

# **Idle No More: A Rhetorical Analysis of a Movement**

by

Maša Torbica

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## Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	Dr. Pauline Wakeham Associate Professor English and Writing Studies Western University
Supervisor	Dr. Heather Smyth Associate Professor English Language and Literature University of Waterloo
Internal Members	Dr. Frankie Condon Associate Professor English Language and Literature University of Waterloo
	Dr. Linda Warley Associate Professor Emerita English Language and Literature University of Waterloo
Internal-external Member	Dr. Kelsey Leonard Assistant Professor School of Environment, Resources and Sustainability University of Waterloo

## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Dissertation Abstract

This project investigates discursive and material constraints against and possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence by rhetorically analyzing key features of the Idle No More movement. Since November 2012, Idle No More has been an active, Indigenous-led, grassroots social justice movement advocating for environmental protections and Indigenous rights. I contribute additional insights about the movement's cumulative impacts by interrogating two defining features of its emergent phase (flash mob round dances and social media activism) and its relation to reconciliation-based and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization. Foregrounding structural and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people as a foundational feature of settler colonialism, I outline how Idle No More-affiliated round dances challenge the gendered constraints of coloniality. Next, reading the Twitter hashtag “#Ottawapiskat” as a successful reframing of colonial attempts to delegitimize Indigenous political activism, I argue that Idle No More digital activism is characterized by dynamic interactions between discursive and embodied interventions. Turning toward the temporal overlap between the movement's emergence and the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, I find that state and public responses to Idle No More illustrate the limits of pursuing decolonial aims through the institutions and discourses of the settler state. Finally, examining a resonant example of resurgence-based initiatives within the Idle No More movement, I posit that youth-led long walks like the Journey of

Nishiyuu constitute embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance. Foregrounding existing insights by Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists, I identify and evaluate how systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty become sites of active contention and subversive political struggle. In doing so, I assert that the Idle No More movement can be understood as an ongoing revitalization of the third space(s) of sovereignty. Altogether, this project challenges normalizations of settler colonialism as an unalterable reality by actively anticipating futures informed by other sociopolitical realities: ones which already existed before and will continue to exist beyond currently dominant power structures.

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Konačno... mama, tata, gega, Maks, Gracie, and Graeme: zahvalnost za sve, zauvek.

## **Dedication**

For Mira and Milorad Torbica.



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## Introduction

*“niya oma nehiyaw, keyapihc oma etahkweyak, moya atoya nimeschikohnanahk”*

**Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum<sup>1</sup>**

\*

The (in)formal policies proposed, enacted, and enforced by various settler colonial authorities across Turtle Island<sup>2</sup> overwhelmingly demonstrate intent to eradicate, negate, or severely limit Indigenous claims to land title, political sovereignty, and distinct cultural identity. Centuries of colonial legislation, discrimination, and institutionalization have resulted in physical, psychological, spiritual, epistemic, and representational violence, consequently displacing Indigenous bodies and communities and subjecting them to multifold, and often multigenerational, traumas. Crucially, despite the scale and duration of colonial violence, Indigenous peoples have consistently found ways to resist occupation, subvert cultural assimilation, and (re)assert sovereignty. Recognizing the longstanding urgency of the aforementioned systemic injustices, this research project asks: what are the dynamics between discursive and material *constraints*

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<sup>1</sup> McAdam spoke this phrase (in English: “I am Cree, we are still here, they haven’t killed us off”) in the Cree language during a United Nations gathering in Geneva, Switzerland (94).

<sup>2</sup> I use this term instead of North America to reflect and honour Haudenosaunee cultural teachings. Although other Indigenous peoples have different cosmologies and geographies for the continent in question, since I am located on the Haldimand Tract, land promised to the Six Nations, I will use “Turtle Island” whenever relevant through this project. The “About Us” page of the *Turtle Island News* website (a print and digital newspaper published at the Six Nations of the Grand River) offers useful information about the cultural teachings informing current use of this term.

*against* and *possibilities for* decolonial resistance and existence? To answer this research question, I analyze key rhetorical strategies and contextual features of the Idle No More movement.

Idle No More is an Indigenous-led grassroots social justice movement focused on environmental advocacy, global Indigenous resurgence, and civil resistance against (neo)colonial power structures. The movement took shape in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan during November of 2012, quickly gained public support throughout the territory now known as Canada and expanded to include international participation by January of 2013. Although it experienced a decrease in widespread public action and engagement during the second half of 2013, Idle No More remains an active social justice movement.

Idle No More is a particularly relevant case study for my research question for three main reasons. Firstly, because Idle No More achieved a comparatively higher degree of prominence and participation than other contemporary Indigenous-led social justice movements/campaigns, it offers valuable insights into how and why certain factors combined to create a uniquely powerful surge in sociopolitical momentum for decolonization efforts. Secondly, since Idle No More is comprised of various non-centrally organized initiatives and discourses, I am able to consider a wide range of rhetorical activity (including: round dances, Twitter hashtags, and youth-led long walks). Thirdly, the temporal overlap between the emergence of the Idle No More movement and the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) enables additional insights into tensions between reconciliation-based and resurgence-based approaches to

decolonization. Overall, my analysis of Indigenous-led rhetorical activity during the Idle No More movement illuminates and evaluates instances where the various systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously functioned as sites of active contention and subversive political struggle.

As I will discuss in more detail within the Methodology sections, this research project stems from self-reflexive solidarity with decolonial and antiracist interventions into settler colonial and white supremacist ideologies and power structures. Accordingly, I aim to respectfully foreground and synthesize existing contributions by Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists, including Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum (Cree), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), Audra Simpson (Mohawk), Karyn Recollet (Cree), Jarrett Martineau (Plains Cree and Dene Suline), Aaron Paquette (Métis), Idle No More Toronto, and the Journey of Nishiyuu walkers. In this sense, my research project is both deeply informed by and seeks to affirm/extend the analytical and archival efforts of the 2014 collection *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, edited by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective. Anthologizing critical, creative, and documentary texts from predominantly Indigenous participants and commentators, *The Winter We Danced* is the most indispensable print resource on the topic on the Idle No More movement. To date, the other book-length publication on the Idle No More movement is *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada*, a 2015 study by non-Indigenous Canadian historian Ken Coates. While my analysis takes issue with some specific points of Coates' analysis, I am particularly interested in placing more emphasis on the critical

implications and ethical stakes of the relationship between researcher and research question. As a non-Indigenous person approaching the study of an Indigenous-led social justice movement, I have found it vital to grapple with my own embodied and emplaced relation to (de)colonization through an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, self-reinterrogation and repositioning. As such, after this Introduction, I include a section titled “Methodology II” where I discuss how the work of critical self-location has informed this research project, and has unfolded into a separate research-creation project, titled *Fault Lines*.

### **Idle No More: a multifaceted social justice movement**

Historical contextualization of the Idle No More movement must be rooted in the recognition that “Indigenous peoples have never been idle in their efforts to protect what is meaningful to [Indigenous] communities— nor will [they] ever be” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 21). To better illustrate the significance of this statement by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective, I turn to an insight from Indigenous scholar and activist, Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa/Lower Brule Sioux). In *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, Estes underscores: “[w]hile traditional historians merely interpret the past, radical Indigenous historians and Indigenous knowledge-keepers aim to change the colonial present, and to imagine a decolonial future by reconnecting to Indigenous places and histories” (18). As such, “Indigenous resistance draws from a long history” both by “projecting itself backward” (“Indigenous peoples have never been idle”) and by projecting itself “forward in time” (“nor will [they] ever be”) (Estes 18; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 21).

Furthermore, when considering how “Indigenous peoples have been protecting homelands; maintaining and revitalizing languages, traditions, and cultures; and attempting to engage [settlers] in a fair and just manner for hundreds of years” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 21) it is vital to recognize that “as colonialism changes throughout time, so too does resistance to it” (Estes 21). As Estes elaborates, “[b]y drawing upon earlier struggles and incorporating elements of them into their own experience, each generation continues to build dynamic and vital traditions of resistance. Such collective experiences build up over time and are grounded in specific Indigenous territories and nations” (21).

While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to offer a comprehensive overview of prior Indigenous resistance initiatives, I begin this section by summarizing Glen Coulthard’s insights about a pivotal mid-twentieth century shift in colonial policy and the key (dis)continuities between the Idle No More movement and prior instances of Indigenous political organizing. Then, turning to describe the emergence of the Idle No more movement, I intentionally foreground contextual insights from Idle No More co-founder Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum. Finally, the rest of this section draws upon a broader range of sources to summarize key elements of the movement’s trajectory to date, particularly focusing on the first six months (the temporal parameters of my analysis).

As the Kino-nda-niimi Collective points out, alongside ongoing individual and localized initiatives, collective Indigenous resistance efforts have also coalesced into numerous “political waves,” such as “the Red Power Movement and the 1969-1970 mobilization against the White Paper” as well as high-profile resistance movements

“at Oka, Gustafsen Lake, Ipperwash, Burnt Church, Goose Bay, Kanostaton, and so on” (21). To unpack the significance of these political waves in relation to the wider history of settler colonial rule, and thus better connect them to the Ide No More movement, I turn to Glen Coulthard’s critical reading of the political impacts of the 1969 White Paper in *Red Skin, White Masks*.

Noting that this policy proposal “called for the blanket assimilation of the status Indian population by unilaterally removing all institutionally enshrined aspects of legal and political differentiation that distinguish First Nations from non-Native Canadians under the Indian Act,” Coulthard suggests that it constituted a pivotal shift in colonial rule. More specifically, prior to the introduction of this policy proposal in 1969, “the reproduction of the colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and what would eventually become Canada depended heavily on the deployment of state power geared around genocidal practices of forced *exclusion* and *assimilation*” (6; emphasis in original). As such, the settler state attempted to “overtly uproot and destroy the vitality and autonomy of Indigenous modes of life” through “more or less unconcealed, unilateral, and coercive” means, including:

institutions such as residential schools; [] the imposition of settler-state policies aimed at explicitly undercutting Indigenous political economies and relations to and with land; [] the violent dispossession of First Nation women’s rights to land and community membership under sexist provisions of the Indian Act; [] the theft of Aboriginal children via racist child welfare policies; and [] the near wholesale dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ territories and modes of traditional governance in exchange for delegated



administrative powers to be exercised over relatively minuscule reserve lands. (6)

As Coulthard outlines, the White Paper of 1969 and two other watershed events (the Calder decision of 1973, and clusters of resistance against oil development) prompted a surge of Indigenous activism in Canada during the 1960s and 70s, which in turn led to significant changes in the settler state's approach to colonial governance. I will briefly summarize Coulthard's discussion of the link between the three watershed events and the shift to recognition politics before drawing connections to the emergence of the Idle No More movement.

The White Paper of 1969 (formally called *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*) attempted to unilaterally abolish all of the elements of legal and political differentiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians which are institutionally enshrined under the Indian Act. As such, it was designed as an instant, permanent solution to the settler state's longstanding "Indian Problem." However, instead of achieving total (legal, if not physical) assimilation, it instigated an unprecedented expression of resistance and mobilization across a wide range of Indigenous communities, becoming "a central catalyst around which the contemporary Indigenous self-determination movement coalesced" (Coulthard 5). For example, the Assembly of First Nations (then called The National Indian Brotherhood) unequivocally opposed the proposed legislative changes, stating: "We view this as a policy designed to divest us of our aboriginal ... rights. If we accept this policy, and in the process lose our rights and our lands, we become willing partners in cultural genocide. This we cannot do" (qtd. in Coulthard 5). The magnitude of

Indigenous resistance to the policy compelled the federal government to rescind the proposal on March 17, 1971.

Next, Coulthard identifies the partial recognition of Aboriginal “title” in the Supreme Court of Canada's 1973 *Calder* decision as the second watershed event shaping this era of Indigenous activism. Proceeding from a claim “launched by Nisga'a hereditary chief Frank Calder to the un-extinguished territories of his nation in northwestern British Columbia,” this landmark case “overturned a seventy-five-year precedent first established in *St Catherine's Milling and Lumber Company v. The Queen* (1888), which stated that Aboriginal land rights existed only insofar and to the extent that the state recognized them as such” (Coulthard 5). Importantly, six out of seven justices validated the Nisga'a claim to land rights prior to colonial contact. However, the ruling hinged on deliberation of “whether these rights were sufficiently extinguished through colonial legislation” (5). Eventually, “three justices ruled that the Aboriginal rights in question had not been extinguished, three ruled that they had, and one justice ruled against the Nisga'a based on a technical question regarding whether this type of action could be levelled against the province without legislation permitting it, which he ruled could not” (5). Although the 4–3 decision was a loss for the Nisga'a, the ambiguity around the question of existing Aboriginal rights raised in the *Calder* ruling led to other legislative changes, such as the 1973 *Statement on Claims of Indian and Inuit People: A Federal Native Claims Policy*. As Coulthard summarizes, this federal legislation “effectively reversed fifty-two years (since the 1921 signing of Treaty 11 in the Northwest Territories with the Sahtu

Dene) of state refusal to recognize Indigenous claims to land where the question of existing title remained open” (5).

Coulthard identifies the clusters of Indigenous resistance to proposed natural resource extraction initiatives during the oil crisis of the early 1970s as the third watershed event. For example, Métis, Dene, and Inuit of the Northwest Territories communities challenged the state’s 1970 proposal to sanction the development of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, “a huge natural gas pipeline to be carved across the heartland of [their] traditional territories” (6). Similarly, Cree communities in northern Québec actively resisted the 1971 proposal for a mega-hydroelectric project which encroached on their homelands in the James Bay region (6). Since it is beyond the scope of this project to trace the exact resistance strategies and their respective effectiveness, I will highlight Coulthard’s assessment of their impacts. Regardless of specific project outcomes, these political struggles “gained unprecedented media coverage across the country” and thereby “once again raised the issue of unresolved Native rights and title issues to the fore of Canadian public consciousness” (6). Crucially, Coulthard also argues that these watershed events fundamentally altered the settler state’s approach to colonial rule:

the expression of Indigenous anticolonial nationalism that emerged during this period forced colonial power to modify itself from a structure that was once primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the genocidal exclusion/assimilation double, to one that is now reproduced through a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and

institutional practices that emphasize [Indigenous] *recognition* and *accommodation*. (6; emphasis in original)

While Coulthard underscores that “[r]egardless of this modification... the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained *colonial* to its foundation” (6; emphasis in original), I will turn to examine the ongoing implications of the settler state’s turn toward recognition politics by considering Coulthard’s essay “#IdleNoMore in Historical Context,” from late December of 2012 (originally published in the Open Access journal, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* and subsequently anthologized in *The Winter We Danced*).

Focusing on “the relationship between the inspiring expression of Indigenous resurgent activity at the core of the #IdleNoMore movement and the heightened decade of [Indigenous] activism that led Canada to establish the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1991” (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 33), the essay identifies key (dis)continuities between late twentieth century Indigenous activism and the emergent period of the Idle No More movement (late 2012). As Coulthard summarizes, RCAP was established to investigate the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state, as well as the relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler society more broadly. This 58-million-dollar initiative resulted in a five-volume *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, published in November of 1996, which spanned over 4,000 pages and included 440 recommendations for achieving a renewed relationship based on the core principles of “mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual responsibility” (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 36). Significantly, RCAP

was immediately preceded by “two national crises that erupted in the tumultuous ‘Indian summer’ of 1990” (the Meech Lake Accord and the Kanehsatà:ke/Oka Resistance) as well as “a near decade-long escalation of [Indigenous] frustration with a colonial state that steadfastly refused to uphold the rights that had been recently ‘recognized and affirmed’ in section 35 (1) of the *The Constitution Act, 1982*” (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 33). Given this political context, Coulthard argues that “RCAP’s call for recognition and reconciliation was supposed to pacify [...] the righteous anger and resentment of the colonized [which had] transformed into an insurgent reclamation of Indigenous difference that threatened to *un-settle* settler-colonialism’s sovereign claim over Indigenous people and [their] lands” (36; emphasis in original). To better understand the political (dis)continuities around the emergence of the Idle No More movement, it is productive to review the defining features of the Meech Lake Accord and the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance (also known as the “Oka Crisis”), as well as some of the temporally proximal land-based direct action initiatives.

The Meech Lake Accord was a 1987 constitutional amendment package designed to secure Quebec endorsement of The Constitution Act, 1982. The proposal was opposed by Indigenous leaders and other groups, “in large part due to the fact that the privileged white men negotiating the agreement once again refused to recognize the political concerns and aspirations of First Nations” (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 32). In June of 1990, as the three-year ratification deadline approached, Legislative Assembly of Manitoba (MLA) member Elijah Harper (Cree) filibustered the amendment (voting ‘no’ eight times between June 12 and 21 while

holding an eagle feather), thereby preventing the province from endorsing it (“25 years since Elijah Harper”). Since ratification from all ten provinces was required, this effectively caused the bill to fail.

Unfolding in the immediate aftermath of the failed Meech Lake Accord negotiations, the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance was an extended conflict between the Mohawk nation of Kanehsatà:ke and neocolonial state enforcers (including Québec police, the RCMP, and the Canadian Army) near the town of Oka, Québec in the summer of 1990.<sup>3</sup> Opposing the expansion of a golf course and the construction of townhouses (by non-Indigenous groups) on disputed lands and sacred burial grounds, the people of Kanehsatà:ke peacefully barricaded a local road in an effort to halt development. On June 30, the municipality of Oka received a court injunction to dismantle the barricade. On July 11, a large force of heavily armed Québec provincial police (Sûreté du Québec; SQ) invaded the Kanehsatà:ke community and a brief exchange of gunfire claimed one casualty, SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 33). While the proposed development plans were ultimately cancelled, the land in question was purchased by the federal

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<sup>3</sup> Since this short summary cannot address the full scope or significance of the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance, I will highlight a few notable works for further reference. The 2010 anthology *This is an Honour Song: Twenty Years Since the Blockades*, edited by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Kiera L. Ladner, explores the impacts of the “Oka Crisis” through narrative, poetry, and essays by a wide range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. The 1991 collection *People of the Pines: the Warriors and the Legacy of Oka* includes personal and critical insights by journalists Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, who lived in the warrior encampment during the concluding phase of the active resistance. The 1993 documentary *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* by Indigenous filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) features footage from the entire 78-day span of the active conflict between the Kanehsatà:ke community and the neocolonial state enforcers.

government rather than being formally transferred to the Kanehsatà:ke community, as they have been demanding since 1761. The self-determination efforts of the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance inspired other Indigenous communities, both nearby and across the continent, to engage in “a diverse array of solidarity actions that ranged from leafleting to the establishment of peace encampments to the erection of blockades on several major Canadian transport corridors, both road and rail” (“#IdleNoMore in Historical Context” 33).

Coulthard further contextualizes the Meech Lake Accord and the “Oka Crisis” within a long continuum of Indigenous resistance to colonial occupation and exploitation by highlighting five notable examples of land-based direct action initiatives from the previous decades:

- 1) The Innu occupation and blockade of the Goose Bay military base, in resistance against the destruction of the Innu homeland, Nitassinan, and their cultural practices dependent upon the land (33-34).
- 2) Decades of resistance by the Lubicon Cree in Alberta, defending their traditional territories from exploitation through numerous public protests, including the 1988 boycott of the Calgary Winter Olympics (34).
- 3) Blockades by First Nations in British Columbia throughout the 1980s and 90s designed to halt resource extraction on Indigenous land-- blockades so frequent and disruptive that they were routinely published as part of traffic advisories in Vancouver newspapers (34).

- 4) The 1989 resistance of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake, who successfully used blockades to halt clear-cutting logging practices within their lands (34).
- 5) Assertions of sovereignty by the Temagami First Nations, including the 1988-89 blockades to protect their land from non-Indigenous development, part of a century-long struggle to assert their community's right to their homeland (34).

The above examples of Indigenous land-based direct action, along with similar initiatives that unfolded “with increased frequency in the 1980s” all significantly challenged the “settler-state stability and authority [] required to ensure ‘certainty’ over lands and resources to create a climate friendly for expanded capitalist accumulation” (34). Since roadway/transit barricades and blockades are “explicitly erected to impede constituted flows of racialized capital and state power from entering Indigenous territories,” the proliferation of such direct action strategies “must have been particularly troubling to the settler-colonial elite” (34). It is also important to highlight that during this era of Indigenous political activism, overtly disruptive expressions of counter-sovereignty were framed as material indicators of a different activist attitude toward the settler state, including increased willingness to consider the “potential use of political violence” to protect Indigenous “communities’ rights and interests” (34). Coulthard illustrates this political and rhetorical shift by quoting a 1988 statement by then National Chief of the Assembly of the First Nations, Georges Erasmus:



Canada, if you do not deal with this generation of leaders, then we cannot promise that you are going to like the kind of violent political action that we can just about guarantee the next generation is going to bring to you. [...] We want to let you know that you're playing with fire. We may be the last generation of leaders that are prepared to sit down and peacefully negotiate our concerns with you. (qtd. in "#IdleNoMore in Historical Context" 35)

How does Erasmus' description of the next generation of Indigenous leaders resonate with the defining conditions and features of the Idle No More movement? Evaluating the (dis)continuities between the first two months of the movement and prior decades of Indigenous political activism, in December of 2012 Coulthard noted that "although many of the conditions that compelled the state to undertake the most expensive public inquiry in Canadian history [RCAP] are still in place, a couple of important ones are not" (36). The first contextual difference is that Idle No More emerged as "an explicitly non-violent movement" with a relatively wide range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous supporters, which is a major divergence from the "perceived threat of political violence that was present in the years leading to the resistance at Kanesatake" (36). The second differentiating feature of the emergent phase of the Idle No More movement is that it lacked the "widespread economic disruption unleashed by Indigenous direct action" during the aforementioned political wave of pre-RCAP Indigenous activism (36). Returning to Coulthard's argument that the RCAP proceedings had a 'pacifying' effect on the "righteous anger" propelling "insurgent reclamation of Indigenous difference" (36), my project attends to historical (dis)continuities in Indigenous resistance strategies by probing

the potential implications of the fact that the Idle No More movement emerged midway through the official proceedings of the TRC.<sup>4</sup> Turning toward a more focused consideration of the movement's formation and initial trajectory, the remainder of this section focuses on insights from Idle No More co-founder Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum, who describes how various historical, political, and personal conditions influenced the emergence of Idle No More.

After underscoring the continuity of Indigenous opposition to colonization ["Idle No More resistance began long before in different names, different locations through the generations since the arrival of Europeans"], Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum discusses her personal journey to becoming one of the co-founders of the Idle No More movement ("Armed with Nothing More" 65). Noting that she "felt disconnected from [her] collection of fond childhood memories out on the territory of [her] people," McAdam describes how working on a book about land prompted a return to her parents' "traditional lands and waters" (65). Emphasizing that the physical return to the land also "meant a spiritual and emotional return to lands in the process of being devastated by logging activities and other developments," McAdam describes feeling both "grief for the devastation and development" and "a profound and protective love" (65). Explaining how the experience of exploring and camping on her family's traditional lands through the spring and summer of 2012 led her to pose questions to Saskatchewan Environment and consequently learn

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<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss in chapter 3, the RCAP proceedings are often evoked as a direct precedent for the TRC.

that “the logging of [her] people’s trees will not stop,” McAdam remarks that “this was a minor issue compared to what was to come” (65). McAdam then summarizes:

Someone tagged me on Facebook about Omnibus Budget Bill C-45 in the fall of 2012 and I was not very interested... at first. Then I went back and took a second look and began reading. Needless to say, I was angry and stunned. Fortunately, the other ladies and I connected; we realized we had the same concerns, so we made a decision to not stay silent. We had to reach people. (“Armed with Nothing More” 66)

As I will outline shortly, McAdam’s subsequent contributions to political organizing against Bill C-45, which would coalesce into the Idle No More movement, initially sought to intervene in the Canadian government’s attempt to pass a 457-page omnibus budget bill containing numerous legislative attacks on the Indigenous rights provision (Section 35) of the Constitution of Canada, as well as provisions weakening environmental protection measures in favour of economic exploitation of natural resources. More specifically, Bill C-45 included major changes to the Indian Act, the Fisheries Act, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, and the Navigable Water Act.

Evaluating the political context around the first Idle No More teach-in and the subsequent popularization of the movement during the winter of 2012 – 2013, it is vital to note that the introduction of Bill C-45 in the House of Commons on October 18, 2012 only focused and intensified pre-existing Indigenous political activism. As the above summary of McAdam’s personal journey demonstrates, individual political consciousness motivated various decentralized attempts of Indigenous

activism, like interrogating and intervening in logging and development encroachment on familial lands. Furthermore, in both urban and reserve Indigenous communities, numerous community organizers and grassroots initiatives were already working to raise awareness and promote dialogue about the potential implications of the Harper government's legislative agenda. For example, on November 9, 2012 Russell Diabo's (Mohawk) detailed summary and critical discussion of the settler state's legislative challenges to Indigenous sovereignty (titled "Harper Launches Major First Nations Termination Plan") appeared in the *First Nations Strategic Bulletin*. Less than four months before the first reading of Bill C-45 (on October 18, 2012), a similar neoliberal legislative overhaul with significant negative consequences for Indigenous sovereignty, Bill C-38, already received Royal Assent (on June 29, 2012) despite significant public criticism and opposition.<sup>5</sup> Drawing attention to the wider context of ongoing legislative overhauls, Diabo's call to action concludes with a stark warning: "If there is no organized protest and resistance to the Harper government's termination plan, First Nations should accept their place at the bottom of all social, cultural, and economic indicators in Canada [...] and be quiet about their rights" (64).

Seeking to increase public awareness about the detrimental effects of Bill C-45, Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum (Cree), Jessica Gordon (Cree and Anishinaabe), Nina Wilson (Nakota and Plains Cree), and Sheelah McLean (non-Indigenous ally) —

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<sup>5</sup> Studying the recent rise of omnibus bills within the Canadian Parliament, Jacqueline Kotyk notes: "in the two-day lead-up to a vote on Bill C-38 in Parliament, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty received more than 3,200 pages of correspondence from Canadians concerned about the bill" (2).

subsequently known as the four co-founders<sup>6</sup> of the Idle No More movement — organized a teach-in about the proposed legislative changes, turning to social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) to publicize the gathering. Describing the first teach-in event, McAdam explains how the initial organizing activity proceeded from the Cree law of “nahtamawasewin”:

Sheelah came up with the idea of sharing this information in a form of a teach-in. So on November 10 in Saskatoon we had our first teach-in and invited as many people as possible to come and hear what Bill C-45 was about, as well as the other bills. Shortly after that, I made arrangements to talk to Elders; they gave us their support and prayers to try and reach as many people as possible. They also said we must use our own laws; one of our most sacred and peaceful law is "nahtamawasewin." This law is invoked in times of crisis and great threat. "Nahtamawasewin" means to defend for the children, all human children; it's also a duty to defend for the non-human children from the trees, plants, animals, and others. The Elders said, you ladies must invoke this law and let it guide your actions. We must always be prayerful and peaceful. (“Armed with Nothing More” 66)

In the week following the first teach-in event (which took place a day after Diabo’s warning against Indigenous political inaction, quoted above), similar teach-ins took place in Regina, Prince Albert, and Winnipeg (Kino-nda-niimi Collective

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<sup>6</sup> Jessica Gordon is from Pasqua Treaty 4 Territory; Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum is a direct descendant of Treaty makers and is from the Treaty 6 territory; Nina Wilson is Nakota and Plains Cree from White Bear Treaty 4 territory; Sheelah McLean is from Treaty 6 territory, and a third generation immigrant whose Scottish and Scandinavian ancestors settled from Western Europe (Ross).

390). Over the next four weeks, Idle No More grew into a Canada-wide grassroots movement, as thousands of participants signed petitions, sent emails to members of Parliament, and held rallies in over a dozen cities to express their opposition to Bill C-45. Despite of numerous calls for a meeting between Indigenous leaders and representatives of the settler state government, Bill C-45 received Royal Assent on December 14, 2012 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 393). Crucially, the government passed all of the aforementioned legislative changes without adequate parliamentary or public debate, and without the requisite consultation with Indigenous leadership or communities.

After the contested omnibus bill became federal law (Jobs and Growth Act, 2012), the Idle No More movement rapidly expanded to encompass a wide range of activities, with a strong emphasis on personal (re)connection to cultural traditions, and collective reassertions of contemporary Indigenous presence in public spaces.

As scholar and activist Jarrett Martineau (Plains Cree and Dene Suline) theorizes,

[s]triking simultaneously at the heart of capitalist consumerism at the height of the holiday shopping season and at the contemporary state of Indigenous absence in the public imaginary — in which Indigenous peoples have been disappeared, forcibly erased or rendered invisible — Idle No More signaled a collective rejection of colonial abjection and dispossession, a communal return to presence. (231)

In doing so, Idle No More mobilized “multiple spaces and modalities of Indigenous resistance that were rooted in, and dynamic expressions of, Indigenous cultural, political, artistic and ceremonial praxis” (Martineau 231). Having situated Idle No

More as a multifaceted social justice movement, the next few sections will incrementally outline my methodology.

## **Methodology**

The first two parts of this section will position my analysis of the Idle No More movement in relation to Indigenous rhetorics and in relation to two key constraints, or systemic sociopolitical obstacles, to decolonization (settler colonialism and the Canadian ‘myth of civility’). I will then explain my approaches to terminology, citation, and self-positioning. Next, I will discuss additional considerations shaping my specific analysis of the Idle No More movement, including selection of temporal parameters (first six months), focus on multimodal Indigenous rhetorical practices (round dance, Twitter hashtag, and long walk), and critical reading methodologies. The final two subsections will discuss key methodological challenges and explain how my analysis remains responsive to Scott Richard Lyons’ conceptualization of rhetorical sovereignty by applying and extending Kevin Bruyneel’s conceptual framework of “the third space of sovereignty” and Glen Coulthard’s (Yellowknives Dene) concept of “grounded normativity.”

### **i. Toward a Rhetorical Analysis of the Idle No More movement**

In the Introduction to the 2015 critical collection *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*, editors Lisa King (Munsee Lenape), Rose

Gubele (Cherokee), and Joyce Rain Anderson<sup>7</sup> begin by invoking Thomas King's (Cherokee) insights from *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. Noting that Thomas King offers a "framework for stories that both affirms [I]ndigenous storytelling traditions—past and present—and undermines the larger cultural narratives that get told about [I]ndigenous peoples" (3), the editors underscore that King is not advocating "for storytelling in the once-upon-a-time sense that dismisses stories as the place for children" (3). Rather, King's ontological/epistemological perspective illuminates how, for Indigenous peoples, "the stories we tell about ourselves and about our world frame our perceptions, our relationships, our actions, and our ethics. They change our reality" (3). As the editors go on to explain, insofar as Indigenous stories locate Indigenous peoples "in time and space and history and land, and suggest who gets to speak and how," it can be said that Indigenous "stories are highly rhetorical" (3). The editors further suggest, "[o]ne might also say [I]ndigenous epistemologies, framed thusly, are also therefore powerfully rhetorical, drawing on persuasive and reality-shifting language practices as old as time immemorial and just as applicable now as they have ever been" (3). In that sense, Indigenous stories might offer "a way out of the colonial stories that have blocked vision for so long, privileging some rhetorical storytelling traditions and silencing others" (3-4).

To briefly contextualize the stakes and structures of colonial stories and silencing, I turn to insights from Lee Maracle's (Stó:lō) *Memory Serves*, a collection of

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<sup>7</sup> As articulated in the author biographies for *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story*, Joyce Rain Anderson "traces her mixed-blood heritage to Algonquin, Wampanoag, English, and Irish ancestors" (217).



oratories published in 2015. As Maracle summarizes in “Oratory on Oratory,” the imposition of colonial stories and colonial governance are closely linked:

Aristotelian definitions of drama and poetry were based on Greek aristocratic supremacy and exclusivity. They reflected Greek culture and Greek social norms. The structure of Aristotelian story reproduces the structure of Aristotle’s society: hierarchical, patriarchal, and racist. The compliance by White male writers over centuries with Aristotelian definitions gave birth to a collection of writings that, designated as the canon, governs our present. As Europe set about to establish colonial preponderance over the entire globe, it foisted this canon on the colonies. It erected structures globally to exclude and limit other types of participation. (144-5)

In the context of rhetoric and composition studies, numerous scholars (including Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams, Catherine Prendergast, Gwendolyn Pough, Scott Richard Lyons, and Malea Powell) have contributed to a “rethinking of the discipline that challenges the Greco-Roman tradition in rhetorical analysis and composition teaching as the primary or only appropriate framework” (King, Gubele, and Anderson 4). This reflects a growing recognition that Indigenous rhetorics and literature must be foregrounded alongside the “so-called objective approaches to knowledge and Euro-American narratives of rhetorical practice” (4) that have traditionally been prioritized, a shift in analytical frameworks that is particularly crucial when discussing Indigenous literature and cultures. But despite positive trends in this direction, rhetoric and

composition studies remains largely defined/directed by non-Indigenous voices, leading to the “unintentional perpetuation of stereotypes and appropriation” of Indigenous cultures. As such, ensuring that scholars of all backgrounds are able to include Indigenous voices and rhetorics in their work, without distorting or misrepresenting these ideas and frameworks, must be a central priority within the discipline.

Responding to these methodological challenges, King, Gubele, and Anderson highlight the importance of establishing a foundational terminology for study of Indigenous rhetorics, aiming to interrogate and reimagine broader disciplinary norms. They compare Euro-American rhetorical frameworks to a single “story” that is told about the discipline, defining its priorities and boundaries, to the exclusion of other frameworks or approaches. Consequently, changing the “terms in which [this] story is told [will] shape the story, shape the epistemologies of the world glimpsed there, and draw a listener/reader’s understanding in particular directions” (7). To better inform and direct future scholarship, the editors name three terms as foundational orientations for productive critical engagement with Indigenous texts:<sup>8</sup> Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story. I will now summarize the salient points for each term then briefly preview how “survivance, sovereignty, and story” create “a web of associations and meaning making that guides” (9) my rhetorical analysis of the Idle No More movement.

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<sup>8</sup> The editors clarify that their use of ‘texts’ is not limited to discursive utterances but rather encompasses “alphabetic, visual, digital, performative, oral, and material” communication (King, Gubele, and Anderson 7). I will return to the significance of these different modes when I discuss the scope of my analysis and critical reading methodology on page (add #).

Firstly, the editors explain why Indigenous rhetorical practice must be understood as *survivance*. Conceptualized by Gerald Vizenor as “more than survival, more than endurance and mere response” (*Fugitive Poses* 15), the term “survivance” registers the lived experiences of colonial oppression while also articulating a sense of active resistance to notions of inherent victimhood and ultimate hopelessness. In the context of Indigenous rhetorics, survivance can “refer to the survival and perpetuation of [I]ndigenous communities' own rhetorical practices, it can refer to [I]ndigenous individuals and communities' usage of Euro-American rhetorical practices, and it can refer to all the variations and nuances in between. It has to do with the spoken word, the written text, material rhetorics, and contemporary technology” (King, Gubele, and Anderson 7). As I will discuss in more detail within chapter 4, understanding decolonial initiatives such as the Journey of Nishiyuu through the lens of survivance allows for a more holistic “recognition of how, when, and why [I]ndigenous peoples communicate, persuade, and make knowledge both historically and now” (King, Gubele, and Anderson 7). Furthermore, as I will outline in the last section of this Introduction, my overall project also centres survivance by remaining responsive to Eve Tuck’s (Unangaâ) call for suspending “damage-centered” research, which entails extending consideration beyond “loss and despair” (417) to instead honour the “complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (416).

Next, while the editors acknowledge that sovereignty is a “layered and sometimes-contested concept,” political sovereignty is what “sets [I]ndigenous nation-peoples apart from being only another ‘minority’ in the United States or

anywhere on their homelands” (King, Gubele, and Anderson 8). To better contextualize Scott Richard Lyons’ (Anishinaabe) immensely influential conceptualization of “rhetorical sovereignty,” I will briefly highlight Lyons’ discussion of the significance of sovereignty for Indigenous peoples:

Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect. For [I]ndigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal. Attacks on sovereignty are attacks on what it enables us to pursue; the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities. (449)

In light of this sociopolitical context, Lyons defines rhetorical sovereignty as “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449-50; emphasis in original). Consequently, as King, Gubele, and Anderson elaborate, rhetorical sovereignty both “points to [I]ndigenous always-existing rights to exercise speaking, to refuse to be silenced” and “continues to point to the exigencies of oppression, unequal power, injustice, and land rights that prompt the need for indigenous peoples to speak, again and again” in a wide range of local and global contexts (8). Crucially, as I will revisit throughout my analysis, “labeling [I]ndigenous rhetorics as simply the study of another minority community within [settler states] commits the error of erasing

those nations and those rights” (8). By contrast, “appropriate, respectful, and historically accurate discussion of [Indigenous] texts” (8) requires honouring both the foundational reality of inherent Indigenous sovereignty and the specific sociocultural contexts of different Indigenous rhetorics (or, as the editors note, “both an [Indigenous] nation's rights as a nation and the nation's and its rhetors' rhetorical choices as part of that frame”). Accordingly, my analysis of the Idle No More movement recognizes that “[e]very new site, new context, new speaker, and new goal will require a shift in what sovereignty means, remaining rooted in its histories but also looking forward to preserve the integrity of [I]ndigenous nations and communities” (King “Keywords for Teaching” 21). As I will elaborate in a later subsection of this Introduction (“Conceptualizing Decolonizing Communication”) my project centres rhetorical sovereignty by drawing upon Kevin Bruyneel’s concept of “the third space of sovereignty,” as well as Glen Coulthard’s ethical framework of “grounded normativity.”

Finally, the editors emphasize the importance of story as a foundation term of Indigenous rhetorical practice. While often considered opposing concepts within Euro-American frameworks, King, Gubele, and Anderson argue that story and rhetoric actually “go hand in hand” (9). Indigenous rhetorics do not draw a sharp distinction between “literature” and other forms of writing. Rather, Indigenous stories, which include theorizing, speaking, writing, and making, are collectively considered part of “the connected narrative that tells us who we are in relationship to one another” (8-9). These are “the foundational stories on and of these lands,” stories that become underlying rhetorical frameworks, embodying the

“memories...of this land, its original logos” (9). As such, positioning story as a foundational term of rhetorical practice also foregrounds and prioritizes Indigenous voices within the discipline. This recognition of and engagement within the links between Indigenous story and rhetoric is central to my methodology insofar as it directs attention and analysis *outwards*. Whereas Euro-American epistemologies might approach Idle No More activism as isolated texts or discrete rhetorical moments, I instead foreground the historical, social, and cultural contexts that both underpin and constitute the meaning of specific decolonial initiatives. In short, I approach decolonial initiatives as stories, locating them within collective, ongoing narratives of Indigenous survivance.

As a multifaceted range of “sovereign struggles that encompass land, culture, and identity,” (King “Keywords for Teaching” 20) the Idle No More movement constitutes a dynamic assortment of overlapping interests. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains:

Idle No More was a coalition of diverse people within the Indigenous community. Some people were mobilized and protesting because they wanted the omnibus bills brought in by the Harper government changed. There were others who were concerned about social conditions on reserves, especially in the North. There were others who wanted their treaty rights recognized and affirmed by the Canadian state. There were activists who had been working on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit People, and there were lifelong organizers concerned with environmental issues. There was a group of us interested in Indigenous

resurgence. There were lots of students and youth leaders. There were lots of elders. There were lots of regular people that care very deeply for the land, their families and their communities. (Simpson et al. 77)

While I am wary of imposing a reductive characterization of the Idle No More movement, I suggest that all of the activist collectives Simpson lists have a shared interest in advancing the sociopolitical project of decolonization. That said, remaining mindful of the movement's multifaceted aims is crucial for avoiding a reductive approach to answering my research question about the *possibilities for* and *constraints against* decolonial existence and resistance. Before proceeding to examine specific aspects of the Idle No More movement, the next subsection considers the relevance of two general constraints, or systemic sociopolitical obstacles, to decolonial initiatives: settler colonialism and the myth of Canadian civility.

**ii. Contextualizing the constraints: settler colonialism and the myth of Canadian civility**

In the territory now called Canada, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler state continues to be characterized by a process of twofold dispossession: dispossession of land, and dispossession of self-determination. This dynamic of twofold dispossession has necessarily shaped the main modes of Indigenous political resistance. However, before considering actual and potential affordances for decolonial interventions, it is crucial to understand the specific dynamics and powers structures inherent to settler colonialism.

Theorists have differentiated between two main forms of colonization: *external* (sometimes referred to as exogenous or exploitation) and *internal* colonization. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang summarize, external colonization is primarily concerned with expropriating “fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings” and “extracting them in order to transport them to— and build the wealth, the privilege, or feed the appetites of— the colonizers, who get marked as the first world” (4). By contrast, internal colonization constitutes “the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the ‘domestic’ borders of the imperial nation” (4). As a form of internal colonization, settler colonialism differs from other modes in that settlers arrive with the intention of taking possession of, and maintaining sovereignty over, all elements of their new domain. Notably, settler colonialism hinges on settler control over land and associated natural resources, including water, air and subterranean earth.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to fully engage with the debates around the use of “genocide” to describe the cataclysmic impacts of settler colonialism (such as the TRC’s use of “cultural genocide” and the use of “race-based genocide” in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls), I have found it productive to consider Canada’s colonial project in relation to Patrick Wolfe’s concept of “the logic of elimination.” Arguing that colonial invasion is “a *structure* rather than an *event*” (402; emphasis added), Wolfe theorizes that settler colonialism is characterized by “the logic of elimination.” Although the “elimination” of Indigenous presence manifests through different aims and strategies, Wolfe argues that the eliminatory “logic” of settler



colonization coheres around a common core: since “settler colonialism destroys in order to replace,” its “specific, irreducible element” is *territoriality* (387-8). Therefore, no matter which specific justifications settlers might invoke to explain their eliminatory acts and agendas, “the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory” (388). Here, Wolfe makes a crucial distinction between the logic of elimination and genocide. The logic of elimination “is premised on the securing—the obtaining and the maintaining—of territory. This logic certainly requires the elimination of the owners of that territory, but not in any particular way. To this extent, *it is a larger category than genocide*” (402; emphasis added). Although I recognize that there are distinct political/rhetorical advantages to prioritizing the term “genocide,” I find that the conceptual expansiveness of Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” productively draws critical attention to the wider conditions (structural and symbolic) shaping and propelling the genocidal consequences of ongoing settler colonization. To illustrate, the rest of this subsection considers how the myth of “Canadian civility” constitutes a key ideological underpinning of the logic of elimination informing/upholding settler colonialism.

Numerous scholars have documented how and why a longstanding ideological investment in a sanitized, exculpatory version of Canadian history and national identity continues to pose additional challenges for decolonial and anti-racist advocacy initiatives. In *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900–1950*, Constance Backhouse notes that while Canada, the United States, and Britain share many similarities with regard to culture and legal tradition, Canada

developed a unique ideological investment in a “myth of racelessness” (13). As such, “despite legislation that articulated racial distinctions and barriers, despite lawyers and judges who used racial constructs to assess legal rights and responsibilities, the Canadian legal system borrowed heavily from this mythology, and contributed to the fostering of the ideology of Canada as a ‘raceless’ nation” (13). In *The House of Difference*, Eva Mackey deconstructs how various historical (e.g., the Benevolent Mountie Myth,<sup>9</sup>) and contemporary (e.g., the policy and mythology of multiculturalism<sup>10</sup>) discourses “utilize [] the idea of Canada’s tolerance and justice towards its minorities to create national identity” (15). The essays collected in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America* further dismantle “[t]he Canadian myth of peaceful colonization” (along with “the myth of discovery,” belief in American exceptionalism, and the discourse of Manifest Destiny) by examining the past, present, and possible future realities of settler colonialism in North America through the complex and multifaceted concept of genocide (Benvenuto, Woolford, and Hinton 5). In *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* Daniel Coleman attends to the implications of the white settler obsession with “maintaining a long-term trance... a mantra that asserts that Canadians are more civilized than

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<sup>9</sup> McKay coins this concept to reflect that “[t]he Royal Canadian Mounted Police [...] are said to have managed the inevitable and glorious expansion of the nation (and the subjugation of Native peoples) with much less bloodshed and more benevolence and tolerance than the violent US expansion to the South” (14). Significantly, “[t]his benevolent gentleness,” became an “important element in the mythologies of Canadian national identity emerging at the turn of the century” (14).

<sup>10</sup> Often contrasted against the assimilationist connotations of the American cultural ‘melting pot,’ the narrative of a Canadian multicultural ‘mosaic’ purports to celebrate all cultures as distinct and valuable (McKay 15). Crucially, in this framing, “multiculturalism implicitly constructs the idea of a core English-Canadian culture” which then, problematically, subjectively positions other cultures as “‘multicultural’ in relation to that unmarked, yet dominant, Anglo-Canadian core culture” (15).

others on all levels—from large-scale international politics to everyday domestic arrangements” (25). Sketching out the various detrimental consequences of this national investment in a mythology of “civility,” Coleman emphasizes that it curtails sociopolitical change by relegating “uncivil” realities to spaces of otherness, both geographical and temporal (31).

Given the magnitude of the stakes (the foundational legitimacy/legality of the settler state), it is not surprising that the ideological deployments of the myth of Canadian civility are particularly stark when it comes to negating or minimizing the historical realities of settler colonization. As Audra Simpson points out, the Canadian settler state is deeply invested in projecting and perpetuating a “the story that... it is a place of immigrant and settler founding” and “that in this, it is a place that somehow escapes the ugliness of history, that it is a place that is not like the place below it, across that border.” Notable examples of this line of mythmaking include former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s claim, before an international audience, that Canada had “no history of colonialism” (qtd. in Henderson and Wakeham 8), and current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s claim that Canada is “without some of the baggage ... [of] colonial pasts or perceptions of American imperialism” (qtd. in Crosby and Monaghan *Policing* 6). Therefore, in addition to the inherent constraints of the logic of elimination present in various settler colonial contexts, I suggest that the myth of Canadian civility poses additional rhetorical constraints. Since the foundational narrative of a national identity defined by altruistic and progressive values (e.g., fairness, civility, pluricultural inclusion, affinity for peacekeeping, etc.) is both deeply entrenched *and* continually

reinscribed, efforts to expose (neo)colonial injustice and challenge the status quo are essentially operating in a sociopolitical context where they must also continually disprove the myth of Canadian civility.

### **iii. Terminology, citation and self-positioning**

I aim to be mindful about the ways I participate in naming different identities. In instances where it is appropriate to invoke a collective term for the various nations and communities living on Turtle Island prior to the arrival of settler colonial regimes, I use the term “Indigenous.” As Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) explain, the term “Indigenous” valuably reflects a situated identity:

Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (597)

Furthermore, the capitalization of “Indigenous” also carries important connotations.

As Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) explains,

...the capital ‘I’ [...] affirms a distinctive political status of peoplehood, rather than describing an exploitable commodity, like an ‘indigenous plant’ or a ‘native mammal.’ The proper noun affirms the status of a subject with agency, not an object with a particular quality [...] and it affirms the spiritual,

political, territorial, linguistic, and cultural distinctions of those peoples whose connections to this hemisphere predate the arrival of intentional colonizing settlers and conscripted and enslaved populations from Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and other regions. (6)

Justice underscores the political significance of the capitalization by pointing out that various individual commentators or entire publications still actively refuse the proper noun form, and continue using terms like ‘native,’ ‘aboriginal,’ and ‘indigenous.’ While the use of these contested terms is sometimes framed as a benign or inconsequential stylistic preference, Justice argues that they (intentionally, or unintentionally) work to “diminish claims of political and historical distinctiveness, which are anathema to colonial apologists” (7). Seeking to prioritize consistent use of the term “Indigenous,” when citing non-Indigenous sources who use other terms such as “indigenous,” “Aboriginal,” or “First Nations,” I have revised those terms to “Indigenous” (in square brackets, to indicate the editorial modification). In a few instances, I refer to sources who use more overtly problematic terminology. In those cases, following the recommendations in Gregory Younging’s (Cree) text *Elements of Indigenous Style*, I explicitly acknowledge the derogatory nature of the inappropriate terminology and do not invoke it beyond what is necessary to contextualize my analysis.

When invoking the collective term “Indigenous,” I am mindful that the territory currently claimed by Canada is home to more than 1.67 million people who identify as Indigenous and 634 distinct Indigenous communities, representing more than 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages (Indigenous Services Canada). I strive

to avoid glossing over significant differences (historical, linguistic, cultural, and spiritual) by referring to specific individuals, communities, and nations where relevant and possible. Similarly, just as I seek to remain respectful of individual agency whenever discussing how specific actions might be constrained by various structural factors, I also strive to avoid abstracting the lived and embodied experiences of Indigenous peoples more broadly. This commitment draws upon Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) and Cheryl Bryce's (Songhees) assertion that "when approaches to [I]ndigenous cultural revitalisation and self-determination are discussed solely in terms of strategies, rights, and theories, they overlook the everyday practices of resurgence and decolonisation" (qtd. in Barker 46).

When using the term "settler" to refer to non-Indigenous people, I work to move beyond a simple binary construction of identity, in favour of recognizing the relevant particulars about different non-Indigenous groups in Canada, especially their respective relationships to citizenship, discrimination, exclusion and colonial legacy. Drawing upon Malissa Phung's discussion of how various marginalized groups in Canada "are still complicit in the ongoing land theft and colonial domination of Indigenous people" (291), I also aim to invoke the "anti-colonial conceptualization of the term 'settler' that both recognizes non-Indigenous complicity in Canada's ongoing colonial project and stands in solidarity with the decolonization projects of Indigenous people" (296). To reiterate, I never intend to imply that all non-Indigenous people are equally complicit in condoning or perpetuating the settler state's colonial project. That said, settler Canadian identity (especially *white* settler Canadian identity) has historically been constructed in

relation to various revisionist fantasies, which position settler Canadians as “industrious conquerors of a ‘frontier,’ a wide, wild, empty northern land, and civilizers of the ‘primitives’ they found there living nasty, brutish and short lives” (Proulx 86). Of course, not all non-Indigenous people “hold all of these views at all times” (86). However, by invoking the term ‘settler,’ I aim to highlight how and why “these interpretative repertoires, and actions based upon them, are at the heart of [settler] Canadian identity” (86) in order to deconstruct and decenter colonial modes of domination.

In addition, given the historical exclusion and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous voices and epistemologies, where appropriate, my analysis highlights the contributions of Indigenous scholars by privileging direct quotations over paraphrases as a deliberate citational practice. This citation practice aligns with my overall critical commitment to speak with, rather than speak for, the Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists invoked in this research project.

Finally, a core element of my critical approach involves exploring and articulating how my embodied and emplaced identity informs my work as a settler-scholar and writer. This research project has been deeply informed by my lived experiences of displacement and migration and is closely connected to a parallel research-creation project, titled *Fault Lines*. A separate section (Methodology II: Critical self-location through research-creation) provides a more detailed explanation, and I include excerpts from the research-creation manuscript in the Appendix.

**iv. Scope of analysis and critical reading methodology**

My decision to focus on the first six months of the movement is informed by several factors. Firstly, these temporal parameters of analysis (November 2012 to May 2013) present the most active period of the movement to date. Secondly, they also align with several published studies (qualitative and quantitative), allowing me to engage with specific findings, and to address gaps within existing research. Finally, the selected parameters highlight the temporal overlap between the Idle No More movement and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Idle No More gained prominence around the middle period of the TRC's official mandate), allowing me to explore salient interactions between the two initiatives, and the different ways in which public and state reactions to Idle No More further demonstrate problematic aspects of the model of reconciliation associated with the TRC.

When considering actual and potential affordances for decolonizing communication, my research into the first six months of the Idle No More movement employs a maximally expansive definition of rhetorical/communicative action. As such, during the research stage of this project I considered a wide range of activities and platforms, including: teach-in event, protest rally, round dance, blockade, sit-in, hunger strike, petition, public address, interview, social media post, Twitter hashtag, ceremony, community organization, alliance building, personal testimony, dream vision, prayers for collective healing, and long walks. Ultimately, the selected parameters of my analysis seek to reaffirm the multimodal (oral, written, material, visual, embodied, and kinesthetic) range of Indigenous rhetorical practices. As



Kimberly G. Wieser<sup>11</sup> points out, critical readings of Indigenous rhetoric tend to focus on verbal communication, often neglecting the significance of *visual* (e.g., petroglyphs and Mayan and Aztec codices), *material* (e.g., wampum belts and quipu), and *kinesthetic/embodied* (e.g., Plains Sign Language or smoking a pipe) forms of rhetorical activity (7). Specifically responding to these insights, my project prioritizes the visual/spatial elements of Indigenous social media communication (creation and use of the #Ottawapiskat hashtag on Twitter in chapter 2), as well as two forms of embodied rhetorical action (round dances in chapter 1, and youth-led long walks in chapter 4).

In terms of critical reading methodologies, my overall project draws upon cultural rhetorics. My understanding of cultural rhetorics as a practice/methodology is informed by a cultural rhetorics performance titled “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” composed by six members of the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab:<sup>12</sup> Malea Powell,<sup>13</sup> Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (Chippewa of Thames First Nation), Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson. As the authors summarize, their approach to cultural

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<sup>11</sup> Weiser identifies as “a woman of multiple ancestries and intersectionalities,” and describes how she is influenced by “familial oral traditions of having Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek ancestry, instruction in culture by an adopted Cheyanne grandfather, and [] daily life living intertribally in a household firmly grounded in the Comanche culture of [her] partner” (xi).

<sup>12</sup> The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab is a research collective with participants from four academic institutions: Michigan State University, Southern Vermont College, Bowling Green State University, and University of Colorado-Colorado Springs. The authors also acknowledge “[o]ther colleagues whose support and thinking contributed to this writing are Doug Schraufnagle, Donnie Sackey, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Madhu Narayan, and Gabrielle Rios.”

<sup>13</sup> Powell identifies as “a mixed-blood of Indiana Miami, Eastern Shawnee, and Euroamerican ancestry” (Powell 434).

rhetorics<sup>14</sup> emphasizes “rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical.” This approach circumvents “words like ‘other,’ ‘alternative,’ ‘marginal,’ ‘non-traditional,’” because they falsely “imply a norm, a stable center in which a ‘main’ rhetorical tradition exists and is augmented by ‘additive’ traditions.” Shifting the focus from “‘center/margins’ binaries,” toward “offering a way of thinking about practices like ‘culture’ and ‘rhetoric’ that makes it clear that everyone has them” productively leads to a greater focus on “the *how*—the *practices* of meaning-making that create, negotiate and maintain those structures” (emphasis in original). As the authors go on to clarify, once rhetoric is understood to be “not so much about ‘things’ as it is about ‘actions,’ it allows for a critical orientation towards actions which illuminates “how particular practices—ways of thinking, ways of problem solving, ways of being in the world—are valued (or not) within specific cultural systems and/or communities.” Emphasizing that “studying those power relationships is central to the project of studying rhetorics,” the authors underscore that “this orientation [is] distinctive in the discipline of rhetoric studies where human practices and makings are often reduced to texts, or to textual objects, in a way that elides both their makers *and* the systems of power in which they were produced.”

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<sup>14</sup> Clarifying their approach, the authors contextualize: “we’re not talking about the popular notion of ‘cultural rhetorics’ as cultural studies + rhetoric studies here. While that model, initiated during the formation of the Composition and Cultural Rhetorics (CCR) program at Syracuse University in the late 1990s, is an important one for the discipline of rhet/comp, it is not the model that guides us. Instead, we offer the following performance as a partial construction of our definition of the practice of cultural rhetorics.”

By applying a critical reading methodology which recognizes that ‘rhetorics’ “refers *both* to the study of meaning-making systems and to the practices that constitute those systems,” my rhetorical analysis of the Idle No More movement foregrounds the sociocultural and spatiotemporal situatedness of initiatives like round dances, Twitter hashtags, and long walks, and recognizes how “the systems of power in which they were produced [or, enacted]” are inextricable from their rhetorical meaning. As I will demonstrate in upcoming chapters, this methodological orientation has significant implications for evaluating the ‘persuasiveness’ of decolonial initiatives. Highlighting their commitment to decolonial practice,<sup>15</sup> the authors emphasize that cultural rhetorics “allow for stories to be told and asks for others to deeply listen to them.” By foregrounding the continuum of Indigenous survivance and explaining how histories of oppression function as a rhetorically relevant cultural context, my analysis of the Idle No More movement pushes back against instances of critical foreclosure (minimizing the sociopolitical significance of specific initiatives, implicitly or explicitly normalizing settler colonization), encouraging a deeper critical listening by registering the rhetorical significance of subtler and vaster communicative patterns (including continuity, historical resonance, the layering of cyclical repetition, and the intersection of concurrent interventions).

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<sup>15</sup> The authors note: “We're especially committed to the understanding of decolonial practice articulated by Qwo-Li Driskill: ‘an ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism’ (70). For Driskill, decolonization ‘includes struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation’ (70). For other scholars, like Emma Perez, the decolonial imaginary becomes a tool for remaking and rewriting, a practice that not only deconstructs, but reconstructs.”

Importantly for my analysis, cultural rhetorics scholars also recognize that there is “rhetorical power in building relationships between multiple traditions, multiple histories, multiple practices.” In keeping with this orientation toward constellated rhetorics, since I am studying a range of different rhetorical forms, I also draw upon additional critical frameworks within individual chapters to provide micro-level assessments of specific situations. (For example, in chapter 2 I incorporate relevant insights from mediated discourse analysis to analyze the visual/spatial elements of the Idle No More-affiliated Twitter hashtag #Ottawapiskat.)

**v. Navigating methodological challenges**

In the introduction to *Decolonizing Native American Rhetoric*, Casey Ryan Kelly and Jason Edward Black emphasize an overarching methodological challenge for studying the rhetoric of Indigenous communities: “much of contemporary rhetorical theory remains tightly sutured to classical Greco-Roman rhetorical foundations and Euro-American<sup>16</sup> democratic theory” (7). They point to several instances where Indigenous rhetorics have been devalued as ineffective modes of public communication because they are “alienating” to settler audiences, refusing to follow the “the implicit norms of the Euro-American public sphere” (7). The authors link this element to a broader trend of Euro-American bias, where people from

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<sup>16</sup> Although Weiser, Kelly and Black, and later Bruyneel, all focus on examples from American history, their insights can be applied to consider the dynamics between Indigenous nations and the Canadian settler state. As Wolfe argues, while there are crucial differences between specific nations/regimes, settler colonialism as a structure of domination/relation is always primarily defined by the logic of elimination. As such, for the purposes of this analysis, specific variations in formation and administration of American versus Canadian settler state policy are of secondary concern.

dominant sociopolitical groups often assume that they must be the ideal/intended audience, and therefore expect marginalized groups/speakers, like Indigenous people and people of colour, to advocate for social justice through “the conventional norms of aggregating public opinion and changing the minds of the powerful” (8).

Similarly, in the introduction to *Back to the Blanket: Recovered Rhetorics and Literacies in American Indian Studies*, Kimberly G. Wieser shows how certain Western interpretive paradigms prove inadequate for locating or illuminating meaning-making processes within Indigenous cultures and communities. Using the metaphor of a spider web (drawn from Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*), Wieser outlines the tension between “mainstream academic discourse” and “American Indian discourse in the communities” (9). The former generally “depends on linear argument—an argument that proceeds through a series of points, each of which is a small chunk of information, connected by the sort of logic for which verbal thinking is most conducive” (9). By contrast, in stories such as Silko’s, premised upon Laguna Pueblo ontology, existential interconnectedness leads to more non-linear communication patterns. As Wieser summarizes, in this cultural context, “there are an infinite number of connections between the speaker and the listener— and the story is all of the rest of the web. The speaker, knowing this, must pick a strand to follow. And the listener must meet him or her at the point of connection” (9). Wieser goes on to explain that the meaning of a particular communication act also hinges on the balance between what is said and what remains unsaid. The resulting dynamic is “quite different from communication theory, in which the speaker (subject) is at one corner of the triangle, the audience

(object) at another, the particular aspect of reality being discussed at the third, and the text in the middle” (9). Wieser’s insights underscore how some critical paradigms informed by the Western intellectual tradition (such as Lloyd Bitzer’s tripartite conceptualization of the rhetorical situation,<sup>17</sup> which draws a clear distinction between rhetor, audience, message, and text) are not fully transferrable to analyze communication patterns within different epistemological and cultural traditions.

The issues of audience bias and conceptual incompatibility are compounded by what I am calling the ‘inherent sovereignty paradox.’ Pamela Palmater (Mi’kmaq) succinctly notes: “[w]hile a great many injustices were inflicted upon the indigenous peoples in the name of colonization, indigenous peoples were never ‘conquered’” (“Why Are We Idle No More?” 37). As the original inhabitants of Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples established a wide range of complex and successful systems of government, centuries prior to the arrival of European invaders. Crucially, while sociopolitical expressions of Indigenous sovereignty have been suppressed/threatened by settler states, Indigenous peoples’ claim to their own sovereignty does not require further validation from settler states. As Kelly and Black summarize: “the concept of organizing a civil society to demand the redress of grievances presupposes the legitimacy of state sovereignty— a position to which [Indigenous nations] never conceded” (11). Since Indigenous peoples and nations

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<sup>17</sup> Bitzer proposes that the emergence and operation of rhetorical discourse seeking to alter reality can be conceptualized as a rhetorical situation, comprised of three elements: “the *exigence* [...] the *audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (6; emphasis in original).

never unilaterally relinquished their sovereignty, the colonial settler state lacks both legal and ethical grounds to extend or deny the right to self-rule. Indigenous peoples are always *already inherently sovereign*, even when sociopolitical expressions/manifestations of their sovereignty are forcibly limited by discursive and material constraints.

In addition to discursive constraints like the myth of Canadian civility, discussed earlier in this section, the steep material imbalances (including financial, military, and demographic capacities) between Indigenous populations and the settler state render unilateral enforcement of sovereignty a practical impossibility. As I will elaborate in chapter 3, discrepancies in material conditions have enabled settler states like Canada to criminalize and punish actions and bodies that seek to undermine the state's rule and legitimacy. Since articulations of and agitations for territorial sovereignty can have lethal consequences, Indigenous peoples are compelled to negotiate with/in an illegitimate state structure for their sovereignty, despite having never relinquished it. Therefore, the process of making demands on the state places Indigenous peoples in a uniquely paradoxical position: political action must function under the implicit acceptance of the demonstrably false premise that the settler state government can legally grant or deny expressions of various Indigenous rights, including the right to self-governance.

Contemporary Indigenous initiatives motivated by decolonial aims, like the Idle No More movement, are located within this 'inherent sovereignty paradox,' and must find ways to negotiate the competing realities of inherent sovereignty and neocolonial constraints (both discursive and material) to its practical

implementation. If we accept this premise, it necessarily follows that all critical analysis and assessment of Indigenous political activism must remain mindful of the inherent sovereignty paradox and should always strive to situate specific initiatives within theoretical frameworks capable of taking the aforementioned realities into account.

As I will trace throughout this project (especially within chapter 4 and the Conclusion) inadequate engagement with the inherent sovereignty paradox is a common limitation within critical assessments of the Idle No More movement where the settler state and non-Indigenous populations are assumed to be the sole or primary audience. Even if such assessments are accurately identifying impactful rhetorical strategies directed at persuading/challenging the state, failing to take into consideration the multiplicity of other audiences and rhetorical aims (e.g., affirmative politics, alliance-building within Indigenous communities, expressions of survivance) risks normalizing settler colonialism by limiting decolonial resistance and existence to the institutions and discourses of the liberal democratic settler state. The next subsection will outline how my critical framework attends to these considerations.

#### **vi. Conceptualizing Decolonizing Communication**

This analysis of the Idle No More movement draws upon Kevin Bruyneel's concept of "the third space of sovereignty," as well as Glen Coulthard's ethical framework of "grounded normativity" to explore constraints against and possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence. In *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*, Kevin Bruyneel



offers a useful conceptual framework for legitimizing Indigenous political actions outside the spatiotemporal boundaries of the settler state, while also recognizing strategic Indigenous negotiations within the current settler state boundaries as a practical necessity. In both the United States and in Canada, the practice of colonial rule is imposed/maintained by spatial and temporal constraints, “through which the colonizer attempts to ‘dominate the physical space,’ ‘reform the minds,’ and ‘absorb the economic’ as well as the cultural and political histories of indigenous people” (Bruyneel 2). These colonial impositions can be understood as the cumulative effects of various efforts by “citizens, institutions, and governments” that work to restrain Indigenous bodies and collectives “who are seeking to maintain and secure their cultural, economic, and political practices over time” (6).

The spatial boundaries of colonial rule range from overt reconfiguration of geopolitical territories and jurisdictions (fracturing or relocating Indigenous nations and/or communities), to disproportional surveillance and criminalization (containing/harming individual Indigenous bodies), to the creation of racist stereotypes (justifying colonial oppression by linking Indigenous spaces with pathology or degeneracy). Temporal boundaries are constructed by various typological narratives that “produce dualistic distinctions and boundaries, such as that between ‘preliterate vs. literate, traditional vs. modern, peasant vs. industrial,’ and these serve as measures of the ‘quality of states’ of dominant and non-dominant groups” (2). This colonial paradigm produces a permanent temporal distinction between a temporally unbound, “advancing” (dominant) people and an “inferior,”

temporally locked (as “primitive” or “traditional”) group in order to justify forceful repression of individual and collective agency and autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

By centering the containment function of colonization, Bruyneel reads Indigenous resistance to colonial rule as a process of working across the forcefully implemented/maintained spatial and temporal boundaries to demand “rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state while also challenging the imposition of colonial rule on their lives” (xvii). He suggests that this resistance engenders a “third space of sovereignty,” a political position that is neither simply inside nor outside the colonial system, but rather proceeds from a strategically shifting, liminal space to reveal “both the practices and the contingencies” of settler colonial rule (xvii). Drawing on Homi Bhabba’s work, Bruyneel explains that “the third space of sovereignty” functions as a “‘supplementary strategy’ that ‘does not turn contradiction into dialectical process. It interrogates its object by initially withholding its objective’” (21). In contrast to approaches which seek to synthesize competing visions of sovereignty, a third space “refuses to conform to the binaries and boundaries that frame dualistic choices for [I]ndigenous politics, such as assimilation-secession, inside-outside, modernity-traditionalism, and so on, and in so doing refuses to be divided by settler-state boundaries” (21).

In outlining this paradigm, Bruyneel is careful to clarify that he doesn’t mean to imply that Indigenous political actors can negate the material discrepancies and

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<sup>18</sup> Johannes Fabian calls this “Typological Time” and explains that it is “measured, not as time elapsed, nor by reference to points on a (linear) scale, but in terms of socioculturally meaningful events or, more precisely, intervals between such events” (qtd. in Bruyneel 2).

subsequent power imbalances between Indigenous communities and the settler state. Rather, he points out that “by refusing the imperial binary through a politics on the boundaries, [I]ndigenous people give their political identity, agency, and autonomy fuller expression, one that is less constrained by colonial impositions” (21). This is a significant distinction, as it both acknowledges the various colonial constraints on Indigenous expression of inherent sovereignty, and situates Indigenous sovereignty as inherently inassimilable with, or irreducible to, the institutions and discourses of the liberal democratic settler-state. As Bruyneel emphasizes, the third space of sovereignty isn’t presented as “an unqualified or unproblematic ideal,” but rather as an option for “defining and seeing expressions of citizenship and sovereignty that are not confined by dominant political boundaries, that refuse the imposition of such boundaries” (25).

Taking Bruyneel’s concept as a starting point, my analysis of Indigenous political activity during the Idle No More movement is focused on illuminating instances where the various systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously functioned as sites of active contention and subversive political struggle. To do this, I also draw upon Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s discussion of Indigenous politics proceeding from distinctly situated, place-based understandings of moral responsibility and social organization, called grounded normativity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This term is introduced in Coulthard’s 2014 text, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

In their article, “Grounded Normativity /Place-Based Solidarity,” Coulthard and Simpson define grounded normativity as “the ethical frameworks provided by ... Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge” (254). They go on to explain that grounded normativity “houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place” (254). Crucially, they demonstrate the value of grounded normativity by identifying how whenever liberal visions of political solidarity fail to account for Indigenous commitment to grounded normativity, they ultimately work to replicate/reinforce colonial power structures.

Identifying the limitations of Marxist theory, Coulthard and Simpson take issue with the ways in which various interpretations and applications have produced “very shallow solidarity with respect to Indigenous claims and struggles” and have placed demands on “Indigenous peoples to forcefully align their interests and identities in ways that contribute to [their] own dispossession and erasure” (252). Turning to prominent contemporary examples, they point to how self-proclaimed ‘historical materialist’ critics Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard label Indigenous peoples’ claims to a distinct, land-based identity as “divisive and reactionary” (252). Widdowson and Howard essentially subscribe to the view that the elimination of class difference will eradicate all other forms of inequality and oppression, leading to “a global tribe” where “the ‘world can live as one’” (252). For Indigenous nations, this supposedly emancipatory vision requires that they abandon their “parochial, indeed ‘neolithic,’ attachments to land, language, and

culture in exchange for ... integration into the simultaneously disciplining yet enlightening fold of the modern proletariat” (253).

Coulthard and Simpson argue that these are essentially flawed theories of political reformation and activist solidarity, underwritten by two normative assumptions (253). Firstly, these critical perspectives operate under the “modernist view of history and historical progress informed by a Eurocentric developmentalist ontology that historically ranks variation in ‘human cultural forms and modes of production’ according to each form’s ‘approximation to the full development of the human good’” (253). Secondly, they frame the “locatedness of land, culture, and place as material and ideational impediments to the formation of broader coalitions and, in turn, posits them as factors that need to be abandoned for the sake of ... emancipation” (253). While both of these assumptions are associated with white supremacist propaganda, they extend far beyond such evidently discriminatory and morally reprehensible ideological models. According to Coulthard and Simpson, they are “foundational to what Walter Mignolo and others have identified as the ‘coloniality of modernity’ itself,” and as such “they have long informed the dominant liberal and Marxist Left’s concern over what they claim to be the inherently parochial and particularistic orientation of ‘identity politics’ that is serving to undermine more egalitarian and universal aspirations, like those focused on class and directed toward a more equitable and nonexploitative distribution of socioeconomic goods” (253). Coulthard and Simpson underscore this point by emphasizing that contemporary critiques of “Indigenous claims to self-determination grounded in and informed by [their] attachments to land and

sovereignty” have also been voiced by “radical scholars and activists [like Jared Sexton and Nandita Sharma] that one would intuitively assume might serve more organically as authentic comrades in co-resistance with Indigenous communities” (253.) Climate justice scholar and organizer Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) draws attention to other instances where non-Indigenous environmental organizing which might *seem* aligned with Indigenous causes nevertheless reinforces some of the harms of settler colonialism. Highlighting often overlooked parallels between the conservation movement and extractive industries, Whyte notes:

National parks, ecological restoration projects, conservation zones, and even the uses of certain terms—especially “wilderness”—are associated with forced displacement of entire communities, erasure of Indigenous histories in education and public memory, economic marginalization, and violations of cultural and political rights.

Whyte’s insights bring to mind Patrick Wolfe’s argument that colonial invasion is “a structure rather than an event” (402), which can further demonstrate why Coulthard and Simpson’s conceptualization of grounded normativity constitutes a truly effective model of decolonizing activity.

As Wolfe emphasizes, the history of colonization doesn’t cease or fundamentally alter “when it moves on from the era of frontier homicide” (402). Rather, the “logic that initially informed frontier killing transmutes into different modalities, discourses and institutional formations as it undergirds the historical development and complexification of settler society” (402). Coulthard and Simpson echo this interpretation of settler colonialism, summarizing:

As a settler colonial power, Canada has structured its relationship to Indigenous peoples primarily through the dispossession of Indigenous bodies from Indigenous lands and by impeding and systemically regulating the generative relationships and practices that create and maintain Indigenous nationhoods, political practices, sovereignties, and solidarities. (254)

Significantly, they argue that by “teach[ing] us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner,” grounded normativity preserves the relationality of Indigenous political orders (254). Consequently, along with paying attention to how “the third space of sovereignty” functions as a site of political negotiation, my reading of decolonizing initiatives and discourses within the Idle No More movement is also focused on illuminating key instances of Indigenous resurgence/resistance proceeding from grounded normativity.

### **Idle No More: the first six months**

This section provides a brief chronological overview of the first six months of the Idle No More movement. By summarizing key online and offline activities here, I aim to contextualize my description of dissertation chapters in the next section. A more detailed chronological summary is available in the closing of *The Winter We Danced*, and each of the upcoming dissertation chapters will provide additional contextualization for the specific Idle No More initiatives I will be analyzing.

As archived on the Idle No More website (see Figure 1), the first instance of

the phrase “Idle No More” on Twitter was in an October 30, 2012 post by Jessica Gordon:



Figure 1. Twitter post by @JessicaPGordon: the first use of #IDLENO MORE. Quoted in the Kino-nda-niimi Collective, page 390.

The Idle No More co-founders created a Facebook page on November 29, 2012 then launched the official website on December 2. By the end of November, #IdleNoMore was trending on Twitter across Canada (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 390). The first National Day of Solidarity and Resurgence took place on December 10, 2012. In more than a dozen cities (including Vancouver, Whitehorse, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Halifax, and Goose Bay), tens of thousands of people participated in rallies and gatherings, “focusing on opposition to recent legislation, attention to life-threatening situations in Indigenous communities, and political solidarity” (391). The next day, Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation, an isolated reserve community in northern Ontario, began a hunger strike<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The exact appellation became a point of contention in the media. Eventually, a liquid fast was defined as the consumption of tea, lemon water, and fish broth. The exact nature of the relationship between Chief Spence’s hunger strike and the Idle No More movement has also been a point of debate. In *The Winter We Danced*, the Kino-nda-niimi Collective notes that although “originally unrelated to any legislation or to [the four co-founders], her simultaneous protest galvanized the movement” by “provid[ing] an urgency that motivated our communities and our leaders to confront the legacy of this colonial relationship” (25).



to protest the unfulfilled conditions of Treaty Nine.<sup>21</sup> Raymond Robinson (Cross Lake First Nation) began to fast in solidarity ten hours later, followed by Jean Sock (Elsipogtog First Nation) on December 17. Over the next six weeks, “hundreds of people across Canada join[ed] in day- or week-long solidarity fasts” in support of Chief Theresa Spence's request for a meeting with the Prime Minister, and either the Queen or her representative, Governor General David Johnston (391).

On December 17, the first flash mob Round Dance took place at Cornwall Centre Shopping Mall in Regina. Another flash mob was held at the West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton the next day, followed by similar round dances in the Rideau Centre in Ottawa, the Polo Park Mall in Winnipeg, and the Mall of America in Minneapolis (among other, smaller locations). Throughout the rest of December, “hundreds of similar events [were] held in malls, highways, and streets in towns, cities, and Indigenous communities across Canada and into the United States” (393).

At the same time, direct action initiatives started to take place. For example, on December 19, over 1,000 people (mostly from the Chippewa of the Thames and Oneida of the Thames communities) shut down a part of Highway 401 outside of London, Ontario. On December 21, members of Aamjiwnaang First Nation set up a

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<sup>21</sup> Located in northern Ontario, the Attawapiskat First Nation community has grappled with numerous negative impacts of settler colonization, including a long-standing housing shortage, a boil water advisory, pollution from nearby mining activity, extreme economic depression, and a youth suicide crisis (Barker). As Chelsea Vowel (Métis) has summarized, after the community declared a state of emergency in late 2011, “the initial public reaction was horror that such conditions could exist in Canada,” however, “[t]hat reaction quickly became swallowed up by a flood of accusations about Band mismanagement and culpability” drawing upon a mix of “ugly national myths” and widespread ignorance about various aspects of Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples including taxation policies, treaties, and the ongoing traumas of colonization (“The Truth Is”).

two-week long rail blockade near Sarnia, Ontario to protest chemical pollution on their land. Although not explicitly organized as such, by this point some of the round dances also effectively served as temporary blockades. For example, a round dance held at the Yonge and Dundas Square in Toronto on December 21 temporarily shut down traffic flow within Canada's busiest intersection at the height of the holiday shopping season (394).

By the end of December, Rachael Peterson, a researcher from Rice University, reported that the hashtag #IdleNoMore had over 36,000 mentions from sites across North America, and *The Globe and Mail* reported that the hashtag had been used over 144,000 times (395). Up until the end of December 2012 most of the Twitter activity related to Idle No More focused on general information about the movement and specific promotion of various individual events. Videos and photos of round dances and flash mobs were regularly posted and promoted (Blevis 11). During the first two months of the movement, most of the participants tweeting about Idle No More were located in Canada, and could be classified as organizers and supporters of the movement (19). Significantly, Blevis notes that at this point both the low engagement and the high engagement categories of participation contained predominantly positive content. For example, in the first few weeks after Chief Theresa Spence announced her decision to begin a liquid fast, “much of the Twitter chatter about Chief Spence was supportive of her campaign” (19).

On January 4, 2013 the Prime Minister's Office announced that Stephen Harper would hold a “meeting” with Aboriginal leaders “coordinated by the Assembly of First Nations” that would “focus on treaty relationship and aboriginal

rights and economic development” on January 11 (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 397). Three days later, an audit of Attawapiskat First Nation's financial records was leaked to the media, revealing a lack of documentation for some of the community's financial transactions. Speaking to the potential political motivations behind this development, the Kino-nda-niimi Collective points out, “many suspect the leak [was] intended to discredit the still-fasting Spence” (397). On January 9, Chief Spence announced that she would not attend the meeting because it did not honour her request to meet with a representative of the Crown as well.

January 11, 2013 constituted one of the most significant days in the early history of the Idle No More movement. Amid intense public criticism, Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with Shawn Atleo (National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada from 2009 to 2014) and sixteen other Indigenous leaders. Afterwards, the Aboriginal Affairs minister John Duncan reported that Prime Minister Harper “agreed to [] 'high-level' talks on treaty relationships and comprehensive land claims, 'enhanced oversight' on Aboriginal issues and further meetings with the leader of the AFN” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 399). Numerous Indigenous leaders from Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and other communities refused to attend the meeting with Harper, and instead joined over 3,000 activists in rallies and protests outside the meeting and on Parliament Hill (399). January 11 also saw a massive surge of international participation, as there were “265 simultaneous rallies held across North America and as far away as Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Finland, Germany, England, and the United States” (399-400). On January 16, the second National Day of Action, partly inspired

by Chief Spence, seven youths and two guides set out for a long walk (called the Journey of Nishiyuu) spanning over 1,600 kilometres from their home in Whapmagoostui to Parliament Hill in Ottawa. On January 23, following a short hospitalization, Chief Theresa Spence ended her fast.

Various events and actions continued throughout January: Métis artist and activist Christi Belcourt launched the Divided No More website, Anishinaabe comedian and writer Ryan McMahon hosted two #ldlenomore Internet Townhalls, Métis writer and lawyer Chelsea Vowel hosted the Idle No More Women's Townhall webcast, and the first of several volumes of *Idle No More: Songs for Life* was released on rpm.fm (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 398-402). By the end of January, Idle No More had an extensive international audience. For example, on the second Global Day of Action (January 28) Idle No More protests were held in Britain, France, Sweden, Greenland, numerous American states (including Alaska, Michigan, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, New York, Texas, Washington state, Oregon), and all across Canada (404). Similarly, the Idle No More video conference hosted by Wab Kinew on January 30 (with speakers Chief Leroy Denny, Tanya Kappo, Taiiaike Alfred, Chief Isadore Day, Shelley Young, and Molly Peters) was watched in 41 countries (404).

The two Global Days of Action, January 11 (#J11) and January 28 (#J28), represented key moments in the movement. Idle No More organizers created a microsite for January 11 on which they catalogued the 265 planned international events, and promoted the use of #J11 hashtag. The first Global Day of Action

resulted in peak social media activity, including 56,954 Twitter posts (Blevis 11). As Blevis summarizes, the volume of online activity began to decrease the next day, dropping roughly 50% to 24,082 tweets and tapering off by the end of January to an average of about 8,000 tweets per day (11). By the second Global Day of Action, online activity began transitioning from specific Idle No More goals to more general criticism of the Canadian government and its treatment of Indigenous peoples, including broad concerns about the KeystoneXL pipeline, climate change and environmental protection (12).

As Blevis traces, the first two months of 2013 marked a significant shift in online expressions of public sentiment toward Idle No More. In addition to the earlier content, such as pictures and videos of round dances and other INM events, many people started posting critical, frustrated or outright racist remarks about Chief Spence, Attawapiskat, and direct-action strategies such as the use of blockades of train and travel routes (19). For example, in the low engagement category of INM Twitter participants, expressions of positive sentiment dropped from 76% in December to 28% in January (19). Blevis also highlights that the presence of Twitter “noise” (non-relevant posts) increased significantly (from 5% in December to 23% in January) (20). The activity of SPAMbots, “pieces of software which identify and then flood popular hashtags with tweets linking to pornography and commercial sites” (Blevis 20) presented a particular challenge.

The most significant Twitter activity during March pertained to the Journey of Nishiyuu walkers. Online expressions of support increased as the walkers approached Ottawa. On March 25, the day that the walkers arrived, the number of

Idle No More related tweets soared from 2,483 the previous day to 9,007 (Blevis 20). However, Twitter activity immediately decreased (to 2,961 posts) by the next day. As Blevis explains, these engagement patterns highlight how challenging it can be to sustain long-term support in the digital landscape.

The volume of both online activity and media coverage of Idle No More continued to decline throughout April 2013. However, the proportional share of international participation in Idle No More Twitter discussion increased as various activist groups across the globe added the #IdleNoMore to their own events and causes. Use of the Idle No More hashtag increased in May 2013, largely due to several political events (including the Senate expense scandal and the \$3.1 billion in unaccounted government funds). Given the increase in anti-government sentiment (including circulation of #PMHarperMustResign), positive sentiment toward Idle No More increased from 27% to 86% (Blevis 23).

On June 21 (National Indigenous Peoples Day in Canada), Idle No More organizers announced the start of a joint campaign with Defenders of the Land, a network of Indigenous communities involved in land struggle, called Sovereignty Summer and accompanied by the hashtag #SovSummer. Described as “a campaign of coordinated non-violent direct actions to promote Indigenous rights and environmental protection in alliance with non-Indigenous supporters,” Sovereignty Summer actions sought to increase public awareness about the Harper government’s (neo)colonial legislative agenda (“Sovereignty Summer Overview”) and to facilitate global coordination and communication among activists. This second aim involved the launch of a new website (using NationBuilder, a software

company providing technological infrastructure to social/leadership initiatives) which included “a contact database of over 100,000 people who are active in the movement” (Rabble). As co-founder Jessica Gordon explained, Idle No More organizers planned to “use the most effective web-based tools to engage and expand [the movement’s] political base both behind the scenes and on the front lines as [they] strive to build the biggest social movement for systemic change that Canada has ever seen” (qtd. in Rabble). Despite the campaign’s explicit commitment to non-violent direct action, Sovereignty Summer initiatives immediately drew punitive and prohibitive reactions. During the first week, activist occupation of an Enbridge pumping station outside Hamilton, Ontario in opposition to the Line 9 pipeline resulted in 18 arrests and five criminal charges (Stone). Assessing the campaign’s online metrics during the fall of 2013, Blevis found:

Between June 1 and August 31 hashtags and terms associated with Sovereignty Summer (#SovSummer and #SovereigntySummer and the phrase “Sovereignty Summer”) were mentioned 7,698 times online. That was followed by news sources (224), blogs (143) and forums including Reddit (19). Nineteen videos which mentioned Sovereignty Summer or one of its known hashtags in video titles or descriptive meta-text were uploaded. [...] The online energy was short lived, dropping sharply to very limited activity on July 7th and struggling to keep above 50 mentions each day for the remainder of the summer. (“Sovereignty Summer”)

Interpreting the declines in digital engagement since the first few months of Idle No More, Blevis suggests that Sovereignty Summer faced additional outreach challenges

as numerous high-profile news stories and events (including “the tragic train derailment in Lac Mégantic, floods in Toronto, the Senate scandal, and the Fair For Canada<sup>22</sup> campaign”) made it more difficult to attract and retain media and public attention (“Sovereignty Summer”).

As I will elaborate in the Conclusion, while Idle No More has not regained its initial levels of widespread public action and engagement, it remains an active social justice movement, adapting and organizing in response to new challenges, and often aligning with other global movements and initiatives focused on decolonization and environmental justice. Since 2013, prominent Idle No More initiatives have included: contributing to pipeline protests (e.g. against Energy East and Keystone XL), campaigning against detrimental legislative changes (e.g. the campaign “KillBillC33” to oppose proposed changes to the First Nations Education Act), and enacting ongoing solidarity with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit People (MMIWG2S) activism. Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) offers a useful perspective for interpreting the significance of Idle No More’s wide range of activist collaborations, interventions, and ongoing adaptivity:

Indigenous environmental movements work to reject the ancestral dystopias and colonial fantasies of the present. This is why so many of our environmental movements are about stopping sexual and state violence against Indigenous people, reclaiming ethical self-determination across

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<sup>22</sup> Led by Canadian telecommunications companies Rogers, Bell and Telus, the ‘Fair For Canada’ campaign included coordinated press release statements and a website aimed at “calling on the government to make a fair decision for all Canadians by removing the loopholes set for foreign companies looking to invest in Canada’s wireless market” (Omar).



diverse urban and rural ecosystems, empowering gender justice and gender fluidity, transforming lawmaking to be consensual, healing intergenerational traumas, and calling out all practices that erase Indigenous histories, cultures, and experiences.

While I have found it productive to focus on the first six months of the Idle No More movement (for reasons summarized at the outset of this Introduction), by foregrounding a wide range of activist initiatives and relevant social contexts, my project aligns with Whyte's insights about the deliberately/necessarily multifaceted nature of Indigenous environmental movements. Similarly, taking issue with critical readings which point to decreased engagement from the settler state and non-Indigenous audiences as a way to foreclose the movement's rhetorical impacts, my analysis seeks to both understand the unique circumstances of the movement's prominence during the winter of 2012 – 2013, and to recognize the cumulative effects of Idle No More's ongoing political and rhetorical intervention.

### **Project Overview**

Overall, this research project examines instances where the various systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously became sites of active contention and subversive political struggle. Accordingly, as described in the chapter summaries below, I analyze three forms of rhetorical communication Indigenous activists enacted during the first six months of the Idle No More movement: round dances, Twitter hashtags, and youth-led long walks. I also consider the significance of state and public responses to the movement in light of

the temporal overlap between the emergence of Idle No More and the concurrent proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

### *Chapter 1— The Round Dance Revolution*

I begin with an analysis of Idle No More round dances as a form of embodied and emplaced communication both to reflect their significance within the movement (often characterized as the “Round Dance Revolution”) and to situate the gendered constraints of coloniality as a foundational consideration for evaluating decolonial efforts. Drawing upon recent work by Audra Simpson and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, I establish how systemic and symbolic forms of colonial violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people reflect deliberate attempts to limit/eradicate prior Indigenous sociopolitical structures. I consequently extend Kevin Bruyneel’s conceptualization of the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization to outline how the forcible imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order continues to function as a gendered constraint on Indigenous political orders, social relations, and individual identities. I then turn to examine how Idle No More-affiliated round dances, which leveraged public affirmation of Indigeneity to enact symbolic critiques of settler colonialism, also meaningfully challenged the gendered constraints of coloniality. Building upon Karyn Recollet’s (Cree) analysis of the 2012 Idle No More-affiliated round dance at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Streets in downtown Toronto, I examine the rhetorical significance of subsequent reoccurrences. Tracing the temporal pattern of annual, adaptive round dances at the same site between 2017 and 2021, I argue that the

sociopolitical impacts of the 2012 round dance, as outlined in Recollet's analysis, have been reaffirmed and expanded by each of the subsequent reiterations. Consequently, considering their overall rhetorical impact within Idle No More, I posit that flash mob round dances powerfully aligned with the movement's emphasis on restoring and empowering the political agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people.

*Chapter 2— Reframing (Neo)Colonial Narrative Bias: #Ottawapiskat and the Third Space of Sovereignty*

This chapter also focuses on the tension between settler colonial forms of containment and a successful form of Indigenous political resistance. More specifically, I first analyze how Idle No More activists leveraged the technological affordances of the Twitter hashtag to subvert neocolonial impositions of spatiotemporal containment, then theorize the dynamic interactions between discursive and embodied Indigenous challenges to settler colonial political structures. After outlining the affordances of the Twitter hashtag as a mode of communication and organization, I apply a qualitative framing analysis to demonstrate how one specific hashtag, “#Ottawapiskat,” successfully supported concurrent instances of embodied Indigenous resistance (such as Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike) by actively reframing neocolonial deployments of narrative bias (consisting of various discursive attempts to delegitimize activists and initiatives aligned with the Idle No More movement). Then, drawing upon theoretical concepts from mediated discourse analysis, I argue that “#Ottawapiskat”

functioned as a strategic site of engagement where the virtual space of Twitter and the relational space of the hashtag were used to reconfigure dominant narratives (or, ideological frames) about the physical spaces of Ottawa and Attawapiskat through the creation of a digital third space, Ottawapiskat. Overall, this chapter contributes to existing assessments of the possibilities and limitations of Indigenous digital activism by considering it in relation to Bruyneel's concept of "the third space of sovereignty" and Tilly's concept of the "repertoire of contention."

### *Chapter 3— Idle No More and the Limits of Reconciliation Rhetoric*

This chapter considers the constraints against and possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence by juxtaposing the first six months of the Idle No More movement against a different yet concurrent decolonial initiative: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). Broadly speaking, the TRC reflects a reconciliation-based approach to decolonization, while Idle No More reflects a resurgence-based approach. Since the emergence of Idle No More as a distinct social justice movement (late 2012) occurred during the second half of the TRC's official proceedings (2008 – 2015), I consider how this temporal overlap aligns with critical claims (by Glen Coulthard, Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, and Robyn Green) that different power struggles between the settler state and Indigenous peoples in Canada tend to follow a pattern I will describe as "constraints-ruptures-concessions." I begin by summarizing the history of the residential school system and the evolution of redress initiatives. I then highlight the notable successes (victim-validating testimonial model, culturally-relevant proceedings) and

limitations (logistical shortcomings, susceptibility to discursive reframing by the settler state, focus on past trauma foreclosing discussion of structural continuities) of the TRC as a reconciliation-based approach to decolonization. Next, I consider how various responses to the emergence of the Idle No More movement add a compelling layer to the existing evaluations of the successes and limitations of the TRC proceedings. Specifically, I outline how state responses (legislative disempowerment and police surveillance) and public responses (opportunistic solidarity and racist backlash) to the Idle No More movement demonstrate that colonial violence has neither ceased, nor completed its ultimate aims. By exploring the limits of a discursive form of reconciliation, premised on gathering and publicizing Indigenous testimony through TRC proceedings, this chapter prefaces my discussion of youth-led long walks as a resurgent form of embodied, emplaced testimony, explored in the final chapter.

*Chapter 4— Embodied, Emplaced Indigenous Resurgence: Youth-led Long Walks as Testimonies of Survivance*

This chapter contributes to existing research on material forms of Indigenous rhetorical challenges to settler colonialism by examining the role and impact of youth-led long walks during the first six months of the Idle No More movement. Focusing on a particularly notable youth-led long walk, called the Journey of Nishiyuu, I examine how the rhetorical impact of this initiative stems from its resonance with various lived histories of colonial oppression, as well as Indigenous traditions of journeying. Attending to the numerous tensions between reconciliation

and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization, discussed in the previous chapter, my analysis considers youth led-long walks as a resonant example of resurgence-based initiatives. Reading the Journey of Nishiyuu as a materially symbolic act of communication, I foreground its effects on Indigenous alliance building, cultural empowerment, and collective healing. As such, this chapter reveals how the decolonizing potential of the youth-led long walks extends beyond their capacity to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and settler populations in Canada, or their immediate ability to compel the settler state toward transformative political change. I further propose that youth-led long walks like Journey of Nishiyuu constitute an embodied and emplaced form of Indigenous testimony—one that challenges the prevalence of trauma narratives by demonstrating ongoing survivance and counters neocolonial erasures by actively reinscribing Indigenous presence on the land.

### **Beyond Damage-Centered Research**

While my analysis necessarily summarizes the devastating effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples and nations, I strive to remain responsive to Eve Tuck's call for suspending "damage-centered" research. As Tuck explains, research on Indigenous communities "has historically been damage-centered, intent on portraying [Indigenous] neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken" (412). Such damaged-centered research primarily works to "document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe" (413). Tuck points out that even when well intentioned (e.g. "testifying to damage so that persecutors will be forced to be

accountable”), this approach has a pathologizing effect, as communities become defined by oppression (413-12). By contrast, Tuck calls for research approaches which can depathologize “the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered” (416).

One proposed alternative to damage-centered research consists of “craft[ing] research to capture *desire* instead of damage” (416). Positioning a “desire-based framework” as an antidote, Tuck explains that by centering “complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives,” this research framework can more fully humanize communities and individuals (416). Tuck is careful to caution that desire should not be understood as a simple “antonym to damage,” and to clarify that she is not calling for a denial of historical conditions, or ongoing inequalities. Rather, an epistemological shift away from damage-centred approaches can extend beyond capturing “loss and despair” to also account for “the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” (417). Theorizing the affordances of a desire-based approach, Tuck elaborates:

Desire is a thirding of the dichotomized categories of reproduction and resistance. It is neither/both/ reproduction and resistance. This is important because it more closely matches the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures. (420-21)

Without overstating the parallels, I find that Tuck’s framing of desire as “a thirding of the dichotomized categories of reproduction and resistance” usefully resonates

with Bruyneel's conceptualization of the "third space of sovereignty," a political position that is neither simply inside nor outside the colonial system, but rather proceeds from a strategically shifting, liminal space to reveal "both the practices and the contingencies" of settler colonial rule (xvii). By attending to instances where constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously functioned as sites of active contention and subversive political struggle during the first six months of the Idle No More movement, my analysis foregrounds the multifaceted ways that Indigenous people "participate in uneven social structures" (Tuck 421) to contextualize and affirm the rhetorical valences of various sociopolitical acts and utterances without imposing dualistic choices for Indigenous peoples and politics, "such as assimilation-secession, inside-outside, modernity-traditionalism, and so on" (Bruyneel 21). Overall, by demonstrating the ways that the Idle No More movement can be understood as a "revitalization" of the third space(s) of sovereignty, this project challenges normalizations of settler colonialism as an unalterable reality and instead anticipates futures informed by other sociopolitical realities: ones which already existed *before* and will continue to exist *beyond* currently dominant power structures.



## Methodology II:

Critical self-location through research-creation

*“Academic theories are but the leaky summations of human stories.”*

-Lee Maracle

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I am currently located on lands Indigenous peoples have inhabited and stewarded for thousands of years, establishing and sustaining numerous distinct sociocultural practices, political structures, and epistemological traditions. More specifically, in the context of land rights negotiations between Indigenous peoples and European settler colonial authorities, I am located on lands covered by the Haldimand Treaty of October 25, 1784. In this document, Fredrick Haldimand, the Governor of the Province of Quebec<sup>23</sup> and thus a representative of the Kingdom of Great Britain, recognized the Mohawk nation as British allies during the American Revolution and addressed those who had “lost their settlements within the Territory of the American States, or wish[ed] to retire from them to the British” (“A Global Solution” 5). The Haldimand Treaty goes on to decree that the “Mohawk Nation and such others of the Six Nations” are to “take possession of and settle upon the Banks of the River commonly called Ours [Ouse] or Grand River, running into Lake Erie [...] six

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<sup>23</sup> To clarify the distinctions between prior and current geopolitical borders, the Province of Quebec was established by the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1763 after British forces defeated the French colonial regime of Nouvelle-France during the Seven Years' War. As an 18<sup>th</sup> century colony in British North America, the Province of Quebec encompassed what is now the province of Ontario.

miles deep from each side of the river [...] which them and their posterity are to enjoy for ever” (“A Global Solution” 5). While these terms encompass approximately 950,000 acres, at present, Six Nations of the Grand River lands constitute “less than 5% of what was originally granted” (“Key Issues”). The Six Nations (Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Tuscarora) of the Grand River are part of the Iroquois Confederacy, one of the world’s oldest models of participatory democracy. The Six Nations of the Grand River community is located along the banks of the Grand River, and is demographically the largest reservation in the state now known as Canada.

The historical circumstances resulting in my eventual arrival on these lands and the ongoing implications of my continued presence crystallize when I consider the dynamics between two events from 1995: my family’s lived experience of displacement and a concurrent example of Six Nations’ resistance against ongoing dispossession. In August of 1995, my family (along with a quarter million people living in the same region) was forcibly displaced from our home during one of the many military operations comprising the violent disintegration<sup>24</sup> of the former Yugoslavia. Faced with the prospect of indefinite internal displacement marked by

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<sup>24</sup> Selecting a name for the numerous conflicts comprising the overall disintegration of the former Yugoslavia remains a politically charged act. All of the commonly used names (Wars of Yugoslav Secession/Succession, Wars in the Balkans, Yugoslav Civil War) reflect a different interpretation of historical power dynamics and as such carry distinct political implications. For the purposes of this discussion, the complex sociopolitical and historical dynamics around the formation and disintegration of Yugoslavia are of secondary concern. Within the parameters of this discussion, I am intentionally directing my focus away from questions about causality, casualties, and legacies of colonization within Europe. Rather, I focus on how (im)migration prompted by political conflict within the geopolitical territory of Europe continues to impact the dynamics of settler colonization within Turtle Island.

acute impoverishment and further risks to physical safety, my parents applied to immigrate to (what I later understood as) three settler colonial states: Australia, Canada, and the United States of America. When we eventually arrived in Canada in April of 1997, we were among tens of thousands of refugees from the Balkans, accounting for about 15% of all immigrants arriving in Canada between 1994 to 2000, and between 21% - 28% of all refugees accepted by Canada during the second half of the 1990s (Statistics Canada 5). While our relation to 'European whiteness' as a category of privileged identity might have been perceived as liminal, mediated by comparisons to 'real' Europeans (Western European societies),<sup>25</sup> it doubtless yielded advantages not extended to asylum and immigration applicants from conflicts in countries/societies not racialized as white.<sup>26</sup>

The legal mechanisms enabling my family's immigration to Canada underscore the sociopolitical implications of our continued presence on these lands. As Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu explain in the Introduction to *Refugee states: critical*

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<sup>25</sup> A recent essay by Zuzanna Ściborska, "Europe, But Not Quite" offers a succinct overview of the "liminal whiteness and Europeaness of Eastern Europe" as it relates to global racialized hierarchies of 'Easternness,' including Edward Said's concept of orientalism and the modern/unmodern dichotomy. Also deeply informed by Said's theories, Todorova's text *Imagining the Balkans* offers a sustained critical consideration of these ideas.

<sup>26</sup> As Constance Backhouse summarizes, "[i]mmigration laws shaped the very contours of Canadian society in ways that aggrandized the centrality of white power" (15). Historical examples of *overtly* discriminatory immigration policies include: the Head Tax provisions in the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1885, the "continuous journey regulation" in the 1908 amendment of the *Immigration Act*, and the *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923*. Even if only considering asylum-related (im)migration, numerous scholars have documented discriminatory aspects of Canada's response to different refugee populations. To highlight a recent example, David De Coninck considers the key discrepancies between state and public responses to the Afghan refugee crisis in the summer of 2021 and the mass displacement of Ukrainians since March of 2022.

*refugee studies in Canada*, “the Canadian settler state’s capacity to grant political asylum to refugees – and assert its sovereign power – is contingent on its centuries-long colonial suppression of Indigenous sovereignty over land, natural resources, and people” (11). This dynamic is clearly reflected in a comparison between the aftermath of my family’s experience of forceful displacement and the aftermath of the second event I want to highlight. In March of 1995, the Six Nations of the Grand River (represented by the Six Nations Elected Council) filed a Statement of Claim against Canada and Ontario (Court File 406/95), “seeking from the Crown a comprehensive general accounting for all money, all property under the 1784 Haldimand Treaty and for other assets belonging to the Six Nations and the manner in which the Crown managed or disposed of such assets” (“A Global Solution” 13). Over the last two and a half decades, my family has gradually experienced improvements in material and psychological wellbeing. Meanwhile, the Six Nations of the Grand River continue to contend with ongoing dispossession through a wide range of strategies, including “petitions, protests, land claims, lawsuits, occupations and blockades” (APTN National News). While a critical understanding of my embodied and emplaced relation to the ongoing violations of the Haldimand Treaty does not alter the underlying power dynamics, it has served as a starting point, highlighting the stakes of my involvement in this research so that accountability is not diluted into abstractions.

So far, I have been summarizing the facts and considerations that led to me begin working on this dissertation project. I will now discuss the questions and considerations which have shaped my process and the resulting project. As the land

rights framework outlined in “Land Rights: A Global Solution for the Six Nations of the Grand River” illustrates, it is unnecessary (hence, misguided and patronizing) for settler scholars to propose approaches to decolonization on behalf of Indigenous communities. It is also clear that individual settler solidarities (be they expressed through discursive or material means) will always be insufficient in the absence of systemic change. Seeking to better understand and thus better support Indigenous-led attempts at enacting systemic change, I began researching affordances for decolonizing communication within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Idle No More movement. I sought to write from a position of solidarity with decolonial and antiracist interventions into settler colonial and white supremacist ideologies and power structures, but was uncertain about how to productively enact that intention within the parameters of a dissertation project.

In March of 2017, I had the opportunity to meet with Idle No More co-founder Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum at the University of Waterloo.<sup>27</sup> In *Nationhood Interrupted*, Sylvia describes *nêhiyaw* protocols for presenting knowledge keepers and Elders with tobacco and gifts when seeking knowledge (42). Aiming to honour Sylvia’s teachings without overreaching into cultural appropriation, at the outset of our meeting I asked if I could offer a poem I had written about my family’s arrival in Canada, dedicated to Sylvia in solidarity with the Idle No More movement. After months of struggling to channel my research questions into academic prose, I had

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<sup>27</sup> While this discussion with Sylvia informed my study of the Idle No More movement in several ways (such as the decision to begin my analysis by considering the impacts of the gendered constraints of settler colonization), to date I have not discussed the research findings with Sylvia or the other co-founders.

written the poem in an attempt to articulate, as honestly and directly as I could, how my lived experience informs my sense of accountability and shapes my approach to the study of contemporary decolonial initiatives. I am deeply grateful to Sylvia for taking the time to talk with me and for accepting my poem, "Revision." I am further grateful to Sylvia for generously sharing the story of our meeting alongside a copy of "Revision" on social media as that gesture sparked connections with other scholars and artists, leading to several pivotal encounters and conversations.

For example, I initially planned to address my embodied and emplaced relation to (de)colonization through five poems that would accompany this research project as an Appendix. However, the scope of that creative work expanded significantly after Dr. Laura Madokoro came across "Revision" through Sylvia's social media post and subsequently contacted me about citing a stanza in the Call for Papers for "Loss: A Symposium," held at McGill University in 2019. As described in the CFP, the gathering aimed to address "the issue of loss by bringing together scholars working in Indigenous Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, Citizenship Studies and related fields to consider this subject through the dual framework of loss and remaining" ("Call for Papers: Loss – A Symposium"). This interdisciplinary orientation echoed the range of research I was trying to synthesize within my dissertation project, and articulated the crux of the critical position I deem the defining factor of my embodied and emplaced relation to (de)colonization:

Connecting the experience of Indigenous peoples and refugees, for instance, complicates the practice of refuge among settler colonial societies such as Canada and the United States. In these countries, the recuperative role that

territory has played for refugees seeking safety cannot be divorced from the original and ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples and histories of slavery and exploitation. (“Call for Papers: Loss – A Symposium”)

Encountering a stanza from “Revision” cited as an example of self-location within this critical position prompted me to think more expansively about how I could meet my critical aims by following a line of inquiry that would move between prose and poetry. With Lee Maracle’s (Stó:lō) observation “Academic theories are but the leaky summations of human stories” (107) from the poem “Ka-Nata” in mind, I decided to bring my dissertation work into dialogue with a separate but interrelated research-creation<sup>28</sup> project, titled *Fault Lines*. Growing out of the initial set of poems I envisioned as an Appendix to this dissertation, *Fault Lines* is now a multimodal poetry manuscript (supported by Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council) focused on examining the dynamics between my lived experience and global displacement patterns stemming from neocolonial power structures and the rapidly escalating ecological crisis.

Before I describe *Fault Lines* in more detail, I want to discuss a core concern for both of these parallel projects: the fraught dynamics of self-reflexivity as a critical practice or ethical orientation for white subjects, especially white subjects in

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<sup>28</sup> My use of research-creation follows the definition outlined by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council: “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms)” (SSHRC).

a settler colonial society. In working on my dissertation and *Fault Lines*, I have repeatedly returned to Sara Ahmed's essay "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism." Drawing attention to the ways that admissions of white privilege or racism are *non-performative* utterances (merely articulating an anti-racist stance/aim does not enact, or perform, the anti-racist aims) by Austin's conceptualization of performative utterances (5-6), Ahmed explains: "we should not rush too quickly beyond the exposure of racism by turning towards whiteness as a marked category, by identifying 'what white people can do', by describing good practice, or even by assuming that whiteness studies can provide the conditions of anti-racism." Given my specific research focus, I find strong resonance between Ahmed's discussion of the non-performativity of anti-racism and the tensions around settler state approaches to decolonization rooted the politics of recognition and the rhetoric of reconciliation.

Ahmed's essay predates the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), yet numerous claims<sup>29</sup> align with more recent critiques of the settler state's shallow responses to the TRC's 94 Calls for Action.<sup>30</sup> For example, Jamila Ghaddar draws a direct parallel between Ahmed's descriptions of individual instrumentalizations of self-reflexivity ( "the shameful white subject expresses shame about its racism, and in expressing its shame, it 'shows' that it is

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<sup>29</sup> For example, "[d]eclaring one's privilege and racism, or one's opposition to either, does not mean that one can transcend or undo racial hierarchies even though individuals or institutions who do so are seen to be at least partially redeemed."

<sup>30</sup> Writing in December of 2022, Eva Jewell (Anishinaabekwe, Deshkan Ziibiing) and Ian Mosby underscore: "too much of the work of reconciliation has, until now, focused on symbols and not structures" (6). I will center this line of inquiry in chapter 3.



not racist: if we are shamed, we mean well”) and the Canadian settler state’s instrumentalization of official apologies for the legacy of the residential school system. As Ghaddar argues: “the nation gains or fortifies its sense of identity when it recognizes, and therefore ultimately transcends, its shameful past” (16).

Accordingly, in the context of this project, the parallels between individual and collective/state instrumentalizations of non-performative utterances and discourses magnify the sociopolitical stakes Ahmed identifies.

What does it mean to be aware of the ways white subjects individually and collectively seek to obscure the immense difference between *denouncing* structural oppression and *dismantling* structural oppression? Turning back to Ahmed’s essay, instead of rushing to formulate my own answers, I have instead listened to the following passage:

To hear the work of exposure requires that white subjects inhabit the critique, with its lengthy duration, and to recognise the world that is re-described by the critique as one in which they live. The desire to act in a non-racist or anti-racist way when one hears about racism, in my view, can function as a defense against hearing how that racism implicates which subjects, in the sense that it shapes the spaces inhabited by white subjects in the unfinished present.

Ahmed describes a reluctance toward “offering some suggestions about ‘what white people can do’” in part because the “desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message ‘getting through.’” Yet, having underscored the risks and harms of white subjects’ tendencies to “[rush] too quickly past the exposure of racism,”

Ahmed unambiguously advises that “whiteness studies, even in its critical form, should not be about re-describing the white subject as anti-racist, or constitute itself as a form of anti-racism, or even as providing the conditions for anti-racism.”

Instead, Ahmed tentatively suggests a critical and ethical orientation premised on “at least a double turn: to turn towards whiteness is to turn towards and away from those bodies who have been afforded agency and mobility by such privilege.” In trying to move between a dissertation project focused on foregrounding Indigenous approaches to decolonization and a research-creation project focused on interrogating the systemic conditions shaping my embodied and emplaced relation to (de)colonization, I have tried to respond to Ahmed’s description of the task for white subjects: to “stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others.”

Accordingly, I have found it productive to approach *Fault Lines* and this dissertation project as textual spaces where I am in conversation with different audiences. In this dissertation project, I primarily foreground, synthesize, and extend existing contributions by Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists within the Idle No More movement to critically affirm and amplify the sociopolitical impacts of an Indigenous-led grassroots movement focused on environmental protections and Indigenous rights. Meanwhile, through *Fault Lines* I aim to invite audiences outside the academy into a deepening critical interrogation (rooted in a particular raced, gendered, and classed subjectivity) of contemporary conceptualizations and debates around citizenship, immigration, decolonization,

and ecological crisis. Before proceeding to consider Ahmed's conceptualization of "a double turn" in relation to poetics as a possible mode of ethical/political intervention, I will briefly summarize two elements of *Fault Lines*: content and form.

Overall, *Fault Lines* explores interactions between three durations of time: biological, historical, and geological. The poems engaging with biological time describe lived experiences of displacement and migration. The poems engaging with historical time consider the impacts of intergenerational traumas and structural inequalities. The poems engaging with geological time consider the recent human exploitation of the natural world in relation to the concept of *tempus nullius* ('nobody's time'). An extension of the colonial principle of *terra nullius* (the fallacy that exploitable territory is 'nobody's land'), *tempus nullius* is a neocolonial attitude propelled by the assumption that the future is another type of unclaimed territory.

As the manuscript evolved, I was repeatedly drawn to the fact that most political conflicts share two preoccupations: efforts to gain/maintain control over land, and a simultaneous struggle to control the language used to describe past/present actions. This prompted me to explore how experimental poetic forms might be able to demonstrate (rather than just describe) the interconnectedness of land and language, while also allowing for expressions of resistance. Consequently, I invented a poetic form (reflected in the title poem, "Fault Lines") which uses strategic textual arrangement to enable four different reading trajectories. Through its capacity for narrative multivalence, this poetic form dramatizes how individuals and groups create different narratives out of identical facts and language. All the same words are on the page at any given moment, but by choosing different paths,

foregrounding or eliding different passages, readers shape the narrative and co-construct the meaning. In striving to convey the ethical complexities of existing within contested land(s) through the content, and in positioning the reader as the agent of meaning through form, “Fault Lines” seeks to move away from fallacies of sociopolitical neutrality (a key feature of settler colonial and white supremacist ideologies) and toward critical considerations of embodied and emplaced relationality.

While I envision the overall collection as a sustained, multifaceted exploration of my embodied and emplaced relationality to (de)colonization, the poems from *Fault Lines* included in the Appendix follow one thematic thread throughout the collection: the shifts in my understanding of my own identity and accountability. The first poem [“Theatrum Belli”] describes my lived experience of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The next two poems [“Matrilineal” and “Fault Lines”] situate my lived experience in the historical context of the region. The subsequent poems follow my deepening awareness of how the personal traumas of displacement [“Homecoming”] relate to the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island [“Revision”]. The final section of *Fault Lines* extends these themes by considering the neocolonial implications of the term “the Anthropocene.” Drawing upon insights from Kali Simmons (Oglala Lakota), I examine how this conceptualization of geological time erases imperial histories and falsely universalizes accountability for/complicity with the specific ideologies and practices (including: settler colonialism, industrial capitalism, heteropatriarchy)

disproportionately responsible for ecological devastation and planetary imperilment.

I have intentionally refrained from bringing the poems in the Appendix into direct dialogue with the texts and initiatives discussed within the upcoming chapters. Rather, I invite readers of this project to consider the poems from *Fault Lines* alongside the essay “‘We Built A Life From Nothing’: White Settler Colonialism And The Myth Of Meritocracy,” by Idle No More co-founder Sheelah McLean.<sup>31</sup> Critically grappling with her positionality as a third generation white settler woman of Norwegian, Scottish, and Swedish ancestry, McLean reflects on growing up with family stories about immigration to Canada which primarily focused on the hardships endured by the white settlers. Pointing out how such narratives constitute a “myth of meritocracy” which “reinforces liberal individualism, providing the public with racist explanations for the vast inequalities that exists between Indigenous people and white settler society,” McLean also remarks, “[t]hese family stories are *national texts* that position white settlers as having earned our social and political status in society through intelligence and hard work alone, erasing the colonial policies that enforced differential access to resources, such as land” (32; emphasis added). Given my positionality as a former refugee and first-generation white settler woman of Slavic ancestry, the material and ideological forces shaping the trajectory of my existence have resulted in different family stories/national texts.

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<sup>31</sup> McLean is an anti-racist and anti-colonial educator, scholar and community organizer whose work has focused on projects that address inequality, particularly focusing on the legacy of oppression experienced by Indigenous peoples within a white settler society.

Insofar as these stories/texts have been less frequently represented and studied in English-language literary and scholarly works, I suggest they might be particularly instructive to examine and deconstruct. As Nygyen and Phu point out, in settler colonial states, “migrants, immigrants, and refugees participate, however unwittingly, in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples and lands, *even when they may themselves face forms of state-sanctioned violence, exclusion, and injustice*” (11-12; emphasis added). Frequently (implicitly and explicitly) addressing the ex-Yugoslavian diaspora located within settler states, *Fault Lines* calls for a reconsideration how our family stories cohere into national texts. If personal and collective stories about the traumas of civil war and forced displacement elide the relevance of ongoing colonization and the structural biases privileging white refugees/immigrants, the ex-Yugoslavian diaspora located within settler states also risks reinscribing the ‘myths of meritocracy’ perpetuated by earlier generations of white European settlers.

Finally, in thinking about how I might remain responsive to Ahmed’s conceptualization of “a double turn,” I strive to remain equally mindful of the inherent limitations of such efforts. As Ahmed describes, “[t]his ‘double turn’ is not sufficient, but it clears some ground, upon which the work of exposing racism might provide the conditions for another kind of work.” Although both of the projects discussed here (my dissertation and *Fault Lines*) draw upon a wide range of critical and creative influences to challenge white settler colonial narratives/texts in more expansive and visceral ways than academic theories alone might support, I recognize that my efforts and ideas are not without gaps and flaws. At this point, I

suspect that attempting to account for all such shortcomings here would further compound the limitations Ahmed identifies. Since a commitment to solidarity with decolonial and antiracist interventions into settler colonial and white supremacist ideologies necessarily requires a commitment to learning, unlearning, and relearning, I will continue to reach different realizations about the possibilities and limits of my capacity to contribute to decolonial and antiracist initiatives through discursive and material efforts.

## Chapter 1

### The Round Dance Revolution

The frequency and visibility of Idle No More-affiliated round dances during the winter of 2012 – 2013 led to the movement being characterized as the “Round Dance Revolution.” This chapter contributes to existing analyses of Idle No More round dances as a form of embodied and emplaced communication by foregrounding the rhetorical relevance of two contextual elements: gendered aspects of colonial oppression and the dance form’s origins within Cree cultural traditions. Drawing upon recent work by Audra Simpson (Mohawk) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), I establish how systemic and symbolic forms of colonial violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people reflect deliberate attempts to limit/eradicate prior Indigenous sociopolitical structures. I consequently extend Kevin Bruyneel’s conceptualization of the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization to outline how the forcible imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order continues to function as a *gendered* constraint on Indigenous political orders, social relations, and individual identities. I then turn to examine how Idle No More-affiliated round dances, which leveraged public affirmation of Indigeneity to enact symbolic critiques of settler colonialism, also meaningfully challenged the gendered constraints of coloniality. To support this reading, I first contextualize the round dance within Cree cultural traditions. Subsequently, I build upon Karyn Recollet’s (Cree) analysis of the 2012 Idle No More-affiliated round dance at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Streets



in downtown Toronto by examining the rhetorical significance of subsequent reoccurrences. Tracing the temporal pattern of annual, adaptive round dances at the same site between 2017 and 2021, I argue that the sociopolitical impacts of the 2012 round dance, as outlined in Recollet's analysis, have been reaffirmed and expanded by later reiterations. Finally, considering their overall rhetorical impact within Idle No More, I posit that flash mob round dances powerfully aligned with the movement's emphasis on restoring and empowering the political agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

### **Gendered containment: contextualizing the colonial imposition of heteropatriarchal/heteronormative constraints**

As emphasized in the Introduction, despite the systemic physical, psychological, spiritual, epistemic, and representational violence propelled by settler colonialism's "logic of elimination" (Wolfe), Indigenous peoples have continually defended and asserted their sovereignty. In that sense, as Sylvia McAdam Saysewahum remarks, "Idle No More resistance began long before in different names, different locations through the generations since the arrival of Europeans" ("Armed with Nothing More" 65). Similarly, as I will discuss in this section, although Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people have endured and continue to experience additional, gendered colonial constraints to personal and political agency, their leadership and participation in the Idle No More movement is also a continuation of longstanding efforts. Leanne Betasamosake

Simpson, a prominent voice within the Idle No More movement and Indigenous resurgence more broadly, remarks:

Indigenous women and 2SQ<sup>32</sup> people have particularly long histories of activism in Canadian cities as a result of the expulsive heteropatriarchal policies of the Indian Act. We have a network in cities of Friendship Centres, shelters, theaters, health care programs, organizations that support the families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and schools because of these actions, not to mention the decades of 2SQ movement building and organizing that has taken place in urban environments, and this unfortunately too often goes unseen. (*As We Have Always Done* 195)

While this chapter primarily examines colonial constraints against and decolonial possibilities for Indigenous women's political agency, I strive to foreground (neo)colonial discrimination against 2SLGBTQQIA individuals and collectives as a closely related concern. Idle No More is commonly described as a movement "conceived and organized *by the leadership of Indigenous women*, operating outside of the mainstream Canadian political establishment and Indian Act governance structures and organizations" (Martineau 231; emphasis added). Recognizing the centrality of Indigenous women within the movement, the Kino-

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<sup>32</sup> To clarify my approach to terminology: drawing upon *Reclaiming Power and Place: the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, I use the acronym "2SLGBTQQIA," which stands for "Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual" (59). In instances where I place "2SLGBTQQIA" in square brackets, I have modified the terminology used by quoted sources for consistency. However, given Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's extensive and esteemed contributions to the discussions around queering decolonization, I have refrained from modifying Simpson's terminology.

nda-niimi Collective documents “[g]randmothers, mothers, aunties, sisters, and daughters [who] sustained us, carried us, and taught through word, song, and story” (23). In addition to amplifying Indigenous women’s voices, many Idle No More organizers and participants also sought “to make the movement an inclusive space for all genders and sexual orientations and to recognize the leadership roles and responsibilities of [] queer and two-spirited citizens” (23-24). However, as the Kino-nda-niimi Collective notes, the Idle No More movement “didn’t escape the heteropatriarchy<sup>33</sup> that comes with several centuries of colonialism” (24). Consequently, the Collective underscores that more work is needed to “build movements that are inclusive, respectful, and safe for all genders and sexual orientations” (24). To explore what that work might entail, I turn to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s particularly instructive assessment of the link between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Simpson proposes that “the Radical Resurgence project must [] center the voices of Indigenous children, women, and 2SQ peoples” because the work of “not just deconstruct[ing] but destroy[ing] the power of heteropatriarchy while building the alternative” is necessary for dismantling settler colonialism (*As We Have Always Done* 118). The rest of this

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<sup>33</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, a writer and academic from Driftpile Cree Nation, evokes the pain of encountering homophobia within a round dance ceremony in the poem “sacred.” Written after the publication of *The Winter We Danced* and published in Belcourt’s 2017 poetry collection *This Wound is a World*, the poem begins with the lines “a native man looks me in the eyes as he refuses to hold my hand/ during a round dance. his pupils are like bullets and i wonder what/ kind of pain he’s been through to not want me in this world with him/ any longer” and moves toward this conclusion: “even though i know i am too queer to/ be sacred anymore, i dance that broken circle dance because i am still/ waiting for hands that want to hold mine too” (17).

section contextualizes Simpson's assertion by considering heteropatriarchy as a gendered constraint on Indigenous political orders, social relations, and individual identities.

In 2019, after many years of stalled proceedings, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls released its Final Report. The Final Report unequivocally concludes:

The violence the National Inquiry heard amounts to a race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, *which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people*. This genocide has been empowered by colonial structures evidenced notably by the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools and breaches of human and Indigenous rights, leading directly to the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations. (*Reclaiming Power and Place* 50; emphasis added)

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to offer a comprehensive summary of the Inquiry findings. However, I want to underscore two clearly established throughlines. Firstly, Statistics Canada findings attest that "*even when all other differentiating factors are accounted for, Indigenous women are still at a significantly higher risk of violence than non-Indigenous women*" (56; emphasis in original). Secondly, 2SLGBTQQIA people "encounter discrimination, stigmatization, and traumatic experiences of violence at disproportionately higher rates than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts [...] in every social context: homes, schools,

communities, religious and spiritual centres, public spaces, and health institutions” (Égale Canada qtd. in *Reclaiming Power and Place* 56).

When it comes to conceptualizing the “colonial structures” invoked in the Inquiry’s Final Report, it is vital to understand that ongoing violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people consists of both *systemic* and *symbolic* elements. Systemic violence refers to the fact that structural and institutional features of colonization have entrenched various oppressive material relations. Consequently, Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people must contend with a myriad of interrelated barriers to wellbeing, including “disproportionately high rates of poverty and unemployment, incarceration, addiction, homelessness, chronic and/or life-threatening health problems, overcrowded and substandard housing, and lack of access to clean water” (Coulthard 177). These systemic inequalities render Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people more vulnerable to various harms, including discrimination, exploitation, sexual and physical abuse, and murder (*Reclaiming Power and Place*). Significantly, within both the public and the private sphere, symbolic violence “normalizes” the systemic violence. Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of symbolic violence (“gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone”), Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) emphasizes that systemic violence is exacerbated by “the subjectifying form of violence that renders the crushing materiality of systemic violence invisible, [...] natural, acceptable” (177).

Discursive attempts to minimize or negate the Inquiry findings often downplay the relevance of symbolic violence by misattributing Canada’s epidemic of

missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people solely to individual “risk factors” like socioeconomic inequalities, vulnerabilities associated with sex work or addiction, and domestic violence (Iverson; Pattison; examples quoted in Paradis et al.). For example, as Elisha Corbett (Irish/Cherokee) summarizes:

When the media use the language of “high-risk individual” to describe Indigenous women and girls, they invite the reader to see these murdered women and girls as less deserving of our sympathy. The narrative goes that Indigenous women who engage in criminal activity and experience violence as a result are at fault. By choosing to engage in a “high-risk lifestyle,” Indigenous women must also accept the violence that comes with that lifestyle.

Similarly, linking (neo)colonial media frames to Judith Butler’s insights on “differential distribution of grievability,” Veldon Coburn (Anishinaabe) finds direct connections between “popular perceptions of Indigenous peoples as less deserving in life and ungrievable in death and violence” and the “prevailing apathy towards the lived experience of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people.” As the Inquiry’s finding of “race-based genocide” recognizes, Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people experience significantly higher risks and rates of violence than their non-Indigenous counterparts because settler colonialism sees Indigeneity itself as a constant threat, turning Indigenous bodies into constant targets.

Drawing upon key insights from Audra Simpson and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, I find that both systemic and symbolic violence against Indigenous women,

girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people can be connected to the containment function of settler colonialism. As detailed in the Introduction, Kevin Bruyneel theorizes that settler colonialism is imposed/maintained by spatial and temporal constraints, “through which the colonizer attempts to ‘dominate the physical space,’ ‘reform the minds,’ and ‘absorb the economic’ as well as the cultural and political histories of indigenous people” (2). These colonial impositions are comprised of various efforts by “citizens, institutions, and governments,” cumulatively working to restrain Indigenous bodies and collectives “who are seeking to maintain and secure their cultural, economic, and political practices over time” (6). The evidence gathered through the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls adds to and affirms decades of previous testimonies gathered through grassroots initiatives *and* formal investigations like the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.<sup>34</sup> As such, it must be meaningfully reflected in effective conceptualizations of colonization and decolonization. I posit that we can productively extend Bruyneel’s conceptualization of the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization to more explicitly include the forcible imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order as a gendered form of containment. As I will demonstrate, heightened attention to the deliberately gendered aspects of the colonial constraints placed upon Indigenous political orders, social relations, and individual identities allows for more accurate understandings of the

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<sup>34</sup> As I will elaborate in chapter 3, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was established in 1991 to investigate the status of Canada’s relations with Indigenous peoples and to propose recommendations to facilitate reconciliation. Coulthard argues that the establishment of the RCAP can be read as a “performance[]of resolution” driven by the settler state’s fear of, and hence suppression of, resurgence-based initiatives (21).

disproportionally negative impacts of settler colonization on Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and accordingly recognizes the removal of such constraints as integral to all decolonial aims and efforts.

Broadly speaking, yet mindful of important differences among individual nations, prior to the imposition of heteropatriarchal settler colonial rule, Indigenous nations featured and supported more equitable and inclusive gendered sociopolitical structures. In many Indigenous communities, women routinely held political power through a wide range of roles, including as traditional or hereditary chiefs, as clan mothers, and as members of women's councils (Anderson). Consequently, they had the capacity to directly or indirectly decide on key issues such as "land use, food allocation, and when to go to war" (Anderson 100). Similarly, within Indigenous communities with longstanding traditions of broader ranges of interpersonal/kinship structures than colonial heteronormativity, 2SLGBTQQIA people had more visible and valued roles. For example, as Audra Simpson explains, in Haudenosaunee communities, women held property, appointed, counselled and, if necessary, removed Chiefs from their positions. Haudenosaunee women also had a high degree of agency in personal relationships, as they could divorce "their men by placing their belongings outside of the Longhouse" ("The State is a Man"). To highlight another example, speaking about the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg nation, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that Nishnaabeg women were highly "skilled and adept in the practices of hunting, trapping, fishing, sugaring, ricing, gardening, and harvesting medicines" (*As We Have Always Done* 111). Consequently, they were "economically independent from the settler economy and therefore were



less reliant on their husbands and Indian agents” (111). Simpson also notes that “intimate partnerships were diverse and shattered the heteronormative sexual and relationship orientations of settlers” as “[t]here were practices of nonmonogamy, separation, divorce, and situations where both genders had more than one partner” (110). The rest of this section will highlight how forceful imposition of heteropatriarchal systems intentionally disrupted more equitable and inclusive gendered sociopolitical structures within Indigenous communities to solidify settler colonial rule.

In “The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty,” Audra Simpson explains why the Canadian settler state “requires the death and so called ‘disappearance’ of Indigenous women in order to secure its sovereignty.” Simpson’s analysis persuasively demonstrates that systemic violence (such as the murder of Loretta Saunders) and symbolic violence (such as the vitriolic reactions to Theresa Spence’s hunger fast) against Indigenous women are both fundamentally driven by the fact that “they are symbols of Indigenous political orders that call into question the legitimacy of state sovereignty.” As Simpson summarizes, since the outset of the colonial project, Indigenous women “embodied and signaled something radically different to Euro Canadian governance.” She emphasizes that “as with all bodies, [Indigenous women’s] bodies were more than just ‘flesh’ – these were and are sign systems and symbols that could effect and affect political life. So they had to be killed, or, at the very least subjected because what they were signaling or symbolizing was a direct threat to settlement.” Engaging with Audra Simpson’s paper, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

further reminds that “[t]his isn’t true just for Indigenous women, but it is also true for queer bodies and children because these Indigenous bodies have always housed and acted out Indigenous power, political and otherwise, that white women, queer people, and children did not have” (*As We Have Always Done* 115).

Conceptualizing the forceful imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order as a gendered form of colonial containment underscores the direct connection between deliberate efforts to limit/eliminate the aforementioned sociopolitical structures and the ongoing realities of “race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, which especially targets women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people” (*Reclaiming Power and Place* 50). In the Canadian context, the Indian Act of 1876 formalized the settler state’s heteropatriarchal, patrilineal approach to governance. The Indian Act intentionally disempowered Indigenous women in two main ways: the legal elimination technique, and the limited political role technique. The legal elimination technique consisted of rendering Indigenous women subordinate to their husbands, so that they lost their Indigenous status if they married non-Indigenous men. The limited political role technique consisted of disenfranchising Indigenous women and also precluding them from running for public office. Indigenous women’s ability to challenge legislative discrimination was further limited by the fact that the Indian Act prohibited “Status Indians” from hiring legal counsel (*Simpson As We Have Always Done* 101).

The heteronormative constraints of coloniality also targeted Indigenous forms of gender construction and fluidity, as well as culturally-specific interpersonal relationship/kinship structures. As Simpson points out, “the earliest versions of the

Indian Act were imbued with heteropatriarchy by which queer Indigenous peoples and relationships were disappeared,” subjecting individuals to “extreme pressure and often violence to conform to colonial heteronormativity” (*As We Have Always Done* 104). For example, the “Immorality on Reserves” filing system at Indian Affairs attests to the fact that Indian agents “actively policed gender, sexuality, and marriage” (105). Such policing had the capacity to cause “severe damage in intimate Indigenous spaces” because Indian agents “were provided the authority to punish Indigenous peoples for not adhering to heterosexuality, monogamy, and colonial gender expressions” (105). The multiple modes of punishment included taking children away from families, withholding economic aid (including treaty and interest payments), and formal criminal charges. By the mid-nineteenth century, the expanding settler state government “had set up various legal and regulatory mechanisms to manage the agency of Indigenous women and Indigenous political orders” by designating “any ‘illicit’ sexual agency taking place in the public sphere” as prostitution (107). Significantly, this charge was could be applied to “any expression of relationship outside of church, monogamous marriages between men and women of the same ‘race’” (127). Consequently, “public expressions of Indigenous sexuality outside of the norms of the colonizers were *contained* in the charge of prostitution in order for the state to destroy Indigenous self-determination by attacking Indigenous bodies through regulatory mechanisms” (107; emphasis added). Underscoring Audra Simpson’s conceptualization of Indigenous bodies as political orders, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reiterates:

Queer Indigenous bodies are political orders. Queer Indigenous bodies house knowledge, relationships, and responsibilities. Queer Indigenous bodies are a threat to settler sovereignty, which is why queer Indigeneity has been and is violently targeted by colonial and settler colonial powers in an ongoing way in order to dispossess. (127)

Simpson also emphasizes that queer Indigeneity is not merely reducible to sexual orientation. Rather, queer Indigeneity encompasses “a web of supportive, reciprocal, generative relationships that we often do not have names for in English and that exist outside of the hierarchy and the imagination of heteropatriarchy— a hierarchy that places the relationship of cisgendered, married, monogamous men and women at the top, and de-emphasizes or erases all other relationships” (134).

My analysis of the rhetorical impact of round dances within the Idle No More movement strives to remain attentive to Simpson’s claim that “[c]eremonies, ritual, social organization, and mobilization that replicate [queer] invisibility and hold up the hierarchy also center heteropatriarchy” (*As We Have Always Done* 134).

Consequently, my rhetorical reading of the “Round Dance Revolution” as embodied and emplaced resistance is premised on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s claim that radical resurgence necessitates “restoring all Indigenous bodies as political orders” (134). Having contextualized the links between structural and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people and the colonial imposition of heteropatriarchal/heteronormative constraints, in the next section I discuss how the round dance offers decolonial possibilities for resisting strategies of gendered colonial containment.

## **The “Round Dance Revolution”: restoring the political agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people**

Building upon my reading of heteropatriarchal sociopolitical orders as a gendered form of containment, this section explores the rhetorical significance of the round dance in relation to its potential for restoring and empowering the political agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people. I first contextualize the round dance as a form of embodied and emplaced communication by considering its origins and cultural significance within Cree cultural traditions. Then, summarizing Karyn Recollet’s reading of round dances in relation to the concept of spatial tagging, I extend Recollet’s analysis to consider the rhetorical impacts of site-specific recurrences.

As noted at the outset of this chapter, the centrality of round dances during the first six months of the movement led to the characterization of Idle No More as the “Round Dance Revolution.” On December 10, 2012, designated the first National Day of Solidarity and Resurgence, tens of thousands of Idle No More supporters participated in rallies and gatherings in over a dozen communities (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 391). Despite significant public resistance, Bill C-45 was passed by the Canadian Senate to become federal law on December 14, 2012. Subsequently, a group of organizers posted a call to action on Facebook, asking “Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people, Métis, youth, and anyone willing to dance/sing/drum with us” to gather for a round dance flash mob at the Cornwall Centre shopping mall in Regina, Saskatchewan (qtd. in Kuttner). At 7pm on December 17, activists gathered

at the shopping mall and began beating out a steady rhythm on hand drums and singing. They were soon “hundreds of other people who [held] hands in a circle moving clockwise around the mall’s giant Christmas tree” (Weir 31). Both during the performance, and in the subsequent descriptions, this round dance was directly aligned with Idle No More movement. For example, in a video of the round dance titled, “Idlenomore - Regina Round Dance Flash Mob,” uploaded to the online video sharing and social media platform YouTube by Smokey01Smoke, we can hear observers in the audience inquiring about the dance, followed by explanations of the Idle No More movement (1:11-1:16). The affiliation with Idle No More also features prominently in the video description, which characterizes the round dance as “great way to get our message across to the community that we are a peaceful sovereign nation - and that our CALL TO ACTION and IDLE NO MORE MOVEMENT has not faded” (“Idlenomore - Regina Round Dance”). During this initial Idle No More-aligned round dance, “an intergenerational and interracial group of over 500 people [] gathered on two floors to take part in the action” (Kuttner). The dance was also actively monitored by both Cornwall Centre shopping mall security staff, and Regina police officers (Kuttner).

Although the round dance was an explicitly peaceful gathering, it can be usefully characterized as a “sonic-spatial act[]of disobedience” (Nardone 94). Spatially, as evident in the video “Idlenomore - Regina Round Dance Flash Mob,” the physical presence of the dancers and observers created temporary barriers to accustomed consumer movement, either interrupting navigation or necessitating alternate routes within the built environment of the shopping mall. Sonically, the

round dance functioned as a live edit, or re-mix, of the shopping mall's holiday season soundtrack, temporarily altering the aural-vibrational atmosphere of the shopping center. Nardone describes the scene in evocative detail:

[While] Mariah Carey's vibrato climbs over the concluding choruses of "All I Want for Christmas Is You," the slow, steady frequency of a drum beat kicks in and gains in amplitude. Dozens of drummers, standing in a circle at the mall's central court, join in and sustain the rhythm. The sound intensifies, swells. A solo voice, sheer and strong, cries out, rising above the drums, and is then joined by a chorus of singers. Hundreds of voices sound out in a series of call-and-responses sung in Cree, as bodies joined hand in hand start the slow step of a round dance. The sounds of the singers and the drummers mask the mall's ambient Muzak, canceling it out. The architecture shakes. Impossible to ignore or avoid, the music's vibrations affectively claim the space, sonically consume it. (Nardone 93)

Overall, the round dance at the Cornwall Centre shopping mall in Regina lasted less than 15 minutes, however, videos and articles about it circulated widely on the Internet. The next day, on December 18, Idle No More flash mob round dances took place in numerous malls across North America (including West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton, Rideau Centre in Ottawa, Polo Park Mall in Winnipeg, and Mall of America in Minneapolis) and within several Indigenous communities (including Driftpile Cree Nation and Sandy Bay First Nation) (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 393). During the rest of December 2012 and throughout January 2013, round dances in solidarity with the Idle No More movement took place in various

symbolically-resonant locations (high-traffic intersections and train corridors, border crossings, highways, bridges, and sites of settler state governance) across Canada, and even internationally (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 393-7).<sup>35</sup>

Significantly, many Idle No More-affiliated round dances, including the catalytic round dance at Cornwall Centre shopping mall in Regina and the high-profile Yonge and Dundas round dance discussed in Recollet's article, can be described as urban flash mob round dances. The term "flash mob" was coined to describe a 2003 mass-prank organized by Bill Wasik (then a senior editor of *Harper's Magazine*) in New York City (Molnár 43). In 2004, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defined flash mobs as "a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, who perform a pointless act and then disperse again" (qtd. in Molnár 44). The 2004 definition reflects the fact that flash mobs initially consisted of relatively artless and apolitical (or, "pointless") public pranks/stunts, such as "freezing in place, pillow fights, silent raves, subway parties, and zombie walks" (Molnár 44). Since their emergence,<sup>36</sup> flash mobs have diffused

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<sup>35</sup> More specifically, Idle No More affiliated round dances took place in the following locations: "Highway 401, London, Ontario (19 December); The Consulate General of Canada, Minneapolis, Minnesota (19 December); Rideau Centre, Ottawa (19 and 30 December); Trans-Canada Highway, Espanola, Ontario (22 December); Pioneer Place Mall, Portland, Oregon (23 December); Polo Park Mall, Winnipeg (23 December); Yonge and Dundas Square, Toronto (23 December and 1 January); Sault Saint Marie rail crossing, Ontario (27 December and 16 January); Portage and Main Streets, Winnipeg (31 December); Waterfront Station, Vancouver (2 January); Deh Cho Bridge, Northwest Territories (5 January); Marysville VIA Rail tracks, Ontario (5 January); Blue Water Bridge and international crossing, Sarnia, Ontario (5 January); the Manitoba Legislature (10 January); Ambassador Bridge and international crossing, Windsor, Ontario (11 January); Westmoreland Bridge, Fredericton, New Brunswick (16 January); and Portage La Prairie CN Rail Line, Manitoba (16 January)" (Nardone 94).

<sup>36</sup> It's worth quickly noting that the emphasis on new communication technologies (e.g. mobile and Internet-mediated text messages) in early media coverage overstated the novelty of this form of public action. Molnár reminds of the "substantive analogies between



and evolved into various distinct subcategories. Molnár's analysis of 200 international flash mobs that took place between 2003 and 2009 proposes five different types: atomized, advertising, interactive, performance, and political flash mobs (49-52). Based on Molnár's typology, Idle No More flash mob round dances clearly align with *political* flash mobs.

As an embodied communication strategy, flash mobs hold significant mobilization potential for political collective action. Flash mobs can serve as a pragmatic and effective political activism strategy as they can be quickly planned and carried out, enabling the “rapid spread of the movement in a way that more rehearsed and controlled performances” cannot (qtd. in Kuttner). These pragmatic advantages are particularly vital in the context of Indigenous political activism. As I will explore in chapter 3, settler colonial societies are generally hostile to public expressions of Indigenous political will and cultural identity because such expressions attest to ongoing Indigenous sovereignty and thereby, implicitly or explicitly, challenge the legal and moral legitimacy of the settler state. Anti-Indigenous hostility ranges from physical and verbal assault against Indigenous activists to systemic suppression of Indigenous political organizing. While Idle No More participants and organizers *did* experience both individual and systemic anti-Indigenous hostilities, compared to other Indigenous sociopolitical campaigns, the Idle No More movement prompted significantly more support and participation

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flash mobs and earlier forms of urban pranksterism” (46). For example, during the 1910s, “Italian futurists plotted and employed similar stunts to meet propagandistic goals: surprise, chaos, agitation, and spectacle” (46).

from non-Indigenous people. Although some of the settler support for Idle No More stemmed from various politically-resonant similarities, or overlaps, between Indigenous and liberal critiques of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative minority government during the winter of 2012 –2013, the unprecedented prominence of the flash mob round dance also significantly contributed to the movement’s momentum and popular appeal.

The participatory and celebratory nature of the flash mob round dance mitigated some of the common challenges to Indigenous political activism, including neocolonial narrative bias and vulnerability to pre-emptive or retaliatory racist hostilities. Neocolonial narrative bias, which will be discussed in more detail within Chapter 2, can be understood as the discursive form of settler colonialism’s containment function. As Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) notes: “[a] significant number of Idle No More events disrupted the narrative of First Peoples political action as irrational terrorism, or as ‘just anger’ without just cause, by complicating what the public might understand to be the genre of protest” (218). Significantly, the fact that “Idle No More gatherings [] disrupted the normative negative assumptions that settler Canadian spectators may associate with protest” directly expanded “the vital possibility of public assembly among Indigenous participants, which in turn [] sustained [Indigenous activists’] energies in agitating for further change” (218). Robinson further reminds:

Importantly, music, sound, and dance in Idle No More gatherings were not simply the media by which political messages were conveyed, but performative forms of politics in and of themselves. They continued

Indigenous political forms that take place through song and dance, and did so in public settings. (218)

As Robinson's remarks reveal, rhetorical evaluations of the Idle No More round dances must take into account complex dynamics of culturally-specific sociopolitical resonance. Therefore, the rest of this section will foreground the relevance of several Indigenous sociocultural contexts, including Cree origin stories and teaching as well as Indigenous forms of creative solidarity. The next section of my analysis will apply these insights to consider the rhetorical impact of one particularly visible and recurring site of Idle No More-aligned round dances: the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Streets in Toronto.

As a cultural form, the round dance "originates among Indigenous nations of the prairies, but finds parallels and equivalence in the tea dances and drum dances of the north, and social and ceremonial dance forms among many Indigenous nations" (Martineau 233). Drawing upon Plains Cree scholar Patricia Deiter-McArthur as well as lived experiences, Karyn Recollet (Cree) summarizes that the round dance was originally a healing dance, eventually became a social dance, and is currently performed in both social and ceremonial contexts. Recollet notes that contemporary round dances "are hosted by families and communities in celebration for graduations, anniversaries, and marriages," and also "take shape as memorials for deceased loved ones and for fundraising initiatives for families and communities" (136). While different communities have their own protocols, Recollet described observing the following process: "[h]and drummers formulate the center of the concentric circles, singing songs whose rhythmic structure follows a double

beat and four push-ups led by a lead singer. The dancers shape concentric circles, holding hands, and dance in a shuffle-step movement accentuated by the down beat” (136).

Significantly, in Cree cultural traditions, women hold a central role in the origin stories of both the round dance ceremony and the sacred teachings of the drum. As Cree Elder John Cuthand explains, the origin of the round dance is closely connected to the relationship between a mother and a daughter:

The story goes there was a woman who loved her mother very much. The daughter never married and refused to leave her mother's side. Many years later the mother now very old passed away. The daughter's grief was unending. One day as she was walking alone on the prairie her thoughts filled with pain. As she walked she saw a figure standing alone upon a hill. She came closer and saw that it was her mother. As she ran toward her she could see her mother's feet did not touch the ground. Her mother spoke and told her she could not touch her. "I cannot find peace in the other world so long as you grieve," she said, "I bring something from the other world to help the people grieve in a good way." She taught her the ceremony and the songs that went with it. "Tell the people that when this circle is made we the ancestors will be dancing with you and we will be as one." The daughter returned and taught the people the round dance ceremony. (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 24)

Similarly, as Idle No More co-founder Nina Wilson (Nakota and Plains Cree) narrates in “Kisikew Iskwew, The Woman Spirit and Misikwaskeek, the Drum Spirit,”

Misikwaskeek taught Kisikew Iskwew “the teachings of the drum and how to respect it” (106). In Wilson’s telling, Kisikew Iskwew, the Woman Spirit fell ill and self-isolated from her people to protect them. In response to her pleas for recovery to the Creator, Kisikew Iskwew was approached by Misikwaskeek, who “told her she would receive the power to heal through song and prayer, and [the] drumbeat” (106). For four days, Kisikew Iskwew “sat with the drum and learned the teachings and songs for the different lodges and ceremonies” (106). On the fourth night, Misikwaskeek instructed Kisikew Iskwew to “go home to her community and take this gift with her for the people” (106). In narrating how Kisikew Iskwew passed on the sacred teachings from Misikwaskeek, Wilson foregrounds the continuity between past and present in two ways. Firstly, through the concluding line of the initial origin story:

[Kisikew Iskwew] unwrapped the drum and presented it to her people, and she sang all day and gifted them with its sacred teachings. She explained how the mind should work together with the drum and how this frees the people’s thinking. After many days, the drum became a sacred gift all the people used in healing and in freeing their minds. *Today this is still so.* (107; emphasis added)

Secondly, through the addition of an origin story for the Idle No More round dances:

It took one young woman to tell a group of her peers, that she wanted to hear the drums in support of Idle No More. She asked many singers if they could do a flash mob round dance, and one singer agreed, so they set out to do what they do best, not realizing how they become part of that flame within people.

This was the beginning of the dancing and singing that were signature at the rallies and teach-ins all over the world, in numbers from 500 to 3,000 participants at any one time (107).

Here, it is useful to further contextualize the centrality of women's roles in stories/teachings by noting that conceptions of gender and identity within the Cree traditions are not commensurate with the way concepts are gendered in the English language. For example, as Alex Wilson, a scholar from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, explains:

We call the moon grandmother and the earth mother in English, but in Cree this is not the case. What is important is the relational aspect acknowledging some kind of kinship. In Cree, land (*aski*) is not gendered [...] Same for water. It's not gender but it has spirit of life and it's fluid. (qtd. in Simpson *As We Have Always Done* 121).

Thus, in stressing the centrality of women's roles in the stories/teachings about the round dance and the sacred drum, I am not intending to uphold exclusionary conceptualizations of a gender binary, but rather, to emphasize the form's potential for disrupting/countering the heteronormative constraints of coloniality. As Nina Wilson explains, the Idle No More round dances sought to engage with and intervene in foundational aspects of settler colonialism. By holding round dances in "the shopping malls built on stolen lands," Indigenous peoples directly challenged capitalism, predatory consumerism, and other driving forces of settler colonialism which constitute "the basis of why lands were stolen to begin with" (108). In this sense, "to have a young woman tell her peers what should happen, to participate in

Idle No More” is both “a reminder that the spirit of Misikwaskeek is still around, healing and teaching” (108) and a direct challenge to the heteronormative constraints of coloniality. Just as the round dances constitute a temporary reterritorialization of Indigenous presence in spaces they are indirectly<sup>37</sup> and directly<sup>38</sup> excluded from, so the centrality of Indigenous women as leaders and participants constitutes a temporary restoration of prior sociopolitical orders.

Although many, especially non-Indigenous, participants and observers likely remained unaware of the sociocultural history behind the round dance and the sacred drum teachings, several of the central features of the origin stories (women’s leadership, the unifying power of the circle and drum, an emphasis on pedagogy) were also key features of the Idle No More round dances. Round dance organizers often stressed the role of women’s leadership. For example, the Facebook event page for the initial Idle No More-affiliated round dance held at the Yonge and Dundas intersection in Toronto (December 21, 2012) emphasized that it was organized by Idle No More Toronto, a group “that is led by INDIGENOUS WOMEN for the Indigenous community who are committed to working in support of, ensuring the inherent rights of First Nations People(s) and the protection of our environment/waters” (Idle No More Toronto; emphasis in original). Additionally,

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<sup>37</sup> In *Under Suspicion*, a 2017 report on racial discrimination by the Ontario Human Right Commission, Indigenous participants described a range of discriminatory experiences within retail spaces, including being watched, followed, stopped, inappropriately questioned and harassed by store clerk and security guards in stores or shopping malls.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Ellwand’s coverage of a prominent Indigenous elder thrown out of Edmonton’s City Centre Mall in 2014, and Nickel’s coverage of public outrage after a prominent Indigenous elder was banned from Winnipeg’s Portage Place Mall in 2016. In both instances, the elders in question were sitting in the food court.

the round dances were often explicitly linked to the unifying potential of the circular form. Santee Smith, artistic director of Kaha:wi Dance Theatre, noted, “the round dance represents a kinetic and spiritual commitment to unity and harmony. To dance you must commit to the energy of the circle, make contact by holding hands, witness others around the circle, unify to the heartbeat pulse of the drum and power of the song” (qtd. in Brand). Finally, teaching the dance to others became a key feature of the round dances taking place as part of the Idle No More movement since Indigenous leaders actively welcomed and guided “non-Indigenous participants of all classes, genders, and ethnicities as allies” (Weir 32). As Weir summarizes, even if most of the non-Indigenous allies did not know the deeper cultural roots of the round dance, by joining or supporting the round dance, they were taking part in a collective engagement with loss (“the devastating effect of colonization on Indigenous peoples, the commodification of land and water, the violence that has diminished all of us”) while also “celebrating a possible future that would involve nation-to-nation relations of mutual recognition and collaboration between Canada and First Nations communities” (32).

Before moving on to consider how Idle No More round dances function as public affirmations of Indigeneity and consequently form symbolic critiques of settler colonialism, I want to acknowledge some of the tensions between this focus on the rhetorical impact of round dances and their role within Indigenous communities as ceremony.<sup>39</sup> Firstly, when discussing how Indigenous “medicine

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<sup>39</sup> A different critical methodology would be needed to engage with the ceremonial dimensions of round dances, which are not specifically “persuasive” in nature and therefore cannot be fully understood solely through a rhetorical analysis. This project, however,



people, pipe carriers, singers, and dancers” contributed to the Idle No More movement, it is crucial to recognize that “their activism is not merely fueled *by* cultural practice; their cultural practice *is* the activism itself” (Vosen 112; emphasis in original). Consequently, even when led and organized by Indigenous activists, the practice of evoking ceremony for political protest or as part of a social justice campaign/movement carries various cultural, political, and spiritual implications. For example, in personal correspondence with Recollet, Cree hand drum singer Marc Longjohn, from Sturgeon Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, shares that some Indigenous people are opposed to public-facing performances of round dances because activists and participants may not be honouring the requisite teachings and protocols. Longjohn summarizes: “the round dance is a ceremony with specific purposes. They never had Idle No More flash mob round dances twenty years ago” (qtd. in Recollet 144).

Without discrediting these concerns, it’s also valuable to highlight a slightly different perspective on the same tension. Speaking at the Elders Gathering on January 26, 2013 in Sagkeeng First Nation, Manitoba at the Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness, Elder and Turtle Lodge founder, Dave Courchene Jr. emphasized the benefits of adaptive innovations:

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focuses on the performative, non-ceremonial iterations of round dances within the Idle No More movement. While these organized public actions took guidance from Elders and traditional practices, they were also deliberately intended to function as public displays of political unity (discussed on next page). It is this explicitly rhetorical dimension of the Idle No More round dances that I engage with, but I want to acknowledge that there are additional communicative and ceremonial dimensions that could be explored through different critical/interpretive methodologies.

A culture never really stays the same [...] It evolves. People are adjusting right now to bringing back the foundation of those ancestral ceremonies. Certainly today we see a much more contemporary type of expression in the Round Dances, but the foundation has not changed in terms of what it represents. The Drum is still the key. [...] What's important is [the ceremonies] are slowly coming back. (qtd. in "Turtle Lodge Elders" 7)

Given my focus on the round dance(s) held at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas in Toronto, I will briefly contextualize the preparation behind the initial flash mob round dance, which took place on December 21, 2012. Drawing upon personal communication with Anishinaabe artist, activist, and curator Wanda Nanabush and Cree/Métis coordinator for Idle No More Toronto, Charm Logan, Recollet explains that organizers consulted with Cree elders to obtain permission to host round dances within Idle No More demonstrations. Based on these consultations,

Cree elders supported the dance as a public performance, given that it was not intended to be ceremonial. Outside of its ceremonial context, this urban flash mob round dance was understood as a public performance of political unity, maintaining its meanings of unity and mourning towards missing and murdered Indigenous women. (Recollet 144)

Recollet details how the round dance functions as "a public performance of political unity" in the 2015 article "Glyphing decolonial love through urban flash mobbing and *Walking with our Sisters*." Centering the concept of "spatial tagging," Recollet offers a spatial analysis of Christi Belcourt's commemorative art installation and the 2012 Idle No More urban flash mob round dance at the intersection of Yonge and

Dundas streets in downtown Toronto (129). Since my analysis of Idle No More flash mob round dances builds upon key insights from this analysis, I will first summarize how Recollet defines and situates the spatial tag within a wider framework of Indigenous resistance. I will then discuss why Recollet finds that urban flash mob round dances can challenge the gendered constraints of settler colonialism.

Recollet's reading of Idle No More flash mob round dances posits that the relationships between "spatial tagging" and "urban glyphing" can produce "new geographies of resistance" (130). Recollet contends that insofar as they constitute "intervening sovereign acts to challenge encroachments of non-Indigenous development and resource extractions on contested Indigenous territories within the Canadian nation-state," embodied Indigenous actions/initiatives like the round dance can be interpreted in relation to "spatial tags" (129). In Recollet's analysis, spatial tagging "describes the function of visual and aural symbols actuated within Indigenous hip-hop culture and round dance revolutions" (130). More specifically, these spatial tags are "created through *embodied pathways of Indigenous motion* as Indigenous artists (singers and dancers), dancing with non-Indigenous settler allies, produce urban flash mob round dances" (129; emphasis added). Significantly, "spatial tagging" is a contemporary practice which emerges out of a much older practice of petroglyphing, where Indigenous artists and knowledge holders "inscribe Indigenous collective memory on rock surfaces" (130). Petroglyphing traditionally involved strategic application of *waabigan* (clay) on rock surfaces, and had a wide range of uses, including: "to record a critical occurrence, relationship or alliance; as signifiers describing a futurism; images demarcating a battle; and a

modality through which to demarcate a sighting, or home space for sacred beings” (Recollet 130). Recollet’s use of “urban glyphing” accentuates “the doing, and the intrinsic Indigenous motion entailed in producing symbols and narratives as forms of cultural production that are inherently political” (131). As such, in Recollet’s reading, the flash mob round dance’s production of spatial glyphs (produced by bodies moving in concentric circles to sounds of drumming) on urban concrete is an extension of prior instances of “glyphs mobilizing Indigenous resistance towards settler-colonialist accumulation of capital through resource extraction on Indigenous land,” such as the Temagami First Nation blockades challenging clear cut logging, the Lubicon Cree opposition against oil and gas development, and the Kanehsatake/Oka struggle against settler colonial real estate interests (130).

In addition to establishing historical continuities, Recollet also considers how specific features of the urban flash mob round dance offer unique capacities for challenging the gendered constraints of settler colonialism. Responding to a resonance between Homi Bhabha’s conceptualization of interstitial passageway(s) between binary categories and the embodied practice of relationship/alliance building known as *kiskipocikek*, Recollet considers how the shape/form of the round dance creates both literal and conceptual interstitial passageways:

According to Deiter-McArthur (1987), the round dance included a practice of relationship or alliance building expressed as *kiskipocikek* (which translates into the English verb, to “wedge in”), an idiom, which means to dance with a woman who is not a relative or a cross-cousin. This would have taken the shape of one who enters the space between two dancers holding hands with

the purpose of relationship building. In this way, engaging the interstice through “wedging in” has a history in the structure of the round dance, representing the interstitial passageway, which, I would argue, increases the range of possibilities for an Indigenous futurity. (136)

In light of the heteropatriarchal constraints of settler coloniality, the practice of *kiskipocikek* reveals how the spatial tags generated by the round dance form intervene in “normative structures of settler colonialism and provide[] the space through which radical decolonial love can emerge” (129). Drawing upon Audre Lorde’s articulation of an erotic life and Gaztambide-Fernández’s conceptualization of creative solidarity, Recollet positions “radical decolonial love” as a relationship building strategy capable of “critiquing the conditions of coloniality in the very act of love making (inclusive and beyond acts of sex)” by producing a self-reflexive space and “challenging the conception of love as a space of permanence, or as a strategy of *containment*” (130; emphasis added).

Recollet also contends that the urban flash mob round dance generates a “geography of resistance that maps out the intersectional nature of the social discourses and practices within a heteropatriarchal system that reproduces and normalizes racialized and gendered violence” (138). As discussed in the first part of this chapter, (neo)colonial narratives often attempt to reframe systemic and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people as a series of unconnected, individual occurrences. Insofar as they constitute an inherently participatory and public form of embodied symbolic communication, round dances enable Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people to

foreground collective lived experiences through highly visible and socioculturally affirmative gatherings. Thus, as Recollet details, in addition to their centrality within the Idle No More movement, round dances have also been a defining feature of the #MMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls) social justice movement (132). In the next section, I extend Recollet's reading of the initial Idle No More urban flash mob round dance at the intersection of Yonge St. and Dundas St. in downtown Toronto to consider the rhetorical significance of subsequent recurrences.

### **Adaptive repetition: the rhetorical impact of recurring round dances at Yonge-Dundas Square in Toronto**

On December 21, 2012, Idle No More's second National Day of Action prompted a massive rally outside the House of Commons in Ottawa, along with similar initiatives held in solidarity with the movement around Canada and the world (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 394). One of the most visible public gathering that day was a round dance staged in the middle of one of the busiest intersections (Yonge-Dundas Square, the intersection of Yonge St. and Dundas Streets East and West) in Canada's most populous city (Toronto, Ontario). The Facebook page promoting the event, created by Idle No More Toronto, outlined the impetus behind the round dance:

We have organized this event to gather in SUPPORT, SOLIDARITY and UNITY with The First Nation(s) across Canada, and also in Support of ATTAWAPISKAT Chief Theresa Spence, who is currently enduring a HUNGER

STRIKE to raise critical awareness, of the dire position of her Peoples. While the media continues to mythologize the history, which has coerced the Attawapiskat Nation into crisis. (Idle No More Toronto; emphasis in original)

As round dance co-organizer Joni Shawana remarked, the turnout was far better than expected: “Our Facebook group was up around 1,100 people when we woke up this morning, and we were kind of like ‘Whoa!’” (qtd. in Dart). In addition to expressing solidarity with Chief Theresa Spence, the organizers also emphasized the value of wider solidarity-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples/participants. For example, co-organizer Charm Logan explained: “[w]e want to engage Canadian citizens [...] [w]e want to work together to save our water and our environment and our homelands” (qtd. in Dart).

Noting that the round dance would be followed by a “teach in” at Ryerson University,<sup>40</sup> the organizers also discussed how the round dance aligns with Idle No More’s emphasis on public pedagogy. Attributing some of the backlash from non-Indigenous critics to longstanding misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples (“[w]e’ve had our culture and our history not properly presented in the educational system”), Logan stated that the pedagogical and dialogical features of Idle No More initiatives (“by doing things like this, producing the brochures we did, and talking to people”) were having a positive effect (“I have noticed a significant change in

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<sup>40</sup> Teach-in speakers included Hayden King (“Contextualizing Idle No More: A Brief History of Canadian Oppression and Indigenous Activism”), Rebekah Tabobodung (“The Indigenous History of Toronto”), Tannis Neilsen (“Strategies of Decolonization and Sovereignty”), Tantoo Cardinal (“Environmental Activism and Connecting to the Earth”), and closing legal advice (“Your rights as an ‘activist’”) (Idle No More Toronto).

people's attitudes toward us") (qtd. in Dart). Co-organizer Joni Shawana expressed a similar perspective: "[w]ith these flash mobs, we're educating more Canadians" [...] [t]hey're going to go do their own research and see what it's all about" (qtd. in Dart).

Recollet's 2015 reading of the 2012 Idle No More-affiliated round dance at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas Streets in downtown Toronto persuasively demonstrates how visual, aural, and kinesthetic elements of the round dance form generate a "geography of resistance." To contextualize Recollet's analysis, I will briefly describe the key features of the round dance gathering. In the event description posted the Facebook event page, organizers instructed:

Everyone is asked to hang out at every corner of the Y&D intersection, blend in to be part of the crowd like your [sic] new to Toronto. Wear RED, Wear your Native Pride, Bring SIGNS that represent your Nation, Dress Warm! This is a Round Dance NOT A RALLY – We ask NO bandannas or facial covers! Listen to the sound the hand drums, as they will be the starting ignition to the Flash Mob Round Dance which will take place in the middle of the intersection! When you hear the drums, join hands and LET'S ROUND DANCE! When the drums stop, quickly disperse into the crowd... and move discreetly into Dundas Square. (Idle No More Toronto)

Several observers and participants recorded the round dance and uploaded video clips to YouTube. A video uploaded by Andrew Watson, titled "Idle No More Toronto," conveys the event's vibrant soundscape: spontaneous instances of individual round dance participants cheering and laughing dynamically, interweaving with the steady, collective sounds of drumming and chanting.



Similarly, a still image from a video uploaded by Hayden King, titled “Round Dance - Yonge and Dundas Square,” (see Figure 2) provides an overview of the event’s spatial composition: multiple rows of stalled vehicles lined up along the streets leading to the intersection; at the core of the intersections, a circle of stationary drummers surrounded by several concentric layers of participants holding hands and dancing, some holding handmade signs.



Figure 2. Still image of a round dance at Yonge and Dundas Square. “Round Dance - Yonge and Dundas Square” *Youtube*, uploaded by Hayden King 21 Dec. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PMUOnOvVv4>.

Recollet’s reading of the round dance as a politically resonant form of spatial tagging is also informed by Tricia Rose’s work on hip-hop culture and social change. Rose proposes that hip-hop culture enacts social change “through the building of sustaining narratives, layering these narratives through repetition and the embellishment of these stories” (Recollet 138). Recollet finds similar dynamics operating within the spatial mechanics of the urban flash mob round dance: “hand

drum singers formulat[e] the inner most cypher/circle; layered with double beat drum soundscape; syncopated with the reverb interstice [...]; layered with hand embraces, love songs, and a stride- and-shuffle to the left” (138). Consequently, Recollet theorizes,

Critique and analysis are embedded within the very form of the urban flash mob round dance. Basically, the structure provides the *spaces between* within which self-reflective anti-colonial critique can manifest.” (138)

In this sense, Recollet’s close reading of the round dance form aligns with Bruyneel’s concept of “the third space of sovereignty.” Although occurring within places actively occupied by settler colonial regimes, “urban flash mob round dances as tags (with symbolic and narrative functions) not only visualize, but also intervene in public spaces” (131). More specifically, such “tags of Indigenous solidarities on urban spaces are visually archiving traces of actions engaged in the very process of transformation” (132). The remainder of this chapter builds upon Recollet’s insights by considering the rhetorical resonance of round dances as temporally and spatially impermanent but regularly *reoccurring* spatial tags.

Since the 2012 round dance, numerous reoccurrences continue to take place at the Yonge-Dundas Square. Some of the subsequent round dances were explicitly organized as part of the Idle No More movement and took place on the same date as the 2012 round dance. For example, on December 21, 2017 over 150 participants gathered for a round dance at Yonge-Dundas Square to mark the five-year anniversary of Idle No More and to ensure that “momentum continues [...] that [Indigenous rights] issues aren't lost” (Quinn Meawasige qtd. in Johnson “March and

round dance”). At that event, participant Suzanne Smoke emphasized the ongoing relevance of Idle No More’s pedagogical role, stating, “[f]or the last five years all of us have been educators” (qtd. in Johnson). Another participant, Taylor Flook, whose parents came from England, testified to the impact of Idle No More’s pedagogical focus, noting: “I learned about the treaties and I realized that much of Canada hasn’t been honouring our side of the treaty relations, so I’m here trying to repair my relations with the Indigenous people and the land” (qtd. in Johnson). Similarly, on December 21, 2018, hundreds of activists held a round dance in the Yonge-Dundas Square to “protest the first draft of Canada’s long-promised Indigenous Rights Framework” (O’Neil). The event was organized by Idle No More Toronto in an effort to “remind the Canadian government that Indigenous Rights are recognized and affirmed” within section 35 of Canada’s Constitution (O’Neil).

Many of the subsequent round dances have evolved beyond direct Idle No More affiliation, and instead have formed in response to various concurrent sociopolitical concerns around Indigenous rights. For example, on May 29, 2019 more than 100 people gathered to demand that “treaties between First Nations and the Crown be respected” (Brake), shutting down the Yonge and Dundas intersection with a round dance. This round dance was prompted by the fact that several proposed legislative changes related to Indigenous rights were before the Senate (including Bill C-91, An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages; C-92, An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families; and, C-262, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act). Reporting on the event for *APTN News*, Brake noted on Twitter that the round dance was “[l]ed

by the women” with “[m]en and boys on the drum,” and “[g]irls holding the two row wampum flag, fists raised” (@JustinBrakeNews). Similarly, on October 20, 2020, two activist collectives/initiatives (Rising Tide Toronto<sup>41</sup> and No More Silence<sup>42</sup>) organized a solidarity rally and round dance at Yonge-Dundas Square attended by several hundred participants. The Facebook page for this event attests that it was organized in response to a concurrent political concern (increasingly violent conflicts between Mi'kmaq and non-Indigenous commercial lobster fishers in Nova Scotia), in order to condemn the “racist attacks and acts of terrorist violence against Mi'kmaq people” (Rising Tide Toronto and No More Silence). More recently, on July 1, 2021, Idle No More Toronto, Idle No More Ontario, and Dashmaawaan Bemaadzinjin (They Feed The People), along with Elders, Drummers, Jingle Dancers and Speakers, organized a round dance and candlelight vigil at Yonge-Dundas Square “to remember the Indigenous Children who died in Residential schools across this country” (“No Pride in Genocide”).

What do the 2017 to 2021 round dances contribute to Recollet’s discussion of the 2012 urban flash mob round dance at Yonge-Dundas Squares? Drawing upon Recollet’s claim that the initial round dance meaningfully “challenged settler colonialism’s claim over Mississauga and Huron-Wendat territorial jurisdiction” (136), I posit that the subsequent adaptive reoccurrences have collectively accrued

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<sup>41</sup> Rising Tide Toronto is a grassroots collective, founded in 2012, “that challenges environmental injustice and the root causes of climate change and environmental degradation on Turtle Island through direct action, in solidarity with Indigenous struggles” (Rising Tide Toronto).

<sup>42</sup> No More Silence “has been gathering names of missing and murdered Indigenous women since it was founded in 2004” (No More Silence).

more sociopolitical significance, as the rhetorical effects of the initial dance have been reaffirmed and expanded by each of the reiterations. From 2017 to 2021, the repeated “tagging” of Yonge-Dundas Square has ensured that the initial inscriptions of “radical pedagogy of love onto urban spaces through embodied motion” (Recollet 140) were not an isolated sociopolitical event. Rather, by forming a chain of conceptually-linked expressions of culturally-affirmative resistance, the adaptive reoccurrences of the flash mob round dances at Yonge-Dundas Square have established a temporal pattern of site-specific embodied critiques of coloniality. Given the visibility of the prior round dances (such as the national news coverage about the traffic disruptions) and the number of repetitions, it is plausible to suggest that the phenomenon of a round dance at Yonge-Dundas Square is by now for many people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous, located within Toronto and beyond), closer to a familiar occurrence than to an utterly unfamiliar/unexpected occurrence. This is because, as Recollet noted, even without permanent alterations to the intersection, “tags of Indigenous solidarities on urban spaces are *visually archiving* traces of actions engaged in the very process of transformation” (132; emphasis added). As such, the existence of a widespread conceptual association between Yonge-Dundas Square and embodied Indigenous communication/ceremony can be usefully situated as one point on a continuum of decolonial reclamation efforts, such as initiatives striving to permanently replace the colonial names of various Indigenous landmarks with their prior appellations.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For example, starting in January 2013, the Ogima Mikana Project restored Anishinaabemowin place names to various routes in Toronto, including renaming a part of

In a 2014 interview with Hayden King, Idle No More organizer Tanya Kappo (Cree) described the flash mob round dances as the most personally resonant part of the movement, elaborating:

*They were a really intense and beautiful moment for me because they somehow brought to life what I had personally hoped the Movement would address. Those issues were first, our sense of ourselves and communities, and second, our existence in this country. I remember going to the round dance at the West Edmonton Mall—it was massive—the amount of people who showed up to drum, the people that came to sing and dance or just be there was incredible. The power and energy that was there, it was like we were glowing, our people were glowing. For the first time, I saw a genuine sense of love for each other and for ourselves. Even if it was only momentary it was powerful enough to awaken in them what needed to be woken up—a remembering of who we were, who we are. (70; emphasis added)*

I cite Kappo's comments at length here to highlight how the spatiotemporal ephemerality of the round dances ("intense and beautiful moment"; "only momentary") did not preclude them from having a transformative, revitalizing effect on the Idle No More movement ("brought to life what I had personally hoped the Movement would address") and Indigenous communities more broadly ("powerful enough to awaken in them what needed to be woken up"). Drawing upon my reading of the gendered containment function of settler colonization, given the

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Queen St. to Ogimaa Mikana (Leader's Trail) in honour of "all the strong women leaders of the Idle No More movement" (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 330).

ongoing systemic and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, it is further very significant that these recurring challenges to settler colonial power structures continually mobilize a form which simultaneously foregrounds the leadership and participation of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and also challenges “the colonial practice of using love as a strategy of containment and permanence” (Recollet 140). Overall, the temporary nature of the spatial tag is changed from mere ephemerality to a more lingering, cyclical ephemerality, thereby resulting in a more impactful, temporally-layered, restoration of prior sociopolitical orders.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Reframing (Neo)Colonial Narrative Bias:**

#### **#Ottawapiskat and the Third Space of Sovereignty**

Proceeding from the premise that the forcible imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order functions as a form of gendered containment, the first chapter of my analysis foregrounded how visual, aural, and kinesthetic elements of round dance powerfully aligned with Idle No More's emphasis on restoring and the political agency of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people. This chapter also focuses on the tension between settler colonial forms of containment and a successful form of Indigenous political resistance. More specifically, this chapter contributes to the current research on the function and impact of digital activism within the Idle No More movement by analyzing how participants leveraged the technological affordances of the Twitter hashtag to subvert neocolonial impositions of spatiotemporal containment, and by theorizing the dynamic interactions between discursive and embodied Indigenous challenges to settler colonial political structures.

After outlining the affordances of the Twitter hashtag as a mode of communication and organization, I apply a qualitative framing analysis to demonstrate how one specific hashtag, "#Ottawapiskat," successfully supported concurrent instances of embodied Indigenous resistance (such as Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike) by actively reframing neocolonial deployments of narrative bias (consisting of various discursive attempts to delegitimize activists and



initiatives aligned with the Idle No More movement). Then, drawing upon theoretical concepts from mediated discourse analysis, I argue that “#Ottawapiskat” functioned as a strategic site of engagement where the virtual space of Twitter and the relational space of the hashtag were used to reconfigure dominant narratives (or, ideological frames) about the physical spaces of Ottawa and Attawapiskat through the creation of a digital third space, Ottawapiskat. Overall, this analysis proposes a modified critical assessment of the possibilities and limitations of Indigenous digital activism by reading Twitter-mediated political discourse in relation to Bruyneel’s concept of “the third space of sovereignty.”

### **Social media platforms and political activism**

Social movement and political activism initiatives set in the first two decades of the twenty first century are often characterized as examples (or evoked as evidence) of a global paradigm shift from *collective* to *connective* action. Most scholars are in agreement about the core aspect of this shift: the emergence and popular proliferation of new media, such as the networked platforms of Twitter and Facebook, has led to radical organizational transformation. However, when it comes to critical assessments of the consequences, multiple theories abound, often presenting competing or conflicting interpretations of the short-term and long-term implications of this shift.

For example, numerous studies find significant liberatory and democratizing potential within the new platforms, outlining how the rise of non-traditional media outlets grants traditionally marginalized political actors (such as grassroots

organizers) unprecedented options for broadcasting and regulating their message, effectively bypassing traditional mass media filters and gatekeepers. As Erica Lee (Cree), the Facebook administrator for the Idle No More group explains:

Traditionally, it's the chiefs and the people in power that have the ability to speak to the media, whereas now, people like me – university students who have been involved in this kind of stuff – are getting interviewed. Social media allows the people who are actually directly involved and impacted by these kinds of movements . . . to have their voices heard. (qtd. in Wood 618)

On the other hand, scholars have also argued that this very same process fosters a problematic perception around the ease of participation, and leads to comparatively less valuable forms of political involvement, often characterized as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism." Morozov popularized this line of criticism in *The Net Delusion: the Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), arguing that despite recent technological changes, in a pragmatic sense, new digital tools are still less impactful than offline participation.

While the debate pertains to social media applications as a collective phenomenon, it is important to note that each platform has distinct communicative protocols, shaping user actions and interactions in different ways. Drawing upon Gibson's work in perceptual psychology, theorists use the term "affordance" <sup>44</sup> to

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<sup>44</sup> Responding to various definitional contentions and inconsistencies, Davis and Chouinard offer an important conceptual advancement by considering how "affordances mediate between features and outcomes" and by situating such variations within sociocultural patterns (6). To summarize, their model accounts for variable mechanisms and conditions which "create a scaffold through which artifacts request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse, and do so through variations in perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy" (6).

describe a particular technology's combination of features and effects (Wood 618). Positioning social networking sites as networked publics, danah boyd reads affordances as architectural features of an environment, pointing out that while individual features may not necessarily "dictate participants' behavior," cumulatively they "configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement" (39). Consequently, "understanding the properties, affordances, and dynamics common to networked publics provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social practices" (boyd 40). When Idle No More took shape in late 2012, participants primarily leveraged the communicative potential of two different social networking sites: Facebook and Twitter. Both platforms share the core features boyd identifies as having "a salient role in constructing social network sites as networked publics," including "profiles, Friends lists, public commenting tools, and stream-based updates" (43). However, a closer look at their respective affordances reveals that Facebook and Twitter each offer distinct constraints and capacities for digital activism, and that the latter platform's capacity for virality played a significant role in the first six months of the Idle No More movement.

Theorizing how the properties of bits work to configure networked publics, boyd proposes four central affordances: *persistence* ("online expressions are automatically recorded and archived"), *replicability* ("content made out of bits can be duplicated"), *scalability* ("the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great"), and *searchability* ("content in networked publics can be accessed through search") (7). In the context of digital activism, perhaps the most impactful difference between the communicative potential of Twitter versus Facebook rests within the

platforms' respective scalability affordances.<sup>45</sup> In late 2012, the communicative architecture of Facebook consisted of interlinked digital spaces ('walls', 'lists', 'groups' and 'pages') where users could share primary or secondary source material such as status updates, personal photos, video clips, news articles, and links to other websites. Engagement between Facebook users could include direct messages, commenting, linking, reposting or sharing posts, and distributing digital invitations for offline events. In general, the communicative architecture of Facebook draws upon offline relationships more than Twitter. Consequently, because "one is primarily 'friends' with those who one knows, however vaguely [...] there is more trust and legitimacy given to the information received through Facebook than through other media" (Wood 618). However, since one is more likely to be Facebook 'friends' with politically compatible people, there is also a higher likelihood that the 'friends' reading a user's posts are already in agreement with the user's political stance/activist initiatives. By contrast, Twitter offers the advantage of wider content distribution since its communicative infrastructure allows users to "cluster, re-broadcast, modify, or reply to ongoing messages and conversations" to a much larger audience (Bruns and Burgess 5). As I discuss next, Twitter's popularity as a digital platform for political activism<sup>46</sup> is largely attributable to its higher potential for virality, which in turn hinges upon the medium's hashtag feature.

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<sup>45</sup> boyd further clarifies that scalability refers to "the *possibility* of tremendous visibility, not the guarantee of it," (48), and stresses that mass dissemination of specific content is not merely a matter of bit properties, but remains contingent upon/influenced by "the social structure underlying the networked publics" (54).

<sup>46</sup> Notable examples of social justice initiatives where Twitter has played a significant role prior to the Idle No More movement include the Iranian election protests (2009–2010), the

## Political activism and the Twitter hashtag

Twitter was originally released in 2006, six years before the emergence of the Idle No More movement, as a social networking tool that could allow users to share personal thoughts and quotidian updates with friends by posting short messages called tweets. During the time period under analysis, individual Twitter posts were limited to 140 characters, mirroring the character limit of SMS messaging popular on cell phones since the 1990s (Tremayne 11).<sup>47</sup> In the early phases of adoption, the platform had almost none of the extended functionality that it does today. Several pivotal technical affordances and cultural applications of Twitter were originally user-led innovations, only later being integrated into the architecture of the Twitter system (Bruns and Burgess 2). One particularly significant user-led innovation is the Twitter hashtag. Recognizable as a keyword or phrase written without spaces and prefixed with the hash symbol (#), the hashtag functions as a mechanism for connecting and coordinating discussion between Twitter users and groups (Bruns and Burgess 1). Hashtags expanded the scalability and searchability affordances of Twitter by adding a searchable secondary communication stream to the platform, as they allow for conversation/connection between users who are not connected through the follower/followee networks (Bruns and Burgess 1).

The use of hashtags in Twitter was originally proposed by San Francisco-based technologist Chris Messina in an August 25, 2007 post (titled “Groups for

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Tunisian revolution (2010–2011), the Egyptian revolution (2011), and the Occupy Wall Street protests (autumn of 2011).

<sup>47</sup> As of November 7, 2017, Twitter posts could include up to 280 characters.

Twitter, or a Proposal for Twitter Tag Channels”) on his personal blog, *Factory Joe*, and promoted on Twitter itself. Messina explained his idea as a proposal for “improving contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity within Twitter” by creating a system of “channel tags” using the pound or hash (#) symbol, allowing people to follow and contribute to conversations on particular topics of interest (qtd. in Bruns and Burgess 2).

The basic communicative function of the Twitter hashtag stems from Messina’s 2007 proposal for the “channel tag”:

Every time someone uses a channel tag to mark a status, not only do we know something specific about that status, but others can eavesdrop on the context of it and then join in the channel and contribute as well. Rather than trying to ping-pong discussion between one or more individuals with daisy-chained @replies, using a simple #reply means that people not in the @reply queue will be able to follow along, as people do with Flickr or Delicious tags. Furthermore, topics that enter into existing channels will become visible to those who have previously joined in the discussion. (“Groups for Twitter”)

Messina’s idea gained broader public support during the October 2007 San Diego bushfires, when he urged Twitter users to use the hashtag “#sandiegofire” to coordinate information and rally individual efforts around a common term. Subsequently, as Bruns and Burgess summarize, “the practice became embedded both in the social and communicative habits of the Twitter user community, and in the architecture of the system itself, with the internal cross-referencing of hashtags into search results and trending topics” (3). However, given widespread community

adoption and adaptation, hashtag use expanded to include everything humanitarian purposes (the coordination of emergency relief) to humorous pastimes (Twitter jokes and memes).

After the addition of the hashtag, Twitter's communicative infrastructure could support both relatively stable, long-term networks based on follower/followee relationships, and more emergent, short-term networks based on shared thematic interest, linked by a common hashtag. Firstly, when Twitter users "follow" one another, all content generated by a followee is automatically visible to the followers.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, hashtags enable users to communicate and coordinate with an ad hoc community about the hashtag topic without needing to establish mutual follower/followee relationships with any of the other participants. Significantly, most Twitter posts (especially those from users with few followers or high privacy settings) will not reach a sizable audience. However, the combination of Twitter's hashtag and retweet features creates the capacity for high-circulation messages. The platform's trending topics feature further augments this capacity by foregrounding an algorithmically-curated list of popular and emerging discussion topics.<sup>49</sup> This feature offers an important affordance for political activism, as the visibility can be leveraged for coordinating or promoting large-scale sociopolitical

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<sup>48</sup> If a Twitter user has set their account to "private," other users cannot follow automatically, but must send a follow request to be approved at the "private" user's discretion. Similarly, hashtagged tweets from accounts marked as "private" will not be included in the overall search results.

<sup>49</sup> According to Twitter's website, trending topics/hashtags are algorithmically determined and customized for each user based on accounts they follow, their interests, and location.

actions, from organizing on the ground protests to promoting alternative narratives.<sup>50</sup>

Rhetorically, Twitter hashtags constitute a performative utterance, and when oriented toward digital political activism, can be read as a collective pragmatic act. Adding a hashtag to a phrase transforms the phrase from a solitary utterance (a static phrase in one post on one Twitter user's profile) to an interconnected utterance, and an action (the post is directly linked to all other past and future posts using the same hashtag). In this sense, Twitter hashtags align with Austin's definition of performative utterances (5-6). Each time a Twitter user adds a hashtag to their post, they are not only *saying* something, they are also *doing* something. If they are using a new hashtag, they are creating a new communication channel within Twitter; if they are using a pre-existing hashtag, they are joining a distinct communication channel within Twitter. By turning utterances into discursive actions, a Twitter hashtag constitutes a material action because it repositions and recontextualizes a given post, placing it in dialogue with the broader social narrative aggregated by the hashtag. Furthermore, hashtag creation can also become a discourse-shaping act. As Brock points out (in the context of Twitter as a Black cultural outlet), a hashtag "invites an audience, even more so than the publication of a Tweet to one's followers, by setting the parameters of the discourse to follow" (539). In the context of networked political activism, Altahmazi theorizes that this

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<sup>50</sup> One drawback of this feature is that outside agents can also attempt to capitalize on the visibility of trending hashtags by adding them to their (unrelated or differently-motivated) content.



discourse-shaping aspect of hashtag activism can be conceptualized as “a macro pragmatic act” performed by ideologically aligned agents in attempts to “achieve the common goal of coordinating a public response to [a] sociopolitical state of affairs, through the circulation of a revised normative interpretation of sociopolitical reality” (2). Drawing upon Searle's work, Altahmazi outlines how protesting and advocating are animated by a collective intentionality which “creates a sense of commitment toward a common goal among the members of the group collectively performing the action” (12). For politically engaged Twitter hashtags, Altahmazi finds that the collective intentionality is expressed through two micro acts: communicating affiliation around shared sociopolitical values (7), and legitimizing the sociopolitical claims of the hashtag campaign (9). Significantly, Altahmazi argues that hashtag activism is “collective in a participatory sense, where each actor performs an act [asynchronously] and clusters it, via the hashtag, with other acts performed by others [sic] users. These clustered acts accumulatively contribute to the collective act, i.e., the trending hashtag campaign” (12). Thus, hashtag activism can be interpreted as a collectively pragmatic act.

### **#Ottawapiskat: discursive and embodied challenges to settler colonialism**

I apply existing research to a case study of a popular hashtag affiliated with the Idle No More movement --#Ottawapiskat-- to examine how the affordances of the Twitter hashtag enabled a range of discursive and embodied Indigenous challenges to settler colonial political structures. As already outlined in the Introduction, neocolonial rule continues to be imposed/maintained by spatial and

temporal constraints “through which the colonizer attempts to ‘dominate the physical space,’ ‘reform the minds,’ and ‘absorb the economic’ as well as the cultural and political histories of [I]ndigenous people” (Bruyneel 2). As such, key challenges to Indigenous political organizing include media bias, geographic dispersal, and state surveillance/repression of on-the-ground initiatives. In terms of the first challenge, #Ottawapiskat reveals how Idle No More activists leveraged Twitter hashtags to create alternative communication channels to reframe colonial stereotypes and allow for affirmative Indigenous self-representation. In terms of the second and third challenges, #Ottawapiskat shows how Idle No More activists leveraged the Twitter hashtag as a mode of organization to connect remote communities, create an alternative conceptualization of margin/centre relations, and confront settler state repression by supporting concurrent on-the-ground initiatives.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Edmonton-based Métis artist Aaron Paquette first used the hashtag #Ottawapiskat in a Twitter post on January 12, 2013:<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> To clarify my citational practice, for the #Ottawapiskat posts which have already been anthologized in *The Winter We Danced*, I cite them as digital communications republished in a print source, providing the Twitter account name, tweet text, and page number for the text. One advantage of this citational approach is that any future changes to Twitter as a digital communication platform or to the individual user accounts will not prevent future readers of this project from locating the cited posts in the print text. For the #Ottawapiskat posts which have not been anthologized in *The Winter We Danced*, I contacted the authors in July of 2023 to ask for permission to cite them by name. In instances where I did not receive written permission to cite the post authors by name in my work, I have redacted the author’s name from the body of my analysis and instead identified them as “Twitter user.” Please note that because of the aforementioned ephemerality of Twitter posts and accounts, even the references still publicly visible at the time of this project’s publication may eventually lead to broken links if users delete posts/accounts in the future.



Figure 3. Twitter post by Aaron Paquette; first use of #Ottawapiskat. Quoted in Kino-nda-niimi Collective, page 239.

Paquette later contextualized, “[m]y first spelling was Ottawa-piskat [...] [a]nd moments after typing it out, I realized, ‘Hey! That’s a hashtag!’” (qtd. in Querengesser). A portmanteau of ‘Ottawa’<sup>52</sup> and ‘Attawapiskat,’<sup>53</sup> the #Ottawapiskat hashtag functioned as a form of discursive reframing primarily through satirical observations about the hypocrisies embedded within popular narrative constructions of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous politics and communities. As Hayden King (Pottawatomi and Ojibwe) summarizes, Paquette’s hashtag quickly morphed into “a collective effort to push back against the narrative of corrupt and freeloading Indigenous peoples that government politicians (with the help of the media) had crafted” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 238-9). It soon became a trending hashtag as a wide range of Twitter users, including numerous prominent Indigenous (e.g. Christi Belcourt, Ryan McMahon) and non-Indigenous (e.g. Margaret Atwood, Naomi Klein) cultural figures, began adding it to “seemingly

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<sup>52</sup> Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, is on unceded Algonquin territory and, as the centre of the state’s formal political power, it has represented an important site for Indigenous networks organizing to resist settler state agendas of dispossession and assimilation (Tomiak).

<sup>53</sup> Attawapiskat First Nation is a community located in northern Ontario. The community has grappled with a long-standing housing shortage, a boil water advisory, pollution from nearby mining activity, extreme economic depression, and a youth suicide crisis (Barker).

endless examples of federal, provincial, territorial, and even municipal (#Torontowapiskat) politics that indicate corruption, waste, lack of transparency or accountability” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 257). In the first five days of circulation, January 12 to 17, #Ottawapiskat was included in over 1.3 million tweets (King 239).

The proliferation of #Ottawapiskat is closely related to concurrent public discourse about Chief Theresa Spence and Attawapiskat First Nation. As I discussed in the previous chapter, while serving as Chief of Attawapiskat First Nation, Theresa Spence was met with polarizing public reactions for her advocacy efforts and criticism of the federal government’s actions. After several years of bureaucratic and legal frustration, on December 11, 2012, a month into the Idle No More movement, Chief Spence and a small group of supporters set up a tent and fire on Victoria Island, behind the House of Commons in Ottawa, and began a hunger strike. The hunger strike created a visible Indigenous presence in the city, politicizing Victoria Island/Ottawa as a space of Indigenous resistance and ceremony (Tomiak). Although Idle No More is an intentionally leaderless initiative, media coverage of the hunger strike (which included profoundly derogatory statements and stereotypes) sought to position Spence as a de facto spokesperson.

On January 7, 2013, nearly a month into Spence’s hunger strike and four days before Idle No More’s inaugural International Day of Action, the federal government released an unfavourable external audit of Attawapiskat. The audit disclosed that the federal government had provided \$104 million for housing, infrastructure, education and administration in Attawapiskat between 2005 and 2011, and alleged that more than 80% of the bank transactions reviewed by the auditors lacked

proper documentation (MacCharles). While the federal government claimed that the timing of the audit's release was a coincidence, it had the effect of casting Spence's financial ethics in a negative light, generating speculation about her authority as a leader.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the suspicion around Spence also enabled the mainstream media to "question the Idle No More movement itself, since they had set Spence up as its leader" (Rutherford et al.). Given this context, the #Ottawapiskat hashtag functioned as a direct discursive intervention, countering and reframing neocolonial stereotypes about the alleged amorality and inferiority of Indigenous political figures and systems.

### **#Ottawapiskat and (neo)colonial media bias**

Prominent Idle No More organizer and Indigenous theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) succinctly captures the crucial link between decolonization and media representation by foregrounding that "Idle No More is not just a fight for Indigenous nations, land, culture, decolonization, language, treaties and the environment; it is also a fight for the fair and accurate representation of Indigenous Peoples and our issues" ("Idle No More"). The ongoing prevalence of deeply racist depictions and sentiments within the mainstream

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<sup>54</sup> In 2011, the federal government put Attawapiskat under Third Party Management in part due to allegations of financial mismanagement (Barker). Upon conducting a judicial review of the appointment of a Third Party Manager in Attawapiskat, the Federal Court repeatedly ruled out financial mismanagement as the cause for the community's hardships. Released on August 1, 2012, the judicial review pointed out that "While the [Attawapiskat First Nation] were having trouble addressing the housing crisis, what they lacked was not the ability to manage their finances...but the material means to do so" (qtd. in Vowel, "The Truth Is").

Canadian media is a well-documented fact.<sup>55</sup> As Simpson states, aside from a few exceptions,

...the mainstream media reports Indigenous issues through the lens of the colonial ideology that permeates every aspect of Canadian culture. Since the beginnings of Idle No More, they have consistently chosen to exaggerate and manufacture controversy and crisis, rather than to create open dialogue. They've promoted fear over understanding and have amplified potential divisions as a way of destabilizing the movement. ("Idle No More")

To briefly contextualize Simpson's comments, representative examples include Christie Blatchford's column in the *National Post* on December 27, 2012, which referred to Chief Spence's fast as "hideous puffery and horse manure," and Jeffrey Simpson's column in the *Globe and Mail* on January 5, 2013 which sought to depict decolonization as a delusion, equating Idle No More activism to "liv[ing] in a dream palace."<sup>56</sup>

Frame analysis theory usefully explains how the mainstream media is implicated (directly or indirectly) in the ongoing process of constraining Indigenous sovereignty by imposing/maintaining spatiotemporal boundaries through the perpetuation of neocolonial narrative bias. Gregory Bateson defined psychological frames as a form of metacommunication that operates through "a spatial and temporary bounding of a set of interactive messages" (197). Subsequent media

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<sup>55</sup> In *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*, Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen Robertson (Lakota/Scottish) offer a comprehensive analysis of how portrayals of Indigenous peoples in Canadian English-language newspapers (from 1869 to 2011) have shaped and perpetuated various myths of 'Native inferiority.'

<sup>56</sup> I examine the wider political significance of this racist backlash in chapter 3.

theorists have applied and expanded Bateson's insights to examine how the process of mass media "framing" (bringing events into a field of meaning) holds various ideological implications. Overall, framing theory posits that how information is presented to the audience influences how the audience will interpret that information. Significantly, Simpson characterizes Indigenous resistance to neocolonial narrative bias by echoing frame analysis theory:

Idle No More has consistently rejected the *framing* of protestors as fed up and angry, or of the mobilization as 'new.' ... We have also rejected the media's need to focus on a single leader or spokesperson, and on a concise list of short-term demands. Instead, Indigenous Peoples have consistently brought in the historic and contemporary legacy of colonialism, occupation and dispossession as context to our deepening movement. ("Idle No More"; emphasis added)

As Gamson and Lasch have established, we can identify the presence of specific media frames through qualitative analysis of an object text (qtd. in Moscato 6). Qualitative analysis can include a close reading of features like diction, rhetorical figures, spatial framing of textual content, and the presence of visual images. While this approach is compatible with some quantitative methods (such as counting the number of posts using a specific hashtag), it does not rely on metrics. It instead remains sensitive to the fact that reading object texts primarily or exclusively by categorizing and interpreting numerical features (such as degree and frequency of hashtag usage) runs the risk of obscuring ambiguous, embedded and context-specific meanings.

To determine how Indigenous and non-Indigenous Twitter users leveraged the hashtag “#Ottawapiskat” to reframe neocolonial narrative bias, I read all public posts containing the hashtag during the first three days of its circulation (January 12, 13 and 14) in 2013. There are two main limitations to this approach of using individual Twitter content as primary sources for my research. First, there is the temporal displacement of my analysis. Cataloguing this content retroactively cannot provide a complete understanding of the initial responses or engagement of the content when it was first posted. Likes, shares, and comments may have increased or decreased in the years since the first posting. This leads to the second main limitation, which is that not all of the original content using this hashtag is necessarily still available. Content may have been deleted, or accounts made private, since 2013. This means that while I have been exhaustive in examining all available related content in June of 2019, there may be Twitter posts or comments related to Idle No More that are no longer publicly available.

These methodological limitations have informed my research and analysis, such that I am not attempting a quantitative assessment of Idle No More content or engagement. Rather, my methodology focuses on currently available content as a useful sample of the *type* of rhetoric and engagement present surrounding the movement in 2013. My reading is informed by a modified replication of the coding and analysis approach described in David Moscato’s qualitative framing analysis of mainstream media reporting of #IdleNoMore. Moscato describes his methodology as follows:



I recorded notes for article focus, theme, language use, tone, sources, and differences or similarities in the coverage between the *Globe and Mail* and *Maclean's*. Catchphrases, terms, and metaphors were recorded to identify whether their usage was suggestive of a particular frame. Finally, notes and findings were categorized to assess what frames were ultimately present. (7)

Since my sample size was much larger than Moscato's, I did not record notes for each Twitter post. Rather, I recorded how the content archived under the Twitter hashtag "#Ottawapiskat" relates to commonly deployed anti-Indigenous stereotypes (discussed in Wotherspoon and Hansen), as well as Moscato's findings regarding the mainstream media coverage of the Idle No More movement. Overall, I found two main frames in hashtag usage: challenges to the hypocrisy of media coverage, and subversions of the "civ/sav distinction." Métis critic Emma LaRocque coined this term to refer to the idea of a binary division between civilization and savagery.

The first frame consists of foregrounding the prevalence of hypocrisy in mainstream media coverage of Indigenous versus settler state politics. Mainstream news coverage of Indigenous communities disproportionately focuses on the negative effects of colonization (poverty, health crises, individual or collective tragedies, etc.). Furthermore, coverage of Indigenous politics and activism is characterized by public denigration of "individuals like Spence and Indigenous people more generally for their apparent sense of entitlement, irresponsibility, and lack of accountability" (Wotherspoon and Hansen 32). By contrast, mainstream coverage of settler state politics tends to frame problematic events as discrete instances, not as evidence of endemic corruption and mismanagement. The

#Ottawapiskat hashtag challenged neocolonial media bias by parodying the stereotypes used to discredit Indigenous communities in general, and Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat specifically.

Underscoring the politically-motivated nature of the audit leak, many tweets using the #Ottawapiskat hashtag in the first three days of circulation highlighted how we could call into question the financial ethics of the settler state leadership. For example, a Twitter user linked a CBC article titled “Harper touts \$400m plan to boost venture capital,” and satirically noted, “Chief of @#Ottawapiskat gives \$400m to his Gambling buddies (called venture capital)” (“Chief of @#Ottawapiskat”). Similarly, alluding to the media’s focus on differences between Spence’s lifestyle and the living conditions in Attawapiskat, Christine Myrden tweeted: “A million people from their tribe use foodbanks each month, while their Grand Chief GG serves 10 course meals in his palace. #Ottawapiskat” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 239). Kenneth Yurchuk’s tweet picks up on a similar line of criticism: “In #Ottawapiskat unelected elders make huge salaries for no useful work. They call it the Senate” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 239). Along with emphasizing the hypocrisy of deeply-rooted stereotypes about the inefficiency of Indigenous political figures and systems, Yurchuk’s tweet also points toward the second frame I will discuss.

The second frame consists of satirically reversing the “civ/sav distinction” (LaRocque) to challenge colonial ethnocentrism and its attendant investment in the myth of progress. For example, Ryan McMahon (Anishinaabe) subversively recast the Conservative government’s support for the Athabasca oil sands as a capitalist ritual: “In #Ottawapiskat they smudge w/the smoke & stench from oil sands tailing

ponds. The dizziness incurred cited as ‘financial spirit helpers’” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 240). Similarly, a Twitter user drew upon the colonial framing of Indigenous cultures as ‘primitive’ and ‘vanishing’ to characterize the settler state’s ideological investment in petro-patriotism and extractivism, tweeting:

“#Ottawapiskat an ossified primitive culture tied to a disappearing resource unable to adapt to a changing environment #IdleNoMore” (#Ottawapiskat an ossified”).

It is productive to read these satirical reversals in relation to Horace Miner’s 1956 essay, “Body Ritual Among the Nacirema.” Miner applies anthropological terminology and analysis to describe various aspects of American society (“Nacirema” is “American” spelled backwards), including “national myths, various hygienic practices, and visits to doctors, dentists, pharmacists, psychiatrists, hospitals, and hairdressers” (Burde 550). Rhetorically, presenting mid-twentieth century American society in terms usually reserved for “startling ethnographic discoveries being described and interpreted for the first time” (Burde 550) underscores both the socially constructed nature of all cross-cultural interpretations, and the starkly Eurocentric bias of Anthropology as a discipline. As Matthew Johnson summarizes:

Miner’s point was that the definition of “ritual,” and the distinction between a doctor and a “medicine man,” was largely a matter of *framing*: by describing the United States in the 1950s in the same terms as an anthropologist might use to describe a tribal society in New Guinea – describing a medicine cabinet as a “shrine,” or shaving as “scraping and lacerating the surface of the face

with a sharp instrument” – he was able to make it seem like one. (emphasis added).

It is also productive to read #Ottawpiskat’s subversive use of humour in relation to Foust and Weathers’ discussion of hashtag memes.<sup>57</sup> In their analysis of the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory hashtag, Foust and Weathers advise scholars “to explore memes as more than simply a formula or image Macro passed around the Internet or Facebook” (140). Expanding upon Shifman’s work, Foust and Weathers analyze the rhetorical dimensions of memes by conceptualizing them as “units of imitation” rather than as “single ideas or formulas that propagated well” (Shifman qtd. in Foust and Weathers 140). To contextualize their analysis: in September of 2014, opponents of a conservative political attempt to overturn a progressive curricular framework for Advanced Placement US History in Colorado’s Jefferson County School Board used the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory hashtag in various satirical tweets. Overall, the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory tweets “invited Twitter users to disrupt the conservative calls for education reform” by “asserting incongruous falsehoods within history ‘lessons’ or blatantly rewriting historic morals to malign ‘patriotic’ lessons” (Foust and Weathers 142). At the most basic level, the hashtag meme “aggregated and archived sarcastic tweets” (136). However, Foust and

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<sup>57</sup> Drawing upon the Greek concept of the “mimeme” and building on insights from genetics, anthropology and ethology, Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” to investigate the relationship between evolution and culture. Originally theorized as a “unit of cultural transmission,” (Dawkins qtd. in Foust and Weathers 140), memes can also manifest as “recurring patterns of thought, expression, argument, [and] performance” (Duerringer qtd. in Foust and Weathers 140).

Weathers also demonstrate how “form amplifies content as memes support collective identities” (143):

As an aggregate, the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory tweets read like a set list for a comedy routine, where the reinforced punchline serves as a callback. Callbacks are internal allusions to punchlines used earlier in a comedy routine, or even from past routines with which the audience is familiar. Callbacks provide coherence or structure to a set, while at the same time creating a heightened sense of camaraderie by reminding the audience of their prior shared experience. (144)

Foust and Weathers’ insights can be applied to explain #Ottawapiskat’s capacity to foster activist solidarity: “[t]hose who are capable of navigating layers of irony [...] get the joke, feeling further aligned with the emergent collective identity” (142). Furthermore, in the context of Indigenous political organizing, #Ottawapiskat also leveraged and validated the centrality of humour within Indigenous cultures and epistemologies, providing another layer of affirmation. As Dr. Twyla Baker (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation) noted, “#Ottawapiskat is further proof of how Natives have always used humor; as medicine, as a shield from negativity, and as a weapon of truth” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 257).

In tracing how “a viral tweet connected to consequential action,” Foust and Weathers find that the political resonance of the hashtag meme extends beyond the digital realm (136). As such, they argue that “the combination of the joke structure” and the communicative affordance of the hashtag “created a synergy with content

and stance, amplifying face-to-face tactics” (144). More specifically, in addition to “snarky, textual resistance,” the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory hashtag meme also propelled and shaped a variety of offline actions, including “walking out of school to occupy overpasses [and] calling in sick *en masse* to force school closures” (146). Foust and Weathers categorize these actions as “performances of critical thinking,” rhetorically aimed “against conservative attempts to delegitimize them” (146) and demonstrate how they ultimately resulted in the “unseating and replacing” of the political figures advocating for conservative ‘reform’ (known as WNW) in 2015 (136). Crucially, they gesture toward a wider application of their findings, noting that “like other memes, #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory provided ‘an argumentative kernel’ capable of being ‘expanded and elaborated far beyond the imagination of any one producer of the meme’” (Deurringer qtd. in Foust and Weathers 136). In the next section, I will consider how #Ottawapiskat also functioned as “an argumentative kernel,” propelling and shaping a similar expansion of interventions into various attempts to delegitimize activists and initiatives aligned with the Idle No More movement.

### **#Ottawapiskat and digital political organizing**

#Ottawapiskat demonstrates how activists leveraged the hashtag meme as a mode of digital political organizing to connect remote communities, create an alternative conceptualization of margin/centre relations, and support concurrent on-the-ground initiatives. In the context of political activism, hashtagged messages create communication networks between users invested in supporting a common

cause, and in doing so, can connect geographically isolated regions to urban centres. This affordance is especially important in the Canadian context, where Indigenous resistance has been impeded by everything from the geographic scale of the settler state to the deliberate colonial restrictions on movement (discussed in chapter 4). As Dene activist Siku Allooloo points out, the fragmentation of Indigenous populations due to spatial dispersion is a particularly pronounced issue in northern communities:

Because of our distance, isolation and low population the North is often overlooked by Canadian society, even amongst Native populations in the South. But Northerners are very *active* and are sure to stay informed, so when Idle No More blew up on the scene we were quick to *take action* and represent in our communities. (199; emphasis added)<sup>58</sup>

I emphasize the phrasing “active” and “take action” in Allooloo’s comments to signal that deliberate use of Twitter hashtags can constitute a form of political organizing even if participants are not coordinating on-the-ground meetings or moving away from their individual physical environments. As discussed earlier, given the discourse-shaping potential of hashtags as performative utterances, it follows that intentional, collective efforts to launch a specific hashtag into the “trending topics” section of Twitter (and thereby gain widespread social attention) can be understood as a collective pragmatic act. Given the content (subverting neocolonial narrative

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<sup>58</sup> It is important to acknowledge that people living in some remote, rural, and northern communities are also more likely to be without reliable or affordable Internet access, which may in turn exclude them from digital exchanges (McLeod 64).

bias) and the timing (shortly after the Attawapiskat audit leak), the #Ottawapiskat hashtag effectively provided a specific discursive intervention for a specific discursive challenge (the discriminatory public discourse around Chief Spence, Idle No More, and Indigenous communities more broadly).

The rhetorical capacity of Twitter hashtags like #Ottawapiskat to serve as a form of support for concurrent on-the-ground initiatives stems from their ability to recontextualize other rhetors' messages and circulate the recontextualized content widely. For example, on January 14, Hayden King tweeted: "#Ottawapiskat debt hovering around \$600,000,000,000. Might be time for a third-part manager" (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 240). King's post underscores that the rhetorical impact of the #Ottawapiskat hashtag meme derives from its ability to interrupt "'the meaning and motivation' of another rhetor [e.g. Prime Minister Stephen Harper, settler state bureaucrats, neocolonial ideologues, etc.], reducing a complex piece of communication by 'reworking it, recontextualizing it, revaluing it, and ultimately redefining it as a referent for [other] memes'" (Durham qtd. in Foust and Weathers 149). As a single instance of narrative reframing, this tweet is fairly socially and politically inconsequential. However, when acting in concert with *thousands* of similar articulations, #Ottawapiskat becomes a collective pragmatic act: a socially and politically significant (albeit temporary) discursive negation of neocolonial narratives and ideological frames.

We can more fully understand how the #Ottawapiskat hashtag interacted with the communicative infrastructure of Twitter to "interrupt 'the meaning and motivation' of another rhetor" by drawing upon conceptualizations of cybertime



and cyberspace from mediated discourse analysis. Mediated discourse analysis posits that all actions occur on two planes: moments in time and points in space. The convergence of the two is referred to as a site of engagement. Sites of engagement are not simply absolute moments or locations, but rather “the result of orientations toward time and space that participants bring to interaction,” which are in turn mediated through “attention structures” (Jones 141). In computer-mediated communication, there are at least five kinds of space toward which users can orient their attention:

- 1) physical spaces: built environments and their geographical coordinates
- 2) virtual spaces: created by the interface used to communicate
- 3) relational space: created by the ‘site of talk’
- 4) screen space: actual space of the users’ screens
- 5) third space: spaces inhabited by neither participant but referred to/evoked. (Jones 144)

A rhetorical analysis of individual tweets in relation to the aforementioned concepts reveals how “#Ottawapiskat” functioned as a strategic site of engagement where the virtual space of Twitter and the relational space of the hashtag reconfigured dominant narratives (or, ideological frames) about the physical spaces of Ottawa and Attawapiskat through the creation of a digital third space. Turning to consider an instructive example, Figure 4 depicts an #Ottawapiskat tweet posted by writer and social justice activist Derrick O’Keefe on January 14, 2013:



Figure 4. Twitter post by Derrick O'Keefe: reference to current events using #Ottawapiskat.

The rhetorical impact of the text in O'Keefe's tweet (and, by extension, all similar tweets using the "#Ottawapiskat hashtag) can be analyzed in relation to the five spatial categories of computer-mediated communication. The *physical spaces* of Ottawa and Attawapiskat are emblematic of wider sociopolitical dynamics. Ottawa is both the symbolic and the geopolitical centre of the settler state's formal political power. Attawapiskat, meanwhile, is marginalized both rhetorically and geographically; but this has paradoxically positioned it at the centre of public debates about governmental engagement with the effects of colonization within Indigenous communities. Thus, the unique symbolic valances of these two physical spaces imbue them with significant rhetorical potential for creating an alternative conceptualization of margin/centre relations. The *virtual space* of the Twitter application allows participants to engage in public discourse without needing to leave their physical spaces. The *relational space* of the Twitter hashtag serves as a distinct communication channel, allowing participants to locate and promote posts by users outside of their follower networks. The combined affordances of the virtual and relational space (persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability, to reiterate boyd's classification) are further reinforced by the rhetorical affordances

of the *screen space*. In both web and mobile versions of Twitter, the spatial arrangement of a post, especially when using the retweet feature, reinforces the rhetorical work of hashtags as performative utterances by placing a new interpretive frame (tweet text and hashtag) around any cited/contested content.

Retweeting with comment augments a hashtag's capacity for discursive recontextualization of external referents by allowing for a literal, spatial repositioning of the original rhetor's message. In O'Keefe's tweet, the text accompanying the hashtag appears above the *Toronto Star* headline ("Senior staffer Bruce Carson disclosed criminal record to PMO: lawyer"), thereby deprivileging and reconfiguring the cited content by emphasizing the PMO's informed decision to "hire[] a 5-time convicted fraudster as a senior advisor" (@derrickokeefe). Consequently, as the culmination of Twitter's spatial affordances, "#Ottawapiskat" effectively functions as a digital *third space*, a discursive intervention which supports concurrent on-the-ground initiatives by reframing neocolonial media bias and challenging the stereotypes stemming from the civ/sav distinction. Or, as a Twitter user posted on January 14: "@aaronpaquette #Ottawapiskat is brilliant [sic]. You have neutralized #CPC smear of @ChiefTeresa and #IdleNoMore" ("@aaronpaquette #Ottawapiskat").

### **Theorizing Indigenous Digital Activism: #Ottawapiskat and the Third Space of Sovereignty**

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, scholars have posited different assessments of the shift from *collective* to *connective* action. To explore the contours

of this debate in the context of Indigenous digital activism, I begin by bringing key insights from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Jared Martineau into dialogue to foreground the theoretical contributions of Indigenous scholars.<sup>59</sup> I then consider how Indigenous digital activism, such as the viral Twitter hashtag #Ottawapiskat, can be understood in relation to Bruyneel's discussion of the "third space of sovereignty" and Tilly's concept of the "repertoire of contention."

Idle No More's inaugural International Day of Action (January 11, 2013) can be read as a representative example of the stakes and shortcomings of digital political organizing. Due to extensive online organizing, #IdleNoMore was trending internationally on social media, and reached a peak of 58,000 mentions on Twitter (Blevis 1). Offline, Idle No More activists were involved in numerous offline initiatives, including protesting the meeting between Indigenous leaders, including National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Shawn Atleo, and the Harper government in Ottawa. In this instance, the apparent success of the online activism might have been a liability. Characterizing the meeting as "a sucker punch, a co-opting, a creating of divisions within the movement," Simpson attributes it partly to the movement's reliance on "a shallow set of relationships, mediated by the internet" (80-1). Simpson goes on to explain:

I had never met most of my comrades in person. While there were small groups of people meeting and strategizing about specific actions and events, we had no mechanism to make decisions as a movement, because at this

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<sup>59</sup> As discussed in the Introduction, my methodology seeks to highlight the voices of Indigenous scholars by privileging direct quotations over paraphrases as a deliberate citational practice.

point social media had replaced organizing [...] When we were sold out by leaders who didn't represent us we were not able to regroup and relaunch the movement [...] I wonder in hindsight if maybe we didn't build a movement as much as a *social media presence* that privileged individuals over community, virtual validation over empathy, leadership without accountability and responsibility, and an unchecked liberalism that has now left us extremely vulnerable to the superficial recognition of the neoliberal state. ("Idle No More" 80-1; emphasis in original)

Echoing Simpson's analysis, Jarrett Martineau (Plains Cree and Dene Suline) confirms that the various forms of Idle No More activism on social media platforms (such as tweetstorms, trending hashtags, and Facebook petitions) "did not compel power to respond and risked displacing forms of grounded place-based political struggle, that contended directly with oppressive institutions and policies, into 'imaginary site[s] of action and belonging'" (245).

Simpson draws attention to the structural limitations of digital technologies as organizing and mobilizing tools for decolonizing action by emphasizing their incongruity with approaches informed by grounded normativity:

When Nishnaabeg mobilized in the past, we spent a considerable amount of time movement building. We did this for a few reasons, the first of which was that our political system is relational; it is entirely built upon intimate reciprocal relationships with humans and non-humans, with the land, and with other political orders. Nishnaabeg life, Nishnaabeg worlds are hubs of relationships through time and space. (Simpson et al. 78)

Simpson's critique of digital political organizing accurately summarizes how the structural inequalities of the analog world are replicated, or potentially even amplified, within digital environments:

I wonder if the simulated worlds of the internet are simulations that serve only to amplify capitalism, misogyny, transphobia, anti-queerness, white supremacy, and create further dependencies on settler colonialism in the physical world. I wonder if this creates further alienation from oneself, from Indigenous thought and practices and from the Indigenous material world.

(78)

However, this interpretive trajectory runs the risk of making slightly reductive inferences:

The internet is the ultimate Cartesian expression of mind, and mind only. There are no bodies on the internet. There is no land on the internet. Insertion of Indigeneity in cyberspace is not insertion of Indigeneity in the physical world. As much as it pains me to admit, grounded normativity does not structurally exist in the cyber world because it is predicated on deep, spiritual, emotional, reciprocal, real world relationships between living beings. (Simpson et al. 79)

Without attempting to invalidate Simpson's concerns about the negative consequences of Indigenous dispossession from "Indigenous material worlds, [] thought systems and [] practices," (79) it is useful to bring this line of analysis into dialogue with Martineau's comments about the "false binarism of 'digital dualism,' in which the online and offline worlds are understood as 'separate' and 'virtual,' rather

than enmeshed within lived reality under capitalism” (245). Drawing upon Nathan Jurgenson’s work, Martineau points out that “our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once. We are not crossing in and out of separate digital and physical realities ... but instead live in one reality, one that is augmented by atoms and bits” (245). Therefore, rather than thinking of digital and analog as inherently separate realms, it is more productive to think about how “networked action, communication and activism are inscribed within pre-existing social and power relations” (Martineau 245).

Moving away from the flawed conceptualization of “digital dualism” actually more fully illuminates the multiple ways that the digital intersects with the analog to exacerbate existing structural inequalities. Here, it is useful to foreground Simpson’s insights regarding the symbiotic dynamic between digital technologies and settler colonialism in detail:

Code and algorithms are controlling our lives and capitalism is controlling code. For Indigenous peoples, this takes place in the wider context of settler colonialism as the controlling structure in Indigenous life. Every tweet, Facebook post, blog post, Instagram photo, YouTube video and email we sent during Idle No More made the largest corporations in the world – corporations controlled by white men with a vested interest in settler colonialism – more money to reinforce the system of settler colonialism. Our cyber engagements, whether they were tweets, emails, blogs or Facebook posts, were also read, monitored, collected, surveilled and archived by the state. They were also read, monitored, collected, and surveilled by the

segment of Canadian society that hates us, and they used these to try to hurt us (Simpson et al. 79)

In recent years, pivotal developments like the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, Donald Trump’s propagandistic leveraging of Twitter, and our deepening understanding of the environmental cost of digital infrastructures all further validate Simpson’s critique.

While acknowledging the validity of the concerns Simpson raises, it is also important to highlight the multifaceted nature of Indigenous digital activism. The Twitter hashtag #IdleNoMore and the associated Facebook group constituted the most publicly visible aspects of Idle No More's digital presence, yet they were only one segment of a much broader communication and organization network. As Martineau reminds, Indigenous online engagement around Idle No More included long-form articles on blogs and in online magazines, various video and audio interviews, and livestreamed teach-ins. There was also widespread use of private electronic communication, including reaching out to “coders, hackers, web developers [...] sharing Google Docs and various ways of building [] collaborative information sharing” (qtd. in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 116).

Building upon Simpson and Martineau’s insights, I contend that it is constructive to consider the complexities of Indigenous-led hashtag activism (such as the #Ottawapiskat campaign) in relation to Bruyneel’s discussion of the “third space of sovereignty” and Tilly’s concept of the “repertoire of contention.” Tilly theorized that the specific tactics available to activists at a particular social intersection of time and place constitute a “repertoire of contention.” For example,



assessing his own spatiotemporal context, he suggested that the repertoire of contention for political activism within the American state during the late 1970s ranged from demonstrating and petitioning, to striking and organizing pressure groups. Tilly posited that the accepted repertoire of contention is generally slow to innovate and most new tactics prove ineffective, thus are soon abandoned. However, in instances when innovation does occur, tactics are introduced and adopted by new or marginal groups, then diffused and adapted to meet the needs of more groups, until the tactics that are proven to be successful eventually reach the central, more established groups and are institutionalized to become part of the repertoire. Ultimately, which tactics a group decides to adopt to reach its goals depends on its resources, opportunities and organizational structure. Furthermore, activist groups must consider the “relative appropriateness and efficiency” of established tactics in comparison with the new, alternative tactics (Tilly 153). In the context of Indigenous political activism, Idle No More’s successful leveraging of digital communication platforms like Twitter demonstrates the value of adding new strategies to the established repertoire of contention. More recently, Costanza-Chock (173) and Rolfe (66) have updated Tilly’s concept for the contemporary spatiotemporal context, modifying it to a repertoire of electronic contention, which includes both Internet-supported and Internet-based tactics. When considering the long-term implications of Internet-mediated strategies, like Twitter hashtag activism, in addition to the earlier concerns raised by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, it is also important to note that the repertoire of electronic contention may not be equally accessible to all activists, as “technical abilities, available resources,

and organizational structure can limit which digital tactics are diffused and adopted” (Harlow and Guo 465).

That said, I would suggest that in addition to the 2013 examples discussed earlier, the ongoing (albeit sporadic) usage of #Ottawapiskat also meaningfully attests to its efficacy as one strategy among a wider repertoire of [electronic] contention. For example, in March of 2017, a Twitter user retweeted a link to a CBC article covering the cost of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s family trip to the Bahamas along with the post, “Alternate Headline: Grand Chief of #Ottawapiskat wastes \$127k of band funds on a family vacation. #SendToThirdParty” (“Alternate Headline”). Similarly, in July of 2020, Indigenous-rights advocate Russell Diabo (Mohawk) used the hashtag #Ottawapiskat to highlight potential conflicts of interest between the Trudeau government and the non-partisan public service sector, posting, “Lol, ‘non partisan’ public service! As the Trudeau gov’t trots out Michael Wernick’s sister Rachel Wernick to hide behind! The same Micheal Wernick who covered for Trudeau during the SNC Lavelin scandal! #Ottawapiskat” (@RussDiabo). Over eight years since the hashtag’s emergence, in June of 2021, a Twitter user shared a link to a Globe and Mail article about the cost of the extensive restoration of Parliament’s Centre Block, commenting, ““#Ottawapiskat Chief & Council to spend \$5 billion on new Band Office despite the urgent crisis in their community”” (#Ottawapiskat Chief & Council”). While the hashtag’s initial popularity decreased throughout the second half of 2013, these more recent examples demonstrate that #Ottawapiskat continues to serve as a rhetorical frame for productive

recontextualization of fraught public discussions about settler-Indigenous power dynamics.

Overall, I suggest that Tilly's emphasis on adaptive and innovative negotiation of available tactics aligns with Bruyneel's conceptual framework of "the third space of sovereignty" (discussed in the Introduction). In this sense, my critical approach overlaps with more recent approaches to the rhetoric of social media movements, such as the concept of "media ecologies" which navigates away from common interpretive limitations like technological determinism (assuming that participant actions are unidirectionally driven by social media technologies) and instrumentalism (treating platforms as instruments for reaching pre-established political goals) (Foust and Weathers 150).

As such, I find that reading #Ottawapiskat as one strategy within a wider repertoire of [electronic] contention (and, in the context of the Idle No More movement, as one node within a decentralized network of multimodal activist initiatives) is a productive extension of Bruyneel's efforts to legitimize Indigenous political actions outside the spatiotemporal boundaries of the settler state, while also recognizing strategic Indigenous negotiations within the current settler state boundaries as a practical necessity. By considering the emergence and proliferation of #Ottawapiskat in relation to the main challenges to Indigenous political organizing (all of which are closely related to the containment function of colonization), my evaluation of advantages and shortcomings of hashtag memes as a mode of digital activism acknowledges the complex social realities of advocating from within the "third space of sovereignty." As a material communicative act and a

rhetorical tactic, the #Ottawapiskat hashtag is an instructive example of a political position that is neither simply inside nor outside the colonial system, but rather proceeds from a strategically shifting, liminal space to reveal “both the practices and the contingencies” of settler colonial rule (Bruyneel xvii).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Idle No More and the Limits of Reconciliation Rhetoric**

While the previous two chapters have focused on tensions between settler colonial forms of containment and an impactful form of Indigenous political activism (round dances and Twitter hashtags) this chapter considers the first six months of the Idle No More movement in relation to a key element of the broader social context: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). Insofar as they constitute two distinct and concurrent approaches to decolonization, juxtaposing the first six months of the Idle No More movement against key features of the TRC enables additional insights into constraints against and possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence. I begin by outlining how the TRC reflects a reconciliation-based approach to decolonization, while Idle No More reflects a resurgence-based approach. Since the emergence of Idle No More as a distinct social justice movement (late 2012) occurred during the second half of the TRC's official proceedings (2008 - 2015), I consider how this temporal overlap aligns with critical claims that different power struggles between the settler state and Indigenous peoples in Canada tend to follow a pattern we can describe as "constraints-ruptures-concessions." In this pattern, the state maintains or escalates (neo)colonial constraints against inherent Indigenous sovereignty through various means. The state's attempts to constrain decolonial efforts are then ruptured by adaptive expressions of Indigenous resistance to (neo)colonization. Consequently, the state reluctantly accedes to some concessions to deescalate the power contention and safeguard the status quo.

While several scholars (including Glen Coulthard, Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham, and Robyn Green) have drawn links between this pattern and certain features of the TRC proceedings and the Idle No More movement, my analysis extends their insights by centering this line of inquiry. Accordingly, I briefly contextualize the formation of the TRC by summarizing the history of the residential school system and the evolution of redress initiatives. I then highlight the notable successes (victim-validating testimonial model and culturally-relevant proceedings) and limitations (logistical shortcomings, susceptibility to discursive reframing by the settler state, and focus on past trauma foreclosing discussion of structural continuities) of the TRC as a reconciliation-based approach to decolonization. Next, I consider how various responses to the emergence of the Idle No More movement add a compelling layer to the existing evaluations of the successes and limitations of the TRC proceedings. Attending to the dual implications of “finished” in Henderson and Wakeham’s claim that “struggles to *contain* the meaning of residential schooling point to colonialism’s uneasy status as a purportedly finished project” (4; emphasis in original), I outline how state responses (legislative disempowerment and police surveillance) and public responses (shallow solidarity and racist backlash) to the Idle No More movement demonstrate that colonial violence has neither ceased, nor completed its ultimate aims. Overall, by exploring the limits of a discursive form of reconciliation, premised on gathering and publicizing Indigenous testimony through TRC proceedings, this chapter prefaces my discussion of youth-led long walks as a resurgent form of embodied, emplaced testimony, explored in chapter 4.

## **Two approaches to decolonization: recognition/reconciliation and resurgence**

Within both practical and theoretical contexts, “the field of activities, relationships, and possible futures between Indigenous and settler people[s]” (Borrows and Tully 3) are commonly described in relation to two concepts: *reconciliation* and *resurgence*. Although these terms cannot be pinned down to a single, indisputable definition, and are not seen as inherently antithetical, they have come to represent distinct models for decolonization. Reconciliation-based (sometimes also called recognition-based) approaches to decolonization generally entail working within the structure of domination to modify the system in the short term with the aim of transforming it from within in the long term. By contrast, resurgence-based approaches entail struggling against the structure of domination as a whole to assert rights and freedoms as sovereign peoples.<sup>60</sup> In the context of North American settler colonialism, the most prominent example of reconciliation discourse within a contemporary decolonization initiative is connected to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). Within the parameters of the TRC, reconciliation predominantly, although not exclusively, refers to (re)establishing mutually respectful interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada to enable equitable relationality. Resurgence discourse has been a central feature of several contemporary Indigenous-led movements, including Idle No More,

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<sup>60</sup> Contextualizing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Aboriginal rights provisions of the Constitution of Canada, and relevant Canadian legal decisions, Peter Kulchyski’s text *Aboriginal Rights Are Not Human Rights: In Defence of Indigenous Struggles* provides a useful discussion of the distinctions between the universal category of “human rights” and Indigenous rights to defend lands and cultures from ongoing colonial conquest.

where individuals and communities advocate for and enact “the resurgence of governance, Indigenous legal systems and languages, economic and social self-reliance, and sustainable relationships with the ecosystems that co-sustain all life and well-being” (Borrows and Tully 4).

Grappling with the tensions between these two concepts, Glen Coulthard’s 2014 book *Red Skin, White Masks* persuasively argues that contemporary decolonization efforts should move away from recognition/reconciliation-based approaches and instead move toward resurgence-based initiatives. Coulthard first traces how “the persistence and dedication of countless Indigenous activists, leaders, communities, and organizations” has yielded “an unprecedented degree of recognition for Aboriginal ‘cultural’ rights within the legal and political framework of the Canadian state,” including the settle state’s “recognition” of “existing aboriginal and treaty rights” under section 35 (1) of the Constitution Act of 1982 (2). Informed by the work of Richard J. F. Day, Coulthard uses the term “politics of recognition” to describe “an expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to ‘reconcile’ Indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler state sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identity claims in some form of renewed legal and political relationship with the Canadian state” (3). Coulthard also draws upon various anti-imperialist critiques, especially the work of Karl Marx and Franz Fanon, to emphatically negate the notion that the “colonial relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state can be adequately transformed via such a politics of recognition” (3). More specifically, he argues that decolonial strategies proceeding from a “politics of recognition” (including “the delegation of



land, capital, and political power from the state to Indigenous communities through a combination of land claim settlements, economic development initiatives, and self-government agreements”) will inherently fail to “usher[] in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition” (3). As Coulthard explains, this is because contemporary forms of recognition “reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (3).

Coulthard's analysis in *Red Skin, White Masks* also devotes significant attention to the ways that strategies informed by the “politics of recognition” overlap and interact with the discourse of “reconciliation,” which stems from transitional justice frameworks. It is difficult to oppose Coulthard's claim that, regardless of their respective merits in a *transitional* sociopolitical context (such as the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa), transitional justice mechanisms (including “state apologies, commissions of inquiry, truth and reconciliation commissions, [and] individual reparations”) are bound to have fundamentally different implications when applied to the *non-transitional* context of the Canadian settler state, “where there is no formal period marking an explicit transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present” (22). Coulthard cautions that in the absence of a systemic renegotiation of existing power dynamics, the settler state's approach to reconciliation runs the risk of leveraging the TRC's work “to ideologically fabricate [] a transition by narrowly situating the abuses of settler colonization firmly in the past” (22). While individual testimonies might be able to push back against such framing by foregrounding ongoing experiences of

colonization, it is reasonable to expect that the settler state will seek to protect its material and political interests by privileging and promoting more palatable narratives, ones which attest to “the process of individually and collectively overcoming the harmful ‘legacy’ left in the wake of this past abuse, while leaving the present structure of colonial rule largely unscathed” (22). Numerous other assessments of the TRC’s mandate and proceedings have affirmed Coulthard’s arguments about the limitations of reconciliation-based approaches by outlining how and why the TRC’s work risks substituting symbolic for structural decolonization.<sup>61</sup> While I will elaborate on those assessments in the next two sections of this chapter, I am particularly interested in considering Coulthard’s invocation of the Idle No More movement as an *indicator* of the limitations of reconciliation rhetoric.

Coulthard’s assessment of the dynamics between the TRC and the Idle No More movement suggests that the settler state’s ongoing interest in constraining Indigenous sovereignty leads to reconciliation and resurgence-based decolonization initiatives informing/influencing each other’s trajectories. In light of his argument against overreliance on the recognition-based approach to Indigenous self-determination, Coulthard advocates for shifting future organizing and advocacy

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<sup>61</sup> At present, in the seven years since the TRC released its six-volume final report and 94 Calls to Action, only 13 Calls to Action have been completed. Furthermore, assessing the completed Calls to Action and overall progress to date in “Calls to Action Accountability: A 2022 Status Update” Eva Jewell (Anishinaabekwe, Deshkan Ziibiing) and Ian Mosby explicitly underscore: “too much of the work of reconciliation has, until now, focused on symbols and not structures” (6).

efforts away from “conciliatory form[s] of settler-state recognition for Indigenous nations” and “toward a resurgent politics of recognition premised on self-actualization, direct action, and the resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power” (22-3). Positioning Idle No More as “a productive case study through which to explore what a resurgent Indigenous politics might look like on the ground” (24), Coulthard posits that “Idle No More is an indication of the ultimate failure of this [recognition-based] approach to reconciliation” (163). Coulthard extends this line of argument in the conclusion of *Red Skin, White Masks* by emphasizing that “the state has always responded to increased levels of Indigenous political assertiveness and militancy by attempting to *contain* these outbursts through largely symbolic gestures of political inclusion and recognition” (162-3; emphasis added). As such, he posits that even the small advancements and concessions gained during the various “state performances of resolution” are in fact driven by the settler state’s fear, and hence suppression, of resurgence-based initiatives:

There would have likely been no Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples without the land-based direct actions of the Innu in Labrador, the Lubicon Cree in Alberta, the Algonquin of Barrier Lake, the Mohawks of Kanasatake and Kahnawake, the Haida of Haida Gwaii, the Anishanaabe of Temagami, and the countless other Indigenous communities across Canada that have put themselves directly in harm's way in the defense of their lands and distinct ways of life. (*Red Skin, White Masks* 167)

Coulthard's claim aligns with similar insights from other scholars in the field. For example, introducing the essays in *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham point out that Canadian history is replete with "insistent repetition of state performances of resolution, and ... adaptive forms of [Indigenous] anti-colonial resistance that have perpetually ruptured such premature pronouncements" (8). Attending to indicators of state attempts at containment/resolution and Indigenous-led attempts at resistance/rupture, my analysis considers if the temporal overlap between the TRC proceedings and the emergence of the Idle No More movement points to another instance of the "constraints-ruptures-concessions" pattern (summarized at the outset of this chapter) characterizing ongoing power struggles between the settler state and Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### **Contextualizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC): history of the residential school system and prior redress initiatives**

Starting in the late 1880s, the Canadian government sought to assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream Canadian society by promoting, and then requiring, their attendance at church-run schools.<sup>62</sup> Aiming to 'kill the Indian in the

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<sup>62</sup> The earliest boarding school for Indigenous children in what is now Canada was established in the early seventeenth century near the French trading post at the future site of Québec City. It was a Roman Catholic school, where missionaries sought to 'civilize' and 'Christianize' young Indigenous boys. The TRC found that this school failed because "parents were reluctant to send their children, and the students were quick to run away and return home" (*Honouring the Truth* 50). In the first decade of the eighteenth century, a British-based missionary society (the New England Company), funded a boarding school in Sussex Vale, New Brunswick to teach young Mi'kmaq and Maliseet children trades, and to convert them to Protestantism. Similarly, in the 1820s, John West, an Anglican missionary from England, opened a boarding school for Indigenous students at Red River. Although most of these early institutions didn't last long, some remained operational well into the twentieth century. For example, the Mohawk Institute, a mission boarding school on the Grand River

child' and to remake the 'savage' into a 'civilized' and 'Christianized' adult (TRC *They Came For the Children* 10), government agents separated children (as young as 4 years old) from their parents and communities, taking them (often forcibly) to residential schools where Indigenous ways of living and thinking were routinely denigrated. In justifying the government's residential school policy, Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, told the House of Commons in 1883:

When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian [...] It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (qtd. in TRC *Honouring the Truth* 2)

Macdonald's comments clearly prove that the settler state deliberately sought to assimilate Indigenous children (to "acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men") by severing familiar and communal ties ("Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence"). At the time, different aspects of Canada's Indigenous policy were already striving to eliminate Indigenous governments and override Indigenous rights and Treaties (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 1). Assimilating Indigenous children through the residential school system was a

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in what is now Ontario, was established in 1834 and remained active until 1970 (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 50).

key component of the settler state's overall goal to cause Indigenous peoples to "cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada" (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 1).

Although the settler government's rationales for the residential school system often evoked paternalistic benevolence, few children experienced positive elements like caring teachers or a supportive learning environment because the overall enterprise was "an education system in name only" (TRC *Honouring the Truth* v). As Nagy summarizes, the residential school system was chronically underfunded, mismanaged, inadequately staffed and rife with disease, malnutrition, poor ventilation and heating, neglect, and pervasive sexual, emotional, and physical abuse ("Scope and Bounds" 56). Children were punished for everything from speaking Indigenous languages to engaging in spiritual or cultural activities, and even for seeing their opposite-sex siblings in segregated wards (56). Even in instances where children did not experience extreme violence, they still suffered "severe loneliness, fear, lack of personal freedom, cultural oppression, racist slurs, monotony and drudgery" (Nagy "Scope and Bounds" 56). It is estimated that approximately 150,000 Indigenous children attended these institutions between the 1800s and 1996,<sup>63</sup> of which at least 4,000 children died<sup>64</sup> (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 90).

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<sup>63</sup> Attendance rates stated to decline during the 1970s. As Henderson and Wakeham summarize, "the federal government relinquished its primary control of the remaining residential schools in the mid-1980s and [...] the last government-operated institution, located on the Gordon Reserve in Saskatchewan, closed its doors in 1996" (9).

<sup>64</sup> It is unlikely we will ever know the exact number of fatalities due to the incompleteness of the documentary record. A 1935 federal government policy allowed for school returns to be destroyed after 5 years, and reports of accidents after 10 years. Consequently, between

By the 1990s, Indigenous resistance to the colonial imposition of the residential school system coalesced into a campaign for redress, “a movement seeking an apology and reparations for the oppression perpetrated by government and church organizations” (Henderson and Wakeham 9). In 1990, a former residential school student filed the first lawsuit alleging abuse, and in 1991, then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Phil Fontaine publicly discussed personal experiences of abuse within the residential school system. Following his disclosure and explicit encouragement of other Survivors to come forward, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) began to consult with Survivors across Canada. Based on these consultations, in 1994, AFN published *Breaking the Silence: An Interpretive Study of Residential School Impact and Healing as Illustrated by the Stories of First Nations Individuals*. Written by and for Indigenous peoples, this study sought to understand the impact of the residential school system, and to offer healing and recovery strategies for impacted Indigenous individuals, families, and communities.

Another pivotal development from this time was the establishment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1991<sup>65</sup> to investigate the status

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1936 and 1944, over 200,000 Indian Affairs files were destroyed. Student health records were also regularly destroyed (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 90). These limitations aside, it is indisputably clear that until 1950, the death rates for Indigenous children in the residential schools were significantly (between three to five times) higher than those experienced by members of the general school-aged Canadian population (TRC 91-93).

<sup>65</sup> As noted earlier, Coulthard emphasized that RCAP was established during an era of increased Indigenous political activism, including high-profile land-based direct actions like the Oka Crisis/Kanesatake Resistance, a 78-day armed standoff between Indigenous protesters and settler state forces (Québec police and the Canadian military). Consequently, Coulthard argues that the establishment of the RCAP can be read as a “performance[]of resolution” driven by the settler state’s fear of, and hence suppression of, resurgence-based initiatives (21).

of Canada's relations with Indigenous peoples, and to propose recommendations to facilitate reconciliation. Although the RCAP had a wide-reaching mandate, the residential school system became a prominent topic of discussion. As Co-Chair Georges Erasmus, remarked:

Everywhere we have gone, we have been told about the impact of residential schools [...] Inevitably, we are told about the loss of culture, the loss of language, the loss of parenting skills, the agony of being separated from family, from community [...] the many, many years of being away from home, the return home, the alienations, the need to reintegrate into the community.

(qtd. in *Breaking the Silence* 2-3)

Prior to this inquiry, Survivors' accounts of their experiences had "not been heard as publicly accepted truth," or they "remained constrained by courts' procedures" (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 4). As the voices of Survivors entered the public sphere during the RCAP hearings, two significant changes took place. While individual testimonies "became historical facts," it also became clear that the negative consequences of residential school system extended beyond "a crime against individual students" (4). Throughout the RCAP process, the residential school system gradually came to be understood as "a targeted program of assimilation deliberately organized by the state and religious institutions," and a source of ongoing, intergenerational trauma (4).

The RCAP inquiry culminated in a five-volume final report, which covered a vast range of issues and included 440 recommendations for renewing the legal and political relationship between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, as



well as between Indigenous peoples and the federal and provincial governments in Canada. In contrast to the majority of the RCAP's recommendations, which were "tabled, ignored, or deferred," the mistreatment of Indigenous children within the residential school system generated a response from the settler state (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 5). On one hand, the state's responsiveness seemed to follow from the gravity of the issue, as the RCAP found that "[n]o segment of our research aroused more outrage and shame than the story of the residential schools" (qtd. in Stanton "Reconciling Reconciliation" 21). On the other hand, the state's limited willingness to address the legacy of the residential school system must be considered alongside the shortcomings of its broader response to the RCAP's recommendations. On January 7, 1998,<sup>66</sup> Jane Stewart, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, issued a "Statement of Reconciliation" that expressed regret for "past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal Peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices" (qtd. in Capitaine and Vanthuyne 5). Notably, this statement did not respond to the RCAP's recommendation for a public inquiry,<sup>67</sup> and made no mention of its call for the dismantling of the Department of Indian Affairs, and the establishment of a separate Indigenous parliament. Instead, the federal government created a 350-million-dollar

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<sup>66</sup> The first government apology for the residential school system is traced back to Assistant Deputy Minister for Indian Affairs, Bill Van Iterson's comments during a June 1991 national conference dedicated to the legacy of the residential schools system, held at Vancouver. According to the Vancouver Sun, Van Iterson apologized to the Indigenous and Métis peoples present, "on behalf of public servants" (qtd. in Dorrell 27).

<sup>67</sup> The RCAP final report found that "a public inquiry is urgently required to examine the origins, purposes and effects of residential school policies, to identify abuses, to recommend remedial measures and to begin the process of healing" (qtd. in Stanton "Reconciling Reconciliation" 21).

healing fund, used by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) and other community-based initiatives to address the lingering consequences of physical and sexual abuse within the schools (5). While the AHF funding provided much-needed healing support for Survivors, Henderson draws attention to how this hard-won measure of progress was more successful than the other RCAP recommendations because it made "the demands of Aboriginal redress amenable to a neoliberalising agenda" (71). As I will elaborate in the next section, much of the initial wariness and eventual criticism of the TRC circled around the same concerns, cautioning against redress initiatives becoming 'resolved' through symbolic changes and individual financial compensation, instead of adding impetus to ongoing calls for structural changes and renegotiation of collective material conditions such as territorial dispossession.

Over the next half decade, the growing number of Survivors pursuing litigation against the government (with cases increasing from 6,000 to 12,000 between 2000 and 2004) led to a class action lawsuit and culminated in a settlement which included the formation of the TRC as one of the terms of agreement (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 5). In an attempt to redirect claims from the litigation process, reduce costs and timeframes, and facilitate healing and reconciliation, the government initially proposed and implemented an Alternative Dispute Resolution Process (6). However, this process was quickly criticized for being overly complex, and for limiting eligibility to claims of sexual and physical abuse. As Nagy notes, "[c]laimants remained subject to humiliating and traumatizing cross-examination, and compensation was meager" ("The Truth and Reconciliation Commission" 207).

In light of these issues, very few Survivors engaged in the Alternative Dispute Resolution Process. According to a 2005 government document, out of 13,500 eligible claimants, only 1,200 applied for the process (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 6). Instead, many Survivors chose to join a 2.3-billion-dollar lawsuit, which was eventually allowed to proceed to trial when the court ruled that the Alternative Dispute Resolution Process did not represent a preferable means for settling the dispute (6). The government signed a Political Agreement in 2005, committing to negotiate a more adequate settlement process for former residential school students. However, when the Ministry of Justice indicated that the government intended to limit their involvement, the Assembly of First Nations launched a class action lawsuit against the government on behalf of all residential school system Survivors and victims (6).

In May of 2006, the Government of Canada and the churches that had administrated the schools reached an out-of-court settlement with the Assembly of First Nations and regional Inuit representatives (6). The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest settlement of a class action lawsuit in Canadian history (approximately 5 billion dollars), included 5 different elements to address the legacy of Indian Residential Schools: 1) a Common Experience Payment for all eligible former students of Indian Residential Schools (\$10,000 for the first year and an additional \$3,000 for each subsequent year spent in residential school); 2) an Independent Assessment Process for claims of sexual or serious physical abuse; 3) measures to support healing (including the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program and an endowment to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation;

4) funding for commemorative activities; and, 5) the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRSSA). The next section will enable a critical consideration of the temporal overlap between the TRC and the Idle No More movement by further contextualizing the relative successes and limitations of the TRC's official mandate and completed proceedings.

### **Evaluating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)**

Truth commissions are one modality within the broader concept of transitional justice. The first truth commission took place in Uganda in 1974 (Henderson and Wakeham 11). Since then, over 40 truth commissions have been created worldwide, most taking place “in the global South, in developing, post-conflict societies” (Nagy “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” 200). Numerous scholars have noted that the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in a stable, Western democracy like Canada constitutes an unusual occurrence. This section will first briefly summarize the origins of transitional justice frameworks and situate the TRC in relation to other public truth commission models. Next, I will highlight some of the most impactful elements of the TRC's work, including the use of a victim-validating testimonial model and culturally-relevant proceedings, achievements as a public pedagogy project, and the facilitation of interpersonal healing within Indigenous communities. I will then consider how several features of the TRC mandate and proceedings rendered its work susceptible to discursive reframing by the settler state, where the focus on healing past traumas can be leveraged to curtail or diffuse calls for structural decolonization.

Grounded in a restorative justice approach,<sup>68</sup> transitional justice and its mechanisms (including: state apologies, commissions of inquiry, truth and reconciliation commissions, commemoration projects, and individual reparation) are primarily focused on restoring dignity to victims of abuse, and promoting reconciliation between perpetrators and the wider society (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 11). The transitional justice framework was “originally devised to facilitate reconciliation in countries undergoing transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy” (11). By contrast, even after the 1982 amendments to the Canadian Constitution entrenched Indigenous rights, many features of the colonial state infrastructure (including “the Indian Act, the Indian reserve system, and the status of Indigenous communities as constitutionally subordinated jurisdictions controlled by a government primarily accountable to outsiders”) essentially remain unchanged from the residential school system era (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 12). As I will unpack throughout this section, the specific implications of situating a truth commission within the “nontransitional” context of the Canadian settler state has been a key issue of critical debate.

Broadly speaking, public truth commissions tend to be either victim-centered or perpetrator-centered. Victim-centred commissions can be distinguished from perpetrator-centred commissions by the approach they take to gathering and conveying truth. Although victim-centred commissions vary greatly,<sup>69</sup> and are not

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<sup>68</sup> While retributive justice focuses on perpetrators’ crimes and sentences, restorative justice focuses on identifying and reducing the negative impacts of a crime on the victim(s) (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 11).

<sup>69</sup> As James contextualizes, “[t]he South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s victim-centred approach featured public hearings at which victims or their loved ones could

always directed by the victims and their interests, victims generally have an important role in the truth-gathering activities (James 185). In contrast, perpetrator-centred commissions place less emphasis on the “voices, needs and experiences of victims,” and instead focus on “witness testimony to ascertain the deeds, conduct and levels of responsibility of perpetrators” (James 186). A representative example of the perpetrator-centred approach is the Nuremberg Trials, which dealt with Holocaust survivor testimony “only to the extent that doing so was relevant to securing the criminal convictions of those who had been charged” (James 186). The main drawback of the perpetrator-centred model is that it runs the risk of treating Survivors “as mere instruments for uncovering perpetrator identities and misdeeds, leading to a downplaying of their perspectives and hopes” (James 187). Even when seeking to bring perpetrators to justice, such instrumentalization of victims curtails the process of social transformation because it maintains “the same patterns of exclusion and silencing” that often characterized the old system being challenged by the commission (James 187).

Following the victim-centred model, the TRC’s mandate included three main spheres of focus: 1) gathering and archiving testimonies,<sup>70</sup> 2) promoting

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confront perpetrators with their pain, anger and questions. The Argentinean National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons began by focusing on the military junta’s ‘disappeared’ victims, but wound up unearthing unexpectedly detailed information about the perpetrators and architects of the injustices. For its part, the Liberian TRC used diverse civil society partnerships, workshops and art projects to access the multifarious truths of victims” (186).

<sup>70</sup> Reflected in the following sections of the IRSSA: “a) Acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences; b) Provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families and communities as they come forward to the Commission; c) Witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels” (Schedule N 1-2).

sociocultural change through public pedagogy and critical analysis,<sup>71</sup> and 3) supporting commemorative and culturally-affirmative initiatives<sup>72</sup> (Schedule N 1-2). The victim-centred nature of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is most evident in its highest-profile work: gathering oral, written, and visual statements from Indigenous Survivors, and others affected by the residential school system. In addition to the TRC's emphasis on diverse forms of testimony, its victim-centred approach is also reflected in the use of culturally-relevant and trauma-informed approaches to testifying and witnessing, and the commitment to centering the ideas, views and voices of residential school Survivors (and their communities) during all of the Commission's public events. In doing this work, the TRC had to contend with a uniquely high degree of public ignorance/indifference about the core issues it was addressing. Unlike other truth commissions, which took place amid widespread awareness of the impetus, in the context of the residential school system, "the harms of historical proportion for which the state was responsible were to a great extent unknown to the public at large" (Niezen ix).

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<sup>71</sup> Reflected in the following sections of the IRSSA: "d) Promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS system and its impacts; e) Identify sources and create as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy. The record shall be preserved and made accessible to the public for future study and use; f) Produce and submit to the Parties of the Agreement a report including recommendations to the Government of Canada concerning the IRS system and experience including: the history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS system, the effect and consequences of IRS (including systemic harms, intergenerational consequences and the impact on human dignity) and the ongoing legacy of the residential schools" (Schedule N 1-2).

<sup>72</sup> Reflected in the following section of the IRSSA: "g) Support commemoration of former Indian Residential School students and their families in accordance with the Commemoration Policy" (Schedule N 1-2).

Thus, while the TRC's limited investigative powers also had problematic implications (as I will discuss shortly), the victim-centred model enabled the Commission to create physically and emotionally safe, culturally-affirmative, and versatile spaces to elicit, support, and validate personal testimonies. As James notes, given the residential school system's program of cultural assimilation and the ongoing public ignorance about the degree of harms, the victim-centered approach is "a fitting attempt at partial symbolic reparation and a necessary push towards societal transformation that the Commission seeks in its very manner of operation to overturn the knowledge assumptions on which settler dominance has been partly based" (192). The Commission received more than 6,750 statements, primarily from Survivors and their family members (26). The Commission also gathered statements from former staff and their families during 96 interviews and during National and Regional Events and Community Hearings (26). Although the TRC was not able to investigate individual actors and institutions,<sup>73</sup> its victim-centred focus allowed Survivors to construct "a new collective memory - one that runs counter to and questions the status quo of Canadian history" (Capitaine and Vanthuyne 16).

The TRC's work was guided by three Commissioners: the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair as Chair, Chief Wilton Littlechild and Dr. Marie Wilson<sup>74</sup> (TRC

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<sup>73</sup> As outlined in section 2 of the IRSSA, the TRC and its Commissioners "a) shall not hold formal hearings, nor act as a public inquiry, nor conduct a formal legal process" and "b) shall not possess subpoena powers, and do not have powers to compel attendance or participation in any of its activities or events" (IRSSA).

<sup>74</sup> The three Commissioners initially appointed in 2008 were the Honourable Justice Harry Laforme as Chair, and Jane Brewin-Morley and Claudette Dumont-Smith. However, they resigned shortly after being appointed and new Commissioners were appointed (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 25).



*Honouring the Truth* 23). The Commission also received advice and support from an Indian Residential School Survivor Committee.<sup>75</sup> Between 2008 and 2015, the TRC held events across Canada. The most attended and visible of these were the four-day National Events held in Winnipeg, Inuvik, Halifax, Saskatoon, Montreal, Vancouver, and Edmonton between June 2010 and March 2014 (*TRC Honouring the Truth* 25). According to TRC estimates, the seven National Events had upwards of 155,000 visitors, including at least 9,000 registered residential school Survivors (25). Primarily intended as a testimonial forum for Survivors and their families, the National Events also raised public awareness of the history and legacy of residential schools, and included performances like concerts and talent shows, which served to foreground the vibrancy of the Indigenous cultural forms, languages, and modes of artistic expression that the residential school system had sought to destroy (30).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Members included: “John Banksland, Inuvialuit from the Northwest Territories; John Morriveau, Métis from Grand Rapids, Manitoba; Eugene Arcand, Cree from Muskeg Lake First Nation, Saskatchewan; Madeleine Basile, a member of the Atikamekw Nation from Wemotaci, Québec; Lottie May Johnson, Mi’kmaq from Eskasoni, Nova Scotia; Rebekah Uqi Williams, Inuk from Nunavut; Doris Young, Cree from The Pas, Manitoba; Barney Williams Jr. (Taa-eee-sim-chilth), Nuu-chahnulth from the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations on Meares Island, British Columbia; Gordon Williams, from the Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, now residing in Ontario; and Kukdookaa Terri Brown, from the Tahltan Nation in British Columbia. Raymond Arcand, a former chief of the Alexander First Nation near Edmonton, Alberta, served on the Survivors Committee until his death in November 2009” (*TRC Honouring the Truth* 23-24).

<sup>76</sup> The Settlement Agreement allocated 20 million dollars for commemoration initiatives that would “honour, educate, remember, memorialize, and pay tribute to former residential school students, their families, and their communities” (*TRC Honouring the Truth* 33). The guidelines and funding criteria emphasized traditionally Indigenous means of conveying truth, including “gatherings and feasts [...] banquets, memorials, talking circles, potlatches, closing ceremonies, pow-wows and welcome home ceremonies” (qtd. in James 193). The Commission recommended 152 commemoration projects to the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development for funding, of which 143 projects were approved (*TRC Honouring the Truth* 33).

To support its statement-gathering activities and to increase public interest and participation in the National Events, the TRC organized two Regional Events (in Victoria and Whitehorse), and held 238 days of local hearings in 77 communities<sup>77</sup> across the country (25). The Commission also sponsored “town halls” on reconciliation at the Victoria Regional Event in April 2012, and at subsequent National Events. Members of the general public were invited to come forward at the town halls to discuss their own commitments to support and expand reconciliation efforts. For the most part, the audiences at the TRC's National Events were primarily composed of Indigenous people. Aside from church officials, journalists, and researchers, “few non-Indigenous people came to listen to the testimonies of former students” (Capitaine 58). The limited interest from settler audiences is somewhat mitigated by the fact that Survivor testimonies were also live streamed to an international audience,<sup>78</sup> and have been archived by the National Research Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

While the limited presence of settler audiences is lamentable, it is important to recognize that for many Survivors the TRC presented a valuable opportunity to reconnect or reconcile with family and community members, not just past

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<sup>77</sup> Communities could apply for TRC funding to organize and host independent events. In addition to facilitating formal statement gathering, these events also encouraged affected groups and communities to develop their own narratives about the schools. The TRC funding guidelines emphasized polyphonic, grassroots approaches, as applicants were encouraged to “include both traditional and contemporary artistic expressions of the residential school experience and impact, such as poetry, writing, painting, sculpting, bead or button work, quilting, song writing, films or plays” (qtd. in James 192-193).

<sup>78</sup> The TRC National Events, live streamed on the internet and promoted on the Commission’s website and social-media platforms, received over 93,350 views from at least 62 different countries (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 31).

perpetrators, the government, or non-Indigenous Canadians. Discussing the TRC National Events held in Winnipeg from June 16 to 19, 2010, and in Inuvik from June 28 to July 1, 2011, Naomi Angel highlights how Survivors used “a range [of] testimony” to “upset the dyadic expectations of the commission” and to “speak to multiple audiences” (107). Crucially, Angel emphasizes that “Survivors often used the space of public testimony given at the national gatherings as a site to speak not only to the commission but also to their family members and other former students” (92). In fact, Angel finds that “[i]n many cases, non-Indigenous Canadians were not envisioned by survivors as the primary audience for these testimonies. Rather, Indigenous family members and communities were the primary audience, with non-Indigenous Canadians playing an indirect or secondary role as listeners” (109).

Another productive element of the TRC is that it offered noteworthy improvements to the way testimony occurs within the adversarial judicial model (often instrumentalizing, retraumatizing and disempowering victims) insofar as it incorporated Indigenous protocols, offered holistic support for Survivors, encouraged public expression of emotion, and allowed for subjective narrative flow. Centring Indigenous worldviews, each of the seven National Events was linked to one of the Seven Sacred Teachings of the Anishinaabe: Respect, Courage, Love, Truth, Humility, Honesty, and Wisdom, and also created space for various forms of Ceremony and traditional observance (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 30). For example, sacred fires were lit at the beginning of each National Event, and daily proceedings began with ceremony. All of the ceremonial observances sought to follow the cultural protocols, customs, and traditions of the Indigenous peoples in whose

territories the Commission was a guest (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 30). The Commission also included multiple testimonial platforms, such as public hearings, sharing circles, special events, and private statement gatherings (26). Recognizing the high incarceration rates of Indigenous peoples and how the experience of residential schools has contributed to likelihood of incarceration, the Commission also collected statements in correctional institutions in Kenora, Ontario, and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (26). Similarly, recognizing the traumatic nature of the testimonial contents, the TRC provided “[h]ealth-support workers, cultural support workers, and/or professional therapists [...] everywhere the Commission gathered statements to provide support and counselling as needed” (26).

These affordances are crucial because it is well-documented fact that many witnesses describe the process of testifying within the adversarial justice system as upsetting and disempowering (Fan). The adversarial model is particularly traumatic for at-risk witnesses, such as victims of sexual assault (Craig) and survivors of intimate partner violence (Katiri), who often report feeling re-victimized by the judicial system. In *Dancing with a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality*, Rupert Ross outlines how this dynamic is further exacerbated for Indigenous witnesses since key differences in judicial traditions and cultural customs create misunderstandings, causing additional distress and disadvantage(s).

Along with creating a more hospitable testimonial environment, the TRC also validated and amplified Survivors’ experiences by taking part in nearly 900 separate public-facing events. In addition to various testimony-gathering initiatives, the TRC organized events with various partners (including “youth, women, faith

communities, the philanthropic community, and new Canadians”) to engage with Survivors’ organizations and other Indigenous groups (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 32). The Commission also collaborated with universities, educators, and Traditional Knowledge Keepers throughout Canada to organize academic conferences and panel discussions at its National Events (31), and accepted invitations to discuss its work with international audiences through the United Nations, the International Centre for Transitional Justice, and a number of university law faculties (32).

Before shifting consideration from merits to limitation of the TRC mandate and proceedings, it is also important to recognise and respect the Survivors’ active involvement and powerful expressions of agency. Regardless of its limitations, the Settlement Agreement was not merely imposed by the settler state on Indigenous peoples, but “was the outcome of a court-supervised settlement to a class action lawsuit launched by Survivors” (James 189). As I will discuss shortly, numerous participants with differing priorities shaped the settlement negotiation process. Although Survivors of the residential school system are not a homogenous group and should not be reduced to a single perspective, their opinions regarding the TRC have likely been influenced by some common factors. Namely, in addition to abuses suffered within the residential schools, Survivors also endured similar struggles in overcoming the settler state’s “indifference and denial,” as “authorities first rejected the students’ claims of injustice and then attempted variously to resist, evade and callously minimize the country’s reparative obligations in relation to the schools” (184). In light of these obstacles, a truth commission is a hard-won and long-delayed opportunity to speak truth to power, and to feel some measure of public validation

and respect. Consequently, as James emphasizes, for the Survivors who “demanded that Canada open up, listen, learn and start taking responsibility for the damage caused,” the TRC constitutes “their victory and tribute” (184).

Similarly, to more fully contextualize the limitations of the TRC, it is useful to review how the mandate and proceedings were shaped by various stakeholders. After interviewing the main stakeholders, Nagy found that the TRC mandate represented a synthesis of the two different approaches to a truth commission that were brought together during the settlement negotiations. The first approach, associated with the AFN, has a more legalistic focus on accountability and public record. The second approach, associated with the TRC Roundtable (comprised of Survivor, Indigenous, and Protestant organizations), is more grassroots and community focused. As Nagy explains, both approaches advocated for “statement-taking/truth-sharing, national events, and a report for public education with recommendations” (“Truth and Reconciliation Commission” 214). A central feature of the AFN approach included an agreement for the provision of documents and the creation of a National Research Centre, whereas a central feature of the Roundtable approach included community events and a Survivor Committee (214). While these two visions ultimately merged to create a “hybrid” model, Nagy posits that the grassroots vision was overshadowed (200-1).

Even before the Commission formally began, critics cautioned that the TRC’s mandate strongly suggested that it was “conceptualiz[ed] by the Canadian state as an instrument that draws a line through history, in effect finalizing or perfecting the colonial project rather than being part of a transformation and decolonization”

(Hughes “Instructive Past” 102). As David Garneau observes, the conceptual valances of the very term “reconciliation” are deeply incongruent with the material realities of (de)colonization: “[r]e-conciliation refers to the repair of a previously existing harmonious relationship. This word choice imposes the fiction that equanimity is the status quo between [Indigenous] people and Canada ... the imaginary the word describes is limited to post-contact narratives,” which is also problematic because it “anaesthetizes knowledge of the existence of pre-[contact] sovereignty” (35). One of the earliest indicators showing how and why the TRC’s work risked substituting symbolic for structural decolonization was the official government apology delivered several days before the Commission formally began its work.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper<sup>79</sup> made a “Statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools” in the House of Commons, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians. The very first line of the apology both delimits and distances the scope of harm by declaring “the treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a sad *chapter* in our *history*” (“Statement of Apology”; emphasis added). Throughout the apology, statements of contrition are consistently qualified by mitigatory phrases like “[t]oday, we recognize,” “[t]he government *now* recognizes,” and “we *now* recognize” (“Statement of Apology”; emphasis added). This rhetorical framing minimizes the genocidal nature of the colonial policy by suggesting that the intervening passage of time was necessary for

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<sup>79</sup>Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper was Canada’s Prime Minister from 2006 to 2015, first forming a minority and then later a majority government.

the nation-state to realize its ethical obligations towards Indigenous peoples. The repeated delineation between past and present recognition also serves to “reassure contemporary national subjects that they can bear no responsibility for the implementation and execution of the residential schools systems” (Dorrell 32). Significantly, the apology’s narrative of moral progress implicitly absolves the national subjects from needing to participate in any reconciliatory efforts. As Dorrell observes, settler Canadians are neither “called upon to respond to their own implication in either the residential schools system or the broader colonial project nor asked to engage in any ethical re-evaluation” (32). Instead, “the apology delivered on behalf of ‘all Canadians’ reinforces and enhances the benevolence and compassion of the state, in turn allowing national subjects to lay claim to these same progressive attributes” (30). Taken to its logical conclusion, this dynamic “suggests that once an apology has been offered by the state on behalf of its national subjects,” all they need to do for reconciliation to be complete is “wait for [Indigenous peoples] to respond with forgiveness” (38).

The strategic prioritization of closure over disclosure, evident as the overarching element of Harper’s apology to residential school survivors, is also reflected in the government’s contributions to the negotiations shaping the TRC’s mandate. For example, the government advocated for the insertion of section 2 [“Establishment, Powers, Duties and Procedures of the Commission”] into the mandate. This section enumerates the Commission’s many legal limitations: “it is not a public inquiry, it does not have powers of subpoena, and it shall not name names unless the person has been already convicted” (Nagy “Truth and



Reconciliation Commission” 215). Nagy’s study underscores that the TRC was tasked with arriving at truth and fostering reconciliation despite the fact that it could not subpoena witnesses, compel testimony or requisition documents to instigate and ensure criminal inquiry into abuses. This was hardly a small matter considering the range of crimes committed in residential schools. As Roland Chrisjohn (Oneida) and Tanya Wasacase (Cree) persuasively underscore, in what other context would Canadians accept that “‘having to listen to the victim’ be sufficient castigation for rape, child abuse, enslavement, or other more specific abuses associated with residential schooling?” (203). James extends this line of criticism by pointing out that a ban on naming perpetrators “means that even the limited sanction of negative publicity for the architects and perpetrators of abuses — often important to the idea of transitional justice as conventionally understood — is unavailable to the Canadian Commission” (190). The TRC did have *some* investigative responsibilities. The Commission was tasked with detailing the “history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS [Indian Residential School] system,” and creating “as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy” (qtd. in James 190). However, as James goes on to explain, while other truth commissions also had limited capacity to “name perpetrators or wrongdoers...their proscriptions on naming have typically been compromises in contexts of explosive immediacy where outing perpetrators could threaten lives and imperil fragile transitions” (190). Since the Canadian context “lacks any such comparable considerations,” the TRC’s limited investigative powers “stand as a naked reminder of the country’s manifestly nontransitional circumstances” (190).

Another central shortcoming of the Settlement Agreement was that it excluded some Survivors of the residential school system because the list of qualifying institutions was not comprehensive. For example, the IRSSA excluded “700 federally funded and church-run Indian Day Schools, which were attended by an estimated 200,000 Indigenous people between 1870 and 2000” (Carleton and Pind). Survivors of Day Schools launched a separate class action lawsuit in 2009, reached a settlement agreement a decade later, in August of 2019, and are still navigating the claims process (Carleton and Pind). During the TRC proceedings, the commissioners attempted to mitigate the effects of such exclusions by applying “a progressive interpretation of their mandate and [making] overtures to the groups excluded from the Settlement Agreement” (Molema 50). This inclusion potentially provided some degree of symbolic recognition, but it could not address the lack of material compensation (Molema 50). On a related note, the overall compensatory framework failed to acknowledge the intergenerational effects of residential schooling, as family members were not able to collect payment on behalf of deceased students (Henderson and Wakeham 11). Furthermore, since Survivors only received financial compensation for individual harm(s), the TRC cannot be understood as an effective means of reparation for experiences of collective Indigenous oppression and dispossession. Treating territorial dispossession “as a separate issue from that of the residential schools” problematically elides the ways “the issues with which Survivors from residential school era contend are rooted in the forced removal of entire families and communities from their homelands” (Corntassel et al. 146). This structural shortcoming is deeply problematic because

without adequate restitution, including return of land, transfers of federal and provincial funds, and other forms of material compensation for historical and ongoing injustices, “reconciliation will permanently absolve colonial injustices and is itself a further injustice” (Alfred 152).

Building upon this line of criticism, several scholars have demonstrated how the form of reconciliation envisioned and shaped by the settler state and the churches intentionally substituted a ritualized, cathartic process premised on individual healing for a more substantive engagement with systemic inequalities. Robyn Green’s analysis of the IRSSA suggests that the overarching focus on trauma and healing essentially served as a means “to foreclose on the colonial past without investing in structural and epistemological ‘transition’ to a decolonized relationship between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people” (“Unsettling cures” 129). Similarly, after close-reading several dozens of mainstream media stories about the TRC, Matt James observed that “[d]iscourses of therapy, healing and forgiveness get heavy play while colonial dispossession and governance are ignored” (198).

To highlight another compelling study, drawing upon Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry,<sup>80</sup> Jula Hughes explores how the TRC’s focus on interpersonal understanding and forgiveness may have promoted “conciliatory mimicry” among the perpetrators (specifically, churches administering and individuals staffing the residential school system). Hughes defines “conciliatory mimicry” as “a resort to making people and institutions almost, but not quite, the same,” to legitimize “power

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<sup>80</sup> Defined as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (qtd. in Hughes “New Victims” 177; emphasis in original).

and to maintain a comfortable balance between sameness and difference” (“New Victims” 178). Based on textual analysis of documentation produced by the TRC, Hughes argues that in response to its limited legal powers (lack of subpoena powers, and consequential inability to compel the participation of alleged perpetrators), the TRC recast “individual employees of the residential school system [not] as perpetrators but as a different class of victims and [...] institutional defendants not as perpetrator organizations but as co-sponsors of the TRC” (179). Hughes posits that this reframing effectively narrowed the conceptual gap between victims and perpetrators at the TRC, significantly altering the content of their respective contributions. Interestingly, the TRC Interim report emphasized the Commission’s effort to “hear directly from the people most affected by the residential school system: the students and staff who worked in the schools” (qtd. in Hughes 181). Hughes emphasises that while there may be complexities and nuances within individual circumstances, casting students and staff as passive-co-victims of the residential school experience fundamentally (and unjustly) misrepresents the degree of difference between “adults who work in difficult institutional circumstances while holding power over children and enjoying the legal freedom of resignation at a time of their choosing,” and “children who are forcibly removed from their family under a discriminatory law and held at an institution in inhumane conditions” (181).

Perhaps even more troubling, analyzing Anglican, Catholic, and United Church journals’ coverage of the TRC, Hughes found that they generally emphasized positive aspects of the schools, and sought to distance negative experiences either

by attributing them to other schools, or by foregrounding instances of student-to-student mistreatment. Hughes concludes that "the depiction of the reconciliation process of the TRC in church publications completely failed to capture the systemic and institutional impacts of the residential school system as part of a broader set of colonizing policies ... Indigenous material exclusion, political underrepresentation, and economic and human insecurity all remained largely hidden from view" ("New Victims" 193).

Significantly, the focus on a narrow definition of individual healing as a substitution for substantive engagement with systemic inequalities stands in stark contrast with a more holistic conceptualization of healing informing the Idle No More movement. Co-founder Nina Wilson describes healing as the overarching aim of Idle No More, noting: "[t]he essence of the movement is not about gender, class, race, belief, etc, it is about healing" (108). However, drawing a sharp distinction between "healing" and "reconciliation" as "two different concepts," Wilson centers the dispossession of Indigenous land as a prerequisite factor for either aim. More specifically, Wilson points out that reconciliation cannot occur if "there is no closure on the land issues" and that "there can be no healing when [Indigenous] people are still displaced, removed from the land" (108). The next section of my analysis will build upon Wilson's claims by exploring how the proposed (neo)colonial legislation which prompted the emergence of Idle No More and subsequent state and public responses to the movement both demonstrate the continuity of settler colonial power structures. That said, it is useful to take a short detour to highlight how even before the emergence of the Idle No More movement, the Canadian government's

refusal to cooperate with TRC proceedings was already rupturing the performative/anticipatory narratives of reconciliation as an era distinct from the “sad chapter in our history” referenced at the outset of the federal government’s 2008 “Statement of apology.”

The terms of the Settlement Agreement required the federal government and the churches to disclose all relevant documents in their possession to the TRC. However, once the Commission’s document-collection processes began, the Canadian government refused to provide numerous records, hindering the Commission’s work. First, the federal government declined to produce all relevant documents held in its national archives, Library and Archives Canada (LAC). LAC argued that it was not required to organize and produce the documents in its possession that were directly relevant to residential schools (up to five million), claiming that the Settlement Agreement required it to provide the Commission only with access to its archives (TRC *Honouring the Truth* 27). After the filing of written arguments, affidavit evidence, and court-ordered mediation between Canada and the Commission, the dispute culminated in a hearing before the Ontario Court of Appeal (27). On January 30, 2013, Justice Goudge ruled that the Government of Canada must provide all relevant documents to the Commission, regardless of where they may be held (27). Although the Government of Canada began producing documents from LAC after this ruling, less than a year later, the Commission was compelled to go to court for another document-production issue. In this instance, the Commission sought the records from the investigation of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) into abuse at the Fort Albany, Ontario, residential school in Ontario

(also known as the St. Anne's school) (27). The Government of Canada was in possession of the records, and the Commission had attempted to obtain the relevant documents from both the OPP and the federal government. After argument before the Honourable Justice Paul Perell of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice on December 17 and 18, 2013, the court ordered the federal government and the OPP to produce all the investigation records in their possession to the Commission (28). Once again, less than a year after Justice Perell ruled on the St. Anne's case, the TRC went to court for another document-collection issue: the records from the Independent Assessment Process (IAP).<sup>81</sup>

The federal government's prolonged refusal to disclose required documents prompted a series of in-person gatherings and a digital campaign organized around the hashtag "#HonourTheApology." In late July of 2013, a coalition of activists from Indigenous and various faith-based and cultural communities called on the federal government to honour the apology to residential school survivors by ceasing to withhold documents from the TRC. This activist campaign highlights the significance of the temporal overlap between the TRC proceeding and the Idle No More movement in two ways. On a logistical level, many of the campaign organizers met during Idle No More events and drew upon some of the movement's most successful digital activism strategies, including using the social video broadcasting platform Spreecast and creating a popular rhetorical frame for the campaign through a Twitter hashtag, #HonourTheApology (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 408). On a rhetorical level, this campaign's critique of the duplicity at the heart of the federal

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<sup>81</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see TRC *Honouring the Truth* 28-29.

government's approach to reconciliation (stated commitments contradicted by actual actions) is similar to the type of critique, or call to action, of Idle No More activism more broadly. The rest of this chapter will engage with Coulthard's argument that Idle No More is an *indicator* of the limitations of reconciliation rhetoric by exploring the implications of public and state responses to the movement.

### **Public responses to Idle No More: shallow settler support and anti-Harper solidarity**

Throughout the winter of 2012 – 2013, the initial settler responses to the Idle No More movement included highly visible expressions of solidarity. For example, as discussed in chapter 1, on December 21, 2012, a large round dance temporarily shut down the busiest intersection in Canada, at Yonge and Dundas Square in Toronto (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 394). The same day, over 2,000 academics signed a Statement of Solidarity with Idle No More and Chief Theresa Spence, calling for “respectful dialogue on treaties and rights” (394). A few weeks later, on January 11, 2013 (designated as the first international day of action), there were 265 simultaneously held rallies in support of Idle No More (399-400). By January 26, multiple associations, including the Canadian Nurses Association, CUPE, Greenpeace, the Council of Canadians, and the National Farmers Union, released statements of support for Idle No More (402).

Without negating the presence of genuine and productive solidarity-building efforts, it is vital to understand how these initial expressions of support for the Idle No More movement relate to opportunistic tendencies within settler Canadian



politics and activism. For example, Adam Barker suggests that it is “impossible to understand Settler Canadian responses to Idle No More without also understanding the parallel backlash against the unpopular federal government of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) and Prime Minister Stephen Harper, which [...] generated the false appearance of affinity between a variety of political actors and activists” (56). There is long history of settlers appropriating Indigenous identity or expressing a false affinity with Indigenous peoples and causes to advance settler political aims (e.g. settler Americans dressed as Mohawk warriors during the Boston Tea Party) and express anti-establishment sentiment (e.g. New Age and counterculture appropriation of Indigenous culture and symbols). As Barker explains, settler “people and collectives are very good at identifying diverse spaces of opportunity in the midst of Indigenous spaces, at times representing themselves as staunch allies while in fact embodying practices that further Indigenous transfer and displacement” (55). In the context of the Idle No More movement, the “strong opportunistic current within Settler Canadian<sup>82</sup> politics and activism” met with two main “spaces of opportunity” for temporary settler alignment with Indigenous activism (Barker 55). Firstly, Indigenous-led protests against legislative erosion of environmental protection “attracted environmentalists who recognized the potential of asserting Indigenous peoples’ Aboriginal rights as a powerful bulwark

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<sup>82</sup> This tendency is not unique to the Canadian context. As Barker points out, “[s]ocial movement scholars have increasingly engaged in criticism of activists, including various anarchist organisers or members of Occupy projects, who have demonstrated a tragic inability to take direction from or work respectfully with Indigenous communities, regardless of their stated intent” (55).

against potential environmental degradation resulting from proposed laws” (Irlbacher-Fox 151). Secondly, opponents of the Harper government could leverage strategic alignment with Idle No More’s challenge against legislative changes proposed (and passed) by the Harper government without sincere or long-term political commitment to the full range of the movement’s decolonial aims.

When Stephen Harper was elected as Prime Minister of Canada in 2006, his reputation for economic leadership and his party’s commitment to fiscal responsibility resonated with voters in part due to the unfolding global financial crisis. However, throughout 2012 and 2013, public confidence in Harper’s government sharply declined (Barker 56). Barker theorizes that the reduction in public support “may actually have been sparked off by the events that also catalyzed Idle No More in the autumn and winter of 2012: the omnibus budget bills that undemocratically altered a number of key pieces of legislation” (56). In addition, numerous scandals (including evidence of corruption and fiscal misappropriation by several high-profile senators appointed by Harper) further incensed the public. Consequently, as voters became increasingly disillusioned with Harper (and the CPC more generally), many settler Canadian individuals and communities “gravitated towards Idle No More in no small part because of its vocal, pointed and long-standing opposition to Harper” (Barker 56).

Barker’s reading of self-interested settler solidarity draws on Thomas and Coleman’s analysis of the left’s fixation on the seemingly buffoonish persona of George W. Bush to usefully illuminate the dangers of a similarly reductive focus on Stephen Harper as a personification of the settler state’s colonial agenda. At the start

of the twenty-first century, President George W. Bush became a stand-in for America's unpopular militant and imperialist policies (especially the Iraq War). Citing examples like the "President Bush—Out of Office Countdown Calendar" and the "accompanying handbook with the consoling subtitle: 'Hang in there, it's almost over'" Thomas and Coleman argue that this rhetorical framing reduced American imperialism to a *temporal* problem (19), essentially "flattening [] the geography of power into the narrow question of one man's legitimacy or illegitimacy as the guy in control" (20). As Culp elaborates, tying the Iraq War to Bush problematically imposed an "artificial beginning and expiration date" upon a complex set of power relations, which extended "far beyond the office of the President or even the Pentagon" (23). This false equivalence ultimately undercut the protests against the Iraq war, as the "antiwar movement was so deeply invested in opposing Bush that it lost most of its momentum when Barack Obama took office" (Culp 23). A similar dynamic played out in Canada during the winter of 2012 – 2013, as widespread political criticism of Harper became "a stand-in for the actual concerns articulated by Idle No More" (Barker 56).

The temporary surge in settler support for Indigenous political concerns at the start of the Idle No More movement can also be understood in relation to Tuck and Yang's discussion of "settler moves to innocence." In the widely cited article "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," Tuck and Yang discuss six types of settler "excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization" (10) including: settler nativism, settler adoption fantasies, colonial equivocation, a 'free your mind and the rest will follow' orientation to decolonization, hypervisibility or erasure of

Indigenous peoples as “at risk” and as asterisk peoples, and finally a valorization of re-occupation and urban homesteading. While not an explicitly named category in the articles, the opportunistic types of shallow settler solidarity align with the logic of the named “settler moves to innocence” insofar as they also work to “reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (10). Drawing upon Tuck and Yang’s work, I posit that campaigning and voting against Harper and his government functioned as a type of “settler move to innocence” through which settler Canadians could excuse their own complicity in ongoing colonial power structures and dynamics. Tellingly, by mid-2013, as other political issues took center stage and Idle No More events decreased in size and frequency, settler Canadian interest in Indigenous issues decreased and notable Idle No More initiatives, such as “the reclamation and renaming of PKOLS, a mountain in Coast Salish territory near Victoria, British Columbia... received comparatively little media attention” (Barker 19).

Thinking back to my earlier discussion of the federal government’s 2008 “Statement of apology,” I find parallels between the way its narrative of moral progress implicitly absolved national subjects from *individual* participation in reconciliatory efforts at the start of the TRC, and the way the change in federal governments (from Stephen Harper and the Conservative party to Justin Trudeau and the Liberal party) at the end of the TRC mandate was also framed as evidence of moral progress, implicitly absolving national subjects from *further* individual participation in reconciliatory efforts. By the 2015 Canadian federal election, many progressive political organizations saw the Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau, as

an adequate solution to the earlier critiques of the Harper government, intentionally or unintentionally confirming “the established political system as *the* political authority of reference,” (Barker 57; emphasis in original) and thereby reinforcing the perpetuation of colonial power structures. By contrast, while direct criticism of and opposition to Harper’s political agenda served as a catalyst for the formation of Idle No More, the movement also expanded and diversified beyond its initial focus on Bill C-45, foregrounding a wide-ranging vision of Indigenous autonomy. For example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reads Chief Spence's hunger strike as “not so much an act *against* Harper, but as a selfless act of bravery and sacrifice *for* our nations and our children” (“Aambe! Maajaadaa!”). This distinction underscores the inherent incompatibility between the short-term expressions of settler solidarity and the long-term goals of Indigenous resurgence initiatives. Emphasizing the structural limitations of state-centered approaches to justice, Simpson outlines why it matters *how* change is achieved:

The kind of change I’m talking about, the reasons why I was on the streets in Idle No More, was not to get Trudeau elected. It was to build a radical alternative present that would give birth to the kind of future in which my ancestors would recognize coming generations as *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg* [...] The crux of resurgence is that Indigenous peoples have to recreate and regenerate our political systems, education systems, and systems of life from within our own intelligence. (“Idle No More and Black Lives Matter” 80-1)

After Harper was voted out of office, polls found a “halo effect” of political and economic optimism surrounding the election of Justin Trudeau (Argitis). Given the

Trudeau campaign's repeated commitment to "a plan for real change" including a "renewed nation-to-nation relationship between the federal government and Indigenous Peoples" (Liberal Party of Canada), Indigenous communities also had reason to feel hopeful. However, since the 2015 federal election, Trudeau's governance has included both direct continuations of previous (neo)colonial policies (such as litigation against financial support for Indigenous children and criminalization of Indigenous resistance to the TransCanada pipeline project) and disintegrations of seemingly progressive commitments (such as the unethical demotion of first Indigenous Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Jody Wilson-Raybould).

So far, I have summarized how several aspects of *positive* public responses to Idle No More are more ideologically complicated than they might appear. A closer examination of the unambiguously *negative* public responses to the movement further reveals the troubling prevalence of anti-Indigenous racism in Canada, which in turn more accurately reveals the unfairness of "reconciliation" rhetoric as a preemptively celebratory framing of settler-Indigenous power structures and relations.

### **Public responses to Idle No More: anti-Indigenous backlash**

As I will document in this section, the initial surge of settler solidarity with the Idle No More movement took place alongside several violent forms of anti-Indigenous backlash. Even at the height of the Idle No More movement, opinion polls indicated that most settler Canadians did not support Idle No More or Theresa Spence, and continued to uphold racist stereotypes. An Ipsos Reid poll of 1,023

Canadians in January 2013 found that although 38 percent of Canadians approved of Idle No More, despite the movement's peaceful and inclusive messaging 62 percent disapproved (qtd. in Denis 221). Only 29 percent of the polled Canadians supported Chief Spence's hunger strike, with 71 percent disapproving (qtd. in Denis 221). Even more problematic in light of the TRC's work (at that point in its fifth year) 60 percent of Canadians agreed that "[m]ost of the problems of Native peoples are brought on by themselves," which represented an increase from 35 percent in 1989, the year before the Oka resistance (qtd. in Denis 221). In addition, 64 percent of respondents agreed that Indigenous peoples "receive too much support from Canadian taxpayers," and 81 percent said that no more funding should go to Indigenous communities until "external auditors can be put in place to ensure financial accountability" (qtd. in Denis 211). Further testifying to the prevalence of racist sentiments and stereotypes, a 2014 survey of 120 participants "found that the percentage of non-Indigenous Canadians who believe that the 2008 residential school apology was sufficient to atone for historical mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and that no follow-up action is necessary has *increased* over time" (Denis 221; emphasis added).

As the Idle No More movement gained momentum, latent racism within Canadian society became explicit and brutal. In stark contrast to the reconciliation rhetoric and supportive atmosphere of the TRC, Indigenous people, including residential school Survivors, could be subjected to racist language and ideology as soon as they left the place of testimony. Yet again demonstrating the gendered nature of colonial violence (as discussed in chapter 1) physical and verbal assaults

primarily targeted Indigenous women. On December 27, 2012, a female citizen of the Nishnawbe-Aski nation walking in Thunder Bay was verbally and physically harassed by two Caucasian men who pulled their car up while she walked on the sidewalk and “began issuing racial slurs while throwing items at her from the car” (Kappo). She was abducted and then physically and sexually assaulted. During the attack, the men told her ‘You Indians deserve to lose your treaty rights’ and made reference to the Idle No More Movement (Kappo). Local authorities investigated the incident as a racially motivated hate crime. The survivor (not publicly named), issued a public statement in which she urged Indigenous community members to be careful:

... right now with the First Nations trying to fight this Bill [C-45] everyone should be looking over their shoulder constantly because there are a lot of racists out there. (qtd. in Kappo)

Unfortunately, this attack was not an isolated incident in Thunder Bay, where Idle No More was perceived to have “inflamm[e]d long-standing tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities” (CBC “Idle No More”). Consequently, more than a dozen Indigenous parents from surrounding communities chose not to send their children back to Thunder Bay for school for the winter 2013 semester (CBC “Idle No More”).

On February 4, 2013 Leslie Belleau, an Idle No More activist and organizer from Ojibway Nation of Ketegaunseebee, near Sault Ste Marie, reported receiving a “bizarre package containing death threats” (Peterborough Examiner). An Indigenous studies PhD student at Trent University, Belleau was living in



Peterborough at the time, and learned of the threats from her sister, who received the envelope in late January. The package contained a letter that included the words “You are a dead piece of sh\*t. A good Indian is a Dead Indian. Stay away from the SOO Lesley Belleau,” as well as newspaper clipping referencing Belleau’s involvement in Idle No More, and a defaced photo of Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo (Peterborough Examiner). Crucially, these reported instances of physical assault and harassment took place alongside a deluge of online expressions of racist comments, threats, and hate speech.

Returning to the significance of the temporal overlap between Idle No More and the TRC proceedings, the rest of this section grapples with the tensions between documentation/representation of contemporary anti-Indigenous hate speech and the TRC’s work of gathering and archiving Survivor testimonies. I will begin by introducing the found poem “White Noise” from settler Canadian poet Shane Rhodes’ 2013 collection *X: Poems and Anti-Poems* to contextualize its relevance to my analysis. I will then briefly summarize the creation of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and outline some of the main critical concerns about settler colonialism and historical archival memory. Attending to Coulthard’s argument that “Idle No More is an indication of the ultimate failure of this [recognition-based] approach to reconciliation” (163), I strive to bring Rhodes’ found poem “White Noise” into dialogue with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. Returning to Henderson and Wakeham’s claim that “struggles to contain the meaning of residential schooling point to colonialism’s uneasy status as a purportedly finished project” (4), I question if the historical impermanence of

contemporary responses to the Idle No More movement might indirectly support neocolonial efforts to frame settler colonial violence as a “sad chapter in our history” (“Statement of Apology”).

In *X*, Rhodes cites and deconstructs numerous textual registries to probe Canada’s colonial past, including government transcripts of the numbered treaties and the Indian Act. Seeking to illuminate “the stories and myths that [Canadian] settler society continues to tell itself to rationalize, normalize and forget the original acts of land appropriation and settlement,” (*Toronto Quarterly*) Rhodes also engages with contemporary discourse. Rhodes outlines these efforts in an explanation of the writing process behind the found poem “White Noise”:

I wanted to write a poem that sampled language many Canadians use when they speak (if they speak at all) about Indigenous issues and Aboriginal people – the things you hear in private or passing but which are rarely stated with any permanence [...] I searched for the public commentary that surrounded events like [Gustafsen] Lake, Oka and Caledonia – but much of this ephemeral information has disappeared. I even searched the Library of Parliament for recorded debates concerning the Indian Act and related policy. However, as I was thinking and scrounging about, Idle No More happened and the internet was awash with exactly what I was looking for and more of it than I knew what to do with. (*Toronto Quarterly*)

As a result, Rhodes compiled and remixed 15,283 comments written by approximately 10,000 users based in Canada in response to 55 news articles about Idle No More published between December 20, 2012 and January 28, 2013 (*Ibid.*).

Each of these incorporations attempts to “materialize” the diffused voices of (neo)colonial thought in contemporary Canada, revealing and meditating upon how Canadians “talk, shout, rant and rave about race, settlement, history and the present” (Ibid.). Rhodes’ description of working with the news story comments resonates with the questions at the core of this chapter so I will cite them at length:

These events allowed a very different story to come out than the one we usually tell ourselves. Watching Idle No More unfold, I don’t know how many times I heard friends say, “God, just don’t read the comments!” I read them. I read a lot of them and it was one of the least enjoyable things I have done – what I found online was far more disturbing than I ever thought it would be. At the same time, it was enlightening to see how easily so many Canadians say disgusting, hateful and discriminatory things when they sense they have a bit of anonymity. (Ibid.).

Here, Rhodes’ reflection brings to mind both the relatively low engagement levels from settler Canadians during the TRC proceedings (“don’t read the comments” evokes the scarcity of settler audience members in hearings and the limited number of non-Indigenous witnesses claiming their relation to the genocidal project of the residential school system), and the problematic nature of two common types of settler responses to the Idle No More movement (shallow/opportunistic solidarity and an increase in racist backlash). Before thinking about how the critical and documentary aspects of Rhodes’ found poem could be read in relation to the TRC’s work (gathering and archiving testimonies and promoting sociocultural change through public pedagogy and critical analysis) I will

briefly consider the implications of some media outlets closing the comments sections for articles which became an informal platform for public discourse about Canada's (neo)colonial power structures.

Significantly, the hateful comments and personal attacks in relation to stories about Indigenous people continued to escalate after the winter of 2012 – 2013. By late 2015, CBC's acting director of digital news, Brodie Fenlon, announced that the corporation would be temporarily closing comments on stories about Indigenous people “because the staggering number of hateful and vitriolic comments left on its web pages are testing the moderation process” (CBC “Closing comments”). The timing of this anti-Indigenous backlash is revealing. As Nigit'stil Norbert, a young Indigenous artist based in Yellowknife, observed in one article reporting the comments closures, the increase in anti-Indigenous sentiment within news stories comment fields strongly correlates with the emergence and visibility of the Idle No More movement (CBC “Closing comments”). Evaluating this correlation through the lens of Jarrett Martineau's claim that the Idle No More movement “forced colonialism into view and, in so doing, into new spaces of discursive contention” (239) prompts me to ask: is the closing of comments sections producing an artificially sanitized public record of (neo)colonial power relations? The phenomenon of news stories about reconciliation efforts which have to be closed to public input to contain a deluge of hate speech appear to have some similarity with the various settler state performances of containment and closure, such as the false narratives of moral progress in the 2008 “Statement of apology.”

Rather than contend the closing of comments sections (unmediated hate speech is also not the answer), I want to draw a distinction between interventions which reduce the *visibility* of anti-Indigenous hate speech and interventions which reduce the *prevalence* of anti-Indigenous perspectives. To think through this distinction, I consider the potential implications of two concurrent processes: the TRC's work of gathering and archiving documentation (including Survivor testimonies, artistic works, historical records, and the Commission's various reports/publications) around the residential school system and the profusion of decentralized, predominantly digital, anti-Indigenous discourse accruing around news stories and social media content about the Idle No More movement. More specifically, since the TRC's document gathering work is closely connected to the creation of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, the rest of this section will briefly interrogate the dynamics between a new centralized national archive of residential school history and the decentralized ephemerality of digital expressions of contemporary anti-Indigenous hate speech.

Informed by section 12 of the IRSSA, the TRC mandate included the creation of a National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR).<sup>83</sup> The NCTR opened in 2015 and is hosted by the University of Manitoba campus, located on original lands

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<sup>83</sup> The NCTR's mandate includes three pillars: "[1] To be a responsible and accountable steward for the experiences, photos, and memories entrusted to the Centre by the Survivors of Residential Schools, to honour their truths, and ensure that they can never again be forgotten or ignored. [2] To continue the research work begun by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in this way contribute to the continuing healing of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples and the country as a whole. [3] To build a foundation for reconciliation by promoting public education and understanding of the Residential Schools and how they are part of a larger history of violent assaults on the distinct cultures and identities of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples" ("Our Mandate").

of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation (NCTR). As I observed during a visit in October 2018, the Centre is deliberately positioned away from the busier parts of campus to better provide Survivors with a safe space to request and review personal records, engage with archival materials and exhibits, and gather for Ceremonies and other communal events. Conceptualized as “a place of learning and dialogue where the truths of the residential school experience will be honoured and kept safe for future generations” (NCTR), the NCTR’s digital and analog collection includes “thousands of hours of survivor statements; footage from TRC events; millions of records from churches and federal departments; and art, poetry, and music created by survivors” (Griffith 324). Without minimizing the overall value of the TRC’s and NCTR’s document gathering and archiving aims and achievements, it is important to recognize how the settler colonial context renders decolonial efforts highly susceptible to various forms of discursive reframing. Since it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer an extended analysis, I will highlight two critical assessments of external factors undermining the intended aims of the TRC’s/ NCTR’s archival efforts.

Extending Derrida’s analysis of ‘archival violence’<sup>84</sup> to consider the specific implications of settler colonial archives, Griffith highlights the parallels between the principle of ‘archival neutrality’ and claims of innocence/neutrality within settler colonialism<sup>85</sup> and also points to the prevalence of colonial metaphors in relation to

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<sup>84</sup> Griffith notes that Derrida’s consideration of the ways “documents are always unnaturally collected and preserved” does not engage with “settler colonial archives documenting violence or denying access or the violence that archives represent” (325).

<sup>85</sup> See Tuck and Yang’s analysis of “settler moves to innocence” discussed in the Introduction.

archives. Griffith cites several examples of “archive-as-land” metaphors including a prior version of Library and Archives Canada’s portal for online archives of Indigenous peoples, named “Discover the Collection: Aboriginal Peoples” (326). The figurative language carries colonial connotations: “archives about Indigenous peoples act as a stand-in for land and the online archival user becomes a ‘discoverer’” (Griffith 326). Griffith’s analysis also describes an example of discursive reframing in relation to the TRC and the NRTC:

... the excellent *A Knock on the Door*, which was put out by the National Research Centre for Truth & Reconciliation and summarizes some of the most important points from the TRC’s multi-volume final report, states that with the new TRC research centre, “researchers will be able to mine the records for additional truths about the residential schools”. Even a book entirely devoted to dismantling settler colonialism deploys the language of resource extraction to explain the concept of archives. (326)

Turning to provincial archives in Ontario and Alberta, Griffith also finds that they “frame the archive as something users can exploit in order to discover, not unlike settlers prospecting for land” (327).

Lest these incursions of settler colonial metaphors appear insignificant, I find it productive to consider them in relation to Ghaddar’s analysis of the numerous legal contentions over archival documents between the TRC and the Canadian government. As already discussed earlier in this chapter, the TRC’s work was hampered by the state’s unwillingness to abide by document disclosure requirements outlined in the IRSSA. Document withholding tactics further

negatively impacted residential school Survivors, leading to delayed or rejected compensation claims through the Independent Assessment Process (IAP). The destruction or preservation of the IAP records, which contained detailed disclosures of abuse within the residential school system, also became the subject of litigation. While some parties (including the chief adjudicator of the IAP, some Survivors, the Catholic Church Entities, and the Assembly of First Nations) called for the destruction of the IAP records, the Government of Canada opposed their destruction and attempted to claim them as government records under the Library and Archives Canada Act (Ghaddar 11-12).

The Supreme Court of Canada eventually ruled that all Survivors can choose to preserve their records or have them remain confidential until they are destroyed on September 19, 2027 (“IAP/ADR Records”). While this decision aligns with calls by NCTR leadership to have Indigenous people lead conversations about access to archival information,<sup>86</sup> it also underscores the central limitation of reconciliation-based approaches to decolonisation: settler colonial institutions continue to shape the terms and parameters of Indigenous expressions of agency. Again, without minimizing the significance of the TRC’s and NCTR’s efforts to centre and empower

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<sup>86</sup>Discussing the difficult balance between preserving/sharing TRC documents while avoiding re-victimizing survivors, Ry Moran (Métis), Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, emphasized the extent of the power discrepancy in question: “[w]hile Canada has amassed close to twenty *kilometers* of paper records detailing the relationship between the state and Indigenous people through the ‘Indian Affairs’ files at Library and Archives Canada, Indigenous peoples have had little to no say regarding the use, disclosure or access to that information” (1; emphasis in original).



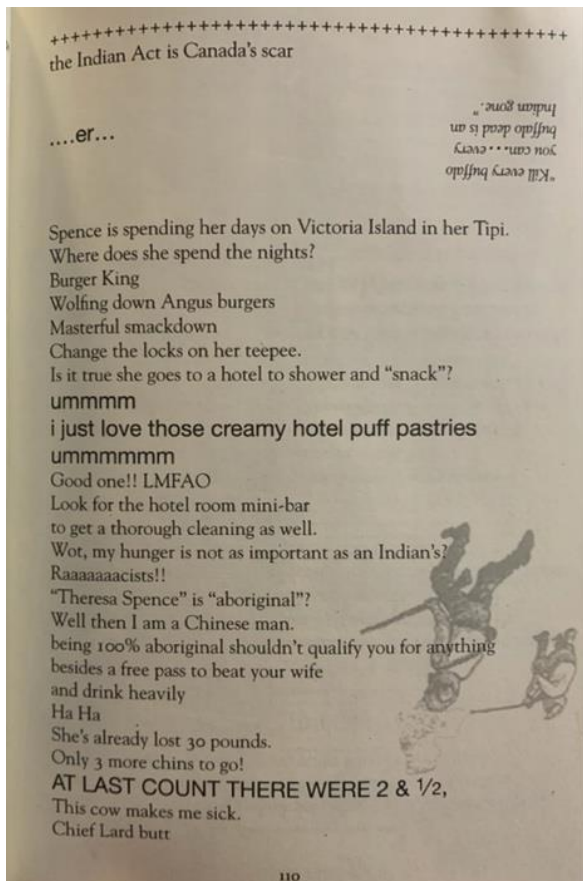
Survivors, the legal battles around document disclosure and archiving of records are stark reminders of enduring power differentials.

Ghaddar's analysis of court cases pertaining to TRC records offers a more detailed examination of the ways the settler colonial state shapes Indigenous efforts aimed at challenging settler colonial ideologies and systems. Interrogating the subjectivity of different court rulings ("some records were to be produced, others temporarily preserved, and yet others destroyed") Ghaddar compellingly argues that "the incorporation of records by or about Indigenous people into the national settler archival repository is crucial for the constitution of a settler historical archival memory (at the expense of an Indigenous one) that transforms Canadian national shame and guilt into national glory and honour" (3). In this way, Ghaddar's work brings to mind Coulthard's 2014 prognosis that in the absence of a systemic renegotiation of existing power dynamics, the settler state's approach to reconciliation runs the risk of leveraging the TRC's work "to ideologically fabricate [...] a transition by narrowly situating the abuses of settler colonization firmly in the past" (22). The creation of the NCTR, an Indigenous-led and Survivor-centred institution, is undoubtedly a significant step toward a renegotiation of existing power dynamics. Three of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action (69, 70, and 77) also focus on structural reform of archives in Canada. However, the demonstrable lack of meaningful structural reform (including progress in responding to the TRC's Calls to Action) over the last decade affirms Coulthard's prognosis and "highlights the limits of 'reconciliation' as a framework for meaningful and lasting change" (Jewell and Mosby 11).

Continuing to engage with Coulthard's invocation of the Idle No More movement as an *indicator* of the limitations of reconciliation rhetoric, I return to the impetus behind Rhodes' found poem "White Noise." I am particularly interested in considering how Rhodes' description of the gaps in settler colonial records ("public commentary that surrounded events like [Gustafsen] Lake, Oka and Caledonia" and "recorded debates concerning the Indian Act and related policy") resonates with the concurrent processes of an anti-Indigenous backlash to news coverage of Idle No More and the NCTR's consolidation of historical records pertaining to the residential school system. On one hand, the closing of comments sections is an understandable response to the problem of anti-Indigenous hate speech in digital public forums. On the other hand, the ephemerality or erasure of public responses to the Idle No More movement also carries troubling implications. An uncritical approach to gathering and archiving contemporary anti-Indigenous hate speech would be undoubtedly harmful. However, what are the consequences of omitting/erasing such expressions from the historical record? By extension, I question if critical approaches to representing and preserving contemporary responses to the Idle No More movement might challenge such neocolonial efforts by attesting to the ongoing prevalence of settler colonial violence.

Although this line of inquiry requires considerable contextualization and nuance, I invite readers of this project to consider the potential resonance between Rhodes' found poem "White Noise" and the TRC's document gathering and archiving work. Insofar as they require readers to become active and critical participants when engaging with (neo)colonial narratives, I tentatively suggest that

texts/projects like Rhodes' found poem "White Noise" are a useful resource for supporting the aims and achievements of the NCTR. As illustrated in Figure 5, "White Noise" invites readers to probe the links between contemporary and historical discourses around race, land rights, and Indigeneity.



**Figure 5.** Page scan of an excerpt from the poem "White Noise" from Shane Rhodes' collection *X: Poems and Anti-Poems*.

Significantly, Rhodes' text hinges on a combination of embodied engagement and cognitive discomfort. Readers necessarily have to physically maneuver the book in different ways to engage with the array of narrative and visual depictions. Many sections convey meaning structurally or metonymically, legible only insofar as the reader is willing and able to parse the contexts and absences, with reference to the

historical documents and other sources that comprise the linguistic material of the writing. As such, “White Noise” functions like a type of participatory archive, one which prompts readers to consider their embodied relation to the material they are encountering. As a deliberately critical curation of the anti-Indigenous backlash to the Idle No More movement, “White Noise” also starkly depicts the difficulty of reconciliation, and the unfairness of asking Indigenous people to move beyond past injustices given the prevalence of anti-Indigenous racism within contemporary Canadian society. The next section will extend this argument by highlighting the immense discrepancy between the Canadian government’s stated commitments to reconciliation and the concurrent realities of (neo)colonial surveillance of Idle No More activities and participants.

### **Policing of Idle No More: Systemic suppression of resurgent activities**

The Canadian government’s responses to the Idle No More movement demonstrate how Indigenous political assertions of self-determination become targets of extensive police surveillance, and are often pre-emptively reframed as criminal threats to national security. Using the Access to Information Act, Andrew Crosby and Jeffrey Monaghan obtained various de-classified documents, including the surveillance records from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Department of National Defence (DND), Public Safety Canada, and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) (“Settler Colonialism” 38). The rising popularity of the #IdleNoMore hashtag on social media in November of 2012 immediately prompted AANDC to start tracking

the movement's digital presence. For example, on December 12, 2012, internal documents reveal AANDC planning to "commission[] someone to monitor the social media [...] more systematically" (qtd. in "Settler Colonialism" 43). Consequently, by the end of December 2012, AANDC had tracked tens of thousands of tweets with the #IdleNoMore hashtag, and used this information to prepare an extensive report on trends within activist discourse, including a North American map of Idle No More-related events, and a global map of tweet origins ("Settler Colonialism" 44). This surveillance report was particularly concerned about domestic on-the-ground initiatives and the scope of international solidarity, using the term "hot spots" to refer to places with significant pro-Idle No More activity. As Crosby and Monaghan point out, "hot spots" is an example of ideologically loaded terminology deployed by the settler state "as a discursive device to categorize groups or regions as threats, often blurring political protests with violence and criminality" ("Settler Colonialism" 44). The rest of this section will consider how such terminology is part of a larger, problematic pattern: pre-emptive projection of criminal suspicion onto all those who pose a challenge to the normalcy of settler colonialism, essentially permanently subjecting Indigenous communities to heightened suspicion and surveillance.

While the de-classified documents attest to heightened concern around any Idle No More activities with a potential to threaten the material interests of the settler state (such as blockades and occupations), Crosby and Monaghan demonstrate that the movement's popularity alone was enough to trigger extensive contingency planning. Documents released by the department of Public Safety's Government Operations Centre (GOC), including a heavily redacted secret document

entitled “GC Contingency Planning Scenario—FN Protests & Potential Escalation,” reveal how the domestic and international support for Idle No More on social media was evoked as a cause for concern (qtd. in “Settler Colonialism” 44). Crosby and Monaghan highlight how various agents of the Canadian government arbitrarily magnified the perceived threat posed by the Idle No More movement, actively constructing a justification for ongoing surveillance. For example, an email from RCMP Corporal Wayne Russett, the Aboriginal liaison for the national capital region, to Inspector Mike LeSage, the acting director general for National Aboriginal Policing, described Idle No More as follows:

This Idle No More Movement is *like bacteria*, it has grown a life of its own all across this nation. It may be advisable for all to have contingency plans in place, as this is one issue that is not going to go away [...] There is a high probability that we could see flash mobs, round dances and blockades become much less compliant to laws in an attempt to get their point across. The escalation of violence is ever near. (qtd. in *Policing Indigenous Movements* 110; emphasis added)

Aligning with a larger pattern I have been tracing throughout this chapter, these comments stand in stark contrast with the government’s concurrent expressions of political commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Comparing the Idle No More movement to a form of bacteria implies that Indigenous activism is a de facto threat to the sociopolitical health of the settler state, and helps to foster a false equivalence between activism and violence. The discursive framing of “flash mobs, round dances and blockades” as “ever near” to “escalation of violence” works to

inherently delegitimize Indigenous claims to treaty rights and self-determination, reframing all Indigenous activists as potential terrorists. Significantly, despite a lack of actual violent activity from Idle No More participants, Crosby and Monaghan show that policing agencies in Canada use the threat of “Aboriginal extremism” (presented as a form of “domestic terrorism” with potential to disrupt economic development and land ownership) to pre-emptively target Indigenous sociopolitical movements (“Settler Colonialism” 52).

Documenting and analyzing the staggering scope of the state’s surveillance activities during the Idle No More movement, Crosby and Monaghan find that the pervasiveness of pre-emptive policing practices aligns with the concepts of “mission creep” and “prepression.” In policing literature “mission creep” describes the disproportionately extensive and invasive surveillance of groups and individuals deemed to be ‘potentially criminal.’ The concept of “prepression” comes from Willem Schinkel’s 2011 study of actuarial archiving systems in the Netherlands. Highlighting several interrelated demographic databases (including Electronic Child Dossier,<sup>87</sup> Reference Index Youth Risk<sup>88</sup> and ProKidPolice<sup>89</sup>) Schinkel explores how they function as surveillance registers to “facilitate the policing of families and criminalization of subjects with multiple archival registries” (367). Schinkel coins

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<sup>87</sup> Established in 2009, this database contains “roughly 900 separate items to be maintained per child between birth and 19” and is “deemed specifically important in relation to the risk of child abuse” (Schinkel 366).

<sup>88</sup> Connected to the Electronic Child Dossier, this database collects “information on risks reported by social workers and others in the field of welfare professionally involved with youth up to the age of 23” (Schinkel 366).

<sup>89</sup> This database contains “all children below the age of 12 who have been in contact with the police, whether as witness to a crime, as victim or as perpetrator” and classifies the points of contacts into a metric for launching further investigation (Schinkel 366).

the term “prepression” to reflect the combined effects of ‘prevention’ and ‘repression’ arguing that prepression both “enables the repression of potential forms of life deemed unadjusted to governing images of ‘society’” and also “constructs a border between the governing image of ‘society’ and its ‘outside’” (374). While Schinkel’s analysis doesn’t explicitly engage with settler colonization as a relevant sociopolitical context, he highlights the spatiotemporal elements of “prepression,” noting “[i]t is a pro-active repression that attempts the timely suppression of certain forms of life” (374). These insights strongly resonate with Bruyneel’s conceptualization of the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization (summarized in the Introduction). Furthermore, the article’s focus on youth-oriented databases brings to mind the longstanding problem of excessive and destructive settler state interventions into Indigenous familial structures, reflected in initiatives ranging from the legacy of mandatory institutionalization in the residential school system, to the epidemic of state-facilitated placements of thousands of Indigenous children in foster and adopted homes away from their communities known as the “Sixties Scoop,”<sup>90</sup> to the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare services.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Patrick Johnston coined the term “Sixties Scoop” to describe this phenomenon in the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. The Sixties Scoop Settlement website offers an up-to-date chronology of the historical context, including the class action lawsuit launches by Survivors.

<sup>91</sup> According to the 2016 census Indigenous children account for only 7.7% of the total child population but constitute 53.8% of children in foster care (Government of Canada “Reducing the number of Indigenous children in care”).



If extended to consider possible applicability to the settler colonial context, the concept of “prepression” usefully illuminates how and why Canadian settler colonial regimes have been, and continue to be, particularly invested in severing familial and sociopolitical ties between Indigenous children and their communities. To illustrate, I want to consider how the settler state’s surveillance of the Idle No More movement reveals a troubling investment in tracking and curtailing the sociopolitical education of Indigenous youth. Demonstrating how the Canadian government applied an “increasingly integrated approach to surveillance and intelligence sharing” (52), Crosby and Monaghan cite a 2013 document from Public Safety which spells out a clear intent to continue monitoring actual and potential Idle No More activities by implicitly framing the political education of Indigenous youth as a national security threat:

[The] Aboriginal population in Canada is young and growing with Aboriginal youth over-represented in the NEET Group (*not in education, employment, or training*); 'Idle No More' phenomenon may intensify.... The lessons learned, experience and knowledge gained while garnering these successes will outlive INM, while informing future protest organizers and the success of their endeavours." (qtd. in “Settler Colonialism” 52)

This passage closely aligns with Schinkel’s conceptualization of “prepression” as “a proactive repression that attempts the timely suppression of certain forms of life” (374) and reflects how pre-emptive police surveillance is deployed in service of the containment function of settler colonization. This dynamic is further reflected in the parallels between the genocidal assimilationist aims of the residential school system

discussed at the outset of this chapter and the above cited oversurveillance of contemporary Indigenous youth activism.

While it is beyond the scope of this project to offer a comprehensive comparison of these different contexts and processes, I want to emphasize how settler colonialism's logic of elimination continually targets the education of Indigenous children. Thinking back to the historical rationalizations for the residential school system (overtly violent claims of "killing the Indian in the child" inherently undermining the supposedly benevolent aims of 'Christianizing' and 'civilizing'), I find that the contemporary vilification of Idle No More's pedagogical potential (rationalized through the language of 'objective' policing like "over-represented in the NEET Group") is disturbingly similar. Keeping in mind that Idle No More began as a series of teach-ins to raise awareness about legislative erosion of Indigenous rights, it is significant that the 2013 memo unambiguously targets the survival of contemporary forms of Indigenous *knowledges* ("lessons learned, experience and knowledge gained while garnering these successes will *outlive* INM") as a way to pre-emptively restrict/eliminate the possibility of these knowledges "informing future protest organizers and the success of their endeavours."

Returning to the main focus of this chapter, the de-classified documents attesting to pre-emptive and overreaching surveillance of the Idle No More movement are a compelling case study for (re)evaluating the stakes of Glen Coulthard's claims about the tensions between reconciliation and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization. Specifically, I want to return to Coulthard's claim that

“Idle No More is an indication of the ultimate failure of [a recognition-based] approach to reconciliation” (163). I find that Crosby and Monaghan’s work reinforces Coulthard’s claim in two ways: by showing how policing supports the containment function of settler colonialism and by underscoring why the Idle No More movement is a particularly disruptive challenge of settler colonial power structures.

Firstly, as discussed in the Introduction and at the outset of this chapter, the containment function of settler colonization refers to the ways that settler colonial regimes impose and enforce spatiotemporal constraints on Indigenous sovereignty and identity. The documented “prepression” of the Idle No More movement (invasive monitoring of Indigenous political and cultural activity justified by preemptive criminalization of material and ideological threats to the settler state) demonstrates the persistence such (neo)colonial governance, despite the concurrent expressions of political commitments to reconciliation and a renewed relationship with Indigenous communities. Secondly, pointing to the clear presence of “mission creep” in various surveillance initiatives, Crosby and Monaghan echo Coulthard’s assessment by claiming that Canadian security agencies targeted the Idle No More movement precisely because it “was so successful at *rupturing* the stability of the settler post-colonial imaginary” (“Settler Colonialism” 53; emphasis added). More specifically, by deploying an elaborate policing and surveillance network the state was attempting to constrain the movement’s potential impacts on various material interests (e.g. transit blockades causing financial disruptions) and its impacts on immaterial qualities, such as an ideological investment in ‘the myth of

Canadian civility' and ongoing constructions of a post-colonial reality (e.g. reconciliation rhetoric as a foreclosure on renegotiations of material power discrepancies).

To conclude, considering the combination of public and state responses to Idle No More in light of the temporal overlap between the emergence of the movement and the concurrent proceedings of the TRC allows for a more accurate, albeit less encouraging, assessment of the relative effectiveness of reconciliation-based approaches to decolonization. That said, it is important to avoid oversimplifying the multifaceted nature of the TRC's work and achievements, especially when it comes to undermining the overall value of its capacity to validate Survivor experiences and promote individual and collective healing/restoration of relationships within Indigenous families and communities. However, returning to my earlier claim (regarding the anti-Indigenous backlash evident in online expressions of hate speech, reflected in Shane Rhodes' found poem "White Noise") the insights gleaned from this chapter's analysis of the temporal overlap between the Idle No More movement and the TRC does clearly demonstrate the fundamental unfairness of asking Indigenous people to move beyond past injustices given the prevalence of similar (neo)colonial discourses and dynamics within contemporary Canadian society. Taking up Coulthard's claim that the Idle No More movement is "a productive case study through which to explore what a resurgent Indigenous politics might look like on the ground" (24), my next chapter will continue to examine the tensions between reconciliation and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization. Specifically, building upon my earlier comments about the settler

state's specific interest in eradication of intergenerational efforts to sustain  
Indigenous cultural and political identity, I will consider the rhetorical significance  
of youth-led long walks as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance.

## Chapter 4

### **Embodied, Emplaced Indigenous Resurgence: Youth-led long walks as testimonies of survivance**

*“In 1978 the Longest Walk, a months-long march from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., led by the American Indian Movement, highlighted the survival of tribal nations and brought attention to legislation that threatened tribal sovereignty. While it is frequently referred to as the end of the Red Power movement, such a designation reifies a narrow conception of Native political activism. Perhaps because of this periodization, the Longest Walk rarely receives the attention it deserves or is understood on its own terms.” (Cobb 180)*

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*“The Journey of Nishiyuu, in retrospect, marked the symbolic end of Idle No More as a truly national movement, to the extent that it sought to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in common cause to address the root causes of Indigenous marginalization” (Coates 124).*

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This chapter contributes to existing research on material forms of Indigenous rhetorical challenges to settler colonialism by examining the role and impact of youth-led long walks during the first six months of the Idle No More movement. Focusing on a particularly notable youth-led long walk, called the Journey of Nishiyuu, I examine how the rhetorical impact of this initiative stems from its resonance with various lived histories of colonial oppression, as well as Indigenous traditions of journeying. Attending to the various tensions between reconciliation and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization, discussed in the previous chapter, my analysis considers youth led-long walks as a resonant example of resurgence-based initiatives. For example, reading the Journey of Nishiyuu as a materially symbolic act of communication, I foreground its effects on Indigenous

alliance building, cultural empowerment, and collective healing. As such, this chapter reveals how the decolonizing potential of the youth-led long walks extends beyond their capacity to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and settler populations in Canada, or their immediate ability to compel the settler state toward transformative political change. I further propose that youth-led long walks like Journey of Nishiyuu constitute an embodied and emplaced form of Indigenous testimony—one that challenges the prevalence of trauma narratives by demonstrating ongoing survivance, and counters neocolonial erasures by actively reinscribing Indigenous presence on the land.

### **Contextualizing the long walk/march as a rhetorical strategy**

As evidenced by the critical excerpts cited at the outset of this chapter, the terms “march” and “walk” have both been used to describe long distance collective movement initiatives organized and led by Indigenous peoples. While my analysis will primarily focus on other types of parallels between the two initiatives highlighted in the cited passages (such as the interpretive impositions of finality), I will begin by discussing my approach to terminology in relation to the terms “march” and “walk.” Although the initiative referenced in the first quotation unambiguously incorporates the term “walk” in its name, contemporary journalistic coverage and more recent scholarship both use the term “march” to discuss the Longest Walk. For example, describing the conclusion of the Longest Walk during the autumn of 1978, Terri Poppe remarked, “[t]he overriding feeling was exhilaration--the entire *march* and this week in DC have built up a stronger sense of

solidarity among Native Americans than had been realized before” (4; emphasis added). Similarly, in the 2015 anthology, *Say We Are Nations: Documents of Politics and Protest in Indigenous America since 1887*, Daniel M. Cobb introduces the 1978 text “Our Red Nation,” authored by Dine, Lakota, and Haudenosaunee Traditional Leaders by summarizing: “[i]n 1978 the Longest Walk, a months-long *march* from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., led by the American Indian Movement...” (180; emphasis added). Turning to the second initiative mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Ken Coates’ 2015 critical reading of the Journey of Nishiyuu also seemingly uses the terms “march” and “walk” interchangeably. For example, a subsection discussing “Historical Aboriginal *Walks*” opens with the sentence “[o]ther *long marches* have been utterly tragic” and proceeds to describe The Trail of Tears as a “forced removal *march*” (121; emphasis added).

The (perhaps unconscious) assumption of some authors seems to be that these terms are interchangeable. However, in the absence of encountering similarly interchangeable terminology from the Journey of Nishiyuu participants<sup>92</sup> I refer to the initiative (and other similar youth-led initiatives) as a “long walk.” While there is value in parsing out the specific sociocultural, and thus rhetorical, differences in the connotations and denotations of both terms, this task is not the primary focus of my analysis. Instead, I consider key sociocultural differences between historical iterations of both long walks and long marches (in chronological order: the Salt

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<sup>92</sup> The Journey of Nishiyuu social media accounts do not invoke the term “long march.” Similarly, while Meaghan Weatherdon’s critical analysis of the initiative does include the phrase “the walkers marched,” the direct quotations from interviews with participants also do not invoke the term “march.”



March of 1930, the 1965 Selma to Montgomery long marches, the Farm Workers' 1966 Pilgrimage, and the Longest Walk of 1978), and I apply certain insights from rhetorical scholarship which is primarily focused on "long marches" to my analysis of the Journey of Nishiyuu. Recognizing that the terms "walk" and "march" are not interchangeable, I have remained attentive to the differences between sociopolitical contexts and historical traditions embodied in various initiatives when considering the applicability of some critical insights stemming from the study of non-Indigenous initiatives to my analysis of the Idle No More youth-led long walks.

Accordingly, the next part of this section highlights the rhetoricity of long walks/marches in a general sense before offering a more detailed summary of three distinct initiatives. I first foreground a relevant historical precedent for the Journey of Nishiyuu (the Longest Walk of 1978) and then summarize two high-profile examples of twentieth-century long marches (the Salt March of 1930 and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery long marches) which stem from significantly different historical/sociocultural contexts yet have been evoked as critical comparison points for evaluating the rhetorical effectiveness of the Journey of Nishiyuu. Finally, I draw upon Izaguirre and Cisneros's analysis of the Farm Workers' 1966 Pilgrimage as a specific rhetorical act and in relation to the rhetorics of the broader Chicax social movement, arguing that this analysis offers an instructive example for evaluating the dynamics between specific youth-led long walks like the Journey of the Nishiyuu and the broader Idle No More movement, as well as the even broader centuries-long tradition of Indigenous survivance.

Long walks/marches (sometimes also called protest marches or peace marches) typically consist of collective movement from an origin point to a predetermined destination, where they frequently culminate in a larger assembly, rally, or demonstration. The number of participants can range from only a few to hundreds of thousands, and the movement trajectory can include streets, highways, rail lines, and other transport routes. As a political advocacy strategy, long walks/marches can create a compelling demand for social change since they often constitute highly visible displays of activist determination, resistance, and solidarity. In terms of particular advantages, prolonged collective movement can garner sustained media coverage, and presents authority figures with a physical manifestation of increasing public support, as additional participants often join along the way. On the other hand, the same factors can lead to increased risk of public and/or private violence against the participants.

Given their inherently public nature (bodies gathering, agitating, interrupting, and crossing through various public spaces) long walks/marches are “perhaps the most iconic rhetorical act performed in social movements” (Izaguirre and Cisneros 34). Despite this prevalence, the distinctly “*rhetorical* nature of a tactic as quotidian as a march can often be overlooked because of its semblance to the social motion that induces its emergence” (Izaguirre and Cisneros 35). Izaguirre and Cisneros locate the rhetoricity of a march in the “fact that it is an assembly (of bodies, texts, affects, and objects) put into collective motion to create social movement visible to publics” (37). As Izaguirre and Cisneros summarize, studies of social movement rhetorics most commonly conceptualize the march “as a rhetorical

*discourse*, or what we might call text or artifact, which is analyzed for its symbolic, performative, and consummatory dimensions” (36). In other instances, rhetorical scholars “consider marches as fragments within a broader effort to trace social movement(s) over time” (36). Significantly, Izaguirre and Cisneros navigate away from reading the march as solely or primarily “instrumental to or symptomatic of social movement(s)” instead focusing on “the rhetorical, materialist nature of the march *qua* movement” (36). As I will outline in more detail shortly, my critical approach aligns with Izaguirre and Cisneros’ emphasis on the long walk/march “as a vivid exhibition of the *materialist* aspects of rhetoric both in form (e.g., corporeality, affect, sensation, physical motion) and in its manifestations (e.g., posters, megaphones, banners)” (36). Taking up Izaguirre and Cisneros’s claim that the “history of the march as a social movement tactic is intertwined with the historical development of social movements as we have come to know and study them,” I will preface my analysis of the Idle No More era youth-led long walks by considering the Longest Walk of 1978 as a relevant historical precedent.

Consisting of a 3,000-mile (over 4,800 kilometres) journey from Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, California to Washington, D.C., the Longest Walk of 1978 cohered around at least three goals. Originally proposed by Dennis Banks, one of the co-founders of the American Indian Movement (AIM), the initiative was intended as a nonviolent demonstration against eleven bills awaiting passage in Congress “which would limit rights to tribal government, hunting, and fishing, as well as restrict access to social services by closing Native schools and hospitals” (Rosenfield). A second goal was to actively educate non-Indigenous populations

about Indigenous cultures, beliefs, and the damaging impacts of historical and ongoing colonization by organizing “teach-ins” in various cities and towns along the route. A third goal was to draw together Indigenous nations (ultimately, over 100 nations participated in the initiative) in affirmation of their sovereignty and in service of their collective opposition against U.S. imperialism and settler colonialism. As Rosenfield summarizes:

Banks felt that the march would be not only an effective way to protest the infringement on American Indian rights, but also to raise awareness among non-Native Americans. His concept gained popularity among leaders and members of the Native rights community, including both American Indians and Americans from other various backgrounds.

Crucially, as a materially symbolic initiative, the Longest Walk reflects a mutually reinforcing dynamic between political and spiritual elements. A *The New York Times* article published in July 16, 1978 described the initiative as a “symbolic trek commemorating the forced migrations of the 1800's, under the carbines of the United States Cavalry, of entire tribes from their traditional homelands to Federal reservations in the West (Franklin).<sup>93</sup> Expanding upon this description, “The Longest Walk Statement” (a collectively authored articulation of the initiative’s motivations and aims) also draws direct parallels between the earlier manifestations of American colonial oppression and the ongoing forms of colonial violence:

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<sup>93</sup> The history of forced removals and migrations including the Trail of Tears will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter.

Our people are often forced to leave their beloved homelands and are sent to lands where they greatly suffer. Our grandfathers and grandmothers were forced to walk many times in front of the guns of the invaders. Today we have been forced to walk again, in front of guns and the threat of destruction that comes from words in legislation. (qtd. in Cobb 185)

“The Longest Walk Statement” also highlights how the initiative’s status as a political demonstration/mode of resistance, aligns with, and gains authority from, spiritual dimensions of Indigenous sociocultural identity:

The Creator gave to us our original instructions, telling us *how to walk about on this Earth* as protectors and relatives to all life. As long as the sun rises, the grasses grow, and the cycles continue, we are to carry on” (qtd. in Cobb 185; emphasis added)

The Longest Walk began on February 11, 1978, as approximately 2,000 participants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, departed from San Francisco and headed to Washington. While twenty-six participants eventually crossed the entire trajectory by walking on foot and camping in harsh conditions, given the physically gruelling conditions, the majority of participants also relied on other modes of transport (such as buses, cars, and planes) to travel the distance between San Francisco and Washington. Importantly, for some participants, the physical and psychological demands of the journey (including spending winter months in the mountains and walking in high temperatures over summer months with limited access to food and water) were not just a testament of their political commitment to

the initiative. As Paul Owns the Sabre, one of the twenty-six participants who walked the entire route, articulated: “We faced horrible conditions...It really became a spiritual thing” (qtd. in Rosenfield).

Once the Longest Walk reached Washington on July 15, nearly 2,000 participants “stopped first at Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park for a rally, at which speakers included American Indian Movement leader Clyde Bellecourt, Chicano leader Reies Lopez Tijerina, actor Marlon Brando, and U.S. Representative Donald Dellums” (Rosenfield). The participants then proceeded to the Washington Monument, where some “leaders of the campaign symbolically slept in a tent” as the initiative expanded to include 12 days of demonstrations and rallies (attended by additional prominent figures, including Muhammad Ali, Senator Edward Kennedy, and comedian Dick Gregory), during which most participants “camped out at a federal park in Maryland” (Rosenfield). On July 25, participants organized “a mass rally at the Washington Monument to protest the bills before Congress and present a Native American Manifesto challenging the current structures and definitions shaping the treatment of Native Americans and outlining their rights and needs” (Rosenfield), which California Representative Donald Dellums read into the Congressional Record on July 27. Ultimately, none of the eleven consisted bills passed into law. However, as Cobb notes in the passage quoted at the outset of this chapter, “the Longest Walk rarely receives the attention it deserves or is understood on its own terms” (180).

I find an important resonance between Cobb’s identification of a tendency to read the Longest Walk as the end of the 1970s Red Power Movement, and Coates’

critical claim that “the Journey of Nishiyuu [] marked the symbolic end of Idle No More as a truly national movement” (124). I will challenge this critical foreclosure of the Journey of Nishiyuu’s rhetorical impacts in two ways. Firstly, I summarize the Salt March of 1930 and the 1965 Selma to Montgomery long marches to later explain how Coates’ primarily perceived and evaluated youth-led long walks like the Journey of Nishiyuu by comparing them to the strategies and outcomes associated with initiatives which managed to generate more national interest/support but had different goals and occurred in very different sociocultural and historical contexts. Secondly, following Cobb’s suggestion that the Longest Walk “might better be reimagined as a critical turning point in an ongoing effort to assert a global [I]ndigenous identity in the context of international law—one rooted in spirituality, sovereignty, and the land” (180), I aim to offer a more accurate reading of the Idle No More youth-led long walks. Foregrounding the Journey of Nishiyuu’s specific goals (Indigenous alliance building, cultural empowerment, and collective healing), I demonstrate how it was *not* primarily seeking “to bring together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in common cause to address the root causes of Indigenous marginalization” (Coates 124) and instead constitutes a powerful instance of place-based reconnection and resurgence.

As a prominent component of many modern advocacy campaigns, long marches are sometimes credited for inciting, or adding crucial momentum to, large-scale sociopolitical upheavals. For example, the Salt March of 1930, led by Mahatma Gandhi, became a key event in the Indian independence movement. On March 12, 1930, Gandhi and 78 volunteers started walking around 16 kilometers per day to

oppose the salt tax laws imposed by the British Raj (Dalton). Over the next three weeks, additional participants joined the march, which spanned from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi (a distance of 384 kilometres), eventually sparking widespread civil disobedience against the colonial regime (Dalton). The success of the Salt March campaign popularized the model of a long march as a method of disciplined, non-violent resistance focused on correcting a targeted form of injustice (Nagan).

Partly inspired by Gandhi's political mobilization of non-violent resistance (conceptualized as "satyagraha"),<sup>94</sup> in March of 1965, the American Civil Rights movement gained significant momentum through a series of three marches between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama (a distance of 87 kilometres).<sup>95</sup> The primary objective of the march was to protest the disenfranchisement of Black citizens due to discriminatory voter registration laws. The initiative started on March 7, with about 600 people intending to walk from Selma to Montgomery. The long march was interrupted at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as participants encountered a blockade of state troopers and local law enforcement officers. When they refused to disperse, the peaceful marchers were assaulted with tear gas and billy clubs (Nagan). Due to this brutal response, the first day of the march became known as Bloody Sunday. On March 9, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led another march to the site of the attack, which was still barricaded, where over 2,000 participants knelt and

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<sup>94</sup> For a longer discussion of this concept and Gandhi's influence on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. see Nagan.

<sup>95</sup> The 1963 March on Washington predated the 1965 long marches. However, while the March on Washington mobilized more people, it used a slightly different model of collective action: participants travelled to Washington by cars, trains, buses and planes, then converged for a relatively short walk, from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial.



prayed before turning back to Selma. On March 10, the Department of Justice filed a suit to prevent Alabama from punishing people for exercising their civil and political rights, and supporters throughout the United States began organizing demonstrations in solidarity with the marchers. On March 17, federal judge Frank M. Johnson ruled in favor of the marchers, but limited participation to 300 people per stretch of two-lane highway (Nagan 12). Four days later, on March 21, protected by federalized Alabama National Guardsmen and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, approximately 3,200 marchers headed out from Selma, covering between 11 to 27 kilometres per day (Nagan). The number of participants increased along the way, swelling to over 25,000 by the time the marchers reached Montgomery on March 25. The initial political demand of the long marches was addressed when the Voting Rights Act passed into law on August 6, 1965. In recognition of its contribution to the Civil Rights movement, the route was subsequently memorialized as the "Selma To Montgomery Voting Rights Trail," and designated as a U.S. National Historic Trail.

Significantly, in Dr. King's public address at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery march, the concept of the long march is reframed as a materially symbolic act of communication, one that represents the activists' moral and political commitment to social justice. Dr. King starts the speech by summarizing the physical difficulties endured by the participants:

We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills. We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways. Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering

sun. Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rain.

Our bodies are tired, our feet are somewhat sore. (119)

In this passage, the combination of general nouns (as opposed to named landmarks) and the invocation of archetypal images (“desolate valleys,” “trying hills,” “sweltering sun,” “drenched by the rain”) give the description a decidedly allegorical tone. The allegorical tone is even more evident in following statement: “[t]he confrontation of good and evil compressed in the tiny community of Selma generated the massive power to turn the whole nation to a new course” (121). Toward the middle of Dr. King’s speech, the recently concluded long march takes on increasingly symbolic resonance, implicitly paralleling the ongoing historical struggle of the oppressed:

...[from] Montgomery to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Selma, from Selma back to Montgomery, a trail wound in a circle long and often bloody, yet it has become a highway up from darkness. Alabama has tried to nurture and defend evil, but evil is choking to death in the dusty roads and streets of this state. (122)

Throughout the second half of the speech, the long march is transfigured from a specific political advocacy initiative to an overarching allegory for the larger “long march” toward a more just society. After proclaiming, “we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us,” Dr. King exhorts the audience to “continue [their] triumphant march to the realization of the American dream” (126). Then, harnessing the dual forces of figurative and literal meaning, Dr. King repeatedly

urges “[l]et us march on” to oppose a whole series of discriminatory policies and practices until they become equitable and inclusive:

Let us march on segregated housing until every ghetto or social and economic depression dissolves [...] Let us march on segregated schools until every vestige of segregated and inferior education becomes a thing of the past [...] Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat [...] Let us march on ballot boxes [...] until race-baiters disappear from the political arena [...]. (126-127)

The sustained use of anaphora (including additional repetitions of “[l]et us march on poverty” and “[l]et us march on ballot boxes,” omitted from the above excerpt) gains additional resonance after Dr. King’s allusion to the Wall of Jericho. Contextualizing marching within the Christian spiritual tradition, King reminds the audience, “[t]he Bible tells us that the mighty men of Joshua merely walked about the walled city of Jericho and the barriers to freedom came tumbling down” (127), effectively linking the sociopolitical impacts of long marches with the concept of moral progress: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (131).

Unlike the Salt March and the Selma to Montgomery long marches, which both became emblematic representations of a larger social justice movement, the youth-led long walks during the first six months of the Idle No More movement did not attain the same level of participation and prominence. Consequently, some critical assessments of their overall significance have tended to focus on their relative (in)ability to engage the wider Canadian population and leverage public support to compel the settler state toward action. While I agree that the lack of

popular support and institutional responsiveness are lamentable, I contend that they should not constitute the sole or main criteria for considering the cultural and political legacy of the Idle No More era youth-led long walks. In addition to highlighting the Longest Walk of 1978 as a relevant historical precedent, my analysis aims to provide a more nuanced assessment in part by foregrounding how North American settler colonialism has targeted Indigenous mobility through containment (the pass system in Canada) and displacement (the Indian Removal Act in America). Reading the Journey of Nishiyuu in relation to colonial practices of suppressed mobility and forced mobility, as well as Indigenous cultural traditions of journeying, I find that Indigenous youth-led long walks effectively leverage material and symbolic dimensions of mobility to assert resistance and reclaim agency.

My analysis of the rhetorics of the Journey of Nishiyuu and similar youth-led long walks draws upon key insights from Izaguirre and Cisneros' analysis of the rhetorics of the Farm Workers' 1966 Pilgrimage, one of the initial and most iconic long marches of the Chicax movement during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>96</sup> To briefly contextualize: on March 17, 1966, approximately 200 adults and children began the nearly 500-kilometre march from Delano (the movement's headquarters) to Sacramento (the state capital) (33). As César Chávez, President of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), described in a letter of support, this march,

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<sup>96</sup> Connecting the farmworkers' "pilgrimage" to more recent initiatives like the 2006 "Great March" where over a million people, including many Latinxs and Latinx immigrants, marched in downtown Los Angeles "in opposition to proposed restrictive immigration legislation," Izaguirre and Cisneros note that "Chicax and Latinx movements have consistently deployed the march to mitigate political weaknesses and affirm their political identities" (34).

undertaken by “the poor, the down-trodden, the rejected, the discriminated-against baring visibly their need and demand for equality and freedom,” was influenced both by contemporary civil rights marches (“demonstration[s]”) and pilgrimages (“the centuries-old religious tradition of Spanish culture”) (qtd. in Izaguirre and Cisneros 33). Accordingly, the farm workers carried a variety of sacred and secular objects, including a banner of La Virgen de Guadalupe, “a large wooden cross,” “a Star of David,” “an oversized photograph of Emiliano Zapata,” and various “flags and banners” (Frank Bardacke qtd. in Izaguirre and Cisneros 33). At various points along their journey to Sacramento, farm workers paused or detoured “in dozens of towns to hold rallies and celebrate Catholic mass,” receiving “aid and support from those sympathetic to their cause” (34). Media coverage and public support for the march increased along the way, culminating in a celebratory rally held upon their arrival in Sacramento, attended by over 8000 people (34).

While the Farm Workers' 1966 Pilgrimage included a distinct trajectory (from Delano to Sacramento) and symbolic dimensions (drawing upon a cultural tradition of religious pilgrimages through the name), Izaguirre and Cisneros emphasize that “analyzing the rhetoric of the farm workers’ march across California escapes the boundaries of any one of these discrete lenses” (32). Highlighting how “the march was *rhetorical movement* that crossed space(s) and time(s),” their analysis underscores how “the march’s status as a rhetorical performance (*a* march) and as an act of composition (*to* march) illuminates the link between this particular, rhetorical act of mobility and the rhetoric of social movements more broadly” (34).

As I will explore in the next section, Izaguirre and Cisneros’ assessment of the

dynamics between the Farm Workers' 1966 Pilgrimage as a specific rhetorical act and the rhetorics of the broader Chicana social movement offers an instructive example for evaluating the dynamics between specific youth-led long walks like the Journey of the Nishiyuu and the broader Idle No More movement, as well as the even broader centuries-long tradition of Indigenous survivance.

Stemming from Gerald Vizenor's work on Indigenous experiences of colonization, survivance "is more than survival, more than endurance and mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence" (*Fugitive Poses* 15). The term "survivance" registers the lived experiences of colonial oppression while also articulating a sense of active resistance to notions of inherent victimhood and ultimate hopelessness. In an interview with A. Robert Lee, Vizenor links survivance with an Indigenous "sense of presence, *the motion* of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance" (*Postindian Conversations* 93; emphasis added). Attending to the prominence of *motion* in Vizenor's concept of survivance, my analysis considers how youth-led long walks like Journey of Nishiyuu constitute rhetorically meaningful (symbolic and material) action, regardless of their immediate ability to compel the settler state into enacting political/legislative changes. Insofar as they symbolically invoke how Indigenous movement has been policed and weaponized in the past (colonial containment and forceful removal), and demonstrate ongoing sociopolitical commitment to sovereignty (underscored by the future potential of youth), the Idle No More era youth-led long walks can be read as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance. I will explore this interpretive approach to the youth-led long walks toward the end of this chapter by drawing upon Malea

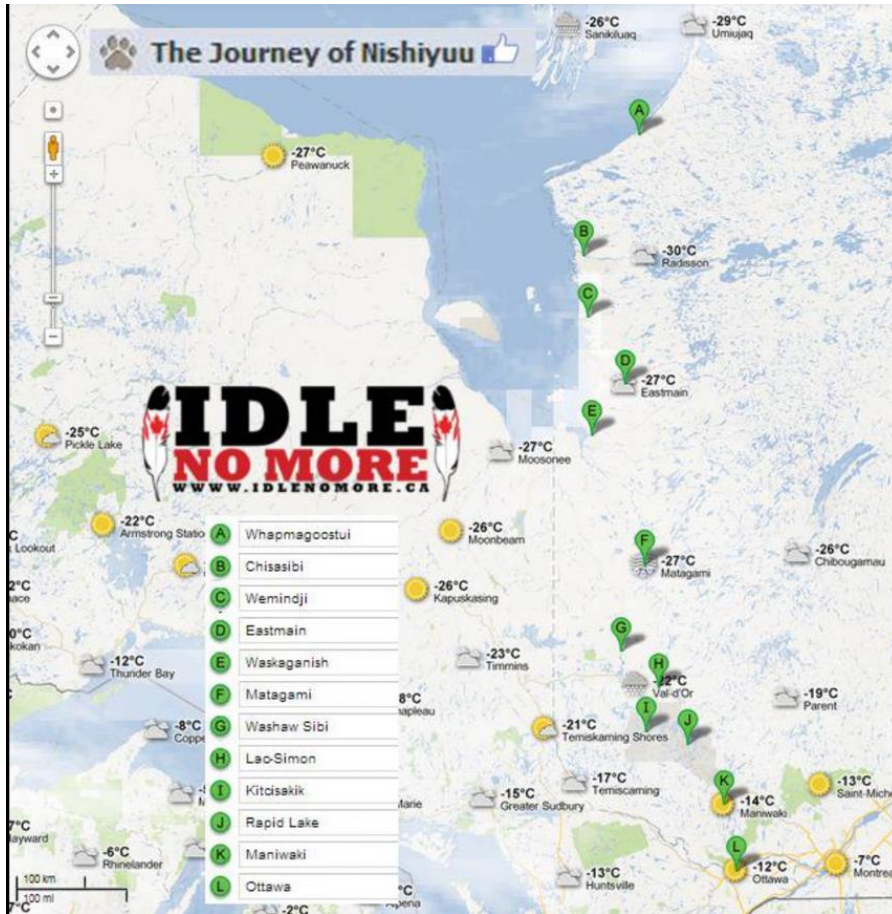
Powell's discussion of "rhetorics of survivance," and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's discussion of place-based Indigenous resurgence.

### **Idle No More and youth-led long walks**

Numerous youth-led long walks took place during the first six months of the Idle No More movement. The earliest walk became known as the Journey of Nishiyuu.<sup>97</sup> The walk began on January 17, 2013 in Whapmagoostui First Nation, a fly-in community of about 800 Cree people located above the 55th parallel along the Hudson Bay coast in Québec (Barrera). David Kawapit Jr. (age 18) organized the walk after experiencing a dream vision inspired by Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike campaign. The original group also included Geordie Rupert (age 21), Raymond Kawapit (age 20), Stanley George Jr. (age 17), Travis George (age 17), Jordon Masty (age 19), Johnny Abraham (age 19), and guide Isaac Kapawit (age 46) (Seesequasis 210). As illustrated in Figure 6, the overall journey trajectory stretched from Whapmagoostui to Ottawa (over 1600 kilometres), following traditional Cree trading routes. The group crossed through and/or stopped at various northern Indigenous communities where more Indigenous youth, mainly from Cree and Algonquin communities, joined in. Unlike the Longest Walk, the Salt March and the

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<sup>97</sup> "Nishiyuu" means "human beings" in Cree. The group's official website offers a more detailed explanation (in the section "Teachings"): "According to our (Cree) legends, in a time before humans came to being, all creatures in the natural Kingdom foresaw the birth of a new species that would one day roam the Earth. They referred to this new species as 'Nishiyuu,' which literally means human beings. However, the term has a complex and much deeper meaning, which include the interconnectedness of all life, as well as the oneness of time within which all life begins and ends. Since time immemorial, we have called ourselves 'Nishiyuu' (human beings) as we still do today, to distinguish ourselves from our relatives in the Natural Kingdom. The term could be said to include reference to all humanity."



**Figure 6.** Journey of Nishiyuu itinerary and weather report. Savoie, Robert. "Journey of Nishiyuu: itinerary and weather report." *Facebook*, February 7, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=481836228521023&set=g.351350614972320>

Selma to Montgomery long marches, the Journey of Nishiyuu did not articulate explicit demands for legislative change or immediate government action. As I will discuss in more detail below, the primary aim of this initiative was to foster greater unity between Indigenous communities, and to assert a distinct cultural identity, part of which included honouring ancestral commitments to protect the land and natural resources.



A week into the Journey of Nishiyuu, on January 24, a group of eight young people started a separate journey, from Bloodvein First Nation to the Manitoba legislature in Winnipeg (a distance of 320 kilometres). Dwight Kennedy (age 15), organized the walk to “bring communities together and save our rights” (qtd. in CBC “Over 800 attend”). Walking 10 hours per day and visiting various communities along the route, the original group was joined by two-dozen additional participants from Black River and Brokenhead First Nations (CBC “Over 800 attend”). After walking for four days, participants joined a large Idle No More rally that was taking place on January 28 (designated as an Idle No More National Day of Action).

Two weeks later, in a separate initiative, fifty youth from Jackhead First Nation also started walking toward the Manitoba legislature in Winnipeg. They crossed 250 kilometres over four days. Along the route, members of Fisher River and Peguis First Nations joined them, arriving in Winnipeg on February 11. Speaking on the steps of the legislative building, event organizer Ben Raven remarked, “[w]ithout these youth, there is no future” (CBC “First Nation youth”). The same week, a larger youth gathering, the Indigenous Nations Movement Youth Forum, took place in Winnipeg (CBC “Indigenous Youth Gather”). While the event was open to all attendees, its primary purpose was to strengthen unity amongst the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities.

Another significant initiative with youth involvement began on March 16, nine days before the Journey of Nishiyuu walkers reached Ottawa. Calling their initiative “A Sacred Journey for Future Generations,” Kara B. Charles (age 14), Marge McKenzie (age 40), Bruce McKenzie (age 48), and Joyce McKenzie (age 49) headed

out from Stanley Mission in northern Saskatchewan with a plan to reach Ottawa (3,450 kilometres away) on June 21. (Curry). The initiative protested the same omnibus bills (C-38 and C-45) that sparked the Idle No More movement. Stressing the environmental impact on his community, (“The [Churchill] river system where I’m from is no longer protected”) Bruce McKenzie explained,

We want to [send] a big statement to Harper and the Conservative government that we mean business. We are serious about our water system, and we want to protect our water system—not only for us but for the whole Canadian population. (qtd. in Curry)

When the four walkers reached Prince Albert, three new participants joined them: Charissa Tootosis (age 16), Jamie Martell (age 32), and Brad McKenzie (age 36). Nancy Greyeyes (age 40) started walking with the group in Saskatoon, followed by Bryan Waciston (age 32) from Onion Lake First Nation, Reuben Roy (age 17) of Beauval (age 17), Geron Paul (age 22) of English River, and Sharron Belay (age 50) from the Nipissing First Nation (Curry). Many other supporters also joined the core group walkers for specific portions of the journey (Curry).

By mid-March, public support for the Nishiyuu walkers increased exponentially as they approached their destination. Throughout their journey, the group’s progress was primarily updated and shared through social media platforms, especially Facebook, where the group garnered over 30,000 followers. Until the final week, the journey had only received traditional media coverage by a Cree-language CBC radio show and Indigenous news outlets (Ball). However, more mainstream media outlets began covering the story in the last few days of the journey, further

contributing to significant spikes in digital and on-the-ground expressions of solidarity. As the group approached Ottawa, the number of tweets mentioning the Journey of Nishiyuu surged from 2,483 the previous day to 9,007 on March 25 (Blevis 12). In the final hours of the journey, children and youth from Cree and Algonquin communities joined the core group, bringing up the number of participants to nearly 400 (CBC “Cree walkers meet”). By the time that the participants stopped at Victoria Island in solidarity with Chief Theresa Spence's protest, they were joined by a crowd of approximately 3,000 supporters (CBC “Cree walkers meet”).

The Journey of Nishiyuu ended with a triumphant rally held under the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill (Barrera). According to RCMP and OPP estimates, the gathering included between 4,000 and 5,000 people (Barrera). During the rally, as the crowd chanted “Harper, Harper” and “Nishiyuu, Nishiyuu,” numerous politicians (including Liberal leadership contender Justin Trudeau, Green party leader Elizabeth May, NDP leader Thomas Mulcair, and NDP MP Charlie Angus) met with the walkers. Although they all voiced support for Idle No More, some politicians also took the opportunity to criticise Prime Minister Harper for his absence, arguably shifting the focus toward partisanship. The most significant acknowledgement from the federal government came in the form of Bernard Valcourt, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, agreeing to meet with the walkers for twenty minutes.

The conclusion of the Journey of Nishiyuu continued to inspire other initiatives. Harper's decision to travel to the Toronto Zoo and greet two pandas arriving from China instead of meeting with the Nishiyuu walkers prompted the

Stanley Mission walkers to start collecting panda hats along the route in an attempt to be seen and heard by the Prime Minister when they arrived in Ottawa (Curry). Three days later, on March 28, twelve young people (ages ranging from 13 to 36) from Treaty 3 territories embarked on a 2,100-kilometre walk from Winnipeg to Ottawa. Calling their initiative “Youth 4 Lakes,” the group carried an Idle No More flag, sought to draw attention to inadequate water supply in Indigenous communities, and spoke against Bill C-45’s erosion of environmental protection for lakes and rivers (Patterson).

Before turning to consider salient discursive elements like the Journey of Nishiyuu’s mission statement, it is productive to foreground Izaguirre and Cisneros’ discussion of how the march’s movement “not only provides form to political claims... but, more fundamentally, it assembles and creates an appeal *in* the assembly” (38). Drawing upon Judith Butler’s claim that “*assembly is already speaking before it utters any words,*” Izaguirre and Cisneros theorize: “a march is not only a claim (or assemblage of claims) on behalf of specific assembled bodies; it is also a performance of a collective body and a collective life” (38). The notion that a long march/walk holds the rhetorical potential to contest “imagined presumptions about the ‘body politic’ that exist in day-to-day (inter)actions” (such as “whose bodies count and whose do not, who can participate in political life and who cannot”) is particularly important in the context of Indigenous political organizing, as well as Indigenous assertions of cultural identity and inherent sovereignty. In the next section, I consider how the historical legacy of settler colonial containment of Indigenous movement reveals additional rhetorical dimensions of the youth-led

long walks. If we accept the premise that “marches puncture an apparent equilibrium across spaces and times through an unruly yet marked collective movement that makes perceptible and sensible forms of becoming and movement otherwise unrecognizable” (38), then it is vital to consider how their insights resonate in instances where the assembled bodies are both moving through colonized/contested territories, and in the aftermath of prior colonial prohibitions against similar movement.

### **Against suppressed mobility: alliance-building and cultural revival**

The primary aim of the Journey of Nishiyuu is articulated on the group’s official website and Facebook page:

This Quest-Journey will establish and unite our historical allies and restore our traditional trade routes with the Algonquin, Mohawk and other First Nations. The time for Unity is now. (About)

To achieve this outcome, the trajectory followed traditional Indigenous trade routes, allowing numerous communities to interact with the walkers, and providing them with a compelling opportunity to support a common goal. As new participants joined the original group, their respective communities assembled volunteer crews to support the walkers. Collaborating on various tasks, including driving alongside the walkers, carrying packs of food and supplies, and ensuring that young people remained safe, the crews functioned “like a big family” (Smith). As volunteer Marilyn Jerome summarized, “[w]e say good morning to each other, even if we don’t know who they are. It’s helping to restore our historical allies and friendships” (qtd. in Smith).

Communities held feasts and other social gatherings to honour the walkers. Norman Matchewan, a Band Councillor of Barriere Lake Algonquin band, describes how his community welcomed the Nishiyuu walkers:

Everybody in the community helped cook a meal [...] Then we danced the night away after. We had music, fiddling, the Cree nation showed their style of jigging. We played some games. (qtd. in Ball).

Pointing out that these community events were largely ignored by mainstream media, Matchewan mused, “I guess they don't want to show the unity,” and went on to remark that while the walkers may not be getting much media attention, “they're getting a lot of community attention. They're not only bringing unity amongst the nations, but within [Indigenous] communities” (qtd. in Ball).

In addition to fostering unity along the way, the youth-led walks also symbolize empowered Indigenous futurity. In an article on the Journey of Nishiyuu, Paul Seesequasis (Cree) remarks that “the simple act of walking” signifies “moving away from colonial confines, from their own fears, from their own insecurities” (211). Emphasizing that the journey constitutes “a move away from the reserve, both metaphorically and physically,” Seesequasis suggests that each step contains “a new vista offering a better future” (211).

Given the initiative's commitment to alliance building, Seesequasis' invocation of “colonial confines” is particularly resonant. Broadly speaking, while specific communities are dealing with unique circumstances, insofar as it is governed by the Indian Act, the entire reservation system constitutes a form of colonial containment, often disadvantaging Indigenous nations through a

combination of territorial dispossession and sociocultural isolation. For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the relevance of the pass system, a long-lasting illegal practice unambiguously designed to suppress Indigenous mobility. Enforced in parts of Western Canada for up to six decades, this administrative strategy predominantly aimed to track and restrict free movement outside of reservations to prevent Indigenous political organizing. The system's effectiveness was such that in 1902, a commission from South Africa visited western Canada to study the pass system as a method of social control (Barron 26). During the Pass system era, initiatives like "A Sacred Journey for Future Generations," which spanned from northern Saskatchewan, across Manitoba, and down to Ottawa, would not have been permitted.

In the Canadian context, administrative discussion of possible policies restricting Indigenous movement intensified in light of the 1885 North-West Rebellion/Resistance (Barron 26). In May 1885, Major-General Frederick Dobson Middleton urged Edgar Dewdney, Indian Commissioner and Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Territories, to prevent Indigenous people from leaving their reserves so that they would be unable to support the ongoing political conflict (Nestor). Dewdney replied that he lacked the authority to issue and enforce such a proclamation, but began to informally instruct Indigenous people "not to leave their reserves without permission" (Nestor). In July 1885, after the conflict ended and the colonial government began prosecuting Métis leader Louis Riel for high treason, Assistant Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed sent Dewdney a lengthy memorandum regarding "the future management of Indians" (qtd. in Barron 27). Reed listed

fifteen recommendations, providing a “blueprint for the total suppression of [Indigenous] society” (27). Recommendation 7 outlines the practice that would become known as the pass system:

No rebel Indians should be allowed off the Reserves without a pass signed by a J.D. official. The dangers of complications with white men will thus be lessened, & by preserving a knowledge of individual movements any inclination to petty depredations may be checked, by the facility of apprehending those who commit such offences! (qtd. in Barron 27)

Dewdney endorsed Reed’s proposal, and the document was forwarded along the settler government hierarchy, eventually reaching Prime Minister John Macdonald. Commenting on the various recommendations, Macdonald supported the proposed pass system, noting: “Mr. Dewdney remarks that the pass system could be generally introduced safely. If so it is in the highest degree desirable” (qtd. in Barron 28). However, only two days after Macdonald received Reed’s recommendations (and long before formal endorsement), Reed informed Dewdney that he had already implemented the proposed system:

I am adopting the system of keeping the Indians on their respective Reserves and not allowing any [to] leave them without passes - I know this is hardly supportable by any legal enactment but we must do many things which can only be supported by common sense and by what may be for the general good. I get the police to send out daily and send any Indians without passes back to their reserves. (qtd. in Barron 25)



Although Reed's superiors eventually issued a post-facto approval, his own admission ("I know this is hardly supportable by any legal enactment") underscores the inherent illegality of the entire enterprise. As Barron summarizes, the pass system was administered for decades in spite of the fact that it violated treaty terms and completely "lacked legal justification." Numerous rationalizations emerged, including the notion that certain Indigenous groups had forfeited their treaty rights "because of their disloyalty during the Rebellion," and consequently deserved to have their mobility limited (30). To this extent, colonial administrators advocated that participants in the North-West Rebellion/ Resistance "should be clearly so identified on the front of the passes for the information of the police and others" (Barron 30).

In 1886, various Indian agencies received pass-books, and began to police Indigenous movement. For an Indigenous person to leave their reservation, they needed a signed permit stating the duration and destination of their trip. Obtaining a pass posed numerous challenges. Depending on the location, Indigenous individuals had to travel long distances to the Indian agent's residence. When an agent was away, anyone wanting to leave the reservation would have to wait for the agent to return. If the agent refused to sign a pass, there was no recourse to an appeal process. Even when pass requests were granted, the holders could be severely limited by the arbitrary and restrictive nature of the terms.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> To cite one representative example: "Jacob's grandfather was once issued a 14-day pass to leave the reserve to attend his daughter's wedding, who was a student at the Regina Indian Industrial School. It took five days on horseback to reach the school and five days back, but that was the time he was allowed by the Indian agent" (Benjoe). For a more sustained discussion, see the documentary *The Pass System*.

For the settler state, limiting and tracking the movements of Indigenous people aligned with and advanced the colonial agenda in several ways. By imposing restrictions on individual mobility, the settler government suppressed Indigenous political organizing and greatly decreased the feasibility of collaborative resistance initiatives. The pass system also exacerbated other forms of colonial oppression. For example, screening individual travel plans it made it easier to enforce the assimilationist aims of the Indian Act, which outlawed participation in ceremonies like the potlatch and the sun dance. Crucially, the pass system was implemented during a time when the Canadian government was striving to increase European settlement in the prairies. Wielded as an administrative instrument capable of ensuring forceful Indigenous confinement, the pass system played a key role in dispelling “lingering fears of an Indian uprising,” effectively “reassuring prospective settlers of a peaceful and prosperous existence” (Barron 30).

For Indigenous communities subjected to the pass system, the negative impacts affected many aspects of daily life, and carried intergenerational consequences. External interference with free movement between Indigenous peoples increased the difficulty of regular contact between families, community members, partners and allies living on different reserves. The pass system hindered parents from visiting their children at residential schools, leading to instances where children were disconnected from their families for years. Indigenous economies also suffered, since delays in obtaining passes and permits<sup>99</sup> could result

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<sup>99</sup> Until 1995, the Indian Act required Indigenous sellers to obtain permits to sell goods off reserves (Carter).

in various losses of income (Carter). By effectively segregating Indigenous people from non-Indigenous people in areas off of reserves, the pass system augmented and cemented the socioeconomic inequalities between the two groups.

Since the pass system could not be enforced in law, Indian Affairs “simply assumed an air of authority and attempted to enforce the system by other means within its power” (Barron 35). Common strategies included withholding rations and other “privileges” from those who resisted the pass regulations, yet “the most effective approach” was to arrest anyone found off the reserve without a pass and, if possible, “prosecute them either for trespass under the Indian Act or for vagrancy under the criminal code” (Barron 35). Such enforcement of the pass system was eventually phased out during the 1930s, although evidence suggests that in some isolated areas, it remained in effect until the early 1940s (Nestor). For example, the Pete family from Little Pine First Nation holds one of the last passes in Saskatchewan. Issued for “Anthony Pete, No. 234,” the pass is dated 1941 (Benjoe).

In light of historical forms of literal colonial containment, such as the pass system, I align youth-led initiatives like the Journey of Nishiyuu with Izaguirre and Cisneros’ conceptualization of the march as “more than an ‘event’ or ‘thing done’” to consider how they function as “a *doing*, a process of *making*, and a *method*” (38). Izaguirre and Cisneros’ reading of the Farm Workers’ 1966 Pilgrimage posits that “the march as rhetoric transformed physical constraints into opportunities to erupt the boundaries of the highway and transfigure mundane spaces into ‘march’ spaces” (43). While they are referencing biological constraints like requiring “rest and refreshment,” (43) in the context of youth-led long walks, the legacy of systemic

colonial containment of Indigenous movement imbues Izaguirre and Cisneros' invocation of "transformed physical constraints" with additional significance. Attending to how the physicality of the march keeps it from being a purely linear or 'robotic' procession, Izaguirre and Cisneros posit:

The march can be understood more rhizomatically [...] comprised of rhetorical 'tendrils' that extended and contracted as the event progressed forward in space and time. In these interruptions, these transformations, the eventfulness of the march becomes even more pronounced. The march's capacity to transform the daily motions of the social fabric into social movement is seen in how it negotiated the physical constraints and capacities of its 'marchers.' (43)

Izaguirre and Cisneros' insights about the farm workers' negotiation of corporeal constraints can be usefully extended to consider the youth-led long walks' negotiation of historical constraints.

Considering the Journey of Nishiyuu as "more than an 'event' or 'thing done'" and focusing on how the youth-led long march functioned as "a *doing*, a process of *making*, and a *method*" (Izaguirre and Cisneros 38) more clearly illuminates the problematic nature of reductive approaches to the initiative's political aims and impacts. Coates' 2015 study of the Idle No More movement contains an instructive example of a reductive approach to the youth-led long walks. While he maintains a favourable attitude toward Indigenous political activism, as mentioned earlier, Coates posits that the Journey of Nishiyuu constituted "the symbolic end of Idle No More as a truly national movement, to the extent that it sought to bring together

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in common cause to address the root causes of Indigenous marginalization” (124). Although Coates qualifies this pronouncement by stressing that “the marchers did not fail, but the country did” (122), his assessment of the initiative’s impact neglects its foundational premises.

Coates acknowledges the impetus for this specific initiative, but then seems to set aside the logical implications in favour of mitigated interpretations. David Kawapit Jr. organized the Journey of Nishiyuu after experiencing a dream vision<sup>100</sup> involving a wolf (representing Indigenous nations) and a bear (representing settler state government). Elaborating upon the meaning of the dream-vision, Kawapit Jr. explained,

A wolf alone can be easily killed by [a bear], but with its brothers and sisters everywhere, it can call upon them and it can take down the bear with ease...

That is what became the unity part of this. We all need to stand together.

(qtd. in Coates 116).

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<sup>100</sup> As Wieser points out, Indigenous epistemologies “are multimodal and include oral traditions, individual lived experience, signs in the world around us, and knowledge shared by other biological and spiritual entities in the form of vision and dream” (15). My analysis aims to respect David Kawapit Jr.’s description of the initiative impetus, but a deeper engagement with the specific cultural and epistemological dimensions of dream visions is beyond the scope of this work. Rather, in considering the Journey of Nishiyuu as a material manifestation of the dream vision, I engage with the limitations of a critical reading which fails to attend to the explicitly oppositional imagery, identifying how this approach constrains the rhetorical implications of the Journey of Nishiyuu as an Idle No More affiliated initiative. For a deeper analysis of the role and significance of “spiritual imaginations” in the inception and progression of the Journey of Nishiyuu, I encourage readers of this project to read Meaghan Weatherdon’s article “Walking the Law throughout the Journey of Nishiyuu.” Drawing upon conversations with walkers, Elders, and community-members, Weatherdon examines the interrelation between spirituality, governance, and legal authority.

In Coates' reading of the initiative, he repeatedly sets aside the oppositional nature of the Indigenous-settler state relationship foregrounded in Kawapit Jr.'s dream-vision (and echoed in the initiative's mission statement). Instead, he characterizes it as a "remarkable attempt at reconciliation and outreach," (122) and suggests that "of all of the Idle No More activities, the Journey of Nishiyuu provided precisely the high-profile, unthreatening activity that could have drawn all Canadians together" (125). Although the Nishiyuu walkers remained receptive to engagement with non-Indigenous supporters, reducing their call for unity to an "unthreatening activity that could have drawn all Canadians together" radically distorts the initiative's conceptualization of the relationship between Indigenous nations and the settler state government.

The Journey of Nishiyuu "Vision Statement" clearly articulates the initiative's commitment to upholding Indigenous sovereignty:

The Cree people have always been fierce warriors; they have always been the gatekeepers of the North. They have had many battles and disputes over the territory, and to this day we have never surrendered our land to [any] nation, not now, not ever. (Journey of Nishiyuu)

While it might seem logical to evaluate the initiative on the basis of its immediate ability to fulfil the goals outlined in its mission statement, considering the Journey of Nishiyuu as "a *doing*, a process of *making*, and a *method*" (Izaguirre and Cisneros 38) enables a more holistic assessment of the dynamics between settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance/resurgence. As Adam Barker observes: "[j]ust as settler colonialism is created by settler collectives spreading through places, building

spatially stretched relationships, Indigenous resistance simultaneously disrupts settler colonial space while reasserting Indigenous spaces, altering the spatialities of both” (46). Overall, the Journey of Nishiyuu constituted a skillful negotiation of the inherent sovereignty paradox (discussed in the Introduction). Even though the Journey ended in Ottawa and included a meeting with representatives of the settler state, those aims were not the initiative’s starting goals. The participants proceeded from the premise of inherent Indigenous sovereignty, and primarily sought to strengthen political relations between different Indigenous nations/communities.

In addition to his critical imposition of an unfulfilled reconciliatory agenda, Coates proceeds to envision two alternative versions of what could have happened during the last stages of the Journey. The first version imagines a much larger degree of public participation, which would have “signaled a new era in Canadian public life, one that extended, and even perhaps completed, the founding hopes and aspirations of Idle No More” (123). The centering of the settler state is more evident in the second scenario. Coates goes on to describe a more favourable reaction from the Canadian government:

... media attention to the Journey of Nishiyuu would have built systematically, demonstrating to Prime Minister Harper and his government that Canadians understood the core message of Idle No More. Worry would have *spread* throughout the government and amongst the politicians about an Aboriginal movement that had grown *beyond the boundaries* of electoral politics. Realizing the need to understand and respond to Idle No More and to *contain* the mounting furor surrounding the journey, Prime Minister Harper

would make quiet arrangements to meet with the marchers well before they reached Ottawa. (124; emphasis added)

Intentionally or not, Coates' use of spatial metaphors here ("spread", "beyond the boundaries", "containment") echoes the invocations of pre-emptive suppression used by law enforcement (discussed in chapter 3). Coates continues to describe this theoretical outcome, outlining a scenario where the radical potential of the Nishiyuu campaign is diffused by a vague verbal concession from the settler-state:

[Harper] would drive a couple of hundred kilometres north of the city and, without media coverage or public attention, walk for most of the day with the young Aboriginal activists. The walk would provide him with an opportunity to connect with the marchers and to discuss government plans and priorities. Prime Minister Harper would then return to Ottawa and, in an important press conference, express his admiration for the Aboriginal youth and for the aspirations of Indigenous Canadians. No promises would be made, largely because (and unlike with Chief Spence) the activists pressed no particular cause except for a desire for greater understanding and more openness. It would not be dramatic, and there would be no grand, transformative political statement, but the tenor of the Canadian conversation about Aboriginal issues would have changed perceptibly. (124-25)

As Coulthard decisively demonstrates in *Red Skin, White Masks*, the settler state has shown a limited willingness to accommodate/recognize Indigenous political claims when they are framed as minority rights within the overall multicultural structure of Canadian law and policy. By contrast, political claims that assert or enact



Indigenous sovereignty are subject to various types of suppression because they pose radical challenges to settler colonial political structures and legitimacy. The Journey of Nishiyuu is an example of an Indigenous initiative that rejects the politics of recognition in favour of rebuilding Indigenous place-relationships. Even when voicing support for the initiative, Coates is undermining its foundational premise by re-centering the settler state as the dominant form of cultural and political identity. To phrase it in another way, if the Journey of Nishiyuu did have a reconciliatory angle, it was more in keeping with grounded normativity<sup>101</sup> than seeking to change “the tenor of the Canadian conversation about Aboriginal issues” (Coates 125).

Instead of applying the settler state-centering criteria invoked in Coates’ scenarios, we can evaluate the initiative’s impact in relation to its own articulated goals. The Journey of Nishiyuu’s “Vision Statement” orients the initiative toward this outcome:

Through Unity and Harmony, the quest will revive the voices of our ‘Anskushiyouch.’ Their voices will be heard once more. With their guidance and strength, the Truth to all the sacred teachings will be revived and we will become once more, a powerful United Nations across Turtle Island. (“About This Group”)

Interpreted in a strictly literal sense, the long walk did not, in its immediate aftermath, produce “a powerful United Nations across Turtle Island.” However, if we

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<sup>101</sup> As Coulthard and Simpson explain, “[g]rounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests” (254).

read it as “a *doing*, a process of *making*, and a *method*” (Izaguirre and Cisneros 38) it is clear that the Journey of Nishiyuu successfully enacted and advocated for Indigenous resurgence. When David Kawapit Jr. stood on the steps of the Peace Tower and told the crowd “[t]his is not the end, this will continue,” he spoke to them in Cree, with an interpreter providing translations (qtd. in Galloway). Significantly, most of the young Indigenous walkers who addressed the public at the rally spoke in their traditional languages (Galloway). As I will outline in the next section, the Journey of Nishiyuu’s mobilization of Indigenous movement as a mode for re-establishing traditional trade routes and political alliances, as well as manifesting and promoting cultural revival, gains additional rhetorical significance when considered in relation to historical legacies of forced mobility.

### **Against forced mobility: voluntary perseverance and journeying**

By all accounts, the Journey of Nishiyuu was a very physically grueling undertaking. When the original seven walkers headed out from Whapmagoostui, the temperature was fifty degrees under the freezing point (Barrera). Over the next two months, wearing mukluks and wooden snowshoes, the Nishiyuu marchers crossed through snow, ice, and knee-deep slush (Galloway). Some nights, they “slept huddled together in tents,” and some days “their tuques froze like helmets” (Galloway). Recalling the start of the journey, Geordie Rupert summarized: “It was so cold. We’d leave with the sun and wouldn’t stop walking until sundown. Our tears froze to our faces” (qtd. in Smith). Six weeks of walking in sub-zero temperatures took a toll on the participants. Upon arrival in Kitigan Zibi, an Algonquin reserve in western Québec, twenty-two of the walkers received medical care at the

community's foot injury clinic, and three participants were sent to a hospital in nearby Maniwaki for additional treatment ("Cree Idle No More").

Pointing out that "Canadians like long-distance journeying" (119), Coates highlights how the Journey of Nishiyuu exemplified a combination of rhetorical appeals particular to physically grueling endeavours, and rhetorical appeals particular to the sociopolitical inclinations of settler Canadians. More specifically:

It was a great story: soft spoken but determined young people from isolated northern communities few Canadians had even heard about were braving intense winter conditions to make a peaceful march to Ottawa to bring their concerns and dreams to the attention of the government. For a country that constantly bemoans the apathy of youth and the unwillingness of young Canadians to engage with public affairs and politics, this was the kind of positive, uplifting story that should have grabbed the attention of non-Aboriginal Canada. (Coates 118-9)

In this framing, Coates draws implicit parallels between the initiative and Aristotelian appeals to ethos ("*soft spoken but determined* young people ... were braving intense winter conditions to make a *peaceful march* to Ottawa to bring their *concerns and dreams*") and appeals to pathos (young people *from isolated northern communities ... braving intense winter conditions* to make a peaceful march to Ottawa to bring their concerns and *dreams*") (118-9; emphasis added). Crucially, in Coates' analysis, the main sociopolitical context for the rhetorical appeals is "a country that constantly bemoans the apathy of young and the unwillingness of young Canadians to engage with public affairs and politics," and the main audience is assumed to be

“non-Aboriginal Canada” (119). Consequently, like previously discussed, Coates’ critical assessment of the Journey of Nishiyuu hinges on centering how “this admirable walk by a small group of Aboriginal youth inexplicably failed to capture the *national* imagination” (119; emphasis added). While he briefly notes the relevance of tragic examples of Indigenous involvement in non-voluntary collective movements, such as the Trail of Tears, Coates primarily situates the Journey of Nishiyuu in relation to past Canadian examples of physically grueling long-distance initiatives undertaken by various groups and individuals, including “the epic journeys of the voyageurs” (119), the 1935 On To Ottawa labour protest, Terry Fox’s Marathon of Hope, and Rick Hansen’s Man in Motion global journey (120). To contextualize my discussion of how the physically grueling nature of the long walk holds specific connotations for Indigenous-led long walk, I will briefly highlight several past and present examples of how settler colonial power structures have weaponized physical movement to undermine the sovereignty and safety of Indigenous peoples.

In the North American context, numerous past colonial regimes coerced Indigenous peoples to march away from their homelands, turning the motion of their own bodies against them by effectively torturing them into serving as the instruments of their own territorial dispossession. In 1830, American President Andrew Jackson signed the *Indian Removal Act*,<sup>102</sup> granting the federal government

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<sup>102</sup> This discussion is focused on the embodied violence of forced movement, yet it is important to note that the political rhetoric of removal had far reaching consequences. As Scott Richard Lyons (Anishinaabe) summarizes: “while the original political policy was concerned with actual physical removals like the Trail of Tears, the underlying ideology of removal in its own way justified and encouraged the systematic losses of Indian life: the

the power to exchange Indigenous territories in the cotton-rich area east of the Mississippi for land to the west, in the “Indian colonization zone” that the United States had acquired as part of the “Louisiana Purchase” (located in present-day Oklahoma) (Sturgis). Although required by law to negotiate removal treaties fairly, voluntarily, and peacefully, the government used brutal tactics to coerce Indigenous peoples into leaving their ancestral homelands. During the winter of 1831, under extreme duress (including threat of invasion by the United States Army), the Choctaw Nation made the journey to Indian Territory on foot, without adequate supplies or support from the settler government.

Despite significant protest from the Cherokee Nation, the United States Senate ratified the Treaty of New Echota (by one vote) in May of 1836. This treaty ceded Cherokee lands in the East to the settler state in exchange for “payment and assistance with [the move] to Indian Territory” (Sturgis xxi). The Cherokee were allowed a two-year period for voluntary relocation, during which only 2,000 people moved away. In 1836, President Martin Van Buren sent General Winfield Scott and 7,000 soldiers to expedite the removal process of the remaining 16,000 Cherokee individuals (Sturgis). The forced removal known as the Trail of Tears began on May 23, 1838 when Scott and his troops began forcefully directing (or, in some instances, deporting over water) the remaining Cherokee toward the area designated as Indian Territory. The removal process included numerous violations of personal and

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removal of livelihood and language, the removal of security and self-esteem, the removal of religion and respect” (*X-Marks 8*).

collective rights.<sup>103</sup> Cherokee individuals were rounded up into camps (sometimes dividing spouses and separating children from parents) without being allowed enough time to gather up food or clothing, with some people placed into stockades at bayonet point while white settlers looted their homes and belongings. Taking into account the number of deaths in the “internment camps, en route, and upon arrival in Indian Territory, the Cherokee death toll rises to 25 [to] 35 percent of those forced to leave their lands” (Sturgis xxi). The many causes of death included illnesses (whooping cough, typhus, dysentery, and cholera), starvation, and exposure (Sturgis 4). Like the Selma to Montgomery march route, the removal route was commemorated as the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. Extending over 8,115 kilometres, the trail spans across nine states.

Tragically, the highlighted forced removals were not isolated incidents. As Laura Tohe points out, the colonization of the United States involved numerous “death marches” (82). Another prominent example is the Long Walk of the Navajo. Carried out by the United States federal government, this mass-deportation and attempted ethnic cleansing campaign forced Navajo people to walk from their lands in what is now Arizona toward eastern New Mexico. Between August 1864 and December 1866, at least 53 distinct forced marches took place (Tohe).

Crucially, instances of forced mobility as a means of punishment/control of Indigenous people continue to occur in more recent contexts. For example, “starlight tours,” which consist of police driving Indigenous people outside the city on winter

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<sup>103</sup> Retroactively applied, the 1994 United Nations definition of ethnic cleansing clearly fits the 1838-1839 removal of the Cherokee Nation (Sturgis 3).

nights and forcing them to walk back for hours in extreme cold, have been documented as a systemic (albeit not formally sanctioned) practice in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Winnipeg, Manitoba (Reber and Renaud). Numerous Indigenous victims (including Rodney Naistus, Lawrence Wegner, and Neil Stonechild) died from hypothermia before the practice was publicized and investigated during the 2003 Commission of Inquiry into Neil Stonechild's death, held by the Saskatchewan provincial government (Reber and Renaud). Another relevant example of mobility-based vulnerability for Indigenous people is evidenced by the Highway of Tears. A 725-kilometre corridor of Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, colloquially known as “the Highway of Tears,” has been the site of disappearance or murder of many Indigenous women (McDiarmid 4). In this region, poverty results in relatively low rates of car ownership, and there are limited public transit options.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, for many Indigenous people, hitchhiking is the only way to travel the vast distances needed to see family, go to work, attend school, or seek for medical treatment (Kurjata “It’s Highway of Tears”). While the exact number of victims is contested, existing RCMP statistics and community/family stories about tragic outcomes both attest to the fact that this form of mobility-based vulnerability is particularly dangerous for Indigenous women (McDiarmid 3-4),

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<sup>104</sup> In 2018, Greyhound Canada suspended bus service in British Columbia’s Highway of Tears, Yukon and Vancouver Island (Kurjata “Greyhound to stop serving”). In 2021, due to losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, Greyhound Canada permanently shut down all remaining bus service, essentially leaving many people without affordable long-distance transit options (Williams). Highlighting the disproportionate negative impacts on “groups like women fleeing domestic violence, including Indigenous women,” anti-poverty advocate Emily Renaud noted that the lack of affordable transit routes across the country is “borderline a human rights issue” (Williams).

once again demonstrating the gendered nature of colonial violence (as discussed in chapters 1 and 2).

In light of historical legacies of forced mass migrations and contemporary instances of mobility-based vulnerability, the combination of *voluntary* and *physically grueling* movement holds specific rhetorical resonance. As Jessica Gordon, one of the co-founders of the Idle No More movement, remarked about the Journey of Nishiyuu, “[t]hey are saying it just takes a simple step and *they can move forward in whatever direction they choose*” (qtd. in Galloway; emphasis added). The final section of this chapter will return to this element of the youth-led long walks by considering how these physical and kinetic assertions of Indigenous sociopolitical agency can be read as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance.

In contrast to their resonance with lived histories of colonial oppression, the youth-led long walks are also connected to the empowering legacy of Indigenous journeying. More specifically, the Journey of Nishiyuu can be read as a continuation of “a time-honoured Cree tradition of walking”<sup>105</sup> (Seesequasis 209). As the organizer, David Kawapit Jr., explained, “the Cree nation used to go on journeys that lasted years to reunite the people. That’s what I want. That’s what we need” (qtd. in Smith). For thousands of years, the Cree, and other Indigenous nations, “have walked, paddled, or, in the west, rode vast distances” as part of lengthy hunting and

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<sup>105</sup> Seesequasis also links this initiative to a more expansive Indigenous tradition of journeying: “[Journey of Nishiyuu is] every bit as evocative and powerful a statement as the Zapatista Walk of Silence on December 21, 2012, when 40,000 Mayans marched through the cities of the Mexican state of Chiapas without a word. They came and left in silence. Similarly, with the Nishiyuu who walked south, across open country and highway, a long column inspired by the idea of the journey” (210).



travel expeditions (Seesequasis 209). Seesequasis points out that such motion balanced tradition and necessity, “combined in a way of existence that was sustainable and life-affirming” (209). Many young walkers linked their motivation for participating in the long walks to ancestral traditions of journeying. For example, Journey of Nishiyuu participant Nathalie Mathias stated, “I joined the walk to support the youth across all our nations, and to show that we are still walking like our ancestors did, like they used to do back then” (qtd. in Ball).

Unfortunately, for many participants, the decision to embark on the journey was connected to the loss of friends or family. Raymond Kawapit, one of the original seven Nishiyuu walkers, shared that the journey was helping him to heal from the tragic loss of his seventeen-year-old brother to suicide. In an interview with Barrera, Kawapit explained that his decision to undertake the journey was influenced by a consultation with his grandmother, who advised him: “when a person makes this journey... that is where they find healing” (qtd. in Barrera). Walking with a photo of his brother pinned to his pull-over coat, Kawapit found that other participants were also mourning the loss of loved ones: “I thought I was alone in my grief when I first started out...I found that they were grieving for their own family” (qtd. in Barrera). Christopher Iserhoff (age 19), from the Cree community in Mistissini, explained that the walk was helping him to confront “issues with drugs and alcohol” by showing him that “the secret is in sovereignty for his people and a renewal of their traditional relationships with other [I]ndigenous nations” (qtd. in Smith). In addition to finding healing in the act of walking, some youth participants also had opportunities to receive support and guidance from elders along the way. Matthew

Natachequan (age 79), a Cree elder from Whapmagoostui, travelled to multiple stops along the Journey of Nishiyuu route to meet with the walkers and offer “emotional support and advice to the many young people who are dealing with heavy burdens” (qtd. in Smith).

While many walkers shared stories about seeking and finding personal healing, some also described the journey in relation to a more expansive sense of repair and renewal. One of the youngest participants, Abby Masty (age 11) joined with the original walkers in honour of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls after she had a dream about walking down a trail on a sunny day out on the land: “[m]y mom asked me why I wanted to walk. I said, ‘I want to help people because of all the women that are suffering and elders’” (qtd. in Galloway). It is important to consider how the invocations of personal and collective healing relate to different sociopolitical narratives about the impacts of settler colonization, and, by extension, how they inform various approaches to decolonization.

As discussed in the Introduction and chapter 3, numerous Indigenous scholars have demonstrated the limitations of Indigenous political organizing premised on settler state recognition and victim-based narratives. To briefly summarize some of the key concerns, in correspondence with Eve Tuck, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson cautions against “publicly demonstrating the pain of loss as a mechanism to appeal to the moral and ethical fabric of Canadian society (which has over and over again proven to be morally bankrupt when it comes to Indigenous peoples)” and instead advocates for “using that same pain and anger to fuel resurgent actions” (“Indigenous Resurgence” 25). Significantly, by contrast to

damage-centred approaches “prevalent in community organizing and youth organizing where a group illustrates, for example, the harms caused by environmental racism and systematic isolation and neglect” (Tuck 414), most of the youth-led long walks mobilized around efforts centred on sociopolitical Indigenous resurgence rather than reconciliation with settler Canadians, or recognition from the settler state. As discussed in previous chapters, this aspect of the youth-led long walks was also characteristic of the Idle No More movement more broadly. Speaking at the Indigenous Nation Movement Youth Forum held in Winnipeg in early February 2013, Tyler Duncan (age 16), a youth chief from the Norway House Cree Nation, highlighted the impacts of an observed shift away from victim-based narratives:

Most of the time when you see us [Indigenous people] in the media, it's how poor, it's how absolutely deplorable we've been treated and the living conditions we live in. For the first time basically in history First Nations people look empowered, look strong and they look like they mean something. (qtd. in “Indigenous Youth Gather”)

Responding to Tuck’s call to suspend damage-centred approaches to Indigenous communities in favour of research which centres Indigenous survivance, the final section of this chapter considers the viability of reading youth-led long walks like the Journey of Nishiyuu as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance.

## Youth-Led Long Walks as Embodied and Emplaced Testimonies of Survivance

Drawing upon Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" and Scott Richard Lyons' analysis of Indigenous writing in relation to "rhetorical sovereignty," Malea Powell examines the writing of two late nineteenth-century Indigenous intellectuals, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Charles Alexander Eastman, tracing how they "use discourses about Indianness that circulated during that time period in order to both respond to that discourse and to reimagine what it could mean to be Indian" (397). Overall, Powell's analysis finds that "Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Charles Eastman *use* writing to come to some new *uses* of [their] own" (Powell 428; emphasis in original). Powell further posits that such repurposing/reclaiming of writing is broadly relevant for Indigenous peoples, as "coming to terms with our relationship to the colonizing consequences of writing in our past, we will begin, indeed, to tell new stories of 'who and what, and *that* we are'" (Momaday qtd. in Powell 428). While Powell's analysis focuses on discursive instances of "rhetorical sovereignty," I suggest that its central premise, that Indigenous people "have *used* the very policies and beliefs about 'the Indian' meant to remove, reserve, assimilate, acculturate, abrogate, and un-see us as the primary tools through which to reconceive our history, to reimagine Indian- and multiplicitous images, to create and re-create our presence on this continent" (428), can be usefully extended to consider the youth-led long walks as physical, kinetic "rhetorics of survivance." Similar to the dynamics of *discursive* repurposing/reclaiming within the examples Powell highlights, the youth-led long walks also repurposed/reclaimed *physical, kinetic* sovereignty through their material and symbolic resonance with both

oppressive (colonial containment and weaponization of Indigenous movement) and empowering (Indigenous traditions of journeying) historical legacies.

The next section of my analysis examines the rhetorical impacts of such resonances by considering the relationship between the Journey of Nishiyuu's message (sociopolitical resurgence) and medium (youth-led long walk along traditional trade routes, revival of journeying). Recall that earlier in this chapter I summarized Izaguirre and Cisneros' discussion of Judith Butler's claim that "*assembly is already speaking before it utters any words*" (qtd. in 38). There, I identified that Izaguirre and Cisneros's conceptualization of marches as "a performance of a collective body and a collective life" (38) is particularly salient in the context of Indigenous political organizing. Connecting these insights to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's discussion of place-based reconnection and resurgence further illuminates *what* initiatives like Journey of Nishiyuu are uttering through assembly and motion.

In the opening chapter of *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*, Simpson outlines the internal political value of one evocative example of Nishnaabeg resurgence to underscore common critical misreadings of Indigenous political mobilizing. To briefly contextualize:

On June 21, 2009, a community procession of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg' dancers, artists, singers, drummers, community leaders, Elders, families and children walked down the main street of Nogojiwanong. With our traditional and contemporary performers gently dancing on the back of our Mikinaag,

we wove our way through the city streets, streets where we had all indirectly, or directly, experienced the violence of colonialism, dispossession and desperation at one time or another. Our drummers provided the heartbeat; our singers provided the prayers. (11)

Highlighting the dissonance between external and internal reactions to the procession, Simpson summarizes:

Settler-Canadians poked their heads out of office buildings and stared at us from the sidelines. “Indians. What did they want now? What did they want this time?” But that day, we didn’t have any want. We were not seeking recognition or asking for rights. We were not trying to fit into Canada. We were celebrating our nation on our lands in the spirit of joy, exuberance and individual expression. (11)

Crucially, while Simpson notes that the gathering was a “quiet, collective act of resurgence” rather than “a protest” or “a demonstration,” she also emphasizes that “[i]t was a mobilization and it was political because it was a reminder” (11).

More specifically:

It was a reminder that although we are collectively unseen in the city of Peterborough, when we come together with one mind and one heart we can transform our land and our city into a decolonized-space and a place of resurgence, even if it is only for a brief amount of time. (11)

Needless to say, the gathering did not ‘overturn’ the systemic realities of colonial oppression.<sup>106</sup> However, it did have a concrete sociopolitical impact: “that day we turned inward to celebrate our presence and to build our resurgence as a community” (12). Underscoring the gathering’s internal political value, Simpson notes that it “was a celebration of our resistance, a celebration that after everything, we are still here. It was an insertion of Nishnaabeg presence” (12).

Simpson’s assessment of the 2009 Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg community procession aligns with Chief Theresa Spence’s comments about the Journey of Nishiyuu. After meeting with the walkers once they reached Ottawa, Chief Spence expressed that the initiative shows that the Indigenous walkers are “really proud of their land” and that they are “telling everybody [...] the land is there for them and they really want to protect the land, so walking — the journey was really a commitment” (qtd. in CBC “Cree walkers meet”). Building upon Chief Spence’s claims, we can usefully reframe the communicative acts of “telling” and “[making a] commitment” as a particular form of embodied and emplaced testimony of survivance. To better contextualize this interpretation, a photograph (see Figure 7) taken by one of the participants, Wabaguin Jimiken Coonishish, depicts the walkers leaving Lac Simon, Québec:

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<sup>106</sup> As Simpson summarizes: “[t]he Nishnaabeg have been collectively dispossessed of our national territory; we are an occupied nation. Individually, we have been physically beaten, arrested, apprehended, interned in jails, sanitariums, residential or day schools and foster care. We have endured racist remarks when shopping or seeking healthcare and education within the city. We have stories of being driven to the outskirts of our city by police and bar owners and dropped off to walk back to our reserves” (12).



**Figure 7.** Still image of Journey of Nishiyuu walkers leaving Lac Simon, Québec. Jimiken Coonishish, Wabaguin. “Journey of Nishiyuu Walkers leaving Lac Simon, Québec.” *Facebook*, March 7, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=516611355052336&set=g.351350614972320>.

Drawing upon Izaguirre and Cisneros’ focus on “the rhetorical, materialist nature of the march *qua* movement” (36), I posit that as an embodied “rhetorical performance” (*a* walk) the Journey of Nishiyuu’s emphasis on sociopolitical resurgence (articulated in the Mission Statement) meaningfully counters the prevalence of trauma (or, “damage-centred”) narratives about Indigenous experiences of colonization by demonstrating ongoing survivance as members of sovereign nations. Additionally, as an emplaced “act of composition” (*to* walk) the congruence between the Journey of Nishiyuu’s rhetorical message (sociopolitical resurgence) and medium (long walk along traditional trade routes, revival of



journeying) effectively counters (neo)colonial efforts to contain/eliminate Indigenous bodies by actively reinscribing Indigenous presence on the land.

Conceptualizing the Journey of Nishiyuu and similar youth-led long walks as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance also aims to avoid several problematic tendencies within non-Indigenous critical assessments of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism. As evidenced by Coates' (mis)reading of the Journey of Nishiyuu, discussed earlier, critical perspectives rooted in "western knowledge and a western worldview" problematically disregard key "differences in political organization, governance and political cultures between Canadian and Indigenous societies" (Simpson *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* 17). There is an inherent tension between critical assessments rooted in "theories of group politics and social movements [which] take the state for granted," and "Indigenous political movements [which] contest the very foundation of the Canadian state in its current expression" (Simpson 17). Consequently, Simpson's description of Indigenous resurgence ["We must *move* ourselves beyond resistance and survival, to flourishment and *mino bimaadiziwin* (17; emphasis added)] stresses that such efforts do not require "sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians [...] [or] a friendly colonial political climate" (17). Rather, Simpson identifies the following preconditions: "[Indigenous people and nations] need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community and ultimately, action" (17). As embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance, the Idle No More era youth-led long walks, like the Journey of Nishiyuu, resonate with Simpson's description of Indigenous resurgence,

both symbolically and literally exemplifying Vizenor's call for "*moving beyond* [] basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal" (qtd. in Tuck 53; emphasis added).

## **Conclusion:**

### **From the first six months to the first decade of the Idle No More movement**

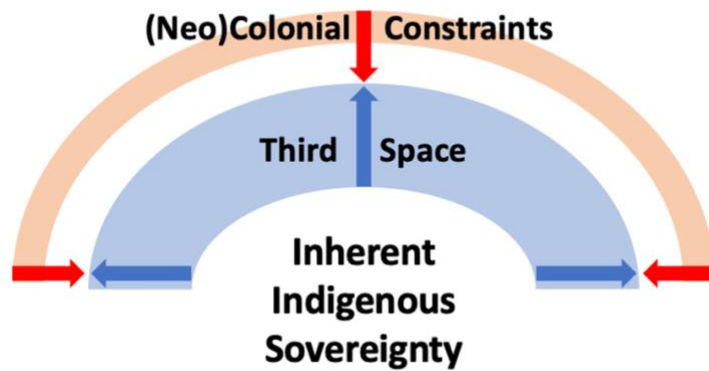
This research project investigated discursive and material constraints against and possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence by analyzing key rhetorical strategies and contextual features of an emergent Indigenous-led social justice movement: Idle No More. Within the Introduction I identified three main factors that make the Idle No More movement a particularly relevant case study for my research question. The three factors include: the movement's high degree of prominence and participation, its wide range of rhetorical activity, and its temporal overlap with the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). In reviewing and evaluating the contributions and limitations of this project, this Conclusion will also consider the relevance of a fourth factor: the movement's longevity.

My project primarily focused on the first six months (November 2012 to May 2013) of the movement because those temporal parameters maximized the factors informing my selection of Idle No More as a case study. As the most active period of the movement to date, a critical assessment of the first six months yielded key insights into the process of building initial sociopolitical momentum for decolonization efforts. Similarly, when interrogating dynamics between Idle No More and the TRC, it was particularly useful to consider state and public responses to Idle No More during a period of high widespread social prominence (as opposed to the later trends of more localized and sporadic social prominence) because those

conditions better approximated the TRC's status as a deliberately Canada-wide initiative. Additionally, because the first six months of the movement have garnered the most critical attention to date, I was able to both expand upon and challenge findings within existing research. However, now that Idle No More has been an active social justice movement for over a decade, it is productive to both ask how initial instances of rhetorical activity resonate within a longer timeframe and to consider the movement's longevity as a distinctly instructive phenomenon.

### **Idle No More: Revitalizing the Third Space(s) of Sovereignty**

Before I summarize this project's main findings, I want to revisit how my critical approach sought to remain responsive to Eve Tuck's call for suspending "damage-centered" research by extending consideration beyond "loss and despair" (417) to instead center the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (416). My analytical framework (illustrated in Figure 8) registered the ways Indigenous sovereignty has been suppressed and/or threatened by settler states through various (neo)colonial constraints and also challenged normalizations of settler colonialism by upholding the foundational premise that Indigenous peoples' claim to their own sovereignty does not require further validation from settler states. Situating decolonial activism within the third space of sovereignty, the previous chapters illuminated and evaluated instances where the various systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty simultaneously functioned as sites of active contention and subversive political struggle.



**Figure 8.** Illustration of an analytical framework focused on the relationship between Indigenous sovereignty, third space, and (neo)colonial constraints.

As such, my analysis of Indigenous-led rhetorical activity during the Idle No More movement foregrounded the multifaceted ways that Indigenous people “participate in uneven social structures” (Tuck 421) by contextualizing and affirming the rhetorical valences of various sociopolitical acts and utterances without imposing dualistic choices for Indigenous peoples and politics, “such as assimilation-secession, inside-outside, modernity-traditionalism, and so on” (Bruyneel 21). Additionally, underscoring the limitations of critical readings which restrict decolonial resistance and existence to the institutions and discourses of the liberal democratic settler state, my analysis of decolonial rhetorical activity within the Idle No More movement applied Glen Coulthard’s insights about the relevance of distinctly situated, place-based understandings of moral responsibility and social organization, called grounded normativity, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s insights about the internal political value of place-based reconnection and resurgence initiatives.

The first two chapters of my dissertation examined the two most prominent features of the movement's emergent phase: flash mob round dances and social media activism. During the winter of 2012 – 2013, the frequency and visibility of Idle No More-affiliated round dances led to the movement being characterized as the "Round Dance Revolution." Additionally, because participants leveraged social media platforms (especially Twitter and Facebook) as modes of organization and communication, the movement's name was often stylized #IdleNoMore, or #INM, even outside of social media hashtags. The prominence of these two features are both reflected in the first two book-length publications on the Idle No More Movement: the 2014 anthology *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, edited by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective, and *#IdleNoMore and the Remaking of Canada*, a 2015 monograph by Canadian historian Ken Coates. As I will elaborate shortly, both of these strategies significantly contributed to the movement's momentum and popular appeal. Since Idle No More emerged as a social justice movement midway through the official proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008 – 2015), the final two chapters of my dissertation considered the dynamics between the TRC and the Idle No More movement in relation to two models for decolonization: reconciliation and resurgence.<sup>107</sup> More specifically, in chapter 3 I examined how state and public responses to the Idle No More movement align with Coulthard's claim that "Idle No

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<sup>107</sup> As summarized in chapter 3, reconciliation-based approaches to decolonization generally entail working within the structure of domination to modify the system in the short term with the aim of transforming it from within in the long term. By contrast, resurgence-based approaches entail struggling against the structure of domination as a whole to assert rights and freedoms as sovereign peoples

More is an *indication* of the ultimate failure of [a recognition-based] approach to reconciliation” (163; emphasis added). Then, responding to Coulthard’s suggestion that Idle No More is “a productive case study through which to explore what a resurgent Indigenous politics might look like on the ground” (24) in chapter 4 I considered the rhetorical significance of youth-led long walks as a resurgent form of embodied and emplaced testimony. I will now review the main findings from each chapter before drawing the insights together to answer my research question.

My first chapter posited that the most visible and defining activist strategy associated with the Idle No More movement meaningfully addressed a foundational feature of settler colonialism: structural and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. Extending Kevin Bruyneel’s conceptualization of the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization, I outlined how the forcible imposition of a heteropatriarchal sociopolitical order continues to function as a *gendered* form of containment, deliberately calibrated to limit/eradicate prior Indigenous sociopolitical structures. By foregrounding the disproportionately negative impacts of settler colonization on Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, chapter 1 argued that decolonial aims and efforts must be rooted in deliberate recognition of and resistance against the gendered constraints imposed by settler colonialism. Remaining attentive to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s claim that “[c]eremonies, ritual, social organization, and mobilization that replicate [queer] invisibility and hold up the hierarchy also center heteropatriarchy” (*As We Have Always Done* 134), my analysis examined how Idle No More-affiliated round dances, which leveraged public affirmation of Indigeneity

to enact symbolic critiques of settler colonialism, also meaningfully challenged the gendered constraints of coloniality.<sup>108</sup> To support this reading, I first contextualized the round dance form within relevant Cree cultural traditions. I then built upon Karyn Recollet's analysis of the 2012 Idle No More-affiliated round dance at Yonge-Dundas Square in downtown Toronto by examining the rhetorical significance of subsequent reoccurrences. Documenting numerous instances of activist-led round dances at Yonge-Dundas Square between 2017 and 2021, I argued that they constitute a continuum of site-specific embodied critiques of coloniality. Through each of the adaptive reoccurrences at Yonge-Dundas Square, the temporary nature of the round dance as a rhetorical expression changes from mere ephemerality to *cyclical* ephemerality, resulting in a temporally-layered restoration of prior sociopolitical orders.

My second chapter argued that digital activism within the Idle No More movement has been impactful because it is characterized by dynamic interactions between discursive and embodied Indigenous challenges to settler colonial political structures. After outlining the affordances of the Twitter hashtag as a mode of communication and organization, I applied a qualitative framing analysis to demonstrate how one specific hashtag, “#Ottawapiskat,” successfully supported

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<sup>108</sup> To review some of the key points raised in chapter 1: while (neo)colonial narratives often attempt to reframe systemic and symbolic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people as a series of unconnected, individual occurrences, as an inherently participatory and public form of embodied symbolic communication, round dances enable Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people to foreground collective lived experiences through highly visible and socioculturally affirmative gatherings. Thus, as Recollet details, in addition to their centrality within the Idle No More movement, flash mob round dances have also been a defining feature of the #MMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls) social justice movement (132).



concurrent instances of embodied Indigenous resistance (such as Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike) by actively reframing neocolonial deployments of narrative bias (consisting of various discursive attempts to delegitimize activists and initiatives aligned with the Idle No More movement). Then, drawing upon theoretical concepts from mediated discourse analysis, I argued that "#Ottawapiskat" functioned as a strategic site of engagement where the virtual space of Twitter and the relational space of the hashtag were used to reconfigure dominant narratives (or, ideological frames) about the physical spaces of Ottawa and Attawapiskat through the creation of a digital third space, Ottawapiskat. By illustrating how #Ottawapiskat navigated several challenges to Indigenous political organizing (all of which are closely related to the containment function of colonization), my evaluation of advantages and shortcomings of hashtag memes as a mode of digital activism acknowledged the complex social realities of advocating from within the "third space of sovereignty." As a material communicative act and a rhetorical tactic, the #Ottawapiskat hashtag is an instructive example of a political position that is neither simply inside nor outside the colonial system, but rather proceeds from a strategically shifting, liminal space in to reveal "both the practices and the contingencies" of settler colonial rule (Bruyneel xvii). Drawing attention to the ongoing usage of #Ottawapiskat, I argued that the hashtag continues to serve as a useful rhetorical frame for discursive renegotiations of settler-Indigenous power dynamics.

Proceeding to situate the movement within the wider social context, chapter 3 interrogated the significance of the temporal overlap between the emergence of

the Idle No More movement and the ongoing proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. After summarizing the history of the residential school system and the evolution of redress initiatives, I highlighted the notable successes (victim-validating testimonial model, culturally-relevant proceedings) and limitations (logistical shortcomings, susceptibility to discursive reframing by the settler state, focus on past trauma foreclosing discussion of structural continuities) of the TRC as a reconciliation-based approach to decolonization. I then examined concurrent public responses (shallow solidarity and racist backlash) and state responses (legislative disempowerment and police surveillance) to the Idle No More movement, demonstrating how they enable a more accurate, albeit less encouraging, assessment of the relative effectiveness of reconciliation-based approaches to decolonization. While I sought to avoid oversimplifying the multifaceted nature of the TRC's work and achievements (especially its capacity to validate Survivor experiences and promote individual and collective healing/restoration of relationships within Indigenous families and communities), I argued that public and state responses to the Idle No More movement clearly demonstrate the fundamental unfairness of asking Indigenous people to move beyond past injustices given the continuities of colonial discourses and dynamics within contemporary Canadian society. To reiterate a particularly instructive example, the de-classified documents attesting to pre-emptive and overreaching surveillance of the Idle No More movement revealed troubling parallels between the genocidal assimilationist aims of the residential school system and contemporary oversurveillance of Indigenous youth activism, demonstrating

that settler colonialism's logic of elimination continually targets the education of Indigenous children.

Responding to chapter 3's discussion of the settler state's longstanding interest in eradicating intergenerational efforts to sustain Indigenous cultural and political identity, chapter 4 focused on youth led-long walks as a resonant example of resurgence-based initiatives within the Idle No More movement. Focusing on a particularly notable initiative, called the Journey of Nishiyuu (a 1,600km journey from Whapmagoostui to Ottawa between January and March of 2013) I examined how the rhetorical impact of this initiative stemmed from its resonance with various lived histories of colonial oppression, as well as Indigenous traditions of journeying. Reading the Journey of Nishiyuu in relation to Coulthard's concept of grounded normativity, I emphasized the impacts of its goals: Indigenous alliance building, cultural empowerment, and collective healing. I also challenged several aspects of Ken Coates' critical reading of the Journey of Nishiyuu by demonstrating how the decolonizing potential of the youth-led long walks extends beyond their capacity to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and settler populations in Canada, or their capacity to move the settler state toward transformative political change. Attending to the prominence of motion in Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, I argued that youth-led long walks like Journey of Nishiyuu constitute rhetorically meaningful (symbolic and material) action, regardless of their immediate ability to compel the settler state into enacting political/legislative changes. Insofar as they symbolically invoke how Indigenous movement has been policed and weaponized in the past (colonial containment and forceful removal), and demonstrate ongoing

sociopolitical commitment to sovereignty (underscored by the future potential of youth), the Idle No More era youth-led long walks can be read as embodied and emplaced testimonies of survivance. This interpretation meaningfully counters the prevalence of trauma (or, “damage-centred”) narratives about Indigenous experiences of colonization by demonstrating ongoing survivance as members of sovereign nations. Additionally, the congruence between the Journey of Nishiyuu’s rhetorical message (sociopolitical resurgence) and medium (long march along traditional trade routes, revival of journeying) effectively counters (neo)colonial efforts to contain/eliminate Indigenous bodies by actively reinscribing Indigenous presence on the land.

Overall, I have found that discursive and material constraints against decolonial resistance and existence are mutually reinforcing and inherently motivated by the logic of elimination. Returning to Patrick Wolfe’s claim that the history of colonization doesn’t cease or fundamentally alter “when it moves on from the era of frontier homicide” (402), my analysis has shown that the material conditions and impacts of settler colonization are propelled by two types of discourses which seek to normalize settler colonization by obscuring its foundational and ongoing violence. The first type of discourse is overtly anti-Indigenous, and can be observed in the ways public and state responses to Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike sought to obscure the causes of abject material conditions within Attawapiskat First Nation by blaming Indigenous peoples for their own suffering. The second type of discourse instrumentalizes seemingly pro-Indigenous sentiment by substituting symbolic changes for structural changes to the

material conditions of settler colonialism. This type of discourse can be observed in various individual and collective attempts to condemn the legacies of settler violence while actively upholding the ongoing perpetuation of oppressive power dynamics.

I have found that discursive and material possibilities for decolonial resistance and existence are also mutually reinforcing, but should be evaluated in light of a foundational recognition of inherent Indigenous sovereignty. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson notes, “Idle No More is not just a fight for Indigenous nations, land, culture, decolonization, language, treaties and the environment; it is also a fight for the fair and accurate representation of Indigenous Peoples and our issues” (“Idle No More”). Crucially, such efforts do not inherently require “sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians [or] a friendly colonial political climate” (Simpson *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* 17). Therefore, when considering the discursive and material strategies that propelled the movement’s momentum and popular appeal, my analysis highlighted how they were primarily valuable for their capacity to sustain Indigenous activism by decreasing pre-emptive or retaliatory anti-Indigenous hostilities. As Dylan Robinson observes: “[a] significant number of Idle No More events disrupted the narrative of First Peoples political action as irrational terrorism, or as ‘just anger’ without just cause, by complicating what the public might understand to be the genre of protest” (218). Rather than primarily focusing on how the participatory nature of popular Idle No More strategies such as flash mob round dances and humorous Twitter hashtags increased the movement’s capacity to build solidarity among settler

Canadian populations, my analysis has highlighted the limitations of centering non-Indigenous audiences as the primary audiences for Indigenous sociopolitical expression. As such, while it is important that “Idle No More gatherings [...] disrupted the normative negative assumptions that settler Canadian spectators may associate with protest,” these rhetorical achievements are particularly valuable because they directly expanded “the vital possibility of public assembly among Indigenous participants, which in turn [...] sustained [Indigenous activists’] energies in agitating for further change” (Robinson 218).

What does “agitating for further change” entail? Drawing upon the work of numerous Indigenous scholars, artists, and activists, my dissertation has repeatedly emphasized that the material conditions of decolonial resistance and existence must proceed from a foundational recognition of inherent Indigenous sovereignty. As Simpson summarizes: “[Indigenous people and nations] need our Elders, our languages, and our lands, along with vision, intent, commitment, community and ultimately, action” (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* 17). However, returning to my discussion of the ‘inherent sovereignty paradox,’ contemporary Indigenous rhetors motivated by decolonial aims, like the Idle No More movement, must find ways to negotiate the competing realities of inherent sovereignty and neocolonial constraints (both discursive and material) to its practical implementation. As demonstrated in chapter 3, discrepancies in material conditions have enabled settler states like Canada to criminalize and punish actions and bodies that seek to undermine the state’s rule and legitimacy. Since articulations of and agitations for territorial sovereignty can have lethal consequences, Indigenous peoples are

compelled to negotiate with/in an illegitimate state structure for their sovereignty, despite having never relinquished it.

In light of these material constraints, the longevity of the Idle No More movement is a particularly instructive phenomenon and merits further analysis. While my project primarily focused on the first six months of the movement, toward the end of my analysis of round dances in chapter 1 and Twitter hashtags in chapter 2, I demonstrated how ongoing, adaptive reanimation of both strategies attest to ongoing, cumulative rhetorical impacts. Since this project has not been able to engage with the full range of Idle No More activity to date, I want to briefly highlight some of the initiatives and campaigns that have occurred since the movement's emergence. Over the last decade, prominent Idle No More initiatives have included: contributing to pipeline protests (including mobilizing against the Keystone XL project from 2014 to its termination in 2021), supporting Indigenous land defenders across the globe, campaigning against detrimental legislative changes in the Canadian context (including the "KillBillC33" campaign which successfully defeated proposed changes to the *First Nations Education Act*), and enacting ongoing solidarity with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit People (MMIWG2S) activism.

The Idle No More movement has not remained equally publicly visible since 2012, yet the success of recent campaigns, including #CancelCanadaDay,<sup>109</sup> clearly

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<sup>109</sup> Idle No More launched the #CancelCanadaDay campaign during June 2021, "in the wake of the discoveries of over 1300+ unmarked graves of Indigenous children at residential 'schools'" ("80 cities and towns respond"). Organizers documented that at least 80 municipalities in 10 provinces and territories agreed to cancel Canada Day celebrations on July 1, 2021. The campaign also consisted of numerous Canada Day protests from coast to

demonstrates ongoing capacity to organize a wide range of participants, in solidarity with other causes, to achieve materially and symbolically significant sociopolitical impacts. As such, it would be productive for future research to focus on the longevity of the Idle No More movement as a specific phenomenon. Based on my analysis, I suspect that many of the elements which were initially perceived as potential hindrances to enacting sociopolitical change (no singular leadership figure, multifaceted activist focus, wide range of rhetorical strategies, international scope) have actually supported and sustained the movement's capacity to work around the spatiotemporal constraints of settler colonization. In the context of ongoing colonial violence, Idle No More's multifaceted approach (building global coalitions, channelling activist efforts around diverse but often place-based initiatives) to decolonial resistance has enabled the movement to contend with the systemic constraints on inherent Indigenous sovereignty in a systemic manner.

Turning toward the limitations of this project, I want to highlight two central considerations and discuss how they relate to my future endeavours. Firstly, this project does not provide a comprehensive analysis of Idle No More. Responding to Kimberly G. Wieser's insights about critical tendencies to prioritize verbal communication over visual, material, and, and kinesthetic/embodied forms of Indigenous rhetorical activity, my project prioritized the visual/spatial elements of social media communication (creation and use of the #Ottawapiskat hashtag on

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coast, seeking to "honour all of the lives lost to the Canadian State – Indigenous lives, Black Lives, Migrant lives, Women and Trans and 2Spirit lives" (Ibid.)



Twitter in chapter 2), as well as two forms of embodied rhetorical action (round dances in chapter 1, and youth-led long walks in chapter 4). Another form of embodied and emplaced rhetorical action I could have considered within the parameters of this project was the use of blockades and temporary train and traffic stoppages, such as the two-week railway blockade established in late December by the Aamjiwnaang First Nation near Sarnia, Ontario, and the five-hour blockade of railways between Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal which took place on January 16, 2013, the Idle No More Movement's first national day of action (“Idle No More protesters stall railway lines, highways”). Secondly, this project could have benefited from more primary research and direct consultation with Indigenous Idle No More organizers and participants. While my methodology consistently sought to foreground direct citations from published statements by Idle No More organizers and participants, obtaining additional insights through interview invitations would have further strengthened my analysis. That said, I recognize that such work would have required additional training around “ethics, theories of change, and forms of knowledge mobilization present in Collaborative Indigenous Research methodologies” (Collaborative Indigenous Research Digital Garden). Reflecting on possible expansions of this project, I would prioritize pursuing such training ahead of any future research on Indigenous rhetorics.

Shifting to consider the overall contributions of this project, I suggest that this project has added two main insights to existing critical assessments of the Idle No More movement. Firstly, my analysis of the two most prominent features of the movement’s emergent phase demonstrated how both round dances and social

media activism successfully challenged foundational aspects of settler colonization (gendered constraints aiming to eradicate prior sociopolitical orders and the discursive and material challenges to Indigenous political activism). Furthermore, by highlighting the rhetorical impacts of adaptive reoccurrences of round dances at Yonge-Dundas Square and the ongoing usage of #Ottawpiskat as a rhetorical frame, I argued that cyclical repetition and/or chronological accumulation of specific decolonial initiatives and interventions work to magnify their respective rhetorical impacts. Secondly, my investigation of the temporal overlap between the emergence of the Idle No More movement and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has affirmed and expanded critical insights about the dynamics between reconciliation-based and resurgence-based approaches to decolonization. Underscoring how inadequate critical engagement with the inherent sovereignty paradox normalizes settler colonialism by limiting decolonial resistance and existence to the institutions and discourses of the liberal democratic settler state, I demonstrated that reductive approaches to audiences and rhetorical aims (e.g., neglecting the relevance of affirmative politics, alliance-building within Indigenous communities, and expressions of survivance) risk producing reductive readings of Indigenous challenges to settler colonialism. By contrast, arguing that the Idle No More movement can be understood as a revitalization of the third space(s) of sovereignty, my analysis has highlighted the ways participants have been generating and mobilizing a discourse of empowered futurity premised on environmental advocacy, global Indigenous resurgence, and civil resistance against neocolonial power structures. In doing so, this project has challenged normalizations of settler

colonialism as a fixed or unalterable reality, actively anticipating futures informed by other sociopolitical realities: ones which already existed *before* and will continue to exist *beyond* currently dominant power structures.

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**Appendix: Poems from *Fault Lines***

“Theatrum Belli”

“Matrilineal”

“Fault Lines”

“Homecoming”

“Revision”

## Theatrum Belli

There was no anaphylactic panic  
after the two paracetamol pills  
placed under my tongue  
to break the fever  
began casting  
a different spell.

Instead, I felt flooded  
and buoyed by wonder.

I opened my mouth in front of the mirror  
and watched my throat constricting quietly.  
With steady fingertips, I searched my face.

Even the younger children  
understood death by then,  
but it was still possible to doubt  
that we would be allowed to die.

When I started to cry,  
it was at the thought  
that everything might pass  
before I could show somebody.

My father, stationed at the frontline,  
was said to be several villages away.

My mother, holding the borrowed flour sifter,  
was walking back home with more bad news.

## Matrilineal

knitting, praying, shaking a plum tree, meeting with suitors,  
naming the stars, throwing grain feed, steeping rose petals,  
housekeeping, bonesetting, learning to read, saving a ducat,  
sewing a torn sieve, holding a mirror at the harvest festival,  
fleeing the siege alone, counting the dead, burying children,

(in a brief lull between past and future wartimes,  
noting how each falling stalk of the chestnut tree  
leaves a distinctly odd mark on the twig:  
an inverted horseshoe secured with seven nails)

rising before dawn, reporting the foreman, filing a patent,  
ascending the gallows, applauding at parades, smuggling  
blue jeans, buying a new well bucket, waiting for rations,  
nursing, crying, marveling, planting unknown seeds, outliving—





## Homecoming

I sense a new note in the asymmetrical arrival  
of nighttime and think: only a few hours away  
from the first snowfall of winter.

The air is a thick, acrid swill of drying blood  
and burning wood. Within thin walls logs hiss,  
shift. Smoke strums the salted slabs of hanging ribs.

Inside the house, a small bowl of figs on the table. Stray  
crumbs by the chair and a drop of honey on the windowsill.  
The tapestry in the loom is filled with wolves.

Colonies of fireflies are asleep underground. Košava squalls  
rattle the brittle husks of huts, barns, bridges, villages.  
The wind cleans out hollows, portends holiness.

So many martyrs appear to speak. I open my mouth  
to scream and hear the sharp sizzle of a snowflake  
scorching my tongue.

\*

It is always the same landscape in dreams. I wake, set feet  
down upon unfamiliar earth and amble on. Old aches cling  
to my bones, tug me toward the next bout of homecoming.

Every exile learns: there is only one path through the locked  
gates of the past. Close eyes, clasp palms. Repeat the names  
of your lost until they dissolve into long, hushed lullabies.

