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Indigenous Trauma Is Not a Frontier: Breaking Free from Colonial Economies of Trauma and Responding to Trafficking, Disappearances, and Deaths of Indigenous Women and Girls

Annita Hetoevéhotohke'e Lucchesi

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me they wanted to “give voice to the voiceless” in their work on violence against Indigenous women and girls, I would have enough money to buy every Indigenous woman and girl already shouting her feminism from the rooftops her own microphone and speaker system loud enough to drown out those people for good. We are not voiceless or silent; we are being suppressed by the very voices that aim to speak for us. This colonial fantasy—of a violated Indigenous woman or girl incapable of speaking for herself—is created by, and supports, economies of trauma that marginalize victims of violence while positioning settlers to benefit from commodification of continued violence. These economies of trauma form a complex self-reinforcing web that, across multiple settler states, spans policy advocacy circles, news media, film and television industries, academia, law enforcement, and nonprofit organizations.

Moreover, these economies do not exclude Indigenous people or organizations. Many Indigenous accomplices help to exclude the most marginalized of their own communities from the work addressing violence against them, permitted to do so in large part because they adhere to colonial standards of respectability and are willing to

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work within the confines of settler-state expectations. Ultimately, this means that those experiencing the highest rates of violence, and are most at risk to be trafficked, disappeared, or killed, are not heard, no matter how loud their voices, nor how eloquent their analyses.

This article maps these colonial economies of trauma as they pertain to trafficking, disappearances, and deaths of Indigenous women and girls, and dissects three key elements—policy and government, media, and academia and research. I am writing reflectively, as an Indigenous survivor of trafficking and other forms of violence with years of experience in policy advocacy and speaking with press, in addition to academic research on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). In each of these three arenas, I experienced pervasive isolation, personal and professional violation, exclusion, silencing, and survivors' guilt; thus, this paper is also a reflection on the question that has long plagued me. I am one of thousands of Indigenous women and girls who have my experiences—what if we all were empowered to be the experts, knowledge producers, and researchers?—what if there were more scholars like me?

In taking up these questions, I use elements of my own story as a survivor-researcher to explore moments in my trajectory in which my experiences of trauma have been commodified within these broader economies of trauma. This analysis is deeply personal, much more so than most academic or scholarly texts, but necessary—not only because it is a critical means of exploring my own positioning in doing this work, but because it is an assertion of my sovereignty as an Indigenous woman survivor of violence; because I would not expect to delve quite so deeply into any other person's experiences; and because this approach demonstrates the power of uplifting scholars like me. There are entire worlds of knowledge, ways of communicating, brilliant ways of thinking, and sharp analyses that have the power to transform the systems of power in which we are embedded, yet are not heard because we do not fight hard enough to normalize this type of autoethnographic writing as *scholarly*. I resist academia's expectation of a removed, so-called objective researcher who extracts marginalized women's experiences of trauma for academic analysis. Instead, as a marginalized-woman-turned-recognized-researcher (we are always researchers, if rarely recognized for it), and with the intent of carving out space for others to do the same, I choose to narrate and analyze my story myself.

It is imperative that we dismantle these colonial economies of trauma by uplifting the expertise and leadership of the most marginalized of Indigenous women and girls—sex workers, victims of trafficking, girls in the child welfare system, those who are incarcerated or have criminal records, unsheltered women and girls, those who use substances, gang-affiliated women and girls, and transgender women and girls. Rather than viewing these experiences as barriers to success—if we shift our value system to acknowledge that these experiences are actually credentials that enhance capacity to design creative and effective efforts to account for and address violence—what might that do for our organizing and our research? for our communities? for these women and girls themselves?

MAPPING COLONIAL ECONOMIES OF TRAUMA

A growing body of literature is interrogating healthcare systems and social welfare programming as creating what Athabaskan scholar Dian Million terms a “trauma industry.”¹ In this frame of understanding, constant diagnosis of Indigenous people as suffering from trauma becomes a weapon that not only supports harmful practices, such as ineffective healthcare and child removal, but also an entire industry of medical practitioners, social workers, government agents, and their institutions. Métis scholar Natalie Clark builds on this term to describe a “shock and awe” campaign by providers, media, and government agencies that rely on the shock value of statistics on Indigenous trauma to support this industry.² In this way, trauma becomes weaponized to legitimize invasive colonial state intervention in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples, particularly women and youth, through healthcare and social welfare and educational programming. These interventions not only support continued trauma industries and settler systems of power: according to Clark, they can be ineffective, producing more trauma than healing and relying on methods far removed from survivor epistemologies and survivor-centered approaches. Similarly, in her work on Canadian institutional response to Indigenous deaths in custody, Sherene Razack argues that settler states must view and understand Indigenous people as perpetually dying and traumatized to the point of debilitation, and thus simply unable to function or even survive without the help of the settler state.³ This view of Indigenous people allows the legitimacy of the settler state to go unquestioned and casts it as benevolent rather than genocidal.

These settler-generated images of trauma-saturated Indigenous communities, as well as the resulting representation of Indigenous women and girls as unable to function on their own, create an economic system that thrives from continued trauma and violence. For government programs, moreover, such representations create a self-sustaining feedback loop, in that any government intervention designed for Indigenous people must center assumptions of Indigenous communities as saturated in trauma. In the case of violence against Indigenous women and girls, this can include policies that presume sexual violation as an inevitability, such as anti-trafficking campaigns aimed at teaching Indigenous women to protect themselves. Other self-sustaining government interventions are the drives for trauma-informed policing, criminal sentencing that accounts for historical trauma, culturally relevant child removal practices, and government investments in research on Native cultures as a protective factor from suicide and trafficking. It is thanks to narratives of trauma that these interventions might sound appealing; however, they are merely kinder, gentler ways of criminalizing, incarcerating, and removing Indigenous people from their communities, while continuing to blame Indigenous individuals for living in a world that targets them for sexual exploitation—or that makes them feel as if they do not want to exist anymore.

Ultimately, the colonial obsession with Indigenous trauma and the institutional practices that stem from it allow colonial states to profit from avoiding accountability for their complicity in creating and maintaining violence against Indigenous people. Cree scholar Robyn Bourgeois provides examples of this, arguing that settler states such as Canada remain directly complicit in human trafficking of Indigenous people

through policies initially framed as benevolent, like residential schools, the Indian Act, and evacuations.⁴ Bourgeois also cites sustained institutional neglect of pervasive gender and sexual violence as yet another level of settler complicity in ongoing violence, which Elaine Craig describes as acts of collective violence, in which law enforcement, the justice system, media, and the general public all share complicity in cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women.⁵

There is a wealth of scholarship specifically analyzing how representations of Indigenous women are tied to ongoing patterns of gender and sexual violence. For example, historian Rebecca Jager reexamines the lives of three Indigenous historical figures and their representations over time —Malinche, Pocahontas, and Sacagawea—to demonstrate how, in narrating all three women as sexually desirous of white men, the settler imaginary strategically undermined the political and diplomatic power the women had among their peoples.⁶ In this framework, under colonial patriarchy Indigenous women's agency and sovereignty become so unthinkable that they must be rationalized as sexual desire—which, tellingly, legitimates settler states and the conquering of Indigenous lands and bodies. These narratives remain so persistent that stereotypes stemming from stories like Pocahontas's and Malinche's become excuses for continued denigration of Indigenous women as dirty, sexually promiscuous, and an exotic, fantasy sexual object. Although the Mattaponi people have published their oral history to share their knowledge of the actual Pocahontas and, rather than a hypersexualized object, to reposition her as a victim of sexual violence, settler discomfort and apathy towards this narrative has allowed stereotypes of her to persist.⁷ Like Jager, but analyzing these stereotypes in film, M. Elise Marubbio examines how the continued portrayal of Indigenous women and girls as sacrificial heroines who, due to their sexual desires for white men, must die, becomes a means of representing the allure and inevitability of conquering colonial frontiers.⁸ This scholarship reveals how stories about Indigenous trauma from sexual violence have been part of media and popular narratives justifying continued colonial violence for hundreds of years.

Scholarly work that engages the relationship between ongoing violence in contemporary news media and representations of Indigenous women and girls includes Elaine Craig's work citing media as complicit in collective violence in the wake of the trial of serial killer Robert Pickton, Paulina García-Del Moral's comparative work on representation as a technology of violence in narratives on femicide in Canada and Ciudad Juárez, and Jiwani and Young's work on news coverage on missing and murdered Indigenous women.⁹ Yet there is little discussion of the ways in which media profit from these images of Indigenous women and girls and the violence they experience; rather, this scholarship demonstrates the news and creative media's sustained participation in the larger economy of trauma and violence against Indigenous women and girls in the cultural feedback loop entering that economy through government and policy initiatives as described earlier. The focus of much of this scholarship, however, is rape and murder and does not address narratives of sex trafficking, which has become a new "hot topic" for media and policymakers. Building on this prior scholarship, I argue that the particular lexicon of visual vocabulary used by the contemporary media to "make

sense” of colonial gender and sexual violence, especially sex trafficking, operates its own continuously profitable trauma industry.

In the wake of an explosion of media coverage on sex trafficking, deaths, and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls, one of the most ubiquitous images is that of an Indigenous young woman with a hand or duct tape plastered over her mouth, typically with bruises, tears, or a fearful look on her face. With little regard to its roots, accuracy, or impact, variations of this image now grace billboards, awareness campaigns, protest signs, and international media. Living embodiments of this image are shown in the *Twilight* franchise, which portrays one of the sole Indigenous women as a forgiving yet quiet and subdued domestic violence victim disfigured with facial scars, and the Indigenous women of the film *Hostiles*, who seem to be largely unaffected by the sexual violence they experience and unable to defend themselves. This representation of Indigenous women and girls has literally turned stories of sex trafficking into a form of currency that media can capitalize on—perhaps a poor man’s version of the shock and awe campaign Clark describes healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers as engaging in. This image is alluring to media not only because of its shock value, but because it is provocative sexually—indeed, some grassroots Indigenous feminists have argued that images such as this actually encourage violent settler sexual fantasies of a subdued Indigenous woman or girl. In this way, “sex trafficking” becomes a coded word in media’s lexicon, signifying pornographic fantasies of women gagged and silenced, chained and tied, and constantly being violated and in need of saving, regardless of the fact that many if not most trafficking victims do not experience trafficking in those ways. Billboard sales agencies, press, companies who purchase ads, production agencies, Hollywood—thousands of largely non-Indigenous, non-survivor people and entities continue to profit from dissemination of such sexual violation and trauma impacting Indigenous women and girls.

One example of this trend in media is the recently released film and media campaign called *Somebody’s Daughter*, which targets sex trafficking and missing and murdered and Indigenous women, and utilizes billboards of a vaguely “Native-looking” woman with a red handprint over her mouth and the words “Invisible No More” headlined above her. This campaign was created and is led by a white woman who apparently feels she is capable of removing a mysterious cloak of invisibility from Indigenous women, despite having had no prior experience working on violence against Indigenous women until she learned of the issue while advocating for grizzly bear conservation (and indeed in a particularly dehumanizing statement has compared “saving Native women” to saving grizzly bears).¹⁰ Built on a presumption that Indigenous women and women of color cannot and do not speak for themselves, this project is emblematic of other widespread experiences of white and neoliberal feminisms that engage in a misguided white savior complex that harms more than it helps. These projects take up space that should be allocated for survivor leadership, further marginalize Indigenous women, and not only profit from violation of Indigenous people, but create and contribute to an environment that encourages others to do the same.

Academia and research circles are not exempt from this exploitation of Indigenous trauma; indeed, some of the most egregious examples of appropriation and commodification of violence against Indigenous women occur during research projects. One

prominent example was the \$91 million Canadian National MMIWG2QQA Inquiry, which suffered from lack of families and survivors in leadership, poor research methods inconsistent with Indigenous cultures and insensitive to grieving families, high staff turnover, and an unrealistic timeline. The end result of these missteps was a report comprised of calls for justice that merely echoed many of the same calls Indigenous communities had been making for decades and also largely assumed that colonial occupation and associated violence such as resource extraction to be inevitabilities that can be adapted to be less harmful to Indigenous peoples. Moreover, the report aimed to end the debate on femicide of Indigenous women and girls, yet in providing media fodder for debating Indigenous women's experiences of violence, essentially did nothing but open up a new pathway for exploitation of continued violence. At best, the report's 231 policy recommendations will take years and multiple administrations to enact.

Notably, although the report succeeded in transforming the issues of MMIWG and trafficking into a hot topic among academics and policymakers, it failed to raise perhaps one of the most important questions regarding the cycle of exploitation: is there such a thing as a right or responsibility to study and write about trafficking, death, and disappearance of Indigenous women, and if so, who has it? Amber Dean touches on this question in her 2015 book examining memorials to Vancouver's missing and murdered women, which makes a powerful argument that when done unethically or by artists or organizations that lack the critical cultural and experiential competencies to do the work, such memorials can fall short of mobilizing us toward collective action or even understanding the issue beyond a voyeuristic tragedy, and allow us as community members to evade responsibility for responding to ongoing violence.¹¹

Dean also argues for commemorative work that helps viewers to see themselves as inheritors of the legacies of this violence rather than detached bystanders. If we extend this argument to include research on sex trafficking and MMIWG, we once again see that much of the existing work falls short. Rather than generating new collective feelings of the impact of this violence that mobilize us to preventative action or justice, statistics on these forms of violence become means of maintaining a colonial "need to know" Indigenous women's bodies and mythologizing the violence they experience as a great unsolved mystery. They also fetishize the numeric over the real and embodied. Indeed, in the wake of growing public debate on how many Indigenous women and girls are missing or murdered and why, there has been an explosion of settler efforts to create databases, map existing data, and engage in amateur sleuthing and armchair exploration of Indigenous women's violent deaths and disappearances.

These forms of research are an especially problematic manifestation of colonial economies of trauma, wherein settler investigation of gender and sexual violence against Indigenous people becomes a profitable exploration rife with violation akin to historic and ongoing violation of Indigenous lands and bodies. Publications, tenure files, research grants, paid positions, and speaking engagements transform inquiry into gender and sexual violence against Indigenous people into lucrative professional endeavors upon which settler careers may be built. These careers, however, ultimately rely upon not only continued violence, but also continued silencing and disenfranchisement of survivors and victims' families.

Underpinning these colonial economies of trauma as they manifest in all three spaces—policy, media, and research—is a presumption of competence that privileges settlers and their epistemologies. The colonial politics of respectability; socioeconomic, racialized, and gendered barriers to survival and professional success; and an understanding of expertise as being granted solely by settler institutions join forces to position settlers, and those who work within their structures, as experts on violence they do not experience firsthand, while silencing and victimizing those who do. Indeed, these economies rely on assumed competencies afforded to nearly everyone *except* those most likely to have experienced violence—marginalized populations among Indigenous peoples themselves.

Moreover, these economies also rely on an entitlement to exploration of Indigenous people's bodies and the violence and trauma they experience. This entitlement is inherent to colonization and settler occupation, which was designed to facilitate settler profit and pleasure from exploitation of and violence against Indigenous bodies. As an outgrowth of this history, these economies of trauma are a means of maintaining colonial streams of profit and systems of power and directly depend on, and are complicit in, continued violence. Settler assumptions of entitlement to explore Indigenous peoples carry profound consequences: no boundaries are admitted, so none can be transgressed, rendering both Indigenous bodies and stories inviolable, and the larger questions of rights and responsibilities to intervene in, tell stories about, and generate knowledge about gender and sexual violence against Indigenous people become irrelevant.

MY STORY

I have struggled to tell my story for years, for many reasons. Some of these are common and predictable. The world does not create a safe environment for survivors to share their stories, victim-blaming and slut-shaming are real, and sharing my past had the potential to have a negative impact on my career as a scholar. Abuse manipulates your mind and your interpretation of what happened to you, and making sense of it all can take a very long time, and healing even longer. All these reasons aside, I also struggle with less common barriers. As an advocate and survivor-researcher, for years I have had my story paraded, violated, and debated in national and international media, and I have never felt safe in sharing the details that mattered most to me—how I survived and fought back.

I did not want to be the victim the press needed me to be, or that the law required. I wanted to be the brave, bold, complicated, messy, dark, goofy, fiercely loving, angry, sad, hopeful, smart, resourceful, vulnerable, tough-as-nails woman that I was, and am. I do not know that I will ever get to fully be that person in a public way, and so some details will continue to be omitted here. This is, then, an incomplete version of my story. However, because the questions guiding this article are so deeply rooted in my own experiences, and because I owe myself and the women and girls I write for the sovereignty that I argue we each do and should have, I choose to push the boundaries of what is shareable here.

I am living proof that every myth you have heard about trafficking on social media is wrong. Yes, I have a tattoo brand; no, it is not my trafficker's name or a barcode or

a number. No, I was not kidnapped from a Walmart parking lot and kept chained in some trailer somewhere; there was no opioid drip, no cross-country travel, no line of men out the door paying \$10 each. There was a girl very much in love with a deeply wounded man who spent his entire life being taught by the system that sex was transactional; and a lot of desperation. I do not pretend that I speak for all survivors of trafficking or for all sex workers; I can only speak to my own experiences; however, I know that I am not alone in this experience. Subjectively, I can say that during this time in my life, every woman I met was also being trafficked by someone she knew and cared for, or had been sold by a loved one in the past and now was working independently. The first time this system was explained to me, he told me, "Look, it's gonna happen either way. Either alone or with someone, everyone has to go out and hustle—might as well do it with a guy who can protect you."

That made sense. But the difference between a woman voluntarily choosing to do sex work with the protection of a man she loves, and a woman doing sex work accompanied by a man she loves because she has to or she will die, becomes very muddy when you cannot afford the roof over your head, or when the man you love is beating you because you cannot afford milk for his cereal.

The grocery store—ironically one of the only places he never followed me—induced panic attacks, and I would find an abandoned aisle and cry for hours. Wandering around with a calculator and a half-used EBT card, knowing there was not enough money for everything we needed and that my prospective injuries depended on what I could not manage to buy, was a form of torture. The morning there was no milk, his cousin had to stop him from beating me to death with a wooden baseball bat.

Like most abusive men, he apologized shortly after, promised it would never happen again, and held me until I could smile it away (about ten minutes at that point, but it had to be a closed smile because I still had gashes in my mouth that made blood seep between my teeth). They left, and a few hours later an acquaintance of his showed up at the front door with a chainsaw. I told him he was not home and to come back later, but he pushed his way inside. An uncomfortable, unwanted hug soon turned into a sexual assault and a claim he had bought me. I do not remember anything after that until I was alone again, crying on the bedroom floor, calling him to come home. He laughed at me, and that was the only conversation we ever had about it.

I never knew where his choices ended and mine began. I never knew what was the collision of his family's trauma and his experiences with gang culture and what was just bullshit. He probably did not know either. I decided I did not want to experience the man with the chainsaw again, so I found ways to make sure there was milk in the refrigerator. I found comfort in women in the same situation as me, and we collectively stretched our creativity, intellect, and means to survive. I learned about the highest form of sisterhood in this time of my life, lessons like the importance of being able to find some cash by any means necessary to buy your homegirl, who just was beaten within an inch of her life, some painkillers on the street because she could not go to the hospital. When the sister who did that for me lost her late-term baby due to abuse, I hustled to pay for her daughter's urn.

I did not realize I was trafficked until years after I had left and started a new life. He probably still does not see it that way. I did not have anyone to talk to about it . . . and when I finally was making sense of it, the only person to tell was my best friend, whom I was speaking to on a recorded prison phone line. What was I supposed to say? All I could say was a half-hearted joke about wanting the same deal all the rappers get when they publicly declare all the ways they survived, but without legal ramifications. People like us know the system and its failures, power structures, and weaknesses better than anyone, yet we are literally institutionally barred from speaking our truths.

Years later, when my public persona as a researcher and founder of a database on MMIWG began to grow, the press started asking about my story. At first, it was easy to be vague and to enforce my boundaries. As time went on, however, the press became more and more invasive. A journalist who led me to believe we were friends published a personal account of mine that I shared in confidence, without notifying me or asking permission. That journalist received high praise and a large fellowship for the project, while I had to issue a public apology because I did not have time to warn my family and friends that the story was coming—especially the friend who was also assaulted during that incident. More writers began grilling me. One asked for my trafficker’s contact information so they could fact-check my story. Another asked if I had reported anything to police, so they could look for records pertaining to the incidents in question—never mind that police harassed and nearly killed me during that time. Writers who I have never met from all over the world are still emailing me questions like, “You’ve been yourself raped: could you please explain to me a little bit how and when it happened and the link to the fact that you are a Native?”

While these interactions are upsetting in their own right, they became a triggering whirlwind of people being paid, with a byline or a salary, to commodify my private experiences of sexual violence for the world to consume. I began to feel trafficked all over again. This feeling was exacerbated by graduate fellowships, grant applications, speaking engagements, and advocacy work that required strategic deployment of desirable versions of my story, none of which included the parts that mattered most to me. Where did my choice to do this work begin—the responsibility I felt to my community and to other survivors—and where did these entities’ exploitation and abuse begin? Once again, the lines became blurred. The cumulative impact of the work, travel, and public hashing and rehashing of my trauma deeply impacted my physical and mental health. Traveling from hotel to hotel, fulfilling a sexualized fantasy on demand for whatever journalist called, allowing others to use the violence I experienced as a means for their own wants and desires, while I ran myself into exhaustion and depression—how was that different from the trafficking I experienced in the first place? I felt as though my story, my time, and my body no longer belonged to me.

This is how I came to understand these systems as colonial economies of trauma. My trauma was actually commodified and sold. I had been willing to contribute my story, on my own terms and within my own boundaries, to organizing efforts and research in the hopes that my labor would create spaces for more scholars and public figures like me, and would empower us collectively to do better in protecting and serving Native women and girls. But the settler imagination does not have room for

that level of narrative autonomy for Indigenous survivors of violence, and whatever boundaries I thought I could enforce quickly became violated. In writing this article, I hope to demonstrate that I continue to resist that violation by telling my story in a way that, albeit selective, feels safe and true to me.

BREAKING FREE: INDIGENOUS TRAUMA IS NOT A FRONTIER

In her aforementioned work on trauma economies, Natalie Clark describes trauma as “the new frontier” for colonial agencies to explore and exploit. While she uses this language to make a powerful argument against such trauma economies, and I am in agreement that settler entities do treat Indigenous trauma as a frontier to explore for profit, I would argue that these economies are not anything new. They were built into colonization of Indigenous peoples as a toxic feedback loop in which exploitation of Indigenous lands, bodies, and stories continues indefinitely, to the benefit of settlers and their occupation and violation of Indigenous sovereignties. In this way, these economies of trauma essentially function as centuries-old extractive industries, wherein Indigenous experiences of gender and sexual violence are violently extracted from survivors and victims’ families for profit and settler gain, without regard to the environmental impact of such an industry, which creates and sustains social relations that pollute our communities, are responsible for mass preventable death, and will require decades of remedial healing work.

Contrary to the views relied upon by colonial economies of trauma, I insist that Indigenous trauma is *not* a frontier. The violence Indigenous people experience is not a commodity to be bought, manipulated, and sold. Just as Indigenous lands and bodies are not, in Apache feminist scholar and poet Margo Tamez’s words, “inherently violable,” neither are our stories.¹² Colonial gender and sexual violence and Indigenous trauma are not to be treated as a renewable resource. We are not frontiers, we are not a resource to exploit, we are not metaphors: we are human beings. My stories are not a territory to be explored on voyeuristic day trips for profit. We are not objects people need to examine or know; we are beings who know ourselves.

So what does breaking free from these economies of trauma look like? How can we imagine policy, media, and research that centers the sovereignty of Indigenous survivors of violence and victims’ families? It starts with developing a path to a future where Indigenous sex workers and survivors of trafficking, incarcerated Indigenous people, Indigenous gang members, unsheltered Indigenous people, queer (especially trans) Indigenous people, and Indigenous youth (especially those in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems) are empowered to be and respected as journalists, media makers, researchers, policymakers, and healers, instead of the people perpetually and mysteriously going missing and being killed. This requires major shifts in institutional culture—it seems so simple to say that people with those experiences should be hired to write the stories, the policies, and the research, and yet anyone who works in these fields will tell you how hard it would be to put that into practice on a large scale.

As founder and executive director of Sovereign Bodies Institute (SBI), I have attempted to put this call to action into practice in our work, and I offer here some of

our practices as potential concrete examples of how to do work that breaks free from colonial economies of trauma. SBI is a nonprofit research institute working across the Americas and dedicated to gender and sexual violence against Indigenous peoples. Our board, staff, and community partners are all Indigenous, and most are survivors of violence or have family members who are missing or murdered. We have created an internal Survivors Leadership Council comprised of Indigenous survivors of trafficking and survival sex work to guide our work on such issues. We do not accept funding from colonial governments and do not provide them with data, nor do we provide data to non-Indigenous researchers or media. All of our projects are fundamentally designed to build and enhance the capacity of tribal nations and Indigenous communities to effectively respond to, heal from, and prevent gender and sexual violence. We do not document violence for its own sake, but rather do so to transform our world into a place that is safe for our peoples. Perhaps most importantly, in assessing what kind of research we would like to do, how we should do it, and who is competent to do it, we are guided by community priorities, consultation with elders and ceremonial people, and, in addition to professional and academic competency, cultural and experiential competency as well. Cumulatively, these practices are an assertion of our sovereignty as Indigenous survivors of violence and victims' families, a refusal to engage in or rely on systems that commodify ongoing violence against ourselves and our peoples for settler profit, and a shift from critique of poor and exploitative models for addressing the violence we experience to efforts to build holistic, experientially grounded work that moves beyond colonial categories and definitions of expertise or credentials.

BUILDING PEDESTALS FOR HOMEGIRL GENIUS

In the process of drafting this paper, I was asked to testify in hearings against TC Energy (formerly known as TransCanada) to determine if the State of South Dakota should approve their request for permits for use of water for man camps to build the Keystone XL pipeline. I was not testifying as an expert; I testified as a survivor of trafficking. My testimony was similar to the story I share here, but much more graphic. This was to give the members of the water board—entirely white, and predominantly old and male—a glimpse into the kind of violence that these man camps are likely to create. I testified in mid-December, and it was livestreamed on social media and recorded by journalists. On Christmas Eve, I woke up to an article from a statewide news station referring to me as a victim who had had her toenails ripped out. I was not contacted beforehand (or at all), and did not consent to have my name published in the article. I spent my holidays triggered, ashamed, and dehumanized as “the girl who had her toenails ripped out.” My mother spent Christmas Eve sitting with me in a dark room, listening to me cry. There was never any acknowledgment or apology for not allowing me to testify privately, or for circulating my testimony in the news, which I had very clearly stated was a risk to my life. I was so overwhelmed with grief and hurt that I spent a few days wanting to die.

It was a Native woman survivor of trafficking who saved me. She reached out to other grassroots Native women, and together they held a healing ceremony that not only helped me to heal from that experience, but gave me coping mechanisms and a

stronger circle of care. They knew what I needed and knew what to do. They knew how to effectively set me on a path to heal years of trauma and violence, and how to pull me from the dark hole made and perpetuated by the ongoing exploitation of my story. All of them were survivors of violence in some capacity and held me and my story with the care and gentleness needed. They are a shining example of the power of uplifting Indigenous survivor knowledge and expertise—it is literally life-saving.

“Homegirl genius” is the talent, intellect, creativity, work ethic, sense of kinship, and personal drive that I have seen among the women who cared for me during and after my experiences of violence, in the midst of their own experiences and healing journeys. The health and safety of our communities—not just Indigenous communities, but our collective communities—relies on our constructing pedestals for homegirl geniuses. They are all Indigenous women, women of color, and women who engaged in sex work or survived trafficking—the three populations least likely to be celebrated for their leadership and intellectual contributions, who experience some of the most significant barriers to settler definitions of success and expertise.

Our experiences of violence and marginalization mean that we have firsthand knowledge of these issues and know them in ways deeper than possible by others. We have developed critical thinking skills and creativity in efforts to survive that make us adept at imagining new methods of harm reduction and violence prevention; we have the cultural and experiential competencies to work ethically and effectively with populations targeted for violence; and we have a unique personal commitment to work towards community transformation. In spite of this, we are marginalized in every sphere, experiencing racialized, gendered, and classed forms of violence that deter us from earning settler-defined credentials that allow us to do the work we already have the expertise to do. It is time to let us do the work, and to build pedestals upon which it can shine.

At the beginning of this essay, I cite Natalie Clark’s work describing the “shock and awe campaign” that media, policymakers, healthcare providers, and government agencies continually create regarding Indigenous trauma. I close this paper with the following reflection: what if this shock and awe campaign was transformed, from eliciting shock regarding rates of trauma and violence to inspiring awe for the power of Indigenous survivors and victims’ families? It is imperative that the world recognize the expertise held by marginalized Indigenous people, survivors, and families in order for us to be empowered to do the work effectively. We know best how to support survivors and design effective strategies to end the violence, because we have lived it and continue to live it. We are not damaged or dirty; we are a healing force.

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