Intersectionalities
A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice

Towards a Decolonial Abolition Feminist Methodology: A Research Project Exploring Women's Experiences of Strip Searching in Prison

Jessica Hutchison

Volume 12, Number 1, 2024

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117976ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.48336/IJRXOG4597

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Memorial University of Newfoundland

ISSN

1925-1270 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Hutchison, J. (2024). Towards a Decolonial Abolition Feminist Methodology: A Research Project Exploring Women's Experiences of Strip Searching in Prison. *Intersectionalities*, *12*(1), 46–69. https://doi.org/10.48336/IJRXOG4597

Article abstract

Engaging in research with Indigenous and Black women as a white woman settler involves critical considerations related to white supremacy, settler colonialism, and misogynoir. This is particularly true when the participants have been imprisoned and the researcher has not. As such, this article describes my unique abolition feminist methodology rooted in a framework of relational accountability which centred experiences of Black and Indigenous women who have been strip searched in prison. It describes the specific steps I took to enact the ethics of relational accountability – reciprocity, respect, and responsibility – in each phase of the research. This includes an innovative method of meaning-making whereby I listened to the recorded conversations with women while I was on the land of a federal prison. This facilitated more wholistic and embodied meaning-making as I was able to hear and feel what the women were sharing while being in the presence of a federal prison. I also engage in abolition feminist praxis by critically reflecting on the ways in which power and practices of superiority showed up throughout the research process.

Intersectionalities 2024, 12(1), 46–69

https://doi.org/10.48336/IJRXOG4597

Research Article

Towards a Decolonial Abolition Feminist Methodology: A Research Project Exploring Women's Experiences of Strip Searching in Prison

Jessica Hutchison[a]

Abstract

Engaging in research with Indigenous and Black women as a white woman settler involves critical considerations related to white supremacy, settler colonialism, and misogynoir. This is particularly true when the participants have been imprisoned and the researcher has not. As such, this article describes my unique abolition feminist methodology rooted in a framework of relational accountability which centred experiences of Black and Indigenous women who have been strip searched in prison. It describes the specific steps I took to enact the ethics of relational accountability – reciprocity, respect, and responsibility – in each phase of the research. This includes an innovative method of meaning-making whereby I listened to the recorded conversations with women while I was on the land of a federal prison. This facilitated more wholistic and embodied meaning-making as I was able to hear and feel what the women were sharing while being in the presence of a federal prison. I also engage in abolition feminist praxis by critically reflecting on the ways in which power and practices of superiority showed up throughout the research process.

Keywords:
Abolition feminism, women in prison, decolonized research, relational accountability, strip searching

a. Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario.
Contact: Jessica Hutchison jhutchison@wlu.ca

Engaging in research with Indigenous and Black women as a white woman settler involves critical considerations related to white supremacy, settler colonialism, and misogynoir, and their impact on the research relationship. Academic research by white settler scholars has caused immense harm to Indigenous[1] and Black communities and continues to do so (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, researchers who have not been criminalized or imprisoned can cause significant harm when conducting research with criminalized people (Pollack, 2003), especially when the topic is deeply personal.

This knowledge motivated me to develop a decolonized and anti-racist methodology grounded in relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) as I explored how women experience being strip searched in Canadian prisons. I have come to understand this as an abolition feminist methodology (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020) with an emphasis on decolonization. Abolition feminist praxis invites researchers to centre the voices of racialized women and gender-diverse people who have experienced the harms of carceral practices and to apply a structural framework to exploring these harms with the explicit recognition that the state is the main perpetrator of gendered, colonial, and racialized violence (Davis et al., 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020). The centralizing of decolonization within abolition feminism is critical within the context of the settler colonial nation state of Canada as over 50 percent of people in federal prisons designated for women[2] are Indigenous (Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI], 2022). Indeed, prisons are one of the sites in which the colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples is taking place (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [MMIWG] Inquiry, 2019).

As such, this article describes my unique methodology which was rooted in a framework of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) and centered the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous women who have experienced being strip searching in federal prison. It includes an innovative

[1] I use the term "Indigenous" to refer to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit. I recognize that the term Indigenous is a colonial term that essentializes First Nation, Métis, and Inuit and invisibilizes the diversity of cultural groups and traditions (Monchalin, 2016). However, following the lead of Algonquin, Métis, Huron, and Scottish scholar Lisa Monchalin (2016), I use this colonial term to talk about a colonial system. As part of my decolonizing citational and research process, I name which Nations Indigenous scholars and participants are from, when known.

[2] Following the lead of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), I use the term "prisons designated for women" because so-called "women's prisons" incarcerate women (inclusive of trans women), trans men, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people who do not fit into colonial notions of gender binaries (CAEFS, 2021).

method of meaning-making (i.e., data analysis in Western methodologies) that emerged organically during the research whereby I listened to the recorded conversations with women while I was on the land of a federal prison. This method facilitated a more wholistic[3] and embodied way of engaging in women's stories as I could *feel*, *see, and hear* the prison, where many of the participants had been strip searched, while I was listening to the women's words. I also engage in abolition feminist praxis by critically reflecting on what I would do differently in future research and offer suggestions for white settler researchers engaging in a research relationship with Indigenous and Black women. I begin with a discussion of my decolonized approach to the research, highlighting how I grounded the research in the principle and framework of relational accountability.

A Decolonized Methodology Grounded in Relational Accountability

As Māori scholar Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminds us, Western research has caused immense colonial harms to Indigenous peoples around the world. This shameful reality provided me with the motivation to thoughtfully develop a research methodology that did not replicate these colonial harms of extraction, appropriation, and exploitation. Rather, I engaged in decolonized ways of coming to know by centring knowledges of Indigenous and Black scholars in the development of my theoretical and methodological frameworks; making explicit my preparations, motivations, purpose, and positionality (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Kovach, 2015, 2021; Wilson, 2008); privileging lived experience and voice through narrative approaches (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Kovach, 2015, 2021); using talking circles as story gathering method, which is a culturally congruent way to invite Indigenous people to share their knowledge and experiences (Absolon, 2022), and centring relationships throughout the entire research process.

Relationships are central to Indigenous research (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Kovach, 2015, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Cree researcher, Dr. Shawn Wilson (2008) suggests Indigenous research is relational and adheres to principles of relational accountability. He writes, "In essence this means that the methodology needs to be based in a community context (be relational) and has to demonstrate respect, reciprocity and responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action)" (Wilson, 2008: 99). He suggests relational accountability requires researchers to be in relationship not only with the participants of the

[3] I use the term "wholistic" as taught to me by Dr. Kathy Absolon as it describes an Indigenous theory that is whole, complete, circular, and relational. Please see Absolon (2019) for more detail.

research, but also with the topic under study, including how and why the researcher came to this topic, how the topic relates to the researcher's life, and the factors that influence the way the researcher thinks about the topic. Relational accountability is essential for engaging in research that does not objectify Indigenous knowledges and peoples, and the researcher must ensure they are entering into the research relationship with a "good heart" so as not to bring suffering to those participating in the research (Wilson, 2008).

Similarly, Black feminist research foregrounds emotion, empathy, and an ethic of care between researcher and those participating in the research, and throughout the entire research process (Evans-Winters, 2019). As Black feminist Dr. Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, there are "Four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology - lived experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and the ethic of caring" (Collins, 2000: 286). In other words, from a Black feminist standpoint, how we come to know requires deep care and accountability to the ways in which we engage in gathering knowledge, and that the centring of lived experiences through dialogue and relationality is essential to meaning-making.

Wilson (2008) outlines relational accountability as enacted through four research phases, which I employed as the framework for my methodology and methods. These phases are: 1) how I came to this topic; 2) how I gathered stories and built relationships; 3) how I made meaning of the information gathered; 4) how I will share what I find. For the purposes of this article, I will share how I came to this topic, how I gathered stories and built relationships, and how I engaged in meaning-making.

How I Came to This Topic

As a white settler researcher, I have a responsibility to locate myself so readers can learn who I am, where I come from, and how I have come to know what I know (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). As Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper and Professor of Indigenous Social Work, Dr. Kathy Absolon (2011: 50) states, "Indigenous methodologies are just as much about *who* is doing the searching as the *how* of the search."

I am a cisgender, white woman settler with roots in England, Ireland, and Italy. Admittedly, I do not know much more than that given our family rarely talks about our ancestry. I have come to know this is part of the "colonial coma" (Absolon, 2022) settler colonial nations instill in settlers to ensure epistemologies of ignorance (Rice et al., 2022). To know where we are originally from and how we came to steal land from its original caretakers would disrupt the notion of Canada being a benevolent country and unsettle our identity. We are now trying to piece together our familial ancestry with the help of my 98-year old great uncle. I currently live and work on the traditional lands of the

Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Neutral Peoples, which is part of the Two-Row Wampum and Dish with One Spoon treaties.

I am an abolition feminist (Davis et al., 2022; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Richie & Martensen, 2020), with my feet firmly planted in a transformative-emancipatory paradigm (Mertens, 2008). My research is political in that I seek to contribute to transformational change, specifically within prisons and other carceral systems. Embedded within this paradigm is the ontological and epistemological belief that reality and knowledge are socially constructed and shaped by unequal power relations. This necessarily requires an axiological commitment to understanding the historical and contemporary factors contributing to the oppression that women in prison experience and placing their experiences at the centre of the inquiry process (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Davis et al., 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Mertens, 2008; Pollack 2003, 2009, 2012). From a methodological perspective, authentic interaction between myself as the researcher and the women participating in my study was essential, and I placed a particular focus on how power functions in these relationships.

Foundational to my abolition feminist praxis is my experience as an advocate with the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), a national, abolition feminist organization dedicated to system- and individual-level advocacy for women, trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people who are criminalized and imprisoned. My role was to work directly with people who are incarcerated in the largest federal prison designated for women in Canada. I received phone calls from incarcerated people on an almost daily basis, usually requesting support for addressing various types of violence perpetrated against them by the prison system. Over time, I have become increasingly concerned about the gendered and racialized violence perpetrated by the state—through the prison system—often through legitimated and mandated policies and practices. The violence takes on many forms, from overt physical and sexual violence to more covert forms such as epistemic, discursive, and psychological violence. My job was to determine how to address this violence most effectively, which included engaging with lawyers, advocating to the warden, and sometimes, just bearing witness to the countless types of state violence women and gender-diverse people experienced daily. It provided me with practical understanding of the myriad ways that state violence is meted out against women and gender-diverse people in prison and has fueled my desire to expand my understanding of prisons as sites of state violence in this research.

Lastly, I am extremely conscious of the fine balance required by qualitative researchers who purport to be amplifying marginalized women's voices by asking them to share their stories. Indeed, Tuck and Yang (2014) remind us that colonial research tends to dehumanize participants by asking them to only share their experiences of pain and suffering as that is what the academy privileges and

rewards. Accordingly, I developed a thoughtful research process, and a conversation guide based upon Indigenous circle processes, taught to me by Indigenous scholars and Elders, that is mindful of the delicate balance necessary to engage with women in their full humanity.

Given the synergies between critical feminist, Black feminist, and Indigenous research, I drew from these methodologies to develop a study that centres Black and Indigenous women's experiences and voices in a way that recognizes their full humanity, and foregrounds relationships in all aspects of the research. Through relationships, dialogue, respect, reciprocity, stories, and shared consciousness (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Wilson, 2008), the research process unfolded in a manner whereby the multiplicity of women's identities and experiences were appreciated and encouraged.

Genealogy of Knowledge

Central to relational accountability and Indigenous methodologies is the explicit recognition of my genealogy of knowledge. In regards to feminist research with criminalized and incarcerated women, Dr. Shoshana Pollack, a critical feminist social work scholar and co-founder of the Walls to Bridges prison education program, has been foundational to the development of my methodology. Drawing from her decades of experience, Shoshana has deeply influenced my understanding of how to engage in ethical research with previously imprisoned women. She has offered me countless hours of mentorship, embodying the feminist principles of care, relationality, and accountability. As it relates to my use of an Indigenous-informed methodology, Dr. Kathy Absolon, Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper and Professor of Indigenous Social Work, guided me over the span of five years on how to engage ethically in Indigenous-informed research as a settler. I have spent hundreds of hours being mentored by Kathy, in formal trainings such as the Decolonizing Education Certificate, Indigenous Research Series, and Introduction to Circle Work, as well as in private settings such as sitting in her backyard having tea and discussing my methodology. She guided me in how to facilitate talking circles as a settler without appropriating Indigenous protocols and ceremonies. For example, I do not engage in sacred ceremonies such as smudging when opening and closing circles. Rather, I have been guided by Kathy to open and close circles in a way that feels authentic to me and my ancestry. We had hard and honest conversations about how my settler positionality impacts my worldview, and as such, my research, and I have developed a methodology, as described below, that is deeply influenced (and approved by) Kathy.

How I Gathered Stories and Built Relationships

How I Engaged Participants

Relational accountability was the foundation for my engagement strategy in that everyone was invited to participate in my research through existing relationships. In Absolon's (2011) dissertation research on Indigenous research methodologies, she found most Indigenous researchers had relationships or mutual connections with their participants. Similarly, Wilson (2008) suggests using intermediaries such as family, friends, and acquaintances, is an important research practice in Indigenous research, as it helps build rapport, and places the researchers in a circle of relations with the participants. As such, I invited women to participate through my personal connections and through intermediaries such as Dr. Shoshana Pollack, and Canadian Senator Kim Pate who has worked with criminalized and imprisoned people for over four decades.

Who I Spoke With

I spoke with 23 cisgender women who had been incarcerated in a Canadian federal prison. Eleven identified as Indigenous[4], six as Black, five as white, and one as racialized. Due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, small conversation circles were held virtually using the platform Zoom. The virtual nature of the conversations provided the opportunity to expand the focus of my study throughout Canada and resulted in women participating from British Columbia (*n*=3), Saskatchewan (*n*=3), and Ontario (*n*=17).

Given the mass incarceration of Indigenous women and disproportionate rate of Black women in prison (Maynard, 2017; OCI, 2022), I prioritized their experiences of strip searching in this study. Further, given the sensitivity of the topic I felt it was important to create as trusting and comfortable an environment as possible to promote authentic dialogue, solidarity, and respect (Absolon, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Black and Indigenous women have similar, yet unique and specific histories and experiences of interpersonal and state violence. Thus, providing a space for women to share these experiences without fear of being judged, and as a form of collective healing, was essential to my process of relational accountability. Accordingly, I hosted three conversation circles with Indigenous women, two circles with Black women, and one circle with white women. Circle conversations took place over a two-week period, with five circles occurring within seven days. Each circle had between

[4] Since then, one participant has indicated she is currently trying to learn more about which Nation she comes from and thus does not currently identify as Indigenous. Until she can confirm this, she is identifying as "a human with a purpose and a will to live."

two and four women in addition to me and lasted between 1 hour and 40 minutes and 2 hours and 40 minutes.

For a variety of reasons, five women were unable to participate in the conversation circles. Thus, I spoke with four women in virtual one-on-one conversations via Zoom and one woman on the phone. The individual conversations lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

How I Gathered Stories

For my research, I engaged in dialogue and relationship with women through small talking circles and individual conversations, which is consistent with critical feminist, Black feminist, and Indigenous research (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Pollack, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Women were invited to participate in a one-time small talking circle, which followed Indigenous protocols, with one round of open discussion.

Pandemic Considerations

The use of Zoom for gathering stories came with some significant considerations. Criminalized women tend to live in poverty and may not have access to reliable and consistent internet data. Therefore, to address this equity issue, I paid each woman $50 to enable her to purchase data to access the internet, in addition to $50 for participating in the research. Additionally, developing and nurturing relationships in a virtual space is more challenging than it is in person. Therefore, I was very intentional in the ways I engaged with women from the very initial correspondence, to what I included in each "bundle of care" (described below), how I held space during the conversations, and how I maintained relationships following the story gathering phase.

Preparation

An essential component of talking circle protocol is the preparation (Abolson, 2011, 2022; Kovach, 2021), which was a primary focus for me. Not only did I devote time to developing relationships with women in order to nurture good feelings and build trust, I also came prepared to each conversation with deep understandings of the socio-political contexts within which women are situated, and with a commitment to engage with their knowledges and experiences in humane ways (Absolon, 2011, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019; Kovach, 2021). The following section provides details about the various preparations I engaged in prior to holding circles and individual conversations with women, to ensure I was engaging in the research in a good way.

Sending Bundles of Care

An important part of my preparation was gifting women meaningful items prior to being in circle with them. Therefore, I prepared and sent each woman a "bundle of care" in the mail. The bundles were inspired by the teachings I have received from Indigenous scholars and Elders. The bundles were part of my commitment to relational accountability as they are a sign of reciprocity in that I was offering a gift before asking women to share something with me. Importantly, by receiving the bundle of care, women were not locked into participating in the talking circles, and I made this explicit to them. Indeed, three women received the bundle of care and were unable to participate in the research for various reasons.

Knowing what I know about strip searching, and how it affects women, I gave significant thought to what kinds of items would be most respectful and meaningful to women who have been strip searched. I wanted to offer them items that affirmed their humanity and helped to heal their body, mind, and spirit. I hoped the items in the bundles could be used to treat their bodies with care and love since the prison system abuses and disrespects them through strip searching. Additionally, my experience as an advocate with CAEFS highlighted the culture of scarcity and inhumanity within the prison system, particularly in maximum security and segregation units.

I was very intentional in trying to ensure the bundles contained items that are congruent with women's sociopolitical and cultural experiences and identities. For example, Black feminist scholar Dr. Rai Reece reminded me that I did not want to send hair products designed for white women to Black women as that would demonstrate a lack of awareness and understanding of Black women's specific hair needs and the politics around Black women's hair. Positioning whiteness as the norm, aside from being offensive, would not be reflective of my overall approach or my theoretical framework and commitment to challenging whiteness.

The bundles of care included coconut oil body cream, Epsom salts, tea, a candle, paper, pens, and semma (tobacco for Indigenous women). I included a hand-written note on the back of nicely patterned collaging paper, explaining what some of the items were and how to use them. I put all the items in a gold silk-like bag and wrote each woman a thank-you card for offering to share their experiences with me, and informed them they were under no pressure to participate having received the bundle of care.

Offering Indigenous Women Tobacco

Offering tobacco wrapped in cloth to Indigenous women is a sacred responsibility (Wilson & Restoule, 2010), which I take very seriously, particularly as a non-Indigenous white researcher. As I was taught by Dr. Kathy Absolon, semma is the first sacred medicine, which, when shared, is the highest level of ethic possible (Wilson

& Restoule, 2010). As a non-Indigenous white person passing tobacco, I spent a lot of time beforehand thinking through my intentions so as not to share it for my own selfish benefit. I wanted to ensure I was not appropriating sacred Indigenous protocols for the purpose of career advancement. By offering Indigenous women tobacco, I was committing to respecting the spirit and heart of the knowledge being gifted during the circles and conversations (Absolon, 2020). I was also promising to lift up everyone's spirit of knowledge while making meaning by honouring the genealogy of knowing (Absolon, 2020). I hoped that when women received their tobacco tie in the mail, they would know my intentions were good, and that I was entering into the relationship in a respectful manner. This is an ethic I continuously returned to throughout the research process to anchor me in the commitments I made through passing semma.

My Approach to Hosting Talking Circles and Conversations

Small Talking Circles

I hosted six virtual small talking circles following Indigenous protocols as taught to me by Indigenous scholars and Elders, with one round of open discussions. Talking circles provide a culturally congruent process for searching for knowledge in that they provide the opportunity for active engagement, and prevent people from interrupting, dominating, and otherwise monopolizing the conversation (Absolon, 2011; Wilson, 2008). To facilitate a talking circle, people sit in a circle, and an open-ended question or topic is posed to the group to promote a conversational style format rather than a rigid and controlled atmosphere (Absolon, 2011). Given circles took place virtually, I prepared and printed off the circle order with a picture of my bundle in the middle so participants could envision who they were "sitting" beside in circle.

For circles with Indigenous women, I asked one of the participants in advance to lead us in ceremony to open the session in a good way. As a settler, I recognize certain teachings and ceremonies are not mine to engage in; thus, I followed protocol by asking Indigenous women to open and close the circle in ceremony. I paid women who led us in ceremony an additional $50, to show honour and respect for their wisdom and effort. One of the women opened the circle with a smudge and a prayer, and another opened with a smudge and a song. The third circle with Indigenous women did not have someone to open the circle as the person I had asked in advance was unable to join us and the other participants chose not to do an opening and closing ceremony.

At the beginning of each circle, I provided an overview of the plan for the session including the protocols for the talking circle. The protocols we followed began with me asking a question, with each person taking a turn to answer the question, in order, and without interruption. Each person spoke for as long as they wanted and shared what they wanted to share. Generally, in talking circles there is no time limit on how long people can speak for, and people can pass if they do not feel they want to

speak (Absolon, 2011; Wilson, 2008). When the speaker had finished, I then passed the talking piece to the next person in the circle, moving clockwise, which is following Anishinaabe customs and is the direction the sun moves (Absolon, 2020). Each circle had between four and six rounds, following Indigenous circle protocol (including introductory circle), plus a round of open discussion and a closing round of reflections following circle protocol.

Introductory Circle

As Western research can be objectifying and dehumanizing, particularly when the researcher is white and the participants are Indigenous and Black, one of the purposes of my methodology was to ensure the women were treated in a way that affirmed their humanity. Similarly, the prison, and strip searching specifically, dehumanizes women and strips them of their identities such that they become seen as containers to smuggle in unauthorized items. Therefore, I intentionally incorporated processes and developed questions that aimed to create a sense of respect, trust, and relationality. This is part of my axiological commitment to engage in a process that does not replicate the harms associated with colonial research on Black and Indigenous women, which merely extracts stories of suffering to the benefit of the (white) researcher (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Thus, I offered the following prompt for the introductory circle:

> So, I think we'll just start our opening circle, which is just introducing ourselves in whatever way feels good. I'd like us to bring our whole selves to the conversation, not just your prison experiences, because you're so much more than your prison experiences. So just introduce yourself in whatever way you'd like, so we can get to know each other.

Circle Rounds

Following the circle introductions, I then posed various versions of the following prompt, "I would like to start by inviting you to talk about strip searching in prisons. You can share your own experiences of being strip searched or you can talk about strip searching more generally. It is completely up to you what you decide to share." For circles with Indigenous and Black women, I grounded this prompt in how strip searching impacts Indigenous and Black women specifically. Depending on what women shared during this first round, I then asked the next question based on what I heard during the first circle round. These prompts were all versions of the questions in the conversation guide developed from my theoretical framework.

Open Discussion Round

After several circle rounds, and as we came upon the two-hour mark, we moved into our open discussion round focused on action and impact. During this round, we engaged in a free-flowing conversation by unmuting ourselves and entering into dialogue together. The conversations tended to be animated and energetic, which I found to be very inspiring. To get the discussion started, I asked each circle the following questions: *If you had a magic wand and you could change anything you wanted about strip searching what would you do?*

Closing Circle

Finally, after the open discussion round we had a closing round of reflections in which women could share anything they'd like to about strip searching. After the closing circle, I thanked the women for sharing their experiences and committed to treating their stories with respect and care. I also encouraged women to take care of themselves in whatever way felt good and told them I would follow up with them the following day to ensure they were okay given the nature of the conversation. Finally, I shared with the women my future plans in terms of meaning-making and dissertation completion. For Indigenous circles, I asked the same woman who opened the circle to end the circle in a good way.

As noted previously, five women were unable to join the small talking circles for a variety of reasons. Thus, I adapted the methodology to include individual conversations with women, as detailed next.

Individual Conversations

I spoke with four women in virtual one-on-one conversations via Zoom and one woman on the phone, due to parole restrictions preventing her from using the internet. I knew three of these women previously. These one-to-one conversations began with greetings and small talk to nurture trust and familiarity. In the case of to the two women I did not know, I then introduced myself more fully and asked if there was anything they wanted me to know about them. I also provided an overview of the purpose of the research and asked if they had any questions or concerns. We then moved into the questions, using the conversation guide. As in the circles, the first question was very open-ended, "My first question is inviting you to share your experiences with strip searching. You can either talk about that from a personal perspective, or you can talk about it more generally. However you'd like." After women shared their experiences, the following questions emerged naturally throughout the conversation and were various versions of the questions and prompts used in the circles. I wrapped up the conversations in the same way as I did in the circles by thanking them; committing to treating their stories with respect and care; encouraging them to take care of themselves in whatever way feels good;

asking them if I could follow up with them the following day to ensure they were okay; and sharing my plans in terms of meaning-making and dissertation completion.

How I Made Meaning and Fostered Trustworthiness

Once I completed the talking circles and individual conversations, I then moved into the meaning-making process. I consider there to be seven distinct but overlapping meaning-making phases in my research: 1) during the circle and individual conversations; 2) listening to the recorded conversations and reading the transcripts; 3) thematic analysis using qualitative analysis software NVivo; 4) listening to the audio recordings of the conversations while sitting outside a prison; 5) informally through conversations, reflection, and preparation for testifying as an expert witness on strip searching; 6) sharing findings chapters with participants for their feedback and input; and 7) cumulative meaning-making. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of my meaning-making process.

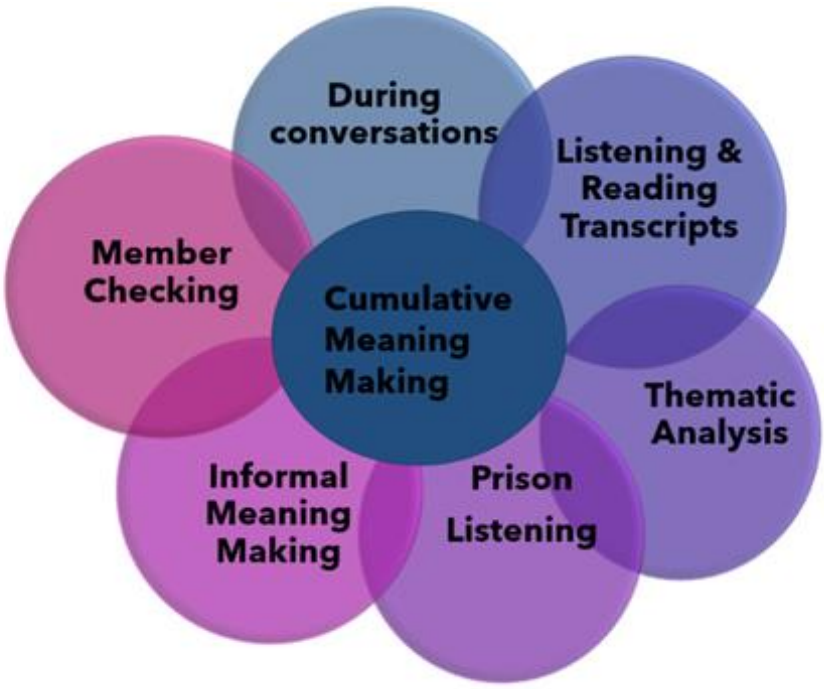

Figure 1 Visual Representation of my Meaning-Making Process.

During Circle and Individual Conversations

As Wilson (2008) notes, meaning-making occurs while story gathering is taking place. As I engaged in the circle and individual conversations, I took handwritten notes of things women said that stood out to me, helped me think of things differently, or confirmed what I already thought/knew. For example, when talking about how she resisted the harms of strip searching, an Oji-Cree woman said, "My spirit rebelled but I didn't." Similarly, a Black Trinidadian woman provided an analysis of the racist foundations of the prison system as "a big plantocracy." These were pivotal meaning-making moments that immediately resonated with me and helped to formulate my thinking and expand my understanding of strip searching.

One thing I found was I took fewer notes during the one-on-one conversations, which I attribute to the awkwardness of writing while someone is speaking directly to me. I felt a need to be looking at and engaging with women, as I was the only person they were speaking to. It felt uncomfortable and disrespectful to take notes while having a one-to-one conversation. Furthermore, the individual nature of the conversations led to more back-and-forth exchanges and less time sitting back and listening as occurs during circle.

Listening to the Recorded Conversations and Reading the Transcripts

As Halcomb and Davidson (2006) describe, transcription involves reproducing spoken words into written words and can include nonverbal and emotional contributions from participants. After having the conversations transcribed by a professional transcription company, I listened to the recordings while reading the transcripts. This allowed me to make any corrections to the transcripts, of which there were very few. Importantly, my meaning-making really began percolating during this process, which I attribute to hearing participants' voices while simultaneously reading their words. I believe this facilitated a deeper connection to the stories, as I could hear how women spoke about their experiences, which were sometimes filled with emotions such as crying and others with laughter, rather than only reading their words on the page. This listening and reading phase facilitated a deeper familiarization with the stories, helping to lay the groundwork for the thematic analysis phase that followed.

Thematic Analysis using Qualitative Analysis Software Nvivo

After making edits to the transcripts, I uploaded them into the qualitative analysis software NVivo. I then began thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a common meaning-making process in many forms of qualitative research, including Indigenous research and feminist research (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). One of the benefits of thematic analysis is it provides a mechanism through which to apply a power analysis to the data, given it is not driven by one particular theoretical framework. Since my theoretical framework provides a structural analysis of the use of strip searching, analyses of systems of oppression and domination

were embedded within the meaning-making process. I engaged in iterative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by applying my theoretical framework to the stories (deductive meaning-making), as well as looking for other patterns and themes that were not part of my theoretical framework but were helpful in answering my research questions (inductive meaning-making).

However, while Kovach (2021) reminds us thematic analysis can be congruent with wholistic, Indigenous methodologies, the process of reducing women's stories to codes made me feel uneasy. I felt I was enacting violence on the women by further stripping their experiences down and gutting them from their contexts. Indeed, (Wilson, 2008: 119) reflects on this:

> So analysis from a Western perspective breaks everything down to look at it. So you are breaking it down into its smallest pieces and then looking at those small pieces. And if we are saying that an Indigenous methodology includes all of these relationships, if you are breaking things down into their smallest pieces, you are destroying all of the relationships around it. So an Indigenous style of analysis has to look at all those relations as a whole instead of breaking it down, cause it just won't work.

Because of this, I decided not to begin a second round of coding and instead took a break from the work to engage in reflection and conversations with trusted colleagues and mentors about next steps.

"Prison Listening"

After completing the first three meaning-making phases, I had this nagging feeling that something was missing. Dr. Absolon suggested to me that I step away from the computer and nurture myself by spending time in places where deep meaning-making can occur. The more I thought about it, the clearer it became. I knew exactly where I needed to be for deep meaning-making to occur. I felt a visceral need to go to a prison to listen to the audio recordings of the conversations I had with women. I literally felt as though I was being pulled by some force to the prison. I needed to *see* the prison; to *feel* the prison while engaging in deep listening to women's stories. There was no question in my mind this was what I needed to do.

My first prison listening session took place in a forest behind the prison, which was the closest I could situate myself on public property (I knew prison administrators would not allow me on their property to do this). While it was useful to be out on the land near the prison, I could not see or hear the prison. By pure luck, the next day I discovered a laneway beside the prison, which turned out to be owned by one of my previous employers, and I was able to gain permission to use this driveway and parking lot for my prison listening. Therefore, for the remainder of the time, I would drive to the

building, park, and then walk up and down the long driveway which shares a fence with the prison. Figure 2 shows where I listened to the recordings while on the same land and in view of the prison. This process brought up a lot of embodied feelings for me, which I reflect on, and make meaning from, in the next section.

Figure 2 Barbed Wire Fence and Security Camera at the Prison.

Reflexive Audio Journaling

Prior to starting each session, I engaged in reflexive audio journaling to keep track of how I was feeling that day, what I was noticing around me and within me, and any thoughts I had about the recording I was going to listen to. Once I learned the property beside the prison belonged to my previous employer, but before I had received official permission to use the property to listen to the conversations, I went and parked in their parking lot and listened to one conversation while sitting in my car. Before I started the listening, I reflected on what I was feeling being near the prison again after two years of not being there in my role as advocate with CAEFS:

> So I am doing my analysis of listening to the recordings while being in the presence, or at least on the land, of the prison. And right now, I found a little lane way beside the prison and it shares a fence with the prison along with the barbed wire. Apparently, this laneway is owned by [previous employer] so I am hoping that I will be able to get some privacy. I hope nobody comes and kicks me out [I am looking over my shoulder as I say this]. But I can see the barbed wire fence, the building itself, so this feels like a pretty prime location to do this

> deep listening. As I was driving here, I was driving my regular route I used to take to the prison and I could feel myself as I got closer to the prison itself, my body tensing up, my throat constricting, my shoulders getting tense, and just feeling my stomach clenching a little bit. Just feeling the tension of being in, or going to, the prison. So just sitting with that as I enter into listening to the recordings.

The physical sensations I was experiencing were similar to how Métis anti-prison activist and scholar Dr. Giselle Dias described how she felt when driving to a federal prison to spend time with her incarcerated friend. She describes it in this way:

> Driving up the lane, I get a glimpse of the prison, and my stomach lurches. I feel sick. I never know what I am going to encounter with the guards when I walk through the prison gates, and the constant surveillance is always unnerving. I am entering the panopticon, an architectural structure designed with the intention of exercising complete power and control over prisoners, who are under constant surveillance, always visible. (Dias, 2022: 221)

Being in the physical presence of the prison certainly heightened my awareness of and reaction to the violence enacted on women by the state. For example, I noticed there were security cameras on the property of the prison which had a significant impact on me as my audio journal shows from one session[5]. Like Dias (2022) noted above, I had the feeling I was under constant surveillance by prison authorities:

> It is a giant cage with a tall, barbed wire fence and all of the security cameras around like a panopticon. So I think I'm being surveilled right now by their equipment which is fine because I'm not on their property but it adds a layer. I don't know exactly how to describe it yet but listening to women talk about their experiences of their bodies being watched and surveilled while I am possibly under surveillance by the prison's camera surveillance system is really

[5] In saying this, I fully recognize that my experiences of carceral surveillance are categorically different than those who are incarcerated against their will. I chose to be there and could leave at anytime and did drive away when I was finished.

> interesting and I need to think more about what this means for me and my meaning-making. It does have a panopticon effect because I'm sitting far enough away from it but I don't know if they're watching me, but I also don't know if there's other cameras I can't see so either way I am under the assumption that I'm being surveilled.

Taking Notes During Prison Listening

As I was listening to the recordings, I took notes on my phone that struck me as important, those I had not heard before or heard differently during this session, and reminders to myself about things to follow up on. For instance, I noticed the repeated use of the word "barbaric" by Indigenous women when describing strip searching. This stood out to me as the title of one of my manuscripts from my pilot study on strip searching is, *"It's Sexual Assault. It's Barbaric": Strip Searching in Women's Prisons as State-Inflicted Sexual Assault* (Hutchison, 2020). The notes I took in relation to this include, "Indigenous people have been stereotyped as barbaric. This is flipping it to call the white settler state barbaric—resistance to colonialism."

Additionally, I started hearing things in different ways than I had in the previous meaning-making rounds. While I was listening to a circle with Indigenous women, I found myself really drawn to their introductions and noted, "Strip searching mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, friends. Humanize women throughout the dissertation by describing them in non-prison terms." While I had already decided to do this, which was why I started each conversation with an opening circle of introductions, there was something about the ways I was hearing women describe themselves that sat with me in a more meaningful way. Perhaps this was because I had listened to and read the transcripts three other times by now. Perhaps this was because I was solely focused on their words. Perhaps this was because I was listening to their words while staring at and being in the presence of the prison where all four women had been imprisoned and this was a way of resisting the prison's dehumanizing impacts on women. Regardless of the reason, I felt a greater sense of solidarity with and connection to each woman while listening to her share her story while I was beside the prison.

This unique meaning-making method facilitated a more wholistic way of engaging with women's stories. By not being tethered to my computer and beholden to the written word, listening to women's voices while in the presence of the violent prison apparatus enabled ways of knowing that would otherwise remain locked behind the colonial wall of knowledge. *Seeing* the prison and *feeling* the prison while *hearing* women speak about the abuses they experienced at the hands of the state provided a deeper and more wholistic understanding of the violence of strip searching. This has implications for decolonizing research methods as Western methods privilege written words over oral storytelling. In this way, I disrupted the notion that rigorous research requires reading transcripts and

extracting themes from the stories participants shared. This method can be adapted to other contexts and research landscapes whose ontologies, epistemologies, and theoretical frameworks align with wholistic and embodied ways of coming to know. Indeed, two scholars have requested permission to adapt this method for their projects on prisoners and food, and the effects of climate change on people with disabilities.

Informal Meaning-Making

Consistent with critical approaches, I believe meaning-making takes place during data collection (Potts and Brown, 2015), and continues, both informally and formally, for a significant amount of time (Wilson, 2008). I carried the stories women gifted me in my heart, mind, spirit, and body following each conversation and engaged in several different types of 'informal' meaning-making such as peer-debriefing conversations with trusted colleagues and mentors and testifying at a trial about strip searching in a provincial jail.

Peer Debriefing

Immediately after the first circle, I began having informal conversations with trusted colleagues and mentors about process, content of the circles, and to engage in abolition feminist praxis. We discussed where and why I made mistakes and spoke about how to correct it going forward. We also engaged in reflexive conversation whereby I reflected on the ways in which power was showing up in circles and conversations, particularly relating to white supremacy, settler colonialism, and cisnormativity. I continued this process throughout the story gathering and meaning-making phases.

Expert Witness Testimony Preparation

Following the story gathering phase of the research I acted as an expert witness on strip searching for a trial on Charter of Rights and Freedoms violations by a jail in the province I live in. Preparation for the trial deepened the meaning-making process as without it I cannot say for certain whether I would have spent so much time reading and re-reading the stories about provincial jails, since they were not the main focus of my study (federal prisons were the focus). I even printed out all of the references to strip searching in provincial jails so I could study them more intensely in the event the cross-examining lawyer asked me questions about anything I said during the testimony. I also researched and learned about provincial strip searching legislation and policies about which I had limited prior knowledge of previously. It also became very clear that more research needs to be conducted about the use of strip searching in provincial jails given the extreme harms being done.

Member Checking

Once I completed my meaning-making, I asked each participant if they would like to read their quotes along with the context I wrote around them as I wanted to ensure I was presenting their words in the way they had intended. It was during this phase that I also asked each person if they would like to use their real first name or a pseudonym of their choosing. I was unable to get in contact with five women, despite repeated attempts to email, call, and/or text them. Therefore, I have selected a pseudonym for them and changed all identifying information to the best of my ability. Approximately half of women I spoke with chose to use their real name; the others selected a pseudonym. I then shared with each woman who chose a pseudonym specific quotes where it was not possible to change particular identifying information (such as which prison they were in). All agreed they were okay with the quotations retaining that information.

Cumulative Meaning-Making

Wilson (2008) frames meaning-making as "cumulative analysis," which I think is how my meaning-making process organically occurred. As was described above, my meaning-making process was not linear. While I had an initial idea of how I thought the meaning-making would unfold, along the way, it began to take on different and unexpected shapes (i.e., prison listening and testifying in court). All of the pieces have come together in a way I believe they were meant to and have resulted in making meaning of women's stories that stayed true to the spirit and heart in which they were shared (Absolon, 2020).

Abolition Feminist Praxis

Central to engaging in abolition feminist praxis is critical reflection upon how the research unfolded, where mistakes were made, and how to change it going forward. One of the major regrets I have is that I did not gather experiences from trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people, as my gender-identity privilege led me to centre cisgender women. This was not an intentional research design; however, I could have done more to ensure that gender diverse and Two-Spirit people felt safe enough to participate. While we do not know how many trans, non-binary, and Two-Spirit individuals are in federal prisons designated for women, we do know that many are imprisoned in these prisons and experience strip searching (CAEFS, 2021). Going forward, all my research into conditions of confinement will be inclusive of everyone who is incarcerated in prisons designated for women.

Although I believe holding the circles and conversations virtually allowed for a more expansive scope that permitted me to conduct a national study, I do think having these conversations in person would facilitate deeper sharing. Speaking to women through the computer screen was reminiscent of speaking to women through thick plexiglass in prison. While I used the skills I

developed as an advocate to foster trust through the glass/screen, I wonder how being in circle in person, sharing food, and having informal conversations before and after the circle would have changed the story gathering. Thinking about how powerful it was to listen to the recorded conversations on the land of the prison, I wonder if this practice could be used to hold the conversations with women directly on the land of the prison. While this would require serious considerations so as not to cause more harm while engaging in the research with previously imprisoned women, it is a story gathering method I would like to explore with women with lived experience.

One of the ways in which my whiteness showed up is in my failure to include an Elder during and/or following the conversations with Indigenous women. One of the Indigenous women suggested this would have been helpful so they could engage in ceremony after sharing such painful stories. I could have emulated the protocols of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and MMIWG (2019) as they had Elders integrated into the entire truth-sharing process, including afterwards. This was an oversight on my part, and I am committed to continuing to deepen my decolonizing research practices in order to reduce the harm I may cause Indigenous people during research.

Concluding Thoughts

Engaging in research with Indigenous and Black women as a white settler comes with significant responsibilities. The methodological framework of relational accountability functions to ensure the researcher is adhering to the ethics of relationality, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity (Wilson, 2008). In each phase of the research, I was guided by key questions relating to how I was attending to relationships, not only with the women who shared their stories, but also my relationship with the topic, the sociopolitical structures that oppress criminalized Indigenous and Black women, and the knowledge keepers and producers from which I drew from for my research. The ethic of reciprocity helped to reduce the replication of colonial dynamics of domination and extraction that is so prevalent in Western research. For example, the extensive preparation I engaged in prior to asking women to share their personal stories with me was an effort to demonstrate that they were more to me than research participants. I saw them in their full humanity and was in solidarity with them against the carceral state. The main reason women wanted to speak with me was to help prevent other women from being harmed by strip searching. My explicit commitment to them was to use my various positions of privilege to share their powerful stories with the intent of abolishing the practice of strip searching.

Furthermore, women who have experienced the harms of incarceration are often not understood as valid knowers and knowledge producers. To counter this epistemic injustice, this research used a decolonial abolition feminist framework and centred the voices of Indigenous and

Black women, providing them space to share their experiences of state violence in a relational way. The small talking circles enabled women who had gone through the experience of strip searching to be in relationship with each other, to co-develop analyses of their experiences, and to heal together. Indeed, several participants shared this was the first opportunity they had to talk with other women who had been strip searched about their experiences, and that it provided a sense of healing. Being in relationship, discussing a form of violence the state wants to keep hidden, is a form of resistance against the colonial, white supremacist, and carceral apparatus of imprisonment which seeks to isolate and separate people from each other and the truth. This relational approach to the research, the centring of those who are most affected by the issue under study, and an analysis that the state is the main source of gendered, colonial, and racial violence, can be instructive for other researchers who are exploring the harms of the ever-burgeoning carceral state apparatus (Richie & Martensen, 2020).

Disclosure

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Research Ethics

This project received Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board approval #6837.

Notes on contributor

Jessica Hutchison is a white settler, abolition feminist, and activist-scholar who is deeply committed to dismantling racist and colonial systems. She is an assistant professor in Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University whose work is informed by her long-standing prisoners' rights advocacy, and solidarity with those most impacted by systems of oppression and domination. Jessica is also a research associate with the Centre for Indigegogy at Wilfrid Laurier University, where she supports other settlers in their decolonizing journeys.

ORCID

Jessica Hutchison https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8591-9152

References

Absolon, K. (2019). Indigenous wholistic theory: A knowledge set for practice. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *14*(1), 22–42.

Absolon K. E. (2020). *Introduction to Indigenous Perspectives and Knowledge: Cultural History and Colonial History* [Workshop]. Wilfrid Laurier University, Centre for Indigegogy.

Absolon K. E. (2022). *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know: Indigenous re-Search Methodologies*. Fernwood Publishing.

Braun V., & Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS). (2021). Human rights in action: In prison. https://caefs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HRIA_2021_WEB_English_FINAL.pdf (accessed 22 October 2024).

Collins P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge.

Davis A. Y., Dent G., Meiners, E. R., et al. (2022). *Abolition. Feminism. Now*. Haymarket Books.

Evans-Winters V. E. (2019). *Black Feminism in Qualitative Inquiry: A Mosaic for Writing Our Daughter's Body*. Routledge.

Hutchison, J. (2020). “It's sexual assault. It’s barbaric”: Strip searching in women’s prisons as state inflicted sexual assault. *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, *35*(2), 160–176.

Kaba M., & Ritchie A. J. (2022). *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*. The New Press.

Kovach M. (2015). Emerging from the margins: Indigenous methodologies. In S. Strega and L. A. Brown (Eds), *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (pp. 43–64). Canadian Scholars.

Kovach M. (2021). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (2nd Ed.). University of Toronto Press.

Maynard R. (2017). *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*. Fernwood Publishing.

Mertens D. M. (2008). *Transformative Research and Evaluation*. Guilford Press.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry. (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/.

Monchalin L. (2016). *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada*. University of Toronto Press.

Office of the Correctional Investigator. (2022). Annual report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2021–2022. https://oci-bec.gc.ca/en/content/office-correctional-investigator-annual-report-2021-2022.

Pollack S. (2003). Focus-group methodology in research with incarcerated women: Race, power, and collective experience. *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, *18*(4), 461–472.

Pollack S. (2009). "You can't have it both ways": Punishment and treatment of imprisoned women. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *20*(2), 112–128.

Pollack S. (2012). An imprisoning gaze: Practices of gendered, racialized and epistemic violence. *International Review of Victimology*, *19*(1), 103–114.

Rice C., Dion S. D., Fowlie H., et al. (2022). Identifying and working through settler ignorance. *Critical Studies in Education*, *63*(1), 15–30.

Richie B. E., & Martensen K. M. (2020). Resisting carcerality, embracing abolition: Implications for feminist social work practice. *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, *35*(1), 12–16.

Smith L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). Truth and reconciliation commission of Canada: Calls to action. archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20240926142211/https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

Tuck E., & Yang K. W. (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(6), 811–818.

Wilson S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing.

Wilson D. D., & Restoule J. P. (2010). Tobacco ties: The relationship of the sacred to research. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, *33*(1), 29–45.