



INVINCIBLE: CALLING IN THE GUARDIANS AND WITNESSES

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Indigenous Youth in Care

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Sandrina Carere, Elika Yamauchi

Keywords: Indigenous children and youth in care, Indigenous youth-led research, Indigenous arts-based research, Indigenous storytelling, Indigenous resurgence

Acknowledgment: We raise our hands in deepest respect and gratitude to the ancestors and families of the lək̓ʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ nations and to our own ancestors and nations. We raise our hands to all Indigenous children and youth who have grown up in colonial systems, to those we have lost, and to those who survive, resist, and imagine justice and resurgence. INVINCIBLE is grateful for funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Insight grant 435-2020-1191) and the Canet Foundation.

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INVINCIBLE is an arts-based storytelling project featuring the stories and artwork of Indigenous youth in care. It is truly a youth-led research project: the INVINCIBLE youth researchers imagined, designed, and created the stories and artwork featured in this special issue. The authors are members of the Youth Council, a council for Indigenous youth in care at Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services, on sovereign lək̓ʷəŋən homelands. INVINCIBLE is part of Kinship Rising¹, a community-led research project based at the University of Victoria that is focused on restoring Indigenous practices of well-being through art and storytelling. In response to the epidemic of colonial violence impacting Indigenous communities, Kinship Rising facilitates land- and arts-based research projects with Indigenous youth, young adults, and community members on issues related to reclamation, healing, and resurgence. Please visit the INVINCIBLE website² to view our stories, bios, artwork, and project details. Also, at the bottom of the last page of each story in this issue is a link to that story on the INVINCIBLE website.

The Guardians and the Witnesses

During one of our INVINCIBLE gatherings, we sat under a grove of towering firs and watched a pair of crows making their nest. They flew back and forth with their beaks full of twigs and mossy nesting materials. The crows soon noticed we were watching their every move. Because they did not know us, and so did not trust us, they smartly refused to let us see where they were crafting their nest. They paused on a large branch above our heads, watching us intently to see if it would be safe to continue. It was amazing to see these crows determine exactly how to keep their nest and their family safe, protecting them from prying human eyes ... because most humans, they had learned, take and take with impunity. The crows stood silently, attentive, committed guardians. Whenever we looked away, they quickly flew to deposit their precious nesting material. We never saw where their nest was located exactly, but slowly, slowly, as they came to realize we were not a threat, they spent less time on their branch watching us, guarding... slowly, slowly, they started flying right to their nesting spot, trusting that we were safe. We became witnesses to their refusal, their stealth, their rhythm, their world-making.

Refusal is a vital anticolonial strategy. Protection, defiance, and stealth are essential to self-determination, to surviving the violence of colonization, the violence of the child welfare system.

This is the process of INVINCIBLE. It is a storytelling project dreamed up, conceived, created, and implemented by the gifted, spirited members of the Indigenous youth council, a leadership council for Indigenous youth in foster care. We, the adult team, were invited into this project by the INVINCIBLES. The idea for INVINCIBLE — and all of the powerful words, art, ideas, and creative force shared in this special issue — came entirely from them, from their fierce desire to be guardians of the most sacred, unsundered stories.

¹ For information about Kinship Rising, please visit <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/kinshiprising/>.

² <https://invincible.uvic.ca/>

(Re)Making Kinship

What does it mean to be a witness, a caregiver, a steward, someone who walks with and is called in to testify to the unbreakable, unceded force of Indigenous youth in care? It took months and months of tenuous trust building, of watching and testing, to build up the vital force of this project and to foster enough relational kinship for the youth to let down their guard — their self-guardianship that has allowed them to survive and even thrive in a system designed to break them. Their artful words now bounce off the page and screen, a balm of good medicine for our hearts and spirits.

As France Trépanier (2008) shared,

Art can be medicine, a survival tool, an antidote. Art is our identity, our place, a sign of our presence on this planet. It is medicine as it helps healing because we've been through so many things. Art is for the people. It can help build our communities. (p. 15)

As witnesses to these invincible stories, we are humbled, inspired, transformed; we are moved to action, moved to rebel and refuse, moved to humility and accountability. As witnesses, the INVINCIBLE youth have claimed us. They called us in to steward what needs to be told and shared and heard at all costs.

These stories make kinship; they make spirit. They rupture the usual, inexorably entrenched pathologies fomented by research about Indigenous youth in care. They declare that someone out there gets it. They unsettle *that other story*, that most harmful, insidious story, the one steeped in youth's spirits, shared around child welfare team meetings, encrypted in client files — that story of Indigenous youth in care that narrates them into broken, lying, manipulative, dispirited, trauma-riddled, risky, transient subjects, fraught with incapacity, unclaimed by community. These are youth who have been shuffled around from group homes to motels to bus stops to shelters, owning nothing but what is contained in stretched-out garbage bags. Denied their homelands. Without kin. Youth who have been carried by the force of ancestors they never had the honour of meeting.

INVINCIBLE is a proclamation for just practice, ethical research, responsive relations... It unsettles the appropriation and commodification of trauma, how methodologies are crafted and sown, and how resurgent child welfare practice should be conducted. Propelled by their unrelenting ethic of care and truth telling, the INVINCIBLE authors have put themselves on the line. They have worked hundreds of hours to ensure that other children in care can have the safe landing place of these sacred, brave, powerful stories. Their stories will live in print and spoken word, shared with little hands in foster care, streamed online, retold in ivory towers, living rooms, classrooms, and workshops. These stories will be the guardians and witnesses for others in the system who may not have been told, "There are others like you, we are here, we care, we are invincible."

References

- Trépanier, F. (2008, June). *Aboriginal arts research initiative: Report on consultations*. Canada Council for the Arts.
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