

Unearthing Justices: Mapping 500+ Indigenous Grassroots Initiatives for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit+ People

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Abstract

In the face of ongoing colonial violence across the land now known as Canada, Indigenous families and communities of the missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ (MMIWG2S+) people continue to navigate a criminal justice system that has long ignored and neglected the murders and disappearances. This grassroots work has been important in raising awareness, mobilizing action, and generating resources and support across the land. The 500+ Unearthing Justices Resource Collection (UJRC) is a publicly available database of more than 500 documented Indigenous grassroots organizing and mobilizing for the MMIWG2S+ people. The magnitude of local activities documented in the 500+ UJRC highlight the vast resources, skills, and strengths that already exist within Indigenous communities, particularly in the absence and neglect of state and institutional justice. These powerful and transformative community care initiatives reveal the many facets of what justice is and needs, well beyond what a criminal justice system can provide. Using a justice mapping approach, this article traces the Indigenous-based initiatives of vigils &

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marches, search support, community patrols, and community accountability to show how they are not only central to addressing the murders and disappearances, but also for imagining other possibilities for justice.

Keywords: justice mapping, Indigenous grassroots, missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ (MMIWG2S+) people

Introduction

Justice is and needs many things. Modern conceptions of justice are developed within a juridical-empirical field (Latty et al. 2016) that are tied to legal constructs of utilitarianism and just deserts. This approach generally conceptualizes justice as rational and equal, with justice monopolized by the state and criminal justice system as a result. In the land known as Canada, such an approach has had many problematic implications for Indigenous peoples that create impediments and barriers to justice (see Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, 1991; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This absence of justice is particularly evident with the thousands of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ (MMIWG2S+) people for whom modern justice is either elusive, absent, or invasive, if not violent (NIMMIWG, 2019).

Where the failings and shortcomings of justice for MMIWG2S+ people have been well documented (see NIMMIWG, 2018a), there has been little insight into how Indigenous families and communities have navigated this terrain given an absence of or invasive justice (Chartrand et al. 2016; Culhane, 2003). Indigenous families and communities have long been involved in actively addressing the systemic intersections of gendered and racialized violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit + people and know what their communities need (Anderson, Campbell & Belcourt, 2018). Their work has been important in raising awareness, mobilizing action, and generating resources and support and has been formative in addressing the systemic barriers that lead to violence (Blaney, 2003). Indigenous grassroots organizing and mobilizing is evident in the Unearthing Justices Resource Collection (UJRC) – a database of over 500 Indigenous-led and Indigenous-based grassroots initiatives, activities, and projects for the MMIWG2S+ people (Centre for Justice Exchange, 2020;



Chartrand, 2019). Much of this important work, however, remains invisible and unknown.

To address this noted gap in research and ensure that those with the lived experiences and expertise are at the centre of knowing and understanding, this article shifts a focus from state justice and operations towards Indigenous grassroots organizing and mobilizing for the MMIWG2S+ people. Through such a shift, this article moves an understanding of justice from one that is state-defined and state-exercised and uniquely situates justice activities with the many Indigenous-based and Indigenous-led grassroots initiatives. Justice is thus conceptualized more broadly within the local context of how communities are actively addressing their justice needs such as support, safety, caregiving, healing, connecting, community accountability, and remembering among many other acts. This shift of focus of justice offers important insights and new possibilities for how justice can be conceptualized and operationalized; one that is located and invested with peoples and communities and the diversity of their needs, often in ways that systems and government lack.

In this article, I draw from bell hooks' (1989) work on centring the margins for theorizing how Indigenous grassroots activities offer imaginative and creative possibilities for justice. To centre justice on the margins, I also adopt a justice mapping methodology to trace some of the initiatives from the UJRC and locate the spaces and activities of grassroots organizing and mobilizing. I focus in particular on collective acts of remembering, search support, community patrols, and community accountability as prevalent activities carried out by the Indigenous grassroots for addressing the many justice needs of families and communities. In mapping these initiatives, I consider the locale and relations in which the activities occur and how they reveal important features of what justice is and needs, beyond the imaginaries of the state or what a criminal justice system does and does not provide (see also Carrier, Piché & Walby, 2019). Many of us find it difficult to imagine what justice would look like outside of a criminal justice system. Yet in those places and for those people where state intervention is either absent or destructive, not only is it possible, but necessary.

Centring justices on the margins

Across the land known as Canada, violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ people is not new; it is chronic. This endemic violence has been well documented over the years in hundreds of reports, studies, and

symposia (see NIMMIWG, 2018a). As highlighted throughout the UJRC, Indigenous grassroots work and energy for the MMIWG2S+ people emerge out of widespread neglect as it attends to the many spaces and people that a mainstream and colonial justice has failed or abandoned for many years (Chartrand, in press). It is also within such spaces where colonial systems are both present and yet absent that creative, resilient, and resourceful justices exist. By centring the activities that occur in Indigenous space, other understandings and possibilities for justice are also made more evident.

Cultural, Indigenous, feminist, and (post)colonial scholars have significantly contributed to an understanding of Indigenous women's current experiences of colonialism, discrimination, racism, and sexism and the ongoing economic, cultural, and social dispossession that makes Indigenous women more vulnerable to violence (e.g., Carleton & Green 2014; Culhane, 2003; Jiwani, 2009; McDiarmid, 2019; Pearce, 2013; Pratt, 2005; Razack, 2002). What this research highlights are the systemic, intersectional, and multifaceted ways that Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit+ people continue to be exposed to colonial violence and that recreates the implicit belief that they are somehow responsible for the violence committed against them.

Other scholars have also documented the refusals, resistances, and resurgences of anti-colonial and anti-violence work carried out against such colonial violence. De Finney (2014; 2017) explores how young Indigenous women negotiate, navigate, and resist racialized and colonial policies. Palacios (2016) discusses the kitchen table resistances of Indigenous women that include teach-ins, media-arts justice, community accountability, and transformative justice. These refusals and resistances have also been conceived in artwork (Moss, 2012; Nagam, 2011), beadwork (Anderson, 2016), film (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2016), grassroots activism (Saramo, 2016), legislative lobbying (Barker, 2008; Gunn, 2017), literary activism (Bowers, 2017; Granzow & Dean, 2016), memorialization (Hargreaves, 2017; Moll, 2016), social media and journalism (Felt, 2016; Stillman, 2007), storytelling (Hargreaves, 2015), and theatre and performance (Collins, 2017; Dickinson, 2014). Such scholars have been mindful of how Indigenous resurgent praxis disrupts settler-colonial narratives and revives cultural, political, and many other forms of Indigenous sovereignty (see Kermoal & Altamirano-Jiménez, 2016; Kinonnda-niimi Collective, 2014). Where scholars have explored the colonial, racialized, and gendered violence, and the refusals, resistances, and



resurgences of Indigenous grassroots activism, there has been less investigation of how the Indigenous grassroots work to address the murders and disappearances, particularly given the long-term and ongoing absence of formal justice and other absences of resource and support in relation to the violence. This article contributes to and builds on the above scholarship and uniquely situates grassroots organizing not only as resistance, resurgence, or disruption but as radical spaces to imagine justice otherwise.

Following hooks' (1989) work on centring the margins, Indigenous people exist in a complex web of settler-colonial relations with varying levels of access to resources, finances, infrastructure, politics, justice systems, and the like. Indigenous grassroots organizing and mobilizing for the MMIW2S+ people exist in a complex arrangement both inside and outside, against and alongside government and other institutional and public spheres. They are born of everyday colonial relations of constrained access and dispossession that often necessitate a terrain for collective strategies. Such multifaceted and creative strategies, resources, and supports are evident in the UJRC such as with community patrols and watch groups, search toolkits and apps, anti-violence workshops, healing circles, safe rides, and memorials and walks among many others (Chartrand, in press; Centre for Justice Exchange, 2020). Where on the one hand, Indigenous grassroots grow out of dispossession, dislocation, and other colonial state operations, they also exist as sites of radical possibilities for counter-hegemonic thinking, organizing, and mobilizing (hooks, 1989). In short, it is justice from below (Appadurai, 2000). By centring the work and activities of the Indigenous grassroots or the 'margins', we also displace some of the more stable and coherent discourses and approaches of conceiving justice.

A theoretical framework of justice is an important point of departure for the MMIWG2S+ people initiatives. This approach shifts a focus of justice from the state and public bodies to one that is invested in people and communities and that reflects the diversity of their needs. Not only have Indigenous families and communities been calling for justice for many years (e.g., Anderson, Campbell & Belcourt, 2018; Blaney, 2003), but they have also been actively cultivating justice across the land through constellations of resources and supports to address the systemic, gendered, and racialized violence. By locating justice in grassroots activities, a concept of justice here is operationalized on what materially and currently exists in communities, in the spaces where the activities are carried out, and in relation to the

people who are cultivating them (see also Craft, 2016; Monture-Angus, 1999).ⁱ

Rather than locate justice in some abstracted institution or legal application, in this article, I decentre the state to explore justice more broadly in its diverse locations, people, relations, and applications. In this way, justice is reconceptualized both inside and outside the dominant system, not in some theorized or idealized possibility, but in an actualized and material state. Indigenous families and communities have long shaped a landscape of alternative understandings and possibilities for justice in a way that recognizes and addresses the immediate and material needs and concerns of families and communities.

Mapping grassroots justices

Locating practices and understandings of justice with the people and within the space that it occurs lends itself to mapping methodologies. Mapping methodologies helps to capture the complexities and relations of the activities that are carried out while making the connections between people and places. More specifically, justice mapping is a way to “locate justice in everyday places, practices, and relationships within and between communities” (Buhler et al. 2019, p. 147). I first outline the methods involved in the collection and curation of the UJRC and then discuss justice mapping methodologies as adopted from Indigenous (re)mapping methods.

The 500+ Unearthing Justices Resource Collection of Indigenous grassroots initiatives is part of a three-tiered collaborative research project to track the work of the families and communities in support of the MMIWG2S+ people. The first part of the project consisted of a cross-country road trip shared with Gladys Radek, a Gitxsan Wet’suet’en First Nations activist, visiting Indigenous communities and families to listen, share, and discuss Indigenous grassroots initiatives concerning the murders and disappearances. We met with 26 Indigenous grassroots and family members, driving more than 10,000 kilometres over the course of 17 days, sleeping in over a dozen campsites. The cities we visited included Manitoulin Island, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Regina, Kelowna, Vancouver, Quesnel, Edmonton, and Saskatoon. Seventeen more video interviews were carried out since the initial cross-country road trip taking the total to 43 interviews for an intimate understanding of the work carried out.

The second part of this project, which provides a more expansive insight into Indigenous grassroots activities, was the development of the



Unearthing Justices Resource Collection. The collection consisted of a national media scan of news, social media, online, and other public sources than generated more than 500 Indigenous-led and Indigenous-based activities, events, and projects taking place across the land in support of the MMIWG2S+ people. The resource collection was launched publicly via a website through the Centre for Justice Exchange with an invitation to the public to add or modify the resource collection.ⁱⁱ The launch also included a webinar with Gladys Radek, Marlene Jack, Chickadee Richard, and Darlene R. Okemaysim-Sicotte and a petition in support of Leah Gazan's (Member of Parliament) Motion #46 for a national basic guaranteed livable income in Canada. The initiatives in the resource collection were documented by thematic activities to provide an overview of the type of work involved and to more easily navigate the collection.ⁱⁱⁱ The collection was also documented by city and province to track the geopolitical location of the initiatives and activities, although fully aware that all of the land is Indigenous country. Where the initiatives are mostly unfunded or crowd-sourced, the collection includes some not-for-profit organizations, non-Indigenous, and academic work where the activities are done in collaboration with Indigenous families and communities.^{iv}

Finally, the last part of this project was a reading of the 118 transcripts of the Community Hearings and Expert Testimonies of the National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that offered important context to the grassroots initiatives and of state (in)operations. Consisting of over 15,000 pages, the transcripts provided witness testimony from family, friends, and experts of the unimaginable structural, systemic, and institutionalized violence experienced by Indigenous women, men, children, families, and community members. These three layers of the project provide both an intimate and broad context for witnessing and documenting Indigenous resources, strategy, and strength (see Oliver, 2001) in relation to an ongoing and endemic colonial violence and for radical possibilities for justice.

To trace the Indigenous grassroots organizing for the MMIWG2S+ people, I draw from justice mapping methods. Indigenous grassroots work and energy, in part, emerge out of widespread neglect and violence of modern justice as it attends to the many spaces and people that a mainstream justice has failed, brutalized, or abandoned (see also Chartrand, 2014; NIMMIWG, 2019). Within these spaces, alternative practices and understandings of justice run both with and against mainstream justice to address its material,

logical, and/or spiritual limitations and violence. By mapping this terrain of work, we begin to rethink actualized possibilities for justice beyond the state.

Much of modern mapping practices has been limited to carving out state boundaries, cities, roadways, and critical infrastructure. This is what Mishuana Goeman (2013) refers to as colonialism's "violent spatial legacy" (pp. 19-20) that erases the people and their traditions and connections to land. Indigenous scholars argue for a (re)mapping method to reconfigure Indigenous-based experiences and understandings of relations and connection with land (see also Goeman, 2008; Hunt & Stevenson, 2016). Mapping in this way has the benefit of looking beyond state boundaries to the socio-spatial relations of how people, place, and activities are linked and the significance between them. This mapping approach is particularly important for Indigenous communities whose ongoing dispossession from culture, people, and land is central to colonial state functions. Rather than look at grassroots justice through the traditional topography of cities, landmarks, and distances, justice mapping here draws from Indigenous (re)mapping methods to find the flows, networks, connections, and relations of justice. As I further outline, mapping Indigenous grassroots work in this way decentres the state and criminal justice institutions and locates justice activities within a complex and local web of relationships.

Current justice mapping research more commonly tracks the accessibility or lack of access of specific populations to formal or state justice. The Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project (Stratton, 2011), for example, created a map of legal services that provide the Alberta public with information, education, legal advice, legal representation and/or other support or assistance related to legal problems. The Canadian Bar Association's (2013) Equal Justice initiative tracks barriers to formal justice across Canada with participants generally describing the justice system as untrustworthy, only available to people with money, arbitrary, and difficult to navigate. The Canadian Forum on Civil Justice (2017) developed the Cost of Justice project that determines the social and economic costs of Canada's justice system to increase access to justice across the nation. Others have also incorporated analyses of access to justice for racialized populations (Francis, et al., 2021) or for tracing law's violence (Buhler, 2017). These approaches, while important for documenting and assessing justice needs and the (in)accessibility of justice, also continue to prioritize mainstream justice, precluding the possibility of community as a place of mobilizing justice.



Outside of the state, justice is and needs many things and can take many forms. Expanding on operationalizing a concept of community justice, Buhler, et al. (2019) created a digital ‘story map’ about justice and injustice in Saskatoon (see also Stratton, 2008). The mapping exercise was a participant-focused and community-based approach that critiqued and de-centred official justice institutions and located justice in the “everyday places, practices, and relationships within and between communities” (p. 147) such as by looking at food sovereignty or artwork. Building on this approach, the current work similarly locates justice at the level of community by mapping the lived and material activities of the people who are responding to a lack of justice in relation to the MMIWG2S+ people. Mapping is an important method to capture such possibilities for justice as it fosters an ability to trace activities across the nation and to establish the links between them.

Mapping methods here strays from conceptualizing justice as static to a fluid state that occurs throughout diverse local knowledge, relations, places, and practices, without imposing a hierarchy of relationships or prioritizing any one initiative or place. The initiatives selected for this article – acts of remembering, search support, community patrols, and community accountability – reflect a range of Indigenous grassroots initiatives from coast to coast, in urban centres, reserves, rural areas, and remote locations, and that draw on the local resources, customs, and connections. Where a map sets boundaries and criteria in its production, a (re)mapping traces new relations, boundaries, and understandings.

Collective acts of remembering

As documented by the NIMMIWG (2019), colonial systems are designed to fragment a collective and shared memory of Indigenous peoples, traditions, and struggles while erasing and trivializing the violence that continues in its wake. Land-based acts of remembering are central to the activities of the Indigenous grassroots to return a collective memory. The significance of remembering is evident in the magnitude of work carried out by the grassroots to keep the women’s stories and spirits alive through artwork, ceremonies, concerts, dance, documentaries, drumming, fasts and feasts, gatherings, marches, murals, multimedia, music and videos, performances, rallies, storytelling, and vigils and walks among others. Collective acts of remembering carry many lessons for justice such as awareness, memorializing, mourning, honouring, connecting, and healing among

others. Perhaps, most importantly, in the face of a violent colonial erasure, collective acts of remembering such as marches, vigils and memorials, keep the spirits of loved ones alive.

The bi-annual public marches and gatherings on the October 4th Sisters in Spirit Vigil and the February 14th Women's Memorial March are some of the most prevalent activities for the MMIWG2S+ people that occur in almost every metropolis, city, and town across the nation. The waves of bodies in outdoor gatherings and on the streets with chanting, singing, drumming, and disrupting traffic are strong expressions of solidarity and for re-presencing those who were violently disappeared from their families, communities, and land. The coinciding vigils are innumerable and often held in the evening in a sea of candlelights that appear as spirits gathering at dusk. Land-based memorials are particular to the place of where the violence occurred or in the communities from where the loved ones belong; marked by monuments often made of earthly materials such as stone, wood, or garden soil. The monuments maintain a more discreet but enduring presence over the landscape.

Collective acts of remembering such as marches, vigils, and memorials create Indigenous re-presencing that also offers spaces for healing and ceremony. The Annual Full Moon Memory Walk, for example, is a sacred memorial walk in Thunder Bay for families and friends that offers prayer, smudge, walk, flag raising, drum ceremony, healing songs, potluck feast, and sacred fire burning.^v These intimate walks and sharing of stories centre tradition and are significant in journeys of healing by remapping relationships of the people, connecting communities, weaving families' stories together, and creating spaces for remembering. Collective acts of remembering are symbolic and shared acts that return the memory of the lives taken to where they belong with their families, communities, people, and land.

Goeman (2013) points out that

speaking, telling, praying, and witnessing assures the power of story to decolonize spatial discourses by reminding us of the connections people have to each other and the life-giving force at work (p. 154).

This life-giving force is reflected in one of the testimonies at the national inquiry that reminds us,



They didn't kill the Indian in us. We are still here. My mother lives on in me. And, when I look at my brother, she lives on in him. And, I look at my nephews and I look at their eyes, and she lives on in them" (NIMMIWG, 2018b, pp. 14).

Rather than relying on a settler-colonial justice that displaces people and asserts authority and ownership over land and people, Indigenous communities advance a justice found in memories, stories, healing, and an enduring and resilient Indigenous presence that reconnects people to place through land-based activities.

The Indigenous grassroots create spaces of remembering to remind us of the beauty, strength, and gifts of each woman and the enduring value of each life (Hargreaves, 2015). At its roots, collective acts of remembering create connections and belonging and expose the ongoing colonial violence. Connections to place and the weaving of relations through acts of remembering are integral to how we can imagine radical possibilities for justice; a justice that does not focus on detection and punishment, but people, communities, and relations.

Search support

Indigenous families frequently point out the many hardships and challenges in keeping a missing person or murder case active within police departments (NIMMIWG, 2019). Search efforts, information gathering, working with media, or navigating the criminal justice system is a heavy tax on time, energy, and resources. Within settler justice, families are isolated and segregated from each other through a “case by case” approach and lose opportunities to share in their experiences and learn from each other’s work and insights. Many of the grassroots initiatives across the land entail all kinds of search supports to provide information and resources to alleviate the associated hardships in a way that connects families.

Unlike settler justice, grassroots energy cultivates constellations of support, resources, and knowledge in a way that connects families and communities. The Drag the Red!^{vi} initiative, for example, was developed when police refused to search the waters after a young Indigenous woman’s body was found in the Red River of Winnipeg, Manitoba. In response to this refusal, families and community members came together to provide boats and equipment and offer training on navigating waters, identifying bones, and establishing search and rescue protocols (Chartrand, in press). The

group also developed an online Missing Persons Toolkit to help families search for loved ones by navigating the media, building an investigation, logging communications with police, and carrying out ongoing searches.^{vii} Other similar initiatives in search support include the *Taken Knowledge Keeper*^{viii} application that runs in concert with the APTN & CBC's (2016) *Taken* television series. The application acts as a portable case builder to help families and individuals track, manage, and hopefully solve missing person cases. These search support initiatives not only centre those who have disappeared but also the Indigenous families and communities across the nation in their search efforts.

Searches and finding answers are central to justice. Although the police may be involved, their involvement is limited and partial within a hierarchy of who is prioritized, targeted, or abandoned (Dhillon, 2015; Maynard, 2017). Marlene Jack, for example, is a family member of the missing Jack family – Ronnie, Russel, Ryan, and her sister Doreen Jack.^{ix} The Jack family has been missing from Prince George, British Columbia for 31 years. Given the ongoing policing neglect and lack of support, Marlene is her own advocate and has become skilled in investigative methods of information gathering, speaking with witnesses, using social media as a search tool, and even renting a billboard to keep the families visible and the search ongoing. These efforts are common among many families who support each other in gathering and collecting information and keeping searches ongoing.

To better visualize the murders and disappearances and facilitate support search efforts, Operation Thunderbird launched a crowd mapping tool of the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women across Canada and the US. According to the group,

This project is meant to not only shame those authorities into getting the work done but is also meant to provide an outlet for women, workers, and families to be able to document cases that do not receive ample attention elsewhere (Kraus, 2013).

A crowd mapping approach to documenting murders and disappearances makes visible both the gender and colonial violence, as well as state justice neglect and abandonment.

Overall, search support at the level of Indigenous grassroots moves well beyond a state and criminal justice function of 'finding bodies' or 'solving cases'. The activities carried out in search support share and build on other



grassroots' initiatives that prioritize relays and networks of information and community support. These constellations show the significance of relations and collectivism in contrast to the divides and individualism generated through a criminal justice system.

Community patrols

Community patrols at the grassroots level have seen a revival across the land. Such patrols have been more commonly associated with the police who were ostensibly returning to a more traditional “beat cop” approach in the mid to late 1980s in response to Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) broken windows metaphor. The theory presumed that one broken window in a community would lead to more broken windows or, in other words, further social deterioration and crime. This assumes, of course, that inner-city or poor neighbourhoods are socially disorganized or dysfunctional and that a policing presence will alleviate social disparities and systemic violence (Saleh-Hanna, 2020). In Winnipeg, as elsewhere, some of the earliest community patrols date back to the early 1980s that started with Indigenous women and native youth who would patrol the streets and hold vigils for the murdered and missing women in the north end of the city (Chartrand, in press; see also Blagg and Anthony, 2014). Local community patrols have been a part of the landscape for years, extending a justice approach to centre community sovereignty and safety over vandalism and the protection of property.

Today, patrols, like the Bear Clan Patrol, walk the streets to provide personal security in a non-threatening, non-violent, and supportive way. Whether in the city, on reserve, or in rural areas, state police interactions within Indigenous communities often escalate to violence and criminalization (Palmater, 2016). Community-based patrols, on the other hand, define their work as “community people working with the community to provide personal security” and patrol the streets to provide support and resource such as clothing and food.^x This approach to safety moves from a retroactive and punitive response of a criminal justice system towards an inclusive membership with an intervention that is community-directed, invested in people, and grounded in everyday concerns. This patrol model now spans more than 50 communities across five provinces. Unlike crime prevention programs like Neighbourhood Watch where individuals monitor their neighbourhoods and act as the eyes and the ears for the police,

community patrols advance a sovereignty of personhood by supporting people rather than protecting personal property (Bear Clan Patrol, n.d.).

Also in Winnipeg is the Mama Bear Clan.^{xi} Having emerged from the Woman's Warrior Circle, they are a group of volunteers led by women to bring back the grassroots to the community. According to the group,

We patrol the community making sure everyone is safe, this may include walking people home or to the bus stops, calling for police or ambulance if needed, sometimes we pray with people or give them a hug. It is all about building connections with the community (Mama Bear Clan, n.d.).

Kim Anderson (2010), a Métis scholar, highlights how much of the traditional importance of Indigenous women and their mothering work has been lost to colonization and patriarchy. The revival of centring the significance of women and children and cultivating and growing one another is as much a part of justice as it is traditional revival. Similarly, in Portage la Prairie is the Women of Mother Earth Network that offers a safe place to women passing through the town. SisterWatch,^{xii} in the Downtown Eastside (DTES), is made up of community leaders, the Vancouver Police Department, and members of the Women's Memorial March Committee, as a way to protect women in the DTES and to make the community safer by protecting the life- and caregivers.

These local initiatives address safety at the community level and are concerned with addressing immediate needs. Not only do community patrols prioritize people, but also future generations to come through a return to traditional approaches of kith and kin. Whereas a criminal justice system protects the interests of people and places associated with property or commodity infrastructure, an Indigenous-centred approach (re)builds kinship networks with community models of caregiving as a central feature of safety.

Community accountability

Community accountability can be many things. Beyond individualizing blame, it can also cultivate people and communities in such a way so that when violence or harm does occur, the conditions that facilitate its exercise are addressed. At the grassroots, it calls on us in a shared and collective



responsibility for addressing the roots of violence and harm, in addition to holding people to account.

The Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik (Women Walking Together) is a grassroots network in Saskatchewan that raises awareness, provides support to family members, and collaborates in anti-violence work.^{xiii} According to the group,

We work at raising awareness and prevention through education and political action to the systemic nature of interlocking issues, such as racism, classism, elitism and colonization which contribute to violence against women; specifically Aboriginal woman (Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik, n.d.).

The Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik members address violence at its intersecting roots, including the violence the families might experience at the level of the state, media, or public. This includes providing support, creating opportunities for the families to tell their stories, acting as shields from the media and public, and protecting each other in their experiences. Such an approach to accountability expands beyond individual harms to more broadly address the many other related and relevant social harms associated with colonial violence or otherwise.

There are many other local initiatives that expand a concept of accountability across the country. Kanawayhitowin, a Cree word which translates to ‘taking care of each other’s spirit’, is an Indigenous campaign to raise awareness about the signs of woman abuse in communities.^{xiv} The not-for profit group provides services throughout Ontario from a community approach where everyone is part of the anti-violence solution. They offer safety planning, resources for men, community action tools, and Moon Teachings among others. Similarly, Feathers for Our Women is a Canada-wide outreach initiative aimed towards youths to raise awareness about MMIWGT2S+ people and violence prevention education.^{xv} The Highway of Tears Community Safety Toolkit also assists communities to promote safety in different ways by addressing and educating on violence and prevention and resource sharing.

Community accountability at the grassroots is multifaceted, ceremonial, and adaptive. It aims at preventing, intervening, responding, healing, strengthening relationships, addressing the conditions that allow violence to take place, and holding people accountable for that violence and

harm (Audre Lorde Project, 2010). Community accountability requires building intentional relations and communities, with accountability as part of a shared, and not individual, responsibility. This approach to justice includes dismantling the everyday structures that facilitate violence or leave some people more exposed and vulnerable. In other words, accountability is taking care of each other's spirits.

Discussion and conclusion

Collective acts of remembering, search support, community patrols, and community accountability make up only a fraction of the critical mass of wisdom, resourcefulness, and self-determination that already exists in Indigenous communities. These initiatives are central to addressing a colonial violence and state absence and offer important insights into what can happen across the land when the local community context is the centre of focus. This article seeks to bring more attention to this arena, against a system of justice that obfuscates the connections and webs of support and safety happening within local grassroots spaces.

Blomley and Robertson (2006) argue that the law erases spatial specificity and local differences to create an ordered legal unity. This kind of homogeneity of bureaucratic and technocratic relations found within a criminal justice system creates barriers between people (Christie, 1977) where relations are structured through a legalese and colonial hierarchies (Monture-Angus, 1999). Mapping out spaces that provide opportunities to respond to and curb violence entails a responsibility, not to institutions but to each other. These communities emerge within symbolic relationships and obligations that cultivate healing, safety, accountability, connection, and transformation (Mingus, 2019), rather than propping up fictitious legal boundaries (see Goeman, 2008). Centring Indigenous grassroots initiatives is not, however, a way of creating another "brand" of justice such as criminal, restorative, or otherwise, but emerges from a need to grow the range of ways we can think about and exercise justice in a fluid and relational way, outside of the more rigid and repressive criminal justice responses that include policing and punishment.

By turning attention beyond a state approach to justice, the community initiatives themselves become the locus of possibilities for justice, particularly considering an absence and even violence of state justice. As noted above, the margins offer important insights into thinking about justice within the spaces that it materializes and where it is needed.



Where state justice has been punitive, retributive, corrective, segregative, and assimilative, it has also served to prop up existing structures of colonialism, imperialism, and White supremacy among others. Justice is and needs many things, but overall, it must cultivate people, relations, and communities and provide everyday needs, resources, and support. A justice mapping approach facilitates the tracing of the grassroots activities in the places that they are carried out, and the connections that are established as a result. In this way, we are not tracing state boundaries or a lack of access to justice, but rather what exists, where, and for whom.

The violence experienced by Indigenous people, families, and communities not only tells us what colonialism is, but also what it is not, what it does not provide, and what communities can achieve in its absence. As Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) argued, Canadian laws are not an ‘Aboriginal answer’ because “our survival as a people has always depended on our own creativity and not on a political power-sharing with the federal government” (p. 185). This is creativity found in the marginal spaces where radical possibilities for justice can and do exist. Academics, government, and the public have much to learn from the families and communities who have been central to organizing and mobilizing around the MMIWG2S+ people. The UJRC is part of a broader project that seeks to amplify the voice, work, and visibility of Indigenous families and communities across the land, reduce some of the barriers between them, promote networks of resource and support from coast to coast, and ensure they can continue and grow their invaluable work in a move towards greater justice, equality, and self-determination.

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ⁱ This approach departs from a scholarship that seeks to locate Indigenous justice in some original form (Borrows, 2002; Napoleon & Friedland, 2014), or as a potential or idealized form of justice such as restorative justice (La Prairie, 1999; Milward & McKay, 2018).

ⁱⁱ The Centre for Justice Exchange is a collective of volunteers who seek to create more inclusive understandings and practices of justice. Visit <https://justiceexchange.ca/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Themes include advocacy & accountability, artwork, awareness & storytelling, coalitions, community care & safety, dance & drum, databases, documentaries & film, gatherings & education, healing & ceremony, literary activism, marches & rallies, memorials & vigils, multimedia news & radio, music and events, performance, protests, resources & tool kits, search support and walks & journeys. These themes are not, however, mutually exclusive and there is significant overlap, relationships, and continuity between each one.

^{iv} In respect for the women and families, we avoid naming those who have been murdered or disappeared, unless the person is central to that initiative.

^v Visit <https://www.facebook.com/events/1997459253651043/>

^{vi} Visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/556842211083726/>

^{vii} Visit <https://www.kanikanichihk.ca/missing-persons-persons-at-risk-toolkit/>

^{viii} Visit <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/taken-knowledge-keeper/id1264800899>

^{ix} Visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/334259026671959>

^x Visit <https://bearclanpatrol.org/>

^{xi} Visit <https://www.facebook.com/Mama-Bear-Clan-1699671170294271/>

^{xii} Visit <https://vancouver.ca/police/organization/investigation/investigative-services/major-crime/sister-watch.html>

^{xiii} Visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/5646182010/>

^{xiv} Visit <http://www.kanawayhitowin.ca/>

^{xv} Visit https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0Bxh_xtY2TEaQZ1FaQUxoWEpScjQ