

Preface

A brilliant sun streams through the room's tall windows. I am at an event hosted by First Nations House at the University of Toronto. It is the early 2000s. We are upwards of fifteen people gathered in a circle, at ease, yet riveted by the conversation. The speaker is mixed-race nehiyaw iskwew (Cree woman) scholar-activist, author, and artist Robyn Bourgeois and the topic colonial constructions of Indigenous women as disposable. It is my introduction to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people (MMIWG2S) across what many now call Canada.

Bourgeois' stark, impassioned critique provoked my anger and activist impulses, which are, not incidentally, among the white settler reactions to Indigenous struggles that I scrutinize in this book. Not long after, I became a non-Indigenous member of No More Silence (NMS), a group of Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women dedicated to raising awareness about the issue. I have stayed connected ever since. In the intervening years, public awareness of MMIWG2S people has increased exponentially, thanks to decades of organizing by Indigenous "warrior women" (Bourgeois 2014), so much so that the Trudeau government finally launched a public inquiry into the matter in 2015. At the time, however, the topic rarely made it onto the public radar and was certainly new to me. That talk at First Nations House became a defining moment of my next decade, ultimately propelling me to research what I call the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in a contemporary Canadian context.

Immersed in the realm of Indigenous–non-Indigenous political solidarity, I soon became familiar with what was supposed to undergird our social-justice imaginaries; in the activist spaces I frequented, we were expected to valorize and act on an anticolonial analysis of Canadian settler state institutions. I also internalized the oft-repeated refrain, of Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices alike, that non-Indigenous allies should take direction from the Indigenous protagonists in our midst. I also frequently heard it said that establishing friendships with Indigenous peoples and communities is a prerequisite for political solidarity work, and I recall my increasing unease with this assumed truism – another element of my experience that shapes this research. I became well versed in widespread Indigenous critiques of the saviour mentality said to drive many non-Indigenous allies, especially white women. I therefore became hypervigilant about my position in the work as a “white settler woman,” which I define as a non-Indigenous woman of European descent whose whiteness goes without comment in most settings. All of this to say, I could talk the talk!

Nevertheless, something was niggling at me as I faced the apparent intractability of settler colonialism: how do everyday interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people reproduce colonial power structures – especially when allies are supposed to know better? In other words, the connection between the micro and the macro continued to elude me. I could not figure out, let alone explain, how white women embody and enact colonialism in everyday activist spaces. On a personal level, I frankly did not grasp how my own, seemingly individual, good intentions might help shore up collective white privilege. And so, I became curious about how white settler colonial power relations – whether reproduced or contested – play out in the solidarity encounter and, in particular, how white women within that encounter negotiate our structurally dominant position as settlers. With these initial thoughts, I spoke with thirteen Indigenous women and eleven white women about their experiences of solidarity work.

To be more explicit, this book is underscored by an unapologetically political rationale – my modest offering to the tradition of activist scholarship derived “through active engagements with, and in the service of, progressive social movements” (Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey 2009, 3). In it, I reflect on my interactions with Indigenous women and white women solidarity practitioners to yield what I hope is useful knowledge for our ongoing social movement organizing. Indeed, as an activist-turned-scholar, I embrace the notion that theory can and does connect directly and intimately to practice. As Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar, activist, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 20) notes in a scathing

critique of Western approaches to knowledge production that would neatly separate thinking and doing, “theory and praxis, story and practice are interdependent, cogenerators of knowledge.” This work represents my reading of a small slice of the knowledge produced by Indigenous women and white women through their engagement with and stories of solidarity work.

Always the aspiring scholar-activist, I take direction from feminist social movement scholar Janet Conway (2004, 6) who advises scholars involved in social-justice movements to think of themselves first and foremost as “an activist knower-practitioner among other knower-practitioners.” At the same time, she situates scholar-activists as uniquely positioned to assess social movement dynamics without idealizing those dynamics. I take up this challenge by theorizing a particular realm of activist practice – the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), in Ontario, Canada – with a hope to facilitate our collective move toward non-colonizing forms of solidarity.

In many ways, my scholarly concerns are autobiographical, emerging directly out of my work with NMS and indirectly out of my involvement since the 1990s in initiatives for social justice and human rights in the United States, Central America, and Canada. However, I deliberately chose narrative ethnography, in conjunction with participant interviews, to limit the space I allot to my story. This approach not only helps me avoid the snare of white solipsism – that is, navel-gazing tendencies or “the tendency to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world” – but also to highlight the collective, structural nature of white settler privilege (Rich 1979, 299). I make judicious use of my beliefs, fantasies, and desires as a white woman attempting solidarity with Indigenous women to shine the spotlight on white settler women’s collective subjectivity and investments in solidarity. In other words, I argue that what can seem like essentially personal or individual anxieties, motivations, and desires are not only that: they are collective, a consequence of ongoing settler colonial power dynamics. I hope that a fuller understanding of the inseparability of the individual and collective will assist white women in our roles and responsibilities related to fostering non-colonizing solidarity. Nevertheless, this book is eminently personal, reflecting as it does my perspectives as a white woman and my efforts to hold myself accountable – to Indigenous women and white women alike – for rendering the collective forces at play.

Let me be clear: this book is not about white women failing to get solidarity right or lacking political convictions or commitment. Instead, it draws on diverse women's insights and experiences to offer a perspective on the complexities of solidarity work and its vital importance, despite the challenges.