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Emily M. Colpitts and Alison Crosby

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT   This article analyzes how the conceptualization of gendered violence shapes responses and possibilities for redress in two very different community-engaged research contexts and projects. The first case study examines how Canadian universities enact sexual violence policies from the perspective of student activists and other stakeholders to understand the struggle over the power to define violence and shape institutional responses. The second case study is a participatory action research project that explores how transnational feminist and human rights regimes shape, inform, and often occlude or over-determine the struggles for redress by Indigenous women survivors of wartime sexual violence in Guatemala. In both contexts, we identify the persistent circulation of a particular 'violence against women' paradigm that functions as a universalizing exceptionalist imaginary which excludes more complex and situated understandings of violence while legitimizing certain responses over others. We consider the possibilities of critical community-engaged research as a means of challenging this presumed universalism. We explore the complexities of conducting such research as white scholars located within the neoliberal academy, given how its investment in community engagement serves to mask the implications of academic knowledge production in colonial and imperial projects and positions the university and the researcher as "saviours" of the "community."

KEYWORDS   gendered violence, community-engaged research, violence against women, participatory action research, intersectionality

As feminist scholars engaged in research on gendered violence, specifically sexual violence, we share an interest in how violence is conceptualized and how this shapes possible responses for redress. Our research is situated in different contexts. Emily engages student activists and other 'stakeholders'[1] at Canadian universities to understand the complex power relations inherent in the development of institutional sexual violence policies and responses (Colpitts, 2021). Her research challenges the construction of universities as homogenous spaces of privilege that are separate from the 'communities' that are framed as the ideal sites of community-engaged

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1 Emily uses the term 'stakeholders' to refer to the range of campus community members involved in her research while recognizing that the 'stakes' in this research are not the same for all. Rather, what is at stake and for whom are central concerns of this research. It is important to acknowledge the settler colonial connotations of claim staking (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and interrogate who is able to stake a claim and have it recognized, particularly in the context of research at Canadian universities, which are often located on unceded territory (Hunt, 2016).

research and teaching (Dean, 2019). Alison's research traces how transnational feminist and human rights regimes shape, inform, and often occlude or over-determine the struggles for redress by Indigenous women survivors of wartime sexual violence in Guatemala. Her work focuses on the possibilities and challenges for decolonial feminist methodologies that centre survivor protagonism, including feminist participatory action research (PAR), within this terrain (Crosby & Lykes, 2019).

Despite these differences in research focus, we have both observed the persistent circulation of a particular 'violence against women' (VAW) paradigm, which is rooted in radical feminism and remains central to institutionalized approaches and responses to gendered violence. As such, we argue, this paradigm functions as a universalizing exceptionalist imaginary (Jaleel, 2013) that excludes more complex and situated understandings of gendered violence and legitimizes certain responses over others. By positing a universal experience of gendered oppression, its circulation also contributes to an uncritical sense of global 'sisterhood' that obscures how white Western feminists are ourselves implicated in the structures and systems that produce violence, as well the potential for our research to reproduce harm and marginalization (Mohanty, 2003; Tuck, 2009). We consider the potentiality of critical community-engaged research as a means of challenging this presumed universalism while also recognizing the complexities of conducting this research within the broader context of the neoliberal university's investment in community engagement, which serves to mask the historical and ongoing implication of academic knowledge production in colonial and imperial projects (Luhmann et al., 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In this way, both the VAW paradigm and the university's investment in community engagement reproduce existing power arrangements by positioning the university and white Western feminist researchers as 'saviours' of the 'community.' As researchers located in Canadian academic institutions, we participate in these systems of power, and, as such, in this article we are critically reflexive of our own positionality within white supremacy. Drawing on the work of Kahnawake scholar Audra Simpson, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2014) call for a "methodology of refusal" (p. 239) of settler colonial knowledge production of violence. Such refusal "shifts the gaze from the violated body to the violating instruments […] Refusal helps us move from thinking of violence as an event and toward an analysis of it as a structure" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 241). In this article, we refuse the VAW paradigm in favour of more intersectional, complex, and situated understandings of violence as a structural condition.

We begin the article with a brief overview of critical feminist scholarship on the politics of community engagement. We then trace the history of the universalizing VAW paradigm, along with the implications of its circulation. Offering two cases, we discuss how we have each encountered and sought to challenge this conceptualization of violence through our community-engaged research. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on the complexities of conducting this research as white scholars located within the neoliberal academy who are working to refuse settler colonial knowledge production of violence.

Critical Feminist Perspectives on Community Engagement

In recent years, Canadian universities have increasingly promoted community-engaged research and teaching as an opportunity for students and faculty to enter into mutually beneficial relationships with the 'community.' This institutional investment in community engagement rarely addresses how power shapes interactions between members of the university and the community or within the university itself (Dean, 2019). As Susanne Luhmann, Jennifer Johnson, and Amber Dean (2019) explain,

> by contrasting an alleged 'real-world' community always imagined outside of the university to the fantasy of the university as a rarefied 'ivory tower,' the university risks being imagined as a supposedly safe, gated community rather than as a site of complex social and power relationships and deeply entrenched inequities, injustices, and exclusions. (p. 18)

The overarching result is that community engagement is framed as "opportunities for students and faculty to demonstrate compassion, benevolence, philanthropy, and good citizenship by giving back to a community *that we are simultaneously framed as both separate from and superior to*" (Dean, 2019, p. 29, emphasis in original). Unsurprisingly, the neocolonial and imperialist undertones of the construction of the university as a 'saviour' and community engagement as 'doing good' are generally left unaddressed (Luhmann et al., 2019).

Gender and Women's Studies is often assumed to have an affinity with community-engaged research and teaching based on the narrative that the field grew out of the so-called 'second-wave' feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s and that activism is therefore "the raison d'être of the field" (Luhmann et al., 2019, pp. 9-10). Community engagement is constructed as a means of overcoming the perceived divide between academic feminism and feminist activism, and thus serves to legitimize the field and assuage anxieties about its depoliticization and disciplinarity (Gotell, 2019; Wiegman, 2012). In this respect, Robin Wiegman (2012) argues that gendered violence is privileged as an object of study because it "lives up to the political desire invested in the field as a project of social transformation" (p. 76). As such, community-engaged feminist anti-violence research is specifically positioned as having the potential to resist the depoliticizing force of the neoliberal university.

At the same time, feminist, post-colonial, and Indigenous scholars have produced significant critical scholarship on the politics of community engagement. This scholarship renders visible the power relations inherent in community-engaged research by troubling discourses of 'partnership' and knowledge 'co-creation,' as well as essentialist notions of 'community' while exploring possibilities for solidarity (Creese & Frisby, 2011; Lykes & Crosby, 2014; Mohanty, 2003). As Amber Dean (2019) notes, key questions include: "(1) Who benefits? (2) Who can/should speak for whom? and (3) How are authority and resources distributed, and what are the consequences […] of choosing *not* to engage?" (p. 35, emphasis in original). These questions are particularly relevant in the context of research on violence and oppression, which, as Tuck and Yang (2014) explain, often involves voyeuristic and consumptive "telling and retelling

[of] narratives of pain" (p. 227) that serve to justify "a host of interventions into communities and treats communities as frontiers to civilize" (p. 244). This critical scholarship challenges constructions of engagement as politically neutral or, worse, as inherently benevolent, and renders visible the ways in which academic research, including feminist research on gendered violence, has been and continues to be implicated in colonialism, imperialism, and other systems of oppression. As we trace in the next section, the universalizing VAW paradigm functions as a particular kind of exceptionalist imaginary and we reflect on how we have encountered its ongoing productive power within our own research.

Violence Against Women as a Universalizing Exceptionalist Imaginary
Conceptualizations of violence are always competing and contested. However, the VAW paradigm is privileged within the North American context and circulates transnationally through feminist and human rights discourses and research regimes. This paradigm emerged from the radical feminist consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s and frames violence as a shared political experience rather than only a personal or private one. Radical feminism posits the constitution of the category of 'woman' as its central organizing premise and frames patriarchy as "the earliest and most fundamental form of oppression" (Mann, 2012, p. 88). One of the most prominent examples of radical feminist theorizing on violence is Susan Brownmiller's (1975) conceptualization of rape as "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (p. 15). The VAW paradigm has been critiqued for universalizing the category of 'woman' and for framing women as inherently vulnerable and violable (Reich, 2002). At the same time, radical feminists employed the shared experience of vulnerability as a foundation for collective action against violence (Mardorossian, 2002).

This conceptualization of VAW is troublesome in that it often delimits the category of 'woman' through the exclusion of trans women. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) generally subscribe to an essentialist understanding of sex to assert that trans women are not 'real' women (Williams, 2014) while dismissing the identity claims of trans men and non-binary people (Awkward-Rich, 2017). TERF logic is mobilized to exclude trans people from 'women's spaces,' including services for women experiencing violence, and constructs trans women as potential perpetrators (Pyne, 2015). These arguments ignore the fact that trans people experience sexual violence at higher rates than cisgender women (Jaffray, 2020) and reproduce barriers that impact their ability to access support.

The VAW paradigm has also been critiqued for ignoring other differences among women by universalizing violence as an issue of gendered power relations. For example, Black feminists have highlighted how this framing ignores the use of sexual violence as a "weapon of racial terror" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 158) and leads to anti-violence efforts that centre the 'ideal' survivor, who is understood to be a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender woman (Richie, 2000). They have also challenged the characterization of all cisgender men as potential perpetrators (Combahee River Collective, 1977), particularly as it ignores how the pervasive myth of the Black rapist is used "as an incitement to racist aggression" (Davis, 1981,

p. 173). Black feminist activists and scholars have articulated intersectionality as a framework to address the inseparability of systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989), which challenges the framing of violence against women as exclusively or even primarily a gendered issue. It also demonstrates how anti-violence efforts can "themselves function as sites that produc[e] and legitimiz[e] marginalization" when these intersections are ignored (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 304).

Indigenous feminist scholars and activists have similarly articulated more complex and situated understandings of violence that challenge the narrow VAW paradigm by demonstrating the inseparability of patriarchy, white supremacy, and settler colonialism (Simpson, 2015). They highlight how colonial constructions of Indigenous womanhood are (re)produced through sexual violence (Anderson, 2000) and conceptualize the imposition of Western gender norms as a form of colonial violence that obscures the diversity of Indigenous gender roles and identities (Hunt, 2016; Simpson, 2015). Further, Leanne Simpson (2015) argues that while Indigenous people have always resisted, gendered violence is used as a tool to perpetuate settler colonialism and capitalism by facilitating the theft of land and resource extraction and by impeding community mobilization toward decolonization. Again, by focusing exclusively on patriarchy, the VAW paradigm fails to address these complexities.

These limitations are compounded by the ways in which the VAW paradigm has been co-opted by neoliberalism. Kristin Bumiller (2008) argues that the need for stable funding has contributed to the increasing incorporation of anti-violence organizing into the state's social service and criminal justice bureaucracies. VAW is thus constructed as a depoliticized, individual issue to be managed through the criminal justice system and the surveillance and management of survivors rather than as a political problem (Bumiller, 2008). Elizabeth Bernstein (2012) is similarly critical of feminist anti-violence efforts that legitimize criminal justice responses, which she calls forms of 'carceral feminism.' Further, survivors' ability to access increasingly scarce resources and supports relies on their ability to render their experiences of violence intelligible within the medical and psychological language used by the state (Bumiller, 2008). This model leaves little room for more complex and situated understandings of violence or for addressing how intersecting systems of oppression shape whose experiences of violence are rendered (un)intelligible.

Although the VAW paradigm emerged in North America, its circulation is much broader, particularly through international human rights regimes to redress wartime sexual violence. Rana Jaleel (2013) argues that this circulation is the result, at least in part, of concerted efforts by American feminist attorneys to "consciously fram[e] rape and sexual violence in conflict zones within ongoing campaigns to help enshrine 'violence against women' […] within an international human rights framework" (p. 120). In so doing, VAW is promoted as a consensus issue for international feminist organizing (Jaleel, 2013). However, by framing feminism as inherently Western, its international circulation has the potential to construct white, Western feminists as the 'saviours' of non-Western women while obscuring how we are implicated in the systems and structures that contribute to violence (Mohanty, 2003).

The proliferation of the VAW paradigm and its reification of sexual harm obscures more situated understandings of both gender and violence. As Jaleel (2013) explains, "universalizing

both women-as-a-category and rape-as-an-act places these terms on a theoretically pristine plane untouched by socio-historical context or competing, interrelated iterations of violence" (p. 123). This framing thus encourages "all women to evaluate their oppression as gender oppression […] and then value this core analytic of gender oppression as the most pressing site for solidarity" (Jaleel, 2013, p. 121). In so doing, it delineates how survivors must narrate their experiences of violence to access support and redress while also shaping what these supports and possibilities for redress are, as illustrated by the way that embedding wartime rape in international law legitimizes carceral responses to violence (Jaleel, 2013). Veena Das (2007) challenges the impulse to 'break the silence' or 'give voice to the voiceless' that animates many transnational feminist campaigns as "even the idea that we should recover the narratives of violence becomes problematic when we realize that such narratives cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved" (p. 57). By jettisoning these more nuanced and situated understandings of both gender and violence, Meghana Nayak and Jennifer Suchland (2006) conclude that adopting the VAW paradigm "for political ends may unwittingly help to sustain hegemonic projects" (p. 468).

While our own research on gendered violence is situated in different contexts, we have observed the persistent circulation of the VAW paradigm and its impacts. Specifically, we have noticed how this universalizing exceptionalism shapes understandings of what "counts" as and causes gendered violence, which, in turn, informs responses to violence. As the following sections demonstrate, we reach similar conclusions that when anti-violence efforts are not grounded in more nuanced and situated understandings of violence, they may not only fail to address the complex systems and structures that give rise to violence but may also reproduce harm and marginalization.

Challenging VAW in the Canadian University Context: Emily's Research
I have been researching gendered violence over the past decade, with a focus on prevention and engaging men. My scholarship is informed by my experiences in student activism and community-based anti-violence organizing. I currently sit on the Board of Directors at Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape. As a Master's student, my research focused on men's anti-violence efforts in South Africa. Shortly after I returned to Dalhousie University following my fieldwork, the Faculty of Dentistry scandal erupted (Halsall, 2015), which was preceded by rape chants at neighbouring Saint Mary's University during the previous year (Haiven, 2017). As a result of ongoing student activism and heightened public attention in response to media coverage of these and other incidents, Canadian universities have faced unprecedented pressure to address gendered violence. Since 2016, five Canadian provinces have also introduced legislation that mandates post-secondary institutions to develop sexual violence policies and complaint resolution processes. Based on these developments, my doctoral research examined the struggle over the power to define sexual violence and shape institutional responses at universities in Ontario.

I conducted this research in 2018/19 by analyzing the sexual violence policies at all public universities in Ontario and interviewing 31 stakeholders from three universities. This project

was approved by the Research Ethics Board at York University (December 17, 2017) and I secured additional permissions from the case study universities. This process was lengthy and each institution's permission requirements were different. The political implications of requiring researchers to gain permission from institutions that they are seeking to critique are troubling, particularly when this process involves individuals outside of the ethics boards, which was the case at two of the institutions that I sought to access. This process might be understood as part of the broader constraints on what can be said about campus sexual violence and by whom (Colpitts, 2020). Allegations of violence are constructed as potential threats to the neoliberal university's public image that must be carefully managed or disavowed (Ahmed, 2015) and research that could expose violence may be treated as a reputational risk.

Research on campus sexual violence often reproduces the narrow VAW paradigm by focusing exclusively on cisgender men's perpetration and cisgender women's victimization. For example, one of the most frequently cited Canadian studies examined the prevalence of sexual violence among cisgender women in their first year of university using gendered measures such as "a man put his penis into my vagina" (Senn et al. 2014, p. 136). This narrow framing not only excludes survivors[2] who are male, trans, and/or non-binary, but also reproduces the rigid victim/perpetrator binary that fails to account for the fact that those who perpetrate violence have often experienced violence themselves (Casey et al., 2017).

By focusing primarily on gender, research on campus sexual violence overrepresents the experiences of white, cisgender women who approximate the 'ideal' survivor (Linder et al., 2017). An analysis of American research on this subject found that over the last 10 years, only 20% of studies collected data on sexual orientation, 0.9 percent on ability status, and 1.4 percent on 'non-normative' gender identity (Linder et al., 2017). While 72% of the studies collected data on ethnicity, less than 22% addressed ethnicity or racism in the analysis of their study's findings (Linder et al., 2017). As a result, identity is often only referenced in the context of heightened vulnerability, which serves to reproduce harmful pathologizing narratives (Hunt, 2016) and frames violence as an event rather than a structural condition (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

By contrast, my research was grounded in an intersectional analysis and sought to challenge the narrow VAW paradigm by engaging a wide range of stakeholders and centring the perspectives of those who are typically underrepresented, including those who are racialized, Indigenous, trans, and/or queer. I was particularly invested in recruiting student activists; although students are often included in research as victims and/or perpetrators, their roles as powerful agents of change are rarely addressed (Krause et al., 2017). To disrupt the construction of the university as separate from the community, I also included members of local community anti-violence organizations. As someone who in many ways approximates the 'ideal' survivor and is affiliated with an academic institution, I am conscious of how my privilege impacted my relationship to this research and whether and how participants chose to engage. I sought to maximize accountability to participants by providing verbatim interview transcripts and the opportunity

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2 I use the term 'survivor' because although it has been critiqued as a feature of the depoliticized psychological framing of sexual violence (Bumiller, 2008), it is the term most commonly used by student activists and community organizers working to address campus sexual violence.

to revise or withdraw the information they shared, as well as by disseminating my findings into a public report, workshop,[3] and blog posts. While I recognize the limits of research to respond to the demands of social justice, given how academic knowledge is privileged within the university, I hope that my findings might be useful to stakeholders who are seeking to hold their institutions accountable to the commitments outlined in their sexual violence policies.

In turning the research gaze toward the university, I sought to refuse its construction as "a homogenous site of privilege" (Dean, 2019, p. 29) by revealing how sexual violence is produced and sustained through deeply entrenched institutional power arrangements. These power structures are evident in whose voices and interests are taken seriously in the development of institutional responses to violence. Participants described, for example, how the sexual violence policymaking committee at one Ontario university was chaired by a white male administrator who exercised his privilege to silence other committee members: "it was a committee of strong women, strong voices, [and] sometimes those voices were not being heard, specifically racialized voices." Participants also described student consultations as shallow and inaccessible.

While the majority of universities refer to intersectionality in their sexual violence policies, my findings suggest that this reference rarely translates into practice in their approaches to prevention and support for survivors (Colpitts, 2021). As such, participants characterized this engagement with intersectionality as abstract and theoretical. For example, one participant, who is Indigenous, explained that although universities' sexual violence policies often acknowledge the heightened levels of vulnerability experienced by Indigenous women, this does not materialize in their responses to violence on campus. This contradiction led her to conclude that "Indigenous women are here but nobody gets that they are here." Similarly, Kwagu'ł scholar Sarah Hunt (2016) argues there is an urgent need to name the colonial nature of campus sexual violence to disrupt and refuse the logic that "the legacy of sexual violence originating in colonial processes and policies, including residential schools, is only felt intergenerationally within Indigenous communities imagined at a distance from th[e] university" (p. 3). This imagined distance not only erases the experiences of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff but also produces the university as a neutral space separate from community, and thus obscures its relationship to colonialism and location on unceded territory (Hunt, 2016).

As this example illustrates, while institutional responses to violence do not necessarily employ the term VAW, they continue to centre the experiences of the 'ideal' survivor. Representation is important in anti-violence campaign posters and in the hiring of staff to support survivors on campus. However, representation alone does not address the structural and systemic barriers that marginalized survivors may face in accessing support. Participants highlighted the necessity of explicitly naming the fact that those who do not approximate the 'ideal' survivor "deserve to seek support as well" and of de-pathologizing these barriers and creating opportunities for marginalized communities to determine what this support entails. They emphasized the importance of expanding the way that survivorship is conceptualized so

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3 This workshop was scheduled in late March 2020 and was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I subsequently shared my findings in guest blog posts on the website of Courage to Act, a national initiative to address gendered violence on campus.

that those who have "untraditional pathways" are not forced to narrate their experiences of violence in a particular and narrow way to access support.

The influence of the VAW paradigm is also evident in the persistent focus on cisgender men's violence against cisgender women in prevention efforts on campus. One participant argued that:

> some people feel threatened that if they're talking about intersectionality or you're not just talking about violence against women, you're […] taking away from the specific and disproportionate violence that women face […] I understand that, but I also see sort of a way that [white] feminism pushes back against certain groups.

This narrow focus may ultimately limit the effectiveness of prevention efforts. For example, one participant argued that if bystander training "only talk[s] about the heterosexual forms of violence [… and] violence that happens to women without contextualizing who those women are," bystanders may not intervene on behalf of those who do not approximate the 'ideal' survivor. Similarly, absent an intersectional analysis (Dunn et al., 2020), anti-violence efforts often fail to address how privilege and oppression shape bystanders' safety and ability to intervene without the risk of escalating violence or criminalization (Elk & Devereaux, 2014; Rentschler, 2017).

When the university is constructed as separate from the community (Dean, 2019), it becomes possible to displace the issue of violence onto the community, which obscures how violence is produced and sustained through deeply entrenched institutional power relations. The perpetrator is thus constructed as a 'stranger' to the university (Ahmed, 2017) and as "the racialized Other, the non-student, who comes to campus for the purpose of sexually assaulting students" (Gray & Pin, 2017, p. 104). This framing legitimizes the reliance on securitization and policing to prevent violence, which ignores how it has functioned as a pretext for the criminalization of racialized men (Davis, 1981). As one participant explained, increased police presence makes racialized members of the university community less safe: "when there were safety concerns on campus, Black men were being stopped and asked why they were on campus, as if they couldn't be students going to class." This example clearly illustrates how anti-violence efforts can reproduce harm and marginalization by legitimizing carceral responses.

The imagined distance between the campus and the community also serves to displace the burden of responsibility for preventing and responding to violence onto the community. While the relationship with community anti-violence organizations may vary from institution to institution, my research participants generally characterized it as one-sided and extractive. As one explained, "our relationship with community organizations was essentially delegating our work to them; there wasn't even a conversation." This dynamic is particularly troubling given the vast difference in resources and capacity as community anti-violence organizations face chronic underfunding (Rushowy, 2019). As such, a member of one organization argued that universities should establish clear memoranda of understanding and provide funding to avoid exacerbating

existing capacity constraints. Without additional funding, the local universities' reliance on her organization threatened to increase wait times for individual counselling, which were already over 18 months long (Colpitts, 2021). Further, despite the fact that these organizations often have extensive experience supporting survivors and facilitating prevention education, they were not necessarily consulted in the development of the universities' sexual violence policies or responses. As such, one organization member concluded that the administration's priority was not "about supporting survivors but protecting the university." Instead of recognizing this expertise and forming partnerships, universities seem to be increasingly invested in bringing these services in-house (McQuigge, 2018; Paddon, 2019).

Ultimately, my research demonstrates the importance of disrupting the construction of the university as "a homogenous site of privilege" (Dean, 2019, p. 29) and of engaging with intersectional analyses of violence to avoid reproducing harm and marginalization in anti-violence efforts. It challenges the construction of the university as 'saviour' and the false separation of the university and the community by revealing how violence is produced and sustained through deeply embedded institutional inequities rather than by 'strangers' to the university (Ahmed, 2017). By refusing the VAW paradigm, this community-engaged research gives rise to more complex understandings of campus sexual violence and of the institutional transformation required for its eradication. At the same time, I recognize that by virtue of being based within a Western, neoliberal academic institution, my work is never outside of the history and ongoing reality of exploitation and harm in the name of research, or of my institution's complex relationship with the surrounding communities. Despite my commitment to naming and critiquing these power relations, I am conscious that my research might be appropriated by the university as a sign of its own 'progress.' As Sara Ahmed (2017) explains, "feminist work in addressing institutional failure is appropriated as evidence of institutional success. The very labor of feminist critique ends up supporting what you critique" (p. 111). As such, it is important to resist and refuse any co-optation of my research as an expression of the university's commitment to addressing violence.

Challenging VAW in Postgenocide Guatemala: Alison's Research

On February 26th, 2016 in a crowded courtroom in Guatemala City, two former low-ranking members of the Guatemalan military were convicted of crimes against humanity in the form of sexual violence and domestic and sexual slavery perpetrated against 15 Maya Q'eqchi' women at the Sepur Zarco military outpost in El Estor, Izabal in northeastern Guatemala in the early 1980s, the height of the 36-year genocidal armed conflict (1960-1996). This was the first time that these specific crimes had been successfully prosecuted in the country in which they had been committed, and the trial and verdict were celebrated transnationally as a victory for gender justice (Nobel Women's Initiative, 2016).

I have had the privilege of being able to document part of the plaintiffs' long struggle for redress as part of an eight-year (2009-17) feminist PAR project that my research collaborator Professor M. Brinton Lykes (Boston College) and I conducted with 54 Maya Q'eqchi', Kaqchikel, Mam, Chuj, and Poptí women who survived wartime sexual violence. We refer

to them as protagonists "to deconstruct dominant psychological positionings of women as 'victims,' 'survivors,' 'selves,' 'individuals,' and/or 'subjects'" (Crosby & Lykes, 2019, p. 2). The project was a collaborative endeavour with the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG), who, as part of the Actors for Change Consortium, began accompanying the group of 54 protagonists in 2003, which is when I first became involved in this work. At the time, following a few years living and working in Guatemala, I was working for the Canadian social justice organization Inter Pares, whose support to the Consortium was part of a Latin America gender justice program funded by the Canadian government, which accompanied protagonists in their search for truth, justice, reparations, and the guarantee of non-repetition, the four pillars of the ascendent transitional justice paradigm (Teitel, 2000). I participated in extensive conversations with the Consortium as this work got off the ground and they navigated the precarious terrain of accompanying protagonists through mutual support groups and women's rights workshops, as well as in giving testimony of harm suffered in a ground-breaking oral history project (Fulchiron et al., 2009). In 2007, Brinton and I worked with colleagues in Guatemala to organize a workshop on mental health and legal advocacy with practitioners from Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala, including Consortium members.

When I returned to academia in 2007, Brinton and I began conversations with UNAMG about a collaborative research project that would document protagonists' struggles for redress. UNAMG was keen to further develop their own research capacity, and we addressed in our discussions the longstanding, ongoing neocolonial dynamics of researchers from the global North extracting knowledge from Guatemala, which was a key tension. We also acknowledged the disparity in access to time and resources to actually conduct research between Alison and Brinton as researchers based in North American universities and UNAMG as a Guatemalan NGO, and we agreed that some of the research funds would be directed towards paying part of the salary of the coordinator of UNAMG's research unit, Brisna Caxaj, to facilitate her active participation in the project as co-researcher (while also recognizing that this was a small gesture given UNAMG's pressing workload). It was also stipulated in the formal agreement signed by our three respective institutions that all parties would co-own the data generated, to use in a range of outcomes—from academic texts to policy proposals, popular education materials, radio programs, and public discussion forums.

There was no formal ethics review process available in Guatemala for our research; as such, we followed the two universities' protocols,[4] conducting ethics training workshops with the research team, including students from our universities, UNAMG staff, and the Mayan interpreters who were going to be accompanying us in the workshops with protagonists (the project worked across four Mayan languages and Spanish). Our access to the 54 protagonists was facilitated through UNAMG; they agreed to participate in our research as part of their ongoing work with UNAMG, building on the prior oral history project (Fulchiron et al., 2009). A critical ethical commitment to protagonists was that we would not revisit the pain narratives that they had had to retell to a multiplicity of audiences over many years. They

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4 The project was approved by York University's Ethics Review Board (May 6, 2009) and Boston College's Institutional Review Board (May 15, 2009) and renewed every year thereafter through 2020.

invoked a refusal to continue to do so during the informed consent process, and indeed made such refusal a condition of their participation. What they asked from us was our continued presence and commitment to maintaining this collective space for dialogue and reflection to accompany their collective actions. Others who agreed to participate, for similar reasons, included the Mayan, ladina and international lawyers, psychologists, feminists, human rights practitioners, activists, interpreters, and researchers who were accompanying protagonists in their struggle for redress, whom we refer to as intermediaries (Merry, 2006). As such, while organized around a common goal, the transnational 'community of women' we engaged in our research was diverse and heterogenous.

At every stage in the research, each action-reflection process was explained prior to participants giving their informed consent. To enact accountability, our use of creative resources in the participatory workshops enabled the first stage of iterative data analysis by participants and provided opportunities for them to give input into the research results as they emerged. The creative resources also facilitated (but of course did not resolve) a dialogical encounter constrained by our linguistic differences. As we began to write up our research, UNAMG hosted a *Conversatorio* [Dialogue] in June 2013 to get feedback on initial drafts (see Crosby & Lykes, 2019, for the specifics of our methodological approach). In July 2019, when the Spanish version of our book came out, published in Guatemala by the Mayan press Cholsamaj, we travelled throughout Guatemala holding book launches where we gave out free copies and invited protagonists, intermediaries, and Mayan and human rights activists and scholars to comment on its findings and the research process. Hundreds of people attended these events.

During the primary period of data collection (2009-13), we facilitated workshops with protagonists and intermediaries (both together and apart). The workshops were a space in which they could reflect on their engagement with the transitional justice paradigm, which had become the primary mechanism in post-genocide Guatemala through which wartime sexual violence could be redressed, specifically, a Tribunal of Conscience held in 2010, the Sepur Zarco case, and the state-sponsored National Reparations Program. The prosecution of rape and sexual violence as genocide and crimes against humanity in the ad hoc tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, and the subsequent incorporation of these violations into the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which came into effect in 2002, were important influences in how gender justice was conceptualized within these processes.

In their struggles for redress, Mayan protagonists have found themselves at the interstices of transitional justice and international feminist human rights and research regimes, including the VAW paradigm, which, rooted as they are in Western onto-epistemologies, rely upon individuated narratives of trauma to prove harm suffered. This convergence has served to produce the transnational figure of the 'raped woman,' an absent-presence reduced to her pain, her wound (Mookherjee, 2015). As Tuck and Yang (2014) argue:

> Logics of pain focus upon events, sometimes hiding structure, always adhering to a teleological trajectory of pain, brokenness, repair, or irreparability—from unbroken, to broken, and then to unbroken again. Logics of pain require time

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> to be organized as linear and rigid, in which the pained body (or community
> or people) is set back or delayed on some kind of path of humanization, and
> now must catch up (but never can) to the settler/unpained/abled body (or
> community or people or society or philosophy or knowledge system). (p. 231)

The creative techniques we used in the workshops, including drawing, dramatization, collage, image theatre, and beliefs and practices from the Mayan cosmovision, facilitated the performance of more complex, situated, and dialogical narratives of agency and resistance in protagonists' "everyday work of repair" (Das, 2007, p. 62). What emerged was a deep-seated contestation of the fetishism of sexual harm found in the VAW paradigm and a foregrounding of structural racialized gendered colonial violence and Mayan resistance and persistence. In one workshop we conducted in July 2012, protagonists used a photograph of a woman "carrying the heavy load" of impoverishment to depict their experience of racialized gendered violence (Crosby et al., 2016). While in a workshop we facilitated in Sepur Zarco with the 14 surviving plaintiffs in August 2017, a year and a half after the trial, they reminded us that, "we can't forget that this struggle is for the land." Their husbands had been disappeared because they had organized to legalize their lands, which led to their widows being forced to 'serve' at the military outpost. The return of their lands remains the pending outcome of the trial; the gaping wound of land theft festers and is not resolved by carceral justice. Throughout our research protagonists continuously situated the ongoing colonial dispossession of Indigenous land and livelihoods as central to their experiences of violence and as the focal point of their struggle for redress, seeking to suture land and body as the urgent collective work of resistance to colonial harm.

Inequities of racialized and classed power permeate the dynamics of community-engaged research. As Tuck and Yang (2014) point out, PAR is:

> not immune to the fetish of the pain narratives. It is a misconception that
> by simply building participation into a project—by increasing the number
> of people who collaborate in collecting data—ethical issues of representation,
> voice, consumption, and voyeurism are resolved. (p. 230)

Mayan women's protagonism was shaped through their dialogical engagement with Mayan, ladina/mestiza,[5] and white intermediaries, ourselves as researchers included, and it is this relationality, underpinned by the racism inherent to the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) and its role in shaping the nature and form of understandings of justice and redress, that surfaced as increasingly central in our project.

Intermediaries, particularly those of us who are non-Indigenous, vernacularize (Merry, 2006) the hegemonic understanding of VAW into the struggle for redress as well as into knowledge production; I can certainly see that in my own trajectory as intermediary in this struggle. In one workshop with intermediaries in July 2011, a tension arose concerning the

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5 In Guatemala, 'ladina/o' refers to those who are non-Indigenous; some prefer to identify as 'mestiza/o' to recognize their history of being 'mixed.'

notion that, as one ladina intermediary put it, "All women are the 'spoils of war,' whether ladina or indigenous," a statement that seemed to occlude the stark fact that Mayan women were disproportionately targeted during the genocidal violence (CEH, 1999). In the ensuing discussion, Mayan intermediaries situated the specificities of Mayan women's experiences of racialized gendered violence within their membership of the Mayan collectivity. They contested the teleological notion of time and repair, critiqued above by Tuck and Yang (2014), noting that Mayan understandings of reparation challenge the possibility of repair; as "it will never be the same; one would have to raise our ancestors from the dead" for that to be possible. The discussion revealed the chasm between Western and Mayan onto-epistemological positionings, and the continued occlusion of the latter, including within the 'community of women' formed through collective action.

This erasure of Indigeneity through the transnational travellings of the narrow frame of the VAW paradigm could also be seen in the international response to the Sepur Zarco verdict, which was celebrated as a victory for "all survivors of sexual violence worldwide" (Nobel Women's Initiative, 2016, para. 1), but not as part of the decolonial struggle for Indigenous justice. This response, together with the transnational circulation of hashtags such as #IamSepurZarco and #WeAreAllSepurZarco throughout the trial, speaks to the ability of said paradigm to create a facile sense of intimacy through an assumption of commonality (and even perhaps community) based on gender oppression and an inability to reckon with the structural condition of violence that is shaped through colonial power. We are not all Sepur Zarco; such refusal both matters and is material.

An important critique of critical reflexivity central to community-engaged research is that it can continue to place the individuated white subject at the centre; I can still make it all about *me*. Instead, it is incumbent upon me to recognize my "white immunity" (Cabrera, 2017), which necessitates listening to and learning from the experiences of racial oppression lived by Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) communities that make visible the systemic nature of white supremacy that I benefit from and therefore have a responsibility to dismantle. I am also challenged to recognize and, indeed, embrace doubt, unknowingness and what I should not actually be allowed to know. This is integral to enacting a politics of refusal of a transnational VAW paradigm that assumes commensurability and translatability under the Western hegemonic frame and occludes the condition of structural colonial violence. As part of this politics, I turn towards other ways of knowing and being that refuse the universalism of Western onto-epistemology and instead recognize the pluriverse, "a world where many worlds fit" (Escobar, 2016, p. 20). Mayan women draw on their cosmovision as a decolonial onto-epistemology that challenges Western dualisms and emphasizes "heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality" (Chirix García, 2019, p. 149). They centre their decolonial struggle against racialized gendered violence in the integrality of the active relationship between land and body as territories to be defended and reclaimed (Cabnal, 2019). They contest the abjection of racialized gendered bodies in transnational spectacles of harm; "we are living bodies, peoples in movement who aspire to bodily wellbeing and that of Mother Earth" (Chirix García, 2019, p. 139).

Conclusion

Our community-engaged research, albeit in very different contexts, reveals the ongoing power of the universalizing exceptionalist imaginary of the VAW paradigm as it circulates through feminist and human rights regimes. The experience of sexual violence is often reified, producing both an 'ideal' survivor who is assumed to be a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender woman, and the racialized transnational spectacle of 'the raped woman' who is reduced to her wound. These figures are of course interrelated, (re)produced through dynamics of victimhood and spectatorship within systems of neocolonial and neoliberal power underpinned by white supremacy. As white researchers located within the neoliberal academy, we must refuse such formulations, and instead turn to more intersectional, complex, and situated understandings of violence and its contestation articulated by protagonists themselves, while acknowledging our own situatedness and related unknowingness. Such a methodology of refusal lays bare the complexity of power inherent in community-engaged research and the danger of researcher spectatorship through the production of pain narratives, "making the spectator the spectacle" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 244) to be dismantled.

As feminist scholars, we are critical of the neoliberal university's investment in community engagement, which positions the university and the researcher as 'saviours' of the 'community' and obscures the implication of academic knowledge production in colonial and imperial projects. We refuse the construction of community engagement as politically neutral or inherently benevolent and the false separation between the university and the 'community.' At the same time, we recognize the potential for critical feminist community-engaged research to challenge universalizing exceptionalist imaginaries and centre more nuanced and situated understandings. This research requires attending to the power relations inherent in community engagement, being critically reflexive about our own positionality as researchers, and problematizing essentialist notions of 'community.' It also necessitates recognizing the limits of what is knowable as white, Western scholars and embracing incommensurability by resisting the impulse to render situated knowledge intelligible through universalizing frames or neocolonial narratives about 'giving voice to the voiceless.'

About the Authors

Emily M. Colpitts (*corresponding author*) is a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University and holds a PhD in Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies from York University. She is a Board member at Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape. Email: emilymcolpitts@gmail.com

Alison Crosby is an Associate Professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies and the former director of the Centre for Feminist Research (2014-19) at York University. She currently directs the SSHRC-funded project *Remembering and Memorializing Violence: Transnational Feminist Dialogues*, https://memorializingviolence.com/. Email: acrosby@yorku.ca

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