

# The Solidarity Encounter

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# Introduction

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The most fundamental principle in the search for a new political ontology for being together in the world is the relationship between the “self” and “other.”

– MAKERE STEWART-HARAWIRA, “PRACTISING INDIGENOUS FEMINISM: RESISTANCE TO IMPERIALISM”

This book is about the everyday self–other relationships of political solidarity in a particular setting: the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women/feminists and white women/feminists<sup>1</sup> in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).<sup>2</sup> This bold claim of Māori-Scots scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira that appears in the epigraph (2007, 134) has been a guiding beacon throughout my research journey, as has more recently the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Its final report is unequivocal: “Finding self-determined solutions for addressing the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people [hereafter MMIWG2S people]<sup>3</sup> means conceptualizing rights as founded in all relationships ... and understanding that at the centre of it all, we begin with our relationships to each other” (NIMMIWG 2019, 12).

I have long been determined to expose solidarity’s relational pitfalls – that is, to figure out what remains colonial about intersubjective (self–other) dynamics in solidarity work – but always with the goal of enhancing its possibilities. To do that, in this book, I concentrate on one side of the self–other equation:

white settler women’s “self-making” projects, or the ways we form our identities and make sense of being white women in solidarity spaces. I soon realized that illuminating these self-making processes required the perspectives of both white women and Indigenous women. Accordingly, I spoke to thirteen Indigenous women and eleven white women “activist knower-practitioners” about their experiences of solidarity work (Conway 2004). The result is a qualitatively based theory of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter from my vantage point as a white feminist scholar-activist. With this intervention into theory, I humbly offer an intervention into practice. I hope that looking at what has gone wrong – and right – in solidarity encounters can be a precursor to further non-colonizing relations, a point I crystallize in the final chapter.

Admittedly, not everyone will share my perspective. Canada is undisputedly a white settler context. Colonialism is in the air we breathe and a large part of who we are and are constantly becoming. We are caught in what geographer Derek Gregory (2004, xv) calls the “colonial present,” where “constellations of power, knowledge, and geography ... continue to colonize lives all over the world.”<sup>4</sup> Solidarity encounters are no different: they are microcosms of the colonial relations that saturate society more broadly. In the spirit of literary and cultural studies scholar Mary Louise Pratt (1991, 2008), we can also think of solidarity encounters as colonial contact zones where subjects, meaning making, and power relations take place. Contact zones involve inequalities that remain long after the initial contact between two or more societies, and so Indigenous–non-Indigenous political solidarity is as fraught as it is necessary. With that in mind, I propose the somewhat paradoxical idea that we *can* do solidarity in non-colonizing ways. I offer this analysis of the perils and possibilities of solidarity encounters to enrich dialogue already underway in other academic and activist endeavours.<sup>5</sup>

As an attentive reader, you will have already noted my use of “non-colonizing” rather than “decolonizing.” This requires some explanation. I had peppered my research proposal more or less equally with both terms before Stó:lō/Métis scholar, writer, and activist Lee Maracle, at the time a traditional teacher affiliated with First Nations House at the University of Toronto, pushed for clarity. After reading the proposal, she chided good-humoredly, “Do you mean decolonizing or non-colonizing? Decide!” And so I did. Before reviewing any of the literature, my intuition told me that non-colonizing was the less presumptuous choice – a kind of Hippocratic Oath for non-Indigenous allies who vow to stop doing colonial harm

in their everyday interactions. I then found Eve Tuck (Unangaâ) and K. Wayne Yang's (2014, 812) now widely cited critique of social-justice initiatives that use decolonization and its derivatives as a metaphor for things unrelated to Indigenous self-determination. I also drew inspiration from postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty's (2003) belief in the possibility of non-colonizing transnational feminist solidarity across borders. Mohanty does not so much define the concept as describe what is necessary for its fulfillment, namely, a commitment to decentring the self, engaging difference, and embracing "unsettled relationality" (Boudreau Morris 2017, 458). Perhaps Corey Snelgrove captures the essence of a non-colonizing approach, however, when he describes it as "a practice that does not reify colonization" (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 2014, 26). I have now come to think of non-colonizing as a precursor to decolonizing; it is the attitudes and actions that set the stage for a radical undoing of settler colonial structures. For a more precise or robust meaning of non-colonizing, that, dear reader, is the subject of this book.

Turning briefly to another definitional question, I know that making a categorical distinction between "Indigenous" and "settler" carries with it certain risks.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, following settler postcolonial scholars Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson (2000, 368), I believe that the lasting structural inequalities wrought by colonialism demand this analytical distinction. Besides, debates about the category settler can be a distraction (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014) and risk ignoring the real effects of its power. I conceptualize Indigenous and settler as relational and "historically porous" categories (Morgensen 2011) that accord to the political demands of a particular colonial project. Finally, I acknowledge the specific histories, solidarity work, and intersubjective relations between people of colour and Indigenous nations in Canada – relations that lie beyond the purview of this book.<sup>7</sup>

While theorizing involves a certain level of abstraction, it is always place-based. In my case, I began generating ideas about the solidarity encounter while living in downtown Toronto in the early 2000s. As the largest metropolitan area in Canada, Toronto wields potent social, political, and economic influence over the rest of the country, often making it the target of resentment. In 2011, when I started interviewing participants for this research, the GTA was home to some 5.6 million people. The City of Toronto alone had a population of 2.6 million, about 19,270 (0.8%) of whom were Indigenous.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other Canadian cities, there are no urban First Nations reserves in the GTA. The closest is the Mississaugas of Scugog First Nation,

located about 94 kilometres northeast of the city. However, Six Nations of the Grand River, the largest First Nations Reserve in Canada, is a relatively short 100-kilometre drive to the southwest.<sup>9</sup>

The Indigenous population in Toronto is a “multicultural, cosmopolitan and diasporic” group, the majority of whom arrived after the Second World War as “part of a postcolonial phenomenon arising from a history of oppression and dispossession,” according to anticolonial scholar and historian Victoria Freeman (2010, 296–97). As a result, Indigenous people from many different nations call Toronto home, some of whom have mixed heritage and/or lost connections. Many others maintain strong relationships with family and friends through frequent travel back and forth to their reserves. While things have changed considerably since Freeman wrote “‘Toronto Has No History!’ Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism and Historical Memory,” most non-Indigenous Torontonians still have little awareness of the city’s Indigenous history or contemporary reality (Freeman 2010, 295–96). The combined effect of these demographics and the sociocultural narrative Freeman describes has been the relative invisibility of Toronto’s diverse Indigenous inhabitants as Indigenous peoples; when noticed, they would have likely been seen as just another ethnic group.<sup>10</sup>

Due in no small part to the rich activist tradition of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, I had a different perspective. For many years, my epicentre was the intersection of Yonge and Bloor Streets, a stone’s throw from my apartment in University of Toronto (U of T) Student Family Housing. I rarely ventured beyond Davenport, with maybe a biannual excursion to Eglinton Avenue with my young daughter for some discount sandals. From this base, I explored the world of progressive Toronto, attending lectures, performances, and events hosted by groups including No One Is Illegal, the Ontario Coalition against Poverty, and Christian Peacemakers. In 2001, I even travelled with OISE folks to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Quebec City. I also joined U of T’s Indigenous Education Network, where I met like-minded people committed to promoting Indigenous education and research at OISE and fostering links with the broader community.

Flash forward to fall 2006. Stepping lightly over fraying antique carpets, past deep mahogany banisters, I entered a dimly lit, panelled room. I was nervous and quiet at my first No More Silence (NMS) meeting to organize the February 14 vigil for MMIWG2S people in Ontario.<sup>11</sup> As I quickly learned, Toronto (Tkaronto) is a hub of Indigenous social, cultural, political, and service organizations such as the Native Canadian Centre, the Native

Women's Resource Centre, Council Fire Native Cultural Centre, Na-Me-Res (Native Men's Residence), and Aboriginal Legal Services – all places I became familiar with through NMS.<sup>12</sup>

## The Paradox of Political Solidarity in a Colonial Landscape

Since that time, Canadian public debate about the need to redefine Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations has grown exponentially. Discussions flared noticeably at several points in the last decade: in the wake of Idle No More in late 2012,<sup>13</sup> after the release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2015, and, most recently, after the publication of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in 2019.<sup>14</sup> Even Canada's 2017 sesquicentennial did not escape scrutiny. As Ojibwe film and pop culture critic Jesse Wentz (2017) notes, "The timing was ripe for Canada's sesquicentennial to meet vocal resistance, its message recast, its meaning reframed." In the classroom, I still turn to Michif visual artist Christi Belcourt's 2017 narration of her poem "Canada, I can cite for you 150" as a powerful critique of mainstream celebrations of Canadian nationhood. Canada's "settler problem" has bubbled to the surface for an increasing number of settlers (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015; Mackey 2016; Regan 2010).

Of course, as Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar, activist, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson puts it, the elephant in the room – the matter of stolen land – looms ever larger in these discussions.<sup>15</sup> I recall listening to the CBC's "Ask Me Anything with Host Ali Hassan" on January 1, 2018, when Hassan asked CBC announcer Duncan McCue (Anishinaabe) about the one thing needed to further reconciliation. Without skipping a beat, McCue identified the resolution of conflicts over land and resources as that one thing. Closer to home, the Indigenous activists I know consistently cite the dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources through sexual and gender violence as the root cause of the crisis of MMIWG2S people (INM Collective 2014; Koonsmo and Pacheco 2016; NIMMIWG 2019; Simpson 2017; Smith 2005).<sup>16</sup> For these activists, stopping the murders and disappearances requires ending settler colonialism in Canada and the Indigenous–non-Indigenous hierarchies it sustains.

The message is clear and increasingly audible, and it includes settlers taking a proactive role in dismantling settler colonialism. The calls come from a variety of ideological quarters,<sup>17</sup> critiques of reconciliation discourse notwithstanding (Simpson 2011).<sup>18</sup> I tuned into these critiques early on in

my research at a 2011 Reconciliation Symposium in Toronto when Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) scholar Marlene Brant Castellano took the stage. The former chair of Indigenous studies at Trent University, Brant Castellano promptly admonished mainstream institutions and politicians who would use the language of reconciliation without the commitment to redress material inequities such as land dispossession. Instead, she exhorted listeners to prioritize Indigenous meanings and practices of reconciliation. My experiences in the solidarity contact zone – from public rallies to more intimate settings such as NMS meetings – attest to these doubts but also to the demand that non-Indigenous allies back Indigenous self-determination struggles by committing to solidarity work (King 2016; Kuokkanen 2012; Walia 2012). Take the email I received in 2011 from a prominent Indigenous woman activist in Toronto: “It is good to hear the organizations are uniting [around the February 14 event] ... Solidarity is one of the tools we need to bring awareness and to help promote safety nets for our beautiful women and their children, our future generations. We have to teach our children to work together so that things get done.” Later that year, Sylvia Maracle (Kanien'kehá:ka) shared her vision of what non-Indigenous support for Indigenous self-determination would entail, namely, a new conversation in which settlers do not cast Indigenous peoples as deficient.<sup>19</sup> In these and many other ways, Indigenous peoples are insisting on and fostering Indigenous–non-Indigenous relationships in which settlers are not positioned as superior (LaRocque 2010). As Coast Salish scholar Rachel Flowers (2015, 34) writes, “There has and continues to be space offered by Indigenous peoples for settlers to align themselves with our struggles to support the transformation of the colonial relationship and constructing alternatives to it.” For Flowers (2015, 35), it boils down to collective anticolonial resistance for a shared future on terms not “asymmetrically dictated” by settlers.

The Indigenous women interviewed for this book are no different. Despite the risks and challenges, they not only ask white women to engage in solidarity but also laud our efforts. Well aware of the complexities, several Indigenous participants stressed the importance of attempting solidarity. In fact, as I discuss in [Chapter 2](#), several Indigenous women claimed that non-colonizing solidarity is not only possible, but also already underway, and that *not* to attempt solidarity is in itself a colonizing behaviour. The simple fact is that non-colonizing solidarity will not happen if people do not enter the fray. Put differently, these Indigenous women urge us to *care* about their lives. If history tells us anything, however, it is that good intentions can have disastrous consequences for those on the receiving end. Thus, it

is important to appraise the positive and negative repercussions of white women's decisions to care about or help Indigenous women. In fact, throughout this book, I contemplate the ironic twist of a desire to help turned inward: white women can veer away from the political aim of dismantling colonial structures and turn exclusively toward the personal or individualistic aim of settler self-making projects.

I remind you that my purpose is not to repudiate white settler women's genuine desires and efforts to engage ethically with Indigenous women. In fact, I want to disentangle this righteous desire from the potentially damaging desire for legitimacy or belonging that can also operate in the solidarity encounter. Perhaps what I do best is convey the "messiness" of intersubjective relations in the solidarity encounter (D'Arcangelis and Huntley 2012). Clear amid that messiness, however, is a central challenge facing white women – how to be vigilant about the pernicious aspects of what I call "gendered colonial subjectivity" or white settler/liberal subjectivity in its gendered forms, broadly defined as white women's feelings, thoughts, actions, and identities in a colonial context. This challenge forms part of the paradoxical waters that all of us must navigate: how Indigenous peoples and settlers can work together to foster equitable relations in the inherently inequitable context of settler colonialism (D'Arcangelis and Huntley 2012). The effects of this paradox – existing in a seemingly inescapable colonial present – on solidarity relations require a more careful look, which is what I set out to do in this book.

## **Beginnings**

I was alone with a powerhouse – a highly respected leader in what has become a more widespread MMIWG2S movement. Mustering up my nerve, I asked, "Do you think it would be okay if I did my dissertation about NMS?" Her nonchalant yes practically brought me to tears and a visceral sense of relief flooded my body. This, I thought, is solidarity embodied.

In retrospect, that interaction obviously brings to the surface many of the themes central to this book. It reflects the blend of social activism and academia that brought me to Toronto in 1999. After seven years in Central America, I chose OISE as the place to ponder my experiences in the so-called field. I have been straddling activism and academia ever since. My tears point to the nexus of motivations – some personal, some political, some guilt-ridden – that brought me to this solidarity encounter. The leader's response signalled not only generosity but also many Indigenous

women's willingness to work with non-Indigenous allies. While I did not end up focusing exclusively on NMS, my experiences with the group plunged me into the research and found their way into this book.

My time with NMS taught me that white women need a better handle on the everyday interpersonal aspects of solidarity work if we are to neutralize the white saviour complex (Kempadoo 2015; Maurantonio 2017; Vera and Gordon 2003). I also knew we needed more experientially based research to gain this understanding. I converted these realizations into two research goals: mapping the challenges and tensions of solidarity work to the operation of gendered colonial subjectivity and developing a framework for non-colonizing solidarity, or interpersonal interactions that do not reproduce settler colonial structures. I decided interviews with solidarity practitioners were the best way to identify interactive patterns between women in the solidarity encounter. I was not disappointed. In speaking to participants and reading their narratives, certain problematic expressions, subtle and blatant, of white women's self-making stood out. In fact, while I intended to focus equally on solidarity perils and possibilities, charting the potentially damaging effects of this self-making was a more daunting task than anticipated. This is why I dedicate much of the book to unpacking the complex layers of the more perilous side of things.

My main finding is deceptively straightforward: the "white desire for proximity" to Indigenous Others can operate as a colonial impulse. That is, a colonizing relationship between Indigenous women and white women persists when white women get too close, figuratively or literally, to Indigenous women in ways that the latter deem invasive. The solidarity encounter of my theorizing is a space with multiple and overlapping boundaries, from material (physical) to intersubjective (interpersonal) to epistemic (about knowledge). As I explain more fully below, the idea of proximity is generative because it allows us to think about not only the kinds of spaces created through solidarity encounters but also the dynamics of those spaces (how white women might seek closeness) in different sociopolitical contexts. Writing this – then and now – reminds me that I am no stranger to proximity desires, as attested to by the personal exchanges I share in these pages.

But, I am getting ahead of the story. To set the record straight, I have never thought that white women go into solidarity encounters planning to reinforce settler colonial structures. If my experience is any indication, though, Indigenous women continue to have negative interactions in these encounters. Shining the spotlight on the white settler woman and her self-making is my attempt to square the facts. Drawing inspiration from

Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) groundbreaking work on white women and race,<sup>20</sup> I, too, see white women's lives as sites for reproducing and challenging colonialism.<sup>21</sup> To this end, I adapt critical whiteness scholar Barbara Heron's (1999, 41–42) question about Canadian women development workers in Africa: How do white women in Canada “negotiate and understand our positions in relations of power”?

I should clarify up front that I consider white settler women a heterogeneous category of women with diverse experiences and relative power.<sup>22</sup> For example, while class as a category came up infrequently in the interviews, Maracle cited it is an important factor in considering the scope of white women's privilege. In 2010, she generously agreed to meet me in her office to discuss my research, which was still in the proposal stage. I sat there listening intently, despite my nervous fidgeting. She began:

If you are a poor white woman, you do not necessarily occupy a dominant position vis-à-vis someone like me ... What you have is illicit citizenship in my homeland. A privilege I do not have. A poor white woman has no access to its wealth, a subjugation we share, but all white women have the privilege of citizenship in a country they contributed [minimally] to constructing.

As this book's first order of business, I consider how white women engaged in solidarity work grapple with this structural privilege as settlers and what our thoughts and deeds indicate about the perils and promise of political solidarity.

Galvanized by the conversation with Maracle, my head was awash in questions. What happens when white women confront (or are confronted with) our settler status? How does white settler guilt affect solidarity efforts? Do white women in the solidarity encounter knowingly or otherwise imagine ourselves to be “autonomous independent individuals” (Moreton-Robinson 2000) capable of denying or transcending our complicity in settler colonialism? In short, to what extent are white women prepared to reckon with our settler status, that is, our membership in a structurally dominant collectivity? What might be the consequences for solidarity if and when we do? The likelihood that notions of liberal individualism were at play started to fascinate me.

Clearly, contemporary solidarity encounters do not occur in a historical vacuum. My initial research consisted of learning about this “white woman subject” of past colonial/imperial encounters as well as Indigenous women's views on the current state of affairs (D'Arcangelis 2015). My review of this

literature fostered another important set of questions. What had become of the colonial roots of Western feminism (Yeğenoğlu 1998)? What if any “colonial continuities” (Heron 2007) exist in today’s solidarity encounter? Are white women still apt to see ourselves as the “helpers” of more “oppressed” Indigenous women?

I have not always been skeptical of self-reflexivity. After all, in putting the white settler woman under the microscope, this research is effectively one giant exercise in self-reflexivity! However, as I put the literature in conversation with what I heard from participants, I became more dubious about the role of self-reflexivity in social-justice pursuits (D’Arcangelis 2018). Consequently, in this book, I take a critical stance on self-reflexivity and ask what (else) is required to right colonizing solidarity’s wrongs. Lastly, I confronted this head-scratching problem: how can transformations at the micro level, such as self-transformations or interpersonal group dynamics, alter social relations at the macro level? In the spirit of dialogue, and with many questions remaining, I recount my journey into the complex undertaking of solidarity between Indigenous women and white women in a contemporary Canadian context.

### **The Impulse to Solidarity: Proximity and Its Discontents**

Now I can return to the animating idea of this book, which is that a white desire for proximity to Indigenous Others can operate as a colonial impulse. That is to say, a colonial relationship between Indigenous women and white women persists in part when white women get too close, figuratively or literally, to Indigenous women in ways deemed invasive by the latter. Moreover, the boundaries in question can be material, intersubjective, or epistemic.

There are several theoretical claims wrapped up in this finding, the main one being this: the deep-seated desire for belonging that characterizes collective white settler subjectivity is necessarily a factor in how white women negotiate the solidarity encounter. In other words, part of being a settler involves a more-often-than-not subconscious yearning to live legitimately on stolen land. What I find most remarkable about this desire – a desire that attaches to liberal subjects in colonial contexts – is its manifestation in the solidarity encounter as a white desire to be “close” to Indigenous women. This is what I call the “desire for proximity.” Accordingly, much of what I track in this book falls under the “problem with proximity.” By this, I mean the fact that over-pursuing closeness through a multiplicity of ways and for a multiplicity of reasons – such as desires for acceptance, inclusion,

forgiveness, healing, purpose, empowerment, or friendship – can potentially enable white women such as myself to disavow our complicity in colonial hierarchies. Working in tandem with the desire for proximity is the closely related white pursuit of exceptionalism, or the wish to be (or, more cynically, to be seen as) an exception to the rule – a “good settler” versus a “bad settler.”

To describe the desire for proximity in both its latent and manifest forms, I coin two phrases: the “spectrum of proximity” and the “impulse to solidarity.” Spectrum of proximity provides a way to group together the desires that I find connote, involve, or require proximity in one form or another, namely, the above-mentioned list of desires – for acceptance, inclusion, forgiveness, healing, purpose, empowerment, or friendship.<sup>23</sup> Impulse to solidarity refers to the latent or activated drive to satiate those desires through solidarity work. I argue that this impulse, which is in effect an impulse to pursue proximity through solidarity work, flows from a particular formulation of gendered colonial subjectivity. As I envisage it, the solidarity impulse relates to, but is distinct from, Barbara Heron’s (2007, 6) “helping imperative” or the “desire for other people’s development” that drives white/northern, middle-class women to do development work in the Global South. In contrast, the solidarity impulse happens “here” in Canada and can include what initially seem like contradictory drives: the white woman’s desires to “help” and “be helped by” Indigenous Others. Expanding the point, the desire to help has an underside evoked with the phrase to be helped by. This underside contains an assortment of self-serving or, more accurately, self-making reasons why settlers in general and white women in particular might engage in solidarity with Indigenous Others. It is here, on the underside, where the desires for proximity defined above thrive best. In short, I argue that Indigenous women’s embodied or metaphoric presence can help white women in the sense of facilitating our self-making projects.

It is important to emphasize that, in my view, it is the uninterrogated, unmitigated impulse to solidarity – not the impulse per se – that generates colonial tensions among women in solidarity encounters and undermines the effectiveness of political solidarity. Furthermore, I do not interpret the solidarity impulse as an all-encompassing concept that exhausts all possible forms of white women’s engagement in solidarity work. Rather, think of it as a conceptual device that helps us identify the problems with proximity and some potential solutions, including ways to temper, disrupt, mitigate, check, forestall, pause, apprehend, or even stop the impulse.

I in no way mean to diminish the degree to which white women in solidarity encounters grapple with our collective privilege and foundationally tenuous or precarious status as settlers. As I mention above, some Indigenous participants emphasize that non-colonizing solidarity is already underway. Even as I signal the tenaciousness of white settler/liberal subjectivity and the quest for innocence at its core, I cite a cautious optimism among participants about facilitating and fostering non-colonizing solidarity.

One more point about this core finding warrants mention. The pervasiveness of spatial references in participant narratives prompted me to characterize both the problem (colonizing solidarity) and its solution (non-colonizing solidarity) in spatialized terms: when white settler women attempt to get too close to Indigenous women, we can cross boundaries or thresholds – figurative or literal – that we should not cross. In these instances, solidarity work risks being worse than ineffectual: it can reproduce white settler structural privilege. In the final chapter, I draw on participant insights to propose a framework for reconfiguring social relations in the solidarity encounter, a framework best encapsulated by the directive “step back, but not out,” as put by an Indigenous participant. What happens when white settler women become aware of and curb the impulse to engage unthinkingly in solidarity? Half the battle, I suggest, is to recognize when our settler/liberal self-interest is about to take centre stage and compel us to come too close to Indigenous women, thereby diminishing the collective political project of solidarity.

### **On Indigenous–Non-Indigenous Alliances, Coalitions, and Solidarities**

This book contributes to a growing cross-disciplinary scholarship on contemporary alliances, coalitions, and solidarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, and on Indigenous–settler relations more broadly.<sup>24</sup> I am especially indebted to the work of Indigenous studies and settler scholar Lynne Davis, whose edited collection *Alliances: Re/envisioning Indigenous–Non-Indigenous Relationships* (2010a) remains among the most comprehensive and wide-ranging texts on these subjects. In fact, Davis (2010b, 2) has long posed similar questions about solidarity’s paradoxes, namely, how non-Indigenous people can “work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples without replicating the continuing colonial relations that characterize the broader frame of Indigenous/non-Indigenous

relationships in Canada today.” Gender and feminist studies scholar May Chazan (2020, 47–48) phrases the question slightly differently: “Can settler struggles for home and futurity become one critical ‘site of uncomfortable change’ in this project of decolonization?” I hope to enrich our collective answers to these questions and others. The broad consensus across this scholarship and in popular literature is that Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations in and beyond solidarity work need reconfiguring.<sup>25</sup> However, little material centres gender as an analytic or focuses intensely on intersubjectivity and the subject-making dynamics of solidarity work. This book attempts to do both.

Settler subjectivity is a vital if sometimes implied subtheme of this literature.<sup>26</sup> For example, settler anticolonial scholar Chris Hiller touches on a core theme of this book. In her study of twenty-two Euro-Canadian solidarity activists, Hiller (2017, 432) concludes that settlers grapple with their colonial complicity through upward (outward focused) and downward (inward focused) “competing spirals of reflection and action.” My framework for non-colonizing solidarity points to the importance of balancing these spirals. In reflecting on his experiences of allyship with Indigenous peoples, geographer Adam Barker (2010, 326) warns settler allies that we cannot extract ourselves from colonial power dynamics just by “confront[ing] the colonial legacy within our own psyches.” Here, Barker touches on the desire for transcendence that my findings suggest can underpin white women’s negotiations of solidarity relations. Barker (2010, 328) cites other barriers to solidarity of relevance to my research, including the effects of settler-ally guilt arising out of egocentricity and settler abdication of our individual and collective responsibilities to take action. In a subsequent book, Barker and coauthor Emma Battell Lowman (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015, 99–105) describe how settler identity reproduces colonial structures and practices through “settler moves to comfort.” They also describe how settler identity can, when unsettled, be a step toward dismantling colonialism (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015, 107). I build upon these threads of Battell Lowman’s and Barker’s work with empirical research into how settler moves to comfort manifest in white women’s solidarity work and how we might mitigate them. Similarly, Corey Snelgrove, Rita Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel (2014) discuss various settler “moves to innocence,” including recourse to a good–bad settler binary and declarations of settler privilege, which can facilitate a central aspect of settler subjectivity – the underlying desire to deny structural complicity in settler colonial systems. My qualitative study builds on their ideas by examining how such dynamics might unfold in a

particular site: the solidarity encounter between Indigenous women and white women in the GTA.

Other themes relevant to this book, including settler self-reflexivity and transformation, permeate much of the literature. Like Barker, Paulette Regan (2010, 11) draws on her lived experience to consider the “pedagogical potential of truth-telling and reconciliation processes.” As a former IRS claims manager who shares Taiaiake Alfred’s critique of hegemonic reconciliation discourse, Regan (2010, 11) seeks to reframe reconciliation as a process wherein settlers would be induced to self-reflexively “unsettle” their internal settler selves and “deconstruct the foundational myth of the benevolent peacemaker – the bedrock of settler identity.” Also invoking the would-be ally’s need for transformation, Lynne Davis and Heather Yanique Shpuniarsky (2010) share a list of guiding principles for effective Indigenous–non-Indigenous alliances.<sup>27</sup> They describe coalitions as sites of pain for everyone but note how challenging it is for many non-Indigenous people “to look inward at their own roles within colonialization, and confront themselves” (Davis and Shpuniarsky 2010, 343). For Barker, Regan, and Davis and Shpuniarsky, settler and settler ally self-reflection is indispensable to solidarity projects. I agree with but also complicate this premise by suggesting that self-reflexivity can backfire and reproduce the white settler/liberal subject as dominant and the Indigenous subject as traumatized and in need of assistance (Million 2013). In this way, I chart the lingering gendered effects of the benevolent peacemaker myth on the settler-turned-ally and develop guidelines that include radical self-reflexivity as a necessary if fraught element for the subversion of this myth.

Like Davis and Shpuniarsky, scholar-activist Harsha Walia develops a list of basic principles related to solidarity. Walia’s (2012, 30) list starts with the need for non-Indigenous people to acknowledge that we benefit from the illicit usurpation of Indigenous land and that we operate in “complicated ways, often as simultaneously oppressed and complicit” in colonial relations. Like Barker, Walia (2012, 28) warns against the paralysis of guilt that can ensue “when faced with this truth” and notes “the line between being too interventionist and being paralyzed.” In “No More Silence, Toward a Pedagogy of Feminist Decolonizing Solidarity,” I, together with Audrey Huntley (D’Arcangelis and Huntley 2012), echo Walia in citing the need for non-Indigenous people to balance their responsibility to ride toward decolonizing solidarity by not taking over the wheel. In this book, I complement Walia’s macro view with a micro one, identifying a key challenge for white women: how to grapple with our colonial complicity without capitulating to white guilt or sending our settler desire for belonging into overdrive.

Critical whiteness scholars Barbara Heron (1999, 2007) and Emma Kowal (2011, 2015) are among the few scholars to complete empirical studies on whiteness and colonialism in relation to solidarity. As I mentioned, Heron's insights into the helping imperative jump-started my own thinking about the possibility of a similar impulse among white women in Canadian solidarity encounters. I also look to Kowal's (2011, 320) Australian-based ethnography on the "stigma of white privilege," a feeling engendered in some white people who take "responsibility for the effects of colonization on Indigenous people." I extend Kowal's work in a gendered reading of similarly aware white women in solidarity encounters. In the process, I raise the distinct and somewhat ironic possibility that a heightened awareness of one's settler status can provoke a crisis of belonging, which can set into motion or exacerbate the solidarity impulse.

### **Indigenous Women Take to Task "Whitestream" Feminism**

As mentioned, the genesis of this research lies in my solidarity work with Indigenous women, which made me wonder why they expressed continual frustration, annoyance, even outrage toward white women's attitudes and behaviours in solidarity encounters – and how everyday interactions could reproduce structural colonial inequities. Likewise, Indigenous women's scholarship on their fraught encounters with whitestream feminist theory and practice have profoundly shaped my approach in this book.<sup>28</sup> Their critiques coalesce around three interrelated aspects of mainstream feminism that have hindered women's/feminist solidarity: a singular focus on gender and patriarchal oppression; an insufficient understanding and application of colonialism as an analytic; and the operation of a colonial impulse to "save" Indigenous women (Grande 2004; Maracle 1996, 2006; Monture-Angus 1995, 1999; Moreton-Robinson 2000).<sup>29</sup> While Indigenous scholars/activists acknowledge the pluralistic, heterogeneous, and dynamic nature of feminist theories and practices over time (see St. Denis 2007, 34), they target those mainstream feminist formulations that have privileged the issues of white, middle-class Western women. Scholars contend that as a result, certain academic and activist settings have overlooked or eclipsed Indigenous women's agency and concerns (see Green 2007c, 2017b). This book is my response to these and other Indigenous/feminist insights.<sup>30</sup>

Geonpul feminist scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) is among those Indigenous scholars who have greatly influenced my approach to studying the solidarity encounter. In her pathbreaking book *Talkin' Up to*

*the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, she examines whiteness as a colonial instrument in contemporary Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations in Australia. She vehemently argues that white feminist academic privilege hinges on the structural invisibility of whiteness, which in turn allows white feminist academics to remain unaware of their complicity in racist, colonial processes. Her account of white feminist subjectivity aligns with other hard-hitting Indigenous critiques of whitestream feminism, including critiques of the liberal individualism lodged within its praxis.<sup>31</sup> Moreton-Robinson (2000, 147) argues that white Australian feminist academics epitomize this tendency to “perceive themselves as autonomous independent individuals, whose antiracist practice is orchestrated through an intellectual engagement based on objective rational thinking and behaviour.” In other words, they can engage with race or colonialism without putting themselves in the picture and recognizing the embodied, lived aspects of their privilege. Moreton-Robinson’s analysis deeply informs mine. I not only adapt her methodology to consider the ways in which white participants grapple with being settlers, but I also consider the problems that can ensue when white women unintentionally adopt an individualistic orientation toward the solidarity encounter.

Indigenous scholars also fault mainstream feminism’s depoliticization of difference, which only reinforces the invisibility of Indigenous women. Moreton-Robinson (2000, xviii) finds that, despite claims to the contrary, a “deracialized but gendered universal subject” still buttresses white feminist claims about so-called difference. On a slightly different note, Sandy Grande (Quechua) (2004, 138) maintains that the linguistic turn in third-wave feminism can deflect attention away from colonial power inequities by evacuating feminist terrain of political struggle and populating it instead with “decentred subjects” more concerned with “struggle over language and representation.” Both Moreton-Robinson and Grande are ultimately concerned with the disavowal and hence perpetuation of power inequities among women/feminists. The upshot, they argue, is a feminist praxis that remains overly concerned with the interests of white middle-class women of Euro-American descent (see also Johnson, Stevenson, and Greschner 1993; Stewart-Harawira 2007). My analysis points to instances when white women doing solidarity work appear to wield, knowingly or otherwise, tactics such as relativizing oppressions and thus risk prolonging a fraught relationship between Indigenous women and white women.

Unsurprisingly, Indigenous women have balked at the need to explain themselves in whitestream feminist terms, that is, to prioritize gender (and

patriarchy) over other facets of their lives. Kanien'kehá:ka lawyer, educator, writer, and scholar Patricia Monture objects to defining herself "negatively," that is, in relation to whiteness by default (Turpel 1993, 187). Instead, Monture (1995) and many others describe race and gender as inextricably bound up in their sense of themselves as individuals and nations. Indeed, Indigenous feminist epistemologies posit an abiding connection between self, family, community, nation, and Creation (Anderson 2000; Cordova 2004; Simpson 2017; Waters 2004a). Cree scholar Winona Stevenson recounts her exasperation with (white) feminists who promote the notion of a common oppression among women, implying that colonial oppression creates a stronger bond with her male relatives than does gender oppression with non-Indigenous women (quoted in Johnson, Stevenson, and Greshner 1993, 167). These scholars strike at the heart of whitestream feminist praxis, which tends to privilege gender/patriarchy but downplay or even omit colonialism, and sometimes racism or classism, as an analytical category for conceptualizing women's oppression (Monture-Angus 1995; Ouellette 2002). This disregard indicates a broader failure among white feminists to interpret histories of gender relations beyond a European-based model on their own terms. The result is a misguided or inadequate understanding of the devastating impact of colonialism on those relations – often described with regard to the imposition of patriarchal gender norms and Christian values onto Indigenous nations and the dismantling of more equitable gender relations.<sup>32</sup> While Indigenous scholars debate the extent to which heteropatriarchy and sexism are colonial inventions, all agree that sex/gender discrimination is now an indisputable reality in Indigenous communities that must be redressed (Green 2007c; St. Denis 2007).<sup>33</sup> As a result, Indigenous women have framed political efforts to amend the Indian Act and to redress violence against Indigenous women as Indigenous struggles for sex and gender equality.<sup>34</sup>

I am mainly concerned in this book with the implications of mainstream feminism not applying an anticolonial lens. After all, Indigenous women and women of colour in particular have long critiqued mainstream anti-violence movements for their ethnocentric perspectives (Beads with Kuokkanen 2007; Maracle 1996; Monture-Angus 1995; Turpel 1993; Vickers 2002). Such movements have not understood why Indigenous women tie antipatriarchal struggles against sexual and gender violence to anticolonial struggles for self-determination. In fact, the necessity of integrating antipatriarchal and anticolonial struggles is now an axiom of Indigenous feminism (FIMI 2006; Green 2007a, 2017b; Jaimes Guerrero 1997; Kauanui 2017;

Kuokkanen 2012, 2019; Lawrence 2003; Maracle 2006; Mihesuah 2003; Million 2008; Monture-Angus 1995; Ouellette 2002; Sunseri 2000).<sup>35</sup> Simply put, when whitestream feminism is unable or refuses to link Indigenous women's empowerment to that of their communities, solidarity work can fall short. More relevant to my argument, white women/feminist praxis that lacks an anticolonial lens will occlude the complicity of white women in colonial processes (see Flowers 2015; Anderson 2000; Monture-Angus 1995; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Grande 2004; Lawrence and Dua 2005).

In their discussions of the ethnocentric, universalizing, and exclusionary elements of some feminisms, many Indigenous scholars express indebtedness to Black feminist thought and women of colour scholarship more broadly (Maracle 1996; Settee, cited in Rebick 2005; Simpson 2017; St. Denis 2007; Sunseri 2008; Turpel 1993). The theoretical advances of this vast literature also find echoes in this book.<sup>36</sup> For example, Black feminist scholarship on working across difference has indelibly shaped my assessment of solidarity relations. The ideas of Audre Lorde (2007, 123) saturate the fabric of my weave of solidarity's potential: "We sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival." I adhere to Lorde's belief in our potential to identify and achieve common goals through collective struggle. However, as Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983, 356) reminds us in a seminal piece on coalitions, despite their indispensability to the pursuit of social justice, coalitions are neither inherently easy nor safe, but threatening "to the core" for those involved. In other words, our very sense of self is often at stake – a central starting assumption of this book. bell hooks (2000) also acknowledges the exceedingly difficult but vital nature of working across difference. Adamant that neither women's common oppression or automatic sisterhood are givens, hooks firmly believes feminist political solidarity can – and must – be forged as a prerequisite for transforming society. For these visionary thinkers, what matters is how we conceive of and what we do with the undeniable differences between us: transformative potential is unleashed not through the formation of power-laden hierarchies out of differences but rather through the creative mingling of non-hierarchical differences (Lorde 2007). Likewise, for me, the real issue is how – not whether – white women should approach solidarity work with Indigenous peoples.

The concept of intersecting or interlocking oppressions also underpins my analysis (Combahee River Collective 1979; Crenshaw 1991; Hill

Collins 2000; hooks 2000; Smith 1983). As critical race feminist scholar Sherene Razack (1998, 14) explains, when women fail to understand oppressions as mutually constitutive, “we fail to realize that we cannot undo our own marginality without simultaneously undoing all the systems of oppression.” In a coauthored publication of the same year, Mary Louise Fellows and Razack (1998) point to a major obstacle to understanding the interlocking nature of power: the “race to innocence” that results when women focus on their subordinate rather than structurally dominant position, an idea I apply when analyzing white exceptionalism as it relates to proximity desires. My logic in this book hinges on the practical directive embedded in understanding oppression and difference in these ways: rather than focus on cultural differences, dominant subjects (in this case, white women) would do well to focus on historically derived, structural power differences and how they are sustained through, for instance, white women’s self-making projects (Razack 1998). As hooks (2000) points out, conceptualizing difference in cultural terms alone does not necessarily lead to identifying power differences or altering the material, exploitative consequences of “Othering.”

Working effectively across difference requires all women, especially those with relative privilege, to attend to power relations between women. Accordingly, if I aim to analyze the effects of white settler colonialism on solidarity work, a close analysis of white women’s negotiations of their structural privilege is in order. As Razack (1998, 21) writes, “Tracing complicity thus begins with a mapping of relations among women. We can then critically examine those constructs that homogenize our differences or package them as innate, decontextualized, and ahistorical.” Returning to the story, I grounded my research in this insistence on mapping relations among women and understanding how oppressions interlock, in the hopes of developing a blueprint for making colonialism foundational to feminist praxis. In conjunction, Indigenous scholarship pushed me to ask *why* white women might find it hard to consistently adopt an anticolonial feminist lens. Might this difficulty stem from the historical involvement of white women in colonial/imperial projects? In other words, how has the evolution of a particular combination of gender, race, and class – the white settler woman subject – affected white women’s self-perception as actors in contemporary solidarity encounters? I then had to fashion a theoretical approach that would allow me to examine the nuances of gendered colonial subjectivity – white women’s proscribed roles in settler colonial contexts and everything that goes into how we negotiate them in the solidarity encounter.

## Theorizing Gendered Colonial Subjectivity

Theoretically speaking, what does it mean to say that our very sense of self is at stake in solidarity encounters? Let me begin with a fundamental premise that dwells at the heart of this book: we cannot detach ourselves from or transcend the power structures around us; but we can, and do, shape and alter those structures. Moreover, because individuals and groups form in relation to other individuals and groups through discursive interactions, individual and collective subjectivities are interdependent (Boyd 2004). Hence, my repeated refrain throughout these pages that the seemingly individual desires, motivations, and behaviours of white women in solidarity encounters both mirror and shape our collective sense of what it means to be a white settler woman. When mindful of this two-way street, I suggest, we are better able to decentre our white settler selves in solidarity work and recognize our desire for belonging for what it is: largely a consequence of our structural position as members of a white settler collectivity.

I conceptualize subject positions as historically and discursively produced structural positions that reflect and consolidate power, endowing people with or stripping them of privilege, regardless of individual intentionality. Nonetheless, subject positions are impermanent states that we collectively construct over time through our attempts to “occupy” or “perform” them – leading to my next point. People exercise agency to “inhabit” (Mahmood 2011) the subject positions into which they are “interpellated” to varying degrees, at varying moments, and often contradictorily. This means there is room for manoeuvring. In short, I agree with Battell Lowman and Barker (2015, 16) when they claim, “individual choices and efforts building to collective action are required to create change.” By rendering agency in this way, I hold the door open for white settler engagement in non-colonizing solidarity.

In this book, however, I take issue with a sharply contrasting assertion about subjectivity, what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 154) describes as a “hyperindividualism that negates relationality.” This is the sense of self that lurks in the shadows of solidarity work. As philosopher of education scholar Dwight Boyd (2004, 6) explains, this particular rendition of the liberal self has developed over the past five hundred years into a “tendency to focus on all forms of social interaction through the lens of the discrete individual” (read: pull yourself up by your bootstraps). In what amounts to a fictive, abstract, and idealized account of the self, human beings are endowed with four features – ontological uniqueness (as disembodied, discrete individuals), symmetrical positioning (as equals), intentional rational agency

(reason), and the capacity for transcendence (of power structures) (Boyd 2004, 9–11). Operating under these rules limits our ability to fathom power hierarchies, let alone see ourselves as privileged members of a structurally dominant group such as white settlers (Boyd 2004). While I do note instances of white women's hyperindividualism in solidarity encounters, I also identify moments when we are prepared to perceive ourselves as members of a dominant collectivity. At the same time, the bricks and mortar of settler colonial logic (or, more accurately, illogic) can stymie even the best intentioned among us.

### **Fine-Tethered Friends: Whiteness, Colonialism, and the Liberal Subject**

As I demonstrate in my analysis of the solidarity encounter, Patrick Wolfe's (2006) assertion that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event has direct implications for settler identity and behaviour. The dynamics go something like this: solidarity encounters are not one-offs or isolated events, but rather relationships occurring under the influence of the settler colonial state. Moreover, Canada's project to sustain its own permanence requires settlers to adopt a particular subject position or set of assumptions about themselves. As gender studies scholar and anthropologist Scott Morgensen (2011, 16) explains, settler colonialism enjoins settlers to engage in a particular act of self-making, that is, to "naturalize their presence on Native land as rightful, final occupants so that the question of conquest can appear to be 'settled'" (see also Veracini 2011). In short, we must convince ourselves, and one another, that we "belong" here. The matter appears far from settled, however. The inherent instability of a community/nation built on stolen Indigenous land cannot help but plague us, even provoking in some an identity crisis "born of [this] psychic and material need to emplace himself" (Razack 2011, 266). This is the desire for legitimacy/permanence referred to throughout this book, a desire that must be continuously mollified by denying colonial power hierarchies (Ahmed 2000). Through this disavowal, most settlers avert a crisis of belonging, even as it lies dormant. However, settler anxieties can surface for a variety of reasons, not least in the presence of Indigenous self-determination that poses "a threat to one's sense of self, of belonging and a hoped for ethical future," as Lisa Slater (2019, 22) says about Australian "good white people." Battell Lowman and Barker (2015, 95) draw a similar conclusion in their gripping analysis of settler subjectivity in Canada: "Seeing the indefensibility of colonialism, the dishonesty of defining national narratives, the threat of being illegitimate on

the land” can shatter a settler’s sense of belonging (see also Mackey 2016). Solidarity work may in fact do just that. By bringing colonial realities into sharp relief, it can cause the crisis to bubble up to the surface and reach a boiling point. While self-making through settler emplacement takes a variety of forms, in this book I chart some of the paths and fault lines of white women’s self-making as it unfolds in the solidarity encounter.

I want to flag once again the distinction between settler desires for legitimacy or belonging, which are precarious by definition in settler colonial contexts, and the righteous desire to engage ethically with Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the coexistence, intermingling, and resulting clash of these desires – within and between subjects – is emblematic of the paradox of attempting solidarity in the colonial present and is at the very centre of this book. For this reason, I propose that understanding the white settler desire for belonging in its collective dimension could diminish its power and clear the path for ethical solidarity.

The women I spoke to offer evidence to suggest that truisms about gender, whiteness, colonialism, and Western individualism can combine to impede settler paths to ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples. Along these lines, a cross-disciplinary chorus of scholars argues that white settler/liberal subjectivity is essentially an amalgam.<sup>37</sup> For instance, postcolonial feminist scholar Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998, 95) describes how ideas about progress, modernization, white supremacy, and universalism associated with the Enlightenment also acted as “legitimizing categories in the civilizing mission of colonial power.” The Latin American Modernity/coloniality (M/C) group goes further, positing that Iberian colonial enterprises enabled post-Enlightenment modernity in the first place, thus ushering in the race and gender hierarchies that continue to underpin settler/liberal subjectivity.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the liberal subject comes into being in the colonial moment. I begin the next chapter by considering why this confluence of colonial and liberal subjectivity matters to the solidarity encounter. In fact, I suggest that white women are prone, though not inevitably, to adopt a settler/liberal outlook even prior to entering the encounter.

### **Saving Others to Save Themselves: Gendering the Subject**

The next step was to gender white settler/liberal subjectivity, which required tracing the historical antecedents of white woman self-making. For this, I looked to Maracle’s (1993, 126) characteristically direct and incisive analysis: “Nationalism and racism infused life into patriarchy and bent the

direction of [Euro-Canadian] feminism before it was ever fully conceived.” In other words, middle- to upper-class white women in a majority-white women’s movement sought “white male status,” that is, inclusion into the broadly liberal, racist terms of the British Empire and, later, Canadian settler colonialism. They typically did this by embracing the role of saviour or helper to more oppressed women – whether at home or abroad. In [Chapter 2](#) especially, I develop the concept of the solidarity impulse to consider the complicated effects of this history (see also “Proximity and Its Discontents” above). To summarize, this impulse refers to the white woman drive to satiate the desire for proximity to Indigenous women through solidarity work. Importantly, I argue that this impulse flows from a particular historical formulation of gendered colonial subjectivity, which I condense into the next five paragraphs.

This complex story has a multitude of diverse actors on both sides of the imperial/colonial divide, including some who straddled that divide.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, in post-Enlightenment colonial modernity, race conferred white women more power, however circumscribed, than that of their nonwhite counterparts. White women were to be the “mothers of the race” (Valverde 1992) – or working-class servants to those mothers – in British imperial pursuits. They were to model racialized thinking, “middle-class morality, nationalist sentiments, bourgeois sensibilities, normalized sexuality, and a carefully circumscribed ‘milieu’ in school and home” (Stoler 1995, 105). Especially apropos to this book, they were to espouse “the values of liberal rationality” (McClintock 1995, 168). In what would become Canada, many white women also played pivotal roles in securing empire and, later, nationhood.<sup>40</sup> For Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 97), figures such as Susanna Moodie represent the white settler woman who could harness race privilege over gender subordination to advance her status in a fledgling nation.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, white protofeminists were in a bind, needing to negotiate their “double positioning” (Loomba 2005) as “the inferior sex in the superior race” (Burton 1994).<sup>42</sup> As feminist historian Inderpal Grewal (1996, 58) implies, it is no small irony that the same women who fought patriarchy upheld England’s white supremacist, imperialist pursuits. Even the most progressive white woman would have capitulated to the “colonial realm and imperial habitus” of the day (Grewal 1996, 80).<sup>43</sup> In fact, the central strategy of liberation was to overcome one’s subordinate gender status through embracing one’s dominant racial status (Burton 1994; Grewal 1996; Lewis 1996; Loomba 2005; Valverde 1992; Ware 1992).<sup>44</sup>

In a word, their paradoxical positioning as marginalized by gender and privileged by race meant that Euro-Canadian white protofeminists were cast in a particular role in colonial modernity – as the saviours of purportedly more inferior women (Burton 1994). Indeed, white women were not automatically welcomed into the post-Enlightenment club. They entered modernity as universal, rights-bearing subjects by deeming themselves better than and thus equipped to help women elsewhere. This, according to Grewal (1996, 63), was the function of the British colonies; there, Englishwomen could prove their racial superiority and assume their place in what was “conceived of as a heterosexual and masculinist project.” In short, they embraced the heteropatriarchal, racist terms of empire.

For these reasons, Euro-Canadian feminism and white women’s “freedom” in colonial modernity have turned on a deep contradiction: our freedom at the expense of the “freedom and autonomy of native cultures” (Yeğenoğlu 1998, 96). Yeğenoğlu (1998, 103) explains the paradox of universalism, how white Western women learn to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals. Subscribing to a false freedom–unfreedom binary, we locate ourselves on the side of freedom – as paragons of womanly virtue, goodness, and benevolence – notwithstanding the oppressive material conditions of many white women’s lives.<sup>45</sup> In this picture, we get to represent the universal category “woman” by relegating other women such as Indigenous women to the “particular.”<sup>46</sup> Because the universalizing gesture is available to Western women precisely through the moment of colonial modernity, Yeğenoğlu, like Maracle (1993) before her, argues that mainstream Western feminism is colonial at its root.

To round out this discussion of gendered colonial subjectivity, I turn to Gayatri Spivak’s (1985, 244–45) neat wrap-up of the ultimate prize in subject making for white settler/imperialist women at the time – individualistic personhood in “two registers: childbearing and soul-making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual reproduction cathected as ‘compassionate love’; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social mission.” In simpler terms, the white settler/imperialist woman is charged with double duty, that is, the reproduction of the white race in both literal (child-making) and figurative (soul-making) terms.

In light of this history, I considered what has become of this civilizing imperative in the solidarity encounter. Do white women still want access to a white, bourgeois men’s club that still denies us entry? Does our position as the “inferior sex in the superior race” (Burton 1994) still trigger a desire to see ourselves as less oppressed than, superior to, and capable of “helping” Indigenous women? How might this desire simultaneously comingle with

solidarity work and the desire for belonging? Chapter by chapter, I address these and other questions by mounting an argument about the complexities of the solidarity impulse – the gendered colonial drive to satiate our desires for proximity through solidarity work. Throughout, I highlight some of the ways in which white women are consciously – and conscientiously – reckoning with that subjectivity.

### **A Not-So-Trivial Pursuit: Proximity and the White Woman**

To think about the actual practices of proximity – what white women might think, feel, and do to (re)position ourselves as modern settler/liberal subjects who “belong” – I turned to one of Sara Ahmed’s earlier works, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*. Ahmed (2000, 12) defines colonial encounters as strange encounters that “involve, at one and the same time, social and spatial relations of distance and proximity.” Most intriguingly for Ahmed, these encounters themselves set off a dynamic through which dominant groups come to think of themselves as superior to “strangers” (read: inferior Others). Ahmed (2000, 5) refers to this as stranger fetishism, the process by which dominant groups sever so-called strangers “from the social and material relations which overdetermine their existence” and simply know them as always already inferior. Dominant subjects forget the historical “processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion” that made them dominant in the first place (Ahmed 2000, 6). As a result, Others/strangers magically appear as different/inferior. This obfuscation of histories of structural (dis)advantage afford dominant subjects a sense of innocence.

This imaginary element – the dominant subject’s capacity to remain willfully ignorant of historical power relations – is what I find most revelatory for my purposes. Drawing on Ahmed, I theorize the solidarity encounter as a mode of proximity where there is a considerable, though never absolute, risk that stranger fetishism will kick in. When it does, I argue, stranger fetishism can obscure colonial relations and, along with them, white women’s self-perceptions as members of a settler collectivity, leaving only atomistic liberal individuals in the wake. In fact, Ahmed’s dominant subject is the classic settler/liberal subject of colonial modernity, brimming with fantasies of autonomy and transcendence. Like Dwight Boyd (2004), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000), and others, Ahmed debunks the ideal of the Western liberal subject personified by a white man with the rational capacity to know Others and move unrestricted through social or geographical spaces. Drawing on such approaches, I consider if and how settler

self-making involves masking colonialism’s “histories of determination” (Ahmed 2000, 31–32) – precisely what must happen for settler colonialism to become and remain naturalized (Morgensen 2011).

There is another aspect of stranger fetishism I find particularly useful, which is the phenomenon of “going strange, going native” (Ahmed 2000, 115). Importantly, the three main techniques of going strange, going native are “consuming, becoming and passing,” which all involve proximity/closeness.<sup>47</sup> In [Chapter 1](#), I “gender” Ahmed’s account to consider how white women’s desires for proximity can work in solidarity encounters to (re) produce gendered colonial subjectivity. I then examine how white women sometimes employ these and other techniques – including calls for friendship and acquiring knowledge of the Other – to reinstall settler dominance by (re)concealing settler colonial “histories of determination.” Put another way, I underline ways in which white women sometimes mobilize proximity in attempts to transcend settler colonialism. In [Chapter 2](#), I draw on Indigenous participant narratives to delineate the problem with proximity, namely, the invasive transgression of boundaries when that pursuit goes too far. In [Chapter 3](#), I home in on the fantasy of “becoming other,” where settlers seek to inhabit all things Indigenous – a fair summary of settler colonialism’s essence. I also discuss the often convoluted paths settlers, and white women in particular, sometimes take – using Indigenous people as the vehicle – to reaffirm their sense of belonging on Indigenous land.

To summarize, white women are at risk of operationalizing white settler/liberal subjectivity’s central dynamic – a deeply entrenched desire for legitimacy and belonging – through pursuing proximity to Indigenous women. Underpinning our pursuit are gendered assumptions about white women as the good helpers of Other women. Throughout this book, I discuss why this role can be extremely difficult to give up for many white women attempting solidarity work. Like most stories, however, this one is complicated. Thus, I consider the twists and turns of solidarity work or, more aptly, how white women negotiate our double positioning while in the solidarity encounter, which includes struggling with the solidarity impulse.

### **Reversing the Gaze: Encountering Methods**

I start my course on Indigenous feminisms by warning students about the risk of focusing on “damage-centered studies, rescue research, and pain tourism,” as put by education scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014, 812). In this book, I heed this warning by not focusing on Indigenous women’s

oppression but instead applying a central tenet of Indigenous feminism, which is to scrutinize colonial dynamics, in this case, those that infuse solidarity work, to keep colonial privilege in view (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013; Green 2017a). In other words, I have sought to engage in “reversing the gaze.”<sup>48</sup>

While my years of human rights activism from the 1990s onward in the United States and Central America inform this book, it is a direct result of over a decade of scholar activism begun on February 14, 2006, when I attended NMS’s first annual Strawberry Ceremony. I have been essentially “in the field” ever since, attending community events and various organizations’ activities, collecting NMS-related documents, and keeping a personal journal. When it came time to conduct formal research, however, and in part to balance the trade-offs between insider and outsider status (D’Arcangelis 2015, 2018), I opted not to pursue NMS as a case study. Instead, I decided to examine the solidarity encounter *per se* and to interview women involved in the work with or without an organizational affiliation. I began my formal fieldwork, including participant observation, in fall 2008. From May to July 2011, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen self-identified Indigenous women and eleven self-identified white women who had done solidarity work in and around the GTA. Taking a narrative ethnographic approach, I drew judiciously on my life history, often as recounted in my journals, to consider what it might indicate about white women’s collective subjectivity and investments in solidarity. I integrated these data by applying a feminist critical discourse analysis (Bacchi 2005; Gavey 1989).

As mentioned, this research has a specific geopolitical reference point – the GTA – and speaks best to the dynamics of Indigenous–non-Indigenous solidarity work in that context. My conclusions may, or may not, apply to other parts of Canada where colonial histories and present-day Indigenous–non-Indigenous demographics vary considerably. I share my analysis, and ask the reader to consider it, with these important differences in mind. Moreover, as qualitative research, I never meant the study to be representative of all women who engage in solidarity work. Rather, I present but a small window into what is a much broader phenomenon.

### **The Participants**

I hold immense gratitude for the twenty-four women whose interviews provide the mainstay for this book. All participants were at least eighteen years old and had engaged in solidarity for six months or longer “around topics

including (but not limited to) violence against Indigenous women, Indigenous land reclamations, and environmental justice,” as worded in my call for participants (CFP). The majority lived, worked, or attended university in the GTA, but three Indigenous women and two white women lived in nearby urban centres and had connections to individuals and solidarity networks in the GTA. While email and social media were useful for recruiting white participants (six of whom answered my CFP and were unknown to me prior to the research), I mobilized personal contacts to recruit nine of the thirteen Indigenous participants. Had it not been for my insider status in solidarity circles, this research would simply not have been possible.

My CFP described the project in general terms as “research on the limits and possibilities of political alliances or solidarity between Indigenous women and white women.” I purposively brought to bear an ample and explicitly material definition of political solidarity to mean a broad array of practices in which people engage together to pursue a political goal.<sup>49</sup> These practices include common elicitations of political protest and mobilizations for social justice and the less visible practices of grassroots groups such as NMS, practices such as behind-the-scenes lobbying, group meetings, social events, email exchange, and the use of social-media platforms. I would be remiss not to add to the mix politicized art such as posters, billboards, art installations, or music videos. Some examples from my own experiences give a better sense of what I mean by the materiality of solidarity work.

I distinctly remember my very first, very snowy February 14 Strawberry Ceremony at Toronto Police Headquarters as a member of NMS. I was seven months pregnant and the designated police liaison; it was my job to mediate any encounters, tense or otherwise, with officers should the need arise. Most years after that, I handed out strawberries and water to the people in attendance. I took part in other more mundane activities such as shopping, cooking, and serving food at meetings. On occasion, I represented NMS at film screenings, distributed leaflets at non-NMS events, and raised money for various purposes, such as hosting the women of Walk 4 Justice.

Whenever possible, within the limits dictated by participant anonymity, I contextualize participants’ statements about solidarity work in relation to these sorts of activities and settings. For the purposes of this book, I define political solidarity and the solidarity encounter in terms of “long-term commitment to structural change” (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2012, 19; see also Flowers 2015; hooks 2000; Snelgrove, Dharmoon, and Corntassel 2014, 19, 24). As gleaned from their descriptions of solidarity work, I am confident that participants shared this baseline understanding of political solidarity.

At the time of the interviews, most participants had been involved in solidarity work for at least two years, and a high percentage – over half of the Indigenous participants and just under half of the white participants – had ten or more years of experience in political organizing around a myriad of issues. While I included women with or without a group affiliation, many had such affiliations. Taking all these factors into account, participants fell into three nondiscrete categories: (1) those who were members of (often multiple) social-justice groups, which included most participants; (2) those who regularly volunteered for or participated in a variety of political actions such as marches or vigils without necessarily any group affiliation, which included many participants; and (3) those whose exposure to solidarity work occurred in educational, paid employment, or artistic contexts, which described a minority of participants.

I relied exclusively on participants to self-identify as Indigenous or white women and note this general self-identification whenever I mention a particular participant. Because five participants, all Indigenous women – Zainab Amadahy (Cherokee, Seminole), Ruth Green (Kanien’kehá:ka), Lee Maracle (Stó:lō/Métis), Rebeka Tabobondung (Anishinaabe) and Wanda Whitebird (Mi’kmaq) – waived their right to anonymity, I refer to them by last name and also identify their Indigenous nation. I use first-name pseudonyms for the other nineteen participants, namely in alphabetical order, Ardra, Belinda, Danielle, Gabriela, Kellie, Lydia, Teresa, and Ursula (Indigenous participants); and Alicia, Carla, Chloe, Darcie, Dawn, Eve, Evelyn, Julia, Peggy, Rachel, and Sarah (white participants). While I did not exclude anyone who identified as mixed race, I did not use this identity marker in the CFP, mainly because of historical and ongoing settler state regulation of Indigenous identity and status where “mixed” can be misinterpreted by authorities and the (settler) public as “inauthentic” (Lawrence 2003; Morgensen 2011). That said, six of the thirteen Indigenous participants acknowledged mixed (Indigenous and European) ancestry even as they foregrounded their identity and experiences as Indigenous women. While only one of the eleven white participants mentioned having Indigenous ancestry, several discussed their mixed European ancestry. Admittedly, the absence of mixed as a possible identity in my CFP could have had the effect of discouraging some women from participating in the study.

In most ways, participants were *not* representative of the general population, except in terms of their ages, which ranged from twenty to sixty-five years. A disproportionately high percentage, roughly two-thirds, of both Indigenous women and white women had postsecondary education, which

is likely because of my social circles as a PhD student and because of the high number of universities in the GTA. Additionally, conducting the study in an urban setting led to an overrepresentation of urban dwellers (though most Indigenous participants had ties with a nearby reserve or Indigenous community outside the province). Only two women (one from each group) self-identified as members of an LGBTQ2S+ community. Perhaps most importantly, the women constituted a self-selected group potentially predisposed to seeing the benefits of attempting solidarity between Indigenous peoples and (white) settler populations. This predilection, however, makes any critical views of solidarity relations all the more potent. As became evident in my analysis, participant narratives collectively reflected an extensive wealth of knowledge and a remarkable level of comfort and self-reflection in discussing the perils and promises of solidarity work. A number of participants were fluent and fluid in their use of activist and scholarly discourses. In this book, I attempt to do justice to this knowledge by tracking some of the more striking discursive patterns in their narratives.

### **Reading Proximity in the Solidarity Encounter**

The intimate reach of this research has the potential to elicit strong reactions in readers. The first audience, of course, was the participants themselves. Following custom in qualitative research, I offered all women copies of their interview transcripts. Whereas only three requested the full transcripts of their respective interviews, a majority (fifteen women) wanted to review the passages in which I referenced their interviews using direct quotations. All participants also received a summary of the findings, which occasioned positive feedback overall. In fact, several women from both groups mentioned that the findings resonated for them. I had follow-up phone conversations, email exchanges, and face-to-face meetings with several people, five of whom had questions about my interpretation of their narratives. When warranted, I deleted or altered passages in response to their comments. While not always easy, these exchanges did more than sharpen my ideas: they were powerful reminders of the intensity of people's lived realities and of my responsibility as a researcher to recount these realities with integrity.

One of the most formidable methodological challenges I faced was how to ask about abstract concepts such as subjectivity or the negotiation of subject position. I learned what *not* to do through trial and error after encountering silence with certain questions. In the end, it was much more useful to ask people about four overarching themes: what led them to do solidarity work; what were the tensions, challenges, or power dynamics of that work;

what if any steps had they or others taken to foster non-colonizing solidarity; and what ways had solidarity work transformed them either individually or collectively. I modelled my methodology on Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000, xxii–xxiii) study of feminist praxis in Australia, which compares and contrasts “the self-presentation and representation of the subject positions ‘middle-class white woman’ and ‘Indigenous woman’ ... [to] provide a context for different bodies of knowledge to meet and disrupt each other.” Putting participant self-presentations alongside their representations of others' involvement in solidarity work gave me a sense of the solidarity encounter's intersubjective dynamics. I then analyzed discursive themes across questions, which allowed certain solidarity dynamics to emerge that might have otherwise eluded scrutiny.

In fact, I did not anticipate the central theme of this book: white women's desires for proximity to Indigenous women. None of the interview questions mentioned proximity nor was the term *per se* raised in discussion. As I discuss in [Chapters 1 and 2](#), proximity as a theme surfaced only when I juxtaposed the two sets of narratives: Indigenous women's representations of white women and white women's self-presentations. In effect, I found myself interpreting Indigenous descriptions of the solidarity encounter's challenges side by side with white women's self-ascribed reasons for engaging in the work. The bulk of my analysis involved unearthing what this juxtaposition reveals: a sometimes unacknowledged and often problematic aspect of gendered colonial subjectivity in solidarity work, which is white women's desires for and pursuit of proximity to Indigenous Others.

Before I launch into my analysis, I am compelled to issue three caveats. First, my goal has never been to make claims about individuals but rather to identify discursive patterns across participant narratives that indicate something about subject formation within broader relations of power, or what anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2011, 33) describes as “the historically contingent arrangements of power through which the normative subject is produced.” My focus is the collective subject formation processes that constitute individual white women and the discourses available to them, for instance, autonomous liberal personhood. As Moreton-Robinson (2000, xxii) explains, dominant subject positions are “implicated in relations of ruling” and “represented in discourse through and beyond the activity and experience of individual subjects.” For the record, my study of how white settler women think about ourselves and negotiate our positionalities is not about “the personal preferences and proclivities of the individual” (Mahmood 2011, 33). Instead, I consider what participants' expressed motivations for entering into solidarity work indicate about collective white

settler woman subjectivity and the power relations at play. However, even as I point to the white desire to retain liberal-subject status as a key force in solidarity encounters, I am not suggesting a false homogeneity for white women, or Indigenous women for that matter. While I may highlight the collective, discursive construction of subject positions, I leave room for individual agency, that is, self-making as an ongoing process of grappling that occurs within certain discursive constraints.

The second caveat is about the possibility of oversimplifying participant narratives and overamplifying the white desire for proximity to Indigenous Others. I identified at least three other discourses related to women's motivations for entering into solidarity: responsibility and accountability; shared political analysis and social-justice inclinations; and practical or strategic motivations. To discuss proximity as a pattern across white participant narratives, I artificially disentangled our complex investments and motivations for engaging in solidarity work. Rarely do we describe or live our motivations in discrete terms; each participant described a multitude of often intertwined reasons for doing solidarity work. My analysis of the solidarity impulse focuses on the proximity-related dimensions of white women's involvement in solidarity.

My third and final caveat concerns one of my presuppositions about allyship prior to the research. I was operating with the common understanding of ally as "a member of an oppressor group who works to end a form of oppression which gives her or him privilege" (Bishop 2002, 152). However, I began to wonder about the unforeseen limitations or flaws in this definition. Might it prop up a patronizing one-way flow of solidarity as something bestowed to the "less privileged," thereby sustaining the very hierarchical relations it means to challenge? Does it preclude people outside of dominant groups, including Indigenous women, from being allies in struggle (Sullivan-Clarke 2020)? An exchange midway through one of my early interviews, with an Indigenous participant, sparked these concerns. When asked to define "ally," she inquired back, "As a white person or as a Native person?" Her response left me temporarily flabbergasted and, frankly, panicked. Had I been conceptualizing allyship in unidirectional terms the whole time? The subsequent reaction of another Indigenous participant struck me equally forcibly. Allyship was again the theme. I casually commented, "It's kind of interesting that we don't have a word to contrast with ally." She hesitated and said, "That's because allies are, I thought, equal – so there shouldn't be anything to contrast with ally." Only if you see solidarity work as charity, she clarified, would there be a contrasting concept: "The poor person, the injured, the grievance seeker, the person who has been aggrieved, the wounded, the victim, the

helper versus the victim in the most classic patronizing way of doing solidarity.” My self-doubt intensified: Had I already assigned white women the role of helper and Indigenous women the role of beneficiary?

Jolted into awareness of one of my deeply held orientations toward solidarity work, I modified my methods. From then on, I asked two questions – one about the role of Indigenous women as allies and another about the role of white women as allies – to disrupt presumptions about a one-sided flow of solidarity from white woman ally (as subject) to Indigenous woman (as object). I also began considering what if anything my belief indicated about a normative logic at work in the discourse of allyship, a sort of default modality for other white women. Does this logic cloak and therefore re-entrench the kinds of hierarchies solidarity is supposed to dismantle? This line of reasoning solidified a focal point of my research: If white women already think of themselves as autonomous/liberal subjects, how might that matter to the encounter? Does colonial “helping” behaviour itself flow from a liberal notion of the self? In other words, do common understandings of allyship presuppose an autonomous subject (the white settler woman) capable of assisting a downtrodden Other (Indigenous woman)? These are the kinds of questions that led to theorizing the solidarity impulse – a drive characterized by two concurring, seemingly contradictory desires on the part of white woman to “help” Indigenous women and “be helped by” solidarity work.

## Map of Chapters

My theory of the solidarity encounter unfolds in five chapters. Throughout, I concentrate on the problems with proximity, or those sticking points that result when white women uncritically follow the colonial playbook. That is, when we inconsistently apply an anticolonial framework in solidarity work, certain outcomes are more likely, namely, the invasive behaviours and paternalistic attitudes derived from our historical role of “helper.” In this way, I want to disrupt white settler/liberal business as usual and prepare ground “for the production of a new kind of [white settler woman] subject” (Razack 1998, 5) capable of extending non-colonizing solidarity.<sup>50</sup>

In [Chapter 1](#), I develop one of the fundamental concepts of the book, the spectrum of proximity. The idea here is that white women doing solidarity work sometimes go to great lengths, conscious or otherwise, to pursue proximity to Indigenous women so they can continue to see themselves as autonomous/liberal subjects. In [Chapter 2](#), I feature Indigenous participant narratives to reveal the problem with proximity, or the invasive dimensions

of this pursuit, and solidify my main argument: the white woman's pursuit of proximity to Indigenous women is destructive when it transgresses boundaries – material, intersubjective, or epistemic – and leads to colonizing forms of solidarity, as defined by Indigenous women. I also tease apart the site-specific complexities of intersubjective dynamics in solidarity encounters, coining the phrase *impulse to solidarity* to refer to the operation of gendered colonial subjectivity. The sequence of [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) reflects my methodological process over time. Only after months of poring over interview transcripts was I struck by how consistently Indigenous women found some white women's behaviours and reasons for engaging in solidarity work to be problematic – even invasive. By presenting my spectrum of proximity first, I provide the framing needed to contextualize Indigenous women's commentaries, giving them the final word, as it were.

In [Chapter 3](#), I continue my exposé of the problem with proximity by homing in on an element of the proximity spectrum – an attraction to or appreciation of Indigenous culture, tradition, or spirituality. By tracking the complex discursive moves from appreciation to appropriation in the interests of white settler self-making and Canadian nation building, this chapter sheds light on the deeply embedded collective practices and dynamics that constitute white settler/liberal subjectivity. In [Chapter 4](#), I focus on the ways in which race, specifically whiteness, coupled with gender can mark gendered colonial subjectivity in the form of white guilt and moves to exceptionalism. I also consider the likelihood that a deep-seated desire for innocence underpins white guilt (when it emerges) as well as the fraught role of self-reflexivity in negotiating that desire.

In [Chapter 5](#), I most directly attend to the practical implications of theorizing the solidarity encounter in the way that I do – as a place run rife with solidarity impulses. Drawing on participant insights, I propose a framework for non-colonizing solidarity that includes measures for rewriting colonial scripts, for disrupting or minimizing the reproduction of pernicious forms of gendered colonial subjectivity in solidarity work. It features a continual succession of self-reflexive double turns (Ahmed 2004) toward and away from the white settler back to the colonial structures – sociopolitical, religious, economic – requiring dismantlement (D'Arcangelis 2018). Intentionally avoiding overly prescriptive strategies, and in the methodological spirit of decolonial scholars Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), I aim to think *with* other white women and our Indigenous allies to develop context-specific non-colonizing solidarity practices. I hope this final chapter in particular spurs further reflection about and inspires a multitude of such practices.

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