. Let’s stand as one body, mind and our souls. Just like the strands of a braid, we will be strong and we’ll never break”; and “We are important. We are strong” spoke to imagining an existence where girls and youth of all genders are witnessed and honoured. This installation was created and recreated in two Sisters Rising forums and a national child and youth care conference at the University of Victoria. In our gatherings around the cedar figure, different visions for change, action and accountability were co-created and displayed. Being witnessed by stakeholders, service providers, researchers,

community members, and policy makers is perhaps one way to begin the process of creating a more just reality where Indigenous girls are heard with respect and dignity.

### **Creating Alternative Visions for Research and Professional Practice**

In this section I reflect on how this research may have implications for practitioners and researchers who work in allyship with Indigenous girls who experience violence. I look to the words of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) who ask: “How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over) hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze?” (p. 223).

In my role as a professional therapist for children and youth who have experienced sexualized violence, I experience the unease of relying on our current judicial and institutional systems while also trying to create safer spaces for Indigenous girls and LGBTQ2+ youth when they don't fit dominant gender and sexuality norms.

My visions for needed change intensify when youth enter the current state justice systems and feel defeated and helpless. My resolve to create spaces of respect and resurgence strengthens when Indigenous girls are blamed for the violence they experience or when they are seen as “walking risk factors” (de Finney et al., 2018).

I experience an ethical requirement as a therapist and ally of Indigenous youth, who live under the weight of colonial history, to be an activist and “consensual ally.” The term consensual allyship, created by activist Jessica Danforth, requires connections that are ongoing and relational (Hunt, 2015). Activism includes advocating for safer and inclusive places, on *their* terms, where youth disclose the violence they have experienced. RCMP detachments in a northern town or a courtroom far from home cannot be the only places for youth to disclose their intimate stories. Every time I accompany girls to report sexualized violence in the north and the

metal doors of the RCMP detachment slam behind us, I want to turn around and take the girls back home. I feel as though the concrete walls that surround us, created for convicting, were not created to hold their stories with dignity. After the girls are taken away to be interviewed I am full of tension, knowing that after they tell their story, they may wait for years for “justice”—if it ever comes. How can I best advocate for spaces where youth are surrounded by memories of being home, and where justice is empowering, not defeating?

As a mental health practitioner for children and youth, I challenge the victim-blaming climate of sexualized violence against Indigenous youth. This may include unsettling the therapeutic practices, judicial systems, and government policies that intersect in the lives of Indigenous girls. An example of this is the proclivity of health systems to turn the trauma and violence youth experience into mental health disorders. Unsettling my professional practice requires revealing injustices embedded in the systems I work with—however uncomfortable doing so might make me—to advocate for youth to have safe spaces where their stories are witnessed with respect. This is not just about taking workshops on “cultural competence.” This is about unsettling what I think I know about my profession and working in solidarity to envision a different reality where collective strength and resurgence are centered. I am constantly reminded in this Sisters Rising project that challenging the overarching theories and systems that influence my profession and unsettling the history of the land I walk on in our Canadian state is not a comfortable place and does not include an easy fix. In this unsettling, I ask: How are systems silencing Indigenous youth? How do they create “the shame” or fear of blame that causes girls to turn away from community supports? How can I embark on research and professional practice that addresses sexualized violence but does not focus on asking for evidence of damage?

## **“The Shame”**

Girls and community members in this research expressed how, when girls experience sexualized violence, they are met with blame, they endure a justice system that does not acknowledge their well-being, and they feel “the shame,” which causes girls to turn away from help and sever ties to needed connections to their community. As girls hide their stories because of shame, they are increasingly isolated from their families, communities, and needed services. This research showed how, in order to repair victim-blaming practices, professionals must identify the shame Indigenous girls experience that is weighted by colonial histories, policies, and ideologies that intertwine in “mental health” and “trauma” work.

Shame is a powerful emotion that pervades sexualized violence and requires response. However, responding to this pervasive emotion requires identifying how shame has evolved as a result of colonial histories of shaming bodies, sexuality, race, and gender. The findings in this research reveal the importance of reaching back into our nation’s history to truth-tell about the violence of colonial history. As a practitioner, I acknowledge the need to look deeply into how this shame came to exist in the first place. In addition, pervasive discourse about shame often evolves from Western constructs of trauma (Probyn, 2005). Understanding how these dominant constructions of trauma silence is vital to finding alternative ways for girls to share their stories and address wellness (Clark, 2016a). According to Clark (2106a):

the definitions of trauma and the meanings we make of it are historically constructed and defined, and are shaped by the intersection of structural factors, including our access to power and our experiences of oppression. Further, these constructions of trauma shape what we consider as violence, what kinds of violence are erased, and the kinds of supports and access to services that flow from this. (p. 5)

## The Unspoken

### Witnessing What Is “Not Not-There”



**Figure 5.3 “Blue Landscape.” Photo by the author.**

I took the photo in Figure 5.3 while walking on a lake near my house in the north in the depth of winter when the land is quiet. In this stillness, I could hear my heart beat and feel the tensions of being on this land with its silenced stories. I coloured the landscape in blue to represent the violence that is seen, but like the land, is silenced. As I reflect on this image, I am reminded of how our nation disregards silenced stories of violence on this land.

In the community where I conducted this research, sexualized violence is a topic that is “hush hush.” Girls and community members say that violence happens, but it is not talked about because of the fear of blame, feelings of shame, and the failure of systems when girls seek justice. The tension of knowing that violence exists but is not talked about is disconcerting. Like a spectre, violence, both visible and invisible, lingers between the past and present.

What I have witnessed in this research is that researching sexualized violence requires being with the tension of unknown, unspoken stories. I borrow the term “haunting” from Tuck and Ree (2013, p. 643) to describe this tension:

Haunting is the cost of subjugation. It is the price paid for violence . . . This is difficult, even annoying to those who just wish to go about their day . . . Erasure and defacement concoct ghosts; I don’t want to haunt you, but I will.

Within the silences and “hushing” are stories that exist but may never be revealed. Participants talked about this silencing, but what also emerges more boldly is how our nation state, under the guise of benevolence, has silenced and buried too many vital stories.

As a professional, who encounters victims in their most vulnerable moments, how do I witness stories of unspoken violence? In this research, I witnessed how violence requires professionals to “take on the responsibility for listening to the unspoken” (McCormack, 2014, p. 3). The unspoken in this research included stories and histories that were silenced, not by choice, but in fear of further retribution and further violence, and by the absence of spaces to talk about violence. As girls and community members in this research expressed, there is a need for basic spaces and processes to speak about violence –and these spaces may be outside standard systems. According to queer scholar Donna McCormack (2014), these spaces may not be the tidy offices professionals offer. Safer spaces to talk about violence may be in girls’ “own houses” (L. Simpson, 2011) that incorporates “intimate spaces of witnessing” and attends to “the contexts of

relationships and spaces involved in listening” (Clark, 2016b, p.10). These may be spaces on the land connected to traditional stories with knowledge keepers.

### **The Ethics of Re-searching**

A question that evolved for me in this research is, Are research and public inquiries the interventions that are needed for change? In the third published chapter of this thesis, entitled “Lighting Fires of Alternative Imaginings: The Ethics of Re-searching Sexualized Violence With Indigenous Girls in Rural Communities,” I reflected on the ethical and theoretical foundations of re-searching sexualized violence. I explored the question of research ethics by addressing how my research collaborations with girls and communities were shaped by my location as a racialized diasporic researcher in a settler colonial country. As a witness, the ethic of refusal was critical, because it created boundaries around what could not be claimed in academic knowledge. I refused to reveal what was off limits, the stories that are kept as community knowledge, or the private pain that does not have a place in an academic setting. In interviews and workshops, I followed the girls’ rights and wishes not to speak publicly or reveal their names. Refusal is not just a “no” but an opening for other forms of knowledge and methodologies. Even with arts-based research, which has compelling potentialities to reveal personal images that express experiences of violence, the question remains—to reveal what, and for whom?

In Chapter 4, in my article entitled “Imagining Alternative Spaces: *Re-searching* Sexualized Violence with Indigenous Girls in Northern Canada,” I reflected on the undercurrents of an exchange with a participant who asked “Will anyone hear my voice?” There was so much unsaid that I knew could not be expressed, especially in a public research context. I express how this was a shift in how I witnessed in this research, knowing that intimate spaces outside of the public gaze are required for girls to feel safe to express what they need to. Throughout this project, I reflected on my intentions of this research and applied Mohawk scholar Audra

Simpson's (2007, p. 77) questions that she asks in her community: "Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?"

### What Could Come Next?



**Figure 5.4 "Renewal Through Fire." Photo by the author.**

*I reflect on fire in this image (Figure 5.4) and thesis as a symbol of ceremony and renewal through fire, to shine a light on veiled spots in history for the purpose of regeneration, not for cooption or redress. What if these fires were to turn the tendrils of colonial history to ash to create space for regeneration based on more than the tenets of dispossession?*

In reflecting on witnessing and inquiring into sexualized violence against Indigenous girls, I consider the next steps for more ethical engagement as a witness. What does this demand?

I am inspired by the words of hooks (1989a) who recommends to those who wish to push against oppressive boundaries “to move out of one’s place” (p. 15) where silences and “unaddressed” places are witnessed with dignity. It is vital for those who witness with Indigenous girls in allyship to oppose the disengaged “atrocious-as-spectacle” forms of spectatorship but also to acknowledge the “unknowability” inherent in experiences of violence (Laub, 1992).

What in the “deep structure” requires unravelling? Inquiring into sexualized violence against Indigenous girls cannot be about the nation (again) using state-sponsored inquiries to claim that violence has been redressed. This research calls for researchers and practitioners to witness and to ask: Who and what are we *not* hearing? What are we not seeing because it is too uncomfortable? What tensions in this work challenge our personal, professional, or national narratives? What and who are we silencing with our current constructs? The Canadian state wishes to place the logic of colonialism safely in the past, rather than focus on how it still thrives.

Instead of focusing on the actions of individual girls or statistics of risk and crisis, what if we were to pay attention to the dominant systems and institutions that are founded on settler colonialism? What if we were to look at how the systems we rely on for justice are based on the same logics that deprived Indigenous peoples of their land, language, culture, and, in the case of too many Indigenous girls, life?

*Re-searching* in this project, for me, has been about witnessing through art with the intention to curtail certainty and create different responses to (re)map the resistance and dignity of Indigenous girls. The ways I do this are all imperfect. My reflections on this project are beginnings without endings, drops in the water, and a means to undo what I know. The intention of this interwoven knowledge is to create counter-discourses that generate spaces of resistance

(Brown & Strega, 2005). I have experienced that consensual allyship and relational witnessing breathes life into what has been buried. As I understand, consensual allyship requires a responsibility for change that is shared. The responsibility for change cannot be placed on Indigenous girls who experience sexualized violence, as if their stories of pain and victimization will repair the ruptures of a colonial past or lessen the weight of history. As Clark (2016b) describes “Indigenous witnessing invokes not only a responsibility to the stories, but truth-telling and activism linked to what we have heard” (p.10).

To transgress the boundaries of what is familiar, in borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987), threatens what is not “known” and puts into question the ground under one’s feet (Lashgari, 1995). As Toni Morrison (as cited in Bloom, 1990) said, to realize the invisible was not not-there can be unsettling. What is required to hear the countless stories of violence and resistance of Indigenous girls and women who have been rendered unhearable and “aurally erased” (Lashgari, 1995, p. 4)? What I have witnessed in this study is that Indigenous girls hold the power of vision to create change on their own terms. This fire, and these vital visions of change create what was unimaginable, can (re)map the ground under our feet.

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## Appendix A. Invitation to Participate



Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Consent to participate in the Sisters Rising study

**You are invited** to participate in Sisters Rising, a research study to support Indigenous girls' dignity, safety, healing and strengths in relation to sexual health and sexualized violence. Sisters Rising is focused on blanketing and honouring girls, youth and communities from a strong First Nations perspective.

### What will I do?

Our project invites you to use **artwork** to explore your ideas, including First Nations artwork, pictures, painting, storytelling, poetry, blogs, video, crafts, beading, and much more. Topics could include your vision for your future and your community's future, cultural healing, being on the land, supporting girls' wellbeing and leadership, healthy relationships, consent, self care, engaging with youth of all genders about sexual violence, and understanding the historical roots of sexual violence. We will explore these questions using artwork of your choice.

You can participate in **one on one sessions**, and/or in **group workshops** with other youth. Research Assistants (RAs) will facilitate and organize the sessions. We will use photography, audio and video to record what you produce during the sessions. For instance, if you are making a painting, video or beadwork, we will take some pictures of your artwork, or a video of you explaining what your artwork means to you. Sessions will last between 1-4 hours. You can choose when, how long and how many sessions to attend (to a maximum of three).

### Where will this be shown?

This study is hosted on a public website ([sistersrising.uvic.ca](http://sistersrising.uvic.ca)). You will choose artwork and quotes that you would like to share with other youth and communities across Canada and the world. You can choose to use your name and image, or be anonymous (i.e., not identify your face, name or community in any way).

### Why does this matter?

Indigenous girls and young women experience high rates of sexualized violence because of systemic issues, NOT individual failings. Systemic issues include colonial violence, poverty, sexism, racism, intergenerational trauma, isolation, and social stigma. However, Indigenous youth and communities are not often included in research about us, and few studies focus on how to enhance Indigenous wellbeing and sovereignty when it comes to sexual health.

You have valuable experiences and opinions to share. By participating in this research, you will get an opportunity to share your experiences with others who will value and listen to your opinion. In addition, you will be taking part in a larger international study doing important work, and your ideas will get shared with other girls, youth and communities across the world.

### **Our Research Team**

Our research team is also Indigenous or racialized and we have training in doing arts-based, youth- and community-engaged research. We also understand the history of colonialism and inter-generational issues impacting First Nations.

Even though you may personally know, work with or be related to a member of our research team, there is no pressure at all for you to participate. You should only participate if you really want to do it for yourself. You will not be judged, treated negatively or impacted in any way if you chose not to participate. You can also chose not to answer any question, stop participating or leave a session at any point without any judgment or negative impact, and without having to explain why. It won't impact our relationship with you in any way, now or in the future.

### **Research Partners**

Several organizations are supporting and helping with this study: The **Northwest Inter-Nation Family and Community Society (NIFCS)** is an urban, off reserve First Nations child and family-serving agency, and research workshops will be held at NIFCS offices. The **Siem Smun'eem Indigenous Child Wellbeing Research Network (ICWRN)** will assist with outreach, recruitment and dissemination of results. This study is part of an international project called **Networks for Change and Wellbeing** also happening in other First Nations communities in Canada and in South Africa. Learn more at [networks4change.org](http://networks4change.org).

### **Limitations**

Sessions will be scheduled outside of school hours. Participation may take time away from work, school work, family, community commitments and extra-curricular activities. We will do our best to schedule sessions that fit with your schedule and that are accessible to you.

### **Dealing with sensitive information**

Because you will be sharing your perspectives with topics such as sexual health, consent, healing and sexual violence, you may have some emotional reactions during the discussions. You may also experience judgment from others, particularly in a group interview. However this study's focus is not on digging for painful stories but rather on highlighting a vision for healing and change. You will be supported in discussing only the topics and aspects you feel comfortable sharing; we have an experienced team, including professional counseling help, to assist you in feeling safeguarded and respected. You will be in control of how much you want to share and how, and we will do our best to ensure that the discussions take place in a safe, open and respectful environment. You can stop, take a break or ask for supports at any point.

Supports will also be offered following the session (i.e., staying after the session to ensure you can get home safely, arranging any follow up supports required, etc.). An independent professional Indigenous counselor with experience with sexual health and violence will also be available free of charge to speak with you by phone, email, or (if in the Victoria area) in person. The counselor's name is Angela Scott (MA, RCC) and you can reach her at [arscott@uvic.ca](mailto:arscott@uvic.ca).

### **Can I withdraw from this project even after signing this form?**

Yes, your participation is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw at any point; simply let the RA know during the session, or by emailing us at [sistersrising@uvic.ca](mailto:sistersrising@uvic.ca). During the session, you can say “pass” to any question that you do not want to answer, and you do not have to explain why. You can take breaks, leave or stop the discussion at any time; we will not judge you or treat you differently in any way. If you decide to stop at any point, you can select one of two options. You can give us permission to use your contributions until the time of your withdrawal, in which case you could decide which artwork, images, video or audio we can use and which ones you want us to delete. Or, we can erase your entire contribution, including all artwork, images, video or audio of yours that we have recorded. If you were in a group workshop, we will document the broad points of your contribution for our use only, so that the contributions of other participants still make sense.

### **How will I decide what I want to share?**

The RA will take pictures, video and audio of the workshops, including of you while you are doing your artwork or discussing topics. Your artwork (i.e., collage, poetry, beadwork, painting, sculpture, drawing, etc.) will be photographed and/or videoed and the original piece will remain your property. In signing this consent form, you agree that we can use, distribute and reproduce the images and files you agree to share with us, as outlined in this consent form.

At the end of each session, you will be able to review all files and decide the level of anonymity and confidentiality you would like. You can decide whether to use your real name or a code name, and to use or not use identifying information or images (such as images of your face, parts of your body, your voice, or your surroundings). If you chose to be identified in some way, you will then select how you want to be identified. This may mean, for example, that you select a picture or video clip that identifies your face, body, or voice, or that you want your name attached to your artwork. In these cases, your anonymity will not be protected in the dissemination of the results.

You can also chose to remain completely anonymous in the dissemination, in which case any identifying information and files will be permanently deleted. We will then assign you a confidential code name, kept separately from information identifying you; this code will not appear on public materials and will only be used by our research team to keep track of who did what. When other people view our research results they will not be able to tell who you, your family or community are.

At the end of the session, the RA will note your decision in their field notes, as well as at the bottom of the consent form along with the your dated initials. You will also be shown examples of how audio/video/picture files are featured on our website to help you make an informed decision.

Please note that individual participants are not able to take pictures, audio or video of other participants or of other people (i.e., friends or family members who are not participants). Any information you share that identifies others who are not participants, such as family or community members, will not be used in this study and will be permanently deleted from our files after each session.

Regardless of whether you want to be identified or not in the materials you produce, there are limits to your confidentiality in this study. Many participants have heard about this study through

local agencies, word of mouth, or people they know in your community, which means others might know who is participating. Especially in smaller communities, others may see you or hear about you attending a research session. If you are participating in a group workshop we may not be able to ensure full confidentiality. We will remind everybody in a group workshop to respect confidentiality by not repeating what they have heard outside the workshop. But it is important to know that the research team cannot ensure that everything that you say in a group will remain completely confidential.

The final limitation to confidentiality is our duty to report any disclosures of abuse, including sexual and physical abuse, as well as threats to harm yourself or others. This responsibility relates to current cases of abuse against a minor that have not already been disclosed and followed up. In the case of a disclosure, we will need to stop the session; we will stay with you and support you while we contact the appropriate service provider in your region for follow up.

Regardless of whether you chose to use your real name or image in the public materials, we will ensure that your personal information is protected at all times. Any information identifying you, such as your consent form, photos, audio and video files, notes, artwork and transcripts of recordings will be kept in separate files, in password-protected online storage, ipads and laptops. Only those people who are directly part of the project such as the researcher and the research assistants will have access to these files.

### **How will this study be shared with others?**

Throughout the study, we will share the materials you agree to share (such as quotes of conversations, video of youth making art, and pictures of artwork) on a public website called **sistersrising.uvic.ca**. Data will be featured just as you decided (i.e., with or without your names or other identifiers). To ensure further confidentiality, these will be grouped by theme rather than by type of participant or by community. Names of communities in which we host workshops will be listed in a group and not linked directly to you. Copies of all research materials, including our invitation and consent form, are included on our website and facebook and can be reviewed or shared at any point.

At the end of our study, we also plan to share the information with others who are interested in finding out more about this issue, such as youth, researchers, service providers, policy makers, families and community members. Results and findings will be widely disseminated on the website, to the partner organizations, to the broader research team, and in presentations, writing, publications, reports and workshops. Youth- and community-friendly materials will be produced. This means that pictures and video of you and your artwork will be featured in these materials.

NOTE: In the sites where MA students are also using this research to complete their MA thesis (Dease Lake, Iskut and Victoria), the following will also be added: [NAME OF RA] will also be completing this research as part of the MA program in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. This means that she is going to write a Master's thesis (a research report) in her own name, under the supervision of her thesis committee that includes Dr. Sandrina de Finney. This thesis will be published online on the University of Victoria thesis and dissertation portal and you can get a copy. This won't change in any way the terms outlined in this consent form (i.e., what we describe in the consent form will apply to the thesis as well.

### **What will be done with the information?**



Signature

Date of session

**Notes on what was decided**

*(example might be: “wants name attached to pictures of raven artwork, and is OK with group picture being used but no individual pictures)*

**Evolving consent (must be completed at the end of each additional session)**

If you participate more than once, please initial and date your consent form each time. What you chose to share with our team and on the website will be reviewed and agreed to at the end of each session, and participant consent will be documented with an initial and date.

-----  
Signature

Date of session

Notes on what was decided

-----  
Signature

Date of session

Notes on what was decided

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Signature

Date of session

Notes on what was decided

Thank you so much for your participation in this study!!



**Appendix B. Artworks**

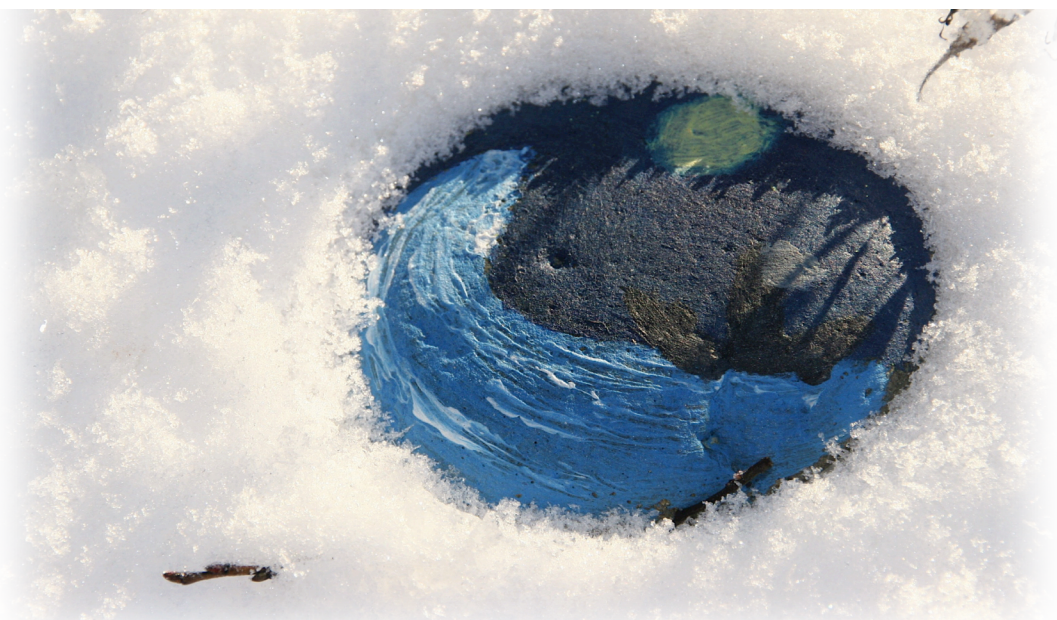
**“My Power is Greater Than What I’ve Been Through”- Sisters Rising Participant**



**“The Fire”- Sisters Rising Participant**



**“Every Rock Carries a Million Stories”-Sisters Rising Participant**





**“Heart Rock”- Sisters Rising Participant**



**“Girls Need Leaders”-Sisters Rising Participant**

"Every Rock Carries a Story"

*I used to hear stories about  
when elders were our guides  
before there was contact  
before the alcohol came in  
before their schools came in  
everybody had their place  
everybody respected everything around them  
I used to hear stories about  
my grandma  
born from strength  
the strength she held  
the strength she carried  
on the land  
on the trails  
we follow our grandmother's bloodline  
so strong and so proud  
I imagine that for us  
my grandpa used to say  
while fishing by the river  
be proud of who you are  
respect the land  
be thankful for it  
my grandma's blood runs through me  
every rock by the river carries foot prints  
every rock carries a million stories*



**"My Grandma Was Born From Strength"**



***"I First Found Strength When I Heard the Drum Beat"***

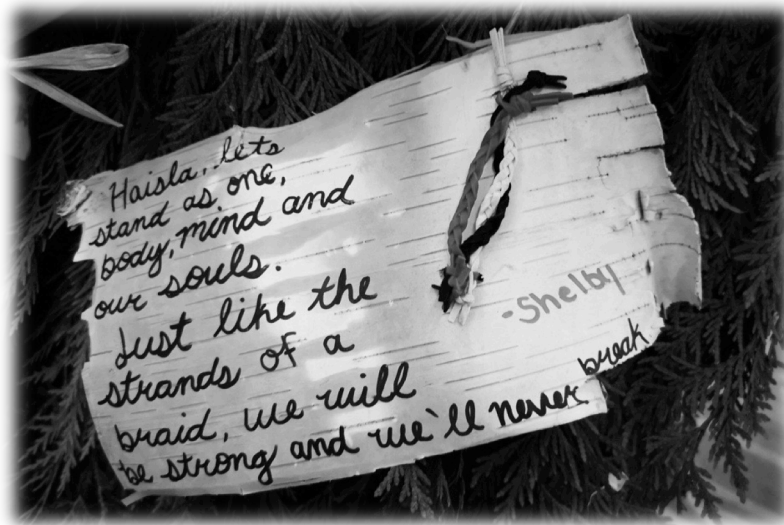
***my heart just beats  
drumming  
in ceremony  
women and girls wearing traditional dress  
honour their bodies  
celebrating becoming women  
drumming  
wearing our button blankets  
it just gives you pride  
dancing  
in ceremony  
traditional ways of honouring women  
dancing  
rights of passage  
honour their bodies  
home family culture  
men as warriors and protectors  
connection to matriarchs  
women are powerful  
dancing  
speaking my language  
confident and proud  
traditional stories and songs  
on my traditional lands  
honour their bodies***

**"Honour Their Bodies"**

## Appendix C

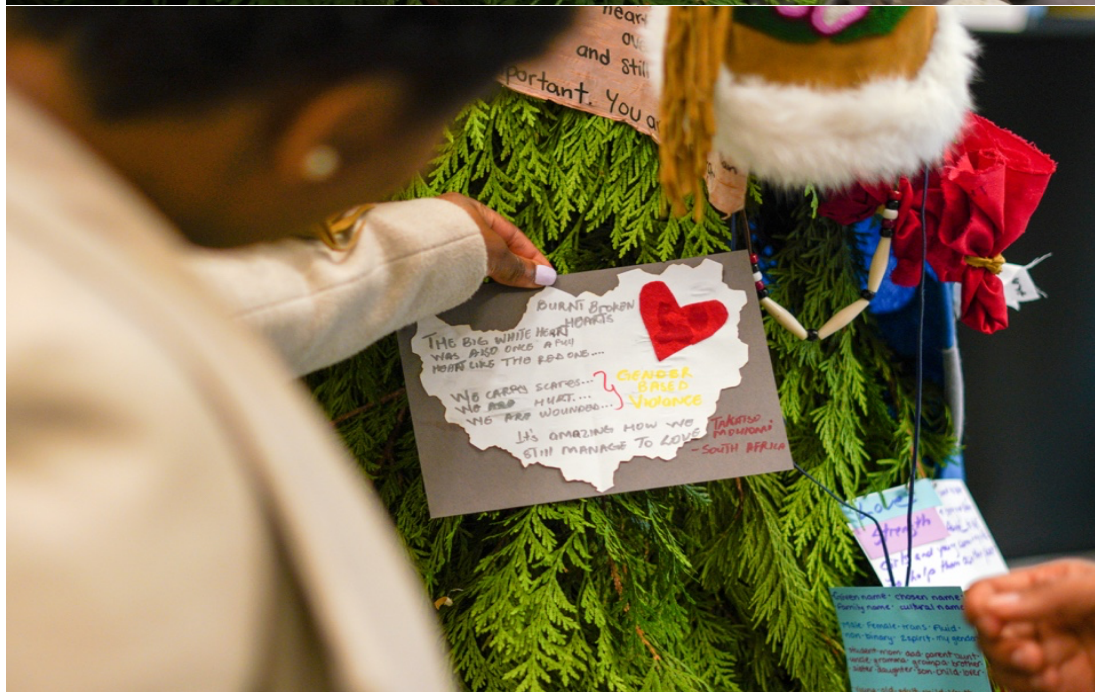
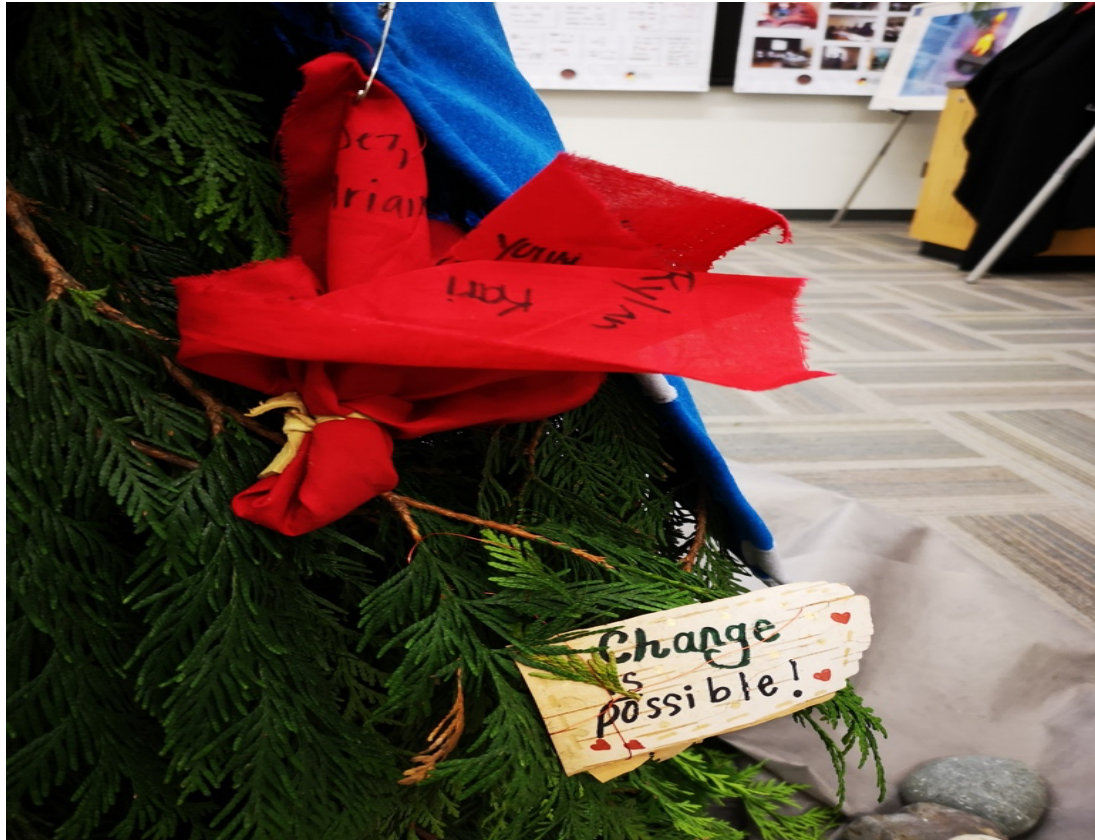
Sisters Rising Forum, Cedar Figure,

October, 2019



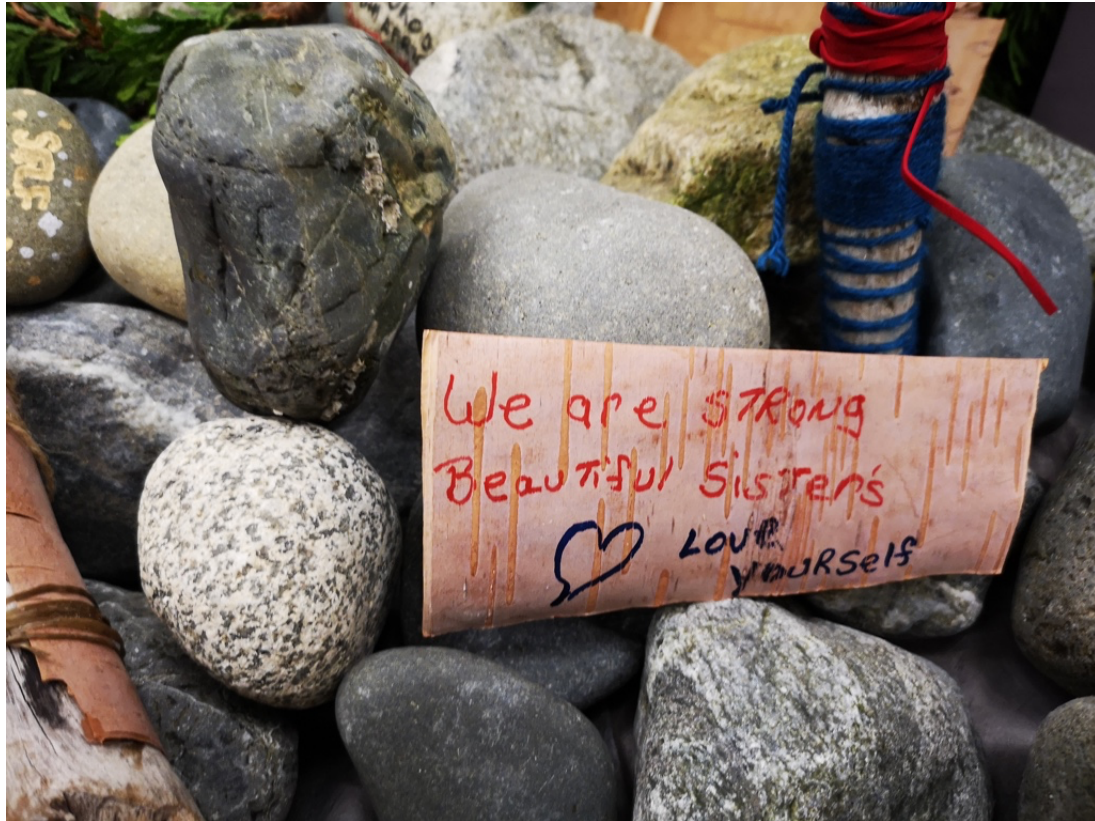




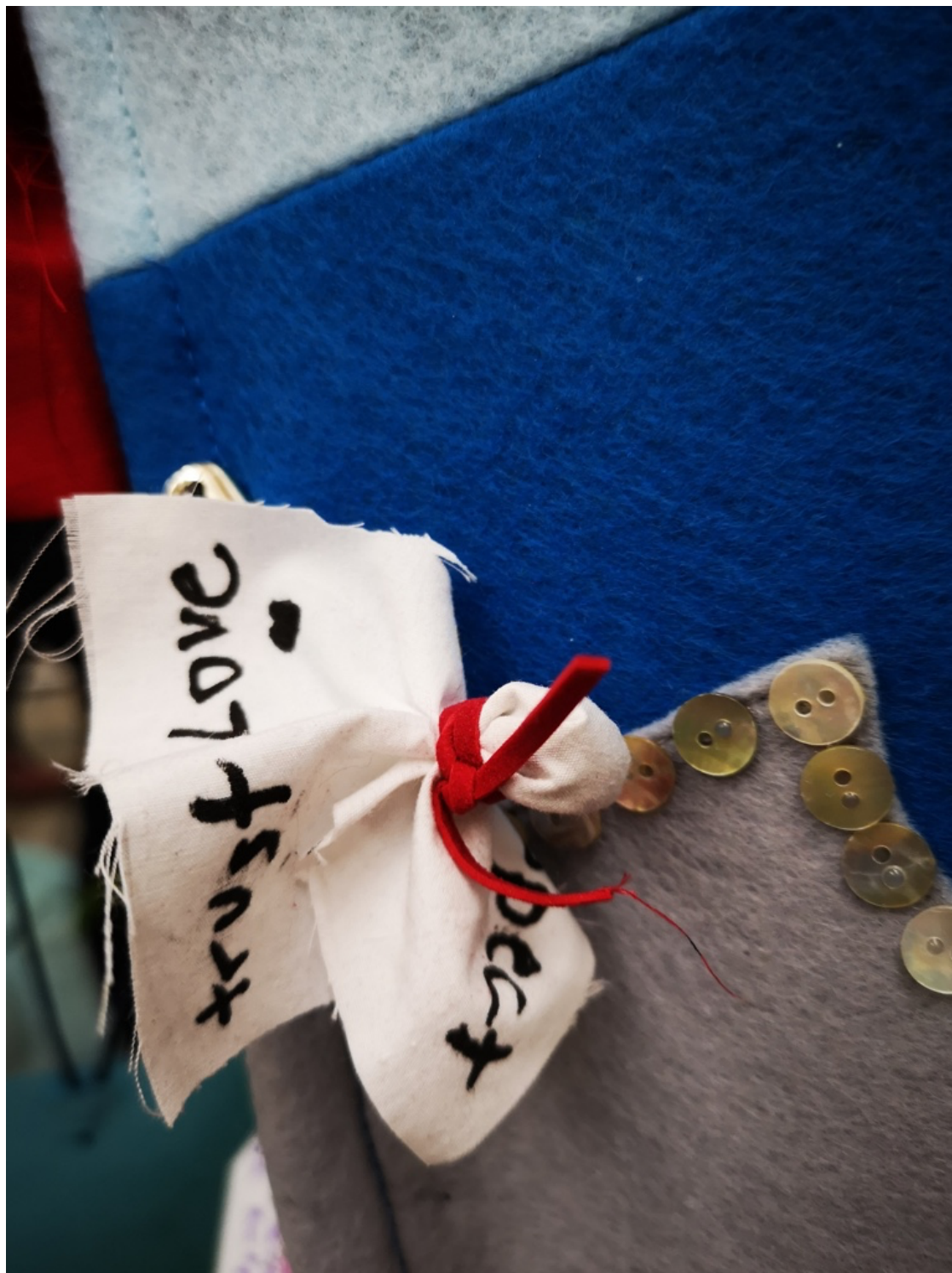


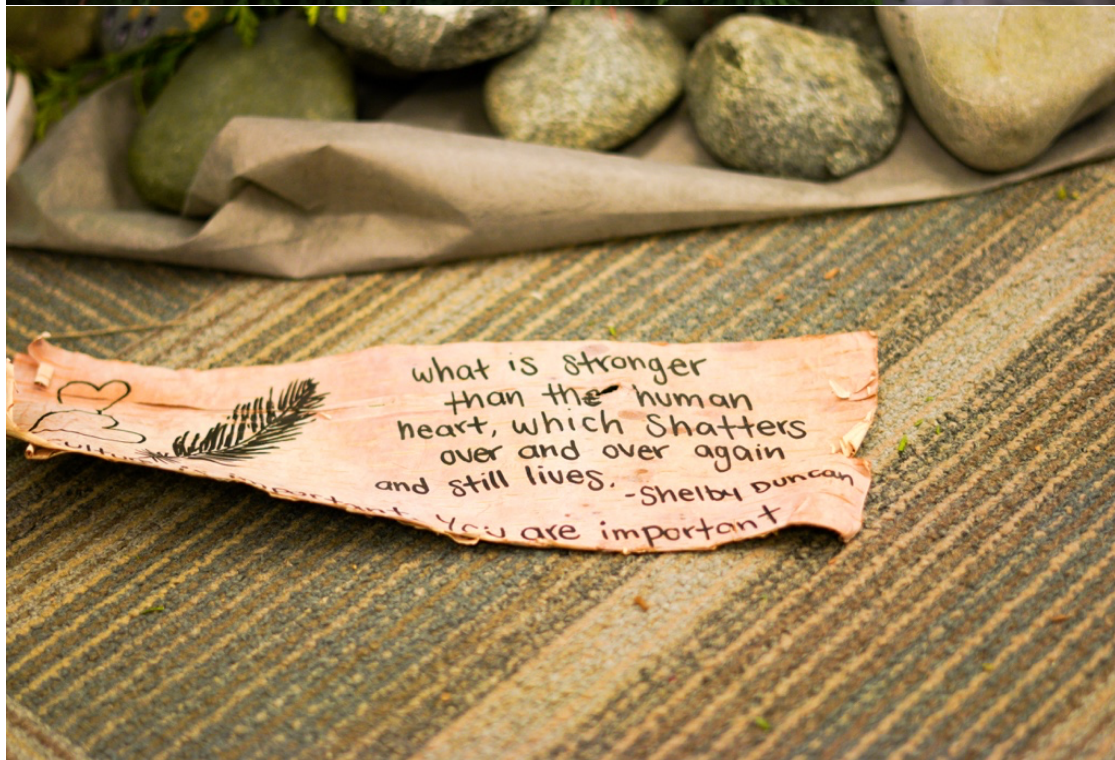
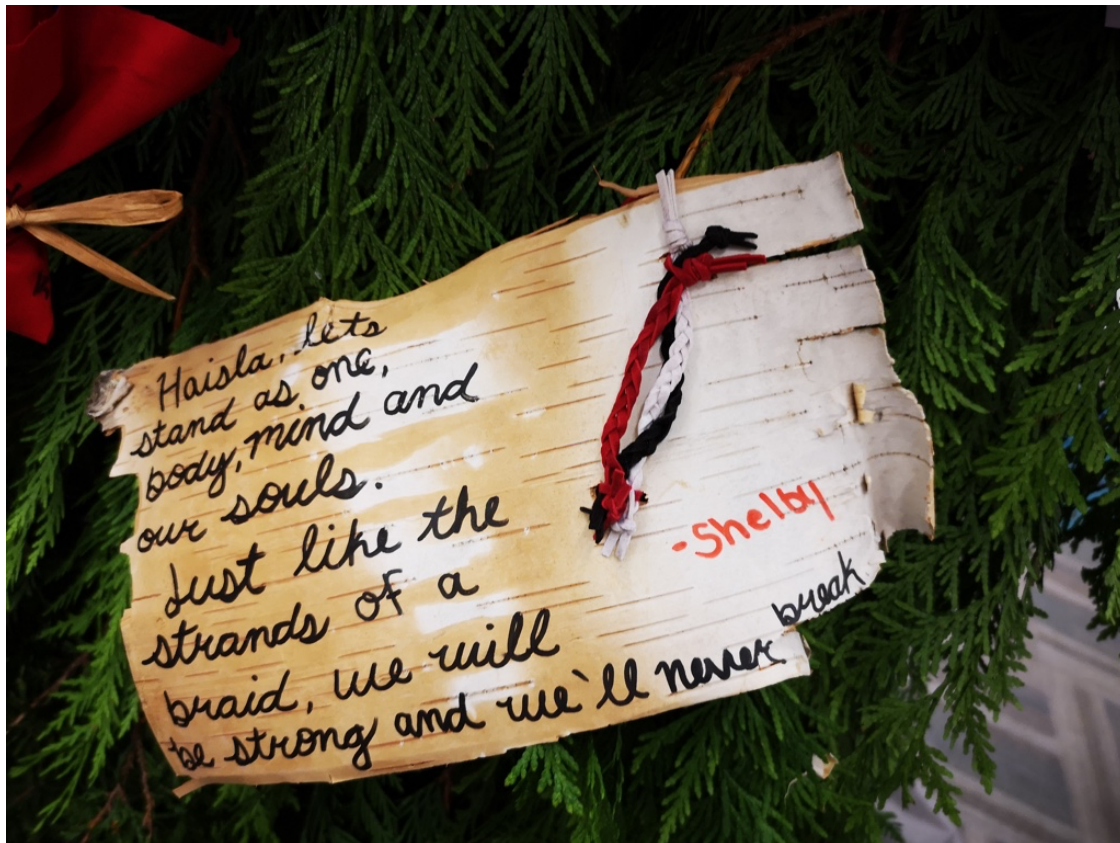


















# Art Gallery, Sisters Rising Forum October, 2019










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

A lot.

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

- Cindy

A black banner is suspended from a ceiling by two white strings. The banner features white text in a serif font. The text is arranged in seven lines, each starting with a lowercase letter. The background of the banner is solid black, and the text is centered. The banner is hanging in a room with a light-colored wall and a ceiling with recessed lighting.

She is strong  
she is kind  
she is a leader  
she has happiness  
she has a connection  
to culture and family  
she is unstoppable  
she is empathetic

-Sisters Rising Participants





## Art Making, Sisters Rising Forum October, 2019









