



## Caring Labours as Decolonizing Resistance

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**ABSTRACT** *This article brings feminist theories of social reproduction in conversation with decolonizing feminisms. It takes up Indigenous women's social reproductive labour as enactments of creative expansion. In approaching social reproduction as a site of struggle, it identifies three processes of expansion and resistance at this site: the expansion of care and intimacy into subsistence production; the expansion of the "family" beyond the nuclear through community and kin networks; and the expansion of relations of care to include the land.*

**KEYWORDS** gender; social reproduction; Indigeneity; decolonization

### Introduction

This piece is concerned with the intimate labours of Indigenous women living in the Northwest Territories (NWT) in the land that is now called Canada, and with the ways that attention to these labours elevates care and social reproduction as a site of struggle and decolonizing creation. Specifically, I take up Indigenous women's role in social reproduction, by which I refer to biological reproduction, the physical and emotional labour involved in the day-to-day reproduction of people, and the interpersonal, cultural, and community-based educative labour involved in intergenerational reproduction. Approaching Northern Indigenous women's labours as a site of decolonizing struggle, I look to acts of creative expansion at the site of social reproduction. I elevate the creative labours Indigenous women deploy in resisting white settler capitalist oppression, restructuring, and exploitation; in the protection and strengthening of communities and intimate relations between people and the land; and in the enactment of forms of being and knowing that expand outside and beyond Western capitalist ideologies.

In the past forty years, feminist theorists from a range of disciplines have worked to expose the power relations, the agency, and the struggles at play in social reproductive labour (also approached as the private realm, domestic

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labour, caring labour, and intimate labour). While work on these labours has challenged the capitalist, masculinized privileging of wage labour as “real” labour, in feminist political economy, social reproduction is often articulated largely in opposition to capitalist production, or, to put it another way, through the *assumption* of a capitalist economy. There has been less attention to other forms of non-capitalist labour, including Indigenous non-capitalist labour. It is often presumed that social reproduction takes place through the structures and sets of meaning of the Western nuclear family. Rather than attempting to freeze the complex and shifting labours of diverse peoples in any sort of fixed category, like “Indigenous social reproduction,” in this piece, I engage with the labours and relations of Indigenous women in the NWT with the aim of elevating the ways in which these women challenge and expand Eurocentric notions of what it is to “care,” to reproduce, or to be intimate. Locating my analysis in the mixed economy of the NWT, I focus on two expansions: the expansion of the “family” beyond the nuclear and through community and kin networks; and the expansion of relations of care to include the land. In so doing, I take up Indigenous women’s social reproductive labour as a site of creative resistance – resistance to white settler patriarchal ideology and the presumed totality of capital. This characterization is rooted in Indigenous feminist theory and activism that has named Indigenous women’s caring labours, their relations to people and the land, and their bodies as primary sites of de/colonizing struggle. These are sites of colonial violence and decolonizing creation; it is the latter characteristic that is the focus of this piece.

I begin with a brief overview of the methods used in this research. I then engage with feminist analyses – Indigenous and not – of care and social reproduction, asking what it means to take a decolonizing approach to social reproduction and to make Indigenous women’s labour the centre of analysis. I then build upon this analytical foundation by engaging with insights and narratives shared with me by Indigenous women in the NWT, arguing that their labours and their relations exemplify an expansion of the powerful place-based imperatives of care to the realm of production, outside of the imagined nuclear “home,” and to the land. I present this analysis as a white settler whose ancestors come from England, Ireland and Scotland, who lives through the structural privileges of being a white settler, and who is committed to the ongoing project of acting as an ally in decolonizing struggle. I write with a commitment to honour the narratives shared with me – and the generosity of the women who shared them – and with an understanding of the distortion and imperfection inherent in listening to and retelling stories. The knowledge, experiences and wisdom shared with me by the women who agreed to participate in the research and by the staff at the Native Women’s Association of the NWT, who guided and supported this project, are what inform the following discussion. Any gaps or misrepresentations in this analysis are my own responsibility.

## Methods

In taking up research in an Indigenous community as a white settler who lives with the privileges of the White Settler State (Razack, 2002), I am, of necessity, engaging in and confronting historical and contemporary colonial research. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p.79) notes, as it relates to Indigeneity, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary.” Today, the concept of “decolonizing research” has entered the Canadian academy; this is a progressive development, to be sure, but not without its dangers. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) note, decolonization must not lose its potency by being subsumed as metaphor. Indigenous communities in Canada have seen Western research deployed for colonial purposes over the past two centuries (Smith, 1999). From explicit attempts to deny and eradicate subsistence economies through social research that denied Indigenous socio-economies as legitimate, to more “well-meaning” anthropological and historical accounts that reproduce objectifying and Othering approaches to Indigenous communities in the North, research in itself is a project of extraction. As such, if research is to occur, it must be able to account for itself; or, to put it another way, it must respond to the concerns, needs, or goals of the community with which it engages. As Andrea Doucet (2008, p. 75) writes, it is not enough to reflect on one’s own subject position in relation to research, or to confess away responsibility or privilege; rather, one must think through the political motivations guiding the research. I position my research goals within a place-based social justice orientation, one that acknowledges the power relations through which academic research is enacted and that aims to challenge inequality and injustice.

This work comes out of a broader research project examining the impact of diamond mines in the NWT.<sup>1</sup> In collaboration with a wide range of community groups, including the Centre for Northern Families, the Status of Women of the NWT, the NWT Coalition against Family Violence, and the YWCA, I conducted 33 interviews with women living in Yellowknife, Ndilo, Dettah, and Behchoko about their experiences with the diamond mines. Recruited through the snowball method and existing relationships, the majority of these women were Indigenous. Interviews were complemented by two open community talking circles, and one community worker focus group.<sup>2</sup> In developing and planning fieldwork, I reached out to The Native

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<sup>1</sup> This broader research is my doctoral dissertation, which examines the impact of diamond mining in the NWT on Indigenous women. It was funded by a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Doctoral Scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews, focus groups and talking circles received ethics approval from the *Aurora Research Institute* and the *Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University’s Ethics Review Board* and conform to the standards of the *Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics* guidelines.

Women's Association of the NWT,<sup>3</sup> asking whether and how they would like to be involved in this research. They were interested in the research and its potential implications for community organizing, and offered to house the project. We worked out a reciprocal arrangement, wherein I was given unused office space and access to their resources, and I helped with office activities over the three-month period.<sup>4</sup> The Native Women's Association of the NWT staff provided invaluable support and expertise to this research. They offered ongoing advice and insight as the fieldwork proceeded, they supported outreach by contacting their community networks to recruit research participants, and they helped to organize, design, and facilitate talking circles. Perhaps more than anything, the ongoing exchanges in the office as we discussed the research brought a rich reflexivity that informed the shifting research design and analysis of the data. Sharing office space over the months of fieldwork gave me the opportunity to engage in ongoing informal discussions about the research with the The Native Women's Association staff, discussions that shaped both my methods of data collection and analysis. For example, below I draw upon a story shared with me by Della Green. This story emerged in the context of a shared work project, rather than a formal interview, but deeply informed my expansive approach to social reproduction, which guided me in conducting interviews and in later analysis.

As another example, in developing fieldwork methods, I originally planned to conduct focus groups solely with community workers, as I was concerned that focus groups with women who had been affected by the diamond mines may involve sensitive material and put research participants in uncomfortable positions. However, upon my arrival, The Native Women's Association of the NWT and other participating community groups expressed the potential for community learning and development that could come from hosting community talking circles, so we coordinated two circles.<sup>5</sup> The talking circle is an Indigenous tool for bringing community members of all ages together for shared learning and listening (Wolf & Rickard, 2003). More than a focus group, these events were spaces for community members (mostly women, but also some men) to come together to share their experiences of the diamond mines. The Native Women's Association of the NWT staff and I cooked lunch for the talking circle participants, with the aim of creating a warm and inclusive atmosphere. Because talking circles are led according to Indigenous tradition and by a

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<sup>3</sup> My collaboration with *The Native Women's Association of the NWT* came out of relationships developed when I worked for the Association from 2008–2010 in violence prevention and intervention.

<sup>4</sup> This included helping to organize an outreach event on missing and murdered Indigenous women, helping to organize an outreach event on residential schools, and assisting in report writing.

<sup>5</sup> The Native Women's Association of the NWT has a history of using talking circles as a way of discussing important and difficult community issues – most commonly, talking circles about residential school experiences.

community leader, it was agreed that it would be appropriate for the talking circles to be led by Della Green, according to her traditions. Della is from Namgis First Nation, Alert Bay, and worked as the Victim Services Coordinator at the Native Women's Association of the NWT at the time. Rather than verbally contributing to facilitation, I made poster board questions, which were displayed for the talking circle. In talking circle tradition, participants are not called upon, but rather are given time to reflect and contribute when and if they desire. Displaying the research questions on a poster board rather than posing the questions orally and consecutively allowed the participants to respond to one another freely while personally reflecting upon the questions and voicing their thoughts at the time of their choosing.

The community talking circles proved to be highly effective, sometimes in unanticipated ways: the dialogue between participants led to richer insights and learning, as people were able to build on one another's reflections. Research participants shared tactics for managing hardships they had experienced, and discussed community-building strategies to move beyond (material and cultural) resource extraction dependency. Many participants expressed satisfaction and solidarity in learning about one another's stories. Approximately 15-20 people joined in the talking circles. Ten of those people chose to speak in the first talking circle, and eight chose to speak in the second. Contributions by participants in these two talking circles, as well as interviews, inform the analysis of this piece.

I analyzed data through a reflexive coding process, aligned with feminist methods of reflexive re-readings of transcripts and multiple codes (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), and with Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna (1989, p. 23), who write that interpretation is "not something which occurs only at one specific point in the research after the data has been gathered; rather, interpretation exists at the beginning and continues throughout the entire process." Because of my methodological commitment to narratives as guiding and informing analysis, I undertook analysis at multiple stages, so that theory and data (in the form of narrative) could inform one another. The interview process itself, combined with transcription, offered the first opportunity to reflect upon themes and insights that emerged. I developed a coding scheme based on a combined reading of my theoretical framework and my interview and transcription notes, and sharpened the codes through two rounds of pilot coding. I used this iterative method of coding interviews to account for themes that emerged outside of my initial research questions. In so doing, I asked myself how these new themes shifted the analytical assumptions and tools through which my analysis was proceeding.

### **Politicizing Care, Decolonizing Care**

In order to ground the discussion of social reproduction that follows, I begin with a story shared with me by Della Green.<sup>6</sup> This story speaks to the power of intimate labours as a site of both decolonizing and colonizing processes. Della's mother attended residential school, and this story emerged as Della was preparing a presentation on the intergenerational impacts of residential schooling. When I asked Della for permission to share her story in this venue, she agreed and wrote it out for me in her own words, which I share here:

I was preparing a presentation for the Residential School survivors, and my co-worker and I were searching for some photos to use for our presentation, and I came across this photo of six students. My heart stopped when I saw the photo, as I recall my Mother having a photo on her wall in the dining room of her home. It was of the six oldest of her children (that included me). It was actually almost the same as the one I saw on the computer screen.

All three girls [in the residential school photo] had the same haircut as the photo [in my dining room], and we all dressed the same. The boys all had checkered shirts on, and blue jeans with suspenders, and they also had the same haircuts in the photo. I asked my husband to send me that photo, as I recall him taking a photo of that photo at our Mother's house, so he did. And sure enough, there we were! We could have been the same students in that photo!

I knew right then and there, even though my Mother said she was not affected by the Residential School, she dressed us just like the students in that photo! I felt sad and emotional about the whole ordeal, for my Mother who is gone now. I often wonder if she really knew. (Personal Correspondence 2015)

For Della, the pictures struck a nerve: they reminded her of the complex, and sometimes contradictory, experience of being raised by survivors of residential school, of the difficult labour her mother enacted as she engaged in the daily and intergenerational reproduction of a home and community that they had been taught was wrong. Indeed, the two pictures Della showed me were a powerful illustration of how the most intimate of labours – parting your child's hair to the side and securing it with a barrette, or ironing the collar on their dress – are tied up in the ongoing colonial contestation at the site of social reproduction in Indigenous homes.

Indigenous women – their lives, their bodies, and their labour – are at the centre of this struggle. Residential school, violence against Indigenous women, forced sterilization of Indigenous women, the starkly

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<sup>6</sup> The excerpts in this piece emerged from interviews, talking circles, and, in this case, personal correspondence. Research participants' contributions are anonymized; however, Della Green asked that her name be attached to this story.

disproportionate rates of incarceration of Indigenous people in Canada,<sup>7</sup> and the even more disproportionate rates of apprehension of Indigenous children into foster care all manifest as a continuity of the White Settler State's (Razack, 2002) colonial interventions into the social reproduction of Indigenous communities (Anderson, 2003). These interventions demonstrate the ways that patriarchy is embedded in white supremacy (Moreton-Robinson, 2009; Simpson, 2014). Today, there are more Indigenous children in foster care than there ever were in residential schools (Christensen, 2014). These processes – these markers of violence – all demonstrate that the profoundly gendered (Anderson & Lawrence, 2003; Smith, 2005) assault on Indigenous bodies, labours, and relationships is not a past “mistake” that demands an apology, but a present crisis that demands action in the form of decolonizing resistance. Indeed, Colleen Hele, Naomi Seyers and Jessica Wood write:

the intergenerational legacy of residential schools, violence against Indigenous women and girls, and the impact of colonial policies – including the criminalization of Indigenous people – all reveal the true intent of the colonial state: to get rid of the Indian problem. (Hele, Seyers, & Wood, 2015, n.p.)

Indigenous feminist literature powerfully marking the caring labours of Indigenous women as a site of de/colonizing struggle has emerged parallel to – and sometimes in conversation, sometimes not; sometimes complementary, sometimes not – the many strands of feminist thought that have politicized care. As early as the 1950s, Claudia Jones urged her comrades to think through the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect to facilitate the exploitation of Black women across the lines of production and reproduction, so-called work and so-called care (Boyce Davies, 2008). In the decades that followed, feminists of different social locations and theoretical groundings expanded on the idea of intersecting gendered exploitation and oppression at the site of “care work.” In liberal theory, the initial intervention – both in terms of scholarship and politics – was the struggle to make the “private realm” public. For second-wave feminists, the liberal reification of a divide between the public and private was deeply pernicious because it assumed a perfect equality between men and women in the private sphere, and insulated the supposedly apolitical private sphere from political critique (MacKinnon, 1989; Olsen, 1983). Thus, the feminist response must be to explode this erroneous binary, and demand public (state) responses to what were previously deemed private (and therefore un-punishable) injustices.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A 2013 report found that 23% of the inmates in Canadian federal prison are Indigenous, a number vastly disproportionate to the four percent Indigenous people make up of the Canadian population, as a whole. Furthermore, this is a number that has been steadily and steeply on the rise since the early 2000s (CBC, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting anti-racist and anti-colonial interventions into this project. Theorizing the public/private divide – even a theorization that seeks to abolish the divide – is one that implicitly includes only those people whose lives have been allowed to exist within that framework. Anti-

In the discipline of feminist political economy the categories taken up and problematized are production and reproduction, rather than a focus on the public/private binary.. Within Marxist feminist, socialist feminist, and feminist political economy traditions, this includes debates in the 1970s over whether to conceptualize production and reproduction as dual systems or a unitary system (Young, 1980); the domestic labour debates of the 1970s and 1980s that challenged revolutionary thought on its exclusion of the so-called “domestic sphere” and asked whether domestic labour can be conceptualized as productive labour, in the Marxian sense (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2012; Fee, 1976); anti-racist interventions that challenged Marxist and socialist feminists to think through how racialized relations of power structure gendered modes of reproduction and production (Bannerji, 2005; Davis, 1981; James, 2012); and feminist political economy interventions of the 1990s and 2000s that moved analysis to the level of social formation (Jenson, 1986; Vosko, 2002) and developed contemporary theories of social reproduction (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Ferguson, 2008). As Leah Vosko (2002) notes, social reproduction theory emanates from acknowledging the necessity of reproduction for production and the interconnectedness between the two. The research presented here takes a social reproduction approach insofar as it is rooted in an inquiry into the paid and unpaid labour performed by Northern Indigenous women for the purpose of daily and intergenerational reproduction (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006).

I suggest that the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of “social reproduction,” which endorse a politicized and historicized approach to caring labours and an attention to the ways in which place, “race,” and gender shape specific social relations of reproduction and production, offer fertile ground for a discussion of Indigenous women’s caring labours. However, most social reproduction theory is rooted in an analysis of the relationship between social reproduction and *capitalist* production.<sup>9</sup> This imbues an implicit totality to capitalist ideology and materiality.

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racist and anti-imperialist feminists from the global South and North have argued that the public/private divide does not represent their experience of the world, in general, or of violence in particular. Anannya Bhattacharjee’s (1997) work in South Asian communities in New York demonstrates that the experiences of family, community, and culture in these communities go beyond simple binaries of what is public and private. Andrea Smith (2005) argues that MacKinnon’s formulation, calling for greater state action, obscures the centuries of state violence inflicted upon Indigenous women in the Americas. Similarly, Cyndi Baskin’s (2003) discussion of violence in Aboriginal communities in Canada advocates a holistic conception of “family violence” that transcends public/private borders, encompassing a cognizance of the ways in which individuals are tied to communities, to spaces, and to histories of colonialism and resistance.

<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, important exceptions to this gap. For example, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thompson (1999) linked feminist materialist critiques of patriarchy with theories of subsistence; Rauna Kuokkonen (2011, 2008) links Indigenous women’s labours and violence to global political economy; and feminists from the Global South, like Vandana Shiva (1988), have long been bringing non-capitalist socio-economic formations into conversations with feminist concerns with global capital.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, there is a tendency in some mainstream feminist theories of care and reproduction to assume Western nuclear family arrangements. Conversely, Northern Indigenous women live and labour in a mixed economy, built through Indigenous and settler social relations, wherein subsistence production persists alongside capitalist production, and Indigenous households are shaped through multiple and competing de/colonizing typologies. In this context, Indigenous women's social reproduction is a site of de/colonizing struggle. Thus, in what follows, I draw upon the insights of research participants to take up Indigenous women's social reproductive labour as it relates both to capitalist production and subsistence production, and as it is enacted through place-based Indigenous social relations and systems of meaning. I elevate the ways that this labour expands Western conceptions of care, reproduction and the intimate as it transgresses and reshapes categorical boundaries. Indeed, Indigenous women's social reproductive labour is a space that holds within it both violent colonial oppression and exploitation, and the *creative* labours of resistance, growth, and possibility: production and reproduction of Indigenous, non-capitalist, non-patriarchal forms of caring, living, and working. In what follows, I take up research participant narratives to discuss processes of creative expansion at the site of social reproduction.

### **Sites of Decolonizing Expansions of Care**

One of the powerful contributions of the feminist literature discussed above is the linking of reproduction and production; that is, the general assertion, expressed diversely across theoretical traditions, that capitalist production relies upon social reproduction – that the two are fundamentally linked. Notwithstanding this shared theoretical grounding, theorists diverge on how, and the extent to which, they conceptualize the mutability of the divide between production and social reproduction. Certainly, the relation between production and social reproduction, and the quality of labours that transcend this divide, is a subject that shifts through time and place. Indigenous women in the NWT, for example, engage in social reproductive labour through the contemporary mixed economy,<sup>10</sup> a potent corrective to the notion that capitalism is a total economy. Indeed, the power of Indigenous social relations in the mixed economy is a demonstration of the ways that an orientation toward the well-being and reproduction of community and kin can transcend the realm of social reproduction and shape engagement with production, capitalist or not.

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<sup>10</sup> The northern mixed economy refers to the ways in which the northern economy has developed through both subsistence production and capitalist production (see e.g., Abele, 2006; Asch, 1977).

Social reproductive work is located in relation to both capitalist production and subsistence production in the mixed economy. I am using the term subsistence here as a category of labour-power that is performed in both the traditional economy and the mixed economy for the purpose of acquiring or producing the needs of a household or community. Frances Abele (2006) points to ways an analysis of the mixed economy shifts traditional Western conceptions of the economic. She reminds us that “understanding the mixed economy means accepting, for heuristic purposes, that the basic unit of analysis is not the individual worker (as is the case for neo-classical economic theory) but rather the household” (Abele, 2006, p. 186). Furthermore, like social reproductive work, which can be at once labouring and emotive, exhausting of labour-power and interpersonally enriching, subsistence and traditional work is understood as much more than a necessary activity for biological or economic sustenance. She writes, “‘Going on the land’ is physically arduous and sometimes risky, but it is not typically understood as ‘work.’ Rather it is recognized as an activity that contributes a great deal to physical, emotional and mental well-being” (Abele, 2006, p. 187).

Within this context, the reach of the imperatives of social reproduction are extended, and become more potent. Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) suggest that the fact of capitalist production is not necessarily followed with a capitalist orientation, and that a “subsistence perspective” (that is, labour oriented toward the reproduction and well-being of the collective, rather than the profit of the one) is a powerful site of anti-capitalist, feminist resistance. For Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999), a subsistence perspective “insists on the priority of use-value production” (p. 58) and prioritizes the “creation and maintenance of life on this planet” over “the accumulation of dead money” (p. 7). In what follows, I outline two ways that Indigenous women resist the imperatives of capitalism and colonialism through the orientation, structure, and enactment of their care labour, first, in the extension of intimate caring relations beyond the imagined “nuclear family,” and second, in an extension of relations of social reproduction to the land.

### *Beyond Nuclear Care*

Social reproductive labour performed in Northern Indigenous communities involve strong kin and community networks wherein care and other reproductive and subsistence activities are undertaken interdependently across nuclear family units (Usher, Duhaime, & Searles, 2003). As Alica, a young Dene woman living in Yellowknife, said, describing her own extended family, “I grew up around little kids, helping take care of the family. But that’s pretty common. And that’s a big part of Aboriginal culture, too, family raising the family” (Personal Interview, 2014). Many Indigenous and non-

Indigenous scholars have discussed the non-nuclear structure of care in Indigenous households (see e.g., Anderson & Lawrence, 2003) – a structure that the Canadian State has attempted to undermine with varying levels of success through policies and practices of surveillance, rupture, and punishment. This includes the forced relocation of nomadic communities into permanent settlements with single-dwelling homes, welfare policies that require nuclear families, and the contemporary surveillance of Indigenous families through social service programming (Anderson, 2003; Martin-Hill, 2003). Indeed, one worker in social services described the racialized, class-based process of surveillance in the following way:

Whereas my client, they live in low-income housing, so they get in a fight and someone calls the cops. He goes to jail, there's a charge laid, and child welfare gets involved. Right? I'm not investigating very many upper-middle class families. We don't get those calls. So you're under a microscope. (Personal Interview, 2014)

However, throughout the Canadian state's persistent attempts to restructure Indigenous processes of care, kin and community networks have remained a powerful space of social reproduction and resistance for many of the women who participated in this research. In the interviews I conducted, Indigenous women consistently explained the ways that their extended kin and community networks worked together in times of strain and made it possible to pursue particular desires or goals. The strength and value of extra-household community links are not, by any means, unique to Indigenous communities in Northern Canada, and have been well documented by feminists (Collins, 1991; Morris, 1985), and Doucet (2000, p. 178) has pointed to the need for family research to shift toward these wider community relations. How then do Northern Indigenous community and kin networks, in particular, decolonize Western assumptions of family and expand conceptions of the intimate?

I suggest that in the context of a mixed economy characterized by an ongoing material and ideological struggle between capitalist, State-sanctioned modes of reproduction and place-based, Indigenous modes of reproduction and production, extended networks of intimacy and care are a space through which the latter can be supported and nurtured outside of the confines of the former. Extended community and kin networks support and facilitate community cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and engagement in subsistence production. In *The Best of Both Worlds* (Harnum et al., 2014), a study examining the mixed economy in the Sahtu region of the NWT, engagement in subsistence production and consumption was described by research participants as labour undertaken in interdependent ways across households that contributes to the well-being of the whole group. Usher et al. (2003) describe this as “supra-household interaction” determined, primarily, by kinship networks. They write that these connections are “celebrated, consolidated, reinforced and reproduced

by sharing, feasting, ritual observance, and associated ethical norms. There is much incentive to maintain the system, little to disrupt it” (Usher et al., 2003, p. 179).

Just as the women I interviewed described extended networks as a source of joy, stability, and strength, they also described these networks as a space of responsibility and labour – labour that often conflicted with roles they might hold in wage-labour, most notably their work in the Canadian diamond mines.<sup>11</sup> Women who had worked at the diamond mines discussed their community and kin-level work as directly in conflict with their work at the diamond mines just as often as they discussed their labour involving their own children. For example, Iris, an Inuit woman, left her work at the diamond mines to look after her sister and her sister’s child in a time of need. Her work history at the mines was consistently interrupted by responsibilities in the home or community, or by illness. When we spoke, she wanted to reapply to the mines and she joked:

This time, I’m gonna stick with it. I tell all my relatives and my friends, you guys can’t die, I’m gonna go to work. And they say, “Okay, we won’t die.” And I say, “Let’s see how long you can hold out.” I say, “Something can happen, but not while I’m working.” But I know that won’t work. (Personal Interview, 2014)

Iris’s work history is an example of a common theme expressed by research participants: that prioritizing care work over wage-labour included not just ongoing reproductive labour, but community-level labour required in times of crisis, stress, or need. As one community worker said:

the expectation is that if anything tough happens in the community, that the women have to be there. Like, if there’s a sick parent or an older person, the men in the community are really not expected to take on the extra roles. Women need to take them on. So that makes it really difficult for women [to work for the diamond mines]. (Personal Interview, 2014)

My aim is not to romanticize these labours or responsibilities or diminish the difficult and sometimes constraining roles these women take up; rather, it is to demonstrate the ways that deep care commitments to extended kin and community are tied up in an orientation away from the demands of capital and towards the daily and intergenerational reproduction of Indigenous communities and people. This, certainly, is transgressive. Marx (1976) and many theorists following him have noted that capitalism requires people who require capitalism. As feminist theorists have added, this includes a requirement for reproductive labour oriented towards the needs of capital. While it has taken different forms in different times and places, there is a continuity in the capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist exploitation of

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<sup>11</sup> There are four diamond mines in the NWT. The first one opened in 1998, and since then, diamond mines have dominated the Territorial economy, accounting for more than 50% of the GDP (GNWT, 2015).

women's reproductive labour across time and place (Anderson, 2003; Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2006; Mies, 1986). Silvia Federici (2004, p. 2) argues that the accumulation of capital requires the appropriation, not just of land, but of women's control over their roles in production and reproduction. The contemporaneous de/colonizing struggle at play at the site of Indigenous women's social reproduction is a visceral demonstration of the embodied character of this conflict, an argument that is apt in the face of the rates of violence against Indigenous women in Canada (Government of Canada, 2015; Sisters in Spirit, 2010) and the past and present state tactics to survey and restructure Indigenous women's reproductive labours (Anderson, 2003; Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2005). By making the care and reproduction of their communities primary, these women – in their relationships and through their labour – are challenging the totality of capital; they are reproducing resistance and fostering the continuity of a subsistence orientation that values place-based practices of care and intimate relations to people and places over the atomized separateness so conducive to the neoliberal order. It is to the enactment of relationships to place that I turn in the final section of this piece.

#### *De-alienating the land*

Land claims, and other forms of contestation over land and resources, are the most visible form of contemporary colonial contestation in Canada. When framed within a settler logic, struggles for land emerge in legalistic terms, as discrete claims of power *over* specific bounded territories and resources. A decolonizing approach to land, however, is one that recognizes land relationally (Simpson, 2007; Smith, 2011). Indeed, Glen Coulthard writes:

it is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is this too); instead it ought to be understood as a field of “relationships of things to each other.” Place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world – and these ways of knowing often guide forms of resistance to power relations that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place. (Coulthard 2010, p. 79)

Coulthard offers an expansion of relational analysis to the land such that the land is not something to be acted upon, but rather something (or some *things*) with which to act. As regards an analysis of Indigenous women's reproductive and care labours, this means that a decolonizing approach requires, first, a spatial specificity (and a specificity toward the plants, animals, rocks, and water within that space), and second, an inclusion of land in relational analyses of social reproduction. By spatial specificity, I mean grounded analyses that look to the histories, materialities, and meanings of

particular relations between people and the land.<sup>12</sup> By including land in analyses of social reproduction, I am evoking a shift from approaching land as the *object*/resource upon or through which, biological and social reproduction takes place, to a relational approach wherein both people and land are the *subject* of social reproduction – an approach expressed below by research participants.

Indeed, in interviews and talking circles, there was a fluidity in how northern Indigenous women expressed their relationships to the land, their relationships to their children and loved ones, and the structures of meaning that threaded through all of these relationships. When I asked questions about the diamond mines – as sites of physical displacement – many women began their response with a discussion of their children, their responses coloured with broad concerns about the ways that resource extraction will impact future generations, but also driven by contemporary proximities between care, intimacy, and the land. A number of women brought up concerns for the caribou, the traditional meat for the Dene, and their shifting migration patterns and depleting numbers as a result of the mines. Sarah, a Dene woman living in a small Indigenous community, put it this way:

The diamond mines also changed the caribou migration. And because they changed the caribou migration, the caribou don't go as far as they used to. They don't go where they used to because their habitat is being taken over. Their numbers are obviously decreasing. And so that is impacting my family, my community, my culture. Where a lot of us don't have access to caribou, our traditional meat. My daughter, who's now 21, she just found out she's diabetic. She's borderline diabetic. She's not obese, she exercises a lot, and when we found that out, we were surprised.<sup>13</sup> We said, how could that be? But that's because our food and our cultural way of living has changed. Our food has changed. Our diet has changed. So, she has to eat a strict diet now and that's just how it is. (Talking Circle, 2014)

Debbie, a Metis woman participating in the same talking circle, held the same concern, and told this story of resistance, which got a good laugh from the group:

And I no longer have a food source. I remember one time we were out hunting and we used the road. We were grateful for the road. But right in front of us, a group of hunters that went out and, honest to god...Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And this whole herd of caribou was hunted, slaughtered. And this group of hunters was standing around, not knowing what to do now. Because they'd never

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Brittany Luby's (2015) analysis of Anishinabek mothers' responses to hydroelectric flooding and the impact this had on traditions of breastfeeding and water-based food consumption in their community.

<sup>13</sup> That Sarah felt the need to explain that her daughter's diabetes was not the result of obesity (which is often read as the consequences of poor individual choices, particularly upon Indigenous bodies) speaks, I would argue, to the intensity of the disciplining, blaming, and surveying of Indigenous bodies and health.

hunted before. But they see an animal and they kill it. So my husband jumped out and showed them how to harvest the animal. And he took all the delicacies, and said, “oh, this part’s no good.” [laughs] So we benefited, thankfully. But, you know, lots of times we went out on that road and people aren’t even seeing caribou anymore (Talking Circle, 2014).

For many of the women interviewed, the health of the land is directly related to the health and well-being of the people in the physical sense of traditional food sources, and also in emotive, interpersonal, and cultural ways. Alica, whose grandfather’s trap line once ran through the space where a diamond pit now lies, explained that she was physically ill when she visited the diamond mines (Personal Interview, 2014). When I asked Shayna, a young Indigenous woman living in Yellowknife, about bringing her child to visit family in small communities, she related spiritual, emotional, and interpersonal health with visiting the land to which her family is connected. She said:

With the land, you hear Aboriginal people, and for me, talking about our relationship with the land. I feel like it’s something that I’m not even fully aware of. My soul, unconscious, my body, anytime I go see my aunty and my uncle at their camp or do any kind of cultural activities, my connection to the land, it’s not even something that’s in my mind, like the forefront of my mind. It’s just such a release there. (Personal Interview, 2014)

The intimate relationship between land and people, and care and subsistence in northern Indigenous communities is a thread that tightly winds between different times and places. In discussing the intimate corporeal, caring, and symbolic relationship Indigenous communities hold to the land, I aim to elevate the day-to-day acts of decolonizing resistance enacted in the commitment to these relationships. Just as much as large-scale battles for land, the daily labours of reproduction, subsistence and care – a woman showing her daughter the plants that are medicine, or the hunting paths of their ancestors, or how to fish, cook, sew, and dry meat – all of these labours, at once intimate and transgressive, expand the possibilities of ways of being and knowing.

## **Conclusion**

In this piece, I have suggested that the intimate labours of Indigenous women are a site of decolonizing struggle, a space of both violence and creative resistance. As a contribution to a decolonizing approach to social reproduction theory, I have elevated the ways that Indigenous women’s day-to-day caring labours extend the space of “caring,” and challenge the totality of Western capitalist patriarchal social relations. Indeed, Indigenous women’s reproductive labour extends beyond the sphere it has been allotted

by settler ideologies and materialities (that is, the “nuclear family”) and thus, in both theory and practice, expands decolonizing enactments of care and intimacies. It is my contention that these labours are transgressive, hopeful, profoundly challenging, and profoundly meaningful.

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