

Speaking Our Truths, Building Our Strengths

Shaping Indigenous Girlhood Studies

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tân'si and welcome to this Special Section of *Girlhood Studies* on Indigenous Girls in which we present work written or created by and/or about the lives of young Indigenous women and girls across Turtle Island (as North America is known to many Anishinaabe/Ojibwe people), and from Mexico and South Africa. As guest editors, we are delighted to share this culmination of a very long process. Although all three of us were new to the editorial role, we were excited about creating the opportunity for contributors to discuss new theoretical and methodological perspectives on the very important topic of Indigenous girlhood. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first endeavor of its kind. Right from the start, we wanted to create and honor a process that put Indigenous girls and young women at the centre of this process. This meant that things took somewhat longer than anticipated, and we truly appreciate the patience of all concerned. We thank Claudia Mitchell for this great opportunity and we would like to acknowledge that without the invaluable assistance, reassurance, cheerleading, support, and careful editorial work of Ann Smith, this issue would probably never have materialized.

Our process began as we formulated the editorial team. Kirsten Lindquist and Kari-dawn Wuttunee are both council members of the National Indigenous Young Women's Council (NIYWC). Kirsten is Cree-Métis with Swedish, English, German, and Ukrainian ancestry, and has been with the council since 2013, where she is now coming into the Auntie support role for younger members. She assists the Aboriginal Governance and Partnership Programs in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. Kari-dawn is a nehiyaw woman from Red Pheasant First Nation and has been a member of NIYWC since its beginning in 2009. Currently, she works with the Saskatoon Health Region as the Aboriginal Community Developer; in



this role she is able to advocate for Aboriginal wellness and health while working in teams of health practitioners. Sarah Flicker, a professor of Environmental Studies at York University, is the third member of the editing team. Sarah is of mixed Jewish ancestry whose grandparents fled and thus survived the European holocaust. As a settler on this land, one who has her own histories of intergenerational trauma, Sarah has worked as an ally in partnership with Indigenous communities for the last decade on community-based participatory research projects that have sought to decolonize youth HIV prevention research and practice.

The NIYWC is a self-governed council of Indigenous young women under thirty years of age. It includes those who identify as Trans, Two-Spirit, and/or gender non-conforming. The council works to provide leadership opportunities, community actions, mobilization, skill-training, and capacity building. The Council develops spaces for celebration, reclamation, and cultural resurgence with a vision for future generations. As part of a group that is run by, and accountable to, young Indigenous women, we were well positioned to mobilize scholarship in this area.

Without any face-to-face meetings, the three of us worked via skype, teleconferences, emails, and social media to curate and bring this Special Section to light. From the very beginning of our collaboration we sought to create and expand the possibilities of scholarship by and on Indigenous girls. In our call for papers we said that we were interested in work that takes a strengths-based approach to thinking about the lives of Indigenous girls and girlhood. We wanted to hear about how Indigenous girls are resisting stereotypes, thriving, taking a stand in their communities, and participating in social, communal, and/or political action.

There were inevitable challenges. In many Indigenous communities research is still seen to be suspect. Despite our optimism and our energetic efforts to support new forms of scholarship that are girl-centred and carried out in partnership with youth, we did not receive as many submissions as we had originally hoped for. The submissions we did receive, however, were diverse, exciting, and most worthy of a wider readership and dialogue. This gives us hope that a Special Section like this, the first of its kind, will result in far more submissions to similar future endeavours.

We sought to have an authentic peer-led review and editorial process. This was in recognition of our conviction that young Indigenous women are the experts in their own lives and in the lived experiences that shape their own stories. Therefore, we committed to the process of finding a young self-identified Indigenous woman to review each submission to the Special

Section, in addition to finding Indigenous and other allied scholars to review each academic submission. Sometimes doing things differently, in order to include diverse voices and viewpoints, takes longer, but we learned many valuable lessons throughout this journey, and we believe that we have a stronger Special Section as a result of our process.

Through this reviewing process we encountered a plethora of amazing Indigenous women across Turtle Island (and around the world) who are championing the study of Indigenous girlhood and Indigenous feminism(s), and who are reclaiming self-determining Indigenous girls' and young women's narratives.

The research, narratives, and artistic pieces highlighted in this Special Section of *Girlhood Studies* also reflect the ongoing process of building relationships between academic research and community informed experiences. Our aim was to provide robust expressions of decolonial and Indigenous perspectives on coming of age resurgently that honored Native traditions, communities, and languages after years of settler, colonial, hetero-patriarchal violence, and oppression. Indigenous girls and young women, with the support of networks such as NIWYC, aunties, kokums (grandmothers), and allies are reclaiming their roles and supporting others to be proud of their unique gifts in carrying the knowledge, culture, and traditions to govern their bodies and communities as expressions of Indigenous self-determination.

While Indigenous girlhood knowing is rooted in the language, customs, and relationship with the land unique to each respective Indigenous nation, there are stories that connect Indigenous girlhood as a collective. In NIWYC we speak back and build community-based actions against colonial gender-based violence, we gather to support young women-led leadership and governance, and we support young mothers and parents, all in relation to land-centred education and justice. NIWYC is a beautiful representation of how unique expressions of coming of age and coming to know converge as a support and mentorship network. Our members have engaged in and continue to engage in community actions that include the restoring of rites of passage in their communities, exploring Indigenous women-lead entrepreneurship and economies, supporting Indigenous youth storytelling through media, art, photography, and music, and supporting gender non-conforming youth in coming of age ceremonies, and in their lives in general. We and the council encourage you to reflect on the ways in which your research can support understandings of Indigenous girlhood and self-determination, and to begin discussions with your peers on what it means to come of age and come to know in your own work.

In this Special Section we have four academic articles that pay attention to the possibilities for Indigenous girls. Haidee Lefebvre imagines what Indigenous girlhood might have looked like when European settlers first arrived on Turtle Island. Brigette Krieg and Natalie Clark, two Indigenous feminist scholars working in Canada, explore the modern manifestations of colonialism in their concern with the present-day challenges of structural and interpersonal violence on Indigenous girls' bodies in Canada. González de la Rocha and Latapí analyse a social policy intervention in Mexico that is improving the material conditions of Indigenous girls' lives. All four articles describe and celebrate the resistance of young Indigenous women and girls, and offer hopeful possibilities for the future.

In her article, "Overlapping Time and Place: Early Modern England's Girlhood Discourse and Indigenous Girlhood in the Dominion of Canada (1684-1860)," Haidee Lefebvre interprets "Pauline Johnson's essay, *A Strong Race Opinion* [that]...criticizes contemporaneous Anglo-Canadian authors for depicting Indian heroines in an artificial light rather than as flesh-and-blood girls." Lefebvre links this interpretation to an examination of the differing notions of girlhood from England, where the "fascination with girls and girlhood fluctuated between their seeing girlhood as a gendered life-stage leading to matrimony on the one hand, and girlhood as a rhetorical device unhindered by biology or chronology on the other" to Canada where they moved from being "at the heart of [its] fur trade" to losing these "separate identities ... as traders increasingly held them up to European ideals."

Brigette Krieg's article, "Understanding the Role of Cultural Continuity in Reclaiming Identity of Young Indigenous Women," offers an illustration of the potential for young women and girls to re-tell their own stories and speak back to colonial and negative stereotypes. Krieg makes it clear that the "goal of [her] project was not to further the literature that examines the limitations of young Indigenous women, but to examine their strengths and their resilience." She describes how, in using Photovoice, these young women and girls "examined their circumstances critically in relation to the historical consequences of past generations [and] [i]n doing this ... rather than getting trapped in a cycle of negativity reminiscing about past wrongs [they] created opportunity for positive change and raised hope for this generation."

Natalie Clark's article, "Red Intersectionality and Violence-informed Witnessing Praxis with Indigenous Girls," challenges "conventional intersectionality scholarship by foregrounding anti-colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty/nationhood." In this article, Clark offers poetry, prose, theory, and praxis to present a red intersectionality framework for understanding and

responding to violence against Indigenous girls. In describing “the everyday practices of witnessing and resisting the discourses of risk” she makes use of her own “ongoing work on violence” and illustrates “the manifestation of colonial power and persistent resistance in the lives of Indigenous girls.” This article is both a theoretical treatise and a practical call to action in its offering of examples of penetrating questions that a red intersectional analysis would need to ask as well as questions that practitioners need to ask themselves.

Mercedes González de la Rocha and Agustín Escobar Latapí’s article, entitled “Indigenous Girls in Rural Mexico: A Success Story?” describes their research into the results of a Mexican social policy program that provides cash transfers to poor families whose children stay in school and attend health clinics regularly. Contrary to what they expected, they found that the program did “narrow substantially pre-existing inequalities among rural indigenous poor girls and their families and, in some instances, reversed them.” They point out that keeping girls in school brings financial relief to these families but they remain aware that “the program does not eliminate other structural forces discriminating against indigenous Mexican girls and that prolonged education is an instrument for mobility only if these other forces are counterbalanced by more comprehensive social strategies.”

In addition to the academic articles, this Special Section features a subsection called Personal Pieces. It begins with an essay, “Hey, Can I Call You Quick? Navigating the Academic Swells as Young Indigenous Women” by sisters, Renée and Lisa Monchalín, who are currently negotiating their lives as Indigenous women academics. Renée is “determined to make a difference in decreasing health inequities facing [their] communities, while Lisa is determined to reduce the victimization and crime that affects [their] communities.”

Youth Facilitator at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), Alexa Lesperance offers an account of her development of the Sexy Health Carnival that is about instilling “positive esteem and feeling good about one’s body and life as well as about one’s decisions.” This carnival is a “fun-filled and interactive opportunity for ... Indigenous youth to become educated on HIV prevention and on other sexual and reproductive health issues.”

The poem, “Mipit” by Amanda Buffalo celebrates the ways in which young people are renewing their traditions, reclaiming their histories and culture, and revitalizing their communities.

Two reviews conclude this Special Section. First, Jasmyn Galley reviews Tomson Highway’s 2010 play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. She links “the injustices that [her] maternal family faced in residential school and the ongoing prejudices they experience in society today” to her reading

of Highway's drama. Galley suggests that the "sexual oppression of women in Highway's play is analogous to the cultural, political, and social oppression of Aboriginal Peoples throughout history at the hands of colonialists as well as at those of contemporary Canadians" and she goes on to show how this play "also implies hopeful potential for change in its depiction of female sexuality as a means of empowerment and renewal."

Nokukhanya Ngcobo, with her review, "Their Journey to Triumphant Activism: 14 Young Women Speak Out" of *14 Times a Woman: Indigenous Stories From the Heart* (2016) by Sandiswe et al. brings the written part of this Special Section to an end. This set of autobiographical essays, by 14 young women who joined a research project "aimed at empowering young women and girls to challenge and fight against all forms of violence directed at women and children" is a triumphant account of their overcoming almost insuperable odds that included extreme poverty, sexual and gender-based violence, and bullying, to complete their Bachelor of Education degrees at a South African university.

Nokukhanya's review is a timely contribution to this Special Section on Indigenous girls because of the recent friendship that has begun between NIYWC and these young women from Girls Leading Change. Two of these South African young women, Lelethu Mlobeli and Takatso Mohlomi, were invited to join the Girls' and Young Women's Advisory Panel along with young women from NIYWC as part of the multi-partner research project, "Network for Change and Well-being: Girl-led 'From the Ground Up' Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa." This Panel had its first gathering in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in December 2015. There, Kari-dawn had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with Lelethu and Takatso whose essays appear in *14 Times a Woman*.

Finally, *Still Dancing* by Jonathan Labillois is a memorable portrait of an Indigenous woman looking her viewers squarely in the eye. The woman's clothing in this arresting image is made up of individual photos of murdered and missing Indigenous girls and women, the vast majority of whom, according to the Native Women's Association of Canada, are under the age of 30. This work of art insists that we pause to consider the epidemic of violence against Indigenous girls and women that continues to plague Canada.

Collectively, the issue celebrates the ways in which Indigenous girls continue to resist colonization as well as reveling in their resurgence and reclaiming of Indigenous culture. Many of the contributions to this Special Section remind us of the devastating and long-lasting social genocide perpetuated by the Canadian Colonial State which is a continuous and persistent chal-

lenge to the well-being of Indigenous girls. However, these submissions also celebrate their resiliency and strength, as well as their ability to create brighter futures.

We are delighted to be featuring the voices of many Indigenous young women and allied scholars, as well as the work of an Indigenous male artist who is deeply concerned about the plight of Indigenous girls. We are thankful for the support we have received from our council members and editing partners and their patience that allowed us the opportunity to learn and be successful in this guest-editing and publishing process. We appreciate all those who took time to review papers and offer their feedback to strengthen the submissions. To all the reviewers, contributors, but more especially to the young women across Turtle Island who contributed their Personal Pieces to this special edition, thank you for taking part in recreating the Indigenous women's narrative and helping us to speak our truths and build our strengths.

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