Rebelling against discourses of denial and destruction:  
Mainstream representations of Aboriginal women and violence; resistance through  
the art of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro

By

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Abstract

Violence against Native women in Canada is widespread and has deeply systemic and colonial roots. This paper will attempt to show the role that dominant representations of culture, race, and gender have in allowing this violence to continue by eclipsing many different narratives and ways of expressing cultural and individual identities. Violence in the mainstream media will be explored and analyzed drawing on concepts from critical theories, Aboriginal epistemological frameworks, and anti-racist, disability, and Afro-centric feminisms to build a framework on which to analyze the meanings of the representations. After exploring violent and colonial discourse, the discussion will turn to art. Self and cultural representation and expression by Native women can act as important forms of resistance to the tools of colonial oppression. The artwork of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro are powerful examples of addressing and exploring issues of identity, culture, resistance, and survival for Aboriginal women.
Rebelling against discourses of denial and destruction:
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Acknowledgements ................................................................. p. iv
Chapter 1: Introduction....................................................... p. 1

1. Empathy as responsibility, subjectivity, and voice: Approaching the theme of violence against Aboriginal women
2. Not new, not over: Violence against Aboriginal women and Canada’s role
3. Colonialism and The Indian Act: Legacies and consequences for Aboriginal women
4. Approaching the research: Where did I fit?
5. Chapter overview and structure of the thesis

Chapter 2: Gender violence, Indigenous knowledge, and a framework for resistance:
Approaching the literature................................................... p. 23

1. Gender violence: Stolen lands and stolen bodies
2. Cultural representation and control
3. Indigenous identity, knowledge, and resistance
4. Summary of chapter and Research Questions

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology........................................ p. 38

1. Case studies
2. Discourse analysis, image and art analysis using a phenomenological approach
3. Risks and benefits

Chapter 4: Mainstream violence, discourses of violence and denial .......... p. 46

1. Constructed, invisible, and confusing: Race and absence of race in mainstream media
2. Deviance and (de)sexual violence
3. I’m just a working guy: The normalization of Pickton and violence

Chapter 5: Becoming a rebel, reclaiming identities ........................ p. 65

1. Resisting violence, missing women, and creating space for stories
2. Representing the self: Aboriginal women making art
3. Memory of women and violence in the work of Rebecca Belmore
4. The rebel: Mime, memory, and identity in the work of Shelley Niro

Chapter 6: Conclusions ................................................................. p. 111

1. Changing discourses and lessons learned
2. Social work, discourse, and art

References ................................................................. p. 118

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1. Empathy as responsibility, subjectivity, and voice: Approaching the theme of violence against Aboriginal women.

Wander around [her] insides, feel your way through decades, generations of lostness […] discover her spirit, bent, then broken. Re-invent [her], re-imagine her, hang onto the picture of perfect being letting go, spiraling down into shame. Picture the rootlessness she must feel. (Raven speaking to Stacey in “Ravensong,” Maracle, 1993, p. 39).

Empathy is important to understanding and reacting to historical processes and to the lives of others. Often, understanding of empathy is relegated to sympathy and a kind of appreciative sentiment. In this sense, it almost seems necessary to develop a positive attitude and kind feelings toward an individual, event, or situation (Yeager and Foster, 2001). Empathy as taught in mainstream social work education is shown to be an emotional response to the experience of others. Yet, empathy must be more than this. Empathy must combine both an intellectual and emotional response, and must come from active engagement in thinking about people, events, or situations. In thinking about empathy, it is important to think about who are others, assumptions about who we are, and about the separation and “differentness” that we have from others.

I first came to approach the theme of violence against Aboriginal women through feelings of sadness, disgust, and almost a sense of panic. I was vaguely convinced that Canada was a falsely and hypocritically formed country and that it was the responsibility of all Canadians to look at issues relating to Aboriginal women. I initially began to think about this topic from the perspective of policy change and structural legal issues that were oppressive and that contributed to the violence that Aboriginal women experienced on personal, group, and cultural levels. However, in looking at my early explorations of this theme, it was clear to me that I was writing for a white, colonial audience that, like me, needed to be convinced that Aboriginal women mattered. In the process of thinking about others, I began to wonder if I was using empathy. If I was, was empathy enough? Lastly, I questioned whether I understood what empathy was.
Despite feeling that all Canadians had a responsibility to look at their complicity in the structural and colonial violence against Aboriginal women, I did not feel a greater or more profound connection to these issues as my immediate reaction of anger towards a simplex perpetrator created a distance between myself and the violence. What I experienced was a jumble of emotions that were often so overwhelming that I often needed to put them away and to distance myself from my research. Sometimes, I would stop the research altogether for a few weeks. In looking at my initial drafts, I saw that my written voice was defensive, condescending, and argumentative. I wanted to convince my audience (clearly not an Aboriginal audience) that the topic mattered without needing to look at myself nor to look at the very women I was trying to defend. It was important to consider my own identities and voice in looking at the importance of how these worked for others in both creating violence and in resisting and surviving violence. It was important for me to take a closer look at empathy.

It is helpful to look at Lee Maracle’s (1993) *Ravensong* as an exploration of empathy as connected to responsibility through the valuing of life within a collective culture. In *Ravensong*, Maracle, an award-winning writer and teacher of Salish and Cree ancestry, explores the role of memory, community, and survival in a story about the flu epidemic in 1950s British Columbia. Reminiscent of the European diseases that tragically killed much of the Aboriginal population during the early part of colonization, the flu causes panic and sadness for the Aboriginal community in the narrative. Stacey, the young protagonist, reflects on the impending loss of lives for her community and the great value of individuals within her collective culture. She thinks, “white people didn’t seem to live this way. No one individual was indispensable. Their parts didn’t seem bonded to their whole” (p. 26). Young Stacey reacts to the neglect that the white medical system paid to her community and the lack of understanding of what losses of one person meant for the whole. Certain people were bearers of cultural knowledge and if they were to die before their time, the culture as a whole would suffer a great loss. All people were important not only for their individual value, but for their role in maintaining cultural wholeness.

It is important to consider how the loss of life can be understood. This understanding can help to guide my own approach to loss of life in my own research. When one of Stacey’s white classmates, Polly, commits suicide, Stacey tries to come to grips with
her death. Polly has killed herself in response to shame she felt about being publicly identified as having been sexually involved with another boy in Stacey’s class. While the boy was congratulated for his actions, Polly leaves the class in shame and later ends her life. Stacey, in her feelings of anger and resentment for the racism and exclusion that she is dealt by her white classmates, stands by and does nothing. Yet, she knows better. In her culture, she knows that there is nothing wrong with female sexuality. In fact, it is fun and exciting, seen with humour and openly, and kindly, joked about. Thus, Stacey does not understand or relate to the social condemnation of Polly, but she does nothing to support Polly. After Polly’s death, Stacey is struck by an overwhelming sense of tragedy that she cannot understand. She is counseled by Raven on how to consider the loss.

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Raven gives Stacey the tools and the guidance for how to approach loss. She learns that the complexity of the joys, sorrows, and uniqueness of life must be understood in order to understand death. She must also look at the collective history of her classmate’s family and culture. Stacey cannot just view her white classmate’s life as an outsider; Raven challenges her to go inside of Polly and to feel Polly’s loss of her own self before Stacey can feel the loss of Polly from the outside. Throughout the novel, Raven pushes Stacey to bridge the gap between her culture and the white culture as a way of securing a peaceful future. In doing so, the white community does not become absolved of colonial responsibility and destruction of Aboriginal lives, but this is a way that both communities can remain whole.

Resistance to violence, destruction, and loss comes through compassion, the difficult task of identifying with the other, and looking at responsibility. In psychoanalytic terms as described by Ana Freud (1948), Stacey has identified with the aggressor in her inaction in protecting Polly. Just as white people stood by as Stacey’s community was devastated by a flu epidemic, Stacey stands by as Polly suffers and ultimately dies. In this case, white people are the aggressor to Stacey’s community and cultural identity. Stacey needs to come to terms with her own guilt and her own capacity at oppression. She had
done nothing for Polly and had, in the moment, protected herself from self-criticism by identifying with the aggressor.

Raven pushes Stacey to come to terms with her lack of action and lack of understanding of Polly. Stacey needs to come to terms with her identification with the white aggressor, not only just in her treatment of Polly, but her own rejection of aspects of her culture as evidenced in her anger at her mother for wanting to remain sexual after the death of her husband. Raven is teaching Stacey a lesson in responsibility. Raven is showing Stacey that empathy must extend beyond sympathy to look at personal responsibility and calls for an exploration of one’s own complicity and guilt. Raven is helping her grow and move through her guilt and complicity. Stacey realizes that she is not an oppressor even though she became one for a moment. Raven helps her to regain her more thoughtful self. Stacey must begin to tolerate herself; she must see her own aggression and complicity, and to figure out her sense of right or wrong.

In *Memory of Fire*, Galeano (1995) explores colonization using worldviews of Indigenous groups in the Americas. In creating a collective history, he re-imagines and re-remembers the experiences of the individual as important components of a collective historical memory. He tells the story of an old Tukuna woman who is punished by her community for destroying the legs of some young girls who had denied her food. She had been born with the powers of healing and vengeance, and could see the deepest sites of penetration of both love and hate. When she is killed by her community, she gathers her own blood in her hands and blows it at the sun and shouts: “My soul enters you, too!” (Galeano, p. 53). Galeano ends by explaining that the story teaches the people that the soul of the person they kill will be received in their own body. This is an interesting lesson in empathy as the soul of the victim will enter the body of the oppressor.

In *Ravensong*, Stacey is told to do the opposite, and to enter and explore the body of her dead classmate. Yet, the two stories are not so simple. Stacey is also a victim of Polly and Polly’s white culture. The Takuna woman was born with the skills of curing and killing. She bore this responsibility for her community. Furthermore, the girls whose legs she dismembered and ate had refused her food. Here, there is a mutual responsibility to enter and explore the experiences of another to whom they are ultimately connected through pain and death. Perhaps both authors use the stories to explore complicity and
interconnectedness between people who are not simply victims or oppressors. Basil Johnston, an Anishinaabe writer, storyteller, language teacher and scholar wrote that stories were used not so much to “amuse children as to describe what the tribe understood of human growth and development” (Johnston, 1999, p. 47). It is important to notice that both of our stories call for an aspect of embodiment and physical entry into the body of the other as important in learning and feeling. As my own work focuses on the representation of bodies and the role of bodies in individual and collective identity, it is interesting to look at the focus on the entering of another’s body as a means of both implication of responsibility and exploration of experience of others. The understanding of empathy has moved from being simplistic and superficial to something more complex.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag (2003) looks at how empathy and compassion can be arrived at when learning about the tragedy that others experience. She begins by looking at a piece of writing by Virginia Woolf in 1936-37 about the tragedy of war. Woolf wrote of looking at a picture of a mutilated body part and wrote that it could be part of a man’s or woman’s body, or that it could be “the body of a pig” (p.4). The sense of dehumanization and destruction in this description is jarring. Woolf was writing about the overall horror of war and a violence that could be understood through the depiction of violence in captionless, contextless photos. Sontag pushes this analysis and shows how pictures have often been used as tools to incite particular understandings of and reactions to violence. The experiences and identities of the viewer cannot be separated from the content of the image.

Seventy years later, viewers of mainstream media sources in Canada were shown pieces of Aboriginal women’s bodies, bodies that were killed and dismantled using the same machinery used to butcher pigs. This was no metaphor used to show the horrors of violence. Aboriginal women were literally treated as pigs and discourse in mainstream media configured the women to be as such. And, as before, viewers of the images and written stories were part of the story. Yet, somewhere along the track of public memory, the colonial treatment of Aboriginal woman was forgotten, and consumers of these stories felt an odd and confusing sense of disgust, sadness, and familiarity. There was something normal about these stories of violence against Aboriginal women. It was not only that Aboriginal women are associated in mainstream media with violence, nor the
normalization of violence through the alternate abundance or invisibility of these stories themselves. Perhaps it was the awareness that these stories were not isolated instances, although rarely making headlines.

Sontag (2003) writes of the unequal display of important and grievable events in mainstream news sources. While claiming to tell of the most important stories of the day, mainstream news stories focus on certain events and the stories are displayed in certain ways that elicit certain reactions. Sontag further argues that viewers are already prepared on how to understand images and stories. Images of Aboriginal women as bruised and down and out prostitutes in mugshots are already something that mainstream audiences are made to expect. Yet, when did these images become acceptable representations? How can they be displaced? What processes are at play in the distancing and disassociation from others?

Perhaps these questions call for a look at the process of othering itself, especially as it relates to the distancing of cultures and peoples. Hallam (2000) writes about the processes of othering with regard to the representation of cultures in research and museum practices. In ethnographic anthropology, the other is seen as occupying both a different geographical space as well as a temporality. This type of othering creates a complex sense of distance between, for example, the Indigenous other and those who attempt to interact with her or him. Social work literature places an emphasis on the idea of cultural competence, in which the practitioner must seek out knowledge on their client’s cultural context. Traditionally, however, this framework rarely looks at structures of power that connect the worker and the client, or call for the worker to examine her own identities (Sakamoto, 2007). Social work, has, for example been critiqued as “actually covered up many of the exploitative and oppressive features of capitalism by helping people cope with or adjust to capitalism” (Mullaly, 2002). In this case, social work is implicated in structures of power that affect the client. In The Myth of Cultural Competence, Dean (2001) questions how social workers can become “competent” in culture when culture is not a single entity, but is individually and socially constructed, and is continually changing. Furthermore, she emphasizes that the social worker must focus on herself as having differences, beliefs, and biases that are come into play when interacting with others (Dean, 2001). The first step in developing critical consciousness, as an important part of anti-oppressive social work
practice, requires an examination of one’s various identities, locations and standpoints (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005).

The result of traditional social work theory and practice is an immediate othering of the client as the one to be studied and as not relating or connected to the practitioner. Yet, when social workers experience and know themselves as complex and changing, they are more open to the influence of the other (Bakhtin, 1993). In textual and visual representations that employ this type of othering, such a distance is created between the creator of this story and the subjects that discussions of complicity and responsibility are made almost impossible. There needs to be self-reflexivity and reciprocity in the interaction between social workers and service users. Social workers need to be able to sit with discomfort, confusion, and doubt (Meihls and Moffatt, 2000). The challenge of anthropologists, social workers, and creators and readers of stories is to look at decreasing the distance between themselves those they are learning and thinking about.

As we have seen, Maracle (1993), in *Ravensong*, looks at the importance of placing oneself within a story and to examine our own complicity, guilt, and the complexities of our reactions. Not only does Stacey need to explore Polly’s present, but she must explore her personal and cultural history. If not, Stacey and those encountering the pain of others are able to create an irresponsible and ultimately destructive sense of distance. Sontag (2003) writes that “if there is any distance from the subject, what a photograph ‘says’ can be read in several ways (p. 29.)” Also, memory of images can alter the image according to the memory’s needs. If responsibility and defenses like identifying with the aggressor are not adequately examined, then the way an image is viewed will reflect only the comfort level that the viewer experiences. In contrast to the distance created through othering practices, Sontag writes that memory is mostly local. One can push further and say that the ability and willingness to take a new perspective on the perception of images relies not only on exposure to different locales and viewpoints, but also on the ability to examine oneself, to imagine oneself into another’s situation, and to look at personal responsibility and complicity.

In his work on remembrance, learning, and ethics, Simon (2005) looks at the recent focus on ethics in social and political thought as “a return to the question of what it could mean to live historically, to live within an upright attentiveness to traces of those who have
inhabited times and places other than one’s own” (p. 133). Like Sontag (2003), Simon (2005) looks at the implications of ways of historical remembrance. He questions how narrative memories, as could be provided through images and news stories, can construct the substance and terms of our connection to the subjects of the memory itself. Thus it is important to look at the processes of how the public memory of Aboriginal women is constructed in mainstream images and discourses. We must question why we are shocked by representations, why we are saddened, but not surprised, if there is an absence of stories and images, and who is creating the stories. We must consider when these types of stories were first told, and why they continue to be told in similar or different ways. Lastly, we must explore what other stories are out there, and we must listen to our desire and hunger for more.

We have the beginnings of the idea that images and discourse are powerful tools used to create and enforce memory, racism, and colonialism for both the subjects of the representations and the viewers. We also see that there is a need for self-examination in moving past a passive and superficial empathy to a sense of responsibility and implication. It is fitting to look at the words of Raven as written by Maracle (1993) as a framework in approaching this work as well as in working with the distancing created by traditional social work theory between the worker and the client.

I have endeavored to understand empathy as a process of placing myself actively in my work and in exploring my role in the creation and interpretation of representations. I try to reflect on my position as an inhabitant of a society that continues to colonize Aboriginal peoples in complex and destructive ways, and I have looked at the creation and telling of new and old stories of Aboriginal cultural identity and selfhood as important acts of resistance to the violence of mainstream representations. Learning from the lessons of both Raven and Stacey, and the death of the Takuna woman, I will look at the role of bodies and the exploration of identities and experiences through the body itself as a way of creating oppression and destruction, as a way realizing responsibility, and lastly, as a way to resist and survive colonization. I have tried to approach this work as a process of understanding and learning about responsibility and have been moved, devastated, angry, frustrated, and hopeful by both my own experiences of learning and by the very lessons that I have learned.
2. Not new, not over: Violence against Aboriginal women and Canada’s role

_Tantoo Cardinal, Commenting on Amnesty International’s Stolen Sisters Report 2006_

Aboriginal women in Canada have long been subject to many forms of violence. Violence, with roots in early colonial times, has extended into the present day with no sign of abating and often involving the same groups and same patterns of violence as two or three hundred years ago. In the last twenty years, over five hundred Native women have been murdered or have disappeared in Canada (CBC, 2004). Yet, Canada has a tradition of public self-congratulation and international recognition regarding its peaceful nature. In an address to the Canadian parliament on March 9, 2004, Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan called Canada “a pillar of support for the United Nations.” He goes on to praise Canada’s role in conflict prevention, peace-building, and its “multicultural character,” and lastly, “applaud[s] Canada’s focus on the rights and dignity of the individual” (Annan, 2004). Michaëlle Jean, Canada’s Governor General, reflected these same sentiments in her speech from the throne. In bringing Canadian values to international affairs would be a step to “create a world where fairness, justice and decency reign” (Jean, 2008).

In a country that has publicly considered itself to be one of the most developed and peaceful in the world, these murders, as well as inadequate reaction on the part of police and law-makers have been criticized by the United Nations and Amnesty International (Razack, 2006). This section will look at violence against, and specifically murder, of Native women in central and western Canada and policy issues that fall short of addressing the complex issues behind this violence, either supporting or allowing further violence to
continue. I will also point to lack of attention in the media to cases of violence against Aboriginal women as well as lack of responsibility taken by police and the justice system in providing appropriate follow-up and sentencing.

The Highway of Tears is the name given by locals to Highway 16 that runs east to west, linking the port city of Prince Rupert with the interior milling town of Prince George in northern British Columbia. Since 1979, women and girls have disappeared hitchhiking along this stretch of road. Although estimates of the number of missing women varies greatly from a low estimate of eight or nine, Amnesty International estimates the number to be as high as thirty-two or thirty-three (Amnesty International, 2006). Along the way it passes through small logging and ranching communities, including Terrace, Smithers, Houston and Burns Lake. Scattered along the highway, are many isolated Native reserves and towns. The women missing along the Highway of Tears, with the exception of one, are all Native. Since most of the women’s bodies have never been found, the pain and reality of disappearance and missing continue to be daily realities for many families (Huntley, 2006).

According to a 1996 Canadian government statistic, Indigenous women between the ages of 25 and 44 with status under the federal Indian Act, are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence (Amnesty International, 2006). Violence against Native women is not restricted to British Columbia. In 1994, three bodies of female Native women, ages 16, 22, and 30, were found 10 km southwest of Saskatoon. John Martin Crawford was found guilty for the crimes after his friend who had been present during at least one of the murders identified him as the perpetrator. Crawford had earlier spent time in jail after attacking and raping a 30-year old Native woman when he was just 19. She was later found dead, although Crawford has not yet been connected to her death. It is likely that he killed at least six Native women, although he is only charged with the deaths of three (Goulding, 2001).

Violence against Native women frequently went unreported and unnoticed by the public in Saskatchewan (Goulding, 2001). Despite the similarities of the case to other cases of serial murder that caused much attention, there was barely anything reported about the murders. After the first body, that of Mary Jane Serloin, was found, the local newspaper
wrote a three column-inches story in the second section below another story about the deliver of 425 poinsettia plants to senior citizens (Goulding, 2001).

The media and police investigations consistently under-react to cases relating to violence against Native women, revealing apathy and even disgust regarding the well-being, or even the existence, of Native women. During the Crawford trial in Saskatoon in 1994, the national media rarely reported on the proceedings (Goulding, 1996), unlike the highly publicized trial of Paul Bernardo who killed white women and girls. The Amnesty International report, Stolen Sisters (2006), cites nine cases of violence against Native women, including the murder of Helen Betty Osborne, a 19-year-old Cree student from northern Manitoba who dreamed of becoming a teacher before she was abducted and killed by four men on Nov. 12, 1971. It took more than 15 years to bring one of the four men to justice. A judicial inquiry that followed determined that the police investigation was sloppy and racially biased (Amnesty International, 2006). Another inquiry about violence in Manitoba found that police had long been aware of white men sexually preying on native women and girls in Osborne’s town of The Pas, but “did not feel that the practice necessitated any particular vigilance” (Hall, 2005, p. 1).

When a non-Native woman was killed along the Highway of Tears, there was an enormous reaction in the media, and focus was immediately drawn to the case. Nicole Hoar was a white, middle class woman, who worked as a tree-planter during part of the year (Smith, 2006). It is important to note that she has dark hair and dark eyes and could have appeared to be Native to the perpetrator. Yet, Nicole’s dubious visible whiteness was not discussed as providing more evidence of racism in the case. Instead, Nicole Hoar’s death was a public outrage. She was finally someone to whom mainstream white Canada could relate.

The media and the public reacted to her story immediately. As one magazine reports: “Her family and friends were instrumental in quickly getting the story out to every major news source. A massive poster campaign ensued, rewards were offered, and a fund established to help find the missing dark-haired 26 year-old from Red Deer” (Smith, 2006, 1). It took the death of a white woman for the mainstream public to begin to look at the Highway of Tears.
Public reaction to violence against Native women can be classified as apathetic or as even malicious. Just like in the Highway of Tears, there are many examples of white women’s deaths eliciting far greater reaction than Native women. In one Vancouver case, 500 individuals voluntarily took part on a search for a disappeared pregnant, white woman. In another case in Vancouver, there was a $100,000 award offered for information on a garage break-in. Yet, the families of disappeared Vancouver Native women who go to the police with their story are told to return home to wait because a missing person search cannot be put out on every Native person. It is implied that the missing woman is out partying, or prostituting and is therefore not really missing (Huntley, 2006).

Yet, this does not just occur in Vancouver or Edmonton where the most notorious cases have occurred. Audrey Huntley (2005), a Canadian filmmaker made *The Heart Has Its Own Memory*, a documentary about the familial memories of murdered Native girls and women. In interviewing Native families across the country, she found that these cases did not happen in just Vancouver or Edmonton, where the most publicity has been centered, but all around the country in all areas where Native people live. Yet, as we shall see in the section on analyzing media discourse, Native women are blamed for the violent acts done to them. Headlines refer to Native women as prostitutes when they are not (Huntley, 2005), and, when they are, there is little understanding or compassion for the difficult and complex reasons that compel Native women to become sex workers.

Amnesty International (2006), in their report, *Stolen Sisters*, looks at the murders of Native women in three western provinces over three decades and finds that, in each case, Canadian authorities could have done more to ensure the safety of these women and girls. The report looks at several factors that need to be addressed in order to alleviate further violence. In particular, the economic and social marginalization of Native women, often caused by government policies that destroy Native families, have created situations of extreme poverty, homelessness, and prostitution (Amnesty International, 2006). Furthermore, Canadian police forces have failed to provide adequate protection to Native women. It could be added, that in some cases, they were complacent in the crime. In the case of Betty Osborne, mentioned above, the local police had long been aware of white men assaulting and raping Native women, but did not feel that it needed “any particular vigilance” (Amnesty International, 2006, p.1). Another factor considered in the report is
that because of the extreme vulnerability of Native women, both white and Native men carry out extremely brutal acts against them, motivated by racism, or by the knowledge of societal indifference to the plight of Native women, which allows many perpetrators of violence to go unpunished (Amnesty International, 2006).

Acts of violence against Native women cannot be seen as individual cases of insanity or, simply pathologized; just as the Montreal Massacre must be seen as a crime against women and not just the criminal lunacy of one man. Violent acts and the murder of Native women in Canada have become widespread and commonplace. When murders do take place, they are extremely brutal and succeed in humiliating and destroying the victims (Goulding, 1996). These murders are part of a larger context of persistent and institutionalized colonialism in Canada.

It will be helpful to look at the case of Pamela George, a case used by Sherene Razack (2000) in her work on gendered racial violence, to show how colonialism and systemic racism are used to allow for and further violence against Native women. In 1995, Pamela George, a mother of two and a member of the Ojibway Nation, was brutally killed by two white men in Regina. She lived on the Sakimay reserve on the outskirts of the city and sometimes worked as a prostitute in Regina. In a seven thousand page report published about her murder trial, only five pages talk about her and show what her life was like. Throughout the report, there is much focus on her as a prostitute, something that she did twice a month. Both men who killed her were white, middle-class, athletic students. They had just finished a year of university and were off for the summer. One was to go tree planting, and the other was to go to Banff to join other white university students to celebrate the end of the term (Razack, 2000).

The two young men picked up Pamela George in “the stroll” in Saskatoon, drove to a secluded area and, after receiving oral sex, beat her until she was dead. They were both picked up a month after the trial, after the RCMP had exhausted a list of Aboriginal men and other usual suspects who lived on the street. During the trial, the defense argued that the severity of the crime should be diminished because both men were drunk and were therefore doing “pretty darn stupid things” (Kummerfield & Ternowetsky quoted in Razack, 2000), and because Pamela George was working as a prostitute at the time of the murder.
Regina professed public shock at the murder, and more importantly, that the murderers and the victim were from such different social contexts. Razack (2000) addresses both the men’s contexts as well as Pamela George’s context and identifies the missing connector in the situation: colonialism. She looks at the material components that bring both sides to the encounter. By beginning at the context, she finds that even the special creation of Regina established a sense of white supremacy with reserves on the outskirts both geographically and economically. Razack (2006) argues that situations of poverty for Native people were created intentionally and that sexual violence was used as a central tool for colonialism. Exchanging sex for services and material goods, such as food was used throughout early colonialism.

Violence can be linked to colonialism. In any situation of armed conflict or colonial conquest, gender based violence such as rape, is widespread. Women are seen as sexual objects, as symbols of national culture and identity that could be tarnished through violence, and are seen as female members of ethnic, religious, or national groups (Amnesty International, 2006). From historical accounts, Native women, from the first encounter, were viewed by white men as objects and symbols used in their quest for establishing white supremacy in the colonies. Women were traded to make peace, to establish land deals, and were taken forcibly to show territorial dominance (Thrush & Keller, 1995).

During colonial times, women on the west coast were traded for sexual relationships, and were used to make financial and political ties with white men. White women were few and white men looked to Native groups to supply them with Native women for various purposes, mostly sexual (Thrush & Keller, 1995). In some cases, they would marry. However, in the case of Xwelas, a Samish woman who was married to three men throughout her life, the marriages were rarely happy because of power differentials based on both gender and race. Xwelas was convicted in 1879 of murdering her third husband, a violent and usually drunk labourer who often threatened to kill her. Xwelas’ case, described by Thrush and Keller (1995) shows the complex intersection of gender, race, and class in early colonial Canada.

It is important to look at the reasons that white men across economic and social class backgrounds as well as of varying ages commit violence against Native women and to make the connection to colonialism. Even the bloodline between the victim and the
victimizer groups in most criminal cases can be traced back fairly directly to the original
groups implicated in the colonial encounter (Razack, 2006). Colonialism is still occurring
in that land is still being taken from Native people and poverty is deliberately produced
through separate policies relating to Native people, such as the flooding of Native land and
repeated displacements (Razack, 2006). Poverty in turn, creates further displacement, loss
of power, increased prostitution, and increased violence against those most marginalized.
Individual Canadian policy actions, such as funding cuts for housing and shelters, as well
as any taking of land, result in increases in violence against Native women (Razack, 2006

In the Native reserves and villages along the Highway of Tears, there is a stark
difference in living conditions from the rest of Canada. There is ninety percent
unemployment in some of the towns, and Aboriginal people live in abject poverty (Chinoy,
2006). They are suspicious of outsiders and mistrustful of police and of the Canadian
Government. There is a cause for their lack of faith in outside authority. When Lana
Derrick went missing in 1995 along the Highway of Tears, her family contacted the
Canadian police to file a missing person's report. They were then given 72 hours as a time
frame in which police would search for Lana, after that, the family was told they were on
their own, Lana’s Aunt, Sally Gibson spoke about this experience to Sharmeen Obaid
Chinoy, a reporter and film-maker concerned with the Highway of Tears. Gibson said: "to
us, prejudice is alive and well in Canada, against our people. And every time a young
woman goes missing along the highway they ignore it, because it's not one of theirs -- it's

The perception and portrayal of Native women in the courtroom and among law
enforcers is similar to the portrayal of this same group of women over the past two or three
hundred years. Violence against Native women is not a new phenomenon. We have seen
the case of Xwelas, and as much as 100 years ago, there was an inquiry to determine why
there was so much violence against Native women (Razack, 2006). Pamela George, like
many other Native women, was portrayed as an “Indian Hooker,” who lacks a more
complex identity and for whom the root causes of her context are not understood (Razack,
2000). There is no discussion of systemic reasons for her poverty and marginalization that
caused a mother of two to need to perform oral sex on two white college boys for money.
Instead, her status as a prostitute is used to lesson the guilt of the perpetrators of her murder. The choosing of the name Highway of Tears, reminiscent of the Trail of Tears, aptly identifies the colonial nature of the violence. Just as the Trail of Tears was a genocidal death march for the Cherokee Nation, the Highway of Tears is the site of ongoing and brutal death of Native women in Canada as part of the same colonial mentality and strategy. As long as a more complex look at violence and its background context of poverty and marginalization are not discussed, then the problem will continue.

We have seen that the colonial system was established around the use of Native women for sex; it has allowed for violence against Native women to go unnoticed, and to be, arguably, institutionalized. The pass system that allowed people to leave reserves and travel to the city, or to white areas, was originally created so that Native women could leave the reserve to be used for sex (Razack, 2006). The journey to and from the reserve for women was fraught with sexual violence. Travel, for Native women was dangerous, just like it still is along the Highway of Tears. Violence against Native women is closely linked to the gender violence and racism of colonialism. Apart from discrimination based on race, women organizing in rural and remote areas did not have access to provincial and federal resources available to establish social service infrastructure, such as shelters.

3. Colonialism and The Indian Act: Legacies and consequences for Aboriginal women

The Indian Act is often cited as the original colonial document. The Act is a federal legislation that was established in 1876, although there have been twenty subsequent amendments to the Act. The Minister of The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is responsible for administering the Indian Act and the implementation of Bill C-31, implemented in 1985. The Indian Act determines how Reserves and Bands operate and determines who is and who is not recognized as Aboriginal. Originally, an Aboriginal person was defined as any person who was a member of a Band recognized for the purposes of the Act, as well as some individuals who did not have membership in a Band (Indian Act, 2006). Among those who have been denied over the years before amendments were made were Aboriginal women who married
either non-Aboriginal men or men from different Aboriginal groups. Children from these marriages were often considered illegitimate and could not obtain Indian status (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, 2006). The Indian Act ensured that racial identity for Aboriginal women was highly political and was imposed from the outside.

Aboriginal women in Canada do not enjoy rights equal to those of other Canadians. Sharon McIvor (2004) challenged the Indian Act in 1985 regarding her Indian status. Later, she wrote about using equality litigation to advance Native women’s rights. She argued that The Indian Act has fostered patriarchy in Aboriginal communities; Aboriginal women were now subject to a loss of Indian status and benefit of band membership, eviction from reserve homes, and the denial of an equal share of matrimonial property in the century preceding. Not taking into account Native women living on-reserve and in northern territories, forty-three percent of Native women live in poverty (McIvor, 2004).

Colonialism has also allowed Aboriginal men and Canadian governments to exclude women from leadership in Aboriginal governance. These policies have greatly increased poverty for Native women and children and have likely increased their exposure to violence (McIvor, 2004).

The effects of structural colonialism are reflected in Native women’s health. Native women’s health is affected by their living situation, and lack of access to services and higher rates of poverty. Aboriginal women are more likely than the general population of Canadian women to die as a result of alcoholism/cirrhosis, motor vehicle crashes, pneumonia, homicide, suicide and diabetes (Grace, 2003). In looking specifically at abuse, over 55% of Native women reported physical abuse, and 45.5% reported sexual abuse. The prevalence of sexual abuse is generally higher among Aboriginal women than among non-Aboriginal women (Grace, 2003).

After decades of legal action taken by Native women to improve sex equality rights, Bill C-31 finally allowed Native women to maintain their Indian status regardless of where they lived or to whom they married. Bill C-31 was finally enacted in 1985 as an amendment meant to right gender inequality. Apart from addressing gender inequality, Bill C-31 also looked at allowing other excluded Aboriginal people to be reinstated by changing the meaning of “status.” It further allowed for Bands to define their own membership rules (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, 2006). However, Native women
continue to advocate to challenge section 15 (1) and 28 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (McIvor, 2004). Section 15 (1) states that every individual is equal before the law and has the right to the equal protection and benefit of the law regardless of gender. Section 28 states that all the rights and freedoms of the charter are guaranteed equally to male and female (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). Using the charter, Native women now want equal status and membership within their communities, equal entitlement to share in matrimonial property, and equal participation in Aboriginal governance. The Native Women’s Association of Canada, although a contentious group among First Nations women, has strongly suggested that the Charter will help Native women to gain power in their own communities. Jennifer Koshan (1998), an associate professor at the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Law who focuses on equality and human rights, writes that the Charter will ensure that Native women are included in the creation, implementation, and ongoing operation of Aboriginal government systems.

We have seen that The Indian Act institutionalized racialized identity and imposed structures of control of identity from the outside. Yet, the racial self can change over time and Aboriginal racial identity is complex and politicized. Zack (1993), in her work on identity politics, describes the “one-drop rule” for Black racial designation in the United States, in which if one ancestor is Black, then the individual is Black regardless of how many non-Black ancestors he or she has. For Native women however, the racial history was different. As we have seen, the Indian Act determines how Reserves and Bands operate and determines who is and who is not recognized as Aboriginal. Originally, an Aboriginal person was defined as any person who was a member of a Band recognized for the purposes of the Act, as well as some individuals who did not have membership in a Band (Indian Act, 2006). Space for and recognition of self-definition and self-identity have become an important issue for Aboriginal women.

Ahmad (1994), in her work on identity and racism, critiques the need for non-white women to culturally and racially identify calling it an ongoing tool of white colonialism. She connects the white feminist movement to white oppression by not providing space for women of colour to retain complex selfhoods that cannot be conveniently compartmentalized. Colonialism had caused an identity crisis for women of colour by employing conquer and divide tactics to force women of colour into small and tidy
categories. Women of colour are constantly fighting for their voices to be heard and for space for expression.

The federal and provincial governments continue to debate about jurisdictional responsibility for Aboriginal people. This, in turn, has complicated the ability for Native women to advocate for themselves as it is often unclear as to whom they should direct their efforts. Yet, Native women have been vocal and adamant about the need to end sex discrimination in the Indian Act, identifying migration from rural to urban areas as contributing isolation and displacement, invasive child welfare practices, and racist strategies and conceptualizations regarding family violence (Janovicek, 2002).

More specifically, with regard to the Highway of Tears, contributors to a symposium on the violence have called for safe houses, a fleet of shuttle buses, increased police presence, educational campaigns and a network of "watchers" established along the highway to keep young women safe and prevent hitchhiking (Hume, 2006). While the recommendations are relevant and call for multi-level change, the symposium points to the common experience of poverty that links the missing women, but does not identify racism or colonialism as structural factors in the case.

Violence against Native women is linked to and fostered by a larger context of continuing colonial policy embodied in the Indian Act and in differential treatment along the lines of gender and race in policing, criminal justice, and media coverage. Colonialism has ensured that Native women have been used as objects and symbols of possession and dominance and that sexual violence has been an ongoing tool of conquest and colonialism. Today, systemic racism and sexism is manifested in health problems, poverty rates, involvement in prostitution, homelessness, and in violence (Amnesty International, 2006). Cases of violence against Native women show the unique and brutal intersecting of racism and sexism that have been allowed to persist within Canadian social, economic, and political systems.

4. Approaching the research: Where did I fit?
Through my years of academia, I have struggled, first to bury my voice in my work, mimicking and often succeeding in arriving at a cold, ironic voice of reason. Then, in looking to uncover pieces of myself, I did not know where I was. When writing about others’ identities, I tried to blink away confusion about my own. I am often mistaken for Latina or sometimes as part Native; in the past, I have looked with amusement and excitement upon the confusion on my audience’s face as I explained which languages I speak, where I have lived, and my interests as they tried frantically to place me within an ethnic category. I have had the opportunity to live in Mexico and currently do social work with Spanish-speaking communities particularly in the anti-violence field. When working with Navajo children in New Mexico, I learned that for weeks the community had assumed that I was Native. Sometimes these realizations are accompanied by guilt, sometimes with humour, and, more recently, with discomfort.

In fact, I am Jewish. Yet, I have rarely identified with or felt included by other Jews. This is because of my anti-Zionism in particular, because I am not religious, and because I do not look particularly Jewish. Often, when other Jews discover that I, too, am Jewish, they are surprised, although many Jews say that they can always identify other Jews. I feel that I am left with little Jewishness, and have come to see my Jewishness as only an answer to inquiries as to what I was ethnically.

Because of my lack of association with the Jewish community, culture, and religion or with other non-dominant groups, I did not bemoan the dominant Christian curriculum in school. I took for granted that great literature and culture were universal, and perfectly complete (Bannerji, 1991, p. 68). I believed that Europe symbolized advancement and civilization, and represented a “truer” understanding of human experience (Ahmad, 1994, p. 192 and p.213). I refused to see its oppression and exclusion, of even my own Jewish ancestors. I certainly did not look too deeply into European or Canadian colonialism of Indigenous peoples. What I had inherited from my Jewish past was a shame and denial of my very Jewishness. During my teenage years, we began to celebrate Christmas and my parents slowly stopped talking about being Jewish. Even my Jewish grandfather chastised my father for marrying my Jewish mother. My parents were loath to say they were Jews, first because of their atheism, then because of their particular disgust for what they saw as the immoral, irritating, and too overtly Jewish people we
knew. More recently, their embarrassment about being Jews centers on their abhorrence and shame around Israeli treatment of Palestinians.

I experienced a vague sense of not fitting in, both from mainstream education and from those who were supposed to be my community. In a discussion in a masters level social work class on white privilege, I realized that I did not really see myself as white until I was in high school. I was always perceived to be on the edge of white, just enough to benefit from some privilege, but not enough to avoid being asked where I was from. As others who are asked this question know, answering “Canada” does not suffice. In fact, I now believe that it should not suffice, unless one is Aboriginal. Even then, Canada is often seen as an imposed or imagined identity. Whiteness was something I associated with Christmas, watching hockey, and having parents named John or Mary. Yet, I was receiving white privilege. I was uncomfortable knowing this, just as I was uncomfortable knowing that while my ethnic group had been marginalized, we were now oppressive to Palestinians.

I felt different from other white people, but I was confused by whether I had created my own alienation from whiteness, while at other times feeling that it was others who had caused my exclusion. White people are seen as having no race, or as racially neutral (Mathur, p. 278); I learned through being questioned on my ethnic identity that I am not neutral. I think that my deep rooted feelings of not being neutral and not quite fitting in have helped me in this work. I was challenged, first by my thesis supervisor, and then by the artists and sources themselves to implicate myself in the stories, to disrupt my feelings of comfort and neutrality, and to re-find myself in my writing all the time allowing myself to discomfort, frustration, and discovery.

5. Chapter overview and structure of the thesis

This chapter has focused on understanding violence against Native women as deeply rooted in Canada’s colonial past and present. Recent cases of violence are not isolated and coincidental occurrences. It has also looked at an understanding of violence as multi-level and complex. Learning about and understanding such widespread and brutal violence can
be very painful as we are all involved in an oppressive and violent system. It has helped me to look at empathy as a framework based on an understanding of complicity and interconnection that must be centered in this discussion. The pain that is felt can be useful; it is embodied knowledge and its very discomfort can lead us to begin to put ourselves in the picture whether we have experienced this violence, witnessed it, or have acted in oppressive and violent ways. A more profound use of empathy encourages us to look at the role of colonialism, not just in sustaining structures of racism and gender inequity, but also as a powerful process of control of the expression of identities. It has been important and helpful to try to carefully locate myself within the research, including the process of discovering my privileges, my sense of not fitting in, and my exploration of empathy.

The following section will focus on understanding gender violence as played out on the body and land, cultural representation, and Indigenous knowledge and resistance. It will look at the formation of individual and cultural identities and the importance of the expression of both in the act of de-colonization. I will then discuss the design and methodology of approaching the case studies and will explore my use of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and analysis of images and art. The case studies will then be discussed looking at both the profound consequences of mainstream discourses of violence, destruction, and denial as well as the importance of using personal narrative, humour, and creativity in order to question, challenge, and rebel against denial and destruction.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It is important to first have an understanding of the history of violence against Native women in North America, exploring the connection of gender violence and colonialism. I will then focus on modes of resistance based on self and cultural representation, de-colonizing the mind, and valuing Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges. This discussion will be helpful in understanding the ongoing colonialism of Native women in
Canada, as well as focusing on ways of resisting and surviving violence through a decolonial model. These areas of focus will provide a framework that will guide my analysis of the case studies.

1. Gender violence: Stolen lands and stolen bodies

Violence against Native women is not a new phenomenon. During colonial times, women on the west coast were traded for sexual relationships, and were used to make financial and political ties with white men. White women were few and white men looked to Native groups to supply them with Native women for various purposes, mostly sexual (Thush & Keller, 1995). Women were traded to make peace, to establish land deals, and were taken forcibly to show territorial dominance (Thush & Keller, 1995). The colonial system was established around the use of Native women for sex; it has allowed for violence against Native women to go unnoticed, and to be, arguably, institutionalized. The pass system that allowed people to leave reserves and travel to the city, or to white areas, was originally created so that Native women could leave the reserve to be used for sex (Razack, 2006).

Historical and ongoing processes of colonialism are gendered; these processes are played out both on the land and on the gendered and racialized body. Andrea Smith (2005), an anti-violence and Native American activist and scholar, provides an insightful and important analysis of gender violence and colonialism as played out both spatially in the land, but also on the bodies of Aboriginal women. In Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide, a recent and well-respected addition to literature on gender violence by scholars in the field, Smith (2005) writes that colonial relationships are themselves gendered and sexualized. Because sexual violence is a tool of patriarchy, colonialism and racism, entire peoples and communities are then victims of sexual violence; colonial processes are gendered. Similarly, in looking at land, Rogoff (2001) wrote that geography and space are, in fact, “always gendered, always raced, always economical and always sexual” (p. 28). It is important to look at how views of geographical space itself are implicated in the histories of colonialism and gender violence.
The issues of colonial, race, and gender oppression are intricately connected. Smith (2005) writes of the “present absence” in the United States’ colonial imagination that reinforces the idea that Native peoples are vanishing and conquest of lands is justified (p. 9). This belief may have been used to support a state of denial, in which a true perception of the presence of Aboriginal peoples could act as a reminder of the precarious founding of the United States itself as a nation. Benedict Anderson (1991), in his classic work on nationhood and identity, wrote that a nation is a socially constructed community that is ultimately imagined by people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. As part of the imagined nationhood of the United States, Aboriginal peoples were forced to “play dead” in order to perform a narrative of manifest destiny in which their role, ultimately, was to disappear (Smith, 2005). In the same way, it will be shown that Aboriginal peoples are also represented in powerful ways as disappeared and missing in mainstream media discourses and visual representations.

Smith (2005) explains that the representation of the Aboriginal body as disappeared is connected to the construction of Native bodies as a pollution of which the colonial white body must constantly purify itself. This may have come through the construction of racialized bodies as morally deviant, as the feminized other, and as less than human (McClintock, 2005). Within this understanding, the white male colonizer need to rid himself of the morally deviant, even, and perhaps especially, when the morally deviant represented parts of himself. Native bodies were described as sexually perverse and were considered inherently dirty, sexually violable and rapable. The rape of an inherently rapable and impure body does not matter. This concept will be further explored when looking at case studies of media discourse surrounding sexual violence against Aboriginal women, especially surrounding Aboriginal women who were sex workers.

The construction of Native peoples as deviant and disappearing extended to the treatment of deceased Aboriginal bodies. There have been countless cases of cases of mutilation of both dead and alive Native bodies, as well as the displaying of bodies and burial bounds in museums (Smith, 2005). The consumption of Aboriginal bodies for museum viewers is a powerful tool for creating public memory and for fostering specific ways of relating to and understanding Aboriginal peoples. In this way, colonization worked as “thingification,” in which there was a move to portray Native people as unreal.
people. We have seen that Native peoples were constructed as internal threats to the mainstream population, and in order to do so, Native peoples were described as “degenerates” and abnormals. In the colonial project, not only were Native bodies in inherently violable and destroyable, but Native lands were also inherently violable.

Cultural colonization centered on the construction of cultures and identities as deviant and dangerous and resulted in further attack on Native women’s identities. As Native bodies were equated with sinfulness, then it became a sin, itself, to be Native. Along with the projection of sin and rapability, there was a projection of violence onto Native people. Violence was considered to be a cultural behaviour for Native people. As Native women were also seen as bearers of culture, they not only posed a threat to dominant culture, but were also seen as inherently attracting violence. Smith (2005) argues that the subjugation of Native women was also key to economic, cultural and political colonization and subjugation of white women as European societies were misogynistic. Furthermore, subjugation could be carried out by playing on the projection of violent attributes onto Native women. In this way, while sexual violence was used to eliminate Native populations, sexual violence itself was projected onto these populations so as to function both as denial of white aggression, but also as a further attack on Aboriginal identity.

In popular fiction and film, Aboriginal men were portrayed as the aggressor, especially against white women. Aboriginal women were often completely absent from such accounts and there was no exploration of white violence against them. Like in other cases of white imperialism, and white feminism, non-white women were seen as needing protection from men within their own group, and not from white men. In this discourse, there is also a lack of discussion of structural violence that disproportionately affects women of colour.

In fact, assimilation into white society only increased Native women’s vulnerability to violence, such as in mission or residential schools. Still, Native men were and continue to be blamed for violence against Native women and there is more likely to be media attention in a case of violence among Native people rather than on violence that involves white perpetrators. Altogether, there is almost no media coverage of Native women as victims of sexual assault, although they are more likely than any other ethnic group in the United States to be sexual assault victims (Smith, 2005, p. 26). Smith’s analysis is very
useful in connecting colonization of the land to colonization of the Indigenous body. She provides an important exploration of colonial violence as sexual violence.

We have seen that Native women have been associated with deviance, disappearing, and in some cases, with danger. In colonial discourse, Native women were also constructed as being overly sexual and as being associated with violence. It is helpful to use McClintock’s (1995) method of looking at the gendering of conquest from psychoanalytic perspectives. Iseke-Barnes (2005), the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Education, asked pertinent questions surrounding agendas of power in producing myth. The gender-based violence used in colonialism follows an ideological history in which women’s bodies were seen both as deviant threats to male hegemony in Europe, and were also colonized through European cultural practices. The colonial project likewise used this ideology in gendering the other and in both viewing and carrying out conquest in highly sexual and violent ways (McClintock, 1995).

Patterns of sexual violence and perversions, as well as obsession with power and control of the feminine were externalized in colonial conquests and in their relations with Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the colonizer’s own focus on sex and violence may have been projected onto the feminized other. McClintock (1995) describes how it was thought that certain Indigenous women were sexually aggressive and would rape a white man upon sight. In European ideology, sexuality and sexual acts, especially involving women, were seen as deviant. By constructing a dominant narrative about Native women as involved in sexual activities and by projecting violence onto them, colonizers and oppressors are able to evade responsibility for their actions.

McClintock (1995) wrote of the ways in which women were seen as more physically and mentally primitive than men in dominant historical discourse. European women were equated with men of colour, and similar measures were taken at controlling them through gender roles, such as during marriage and education. The woman of colour was seen as even more primitive than her male counterparts. Primitive, in the European use of the word, could signify lack of rational thought processes and an extreme sexuality. Thus, women of colour and white women were seen as lower down on the racial hierarchy than their male counterparts.
Within a European focus on deviance, danger and its accompanying excitement arose when crossing gender, racial boundaries, or even class boundaries. In her writing on BDSM in Europe, McClintock (1995) discusses the ways in which transgressing these lines were equated with risk and exciting deviance. Furthermore, critical disability studies have identified the ways in which the disabled body is equated with monstrosity, deviance, and primitivism (Thomson, 2006). Similar to historical constructions, in media representations of Native women, they are portrayed as deviant, dangerous and violent even, and possibly to negate, when violence done against them.

Gender violence and colonialism are linked through violence to the land and to the gendered body. Colonialism has furthermore imposed a dominant culture, and in doing so, has eclipsed many different narratives and ways of expressing cultural identity. This has made the question of cultural representation key to understanding colonialism and setting a framework for de-colonization. Furthermore, as violence against Aboriginal women is shown not just to be an outcome, but a means of colonization, discussion of resistance to violence must center on de-colonization. This discussion will be helpful in understanding violence against Aboriginal women in North America, as well as pointing to self and cultural representation and expression as forms of resistance.

2. Cultural representation and control

Control of culture and cultural representation has been key to colonial strategies. Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1989), in Decolonizing The Mind, writes of the ways in which the colonialism of Africa was a cultural project and discusses the ways in which language, in particular, was used to impose European domination. Even radical and pro-African writers used European languages, and thus, a degree of European cultural values and heritage, in their resistance movements. Thiongo describes the difficulty of translating African languages into European languages and the importance of language in captivating and containing social norms, attitudes, and values of a people. Language is understood as a carrier of culture as well as a means of communication. Because colonialism was a means to control people’s wealth, it was important to control the language of real life, or the language that is used during by a community to establish connections for the purposes of
production. Johnston (1999) wrote that among Anishinaubae, language is used to convey lessons and knowledge through stories. Again, culture and language were very connected; colonial control of language resulted in cultural control.

This framework for understanding colonization as based in cultural control and domination is helpful in looking at colonialism in Canada. Language was used to culturally control self-definition in relation to others. By imposing a foreign language, and, in the case of the colonial education of Native peoples in Canada, to forbid the use of their own languages, there was a colonialism of the mind. In looking at decolonization, it is important to look at the central role that language plays, as well as the use of cultural expression to resist and counteract historical and ongoing attempts at the control of both.

The creation and control of history plays an important role in understanding current oppression of Native people. Iseke-Barnes (2005) describes the challenges Indigenous peoples face in the context of dominant misrepresentation in public broadcasting, the internet, and in education. In this context, history is seen, not as truth, but as “an interpretation of events told from a particular point of view” (Mackay quoted in Iseke-Barnes, 2005, p. 149). Iseke-Barnes looks at “A People’s History,” a series done by the CBC, as an example of a highly political project in undermining Indigenous histories, and more specifically, Indigenous claims to the land. Indigenous knowledges are described as myths, while dominant ones as theory. Scientific properties are ascribed to dominant knowledges, and there is no acknowledgment that science is only “enhance, deprecate or ignore what has gone before” (Dei quoted in Iseke-Barnes, 2005, p. 151). Eurocentric science is portrayed as fact, while othered knowledges are portrayed as myth. It is important to look at who benefits from the production of myth, and whose voices are denied in the discourse surrounding myth.

Certain experiences and cultural identities are reflected in all productions of knowledge, and they are produced through an interpretive lens. History is generally told from the vantage point of the dominant culture that will allow for continued dominance of this group by privileging aspects of its identity and culture. Like Iseke-Barnes (2005), Smith (1999) looks at the ways in which Western knowledge gained positional superiority. Marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples are portrayed as being unchanging, uncomplicated, and internally homogeneous. As history is about power and the
maintenance of power, those excluded and othered through the creation of history experience marginalization and a lack of power. An important step in de-colonization, is to know and reclaim the past by exploring alternative histories. It is therefore crucial that Indigenous peoples to look at the re-telling and re-remembering of history, as well as to explore ways of representing the self and culture. This way of understanding history and the creation of knowledge will be useful in exploring the narrative discourses and the images that are used to represent Aboriginal women.

It is helpful to look at writing on museums as addressing cultural representation, public memory, and the creation of history. Durrans (2005) looks at cultural representation and explores the ways in which museums, in particular, use this as a tool of create and maintaining history. The author argues that the cultural representations in museums are politically motivated interpretations of others. Museums distort and often conceal the oppression of the cultures that they represent. Because the representation process is made through choices and negotiations, the “truths” that they represent cannot reveal the complexities of either the museum’s focus on and representation of cultures, or the museum itself as a colonial player.

Durrans (2005) writes that any engagement with the world will require a selection of what the engager finds relevant and a rejection of what is not considered so. In sites of cultural representation, such as in art, the media, or in museums, it is necessary to explore how a particular representation is utilized for a particular purpose, and how the purpose itself is justified. The museum practice has been seen as undergoing a contest between the desires of the “expert” and the viewer, and the goal of entertainment, the latter in attending to the viewer’s need for the comfortable and the understandable. Of importance is to consider who controls representation, a theme that must examine power iniquities. Like museums, mass media can be criticized as being geared toward entertainment. Yet, as we have seen, there is an agenda in the representation process. It is important that power relations with regards to who is producing representations of whom must be explored in addressing cultural representation. Durrans’ analysis is useful for looking at dominant representations of Indigenous culture.

The process of othering and creating distance between the viewer and the subject in museums are similar to the processes of othering in certain fields of academic research.
Both anthropology and social work the research subject or the client have been traditionally seen as different and distant to the scholar or the worker. In anthropological writing, for example, Indigenous cultures, are described as existing within a different era, or as occupying a different temporal location. To interact with the Indigenous other, is to travel back in time. This feat brings up interesting relationships of power as people are othered through discourse not only into different geographies, but different temporalities. When observation is used to study this now distanced other, they are seen scientific objects, as “isolates of historic interest,” a highly controversial term used by the Human Genome Diversity Project (Riley, 2004). Hallam (2000) argues that observation itself creates the dichotomy of “self” and “other,” as the power and subjectivity of the observer is denied. Dei (2000) wrote that in social service agencies and in the work of social workers, that an “antiracist worker may recognize and discuss systemic racism and yet fail to see themselves as implicated in the structures that perpetuate and reproduce racism” (p. 31). This same process of privileging observation and underplaying hierarchies of power between those who observe and those who are observed can be explored in representations of Native women in the media as well as in the work of Aboriginal artists.

Edward Sheriff Curtis was a white photographer who traveled around North America for thirty years beginning around 1900 to photograph Native peoples. Like others, Curtis aimed to document and capture Native peoples in film they were inevitably believed to vanish. Thus, as very real policies of extermination and assimilation were being implemented in the United States, Curtis was out to find the powerfully real and simultaneously created image of the disappearing Indian. When the Native people Curtis encountered did not look Indian enough, he would ask them to dress in the clothes of another Native culture, to shave off hair, and to don certain poses (King, 2003). Curtis was not after the alive and surviving Indian, he was after a romantic image of the past, a representation that sometimes had never even existed at all.

Thomas King (2003), a well-known Native writer and professor of English, wrote about Curtis, cultural representation, and Indian identity in *The Truth About Stories*. King collects postcards that show Native people. In one of his postcards, a group of Native men are shown in full headdresses golfing at Banff Springs Hotel golf course in 1903. Their caddies are two white men who are named in the caption of the photograph. King likes this
photograph as the idea of the authentic and fixed Indian identity is being played with. Despite the fact that white men are caddying for Native men, the postcard is also revealing of other power relations as only the names of the white men are mentioned. In 1994, Thomas King and his brother embarked on their own journey across North America to photograph Native people. But, instead of looking for easily recognizable images of the authentic Indian created for tourist consumption and to feed a national imagination of conquest and disappearance, King chose to photograph representations that were not so easily recognizable. After photographing a statue of Will Rogers in a McDonald’s parking lot, King’s brother asked, “I know he’s Indian […] and you know he’s Indian, but how is anyone else going to be able to tell?” (King, 2003, p. 42). Here, King shows how Native people were constructed as having a particular cultural identity that was othered through the very idea of the disappearing Indian and the resulting distancing from white settlers and creators of history and national memory.

It is important to look at different forms of racism present in texts in order to better understand ways in which they are employed to create cultural representations and othering in texts and images. Scheurich and Young (2002) look at racism within research epistemologies. In many of the media representations of Native women there is what is called “invisible man” syndrome, in which white people ignore racial issues and people of colour (p. 51). Often, race is not mentioned, and racism is therefore seen as inconsequential. The authors suggest that the racism in research epistemology is based not in institutional racism or societal racism, but a lack of understanding among researchers of the ways in which race is embedded in research. This is an interesting point, but it seems that this would not be possible without systemic racism. As has been discussed throughout this paper, the “othering” process is often historically and politically created and maintained through power hierarchies.

Scheurich and Young (2002) discuss different types of racism as simultaneously existing within increasingly broad forms. Individual racism is within the context of institutional racism, which in turn is found within societal racism, and civilization racism. Too much focus is thought to be placed on individual racism, and is often difficult to ascertain if the racist individual does not view herself as racist. The authors are correct in showing that racism is very complex on all levels. However, instead of simply moving past
individual racism, it is important to examine the ways in which race has been constructed. Sheurich and Young (2002) point to the importance of acknowledging civilizational racism out of which epistemological racism emerges. Epistemologies like postmodernism and positivism promote the social history of the dominant culture that is connected to the white race. The authors call for a dialogue among scholars of all races to discuss foundations of epistemologies so as to bring the issue of racism out in the open. Also, social histories of people of colour must be taught as legitimate knowledges and race-based perspectives in methodology teachings need to be popularized and used.

While these guidelines are very important, they may present several practical problems. Firstly, this may promote the need for individuals of colour to represent their race, or to speak first from their racial identity, rather than their subjective selfhood. Also, teaching from a certain perspective may still occur within the context of dominant cultural pedagogies, ways of recording information, writing, and language. Thiongo (1989) has written about the importance of language in identity and in cultural expression and representation. While Scheurich and Young provide useful understandings of different forms of racism, more needs to be done in order for racialized peoples to self-represent and to ultimately address racism in all its complexity.

The discussion of gender violence and colonialism was shown to be linked to questions of cultural representation as a means of both oppression and resistance through decolonization. Sexual violence was shown to be a key part of colonization as the bodies of Indigenous women were equated with conquerable lands. Furthermore, both Smith (2005) and McClintock (1995) look at the prevalence of denial, projection, and the repression of desire and sexuality, in the construction of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal culture as inherently violable, dirty, and ultimately conquerable. Thiongo (1989) wrote about the importance of using language and cultural representation in resisting the complexity of cultural colonization. Durrans (2005) also looked at ways in which cultural representation was used to compartmentalize and to conceal oppressions. Hallam (2000) provides a framework for understanding the process of othering used in the representation of peoples and cultures. Lastly, Scheurich and Young (2002) look at the importance of anti-racist framework in research and in representations of others. This combined understanding colonization and othering is useful in a discussion of resistance.
3. Indigenous identity, knowledge and resistance

In looking at the possibilities for self-representation and resistance to colonial structures, it helpful place to consider the roles of self and cultural expression and representation. In order to respond to dominant representations of Native women, it is important to look to Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies. Resistance can come through challenging mainstream practices of cultural and knowledge exclusion, in which dominant discourses are privileged as truth or fact.

Linda Smith (1999) writes of the need for spirituality in the decolonizing process, and identifies spirituality as the “clearest contrast and mark of difference between Indigenous peoples and the West” (p. 75). She explains that, so far, the West has been unable to understand, decipher, or to control this aspect of Indigenous peoples’ lives. While the latter may be questionable in the case of Native peoples in Canada, the importance of spirituality in resisting dominant culture and even violence can be seen in the use of the medicine wheel in Native social services, and the use of drumming and song as healing techniques for families that have been affected by violence.

Hanohano (1999) discusses the need to value and use Native epistemology in confronting current global moral and spiritual crisis, especially as relating to environment, education, and health. He writes that the time has come for teaching from elders to be heard and used in restoring harmony and balance, especially in education for not only Aboriginal peoples, but for all people. Native learning methods that incorporate spirituality and community are useful and imperative alternatives to the competitive and often destructive Socratic education.

Not only is Indigenous knowledge needed to remedy environmental and spiritual ills, but the epistemology of non-linear connection with important elements like the Sacred Circle, Mother Earth and Elders are important in how humans relate and learn. Hanohano (1999) explains that for Natives, they base their relations with others and with Mother Earth in a personal sense of space and a knowledge of oneself. The goal of Native peoples is for survival as a group. Hanohano (1999), like Lorde (1984), believes that Native
epistemology and experience should not take a defensive position in struggling for validity and space from mainstream knowledges and audiences. Instead, Native epistemology must retain vitality in self-development and discovery.

Hanohano’s (1999) writing is important in explaining the existence and importance of a world view that can be integral in addressing global problems and ensuring Native existence. However, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Indigenous experience and identity. Perhaps it is within the context of Western mainstream cultural hegemony that Native experience must be expressed as a single entity. In this context, marginalized groups have little room to self-express and self-represent. Instead, it is important for many voices and identities within marginalized groups to be expressed and heard.

Self-definition has been an important part of resisting oppression for racialized peoples. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discusses the power of self-definition for Black women within the context of oppression. Lorde (quoted in Hill Collins, 2000) wrote of the need for the oppressed to watch and become familiar with the “language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (p. 91). While, in effect, acting out a life in which the oppressed plays along with the oppressor for self-preservation, the oppressed must summon great strength in living a second life, in which independent self-definitions can be maintained. Within a racist system in which the dignity and representation of the oppressed are continually attacked, oppressed groups must struggle to preserve their sense of self and to resist through demanding space and a voice.

Finding a voice and finding space have also been important in surviving colonialism. Hill Collins (2000) explores the inner, private spaces of Black women’s consciousness, even while their outside appearance may appear quiet, passive, and accepting of oppression. It is the inner space that allows the women to cope with their experience and to transcend different levels of oppression through maintaining strength and self-definition that differs from what is told to them and about themselves. The importance of finding a space and finding a voice is key to black women’s ability to exist and to maintain that crucial inner space. While black women are a highly visible racialised group in North American racial culture, like Aboriginal women, they are also paradoxically invisible as fully human individuals. Hill Collins (2000) describes the potential of safe and
creative spaces among other black women, in blues music, and in institutionalized spaces such as churches. Yet, “the act of using one’s voice requires a listener” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 98). This is important in considering the role of the audience, the viewer, and the reader in resistance movements.

Much of black women’s self-definition has occurred within the context of the group, and also among other black women (Hill Collins, 2000). It has also come out of the culture of the blues, in which independence is emphasized over victimization. Blues music is a form of Afrocentric communication, which allows for the maintenance and the flourishing of the individual within the context of the group. Self-definition has much to do with actively struggling against controlling and destructive images of oneself spread by the oppressive mainstream (Hill Collins, 2000).

Afrocentric feminism has been an important part of marginalized women’s resistance movements. Afrocentric feminism calls for the valuing of Indigenous women’s ancestral knowledges in order to understand and appreciate the complex nature of their lives, as well as to confront spiritual and environmental problems, in particular. Mainstream feminism has been regarded by many women of colour as a largely white women’s movement that has historically acted on racist principals of white superiority and has outright excluded women of colour from its strategies and goals (Newman, 1999). Native women’s movements have been based on how they understood their place in local in politics, as well as on broader social relations (Janovicek, 2002).

Wane (2002) emphasizes the need to view the women as distinct individuals and to avoid homogenizing their experiences. There is a danger of attributing Western feminist principles to women who have had unique strengths and understandings of their experiences for generations. Instead, African feminism can be understood as viewing women as subjects of oppression and as victims of gendered labour subordination, while emphasizing and valuing the individual women’s subjective realities.

It is important to look for creative ways of giving voice to lived experiences and to create space for subjugated knowledges. Native women, like disabled people and Black women, have been deprived of their sense of reality through the imposition of outside destructive and simplistic images and representations of their lives. It is therefore important
to look at alternative sources of history to allow for spaces in which “other” experiences and perceptions are given space and valued.

Discussing African feminism is not intended to prescribe further outside direction onto Native women, but instead, it shows the existence of empowering alternatives to Western feminism and to dominant cultures’ definition of experience. Furthermore, in placing the individual women’s experiences as central to the framework, African feminism can be useful for women who are not African, as it offers an empowering framework and world view.

We have seen that the ability and need to self-represent is vital to Aboriginal women’s continued survival just as imposed representations from dominant creations of history and cultural representations have carried with them powerfully destructive colonial agendas. The invisibility cast on the women through dominant outside representations has served as an ongoing colonial tool that has, at worst, legitimized extreme violence towards Native women. De-colonialism can occur first in the women, by reclaiming and retelling stories, voices, and knowledges. We have seen the importance of de-colonization on the part of the oppressor through self-examination and an often uncomfortable look at complicity and responsibility as well as reworking destructive discourses and stories.

3. Summary of chapter and Research Questions

This chapter has looked at the question of gender violence and the representations of Aboriginal bodies and women’s bodies within a colonial and imperialist context. It has also explored the centering of Indigenous knowledges in resisting colonialism. Such resistance is ultimately located in self and cultural expressions and representations, as well as in the process of de-colonizing the mind, as described by Thiongo (1989).

In approaching the case studies, it will be important to ask the following questions. What are mainstream media representations of violence against Aboriginal women? What are the colonial implications? How have Aboriginal women resisted these representations? What is the significance of the alternative representations in terms of individual and cultural identity and expression? These questions appear simple, yet when further
explored, they reveal much as to the relationship of the viewer and the viewed, cultural representation as colonization, and Aboriginal traditions and humour as resistance, for example.

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology:

1. Case studies

   This research looks at discourse as well as images in the mainstream media for patterns of both maintaining as well as fostering racism and colonialism. I then look at the art of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro as exploring ways of resisting and surviving mainstream discourse.

   Mainstream media was analyzed using techniques of discourse analysis and visual analysis as to its colonial content. I looked not only at what was being written, but how things were written. I chose to look at articles from The Globe and Mail, CBC online, The Toronto Star, The Calgary Sun, The Vancouver Sun, Reuters, and a standard police report that informs the description of missing women in the mainstream media. The articles were
chosen from an array of sources to look at the mainstream nature and widespread prevalence of discourse. All of the articles either address the Pickton case or the Highway of Tears, two cases that have been widely covered by the mainstream media in the last few years. The earliest articles were published in 2002, and the most recent were published in 2007. This research is not meant to offer a complete survey of articles written during that time. Instead, I focused heavily on the discourse used in several articles in order to thoroughly examine content and meanings.

I then looked at performance and installation art of Rebecca Belmore. Rebecca Belmore is an Anishinaubae artist, born in Upsala, Ontario. Belmore grew up in Upsala, near Thunder Bay, spent summers with her grandmother on the Lac Seule reserve, and went to high school in Thunder Bay. Later, she studied experimental art at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. After living in Toronto for many years, Belmore moved to Vancouver where she currently lives (Laurence, 2002). Her work has addressed history, place and identity through the media of sculpture, installation, video and performance. Belmore often displays her work in public spaces in order to bring art outside the confines of the gallery and museum world. Belmore challenges the history of the museum in representing the colonized Aboriginal body (Smith, 2005). She also makes careful use of space and memory by performing her art in meaningful places, such as the Vancouver East Side where many Aboriginal women work, live, and die.

I also explored the film, photography, and an installation of Shelley Niro in looking at themes of cultural representation and the use of humour. Shelley Niro is a filmmaker, painter, photographer and writer who has exhibited her work in Canada and the United States. Shelley Niro is a member of the Mohawk Nation, Iroquois Confederacy, Turtle Clan, Six Nations Reserve. Niro was born in Niagara Falls, New York in 1954, grew up on Six Nations Reserve, and now lives in Brantford, Ontario. She has studied at the Banff School of Fine Arts, Durham College, and the Ontario College of Art. Niro’s photography looks at playing with, and re-presenting stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples, particularly women. Niro is known for her humourous and intimate work that features herself or family members and friends (CMCP, 2007). Niro’s work has been part of such exhibitions as Unbury My Heart, Reservation X, This Land is Mime Land, and Indian: By Design. Niro uses stories to explore her history as well as to show aspects of the collective
memory and history of her people. Spirituality plays an important role in Niro’s work as a way of focusing on and drawing from one’s history and also to the present world. The work of both artists were looked at for ways of exploring memory and experience, and addressing life and death.

The artists were chosen because both identify as Aboriginal and both address colonialism, identity, and cultural representation for Native women in Canada.

2. Discourse analysis, image, and art analysis using a phenomenological approach

I have chosen to look at the theme of violence against Native women in Canada. Max Van Manen (1997) describes a theme as the desire to make sense, openness to something, and a process of “insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure” (p. 88). I directly addressed my own subjectivity and social location while engaging in the dynamic process of researching the chosen theme. Traditionally, looking at discourse and art has not been included under the category of phenomenology, which has focused instead on research with human subjects. However, Max Van Manen (1997), in his work on researching lived experience, included discourse analysis and looking at images as legitimate areas of phenomenological research. Texts and art can act as experiential material, or descriptions for analysis. Texts, images, and art can be considered sources of lived experience as well as reflective accounts with phenomenological value. Visual art also has a language. Artists are involved in shaping their lived experience. According to Van Manen (1997), art is “lived experience transformed into transcended configurations” (p. 63).

This research explored the ways in which colonialism has imposed a dominant culture, and the ways in which it has eclipsed Native women’s narratives and their ways of expressing cultural identity. In looking at mainstream media discourse, I also examined the ways in which cultural conquest occurs and the ways in which Indigenous knowledge is undervalued and made to be invisible. It is also important to focus on modes of resistance through art as centered on means of self-representation, decolonization of the mind, and valuing Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges. I also examined the ways in which race, ability, class, and gender are implicated in the construction of the self.
The research was carried out using a general phenomenological approach that also incorporated tools of discourse analysis to look not only at experiences, but also representations of Native women both in mainstream documents and also in art. Phenomenology allows for careful reflection and the inclusion of multiple meanings, which is very important for doing research on marginalized and oppressed groups. Because a large part of the theoretical work will be directly examining differing experiences, subjugated knowledges, and means of self-representation for Native women, a flexible research method that pulls from different methodologies is also important and well-suited for the topic. I used critical theory and anti-racist, disability, and Afro-centric feminisms as frameworks on which to analyze the cases. In learning from Indigenous knowledge, it was important to look at my own role in a colonial system, and to look at my own distancing from the research.

Van Manen (1997) discusses action-oriented research and hermeneutic phenomenology as critical philosophies of action. Hermeneutics is important in placing emphasis on the researcher’s self-reflection, as well as the transformation and learning that takes place between the researcher and the researched. This process of careful personal reflection in thinking and writing about the experience of others and in exploring the power of stories is also explored by Aboriginal thinkers such as Lee Maracle (1993), Basil Johnston (1999), and Thomas King (2004). Their ideas have been explored in preceding sections, and was used in analyzing and writing about the case studies. Using a flexible and inclusive form of phenomenology, thinking is hoped to become revolutionary and then to lead to speaking out and taking action.

Phenomenology is also suited to this type of study as it does not prescribe a certain way of taking action. Instead, it emphasizes thoughtfulness as leading to indignation, concern, or commitment that can in turn affect a political agenda. In this way, phenomenology also leads to collective political action as well as personal action. This comes through a personal engagement with the subject and through placing oneself as the researcher into the work (Van Manen, 1997). The theme of violence against Native women in Canada is closely connected to a need for political change and the need to address ongoing structures of colonialism.
Phenomenology can be useful to the study of violence against Native women in Canada as it looks for meanings, has room for multiple and individual voices and knowledges, and has potential to be action focused research. It is also carried out in a thoughtful and self-reflexive manner, which is of great importance in looking at issues relating to gender and racialized violence. Lived experience is acknowledged as a valid basis for practical action. There is a personal and lived sense of principled knowledge. By paying close attention to the meaning and significance of pedagogic situations and relations, more thoughtful learning can occur.

Data for phenomenological research can be understood as the “lifeworld” (Van Manen, 1997). The lifeworld is thus the source and the object of phenomenological research. It is necessary to look for the meaning behind an activity or an experience and the lifeworld offers many sites in which to find information that may reveal something of its fundamental nature. In my research, I will look at writing and images, as well as various art mediums on the theme of violence against Native women. If understood as stories and narratives, they are already transformed from the original experience. This begs the question as to whether these transformations can be analyzed as original experiences, or just as representations of experiences and identities. In my research, I feel that it does in that the writing and recording of experience is itself an experience that has value. In the context of violence and Native women, expressing one’s experience is a way of resisting to and coping with extreme difficulty of experience. Furthermore, art is a way of re-experiencing and re-remembering stories, lives, and emotions. Art can transform experience through playing with representation. The art itself, as well as the artist and the viewer all become part of the lifeworld experience that Van Manen (1997) describes.

Van Manen (1997) further argues that an individual’s experience may also be the possible experiences of others. Thus some Native women’s experiences do not encompass all Native women’s experience, but they speak a truth of the whole collective and are very useful in understanding an essential element of the group’s experience as a whole and may reveal great patterns. Experiential meaning is important in phenomenological research for just this reason. One person’s experience may be the collective’s experience. In this research, it was important to look at Native women’s experiences of violence and their experience of expressing views about these experiences themselves. Van Manen (1997)
describes the possibility of “borrowing” from other people’s experience and their reflections on the experience in order to be better able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole of human experience. In the context of this research, it was necessary to avoid acting as the anthropological colonizer who analyzed Native women’s experience as a way of imposing cultural imperialism. Instead, it was important to understand the wider context of systemic violence that impacts Native women and others’ roles as allies, aggressors, and colonizers. This proved to be the wider experience of humanity of which Van Manen writes.

The researcher cannot be separated from the research or the researched. Research and theory are, themselves, a pedagogic form of life; they are inseparable from life. Phenomenology also endeavors to refrain from being an external, top-down, expert, or contractual form of research. Instead, it is seen as being carried out by the people, versus for the people. It is concerned with listening and careful reflection on what is heard (Marshall, 1999). This can be applied to the analysis of texts as well.

Frameworks can help to inform phenomenological research. In this research, critical theory was useful in looking at historical problems of domination, oppression, and racism as well as to understand and critique underlying social patterns, such as colonialism. Feminisms were used in this research in placing myself in my research as well as to aim for research that is transformative. These frameworks as well as the phenomenology approach hopefully allowed for flexibility and profundity of interpretation on a topic that relates to social justice and requires systemic change, specifically change towards de-colonization.

However, it is important to consider mainstream feminism’s tenuous relationship with Native women. In critiquing the deformities of Native societies centering on constructions of gender, mainstream feminists have acted as missionaries to try to make Native women “less Indian” (Jaimes and Halsey, 1992, p. 318). Janet McCloud, a Native activist who was also involved in the American Indian Movement, wrote that “many Anglo women try, I expect in all sincerity, to tell us that our most pressing problem is male supremacy. To this, I have to say, with all due respect, bullshit. Our problems are what they’ve been for the past several hundred years: white supremacism and colonialism. And
that’s a supremacism and a colonialism of which white feminists are still very much a part” (McCloud quoted in Jaimes and Halsey, 1992, p. 318).

In acknowledging the racist and colonial connections of mainstream feminism, I used an anti-racist feminist approach that acknowledges the intersection of race and gender and takes into account colonialism and systemic oppression (Bourne, 1983). I endeavored to show that violence against Native women is intrinsically linked to colonialism, which is ongoing, and which is institutionalized.

In analyzing mainstream discourses, I understood discourse as a powerful tool used to create and enforce memory, racism, and colonialism for the subjects of the representations, the readers, and the author. Media plays an integral role, within a colonial structure, of fostering and furthering racism (Van Dijk, 1993). Looking at resistance through art was done with the understanding that the creation and telling of new and old stories of Aboriginal cultural identity and selfhood were important acts of resistance to the violence of mainstream representations. Just as there was a need to place myself in the writing, there was a need to explore the process of othering and distancing in the viewing of art (Sontag, 2003).

This research comes at an interesting time in the field of social work. There is an increasing trend to include arts in informing social work as well as in social work research. The framework of using art as an alternative to evidence-based, rationalist social work thinking (Chambon, 2008) was used to explore the case studies as embodied knowledge that could be useful in both the content and the process of social work as well. Particularly, the art of Belmore and Niro was looked at as informing social work on the processes related to empathy including identifying with the other and complicity.

2. Risks and benefits

The question of violence against Native women in Canada is a very sensitive and painful topic for many, especially as it relates to gender and racialized violence, in general, as well as to violence against marginalized groups such as those struggling with poverty and sex workers. As was discussed, phenomenology was a helpful method of inquiry as it allowed for the expression of marginalized voices. It allowed for an exploration of
meanings and experiences in a complex and holistic manner (Creswell, 1998). Also, using hermeneutic methodology as well as critical theory and feminisms, it was important to allow for traditionally silenced knowledges and stories to emerge as valid and important. There has been a lack of focus on Native women and violence in academic scholarship, as well as appropriate and respectful representation in mainstream media sources (Razack, 2000, and Amnesty International, 2006). This research can therefore provide a benefit to the population in the form of social action and change by focusing on Native women’s experiences and voices.

As there were no human participants, there were no immediate risks during the study. However, by recognizing the power embedded in the creation of knowledge and the role that research has in doing so, there was a risk that knowledge created about Native women and violence would not reflect what Native women wished to be known about themselves. If information and experiences were analyzed in ways that alienates or overrides the women themselves, then the risk is that the women would be further silenced and marginalized. I chose to explore this possible risk by carefully selecting my advisory committee to include two women who identify as Indigenous and have done conscientious scholarship and reflection on the question of cultural representation in research. I have also consulted with individual Native women throughout the process of research in order to gain important feedback on the discourse analysis and visual analysis parts of the research. I have been able to meet with Shelley Niro to discuss her work as well as my research, and I have made an effort to meet with Rebecca Belmore. In the area of analyzing and writing about art, I have spoken with or corresponded with people who have knowledge about the particular artists, or who have focused on the areas of cultural representation or resistance in art. As I originally planned to look at alternative media as sites of resistance, I was in contact with the creator of a website in memory of missing women. I included a discussion of this website in the final product.

Furthermore, I believe that the chosen research methodology and frameworks themselves provide and demand ways of carrying out research and analysis responsibly. I underwent constant personal reflection to look at my own role and presence in the research, and to explore whether I ultimately created a hierarchical and often destructive distance
between myself and the researched. Careful and continued exploration and thought was placed in the power embedded in the research process and the production of knowledge.

Chapter 4: Mainstream discourses of violence and destructive images in mainstream media

Discourse in the mainstream media both reflects a wider violence directed at Aboriginal women as well as contributes to and creates further violence. Media will be shown to play an integral role, within a colonial structure, of fostering and furthering racism. This section will provide an analysis of case studies and trends in mainstream media. One such trend is that Native women, in mainstream newspaper such as the Globe and Mail or the Toronto Star, are referred to in very specific ways when the topic is violence. The newspapers refer to Aboriginal women as fragments rather than as whole people; when they are not described outright as disappeared, they are written about as being in the process of doing so. Visual images also contribute to the representation of Aboriginal women as simplistic, historical, and disappearing; pictures show sad looking, bruised, and solitary faces without showing the contexts, resilience, or complexities of the women. Both discourse and visual images will be explored within the context of a wider structure of violence and colonialism.
The mainstream media uses specific language to represent gendered and racialized bodies. These representations have consequences as social power is related to the body’s role in identity and selfhood (Thomson, 2006). The mass media has a fundamental role of reproducing and furthering racism, doing so by asserting a symbolic and ideological influence on the readers or viewers (Van Dijk, 1993). Van Dijk (1993) contends that modern political and corporate power relies on the support and legitimation by the mass media and its ability to manufacture ethnic consensus and consent. The media’s connection to elite institutions and the pivotal role of media in “shaping and changing the social mind” defines its role in wider racism (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 243). Johnston (1999), in his work on language for the Anishinaubae culture, offers a powerful alternative to mainstream discourse. He wrote that it was integral that among Anishinaubae, a speaker “took care to speak only about matters within his knowledge and experience […] A person abusing the truth and language was ridiculed […]” (Johnston, 1999, p. 51). In looking at discourse surrounding violence and Aboriginal women, it will be shown that abuse of language and “truth” has the effect of abusing the women themselves. It will be shown that Aboriginal women are represented in specific ways that are disabling and violent and that are connected to wider structures of gender violence and racism.

1. Constructed, invisible, and confusing: Race and absence of race in mainstream media

It is important to look at the question of race in the discourse of articles relating to violence against Aboriginal women. In my own research on the Pickton case, I was unable to find any explicit discussion of race in mainstream sources, although likely half of the women killed were Native. Lorde (1984) wrote about the invisibility of whiteness when race is not openly discussed and the implicit assumption that the subjects are white. By not discussing the racial relationship of Pickton to his victims, it is negating the seriousness of his actions. Furthermore, it will be shown that through normalizing Pickton, there is an implicit normalization of his actions.

Race and racism are often not discussed directly in mainstream writing about the Pickton case and the Highway of Tears resulting in a profound sense of confusion and
complicity for the readers as they become engaged in a process of denial and distortion. In articles relating to the Highway of Tears, in which up to thirty-three women and girls have gone missing, little attention was paid to the case until the disappearance of the single non-Native woman (Amnesty International, 2006). Yet, although ninety-seven percent of the victims are Aboriginal, race is still not discussed in mainstream media sources as an important factor in the case. Furthermore, although the disappearance of Nicole Hoar, the single non-Native woman drew much attention from mainstream media sources, it was not mentioned that although of white ancestry, she had a dark complexion and could be mistaken as Native or Metis.

The disappearance of Nicole Hoar drew attention and money to the case. The Nicole Hoar trust fund quickly raised upwards of $15,000, and the Hudson’s Bay company in Red Deer where she was from offered $25,000 for any information on her case. In the first days after Nicole was reported missing, one of the biggest ground and air searches ever in northern B.C. was launched for her. A Calgary Sun article is full of impressive numbers and unfolds an inspiring story of community engagement from loggers to RCMP helicopters.

Spearheaded by 66 professional search and rescue team members, backed by 200 volunteers, and with more than 50 tree-fellers and loggers from the reforestation service where Nicole worked helping, teams scoured the ditches alongside the highway for miles. Above them, RCMP aircraft and helicopters covered the search area, and a huge poster campaign left pictures of Nicole on every available post and pole from Prince George to Smithers (Smith, 2002).

Yet, the discourse is also confusing as it hints at another, more complex story, while not naming it directly. In this article, Highway 16 is referred to as the Highway of Tears, a name given to the highway by locals, referencing the Trail of Tears, a genocidal march of Aboriginal people across the southern United States in 1838 after the Congress of the United States passed the “Indian Removal Act.” The article also quotes Leonie Rivers, executive director of the British Columbia Native Women’s Society. Yet, there is no direct mention of race. In confusing and unexplained contrast to the careful attention to Hoar’s case, Rivers is quoted as saying that “when our families first went to police reporting our girls missing, they were told they were only runaways who'd gone to bright lights of
Vancouver” (Rivers quoted in Smith, 2002). The reader is confronted by the unexplained contradiction between attention to Hoar’s case and to the other “families” and must wonder what about these families makes the disappearances of their daughters unquestioned and not worrisome to the police. The reader is not told about the difference between the families who were shunned and ridiculed by the police and Hoar’s family whose tragic story of loss sparked an epic search. Specifically, the reader is not told that Hoar was white while the thirty one other women were Native. In an article so obsessed by numbers, there is no mention of the total tally of disappearances, a staggering number that has called international attention to the case.

The article goes on to state that “anyone who's seen the anguish in her [cousin’s] eyes can only hope she and the rest of Nicole's family are rewarded for their dogged optimism” (Smith, 2002). The families of the Native victims may have not have had the privilege of feeling such “dogged optimism,” as efforts to find their missing daughters or sisters were met with sarcasm and denial on the part of police and no such mass public outpour of support followed the cases.

There is also a sense of closeness and community in the writing when describing Hoar. While Hoar is referred to familiarly by her first name as Nicole, her parents as Jack and Barb, and her highschool boyfriend as Steve, only six of the other thirty one other victims are named. Their cases are summarized in one or two lines. Their first and last names are given as are the dates they went missing or the dates their bodies were found. They are described as “missing,” “disappeared,” “vanished,” and “dumped” (Smith, 2002). The reader may be struck by the difference in the way the cases are described. Or, the sense of surprise or outrage may not happen at all as a sense of historical remembrance and sense of familiarity with this type of story may have calmed and buried such reactions. Without pointing to race as the determining factor between the treatment of the cases, there is almost a sense of familiar silence, in which confusion, if felt, is brief, and then quickly swallowed and made to disappear.

The irony of the Hudson Bay Company’s large financial contribution to Hoar’s case and lack of contribution to the cases of Native women despite the long history of trading, exploration, and involvement in Aboriginal communities is also not discussed. The article questions why Hoar decided to hitch-hike down Highway 16 in light of the multitude of
disappearances along the same road. However, what it does not discuss is that all the women disappearing since the late 1970s were Native. Hoar, as a white woman, may have therefore been able to distance herself from the danger. Furthermore, by highlighting the disappearance of Nicole, it was as though the mainstream media drew a strange sigh of relief as the kidnappings were not just of Native women and girls. Not discussing race or racism could be legitimated by focusing on the fact that a white woman had disappeared as well. Yet, as we have seen, the focus on Nicole’s case came hand in hand with a denial of the seriousness of the other cases, neglecting the question of why so many Native women and girls were disappearing, and why there was much less media, police, and public attention surrounding their cases.

Van Dijk (1993), a well-known source on critical discourse studies, attributes exclusion of such stories to the fact that minority journalists, perspectives, sources and news actors are seen as less important, more emotional, and more biased than white agents. Further, the reliability of news sources is not judged by the quality or reliability of the source itself, but by the source’s membership to an institution or group (Van Dijk, 1993). Not only are the consequences of the racial violence downplayed, but the language in many articles implicates the witnesses and victims as untrustworthy and unreliable, questioning the validity of their statements. In the article published by the Calgary Sun, Rivers, who speaks for missing Aboriginal woman, is quoted, while the story of Hoar and the pain of her family are not. The result is an unspoken caution resulting in a sense of mistrust and disbelief of Rivers’ words and consequently the experiences of the Aboriginal women and families.

Winona LaDuke (2005) wrote that Native women are viewed as women of colour and therefore politics will be viewed as race-based and experiences will be seen as limited. In her home state of Minnesota, the risk of violent death is ten times more likely among Native women than among white women. LaDuke discusses the concept of “ethno-stress,” which is experienced by Aboriginal women and includes “finding someone trying to steal your land, legal rights, your sister will be in jail, your public Anglo-dominated school district will be calling about your children’s conflicts with teachers or their spotty attendance and your non-profit organization’s funding is getting cut by a foundation because you are no longer a priority” (p. xvii). She further connects “ethno-stress” to
processes of colonialism, sexual violence, dehumanization and marginalizing of identity. In the case of the media, “ethno-stress” can be used to describe the experience of racialized journalists or informants in facing scrutiny, disbelief, and a marginalizing of their opinions due to racism.

In the story on the Highway of Tears, the question of race, or rather racism, is referred to indirectly and it is not directly named. When racial violence is openly discussed in mainstream media, cases are often explained as “regrettable incidents,” which have the effect of blaming the victim in some way (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). In an article published by the CBC on November 24, 2007, the title reads, “crown says ‘unsavoury’ witnesses at Pickton trial can’t be dismissed.” Here, there is a reversal of blame, in which the witnesses, and implicitly the victims, are seen as biased and illegitimate because of “their history of lies, drug addiction and in some cases, criminal records” (CBC, 2007).

Furthermore, as shall be discussed further on, photographs chosen by the media to display of women killed by Pickton are often mugshots taken when women were apprehended for offences most likely relating to prostitution or drug use. By portraying the women using recognizable imagery of criminals, and showing them along tidy and put together images of Pickton, the viewer is implicitly told who is more criminal or deviant. The normalization of Pickton alongside the construction of deviance of Aboriginal women will also be discussed in the following section.

We have begun to more clearly see a story, in which the views, experiences, and lives of Aboriginal women are excluded from white dominated media. By not mentioning race, a story so much based on race becomes confusing and often stops making sense altogether. In the Calgary Sun article, the reader learns that while the police took no action on the disappearances of some women, they took part in one of the largest searches ever to occur in northern British Columbia for another. If the readers, unsatisfied with their nagging and uncomfortable sense of confusion, deduce that the difference between the two cases is due to differences in race, then their confusion is only mildly abated. The identification of race alone without a discussion of racism does little to offer analysis and understanding. Most importantly, this distortion of the story creates a superficial distance between the reader and the subject of a story and does not call for an exploration of responsibility and complicity.
2. Deviance and (de)sexual violence

In discourse used by the mainstream media relating to Aboriginal women, the women are constructed as being deviant on multiple levels. This not only has the effect of allowing the reader to distance herself from the text, but also creates a distance from the women themselves. This discourse also leads to the projection of sexual violence onto the women as they are constructed as being multiply deviant. The construction of Aboriginal women as being deviant has colonial roots, and has facilitated the projection of violence and rapability onto the women with implications of absolving guilt and responsibility for those who commit violence and rape. It will be shown that the same patterns of violent othering is repeated in mainstream media discourse.

The colonial roots of othering with regard to gender, race, and sexuality are clear. Patterns of sexual violence and perversions, as well as obsession with power and control of the feminine were externalized in colonial conquests and in the colonizer’s relations with Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the colonizer’s own focus on sex and violence may have been projected onto the feminized other. McClintock (1995) describes how it was thought that certain Indigenous women were highly sexually aggressive; some African women were thought to rape a white man upon sight; Indigenous women were exoticized and seen as highly sexual through colonial processes. In European ideology, sexuality and sexual acts, especially involving women, were seen as deviant. So, the perceived or constructed highly sexual nature of Indigenous women was in fact, a European taboo or form of deviance. By constructing a dominant narrative about Native women as both sexual and violent, colonizers were able to negate their own violent actions towards Indigenous women by projecting their own feelings and acts of deviance onto Indigenous women.

In social work practice, the physical body has played a central role in assessment and analysis of identity. In her work on incorporeal knowledge and social work practice, Phillips (2007) wrote that physical difference, for example, in terms of sex, gender, race, and ability has often served to inform an understanding or construction of identity. Social workers, in acting as gatekeepers to services, make decisions on who will receive what kind of support and services based on the assessment of insufficiencies surrounding
particular bodies. Furthermore, policies and practices are created based on constructed categories of identity, which in turn are based on physiological dimensions of the body. Phillips provides an example of the viewing of white women’s sexual activity as being neurotic, while racialized women’s sexuality was and is often viewed as “sex crazed” and out of control. This is reflected in the rationalization of practices of sterilization of women of colour, the experimentation of birth control on their bodies, mistreatment and mistrust by social service providers, and the withholding of services and financial support. In social work practice and discourse, just as in media discourse, the body continues to be a site of political and social acts based on understandings and constructions of deviances.

In Vancouver’s downtown eastside and along the Highway of Tears, it was common that the police did not listen to Native women when they wished to report a missing sister, daughter, or friend (Smith, 2002 and Huntley, 2005) arguably because her extreme deviance within a dominant framework was enough to render her invisible before searches were even carried out. The families are told that disappearing is a product of her lifestyle, but what is really implied, is that disappearing is implicit in the construction of her identity as a Native woman by dominant society. Durrans (2005) writes that like museums, mass media can be criticized as being geared toward entertainment, while performing the dual task of creating history based on representations. As we have seen, there is an agenda in the representation process. When Native women are portrayed as body parts or as sex workers, this serves the purpose of dismissing experiences of violence by representing the women’s very experience and existence as deviant on many levels. Such a representation is also based in denial of complicity by individualizing and projecting the problem onto the victims without examining power relations between the creator of discourse and the women, between the writer and the reader, and between the reader and the women.

Thiele, a feminist theorist, (1998) discusses three forms of invisibility that are useful in understanding the place of the Aboriginal women in news stories and for a further understanding of the use of the construction of deviance in distancing Aboriginal women. Exclusion occurs when a subject is completely ignored; in pseudo-inclusion, it appears that they are taken into account, but they are ultimately marginalized; and lastly women are alienated when they are included as subjects, but the parameters of their lives are not
discussed. In the mainstream media’s discourse around both cases, all three forms of invisibility are evident. Aboriginal women are largely excluded from the discussion, at times marginalized, and their identities are diminished and not addressed. They are invisible in that they do not appear as subjects in their own right.

One way that the stories of women are rendered invisible is through the treatment or way of approaching the topic of sex work in media discourse. In articles relating to the Pickton case, in which up to fifty women were killed, both the RCMP and journalists skirt around the topic, and even the usage of the word, “sex.” In contrast to discomfort around sex, acts of extreme violence and destruction are described in detail. As many of the women worked as sex workers before their deaths, discomfort surrounding sex in contrast to openness to discussing violence implicitly makes violence more acceptable than sex and makes the activity of the women as sex workers more deviant than the activities of Pickton as a killer. In other murder cases, Native women are referred to as prostitutes even when they are not (Huntley, 2005), which creates the effect of constructing them as deviant. We have seen that this has the effect of diminishing the importance of their stories through the colonial tradition of othering and rendering invisible when such deviance is projected onto colonized peoples.

In many articles, it the women appear as fragments or as lacking wholeness. They are “remains,” “bodies,” and “vanished women” (Armstrong, Matas & Fong, 2007, p. A1). In an article in the Toronto Star, Dimanno (2007) uses words such as “DNA” and “a jawbone” to describe two women killed by Pickton. The women’s complex identities are fragmented as they are described as drug users or sex workers. Women are referred to as body parts or as disappeared. In another article, it is explained that Pickton “brought prostitutes to his farm, killed them, butchered their bodies and disposed of the remains” (Dowd, 2007). In this description, the women are literally made to disappear. In contrast, to this focus on fragments of bodies and identities, many articles attempt to show Pickton’s character in great depth, such as in an article entitled, “I’m just a working guy” (Armstrong, Matas & Fong, 2007, p. A1). The same treatment and consideration are not applied to the women.

Through the dismantling and mutilation of bodies in discourse, the women are rendered disabled, a further form of deviance from the mainstream understanding of a
whole and working body. Thomson (2006) wrote that disabled bodies were seen as monstrosity and as deviant (p. 180). Female bodies were also represented as deviant stemming from traditional western philosophy’s view of females as deformed or mutilated males (p. 180). Choinard and Grant (1995) discuss the ways in which ableism and heterosexism are embedded within patriarchal, capitalist societies. Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) wrote about the othering of racialised women based on the perception of their face as a hindrance to their functioning. Chouinard and Grant (1995) also write about the commodification of human life as a way of creating invisibility. This has been used to other disabled people because of their perceived inability to produce commodities, services, and profit. Similarly, Native women are rendered invisible through the colonial desire for Native people to disappear. Like disabled women, Native women are socially constructed as marginal and excluded others.

Within a patriarchic culture, violence against women is endemic. Furthermore, in a colonial system the bodies of Aboriginal peoples were deviant (McClintock, 1995). Evans (1999) writes that having a disability is seen as a subtraction from one’s status as a “bearer of culture” (p. 275). Furthermore, disability has been equated throughout history as associated with evil, ugliness, or moral ambivalence. Lack of morality and what is perceived as social deviance, such as sex work, were seen as detracting from one’s humanness (McClintock, 1995). The dehumanization of Aboriginal women through the representations of their bodies as disabled, deviant, and through their implicit and, perhaps, unspoken, racialized presence is rampant in mainstream media stories.

In both the Pickton case and the Highway of Tears, the women are literally mutilated and disabled in complete and extreme ways through the language and images of media representations. Maracle (1988) argued that sex crimes are processes of de-sexualization and wrote that colonization has been the absence of beauty and the negation of sexuality for Native women. Native women were the “undesireable, non-sensuous beings that never go away (p. 24).” Native women are dehumanized through a lack of sexuality, beauty, and wholeness allotted to them through mainstream media representations. The language of “disappeared” and “missing” further the process of erasure on an ideological level.
When present in the mainstream media, the women are described as “Native females” and their physical attributes or body parts are described in great detail. While the website, missingpeople, seeks to do the important task of bringing light to the issue of women who have gone missing or were murdered, the images and discourse used on the website is problematic. On the initial home page, the viewer is shown a multitude of mugshots of women. Many are bruised, their hair ruffled, and their eyes blank and dejected. Many of the photos were taken by the police likely when the women were charged with various activities associated with prostitution or drug use. Having the victim portrayed as the criminal is confusing and jarring.

The viewer has the option of clicking on most of the photos in order to learn more about the women and they are once again confronted by violent discourse. The following is a typical description put forth by the Vancouver Police Department and used on this website, as well as on other websites and posters.

Native Indian female, 22 years, 5 foot 4 inches (153 cm), 125 pounds (55 kg), long black hair, brown eyes. [She] is a known drug user and sex trade worker in the downtown east side area. Last seen in December 1996 and reported missing in July 1997. (Vancouver Police Department)

In reacting to the dehumanization of Native women in mainstream discourse, Lee Maracle (1988) asks “How often do we read in the newspaper about the death or murder of a Native man, and in the same paper, the victimization of a ‘female-native’?” In using such terms, Native women are described using the same language used for animals.

In contrast to the disregard for the women and their association with animals, many articles bemoan the treatment of animals on the Pickton farm. On February 20, 2007, the Vancouver Sun published an article entitled, “Pickton pigs in ‘distress’” (Culbert and Neal, 2007). Unlike in articles that discuss the same brutality against the women, this article begins by issuing a warning that some readers may be offended by content of the story. It then explaining that “a veteran Vancouver police officer cried on the witness stand Monday as she described the condition of several pigs inside a stock trailer parked on Robert (Willie) Pickton's property.” The pigs are described as being in “ill health,” that “one pig had lost a litter of piglets,” and that “two other pigs were lying on top of the hog for warmth.” In contrast, we remember the words of Rivers, director of the British Columbia
Native Women’s Society, in the Calgary Sun article on the Highway of Tears as saying that “when our families first went to police reporting our girls missing, they were told they were only runaways who'd gone to bright lights of Vancouver” (Rivers quoted in Smith, 2002). The tears of the Vancouver police officer for the pigs takes on a sharper dimension when we remember that such reactions do not come when remembering the women.

In an article published by the Toronto Star entitled, “Daughters bond at Pickton trial,” Dimanno (2007), appears to take a softer, more human look at the consequences of the Pickton trial by describing the very real effects on two daughters of the victims. Unfortunately, her efforts fall short as she uses the same overly physical and animal-like description that other mainstream articles have used. In describing one of the daughters, Dimanno writes, “[She] is 16, skin caramel-coloured, with thick brown curls cascading.” Like in other articles, Dimanno does not mention that the daughter is Aboriginal, the clue being that her skin is “caramel-coloured,” a reference to candy.

The tone of the article is almost too upbeat. The Pickton trial is represented as a site for young women to bond and this they do with “there-there pats” and “hushing,” with the final result that “arm-in-arm, the girls walk out into the sunshine (Dimanno, 2007).” Dworkin (1983) wrote that women are defined principally by their physical appearance and needed to “sunlight and cheery and sweet, or [she] could not bribe her way with smiles through a day (p. 43).” Just as the daughters are “caramel,” sweet, and sunshine walkers, the mothers’ physical appearances are described as “DNA” and “a jawbone” (Dimanno, 2007), a stark reality of the common representation of Native women in the media. It is therefore perhaps fitting that the girls engage in the activity of “hushing” as one destructive depiction of the women was exchanged for another. The collective history and reality of the girls’ lives as the tragedy of their mothers’ deaths are erased through language, as the sunshine overtakes them in a false celebration of the final disappearance of their mothers.

Like othering and deviance, the disappearance of women from and during media stories has colonial roots. For Smith (2005), the issues of colonial, race, and gender oppression are intricately connected. She writes of the “present absence” in the US colonial imagination that reinforces the idea that Native peoples are vanishing and conquest of lands is justified (p. 9). This idea also functioned as a way of denying the precarious founding of the United States itself as a nation. Aboriginal peoples were forced to “play
dead” in order to perform a narrative of manifest destiny in which their role, ultimately, was to disappear. Smith (2005) also explains that the representation of the Aboriginal body as disappeared also connected to the construction of Native bodies into a pollution of which the colonial white body must constantly purify itself. Native bodies were described as sexually perverse and were considered inherently dirty, sexually violable and rapable. Within a colonial ideology, a rape of an inherently rapable and impure body does not matter.

Smith (2005) also looks at the treatment of deceased Aboriginal bodies and recounts cases of mutilation of both dead and alive bodies, as well as the displaying of Aboriginal bodies and burial mounds in public ways, such as in museums. The consumption of Aboriginal bodies for museum viewers is a powerful tool for creating public memory and for fostering specific ways of relating to and understanding Aboriginal peoples. In this way, colonization worked as “thingification,” in which there was a move to portray Native people as unreal people. Native peoples were constructed as internal threats to the mainstream population, and in order to do so, Native peoples were described as “degenerates” and abnormals. In the colonial project, not only were Native bodies in inherently violable and destroyable, but Native lands were also inherently violable.

Violence against Aboriginal women’s bodies in the processes of colonialism was not unique to North America. Wang (2007) writes about the history of Aboriginal women in Taiwan. Beginning with the arrival of Japanese presence in 1897, the role of Aboriginal women began to change as their bodies were used increasingly for symbolic and real conquest. He writes that there was a purchasing of Aboriginal women’s bodies that were seen as exotic and that were a form of racialist conquest (Wang, 2007). This came in the increasing entry into sex work as local means of surviving were destroyed and there were no jobs for men to replace them. Wang argues that the use of sex work was an effective way to destroy Aboriginal culture as the payment of Aboriginal women for sex was a great shame and important taboo in the culture. Japanese soldiers also used the taking of pictures of Aboriginal women’s bodies as a ritual of conquest. In this way, Japanese colonizers attempted to claim the bodies of Aboriginal women as a symbolic force over the group as a whole. Claiming bodies came through sex, murder, and the consumption of the exoticized
body for newly emerging tourism. Wang stipulates that these were all ways of decapitating cultural and individual identities; similar tools are used in mainstream discourse.

The use of images for news and tourist purposes was also a powerful tool in conquest. Wang (2007) wrote of the use of photographs and representations of Aboriginal women’s bodies in Taiwan as a means of imposing symbolic force over Aboriginal people as a group. The mainstream media uses images and specific discourse to represent gendered and racialized bodies. The ways in which the representations are understood and viewed, as well as the process of creating representations have important consequences for the body’s role in identity and self-hood (Thomson, 2006). Furthermore, as Sontag writes, images have a specific role in creating historical understanding and images cannot be separated from the viewer. Van Dijk (1993) connects the role of mainstream media in creating images and discourse to the reproduction of racism, doing so by asserting a symbolic and ideological influence on the readers or viewers (Van Dijk, 1993).

3. I’m just a working guy: The normalization of Pickton and violence

On January 24, 2007, The Globe and Mail published an article entitled, “I’m just a working guy.” In beginning to understand the text, it is useful to look take a closer look at Thiele’s writing on social and political theory and to apply it to journalistic writing about social and political issues. Thiele (1998) wrote that these fields have been for, by, and about men. Women are partial figures engaging in activities directly analogous to men. Real women are made to disappear from theories about human society (p. 30-31). In the article by Matas, Armstrong and Fong, there is a social order evident and it is clear that the victims are of a lower rank than the authors likely because they were sex workers. Thiele further argues that women are marginalized and their contribution to society is trivialized. They are invisible in that they do not appear as subjects in their own right (p. 31). The women in the articles appear as fragments. They are “remains,” “bodies,” and “vanished women” (Armstrong, Matas & Fong, 2007, p. A1). They are also described by RCMP Sergeant Bill Fordy, who interviewed Pickton, as “…workers” (p. A1), as he is unable to pronounce the word “sex.” This shows both an attitude about human society that Thiele writes about, and also further fragments the women’s identity. In contrast, many articles
psychoanalyze Pickton and show his life and character in great depth. In an article found in the Globe and Mail, the title reads “Pickton’s personality on public display” (Jong, 2007). The same treatment and consideration are not applied to the women.

The women are discussed in terms of prostitution, poverty, drugs, sexualized objects, and mutilated bodies. Women are made invisible in research and theory. In a Reuters article published on Jan 30, 2007, it explains that Pickton “brought prostitutes to his farm, killed them, butchered their bodies and disposed of the remains” (Dowd, 2007). Women are referred to as body parts or as disappeared. Police have shown reluctance to find women when families and friends approached them with concerns. Pickton’s farm was littered with identification cards, receipts and other evidence that clearly identified the women (Armstrong, 2007) showing that he had little fear that someone would look for those who were already invisible. Then, in writing surrounding the case, women disappear again through long descriptions of body parts and violence.

The tricks of the trade of sexist writing (Thiele, 1998) were employed in the article to marginalize the women, while normalizing Pickton and his actions. The tricks of the trade include de-contextualization, or the myth of objectivity (p. 35). The women are taken out of their complex environmental systems although the journalistic style of the writing implies objectivity. There is an imposition of value systems, ideology and consciousness. The value system here is one in which sex work, Native women, and poverty are deemed embarrassing and even humourous. The RCMP officer’s tone is sometimes ironic and mocking in the interview, and the authors purposely choose to quote Pickton’s statements such as “I’m just a pig man; that’s all I got to say (p. 41)” to show his working class and uneducated mannerisms. The universalizing of male experience also decontextualizes the women by once again not including any information about their lives, other than their death.

Lastly, Thiele discusses naturalism (p. 36) as a technique that excludes women by assuming that what is natural does not require an explanation. The killing of Native women is done by a “normal guy (A1)” and there is no discussion of reactions of shock or sadness, or surprise at the murders. There is no explanation of how the murders could have occurred from a sociological position because they are naturalized.
It is important to look at the question of race in the discourse of the articles. Lorde (1984) wrote about the invisibility of whiteness when race is not openly discussed. White people are seen as having no race, or as racially neutral (Mathur, p. 278). In the Pickton case, there is an assumed whiteness of the victims, and the more complex and important implications of the case are therefore not addressed. Pickton has been normalized through descriptions of him as “relaxed,” “patiently answers questions,” “just a working guy,” and “responds to questions politely” (Matas, Armstrong, and Fong, 2007, p. A1). Further, by not discussing the racial relationship of Pickton to his victims, it is negating the seriousness of his actions, and through normalizing Pickton, there is an implicit normalization of his actions. Violence against Native women is therefore normalized through the tricks of the trade described by Thiele. Lastly, in a system in which whiteness is normalized, Native people are othered.

Eichler’s writing about feminist methodology is useful in looking at the sexism and racism in the newspaper text. Eichler (1997) wrote that feminism is a perspective not a methodology (p. 12). There is a need to discuss the situation from the perspective of Native women, sex workers, and families of the victims to show the deceased as more than just body parts. Eichler uses Maria Mies’ (p. 13) postulates to inform feminist research. They are also useful in understanding where changes need to be made in the writing in the articles.

“Value free” research should be replaced by conscious partiality through partial identification with research subjects. It is important to acknowledge personal reactions to the murders as well as our role and participation in a racist system. Active participation should replace uninvolved spectator knowledge in research. Changing the status quo should be a priority in research. The study of an oppressive reality should be carried out not by traditionally defined experts, but by the objects of oppression. The inquest into the murders is carried out by police who have long had tenuous and abusive relationships with Native women. In the interview with Fordy and Pickton, even if used for strategic purposes by the police officer, there is still a somewhat buddy-buddy relationship between the two, and the Pickton is relaxed, joking, and laughing. Fordy shows discomfort when talking about the women’s work and is unable to say the word “sex” to which Pickton laughs. Yet, his discomfort at talking to someone who killed up to fifty women is not
apparent. Pickton and his actions are normalized in the article, and sex work is uncomfortable and abnormal. The women are othered and Pickton is normalized.

Lastly, there is a need to look at women’s individual and social histories and to collectivize their experience. The wider issues of gender violence and colonial violence need to be discussed. Instead, in many articles there are lengthy discussions of the tools used to kill women as well as descriptions of dismembered body parts. In collectivizing, the women’s bodies must be figuratively recollected into existence.

Sex work plays a critical role in the construction of identity of the women.) Women were thought, in the West, to know more of the intangible “Good,” which suited them for decency (Dworkin, 1983, p. 39). Begum wrote that women are principally defined by their physical appearance (pg. 75). Kant wrote that women had beauty and were modest and compassionate by nature (Kant quoted in Smith, p. 84). As long as certain “female qualities” are fostered, than educating a woman is acceptable. In the context of prescribed passivity for women, sex work is deviant both because of its active nature and because women were not supposed to be sexual.

It has been helpful to use critical disability feminism to look at representation of bodies. Rosemary Garland Thomson (2006), a well-known disability theorist, wrote that disabled bodies were seen as monstrosity and as deviant. She points to Aristotles’ discussion of the female as a deformed or mutilated male. Female bodies have been represented as deviant. Historical practices of femininity such as footbinding, female genital mutilation, and plastic surgery have configured female bodies in ways that duplicate parameters of disability. In the Pickton case, the women are literally mutilated and disabled in the most complete and extreme way. In a Canadian press article published on January 29, 2007, it was written that “someone was hunting women from Vancouver’s downtown eastside.” In another article in the Globe and Mail, the headline reads “sick and dying Pickton pigs left without food and water” (Armstrong, 2007). In both articles, women are equated with animals, and in the latter case, animal welfare is given more consideration than the treatment of women. Thomson wrote that social power is related to body’s role in identity and selfhood. Little to no social power is connected to individuals who are women, Native, and sex workers.
In mainstream discourse, disability has been seen as an icon of pity (Razack, 1998). Similarly the women are understood only through their death and through violence. There is a need to move from pity in acknowledging each person’s complicity in oppressing others and our role in an oppressive system. We have seen that sex work and Native bodies can be seen as deviant. In a colonial system and white supremacist system, the bodies of Native women are deviant. Language used to describe the women in the press creates invisibility, pity, and exclusion. So, mainstream Canada is complicit in a system that makes Native women disappear.

No discussion of this nature is complete without looking at possible sites and tools for resistance. Lorde (1984) wrote that the oppressor evades responsibility for their actions. The oppressor needs to actively seek out information regarding the oppressed. It is not the job of the oppressed to educate the oppressor, which would keep the oppressed concerned with the oppressor’s needs. In seeking out information on the oppressed, the oppressor becomes an ally and helps resist the dominant script regarding the oppressed. The women’s families have also resisted the public image of the women in showing more complete portrayals of their sisters, daughters, and friends (see various websites listed in bibliography). Eichler suggests the need for closeness to the subject, for solidarity, for local self-determination, and action in doing feminist writing and research; the involvement of family members and friends, as well as the oppressor’s acknowledgement of their role in oppression are very useful in working with this method.

bell hooks wrote of the oppositional gaze, a gaze that says “not only will I stare, I want to change reality” (p. 116). The gaze has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally and could be useful for Native women to document their experience and to resist dominant representations of them. Mohanty (1991) wrote of the need for third world feminists to re-write history based on the specific locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and post-colonial peoples and on day to day strategies of survival (p. 10). Although Native women are not living in the third world and they are not in post-colonial times, these guidelines could still be useful. Mohanty (1990) also wrote that racism is as much an issue for white people as for people of colour, as white people are implicated in racial formations. There is a need to take action after acknowledging hierarchies of power based on colour and race.
Jaimes and Halsey (1997) wrote of Native resistance. Beginning with the Cheyenne proverb, “a people is not defeated until the hearts of its women are on the ground” (p. 316), it is evident that the Pickton case as well as its treatment in the media is intensively destructive. It also shows a site of hope and resistance in these very women. Native women form the core of Indigenous resistance to genocide and colonialism (p. 316). Yet, mainstream feminism has had a tenuous relationship with Native women by critiquing the deformities of Native societies produced by colonialism and feminists have acted as missionaries to try to make them “less Indian” (p. 318). Feminism can be racist and have a colonial mentality. Janet McCloud (quoted in Jaimes and Halsey) wrote that “many Anglo women try, I expect in all sincerity, to tell us that our most pressing problem is male supremacy. To this, I have to say, with all due respect, bullshit. Our problems are what they’ve been for the past several hundred years: white supremacism and colonialism. And that’s a supremacism and a colonialism of which white feminists are still very much a part” (p. 318).

Because of the ubiquitous nature of gender-based violence and racism, which are played out in mainstream press, all women and men in Canada must acknowledge the ongoing colonialism and its direct implications for violence against Native women. This type of violence has been written about in ways that normalize the oppressor, while marginalizing, excluding, and rendering invisible the women involved. It is crucial to deconstruct that ways in which gender and racial violence are perceived, written about, and dealt with in many locations in the colonial system.

The lives of Aboriginal women in the mainstream media are fragmented, rendered invisible, through violent colonial processes of othering. Writing on violence has succeeded in normalizing the oppressor, while marginalizing, excluding, and rendering invisible the women involved. Other stories exist both in alternative media and in art. Aboriginal women artists are active in the retelling and remembrance of stories and lives that have been purposely and strategically neglected in mainstream media. Aboriginal people, through the telling and retelling of their stories participate in a powerful rebellion that profoundly questions and challenges mainstream colonial violence.
Chapter 5: Becoming a rebel, reclaiming stories and memory in the works of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro

1. Resisting violence, missing women, and creating space for stories

Resistance to violent media representations can be based on the centering of Aboriginal knowledge through reclaiming and retelling stories. We have seen that violence against Aboriginal women is not just an outcome, but a means of colonization and imperialism. A discussion of resistance must also look at de-colonization. Thus, the process of telling and retelling stories can be understood as resisting cultural colonialism through the playing with and rejection of dominant cultural representation. Maracle (1988) wrote that “through all the hurt and the anger written into the lives of Native people, has survived great love” (p. 4). She uses the word, “written” in implicating language and the social construction of history as destructive forces for Native women. Maracle also looks at ways that Aboriginal women can use the tools of language and the story telling to “weave a new story” (p. 4).

The desire to and the process of telling personal and collective histories are important for Indigenous peoples internationally. In Wang’s (2007) work on Aboriginal women in Taiwan, he put forth that Aboriginal people are forced into a state of mourning and grieving that they cannot escape unless they are able to tell and retell their stories. In her book, “I am woman,” Maracle (1988) blends stories of different women together to show a collective reality and to explore a marginalized history. Both these examples of narratives are important steps in resisting colonialism through the reclaiming of stories and the exploration of collective memory.
Yet, we have also seen that the viewer and audience of stories are not passive or objective recipients of information, but play important roles in the interpretation and creation of knowledge. Sontag (2003) writes that the experiences and identities of the viewer cannot be separated from the content of the image. bell hooks (2000) explores the lack of love in mainstream culture, emphasizing that when the collective moves towards love as a whole, then loving families will be represented in the mass media. “Hopefully, we will listen to these stories with the same intensity that we have when we listen to narratives of violent pain and abuse (p. 211).” According to this understanding, the emphasis on violence and destruction in the representation of the women’s lives is endemic of a mainstream culture that has lost its ability to love. While this may be the case, the careful descriptions of Native women that create invisibility and destruction also have much to do with representations of gendered, racialized, and colonized bodies and the conscious or unconscious effort to not see Native women as capable of being loved and loving. Like the projection of violence and rapability onto Native bodies, the lack of love associated with Native through mainstream constructions of Native identity may reflect the lack of love or ability to love that is felt by those creating these representations, as well as a strong sense of denial and fear about one’s own complicity and responsibility for the experience of others. As Maracle (1993) wrote, in “Ravensong,” understanding another’s experience is based on the ability to explore and experience her life and history, and ultimately to look at responsibility for her experience.

We have seen that Native women’s lives are not treated with importance in mainstream media sources. Butler (2004) writes about a hierarchy of grief in which some lives are deemed more important than others through the grieving process. A first reaction is that Aboriginal women’s lives are surely not important in mainstream Canada as little is written about the many dimensions of their lives, including that of love. Violence against Native women has also been shown to be normalized in the media. However, descriptions of deaths of Aboriginal women, although technical and destructive, are rampant in the mainstream news, even when race is not directly mentioned. Butler (2004) looks at the use of public grief as a deterrent for looking for solutions or resolutions. The disappeared or missing Aboriginal woman is one who does not need to be looked for and is one for whom redemption and justice is not needed even if found. Perhaps grief and reminiscence are
tools of passivity and part of a colonialist desire to see Aboriginal women as gone, or as disabled and dismembered. Razack (1998) wrote that there is a need to move from seeing the other as icons of pity to acknowledging each person’s role in an oppressive system.

In beginning to look at the importance of exploring Aboriginal stories and experiences, it is helpful to explore the valuing of certain types of knowledge and a devaluing of other types. Linda Smith (1999), in “Decolonizing methodologies: research and Indigenous peoples,” looks at the ways in which Western knowledge gained positional superiority. Because history is about power and the maintenance of power, Indigenous peoples have been excluded, marginalized and othered through the very process of creating history. Othering has also taken place through the creation of “true” media stories. An important step in de-colonization, is to know and reclaim the past by exploring alternative histories and by telling and retelling stories. The stories must also be understood within the wider contexts of gender-based and colonial violence. Mohanty (1991) wrote of the need to re-write history based on the specific locations and histories of struggle of oppressed peoples.

The use of Indigenous knowledge as well as the use of spirituality are central to the telling of stories. Smith (1999), in her work on de-colonization, calls for spirituality in the de-colonizing process in order to resist dominant culture and violence. Hanohano (1999) writes that Indigenous knowledge is important for grounding relationships with others and with Mother Earth, while focusing on survival as a group. While it is important to emphasize and value Indigenous knowledge, it is necessary to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Indigenous experience and identity. Perhaps it is within the context of Western mainstream cultural hegemony that Native experience must be expressed as a single entity as marginalized groups have little room to self-express and self-represent.

Alternative media, such as websites, have provided space for the expression of alternative stories and experiences. The website, “missingpeople,” provides space for stories and ways of expression that are not included in many mainstream sources. The website, created in “memory of Vancouver Downtown Eastside missing and murdered women” (www.missingpeople.net), offers songs, poems, a guestbook, and information about individual women. The website was started on Jan 15, 1999 by Wayne Leng in memory of his friend, Sarah de Vries, who was missing from Vancouver’s downtown.
eastside. Soon, the concept grew to include all women who were missing from that part of Vancouver. Many family members and friends of the women have helped by supplying photos and stories of the women. Leng (personal communication, March 10, 2008) writes that “it has been good for helping to keep the missing women story alive and a way of remembering our loved ones. It also has helped with those researching the case.”

The website uses the word “missing” in different ways than we have seen it being used in mainstream media sources. “Missing” can move from a passive description of the women with no marker in time as to when they become “missing” to an active and contextual understanding of the word. The familial contexts and relational belongings of the women are emphasized; the website shows that they were loved throughout their lives and continue to be loved after their deaths.

The home page features the song, “Missing,” solicited by the grandparents of a missing woman from Vancouver’s East Side and written by Susan Musgrave. The line: “you are the missing part of me (Musgrave, 2007, from www.missingpeople.net)” shows the women as missing parts of people who love them rather than as fundamentally missing people. They are embodied and related in physical terms to others, but unlike the mainstream media’s portrayal of body parts, they become parts of memory and love. In Ravensong (1993), Raven describes the process of relating to others and says of exploring the missing of a girl who has died: “Wander around [her] insides… reinvent [her], re-imagine her” (p. 39). Just as Raven has suggested, the song, “Missing,” explores the relational meaning of loss and missing in powerful ways that connects the creator of the lyrics, who is no longer distant and disconnected, to the subject herself in a contextual, personal, and loving way. Maracle (1988), in addressing love, writes that “it has taken so long to wade through the garbage heaped upon us by a racist colonial society to find love” (p. 38). The loving description of the physical belonging of the woman transforms her from being a missing woman into a missed woman and situates her within the collective.

Using websites offers an interesting space for resistance for Native women. Indigenous peoples have always used self-expression, and that the internet would only provide a larger audience. We have seen that anthropology and academic scholarship regarding the “other” has revolved around the use of observation and the privileging of visual material and texts. Silverstone (2001), in his work on minority voices and the media,
discusses the possibility of using the internet for constructing a space for marginalized peoples globally to use for self-expression and for organization. This may be a useful place to begin, because, through the media, the world is “reflected, refracted, represented, imagined, claimed, and reflected upon” (Silvertone, p. 13, 2001). Interestingly, Silverstone (2001) discusses ways in which the global media commons can disrupt power relations entrenched in other scholarships. Time and space can be transformed as there is a capacity to reach the “Other.” This occurs when the interrelationships of the global and the local are defined and redefined through representations in this medium. The global media commons is referred to as a “(dis?)-spatialized space” (p. 16) that has the capacity to upset space/time boundaries to create increased human freedom. Yet, this raises questions relating to access, class, and even geographic location, as experiences of the global commons are greatly affected by such social locations.

This work began with an exploration of lessons taught by Raven in *Ravensong* (Maracle, 1993). Before discussing the works of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro in creating stories and exploring memory and identity, it is helpful to look again at the role of memory, community, and survival in a story about the flu epidemic in 1950s British Columbia. The main character, Stacey, reflects on the impending loss of lives due to the sickness and thinks, “White people didn’t seem to live this way. No one individual was indispensable. Their parts didn’t seem bonded to their whole” (p. 26). The protagonist reflects on the important belonging of each person to the whole collective as well as white people’s lack of understanding of this. In her Aboriginal culture, certain people were the barer of cultural knowledge and if they were to die before their time, the culture as a whole would suffer a great loss. When Aboriginal women are missing or killed, showing their unique role and importance within the community becomes an act of resistance to the neglect and devaluing of their lives.

Resistance to cultural colonization and loss of cultural knowledge and values also comes in the form of examining cultural wholeness and tackling issues that result in cultural colonialism. After the flu epidemic has come and gone, Stacey reflects on the effects of the devastation and notices that “the whole consciousness of the village changed at the same moment. The women lost the safety of family” (p. 197). For the first time, numerous women left the village to marry whereas before, they would marry someone
from the village or bring someone in. With the loss of woman, was a loss of community and culture.

In *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, Maracle also explores the consequences of women leaving the reserve or rural town. She explores the loss of safety associated with moving to the city associated with poverty, the use of drugs, and sometimes the involvement in sex work. At one point, Bobbi Lee moves to Toronto from the Pacific coast. In Toronto she experiences such a loss of direction and belonging that she lives in a daze and feels empty and numb. She experience a powerful sense of missing and disappearance of parts of herself. She had left home because of an abusive and racist white father and because of the poverty of her home fishing village. She begins to feel again when she moves back out west and begins to re-contextualize her personal and collective history. Bobbi Lee does so by becoming politically engaged in Aboriginal rights. She challenges the fisheries industry that is responsible for prohibiting the old ways of fishing, which created poverty, a loss of cultural knowledge, and a sense of familial incompetence and depression that ultimately led her away from home in the first place. In tackling the source of poverty and loss of culture, and by returning to her community, Bobbi Lee is able to feel again.

Just as colonization is closely connected to gender violence, the physical and spiritual loss of women is connected to cultural wholeness. Maracle (1994) emphasizes the consequences of the loss of women as important to the cultural continuity of her people. Lee-Ann Martin was responsible for curating Divergences, an exhibition of the work of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro in Regina in 2004. When reflecting on the exhibit, she wrote that “Aboriginal women carry specific cultural knowledge and, as such, are the caretakers of their cultures” and are necessary for the continuity of a “vital, dynamic community” (Martin, 2004, p. 12). Aboriginal women artists have addressed the issue of cultural representation and cultural knowledge in looking at resistance to colonialism.

The art work of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro seek to examine issues of identity and concepts such as community, connection or disconnection to land, colonialism, and violence. Belmore and Niro both explore the body as central to the experiences and identities of Aboriginal women and, through the body, are able to explore experiences of colonialism, loss, cultural identity, and survival. Both artists use their bodies and self-representation in interesting and powerful ways to question and reject dominant
representations and narratives. Like Maracle’s (1994) discussion of entering the body of the victim and Galeano’s (2005) retelling of the Takuna story of the victim entering the body of the perpetrator, the artists explore the role of the body in relation to empathy, responsibility, and resistance in order to re-tell, re-remember, and render alive histories, memories, and identities.

2. Representing the self: Aboriginal women making art

> Creating in the presence of the absent makes me a witness. I believe I am just beginning to understand my role, particularly as an artist who has inherited an Indigenous history.

(Belmore, Canada Council for the Arts, 2004.)

Aboriginal women have addressed issues of cultural, collective, and individual expression and representation through contemporary art. They have also explored the construction of identity and the body’s relationship to the gendered land. Often, this is done through the representation of the self in their art. Aboriginal women artists often use old traditional ways of making art as well as old materials and use them to react to Western art history (Chadwick, 2007, p. 389). By pushing the boundaries of both traditional art theory and art itself, the result is a deeply personal reflection on self and cultural identity, a telling and retelling of stories, and an exploration of memory.

In mainstream historical discourse, self–portraits are seen, in the twentieth century, as a continuation of the Romantic ideal of the painter partaking in an essentially individualistic “spiritual journey” that borders on heroism (Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, 2000, p. 167). While there is generally less self-portraiture in the twentieth century as art becomes more abstract and there are less recognizable representations of self, there was also a trend of serial self-portraiture. Artists such as Frida Kahlo or Kätthe Kollwitz, and more recently Cindy Sherman, produced numerous self-portraits that spanned their whole lives. Unlike the Romantic self-portrait, in the twentieth century, self-portraiture became very personal, “more of a quest for self-knowledge than a superhuman saga undertaken in an heroic persona” (Cheney et al., 2000, p. 167). Often, the artist is represented in imaginative, explorative, or playful ways as historical, mythical, or religious figures such
as the Virgin Mary or a goddess that result in a reworking and reimaging of these figures. Artists also address their relationship to consumerism and consumption of aspects of identity in art. In painting, artists in the twentieth century used Cubism, Expressionism or Surrealism to fracture previous representational modes and to question the meanings of truth, beauty, and identity.

In Contemporary or in the Post-Modernist era, there has been an increased acceptance of different kinds of expression along with a rejection and a questioning of Eurocentric and white male dominated art. There is also a trend to use many different mediums for expression including video, photography, film, and performance art (Cheney et al., 2000). In this period, Aboriginal women artists have used self-portraits to address and look at redefining sense of self and to challenge stereotypes often imposed on them (Martin, 2004). In this way, Aboriginal women’s art was less focused on the individual and more on the collective, and often explored the interesting relationship between the two.

This movement has created more space for Aboriginal women artists despite the lack of Aboriginal curators and art historians that are needed to emphasize, showcase, and interpret Aboriginal art. A book that has addressed these issues, Making Noise: Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community (2004), begins with the quote by Robbie Robertson: “You can bet your ass I won’t go quietly makin’ a noise in this world” (p. 17). The act of making art by Aboriginal peoples is an act of challenging mainstream views of art. As there are few Aboriginal curators, it is a concern of what kind of interpretation mainstream curators will bring to their work. Because of this, Aboriginal artists must often act as curators and historians in lobbying for their works to be shown, understood, and valued (Martin, 2004a).

In the 1980s, feminist art representations began to move from focusing not only on objects, but on social relations that were “productive of memory and subjectivity (Rosalyn Deutsche quoted in Rogoff, p. 26, 2001).” Irit Rogoff (2001), a writer and academic who has focused on visual culture and colonialism, writes that women artists create gender space, and do so by remaking public urban space and by creating linguistic confrontations both to display and disrupt illusions and expectations of what is to be seen. We shall see that both Belmore and Niro engage in disrupting both expectations about public space and expectations about representations of gender. When thinking about the use of public space,
it is important to think about exclusion from public space. Minton (2006) writes that the concept of a public space is difficult to define, but it raises questions of access, control, and who is or who is not allowed to use it. Voyce (2006) defines public spaces as neutral meeting grounds for communities and as spaces in which to live, survive, and exchange ideas and commodities. However, Aboriginal women artists show that public space has not been neutral and has been wrought with violence impeding on survival and power differential in the very exchange of ideas and commodities. Thus, embedded in the idea of public space is the experience of exclusion.

Incidents and experiences of exclusion are brought to the surface in art and can be explored within the concept of “visual culture.” Rogoff (2001) writes that geography and space are, in fact, “always gendered, always raced, always economical and always sexual” (p. 28). However, spaces can continually change through language, a gaze, and even a gesture. When looking at images, it is important to consider a “visual culture,” in which both vision and the visual world “produce meanings, establish and maintain aesthetic values, gender stereotypes, and power relations within culture” (p. 28). Sontag (2004) writes about the important role that the perspectives and experiences of the viewer have in determining the interpretation of an image in the field of news media. She writes about the process of coming to understand and feel for the pain of others and holds the viewer accountable for the interpretation of images. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes the potential of safe and creative spaces among other black women, in blues music, and in institutionalized spaces such as churches. Yet, “the act of using one’s voice requires a listener” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 98). The listener is needed and is implicated in the experience of artistic expression.

Many twentieth-century critics asserted that “art has no sex” (Chadwick, 2007, p. 283). While hoping to emphasize that both men and women artists had equal capabilities, this belief ignored the very different experiences of both creators and viewers of images. Like Sontag (2004), Rogoff (2001) also puts emphasis on vision and the role of the viewer within a visual culture that encompasses both vision itself and the viewed. She looks at vision as a space, in which cultural meanings are not only represented, but composed.

In exploring images themselves, Rogoff (2001) writes that images allow for the experiencing of pleasure and displeasure, they influence style as well as trends in
consumption, and lastly can mediate power relations. Not all viewers are equal, and some are privileged within the realm of spectatorship. This is commonly discussed in terms of the male gaze, in which the presentation of the nude female body is a site of male viewing pleasure, or a “commodified image of exchange, and a fetishized defense against the fear of castration (Chadwick, 2007, p. 282). This can also be understood through McClintock’s (1995) discussion of the Indigenous female body as a symbol of the exoticized and inherently conquerable “other” during colonial processes.

Rogoff (2001) goes beyond a questioning of the power of the viewer and questions which parts of the past have widely and currently available visual representations. In other words, not only must there be a questioning of the power of the viewer, but the hierarchy of power of visual representations themselves. If representations of Aboriginal women are created by the colonial group that was involved in creating mainstream history, then not only will this affect the creation of images, but the experience of the viewer.

An Aboriginal viewer of a mainstream representation of Aboriginal people has a different experience of viewing the work than would a viewer of settler descent, for example. Here, the act of viewing the image itself is no longer seen as neutral and visual culture does not stop at the creation of images, but must include the viewing of images. Rogoff (2001) therefore asks, “whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images?” (p. 29). A further question can be posed, in which “whose identities, histories, and fantasies are degraded through the viewing of which visual images? Rogoff (2001) addresses this theme by questioning who is allowed what level of looking, whether it be an outright stare, a peek, or no looking at all. Like hooks’ (1992) exploration of the oppositional gaze as an act of resistance and defiance, Rogoff questions how looking and working with the gaze can act as an exploration of power and as resistance to power.

In Enlightenment thinking, the visual was given primacy over other ways of knowing and vision was seen as neutral and the visual world was considered as ultimately knowable through the mere act of looking, authors such as Sontag (2004) and Rogoff (2001) push for a more complex understanding of the visual as a culture, in which both meanings and the experience of the viewer and connected and evolving. In looking beyond just the visual to an understanding of visual culture, Rogoff (2001) sees hope in the creation and exploration of such culture through what she sees as its potential to rewrite
culture. Both Belmore and Niro use techniques that speak directly to the viewer and attempt to disrupt conceptions about art in general, and also about representations of Aboriginal identity.

Narrative and autobiographical foundations can be used to disrupt the individualism of traditional Eurocentric art theory and self-portraiture by exploring the collective voice. In her discussion on autobiography, resistance, and transnational feminism, Kaplan (1992) write about the use of autobiography as a tool used to express collectivity and cultural resistance. Kaplan offers a different understanding of self-representation that ruptures the twentieth century self-portrait’s focus on individualistic and personal experiences and processes. Autobiography, as a form of self-representation, can be a powerful tool in resisting this very knowledge system. They explain that resistance literature is created out of “political conflicts between Western imperialism and non-Western Indigenous resistance movements” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 120). It is possible to use autobiographical narrative to explore collective experiences as well as political positions and movements. Smith and Watson (1992) write of testimonial autobiography, in which one person participates in the telling of another’s story. This has been used to disrupt mainstream literary conventions and shows the solidarity between those who write, translate, or interpret and those who share their experience. The exploration of memory and experience by Aboriginal women artists is important in creating and strengthening collectivity and also action.

Galeano’s (1995) “Memory of fire,” is an example of using narrative and historical memory in re-remembering the experience of the conquest of Latin America. The book begins by an exploration of the meanings of creation and the framing of worldviews that differed from that which was to be imposed upon the Indigenous cultures of the Americas. Galeano also establishes this worldview as a departing point from which he explores a historical memory. He explains the creation of language as the taking on of life and love, and the need to communicate. Like bell hook’s exploration of the need for love, Galeano equates love with communication. This is resistance to the violence of mainstream discourse, in which language has been used as an attempt to control and destroy identity. Furthermore, language in the Canadian context was a powerful tool of colonialism in the residential school context, in which Aboriginal children were forced to reject their language and to take on the language of the colonizer.
Language can therefore be a site of resistance. Galeano is able to transform and appropriate the language of the colonizer in an ultimate rejection of the culture of the colonizer. He does so by using the title “Genesis,” a clear Judeo-Christian reference to explore the origins of his own people onto which Christianity was later imposed. Zack (1993), in her work on exploring her mixed racial identity, describes difficulties she experienced in understanding her own identity. Writing and self expression were ways that allowed her to transcend the complexities of racial identity. Being read and heard must also have facilitated her expression of self. So, too, have Aboriginal women artists explored their collective identities and have used tools of humour, parody, and shock in using and transforming images and representations for resistance.

Humour and irony are important parts of contemporary Native art that both such traditions in storytelling and learning, but also are used to connect with the viewer and convey meaning. Basil Johnston (1999), in his work on learning language, wrote that children learn about their heritage and cultures through stories. Among old Anishinaubae storytellers, stories needed to be both whimsical and full of meaning at the same time. They invented comic situations for both humans and deities. In order to think and reflect, it was necessary also to laugh. Beneath the humour and laughter is the real meaning of the story, for instance lessons about human growth and development. It was also important for the storyteller to let the listeners interpret the story in their own way and to trust that even children would do so in “reasonable and sensible” ways (Johnston, 1999, p. 46). Humour in Native art is also done through the character of the trickster using the tradition of inversion. Fisher, a writer and artist who looks extensively at Native issues, writes of the trickster as having a “seemingly polymorphous and uncentred persona,” while being “adaptable to change and adversity.” The trickster speaks with a “polyphonic voice characterized by ambiguity and paradox” (Fisher quoted in Greenberg et al., 1996, p. 430). The trickster can also be understood in some cases as a spirit “who sometimes teaches humanity about the morality of freedom by breaking all the rules” (Hill, 2007). Humour and playfulness are used to explore deeper truths and stories through the changing and adaptable figure of the trickster.

Belmore, in reflecting on humour in “The trickster shift: Humour and irony in contemporary Native art” (1999), thought that sometimes non-Native people may feel that
it is too dangerous to laugh when shown humour in Native art. But, for Native people, to laugh has “been a source of strength, because when things get really bad at least you can laugh about it” (Belmore quoted in Ryan, 1999, p. 146). Belmore looks at dismantling the dichotomy of laughing with versus laughing at, by challenging the audience, even a white audience, to use laughter as a way of decreasing the distance of the other, and as a way of exploring pain and discomfort. For her, humour is connected with healing. Belmore stresses that it is important for her non-Native audiences to be able to laugh as well as Native stereotypes can be ridiculous and need to be rejected. Like Johnston (1999) emphasized, humour can also lead to addressing more serious subjects; Belmore uses humour as a mask behind which she can make people think and question. Niro also uses humour, and like Belmore, uses it as a disguise or costume behind which to address deeper issues. Niro feels that In “This land is mime land,” Niro literally dons costumes and masks to address cultural representations and stereotypes.

The work of both Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro in documenting the experiences of others can also be understood as examples of testimonial autobiography, in which one person participates in the telling of another’s story. This has been used to disrupt mainstream literary conventions and shows the solidarity between those who write, translate, or interpret and those who share their experience. Furthermore, the use of the “collective subject” of a testimonial disrupts Western discourse of equating identity with individuality only. By pushing the use of the genre of self expression, there is a disruption of Western ideas and values surrounding identity and selfhood.

In 2004, works of both Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro were shown together in Regina, Saskatchewan, in an exhibit called, “Divergences.” The exhibit was meant to “challenge the history of European landscape painting” that was made popular in Canada by the Group of Seven. The curator, Lee Anne Martin brought the artists together because of their focus on land. European representations of landscapes in art commonly exclude Aboriginal art traditions as well as any evidence or historical memory of conquest or resistance. By excluding both aspects of history as well as artistic expressions, the art effectively excludes Aboriginal existence. Tuer (2005) calls this “a historical amnesia, in which the landscape is de-peopled.” Anderson (2003), an art columnist for the Regina Leader Post, writes about “Divergences.” He wrote that both artists challenge the
landscape paradigm of the Eurocentric tradition of viewing the land from a distance, by using “other kinds of models—visual, historical and conceptual—that assert Aboriginal traditions, models, memories and values instead” (p. F2). While the artists challenge the idea of landscape, they also challenge ideas around cultural representation, the portrait, understandings of violence, and representations of Aboriginal women. Belmore and Niro’s works in “Divergences,” as well as other exhibitions will be explored in greater depth in the following sections as challenging and exploring cultural representation and identity, colonialism, and memory.

3. Memory of women and violence in the work of Rebecca Belmore

“Not only will I stare, I want to change reality.”
(hooks, 1994, p. 116)

Rebecca Belmore is an Anishinaubae artist, born in Upsala, Ontario. Belmore grew up in Upsala, near Thunder Bay, spent summers with her grandmother on the Lac Seule reserve, and went to high school in Thunder Bay. Later, she studied experimental art at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. She currently lives in Vancouver after living in Toronto for many years (Laurence, 2002). Her work has addressed history, place and identity through the media of sculpture, installation, video and performance. Belmore often displays her work in public spaces in order to bring art outside the confines of the gallery and museum world. Belmore challenges the history of the museum in representing the colonized Aboriginal body (Smith, 2005), but also chooses to perform her art in meaningful spaces, such as the Vancouver East Side where many Aboriginal women work, live, and die.

In her artist statement, Belmore tells the story of going with her mother to visit the tiny island in northern Ontario where her mother was born. What they found was “an empty outline” of the log cabin that was her birth place. When Belmore returned as an adult to find the same place, she could not find the empty, absence that she was looking for. Yet, she had an understanding of a “conceptual space” that was, in fact, a memory of
disappearance and absence. Of this moment, Belmore said that “it was enough to be in the midst of such a beautiful absence” (Belmore quoted in Roberts, 2006). The idea of memory of absence is pervasive in Belmore’s work. Later, Belmore was to declare that “creating in the presence of the absent makes me a witness” (Rebecca Belmore, Canada Council for the Arts, 2004.) Belmore’s work has much to do with exploring qualities of memory and the act of remembering itself transforms much of her work into memorials and explorations of memory. “Current history and place become crucial elements for understanding the complexity of the terrain that we inhabit.”

In 2005, Belmore was chosen by a committee made up of the Canada Council for the Arts, Foreign Affairs Canada and the National Gallery of Canada to represent Canada at Venice’s Biennale contemporary art exhibition (Canada Council for the Arts, 2004). Reflecting the increasingly problematic idea of nationhood, Belmore said of the experience: “I’m at the Canadian Pavilion, but I’m not representing Canada […] my Canadianness is something that I negotiate as an Aboriginal person” (Belmore quoted in Surlock, 2005). The piece she ultimately showed in Venice, in 2005, was “Fountain,” a performance piece that involves a video projected into the water of a moving fountain. The video shows a large pile of driftwood bursting into flame as Belmore walks wearily in front of the burning wood. As the camera points towards the ocean shore behind it, Belmore is seen to be gathering water into a bucket, submerged and struggling to stand in the water. She leaves the water, walks towards the viewer, and then throws the water against the camera lens. The water quickly transforms into blood and Belmore looks, tired, but alert, through the blood at the viewer.
The choice of using a fountain is symbolic as the piece is performed in Venice, known as a city of fountains and waterways, while Belmore comes from Vancouver, a place also obsessed with fountains and water (Williams, 2005). The familiarity of the fountain symbol serves as a way of diminishing the geographical and temporal distancing of the content of the piece from the viewers in Venice. The piece also challenge whether the fountain can be considered a “symbolic oasis in the arid environment of colonial relations” (Martin, 2005, p. 50). Belmore explains that the water in the piece is meant to be a reminder of how valuable water is as the setting of the film is on Musqueam land that has been polluted by the proximity of the Vancouver airport, lumber mills, and a sewage-
treatment plant. However, the piece means more than that. In many of her pieces, Belmore uses the presence of her own body to convey meaning. “I think it has to do with myself being an Aboriginal person and how my body speaks for itself. It’s the politicized body, it’s the historical body. It’s the body that didn’t disappear. So it means a lot in terms of the presence of the Aboriginal body in the work. And the female body, particularly” (Belmore quoted in Williams, 2005). Here, Belmore uses autobiographical tools to express a collective experience and memory. In this case, she explores the memory of colonialism and its visible scars on the gendered land and body.

In “Fountain,” Belmore’s physical presence as an Aboriginal woman frantically gathering water on Aboriginal land could be interpreted as the gathering together of Aboriginal culture and wholeness. She then throws blood in the face of her European viewers as she tosses the now blood-filled bucket at the camera, staring defiantly and knowingly into the camera. She not only shows the violence and bloodshed of Aboriginal peoples and particularly Aboriginal women. She is asking Europe to look back through the blood at herself, an Aboriginal woman, a politicized and historical body.

Belmore is using what bell hooks (1994) calls the oppositional gaze, a gaze that says, “not only will I stare, I want to change reality (p. 116).” The gaze itself is powerful as a means of standing ground and looking the oppressor in the eye, an act that was disallowed throughout years of black slavery and punished with lynching through the decades following emancipation (hooks, 1994). Belmore’s stare into the camera is active and full of agency as she embodies the ongoing presence of Aboriginal women in a system that has systematically opposed their presence (Razack, 1998). Furthermore, by using an installation, she is augmenting “the distance between the viewer’s intuitive experience and position as a bystander” (Mayrhofer, 2002). The viewer is pulled into the content and experience of the work. Belmore said of the moment when the blood runs down the screen: “I stare at you from one side and you’re on the other side, I think that really is the question: How long do I have to do this?” (Belmore quoted in Enright, 2005, p. 64). Belmore is speaking to challenging the space that exists between herself and the viewer. She questions herself as the unchanging and perpetually viewed phenomenon, and questions why the viewer does not move past the act of viewing to the acts of change and self-challenge.
In “Memory of fire,” Galeano tells the story of a Takuna woman who is punished by her community for destroying the legs of some young girls who had denied her food. When she is killed by her community, she gathers her own blood in her hands and blows it at the sun and shouts: “My soul enters you, too!” (Galeano, p. 53). Like the Takuna woman, Belmore is also demanding the gaze turn on complicity in murder and destruction. The act of throwing one’s blood or the blood of her people is a powerful symbol of responsibility. Lee-Ann Martin (2005), a curator and writer who has worked with Belmore, wrote that the blood in “Fountain” is a metaphor for the burden of Aboriginal history and that Belmore “flings responsibility for the cycles of bloodshed found within the history of colonialism in the Americas back to their European source” (p. 52). Like the Takuna woman, Belmore is using blood for redemption, remembrance, and the demand for responsibility.

Belmore’s work has similarities to the work of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban American artist. In the “Silueta” series, the artist shows imprints or photographs of her body or herself as the Great Goddess on different landscapes. Mendieta first used blood in 1973 in a performance about rape (Chadwick, 2007). Soon, she began to use imprints of her body in locations in the United States and Mexico. She also bound herself in strips of cloth and buried herself in mud and rocks. In doing so, she not only questions the male land artist tradition of portraying empty and de-peopled landscapes (Chadwick, 2007) by connecting her body and her body’s memory to the land, but, in doing so, her work also speaks to the gendered land through conquests and imperialism by exploring relationships of the female body, land, and nature. History for Belmore came from an exploration of geographical space as well as her body. “Place is very important to me, my body is very important to me and with that comes my own history” (Belmore quoted in Surlock, 2005). Of throwing blood at the camera, Belmore said that “it’s not only about my Indian history. It’s about the history of this land” (Belmore quoted in Gopnik, 2005). Violence on the Aboriginal woman’s body was reflected and repeated on the land.

McClintock (1995), in her work on gender and colonial conquest, wrote about the feminizing of the land in order to transform it into an inherently conquerable and obtainable possession during the conquest of the Americas. Both Mendieta and Belmore use Indigenous symbols and their own bodies first to directly question the use of gender
violence in colonization and the gendering of the land in the colonial imagination. Belmore wrote that “like a wonderer in this human/landscape my own body becomes a player within the work [...]” (Belmore, Artist statement). For the Anishinaubae people, the land was owned collectively by the Nation. However, the Nation was also part of the land and needed to care for it so that future generations could also benefit from it and reside upon it (Johnston, 1999). The artists use their own presences and bodies as testimony to a different history and reality of Indigenous connection to and possession of the land. Lastly, like Mendieta, Belmore uses blood to symbolize both violence and culpability, but also life and resistance. By showing Indigenous women’s blood, she is also testifying to her existence and her physical connection to land and water. Of “Fountain,” Belmore said that “all the history in between [my place and your place] is the blood” (Belmore quoted in Surlock, 2005).

Belmore responds to the idea of the disappearing Indian that is rampant in colonial ideology and in mainstream media discourse. Smith (2005) wrote of the “present absence” in the US colonial imagination that reinforces the idea that Native peoples are vanishing and the conquest of lands is justified (p. 9). Both the source and the result of such a belief is likely a powerful state of denial, in which a true perception of the presence of Aboriginal peoples could act as a reminder of the precarious founding of the countries like Canada. Aboriginal peoples were forced to “play dead” in order to perform a narrative of manifest destiny in which their role, ultimately, was to disappear. We have seen that this ideology is evident in mainstream media discourse and visual representations. In Fountain, Belmore responds to this powerful sense of historical and present denial of both Aboriginal existence, and the reminder of guilt and complicity with regard to Aboriginal peoples. In throwing blood at the viewer, she is thrusting both representation and reminder of life and death into the consciousness of the viewer. Then, as the blood slides down the screen and away, Belmore remains standing and staring as a testimony of survival and memory. Thus, in more metaphoric terms, when the physical traces of violence disappear, memory, responsibility, and complicity remain.

The theme of disappearance and memory is also explored in “Vigil,” a performance piece that was part of “The named and unnamed” exhibit at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in 2002. The exhibition was created by Belmore as a response to the
disappearance and murders of women, many of whom were Native, from Vancouver’s downtown east side. Townsend-Gault (2006), who specializes in First Nations art at the University of British Columbia and has written much about Belmore, describes the exhibit as implying “desecration, spoiling and defacement […] as was the sluggish indifference of the authorities to more than twenty years of ‘disappearances’” (p. 730). Belmore’s “vigil obligates viewers to collectively witness unspeakable atrocities and to take part in building a temporary monument to the victims” (Mayrofer, 2002).

“Vigil” was performed by Belmore on June 23, 2002 at the corner of Gore and Cordova streets in downtown Vancouver. The piece was filmed and then projected onto a large screen that was covered in forty eight lightbulbs, making the piece physically difficult and uncomfortable to look at. Belmore is shown calling out women’s names while she scrubs the pavement, where many of the women might have walked, with a wire. She then lights candles, one for each woman. Belmore then writes the women’s names in black marker all over her arms. This is not just a sad memorial, but an angry protest. A Globe and Mail columnist called the work “a raw redemption song” (Milroy, 2002, p. R1). Belmore shouts the names of the women and even gags on a rose as she bites the thorns off the stem. Like in both Maracle (1993) and Galeano’s (1995) exploration of empathy as involving a partial embodiment or consumption of memory, Belmore painfully bites the thorns and roses as experiencing the different aspects of memory, both painful and beautiful, as well as a visual display of silencing as her mouth is stuffed full of roses and thorns. Townsend-Gault (2006), an art historian who has focused much on Aboriginal art wrote about “Vigil.” “The crimes against the body, the Native body, the woman’s body, are embodied in, enacted by, or inscribed on her own body, as if in an act of atonement” (Townsend-Gault, 2006, p. 730).
Belmore also engages in an act of nailing her long red dress to a telegraph post and then pulls her body away showing strain in ripping herself free from the post. In what has been compared to an act of crucifixion (Mayrhofer, 2002), Belmore struggles as she is nailed to the post. Attention is now on the actual material of the dress as it is tugged and strained, and ultimately rips. “This is bodily stuff, this is the fabric of the flesh […] this is trauma’s re-enactments” (Townsend-Gault, 2006, p. 730). Mayrofer (2002), in her work on ephemeral moments in art, suggests that the ripping of the dress may be an act of self-harm that reflects the experience of the women themselves. The ripping of the fabric may also reflect the act of remembering and the experience of memory. Chambon (2008) writes about embodied learning, particularly from material experience and art, for social work. In keeping “viewer grounded in the materiality” of the work (Chambon, 2008, p. 594), the viewer evolves into participating in the experience of the work and arrives at knowing through the experience. In this case, the focus on the material of the dress itself allows for the embodiment of trauma itself made visible and tangible through the strain and pain of the fabric. The physical occurrence of the piece then becomes part of the memory. Memory itself becomes knowable through the tangible experience of the piece itself.

“Vigil” ends as Belmore is shown in T-shirt and jeans as she leans against a black pick-up truck as James Brown’s “It’s a man’s man’s world” blares out from the truck’s stereo. The truck has been there the whole time at the “periphery of her actions” (Townsend-Gault, 2006, p. 731) as a reminder of outside and male vigilance of Belmore even as she performs a vigil herself. The video of the piece is looped and looped again as the process of memory through telling and re-telling is played out.

In “True Grit,” Belmore plays with cultural representation, specifically the idea of producing culture for tourism, or the viewer. Belmore depicts herself on a six foot tall floral cushion. Her arms are crossed and she stares out at the viewer. In this work, Belmore is showing a statement about the commodification of Aboriginal women’s identities through the creation and selling of art for the tourism industry (Martin, 2004). She questions what is expected as the consumer market demands “authentic” Aboriginal art. By producing an unexpected image, Belmore questions whether the consumer wants art truly produced by Aboriginal women, or art that shows an expected and safe part of
Aboriginal identity. She also questions the making of such art itself and shows the complexity of the experience of an Aboriginal artist in deciding how to produce an image or how to self-represent through art. Belmore said of the piece: “I used myself as the central figure, the Northern motif, the Native Indian as a marketable commodity, the artist as product” (Belmore quoted in Phillips, 1992).

Rebecca Belmore, *True Grit, A Souvenir*, 1989, mixed media, 190 x 190 x 31 cm
Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, gift of the artist.

The idea of the consumption of Aboriginal culture for tourism is a theme explored by many Aboriginal thinkers and artists, including Belmore. Chrystos, a Menomonee poet, wrote about the consumption of Aboriginal culture and identity in her poem, “Old Indian Granny.” She wrote that “it’s knowing that with each invisible breath that if you don’t make something pretty they can hang on their walls or wear around their necks you might as well be dead” (Chrystos quoted in Smith, 2005, g. 13). Here, the very production of art is implicated in the production of Aboriginal identity and value in a colonial system. Yet, the art created by Aboriginal people for tourist consumption serves also as “texts” for the
analysis of the process of mutual imagining of the other that defined and articulated Native relations with their colonizers” (Phillips, 1992). When assimilation policies were at full force and the creation and expression of culture by Aboriginal people were violently attacked in Canada, the production of “tourist art” and the art itself were and remain testimonies of this history. Belmore explores tourist art and looks at cultural representations and performances of identity as played out in this art.

When Belmore was a student at the Ontario College of Art, she performed a piece called “(I’m a) High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama” that was supposed to address who she was or who she thought she was. The background of her performance piece was a television showing repeated scenes from the movie, “Little Big Man,” in which women and children were shot and teepees were burnt. Belmore sang the song she had written, “(I’m a) High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama.” She sang: “hang me from your keychain. Watch while I dangle in distress. Fe-e-e-l like you know our way.” Belmore juxtaposes past and present, as well as consumerism and art, particularly in the title, mixing “high-tech” with “teepee.” After performing the piece, Belmore went back home to Upsala, Ontario and felt that she was taking her “plastic teepee home, taking [her] stereotyped environment, [her] self-image” finally back to show to her own people and to see how they responded (Belmore quoted in Ryan, 1999, p. 75).

Although many of Belmore’s pieces are solemn and often tragic, Belmore uses humour as a way of rejecting cultural stereotypes. Belmore said that she uses humour as a tool. Humour works in different ways with different audiences; often non-Native audiences do not know when they should laugh, or if they are allowed to laugh. Yet, when Belmore dresses in stereotypical or exaggerated costumes, she tries to express that “this is funny. Let’s laugh! This is really stupid This is quite silly. These stereotypes are really really silly, aren’t they?” (Belmore quoted in Ryan, 1999). In these types of pieces, Belmore tries to rework and play with reality with the intention of being able to use laughter as a way of rejecting and questioning reality.

In the 1990s, Belmore focused on large-scale works and made extensive use of natural materials in order to represent or to recreate particular places. Once again, the idea of representation and memory is key in this act and the geographical place also becomes a cultural and personal place of stories and memories. Martin (2004) writes that Belmore’s
use of natural materials and her focus on place, is not about landscape, but is about land itself. She writes that Belmore aims to “reject romantic depictions that distance the land from the viewer’s personal experience.” Thus, not only does the artist look at the role of land in her memory and cultural history, but she pushes the viewer to make the connection as well. She explores ways of representing location by creating three dimensional places, in which the viewer becomes a participant in both the physical space, but also in the represented memory itself.

“A blanket for Sarah” was created by Belmore in 1994 and incorporates the use of pine needles and other natural materials, such as mosses. Belmore collected this material from Sioux Lookout where she grew up and spent a great deal of time and care in putting the material together (Martin, 2004). Although Belmore places much focus on performance in artistic career, she also engages closely with the material and natural world by “gathering materials from her natural environment and transposing and transfiguring them for a gallery setting” juxtaposing “seemingly Minimalist forms” with “anti-heroic and ephemeral natural materials” (Laurence, 2002, p. 46). Like “True Grit,” “A blanket for Sarah” is very large and the pine needles are woven into a background of wire mesh. However, because they are introduced on a sharp angle, they are very jagged and jut out at the viewer. Even in photographs of the piece, it is evident that the needles are sharp and pointy. The blanket is no longer just a protective cover, but now represents a complicated, uncomfortable, and even threatening presence. Sarah is the name of a woman who was homeless and who froze to death in Sioux Lookout (Martin, 2004.) Belmore explores the ideas of blanket in this work. As the piece is large, the viewer must be careful in moving around it and thus becomes a participant in the work as they become aware of their own safety and concern in navigating the jarring work. The blanket can also represent a cover of denial and the veiling of reality regarding the experiences of homeless women. Belmore describes this piece as one of the most challenging works she has created as she applied over one million dead pine needles through the screen. Although the piece appears simple, the sheer time and care it took to create transform the work into an experience of diligence and devotion that speak to the memory of Sara.

In 2004, works of Belmore and Niro were shown together in the exhibit, “Divergences.” Along with “A blanket for Sarah,” Belmore showed a large, mixed media
installation that explored memory and cultural survival. The piece was called “Maw-che-chehitoowin,” or “A gathering of people for any purpose.” The work was created in 1992 for the Land Spirit Power exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada. The piece shows a circle of chairs on a linoleum floor similar to the ones on which Belmore grew up (Martin, 2004). Belmore firmly situates the piece as taking place on her childhood floor, making use of a spatialized memory. On the floor is a circle of chairs, and on each chair is a tape recorder with the recorded voices of women in her community. Like Huntley’s (2005) film “The heart has its own memory,” in which the hands of women are shown as the women talk about their memories, Belmore makes use of voices without showing faces. Here, the viewer can see the chairs and the floor and can hear the voices of Belmore’s childhood. The actual floor from Belmore’s home is on display on the wall.

The viewer is once again transformed into a participant as she sees and hears memories. The vision of the floor is disruptive to expectations as it is displayed as if it were a painting on the wall. Belmore has succeeded in creating a form of testimonial autobiography, in which she has participated in the telling of others’ stories. Furthermore, the outcome of the multiple narratives is a collective memory and story that both shapes the individual and allows the individual to reinforce the whole.

What is most interesting is that although the piece is entitled, “A gathering of people for any purpose,” there are no people in the piece. Belmore has put emphasis on the Aboriginal body as a politicized and powerful body. But, here, Belmore has omitted using bodies in a piece that is about people. This piece is also important in exploring the idea of absence. We have seen that memory and absence have been themes in Belmore’s work. Belmore believes she has a responsibility and a role in exploring stories of those who are not present. Belmore wrote that “I believe I am just beginning to understand my role, particularly as an artist who has inherited an Indigenous history” (Belmore, Canada Council for the Arts, 2004.)

For Belmore, the absence of others has an immediate impact on those who are present. Like the story of the Takuna women or Raven’s words, responsibility and complicity in the lives of others is important and integral to an understanding of collective experience and history. In “A gathering of people for any purpose,” the subjects of the work are not actually present, but the memory and voices of the women are strong and
create a sense of existence. Belmore addresses the idea of the Aboriginal body that “didn’t disappear” (Belmore quoted in Williams, 2005). Here, the bodies themselves are not present, but the actual presence of the women has not disappeared. Instead, the viewer hears voices, sees the well-used floor of Belmore’s childhood, and is infused with images of a kitchen, a meeting place for women in Belmore’s hometown, as well as a symbolic place of meeting for many women. In this way, the collective histories and memories of women are called in to play. Johnston (1999) wrote that next to deeds, the Anishinaubae most respected speech. He quotes Anishinaubae writer and Pulitzer Prize winner N. Scott Momaday as saying that “words were medicine; they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. (Momaday quoted in Johnston, 1999, p. 50).

Belmore uses her Anishinaubae tradition of honouring speech and words by using tape recorded voices to reinvent memory and identity for the women of her community. Like magic, the invisible words create visibility and meaning for the women’s lives and identities.

Belmore’s use of “for any purpose,” in the work’s title is reminiscent of a cooking recipe and the viewer herself is struck by memories of smells and the physical touch and taste of food. Belmore’s work calls for a collective remembering, in which the viewer becomes a rememberer, and the bodies of Aboriginal women, although physically missing, become very real and remembered. Like the song, “Missing,” the women become missing within the context of others and the viewer comes away with a feeling of missing and missed women.

Belmore’s work is powerful in exploring a collective identity through the representation of the self and through the creation and telling of memory. She aggressively pulls the viewer towards the viewed until both interact and tell stories. Belmore’s work powerfully explores the gendering of the land, the politicized Aboriginal body, identity and cultural representation, and absence and memory. Memory and remembering for Belmore are embodied and tangible experiences that she carries out both on her body and in exploring space in her performance pieces and installations. The act of remembering becomes painful and beautiful at once. “With art you can make beauty, and at the same time you can address the ugly” (Belmore quoted in Enright, 2005, p. 64). Belmore
performs the acts of memory and feelings, drawing them on her body and carving them in space. She tugs and pulls at the viewer to do the same.

4. The rebel: Mime, memory, and identity in the work of Shelley Niro

“Don’t be afraid: the voices of the past are calling you, the voices of the present urge you on.”
-Sheley Niro (from “It starts with a whisper,” 1993)

Niro is a filmmaker, painter, photographer and writer who has exhibited her work in Canada and the United States. Shelley Niro is a member of the Mohawk Nation, Iroquois Confederacy, Turtle Clan, Six Nations Reserve. Niro was born in Niagara Falls, New York in 1954, and now lives in Brantford, Ontario. She has studied at the Banff School of Fine Arts, Durham College, and the Ontario College of Art. Niro’s photography looks at playing with, and re-presenting stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples, particularly women (Indyke, 2005). She often uses humorous scenes of parody featuring herself or family members and friends as the models for her photography (CMCP, 2007). Niro’s work as been part of such exhibitions as Unbury My Heart, Reservation X, This Land is Mime Land, and Indian: By Design. Niro describes art “as another form of activism as much as it’s also a form of creativity. It’s another language to mobilize people or rethink their history or experience […]” (Niro quoted in Marr, 2007). Niro (personal communication, March 12, 2008) explains that Aboriginal people still carry the weight of oral history and continue to make corrections and adjustments to what is taught as history.

Niro uses stories to explore her history as well as to show aspects of the collective memory and history of her people. For Niro (personal communication, March 12, 2008), it is important to acknowledge people from the past and to “think about people from the past who weren’t allowed to be expressive.” Spirituality plays an important role in Niro’s work as a way of paying attention to one’s history and also to the world in the present. In giving ancestors a voice, it is important to tap “into an energy that you can’t always see or hear, but if you sit still for awhile and listen, those answers come through” (Niro, personal communication, March 12, 2008). Like Belmore’s exploration of memory and history
through an honouring of absence and disappearance, Niro emphasizes the personal and spiritual act of listening to silence as a way of accessing memories.

Niro is the oldest sister in her family, and has one older brother. She describes her siblings as being artistic whether they are writers or makers of art such as corn husk dolls. Niro spent her childhood on the Six Nations Reserve and later moved to Brantford, Ontario where she has spent much of her adult life. She tells of her mother as being very lively and as having a great sense of humour. Niro has used her mother and her sisters in her work. As children, Niro says that they loved watching television, following such shows as “The three stooges,” “Mission impossible,” and “I love Lucy.” These sessions would only be interrupted when her father would walk by and turn off the television. Afterwards, Niro and her sisters would sneakily turn it back on and keep watching (Niro, 2008). Perhaps stemming from her love of entertainment, Niro (personal communication, March 12, 2008) insists that film “needs to be positive, life affirming, joyful.”

Rather than escaping reality in fictional works, Niro shows a stark, often humourous, sometimes tragic view of reality. Kalafatic (1999), in her work on Aboriginal women and film in Canada, wrote that Niro prefers to create fiction instead of documentary to mirror and reflect ourselves back to us, “but in an altered way” (p. 111). Much of her work explores the role of memory and histories for Native women and shows how Native women have survived using artistic expression, humour, and rebellion. Kalafatic (1999) describes Niro as continuing the tradition of using native storytelling techniques and filmmaking. They are also part of a tradition of women filmmakers in Canada that want and need to tell their own stories as well as to explore collective identities and experiences of their peoples.

Niro’s film-making is better understood within the context of the history of women filmmakers in Canada and the role of Aboriginal women in this history. When the National Film Board of Canada formed in 1939, contemporary English-Canadian women’s film production was launched. This genre was often in the form of documentary and films centered on themes about war and the war effort in Canada. In 1950, Margaret Perry, and in 1961, Judith Crawley created films relating to the representation of West Coast and Mi’kmaq Aboriginal legends. It is likely that neither director was Aboriginal and it is unclear about their process of gathering information or legitimacy in creating these films.
Beginning in 1967, Alanis Obomsawin began to produce films on Native issues, including “Kahnesetake: 270 years of Resistance,” which she created in 1993.

When Studio D, a publically funded women’s studio, was created in 1975, women filmmakers were able to address subjects that closely related to them. Studio D also aimed at giving Indigenous film makers access to funding and distribution (Armatage, et. al, 1999). In the 1980s, Studio D provided training programs for Indigenous women in making films. Around this same time, there was a shift within filmmaking at the National Film Board from viewing gender as the sole defining characteristic of identity to looking at issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Funding for women’s films has also been aided through the creation of federal and provincial arts councils, such as the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council (Armatage, 1999).

Niro has created a series of short films that explored personal and collective experiences and struggles to resist and survive colonialism. She does so using humour and gentle familiarity with both the subjects and the audience. Her camera technique is intimate, in which the camera itself is no longer a neutral look into the lives of Aboriginal peoples. It is transformed from an ethnographic tool that merely captures and does not explore its own lens into a handheld, self-conscious device complete with words flashing across the screen and actors peering, winking, and laughing into the lens. The camera person as well as the camera itself becomes part of the scene. Niro (2008) explains that it feeds her to make film and that film has provided her with a new way of looking at history.

This visual culture, as described by Rogoff (2001), is energetically explored by Niro in “Overweight with crooked teeth.” An Aboriginal man is shown walking down a long dirt road towards the camera. He wears a trench coat and a hat with a small feather in it, playfully reminiscent of cultural representations of Aboriginal people as the feather wearing, museum dwelling savage. When he finally arrives, he puts his face close up to the lens. The narrator, Lily Shangreaux, then begins to read a poem written by Niro’s brother, Michael Doxtator, in the 1970s. It begins by asking in a lilting and familiar way, “what were you expecting anyway?.” The narrator then names mainstream historical figures and representations of Aboriginal people. “A noble savage?” she asks. Later, she wonders, “Sitting Bull?.” In a slow voice she continues to reflect on identity as the camera shows everyday scenes of Aboriginal people. Some ride in a truck, smiling, laughing, and waving
at the camera. The quiet hilarity and absurdity of dominant cultural representations is reflected in their faces. The narrator says in a slow, soft voice, “we’re not supposed to think, just act. Not supposed to fart or screw!” The viewer is taken aback and is suddenly self-conscious of her own presence, her own desire to see and watch. No longer, is she invisible. The audience is being watched, waved to, and directly questioned using clever humour and familiarity.

Anzaldúa’s (1990) theorizings on a new Mestiza consciousness is useful in understanding the possible dimensions of Niro’s characters as engaging in many different aspects of cultural identity, from the reserve to the city, and the realities of everyday life. Anzaldúa writes of a “new” mixed race, mixed cultural identity, the concept of which originally related to the Indigenous and Spanish racial mix in Latin America. Anzaldúa (1990) explores what she sees as the perpetual transition and dilemma of Mestizo peoples. She writes of an inner war in which a “struggle of flesh” and a “struggle of borders” is played out (p. 378). A Mestiza woman receives differing messages and frames of reference that ultimately cause a cultural collision. But, by dichotomizing these parts of her identity, the result is a dualism of violence, in which all action is a reaction to the opposing culture, to patriarchy, and to white supremacy. Instead of dichotomizing different parts of her identity, Niro pulls them together through humour and play. Using the polymorphism of the tradition of the trickster, Niro is able to maintain a sense of wholeness by examining her different parts through irony and playfulness.
In “The red army is the strongest,” Niro once again uses her subtle and intelligent humour. The film begins as Aboriginal people enter what appears to be a community center. They smile and chat as they enter, often in pairs. Once inside, they perform a dance on a small stage to a propaganda song sung by the Red Army Choir for Soviet troops, “the red army is the best.” Niro discovered the song in a New York City music store when she happened upon the Red Army Choir’s compact disc (Niro, 2008). Niro plays with the word, “red,” changing it from its original Soviet connotation to celebrate Aboriginal warriors. The dancers combine stiff Eastern European marches and hand movements while carrying tomahawks and wearing feathers in their hair. Their faces are serious and grim. Once again, the camera shot looks slightly like a home video and the viewer is drawn into the scene. It also looks like there is an audience sitting in front of the stage on which the dance is performed. The use of the double set of audiences once again causes the viewer of the film to be self-aware of her role as the watcher.

Niro also uses a serious and sometimes tragic tone in her filmmaking. In “Rechargin’,” Niro depicts a Native woman dancing in a dance studio as she watches her image in a mirror. She directly plays with her own reflection, walking up to it, making faces, reaching out her hand. Here, she plays with the idea of identity and the reflection of identity transformed, watched, and once again, made familiar and intimate to both the dancer and the viewer. Here, the dancer watches herself and the direction of her rebellious and fighting gaze is self-directed. In a way, the viewer is excluded in this film, as the dancer performs for herself.

In “Tree,” Niro shows short clips of a young Aboriginal woman standing in various parts of a city. The film is shot in black and white, and the woman is wrapped in a beautiful blanket as she watches cold, urban scenes and quietly cries. At last, she slowly transforms into a tree. Niro emphasizes Aboriginal connection to the land, the destruction of both land and culture, and the disconnection that the woman feels as she stands in the city. Through colonialism, there has been an attack and an effort to deposes Aboriginal peoples of their languages and histories. In some cases, all that is left is land. Yet, even this is still being taken (Niro, 2008). However, the young woman is wrapped in a warm blanket with
Aboriginal designs on it. While she is alone and sad, she is protected and made safe. This is important in Niro’s work as the characters are ultimately loved and we are reminded of their humanity and also of the humanity of the process of creating film. When the woman becomes the tree, there is a sense of safety and comfort. The tree is also a symbol of historical and cultural memory as the young woman now becomes a long lasting witness to what she has seen. Not only is the tree a symbol of memory, but it also has a role in, quite literally cleaning the air; it teaches about the role of memory in creating safety in the future. Niro also plays with this theme in “Home,” as she shows a group of Aboriginal youth and young adults living in an urban park. She shows their day there, their interactions, and the community and comfort that they give each other. This film also speaks to Aboriginal relationship to the land as they find the park home, even in an urban setting. As we have seen, the setting for much of Niro’s work has been in urban environments, firmly situated in the present, and involving very real and accessible characters. Niro addresses connection to the land through the themes of gendering and colonialism, but also does so through the real and material connection of everyday life, whether it be in a city park or a community theatre.

Similar to Belmore’s “True grit,” Niro’s piece, “The shirt,” plays on the idea of the cultural representation of Aboriginal women for tourism consumption. “The shirt” (2004) is both a short film and a series of photographs. Both were shot in southern California, and the woman in most of the frames is Hulleah Tsinahajinnie, an Aboriginal artist and friend of Niro. The film lasts five minutes and shows each of Tsinahajinnie’s poses in sequence. She wears versions of a shirt that plays on the “All I got is this lousy T-shirt” that tourists buy, jokingly, for their friends who were not so lucky to go away. Certainly, the Aboriginal woman in the photographs has not gone away, either on vacation or from her place of origin. She is not a tourist; she is the ant-tourist in that she has always been there, she has never left, and she will not go away.
The shirts worn by the same woman in different poses begin by reading “my ancestors were annihilated, exterminated, murdered and massacred” and end by reading, “and alls I get is this shirt.” The subject, with her feet firmly planted on the ground and her arms crossed, represents the Aboriginal woman who is still very much alive. In one picture, she has no shirt, supposedly having removed it as she does not want or need it. She is rejecting the tourist image that has been imposed upon her. She also exposes her face and her hair and stares with strength, daring, and honesty into the camera. She holds her own breasts, possibly as a reaction to appropriation of women’s bodies in anthropology or tourist art that has focused on the “primitive Indian female.” She also holds her breasts in reaction to the body parts disappearing on Pickton’s farm and along the highway of tears. Her body is clearly her own. She is whole. Hers is a real body, marked from carrying children and weighed down with age. She is not an “imaginary Indian” and she is her own.
It is interesting to further explore the representation of the partially nude woman in this work as challenging traditional art theory and as relating to the gendered land. In traditional art theory, nudity has implied “vulnerability and often availability” (Cheney, et al. 2000, p. 194), in which the ultimate feminist act was to paint a male nude to reveal his vulnerability and for the female artist to create a female gaze. Niro’s piece, “The shirt,” questions this interpretation of nudity. The photograph of the woman with her shirt removed is a powerful image that shows strength and defiance in nudity. It is the only photograph in which the model has also removed her glasses and can stare directly into the camera at the viewers. There is no sign of vulnerability in her stance. While remaining the subject of the photograph she is still able to reverse the gaze and to question, and effectively displace the invulnerability of the viewer. She questions the projection of vulnerability, discomfort, and shame of the viewer through her very confidence.

Chadwick (2007) also writes about the history of women artists representing the nude female form in art. She writes that these images attempted to challenge constructs of the female identity as weak and as understood through sexual instincts, among other things that resulted in simplistic and degrading understandings of femininity. We have seen in the lessons of Raven, in Lee Maracle’s “Ravensong,” that female sexuality was viewed differently in Aboriginal communities then in mainstream white ones. Whereas Stacey’s classmate was overcome with shame at the telling of her sexual experiences, the sexuality of women in her community was something to be celebrated. Just as we have seen a different take on nudity in Niro’s work, there is also a different understanding of sexuality and therefore the representation of a semi-nude woman by an Aboriginal woman artist would not necessarily be used in the same way as for a white woman artist who surely had different struggles regarding the representation of female sexuality.

Smith (2005) wrote of how Native bodies are portrayed as a pollution of which the colonial white body must constantly purify itself. This is done through the description and projection of sexual perversion and “rapability” onto Aboriginal women. It is also done through the extreme disrespect shown to their physical bodies both alive and dead. She recounts stories in which there is mutilation and mistreatment of deceased Aboriginal bodies and looks at the displaying of Aboriginal bodies and burial bounds in museums. The consumption of Aboriginal bodies for museum viewers is a powerful tool for creating
public memory and for maintaining specific ways of relating to and understanding Aboriginal peoples.

Niro challenges the consumption of Aboriginal women’s bodies for the creation of colonial histories in “The shirt.” By showing the words themselves on T-shirts that describe the colonial process and ending with a semi-nude Aboriginal woman staring defiantly back at the viewers, Niro challenges this history in the very presence of an Aboriginal body. As we have seen, the representation of the subject of Niro’s “The shirt,” represents opposition to a white, male, and colonial gaze. It also stands as a testimony to a different experience of Aboriginal women artists and as an opposition to mainstream assumptions about female sexuality and women’s bodies in art.

In much of Niro’s photography, she uses humour and playfulness in exploring the themes of cultural representation and colonialism. Niro (2008) explains that non-Native audiences often respond better when Native artists use humour. Humour has the effect of getting the viewer involved. Niro aims to make her art as accessible as possible and uses recognizable situations and experiences. Much of Niro’s work comes within the tradition of theatrical photography, in which photographs are meant to tell a story through the staging of scenes and the deliberate posing of “actors” before the camera (Theberge, 2006, p. 7). While traditional art theory was critical of the theatricality of art in questioning and striving for the “purity of representation in capturing the essence of experience” (Henry, 2006, p. 134). Yet, “in an era when all photographic representation has become suspect, these fictions encourage an interrogation of the ‘truth’ of representation” (Henry, 2006, p. 134). In an interview with Abbott in 1995, Niro spoke about dressing up in costumes for her series entitled “This land is mime land.” She explained that “it starts feeling kind of schizophrenic because you’re putting on these different disguises but it was like I could put on these other personalities” (Niro quoted in Abbott, 1995). Using the tradition of the trickster’s polymorphous and humourous tradition, Niro gives insight into cultural representation, colonialism, and memory by deliberately using theatre and parody.

In “Mohawks in Beehives,” which Niro did in 1991, the photograph portrays her three sisters smiling ironically into the camera as they display their hairstyles. The three women gaze into the camera and make mock model poses showing off their nineteen-sixties hair styles. Niro is making commentary on the use of Mohawks as a hairstyle and
also the use of the 1960s, white hair style beehives as donned by her family members. Of cultural representations, Niro said that “we’re portrayed in the movies as cardboard cutouts, and when you try to present a different image, people are disappointed” (Niro quoted in Hanna, 1992). Yet, Niro insists on playing with cultural representation. Niro (2008) explains that she also chose to do this piece as well as others around the time of the protest involving the Mohawk Nation at Oka, Quebec, as well as the time of the Gulf War. Niro wanted to take a break from the heaviness of the conflicts and to have fun with her cultural identity. Freedom for Niro came through self expression. Niro explained the feeling of creating “Mohawks and Beehives” in an interview with Abbotts (1995).

It was liberating in the fact that we just allowed ourselves to act, to be flamboyant and outrageous, because you’re usually in situations where you have to know the rules and the protocol and know how to act in public. But, when you’re with your sisters you can give yourself license to be as obnoxious as you like, especially if you’re going to be out attacking the rest of the world. So, that’s what we did on this day. We invaded downtown Brantford […] (Niro quoted in Abbotts, 1995)

Attacking and challenging the world came through humour and play. Invading town involved dressing up and laughing with one’s sisters. Once again, Niro uses the trickster’s humour and polymorphism in playing with the heaviness of history and conflict.

Mohawks in Beehives
Shelley Niro (1991)
Niro’s series, “This Land is Mime Land,” Niro also uses humour and parody in exploring aspects of Aboriginal identity and in challenging dominant cultural representations. Chronologically, the series follows “Mohawks in Beehives” at a time when Niro “wanted to put [herself] into the work and [she] wanted to work with contemporary imaging” (Niro quoted in Abbott, 1995). Niro (2008) explains that this series is about being in the present, but thinking of the past. She emphasizes the relationship between stereotyping, the construction of history and efforts at the erasure of Aboriginal culture. In each piece, Niro presents three photographs in a row. The one on the left depicts Niro dressed as a popular western historical figure such as Elvis, the Statue of Liberty, or Marilyn Monroe. The poses are exaggerated and the costumes are obviously home-made. The first photographs are about performing various aspects of life, history, and identity. In some of the photographs, the shutter release cable is in view possibly emphasizing the constructed and contrived nature of creating and documenting cultural and historical identities. In the middle photograph, Niro displays a sepia-toned picture from her family photograph collection. On the right, Niro shows herself in casual and poses, in which she is often looking and smiling at the camera. Niro describes the act of dressing up as stepping outside of herself. Niro found all the costumes for the photographs at a local costume store and personally took all of the photographs herself. Alone in the studio, dressing up in costumes, and moving in front of the camera was a somewhat odd and amusing experience (Niro, personal communication, March 12, 2008).

North American Welcome
56 x 94 cm overall
Gift of Sandra Jackson, Bramalea, Ontario, 1995
Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (no. EX-95-134)

In “North American welcome,” Niro depicts herself as the statue of liberty. She is draped in a white sheet, adorned in a paper cutout crown, and holds a Hallowe’en flashlight as the torch, an obvious symbol of dressing up. She wears glasses and looks vaguely off to one side. In the middle photograph, a woman is shown wearing a large T-shirt from “Three fires traditional homecoming powwow,” and a “Six Nations” baseball hat. She looks straight into the camera. In the last photograph, Niro is shown in a strikingly contrasted and
shadowy black and white photograph relaxing in a seated position with one leg slung casually over the arm of the chair. This work plays with the story of the settler-Native encounter by portraying herself, a Native woman, in the role of another famous figure of welcome, the Statue of Liberty. Whereas Native people are often represented as savages, deviant, or disappearing, Niro questions these representations with another easily recognizable image of welcome. The Statue of Liberty is associated with the recent history of immigration to the United States beginning in 1886 when it was given to the United States by France as a symbol of friendship (National Park Service website, 2007). Niro explores both a different history of encounter and also points out that all who arrived were originally immigrants and First Nations peoples were the original “welcomers.” Furthermore, in juxtaposition to the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom connected to arrival in North America, for Aboriginal peoples, the arrival of outsiders meant a severe loss of freedom. It also plays with the idea of the temporal distancing of Aboriginal people to the creators of history in which Aboriginal people are perpetually delegated to stories of the colonial encounter. The other two photographs in the piece show Niro in the present day as well as the family photograph of her recent history to attest to present realities and experiences.

In “500 Year Itch,” Niro dresses up as Marilyn Monroe in a white dress, a blond, curly wig and elaborate make-up. Underneath her billowing dress, she has placed a fan lying in its back to make her dress swoop up around her. She holds the shutter release cable in her hand and the wire moves across the floor, towards the viewer, and out of sight. Barely visible on her other wrist is a black watch, again a reminder of the construction of both identities and the construction of temporal relationships to these identities. In the middle photograph, Niro shows an old photograph of her mother wearing a plain, light dress, and twisted slightly probably trying for a sensual pose like that of Monroe. Her hair is also short and wavy, but it is black. In the last photograph, Niro, herself, poses in a plain button up shirt and baggy pants. She looks sad, or possibly bored as she stares to the left of the camera. Again, she wears the same watch as wore when dressed as Marilyn Monroe. Niro chose to do this piece in 1992, close to the five hundred year anniversary of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas (Niro, personal communication, March 12, 2008). Like

The exploration of Marilyn Monroe is interesting as it was also done by Thomas King (1999) in “Truth and Bright Water.” In this book, a character tries for years to dye her black hair to look blond like Monroe’s hair. Despite sitting for hours and enduring the chemical pain of peroxide on her scull, she ends up only with an orange-like tint and tacky bustle of damaged hair. She is also convinced that Monroe is secretly Aboriginal and was adopted out to a white family. For this character, Monroe represents glamour and beauty, and is also Aboriginal. But, although the character believes in Monroe’s Native identity, she experiences the unattainable nature of Monroe in the literal burning of her skin and the inability to change her hair colour.

Niro’s exploration of Monroe is also about dominant constructions of beauty from which Aboriginal women were denied access. By playing as Monroe, Niro is disrupting this dominant narrative of white beauty. She also does so by placing herself in plain clothes and questions beauty in itself as she stares through her glasses to the side of the shot. In the
middle photograph, she shows an alternative view of beauty as the woman sways in her skirt and looks alive and happy. Of the viewer, Niro asks, “what do you decide is beautiful?” (Niro, personal communication, March 12, 2008). Monroe also represents the need to put on a costume “to get through life” (Niro, personal communication, March 12, 2008). Like King’s (1999) exploration of the confusing connection between the Aboriginal character in his book and Marilyn Monroe, Niro reflected on the relationship of her mother to Monroe. “I was thinking about some similarities, how my mother and Marilyn would have been the same age, and how they both lived in North America, but at the same time they’re so different that there’s no connection there at all” (Niro quoted in Abbott, 1995). Niro (personal communication, March 12, 2008) also explains that beyond beauty, in order to have a complete personality, one must be living in the world now and also have a memory of the past. By showing herself in the left hand photograph, Niro is firmly situating herself in the present as a real and complete person who remembers the past.

Niro explores other aspects of identity in the same exhibit. In the title piece, “This is mime land,” Niro dresses up and photographs herself as a star trek figure in “The Final Frontier” showing again the spatial and temporal othering of Aboriginal people. In “Camouflaged,” Niro dons a large purple coat and dark sunglasses perhaps to address issues of assimilation, the rendering invisible of Aboriginal identities, or the disappearing of Aboriginal women’s bodies, in this case, under layers of Western clothing. In the middle frame, she shows a woman wearing fancy Western clothes and shoes. The photograph is overexposed and the woman squints into the sun finding it hard for her to see or even locate the viewer. Lastly, Niro shows herself with her back to the camera wearing the same button up clothes she wears in other photographs in the series. By turning away and not looking, she is exploring the idea of camouflage and the power of knowing and seeing not only for herself, but for the viewer. The effect is frustrating for the viewer who wants to see. The voyeuristic and power-laden position of the viewer is disrupted when unable to see. Here, camouflaging is also resistance to being seen by the historically destructive colonial eye.
Niro further explores the relationship between the viewer, the subject in the right hand frame, and the subjects in the middle and right side. In “Judge me not,” Niro portrays herself as a judge complete with a white wig and black cloak. Her pose is a classical, stiff one, and she turns slightly away from the camera. Her face is white and powdered and her lips are painted red. In the middle panel, she shows a family snapshot of a woman dressed all in white, with sunglasses. She stands squarely facing the camera with her legs widely spaced and firmly planted on the ground. Behind her is what looks like a protest in front of a government building in Ottawa. In the last photograph, Niro is depicted
looking head on into the camera, displacing the direction of the judgment by directing her
gaze at the viewer.

Judge Me Not
55.9 x 94 cm overall
Gift of Sandra Jackson, Bramalea, Ontario, 1995
Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (no. EX-95-141)

Here, the idea of judgement is explored as the both the judge and the legal system represented in the government building are the ones ultimately being judged. In looking at the other photographs, Niro herself becomes an observer and a judge. And, in staring out at the camera and away from the protest, the woman in the middle photograph is shown to be judging the viewer. If looked at differently, the protesters could be perceived to be also directing their messages at the viewer of the image, and the viewer is made self-conscious as her sense of anonymity is disrupted as she is made the center of attention. In this photograph, Niro hoped to convey the message that “that’s enough with the judging” (Niro, 2008). Native people were always being judged from what they do with their money to why they want to keep or fight for their land. Also, Niro plays with the idea of constructing identities by showing that the judge also puts on a costume and plays a role (Niro, 2008).
Niro explores memory and stories in her work. “Seeing with my memory” is a painting that Niro did in 2000. The painting shows a woman peering out from behind a tree. She wears glasses and looks like the artist. Behind her is represented her home land of Six Nations near Brantford. The landscape is lush and colourful, and the woman appears within the forest, but looking out into the viewer, or the painter. Not only is she looking at the viewer, but her act of looking reminds us that the viewer is also part of her memory. Perhaps the viewing itself is a part of her memory, a part at which she can now look.

Niro explores narrative and memory in her piece, “Passages,” completed in 1997. In this work, she uses painting as well as photographs to re-remember aspects of her mother’s experience, the experiences of Aboriginal people entering urban settings, as well as a cultural memory of the land as it existed before colonialism. Much of the piece is displayed at ground level so as to pull the viewer into the image by disrupting their expectations of where their eye should go. The piece incorporates four painted scenes and shows four large photographs in front of the painted scenes of her mother entering the town of Woodstock, Ontario, pictures of urban structure connected to rigid politics, such as government buildings and a no parking sign, and lastly her mother leaving town, once again by foot.

In the first painting, Niro depicts part of the creation story of the Haudenosaunnee, or Iroquoian people. Although Niro herself is Kanyen’keha, or Mohawk, the two peoples share a common understanding of the creation of life, or the story of Turtle Island. The second painting shows a waterfall that is now found in upper New York State where the original home territory of the Kanyen’keha nations come from. The third painting shows a longhouse to symbolize the Haudenosauunnee people, or the people of the longhouse. The longhouse can symbolize both a physical structure, but also religion, a cultural group, and a cultural meeting place. The last painting shows the Grand River in Ontario where Niro’s home of Six Nations is now located. This work is a powerful exploration of memory and the role of the gaze in exploring one’s individual and collective history.

Lastly, in one of her most powerful works, “Rebel,” Niro responds to the desensualization and de-sexualization (Maracle, 1988) of Aboriginal women. In this work, Niro shows a representation of her mother reposing on the “American Motors Rebel” trunk of a classic vintage American car with her hand lifted above her head in a pose reminiscent
of Goya’s Majas. The presence of an older Aboriginal woman on top of an American car is also a juxtaposition of the all American girl. Niro’s mother is, in fact, the true American woman whose ancestors have been here since before America was called America. Niro plays with car culture and advertising, by exploring representations of sexuality, beauty, and consumerism.

The concept of the rebel has also been explored by Lee Maracle (1988) who wrote that the rebel can make changes by re-writing “her life onto the pages of a new history” (p. 121). Here, again, is the idea of the re-writing and re-telling of history as a means of creating or recreating cultural wholeness and individual identity. For Aboriginal women, both concepts are ultimately linked, as a resistance to the colonial effort to destroy the “sense of nationhood and the cooperation” among Aboriginal peoples (Maracle, 1988, p. 120).

Niro explores the idea of the rebel as exploring cultural stereotypes and collective memory, and looking at self-expression and representation. For Shelley Niro, the idea of the rebel is a proactive one that incorporates both humour and movement to action. Niro’s work is powerful and accessible, as it gently pokes at, and questions the viewer using humour. At times, this humour is fringed with sadness and at times with hilarity and playfulness. The viewer is pulled into the space of the viewed and must challenge her own assumptions, discomforts, and oppressions. Niro has created rebellion through art.
Chapter 6: Conclusions

To the rebel, it is the altering of her condition that will re-write her life onto the pages of a new history. Only rebellion, the spiritual cleansing of the bad blood that separates her from her womanhood, can appease the rebel.

-Maracle, 1988, p. 121

1. Changing discourses and lessons learned

For me, the process of writing this thesis, has been a process of learning about stories, trying to understand certain ones, and lastly undergoing a process of trying to write and imagine myself into the stories. This has not been a comfortable process for me. I was struck by the powerful hatred and denial in the stories of the mainstream media. I was also amazed, saddened, and moved by the beauty, anger, and humour of the art of Belmore and Niro. My discomfort also came from needing to look at my own story and my own capacity at writing stories. When I looked at early copies of this work and did not find myself, I reacted both with fear and exhaustion. My fear came from finding myself disappeared, perhaps disinvested even in the exploration of disappearance itself. I also felt tired before I had even tried to edit my writing, overwhelmed by the knowledge of hidden feelings, sadness and anger, that were hidden from my work.

Unlike anytime before in my academic history, I was confounded and confused by the very tools of using language that I had been diligently taught over the years. I had been taught to hide and change myself in my writing. I was rewarded when I could not be found, and I was given writing tips when I could see myself clearly. It was an uncomfortable moment when I recently looked for myself in my writing and could not find myself. The writing of this thesis was, therefore, also a process of self-discovery, and at times, called for a sincerity and conscientiousness that I did not know. I learned about distancing and denial through the exploration of mainstream writing, and I learned about honesty and responsibility through the art of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro. Research and writing became personal and emotional, and for the first time in years, I let it be so.

I was writing about pain, death, and a profound sense of invisibility, but I was also writing about life, love, and laughter. In the process of moving from looking to
participation in my research, I first experienced the often overwhelming stress of sadness and despair as I learned about a system that was profoundly uncaring, destructive, and colonial. Later, in experiencing the art, I began to, and also let myself feel happiness and joy. Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro are two women who are profoundly alive. To me, they are the rebels who show, and explore, on their bodies the lives of many. In doing art, they are screaming and laughing in the face of violence and colonization, and they are embracing life and identity with stories and art.

In my examination of mainstream media writing, there was a powerful sense of violence and denial in the discourse itself. I was unable to find any explicit discussion of race in either the Pickton case or the Highway of Tears, although Native women were highly victimized in both cases. If race was mentioned indirectly, there was no naming of racism. We have seen that by not mentioning race, a story based on racism becomes confusing and often stops making sense altogether. Most importantly, this denial and invisibility in the writing creates a distance between the reader and the subject of a story and does not call for an exploration of responsibility and complicity. Furthermore, photographs chosen by the media showing women killed or missing are often mugshots taken when women were apprehended for offences at other times in their lives. This creates a reversal of blame, in which the witnesses, and implicitly the victims, are represented as biased and illegitimate. Moreover, we have seen that representations of Native women as deviant have the effect of dismissing experiences of violence. There is also a disaffirming and disavowal of life.

Media discourse has been intensively destructive and violent with regard to Native women. Because of women’s important and central roles in cultural continuity, this violence must be taken very seriously. We have also understood that violence in the media comes with the colonial history of gender violence as central to cultural imperialism as well as violence on, and destruction of land. The Cheyenne proverb, “a people is not defeated until the hearts of its women are on the ground,” points to the tragedy and severity of gender violence as part of colonialism. It also points to the strength, resistance, and survival that Native women carry. Jaimes and Halsey (1992) in their work on colonial resistance in North America write that Native women form the core of Indigenous resistance to genocide and colonialism.
Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro have addressed the fragmentation, invisibility, and othering of Aboriginal women’s identities in mainstream discourse by telling new and remembered stories in remembered and new ways. Both are active in the re-telling and re-writing of stories and lives that have been purposely and strategically neglected in mainstream media. Stories are important, just as the very telling of the stories themselves becomes an act of memory and creation of history. Rebecca Belmore’s work is powerful in exploring a collective identity through the representation of the self and through the creation and telling of memory. Belmore explores the gendering of the land, the politicized Aboriginal body, identity and cultural representation, and absence and memory. For Belmore, it is possible and necessary to stand firmly in the presence of the absent, to re-remember and affirm life, and to create vigils to question and remember death. She aggressively pulls the viewer towards the viewed until both stare one another in the eye and tell stories. As blood, memories, and history wavers between the viewer and the viewed, another story emerges as the often painful process of self-examination unfolds.

Shelley Niro uses stories to explore her history as well as the collective memory and history of her people. Niro often uses humour and playfulness in exploring the themes of cultural representation and colonialism. By peering into the camera, dancing as Marilyn Monroe holding the shutter switch, or marching to Red Army propaganda music, Niro embraces, plays with, and holds up for all to see, identity and life. The viewer is pulled into the space of the viewed and must confront one’s own assumptions, discomforts, and oppressions, as well as to explore joy and life. For Niro, resistance to cultural colonization and loss of cultural knowledge and values also comes in the form of examining cultural wholeness and tackling issues that result in cultural colonialism. Like Belmore’s exploration of memory and history through exploring absence and disappearance, Niro looks at the personal and spiritual act of listening to silence as a way of accessing memories.

Belmore and Niro have created rebellion through art. Their work seeks to examine issues of identity and concepts such as community, connection or disconnection to land, colonialism, and violence. Belmore and Niro both explore the body as central to the experiences and identities of Aboriginal women and, through the body, are able to explore experiences of colonialism, loss, cultural identity, and survival. Both artists use their bodies
and self-representation in interesting and powerful ways to challenge and reject dominant representations and narratives. Like Maracle’s (1994) discussion of entering the body of the victim and Galeano’s (2005) retelling of the Takuna story of the victim entering the body of the perpetrator, the artists explore the role of the body in relation to empathy, responsibility, and resistance in order to re-tell, re-remember, and render alive histories, memories, and identities.

2. Social work, discourse, and art

It has been moving and altering to do this research, to look at, and participate in stories. Yet, I am a social worker, and the connections to social work must be made direct and clear. In thinking about social work, I must first acknowledge its colonial history. Social workers, in Canada, have participated and continue to participate in cultural imperialism and have been complicit in genocidal practices towards Aboriginal peoples. From the Sixties Sweep and the adoption of Native children into white families to the cultural and classist understandings of the family that continue to define child welfare practices, the field of social work actively participates in, and even creates colonial and racist practices.

Janovicek (2002), a historian on violence against women, has written about the racism behind services for abused women. Strategies said to help Native women are influenced by patriarchal relations, colonization, and rural-urban relations. The result was an exclusion of Native women from accessing many programs due to racist ideology in this sector of social work. The legacy of racism is also present in many social work classrooms where the norm of whiteness and the othering of knowledges, experiences, and histories are common parts of curriculum and learning environments. Social work scholars, such as Sakamoto (2007), call for subverting the exclusionary effect of whiteness by incorporating Indigenous knowledge of practitioners and clients.

In exploring its colonial past and complicity in ongoing structures of cultural colonialism, the field of social work is currently undergoing self-exploration and efforts at renewed definition both in education and in social work practice (Chambon, 2007a). In this process, the use of art for self-definition has become helpful and pertinent. There is a
tradition in social work practice and research in moving towards evidence-based criteria, which calls for professional performance to be “highly rationalistic, within a positivist or postpositivist approach” (Chambon, 2008, p. 592). Yet, learning through art offers a different approach of focusing on subjectivity and embodied forms of knowledge, as well as learning through experience and material perception. In her work on social work and the arts, Chambon (2008) looks at the art of Vera Frenkel as an exploration of content and process as paralleling the same search in social work.

Art not only has the potential to be a source of social work knowledge, but it can be a form of expressing what is learned about such experiences as loss, remembering, and life. Art can also be a way of experiencing and expressing embodied knowledge. Art “keeps the viewer grounded in the materiality” of the work (Chambon, 2008, p. 594). As we have seen in the art of Belmore and Niro, art is also able to pull the viewer in until she not only becomes aware of her subjectivity, but experiences a sense of involvement whether it be stemming from humour, fear, denial, guilt, complicity, or beauty. This physical way of knowing can be powerful for informing and learning about social work and specifically, for developing critical consciousness through the examination of one’s various identities, locations, and standpoints (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005).

The art of Belmore and Niro also has the potential to push social workers to examine their own experiences and histories, and to dismantle the process of othering that occurs when we are not challenged to partake in self-examination and critical consciousness. Just as the viewer of art moves from passivity to partial participation or involvement, the social worker moves from a positivist and objective stance to examine her many complexities in order to more complexly understand her client.

Chambon (2007) writes of recent meetings in Vermont entitled on the theme of “Transforming Social Work.” The meetings were meant to question and challenge how social workers write, see, and listen when engaging actively with social realities. In particular, the group calls for and notices an increasing centering of the arts in social work. The use of arts in social work must also respond to the social realities of mainstream discourse, in particular, in the media as one of the “important fabricators of representations” through “decontextualizing and dehistoricising the ‘stories’ […]” (Chambon, 2007, p. 205). We have seen that discourse relating to violence against Native
women has been wrought with violence and has contributed and maintained colonial and racist structures through such tools as normalization of violence and silencing of actual stories and lives.

Social workers, in their writing on social realities, must also be aware of the power of language and discourse, and must undergo a constant process of self-reflexivity. It is crucial to deconstruct the ways in which gender and racial violence are used, written about, and perceived in many locations in the colonial system. We must strive to put ourselves into the picture, to not shy from emotions and complex reactions. We need to examine our own intellectual distancing that can come through “objectifying social processes while casting aside the realm of personal commitment and of feelings” (Chambon, 2007, p. 206).

Just as the media tells one story and Aboriginal women’s art tells others, academic writing must be understood as being implicated in the telling of stories. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1992), in their work on de/colonizing the subject, write of testimonial autobiography, in which one person participates in the telling of another’s story. This has been used to disrupt mainstream literary conventions and shows the solidarity between those who write, translate, or interpret and those who share their experience. The exploration of memory and experience by Aboriginal women artists is important in creating and strengthening collectivity and also action. This way of writing and expressing experience is also important in academic writing. Yet, in participating in the telling of stories, Basil Johnston (1999), in his work on language for the Anishinaubae culture, reminds us of the power and magic of words and the care that needs to be taken in telling stories.

We have seen that challenging distancing in social work practice, writing, or participating in art has much to do with challenging the processes of othering. In this work, I have chosen to describe this process as one of empathy, challenging the lighter and amiable understanding of the word. Instead, I have looked at empathy as a difficult and often painful process of embodied learning. This process is often uncomfortable as it calls for an examination of our own complicity and capacity at oppression. It can also be a beautiful and joyful process of exploring life and love. The works of Belmore and Niro disrupt and dismantle the space the separates the viewed from the viewer, the subject of the story from the writer or imaginer, or the social worker from her client. Using their bodies to
explore identities and experiences, as well as oppression and destruction, their art speaks to the realization of responsibility, and lastly, to fighting and surviving colonization. To rebel has been the process of combining laughter and pain to explore and challenge oneself and then to challenge reality.

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