ABSTRACT

Representations of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canadian Art

Yasmin Juliet Strautins

This thesis focuses specifically on artistic projects that address violence against indigenous women and uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine their meaning and reception. I argue that the mainstream media has negatively stereotyped missing and murdered indigenous women and that art projects have the ability to reframe their lives to the viewing public. I focus on five case studies of works, including Vigil (2002) by Rebecca Belmore, REDress (2011) by Jamie Black, The Forgotten (2011) by Pamela Masik, Walking With Our Sisters (2013) by Christi Belcourt and Shades of Our Sisters (2017), created by Ryerson University students and produced by Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter. Art has the capacity to encourage activism, raise awareness and promote reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Comparisons can be drawn between how the case studies of these art works have framed the lives of missing and murdered women and the dominant media images that have prevailed in Canadian society.

Keywords: missing and murdered indigenous women, art, activism, Canada, media, storytelling, symbolism, embodiment, reconciliation, indigenous rights, Vigil, REDress, The Forgotten, Walking With Our Sisters, Shades of Our Sisters
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Chapter 1
Introduction

The reality of missing and murdered indigenous women has emerged as one of the most pressing human rights concerns in Canada. Indigenous women are five times more likely to die as a result of violence than women of the same age but different ethnicity (United Nations “Human Rights Violation”). Currently, there are more than 1000 documented cases of missing and murdered indigenous women. The statistical data gathered on domestic violence against indigenous women is alarming. Physical injury is reported to be the leading cause of death for women living on Canadian reserves, while eighty percent of indigenous women have seen or experienced domestic violence in childhood (McGillivray and Comaskey 13). The problem has had a significant impact on members of indigenous communities across Canada, as many are likely to have a family member or friend who has either gone missing or been murdered.

Violence against indigenous women has not only affected indigenous communities but has also played a significant role in Canadian politics. At an international level, a Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations has highlighted the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women to the General Assembly’s Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee and emphasized the need for action by federal, provincial and municipal governments (Laurin). The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police has called on their forces to create new policies and procedures to counter high levels of violence faced by indigenous women (“Missing Persons Investigations Policies” 35). The current federal government led by Justin Trudeau has made addressing missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada a top priority to promote reconciliation with
indigenous peoples. At a provincial level, the government of Manitoba has created an action group that brings together indigenous organizations and community agencies to implement policies addressing the problem (Province of Manitoba 1). At both federal and provincial levels, governments are calling on Canadians to engage in conversations about how to confront the high levels of violence against indigenous women.

It is important for the public to consider why so many indigenous women have gone missing or been murdered. What are the underlying reasons for the fact that nationally, indigenous women have reported acts of violence at a rate of 3.5 times more than non-indigenous women (Brzozowski, Taylor-Butts and Johnson)? One can look to historical factors as to why indigenous women have become increasingly marginalized by violence. In the past, some indigenous communities had patriarchal power structures but in other indigenous societies women held powerful political and social positions with various responsibilities handed down to them from their ancestors (McGillivray and Comaskey 1). The communities that were matrilineal and women-centered began to alter only after exposure to a European understanding of femininity and masculinity, one that subjugates women (McGillivray and Comaskey 28). British and French settlers’ lack of understanding and respect for indigenous culture in Canada was the root cause of this problem. Patriarchal power structures were introduced by Europeans to formerly egalitarian and female-centric communities because some settlers were fearful of the foreign concept of strong women as leaders in their communities or they saw European patriarchal norms as signs of inevitable, superior progress (McGillivray and Comaskey 28). European settlers attacked cultural differences in indigenous societies and
purposefully marginalized indigenous women to fragment indigenous communities ("Artist Jamie Black and the REDress Project").

The Government of Canada has played a role in marginalizing indigenous women as exemplified in the Indian Act of 1876. This national policy specifically separated indigenous women from their communities. It stipulated that an indigenous woman living on a reserve who chose to marry a non-indigenous man would automatically lose her Indian status (Lawrence 2). Conversely, an indigenous man would not lose his status if he chose to marry a non-indigenous woman (Castellano 122). Therefore, Indian status began to be associated with the male line of descent. This part of the Indian Act remained national policy until an amendment was passed in 1985 due to political pressure by indigenous women and their feminist allies. The clause controlling Indian status demonstrates the Canadian Government’s role in discriminating against the legal rights of indigenous women.

After the Indian Act was amended in 1985, an indigenous woman who married a non-indigenous man could apply to band councils to have her status reinstated. However, most band councils had become male dominated and influenced by the Indian Act’s bias against indigenous women (Fiske 251). Evidence reveals that some band councils purposefully made it difficult for indigenous women to regain their status (Fiske 252). In many cases they were labelled outsiders by their communities even if their Indian status was restored (Fiske 252). Some were ultimately forced to leave their communities because they were made to feel unwelcome (Fiske 252). Métis scholar Janet Silman argues that the Indian Act led non-status indigenous women to become “painfully aware
of sexual discrimination”, as they had their rights taken away and many were unable to find employment (Silman 93). The lack of access to employment led to a decline in the living conditions of many indigenous women (Silman 94). Consequently, a cycle of discrimination is now ingrained in some indigenous communities.

In the article “Boundary Crossings: Power and Marginalisation in the Formation of Canadian Aboriginal Women’s Identities”, Jo-Anne Fiske illustrates how an indigenous woman who lost status faces barriers when trying to access necessary services because the Canadian government has tied client eligibility to Indian status in an attempt to lower costs (Fiske 257). Due to systemic discrimination against indigenous women, many cannot find jobs or affordable housing (Fiske 257). The Native Women’s Association of Canada asserts that indigenous women face persistent and often extreme social and economic marginalization (2). It is unjust that many lack access to higher education, affordable housing and employment (CCPA 37). A report by Amnesty International titled “No More Stolen Sisters” “estimates that three times more Indigenous children are in state care” at present than during the time of residential schools (17). Indigenous women are more likely to experience a lower quality of life due to various factors including that they are more likely to have been removed from their families and placed in the foster care system (Amnesty International 4). The social and economic discrimination they face is a human rights violation according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Amnesty International 4).

In a 2009 research study the NWAC found that 40% of indigenous women are living in poverty” (NWAC, “Aboriginal Women” 1). Some feel they have no alternative
but to work in the sex industry, where they face higher levels of violence (Fiske 257). In 2004, Amnesty International Canada reported that thirty percent of women working in the sex industry in Vancouver were indigenous, although indigenous people only made up three percent of the Canadian population (Knopf 365). In 2008, Statistics Canada found that “70% of sexually exploited youth and 50% of adult sex workers in Winnipeg are of Aboriginal descent” (Statistics Canada 10). These numbers are especially alarming as indigenous people only account for about 10 percent of Winnipeg’s population (Statistics Canada 10). Indigenous women working as prostitutes are further marginalized because of “ethnic stigmatization” (Knopf 365). They are stereotyped not only because of their gender but also because of their racial background.

The mainstream media has employed discriminatory stereotypes to label indigenous women, which in turn has increased their vulnerability. An example of can be seen in the media coverage of the high profile murders of indigenous women by the serial killer Robert Picton in British Columbia. The women were labelled by the media as “abused and runaways” (Jiwani and Young 906). Feminist scholars Jiwani and Young highlight how Serena Abbotsway was described in a newspaper article as “abused in every possible way which really set her future” while she was in foster care (906). Jiwani and Young uphold that the media has continued the trend of describing missing and murdered indigenous women as living “high risk” lifestyles (906). Many of the women murdered by Picton were from the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver, an impoverished neighbourhood that newspapers often label as the “poorest postal code” in Canada (Jiwani and Young 897). The indigenous women who went missing or were murdered in the Downtown Eastside were grouped together and described as drug addicts and deviants by
the media (897). Jiwani and Young explain how a newspaper article described April Roech as representative of all indigenous women living in the Downtown Eastside by stating “she had much in common with the other women on that list. She was battling a drug problem as were the others. She was known to work as a prostitute, as were they” (897). Whenever an indigenous woman does not “fit the pattern” of being a prostitute, criminal or abused in foster care, the media features a headline such as “‘Fabulous girl’ didn’t fit in Downtown Eastside” (Bolan). This illustrates how the mainstream media values certain lives while devaluing others.

There have been resistance efforts challenging negative stereotypes of indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside. In “A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood” Kim Anderson, who identifies as Cree and Métis argues that there are “foundations of resistance” for indigenous people which include connections to family life, community, land, spirituality, language and storytelling (116-136). Dara Culhane’s article “Their Spirits Live Within Us: Aboriginal Women in the Downtown Eastside Vancouver Emerging Into Visibility” highlights the annual Women’s Memorial March held in the Downtown Eastside as an example of indigenous resistance (593). This initiative has challenged the negative stereotypes of indigenous women in the mainstream media in an effort to reclaim power for indigenous women. Writing from one of the March’s flyers (2001) illustrates how this initiative counters negative labelling “We are aboriginal women. Givers of life. We are mothers, sisters, daughters, aunties and grandmothers. Not just prostitutes and drug addicts. Not welfare cheats. We stand on our mother earth and we demand respect. We are not there to be beaten, abused, murdered, ignored” (Culhane 593). The Women’s Memorial March’s demands serve as inspiration
for efforts to retell indigenous women’s stories showing that they are powerful and have the ability to bring about change.

In this thesis I argue that it is vital to provide the public with alternate representations of indigenous women’s lives in order to fight negative stereotypes perpetrated by mainstream media outlets. This thesis explores how the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women are reframed in five provocative artistic projects that address violence against indigenous women. These particular case studies have been selected because they are accessible to the public and have received the most scholarly attention and discourse. I argue that art is a powerful tool in potentially shaping, indeed re-shaping the public perception of missing and murdered indigenous women. This is a crucial time for research development in this area of study as the long-awaited national inquiry addressing the more than 1000 documented cases of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada is underway.

It is important to consider why an emphasis should be placed on art in reframing indigenous women’s lives for the public. The art projects featured in this thesis showcase how art has the ability to transform a difficult topic into one that can be engaging and accessible to the public. Prominent indigenous artists including Christi Belcourt and Rebecca Belmore, who are featured in two of the case studies, have described how art can make a complex subject more approachable to the public. Christi Belcourt professed, “I think art is a vehicle and it is powerful in its ability to communicate what, sometimes, plain words cannot” (Belcourt qtd. in Benjoe). Art can be a way of interpreting one’s own experience in the world. When people encounter a given art work, they may or may not have a strong reaction to it. A recent lecture series entitled “Creative Minds Creative
Minds” (launched by the CBC), explores how political activist art can be vital in shifting public opinion. Guest speakers at one of the lectures, including artists Rebecca Belmore and Buffy Sainte-Marie, have claimed that art has the power to make people care about subjects they either were unaware of or had never taken an interest in (“Creative Minds: Art and Social Justice”). It is possible for works of art to accomplish this by manipulating how its subject matter is portrayed in an effort to elicit different reactions from the viewer (“Creative Minds: Art and Social Justice.”). This thesis explores how various works aim to affect or influence public opinion through an analysis of how indigenous women are represented in the selected case studies.

My research relies on three primary sources of information. The first is an account of my experience viewing the art installations either in person or through videos and images found online. I provide a summary of the motifs in the work that I found to be most interesting and affecting. A written account of my personal interpretation of the art work is important because of the subjective nature of art. I have chosen to include my reaction to each art installation because my view of the installation is reflective of my own values, beliefs and pre-existing biases. My experience of an art work is also based on the specific time and place that I viewed it (Ratcliffe). The second set of sources includes newspaper articles, blogs, journals and books that have been written about the selected art projects. This helps to identify how various experts and general members of the public have interpreted and reacted to the installations. The third set of sources includes comments that the artists of the featured case studies have made online and in academic journals regarding their art projects. It is important to include direct input from the artists themselves about their intended project goals and how they have decided to represent
missing and murdered indigenous women. This is vital as it helps one understand their vision in terms of how to reframe the lives of indigenous women to the broader public. Considering the artist’s vision for a work is also necessary because an artist’s intended interpretation may differ from how works are understood and received by critics and other viewers.

I had intended to interview each of the artists of the case study projects that are featured in thesis. I contacted the creators of the projects asking for an interview but did not hear back. In an effort to highlight input from each of the artists I analyze prior interviews they have given and their artistic visions for the projects that are summarized on their websites.

As a non-indigenous member of the Trent University community, I recognize that my research comes from a settler’s perspective. I have sought input for my research from members of the First Peoples House of Learning at Trent University and indigenous scholars with the intention of using appropriate terminology. In my thesis, I refer to First Nations, Métis, Aboriginals, First Peoples and Inuit as ‘indigenous’. I am aware of debates in indigenous communities on the appropriate terminology and realize that this is a politically charged issue (Alfred; Corntassel; Kenrick and Lewis).

Colonialism is a framework that can be used to understand indigenous people’s fractured relationship with settlers. Prominent indigenous scholars Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel’s define colonialism as “a narrative in which the Settler’s power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective on that power” (601).
Indigenous peoples continue to be marginalized in Canada due to the ongoing effects of colonialism. Alfred and Corntassel argue that the Canadian state uses “shape shifting” tactics to “erase indigenous histories” and a connection to the land (601). George Manuel and Michael Posluns who both formerly worked for the Assembly of First Nations outline the “effects of contemporary colonial processes” in their influential book *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. They maintain that “The colonial system is always a way of gaining control over another people for the sake of what the colonial power has determined to be ‘the common good.’ People can only become convinced of the common good when their own capacity to imagine ways in which they can govern themselves has been destroyed” (60). Residential schools are an example of the Canadian Government and the Christian Church’s attempt to sever indigenous people’s ties to their communities for “the common good”. The schools were created to assimilate indigenous children into Canadian society and convert them to Christianity and were in operation for over a century with the last school closing in 1996 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). It is important, however, to recognize that indigenous peoples in Canada should not be defined only by their experiences in residential school or the narrative of colonialism (Alfred and Corntassel 601). Alfred and Corntassel argue that they should define themselves by their “actions to regenerate their identities” by practising their traditional languages, social structures, governing practices and laws (614).

Missing and murdered indigenous women have experienced the effects of colonialism and violence in differing ways that are specific to their unique identities as First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Unfortunately, the majority of research and data gathered on missing and murdered indigenous women has not discussed the different experiences
of indigenous women and they are often grouped together as a homogenous group (NWAC, “Sisters in Spirit” 14). This has made it difficult for organizations such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada to meet the specific needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis in response to violence against indigenous women. In this thesis I highlight how specific art projects have been able to convey the unique identities of indigenous women to the public in an effort to help communities heal.

The thesis begins by exploring critical work on how art can counter the media’s negative construction of missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives. It highlights the research on feminist scholars who have investigated how the value of certain lives is socially constructed. It seeks to counter the media’s predominantly negative portrayal of missing and murdered indigenous women. It includes prominent scholars’ in-depth media surveys of missing persons’ case articles. Media surveys in this case are defined as an analyses of a selection of newspaper articles that discuss missing and murdered indigenous women. Literature on political activist art, indigenous art and art specifically concerning violence against indigenous women will also be discussed.

including the role of embodiment, naming and symbolism in reframing the women’s lives.

I define naming as the practise of revealing an individual’s name; for example, in *Walking With Our Sisters* some of the moccasin vamps have names beaded into them. Symbolism is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: such as artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states.” Embodiment is discussed in this thesis in relation to Rebecca Belmore’s *Vigil* (2002) and is the method of using one’s own body to tell a story. The themes convey the importance of representing the women as valuable members of society countering the pervasive stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media.

An interdisciplinary approach is utilized when examining each of the case studies. My own background is in the field of human rights, political science and Canadian studies. This project touches upon numerous areas of research including but not limited to activist art, community art, indigenous art and feminist theoretical analysis. I am not an expert in each of these fields and instead focus on including key articles and books that relate to how missing and murdered indigenous women are represented in art. Each of the thesis chapters highlights relevant literature related to central themes of the case studies.

The chapters are arranged chronologically from the oldest work (*Vigil*) to the most recent (*Shades of Our Sisters*) as many of the projects were influenced by previous
installations. The first case study in this thesis is *Vigil* (2002) by Rebecca Belmore. This is a performance piece that originally took place in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. The choice of this location was strategic, as Belmore wanted to focus on violence perpetrated against indigenous women in the area. Belmore’s performance included yelling the names of missing and murdered indigenous women written in black marker on her arms, and lighting candles for each woman. *Vigil* is a powerful performance piece that subsequently inspired other artists to create commemorative projects. I consider how Belmore, as an indigenous woman, embodies in her performance the pain and violence experienced by missing and murdered indigenous women. I discuss Belmore’s goal for the project, which was to draw attention to the inaction of the Canadian government and mainstream media in raising awareness of staggeringly high levels of violence against indigenous women.

The following chapter discusses Jamie Black’s *REDress* (2011) which includes over 150 red dresses that are each unique and have been donated by the public. The project has been installed in outdoor public locations, on university campuses and also inside gallery spaces including the Canadian Human Rights Museum. This project is important because it shows how the symbol of a red dress can be used to draw attention to violence against indigenous women. In this chapter, I outline my experience viewing the art installation and attending workshops led by Jamie Black at the University of Toronto in March of 2017. The chapter discusses the project’s goal of drawing attention to the role that sexism and racism play in violence against indigenous women. It outlines how Black is able to “evoke a presence through the marking of absence” and features themes of symbolism, connection to the land and political protest (Black). This relates to
the thesis’ main argument, as Black is representing missing and murdered indigenous womens’ lives in a unique light in order to counter negative stereotypes present in the mainstream media.

*The Forgotten* (2011) by Pamela Masik features 69 individual portraits of missing and murdered indigenous women on eight by ten foot canvases. They are painted reinterpretations of photos originally released on a RCMP Missing Women’s Task Force Poster. The goal of Pamela Masik’s art installation is to raise awareness about the high level of violence experienced by indigenous women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Masik has asserted that the title of the project was “chosen to describe society’s apathy toward a group of women marginalized by class, race, gender, and sexuality” (Masik, “The Forgotten Project”). The goal of her project is to encourage inquiry as to why so many women have gone missing and been murdered in the Downtown Eastside. This project differs from the other case studies because it has garnered much criticism and controversy from scholars as well as the wider public. Amber Dean and Laura Moss have questioned the graphic depictions of violence in the portraits, as many of the women’s faces are battered and bruised. This chapter explores the problems associated with Masik’s representation of the women. I consider what it means to be an ally to indigenous communities and outline how the controversial nature of the project has influenced a conversation about how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women in art. This has prompted the question of whether or not art that showcases brutal violence further marginalizes its subject matter or is an effective method of awareness raising.
Walking With Our Sisters by Christi Belcourt is a collection of over 1810 donated pairs of moccasin vamps that represent missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada. These moccasin vamps are left deliberately unfinished and unsewn into moccasins to represent how the women’s lives were taken from them prematurely. The project also includes 118 pairs of children’s vamps to commemorate those who died in residential schools. The project has been displayed in galleries as well as indigenous community centers. Belmore views Walking With Our Sisters as a memorial and ceremony. The chapter focuses on the community involvement that has made a project of this scale possible. It discusses not only the impact that volunteers have had in donating vamps to the project but also the valuable input of elders and community organizers. In addition the chapter outlines the importance of symbols and the names that are beaded onto the vamps.

The final case study focuses on Shades of Our Sisters (2017), originally created by Ryerson University students and produced by Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter. The producers of the project are family members of the murdered indigenous women Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter. The goal of the project is to honour missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, transgender and two spirit peoples and celebrate their lives, shifting the focus from “tragedy to celebration” (Hopper). This chapter analyzes how Shades of Our Sisters celebrates the lives of Sonya and Patricia through “artifacts from their lives, short documentary pieces and soundscapes” (“Who We Are”). The project is unique in featuring objects such as dolls, letters and notebooks that once belonged to the two women. Shades of Our Sisters aims to “humanize” missing and murdered indigenous women and create an educational
experience for the viewer (“Who We Are”). The chapter highlights the importance of indigenous storytelling to promote healing in indigenous communities. It also discusses the theme of reconciliation and why it is necessary for Canadians to have conversations about the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women. Finally, the chapter analyzes how Shades of Our Sisters represents the lives of the women and encourages the public to become activists challenging the media’s negative framing of indigenous women’s lives.

This thesis maintains that art projects can reframe missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives as being valuable to society and also challenge the media’s dehumanizing racist and sexist stereotypes. The art installations selected as case studies accomplish this by using a variety of approaches, including naming, symbolism and embodiment. The art projects attempt to portray missing and murdered indigenous women as individuals who were loved and valued by their families and communities, rather than disembodied and faceless statistics.
Chapter 2
Situating Research in Political Activist Art

Art is a powerful vehicle through which the status quo and mainstream ideology can be challenged. I focus on how indigenous women’s lives are represented by the mainstream media, feminist scholars and artists. This literature review is divided into three sections. I begin by outlining how the mainstream media has created a negative framework to understand the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women. I then discuss scholars’ analysis of media surveys that reveal problematic racist and sexist stereotypes. Feminist scholars’ research into the framing of lives and how the public engages in mourning is outlined. Their research reveals how missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives can be reframed to the public. Finally, I highlight research on political activist art that describes how artworks can influence the public’s understanding of a politically charged topic. This supports my main argument that art has the power to change conversations on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women and counter negative stereotypes present in the mainstream media.

Analysis of Mainstream Media Coverage

It is essential to give an account of research that looks at the mainstream media’s reporting on missing and murdered indigenous women in order to provide evidence of negative media stereotyping. Feminist scholars including Kristen Gilchrist, Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young have conducted media surveys on the topic of missing and murdered indigenous women. Their conclusions suggest that indigenous women have been marginalized by problematic media coverage. A case study by Gilchrist finds that the level of reporting on missing indigenous women was “three and a half times less”
compared to missing white women and the “photographs were smaller, less empathetic and provided minimal details” (382). This reveals the power of the mainstream media to influence the public to understand certain lives as being valued over others.

This thesis specifically focuses on challenging negative stereotypes present in mainstream media sources. Gilchrist, Jiwani and Young’s media survey findings support my argument that changing current conversations on missing and murdered indigenous women is necessary. My research relies on Jiwani and Young’s analysis of *Vancouver Sun* articles. It also features Gilchrist’s media review of local newspaper articles selected from a Canadian Newsstand online database (378). She specifically chose the most widely read articles that are accessible to the public (378). This thesis does not refer to alternative, indigenous or counter culture sources in making the case that missing and murdered indigenous women have been negatively stereotyped by the media, though we should contemplate the possibility that their approach is distinct from the mainstream media.

The mainstream media has the ability to act as a gatekeeper and select which missing persons’ cases are important and should receive a wide range of coverage. News outlets often portray the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women according to socially held stereotypes, constructing certain lives as valuable, others less so. This construction is “filtered through a predominantly western, white, heteronormative, middle-class, male lens” (Henry and Tator qtd. in Gilchrist 2). News is a “constructed reality” where the bias of reporting impacts the public’s perception of its subject matter (Tuchman 97).
Indigenous women have been negatively labelled by the media and there is evidence from scholarly articles to support this assertion. “Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse” (2006) by Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young investigates problematic stereotyping in 128 articles in the *Vancouver Sun* on missing and murdered indigenous women from 2001 to 2006. They find that indigenous women are represented in the media as being “deviant” and living “high risk” lifestyles (904-909). The media commonly portrays them as “abject victims of poverty”, “drug-addicted prostitutes” and “degenerates” (Jiwani 6-8). Indigenous women are visible in the media as criminals and sex workers which dehumanizes them (Jiwani and Young, Gilchrist; Razack). Even accounting for the Sun’s reputation as close to a ‘tabloid’ paper, this portrayal is intensely negative.

Women who work in the sex industry are marginalized by mainstream society while the men who purchase sex do not face the same backlash because they are understood to acting in line with masculine gender stereotypes (Jiwani and Young 900). Feminist scholar Sherene Razack suggests that the indigenous women working within the sex industry exist within “spaces of degeneracy” where men are able to engage in devious behaviour and purchase women’s bodies and then return to their normal lives (127). This shows how women who work in the sex industry become a part of the lower class, while men who buy sex retain their social status. Jiwani, Young and Razack agree that this leads to the marginalization of indigenous women due to the intersection between race, class and gender that empowers white men. Societal norms that govern public life therefore privilege certain lives while rending others invisible (Dean; Jiwani and Young 902).
There is a contrast in the media between the bodies of the virginal white mother figure who is seen as “good” and worthy of being mourned, and the impure racialized woman who works in the sex industry and is labelled as “bad” and deserving of crimes committed against them (Collins; Jiwani). This categorization of women being “good” or “bad” based on racial background perpetuates the negative stereotype that some women are more deserving of violence (Collins; Jiwani and Young). Feminist scholar Amber Dean supports Jiwani and Young’s research by affirming how harmful it is to devalue lives based on race and gender. In her book *Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women* she articulates how (in the media) sex workers are “framed in a way that implies criminality” through negative labels to describe them and choosing to feature mug shot photographs (86). This example illustrates how the media ignores all other aspects of a women’s life that could humanize them. Instead these articles sensationalize, focusing on the negative aspects of sex work, thus conveying the impression that their lives are not of value (Jiwani and Young; Dean). The dehumanizing of sex workers’ lives increases their vulnerability and makes them more likely to be targets of violence.

Yasmin Jiwani, Patricia Collins and bell hooks have researched how women of racialized backgrounds including indigenous and black women, face discrimination in mainstream news outlets and argues that “coverage of women who are racialized by others also conforms to these society constructions- invoking and re-inscribing popular stereotypes of these women as being hyper sexual, thereby minimizing the reality of violence done to their bodies” (Jiwani 902). The media’s negative labelling and suggesting a connection to the sex industry in order to dehumanize racialized women (Gilchrist; hooks). The media coverage of Serena Abbotsway, one of the indigenous
women murdered by Robert Pickton, can serve as an example of the way that indigenous women are misrepresented in the Canadian media. News articles covering her background story focused on her troubled youth and the abuse she experienced in foster care during her childhood (Jiwani and Young 906). Jiwani and Young make the important point that news agencies did not mention the reasons that she was adopted or any possible adverse effects of colonialism and residential schools in her community (906). Mainstream media usually choose to ignore the historical and societal factors that contribute to indigenous women being victims of violence and murder (Jiwani and Young 906; Razack; Carter). This reinforces how missing and murdered indigenous women are rendered invisible in the media by racist and sexist stereotypes.

The media’s stereotyping and fraught coverage has affected the public’s response to missing persons. The case of sixteen year old Felicia Solomon (from Norway House Cree Nation) who disappeared in March 2003, was given very little media coverage. Soloman’s family claimed that they received no help from the police in finding their daughter who had been unfairly labelled as a gang member and prostitute (“No More Stolen Sisters” 17). Due to the lack of media attention about the disappearance, her family members were left to issue missing person posters by themselves, as no one from the community volunteered to help (“No More Stolen Sisters” 17). Some of her remains were eventually found in June 2003, but no charges were ever made for her murder. Speaking about the police officers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Soloman’s grandmother stated “You know, they label aboriginal people right away” (“No More Stolen Sisters” 17). This example reveals how some missing persons’ cases are mishandled because of racial discrimination.
The mainstream media is biased when reporting on missing persons’ cases (Gilchrist 373). “Newsworthy Victims?” (2010), a journal article by Kristen Gilchrist, features a media survey of articles on this topic and examines the coverage of three cases of indigenous women from Saskatchewan and three cases of missing white women from Ontario who went missing from 2003-2005 (378). All of the women had close ties to family members and friends, and were not runaways or associated with the sex trade (378). In her media analysis, Gilchrist concluded that the missing white women were mentioned at least six times more frequently in the paper than missing indigenous women (379). She also described how the overall word count of the articles was “135,249 words published in articles related to the white women’s disappearances/murders and 28,493 words about the aboriginal women; representing a word count of more than four to one for the white women” (379). Gilchrist upholds that this signifies notable, undeniable racial discrimination (379).

Gilchrist’s analysis of media headlines for the six cases affirms her findings that indigenous women were being rendered invisible by the press. She maintains that the headlines consciously tried to avoid naming the indigenous women and “referred to them impersonally” (380). She specifically mentioned “RCMP identifies woman’s remains” (Pruden qtd. in Gilchrist 10), “Teen’s family keeping vigil” (Pruden qtd. in Gilchrist 10), “Fear growing for family of missing mom” (Pruden qtd. in Gilchrist 10), and “Trek raises awareness for missing aboriginal women” (Haight qtd. in Gilchrist 10). These headlines from articles published from 2003 to 2005 can be compared to the coverage of missing white women whose lives were constructed as worthy of being mourned. Headlines for the cases of missing white women included, “Ardeth Wood ‘Lives in the Light of God’”
(Harvey qtd. in Gilchrist 10) “Jennyweloveyou,wemissyou”(Mick qtd. in Gilchrist 10), and “‘Waiting for Alicia’” (Diebel qtd. in Gilchrist 10). Gilchrist observes how the media covers these stories is essential to understanding racist and sexist stereotypes. She argues that in the news articles, while the white women were largely described as being the “girl next door” and complements were used to describe them including “gifted,” “optimistic,” and “lit the room in life”, the coverage of the indigenous women was sparse and the readers were not given a similar picture of how much these women meant to their loved ones and communities (381-382). Gilchrist comments that the clear racist and classist differences in the coverage stem from the stereotype that indigenous women are “dirty, lazy, degraded, and easily sexually exploited” and that this “has profoundly shaped the experiences of aboriginal women since colonial contact” (384).

It is important to note that the two most influential articles on media coverage by Jiwani and Young was conducted from 2001 to 2006 and Gilchrist’s case study was published in 2010. However, minimal changes have taken place in the media’s approach to the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. A report titled “What The Canadian Public Is Being Told About The More Than 1200 Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women And First Nations Issues” by Daniel Drache, Fred Fletcher and research associate Coral Voss, examines media coverage from 2006 to 2015 in eight major daily newspapers on topics related to indigenous peoples. It also notes the spike in media coverage on missing and murdered indigenous women from 2014-2015 due to the activism of the Native Women’s Association of Canada. This put pressure on the RCMP to publish the report “Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview” in 2014, estimating the number of missing and murdered women to be over
1000 (Drache, Fletcher and Voss 5). They outline the media’s current “spotlight phenomenon” which will highlight some cases of murdered and missing indigenous women “followed by a reporting void” (Drache, Fletcher and Voss 4). The authors point out that news stories are “shallow and uneven” and fail to address “deep rooted causes” of the problem such as the effects of racism, sexism and Canada’s colonial history (Drache, Fletcher and Voss 3).

Despite some increased coverage, many of the media representation problems identified by Jiwani, Young and Gilchrist persist. The report by Drache, Fletcher and Voss reinforces how mainstream media coverage from 2006-2015 still largely fails to connect the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women to Canada’s colonial past. It also does not address how the Canadian government failed for decades to confront this problem. Jiwani and Young claim that indigenous identity “in this instance, constitutes the contested battlefield of meanings that can only be won when society recognizes its complicity in reproducing neo-colonial systems of valuation that position Aboriginal women in the lowest rungs of the social order, thereby making them expendable and invisible, if not disposable” (912). Only by reframing indigenous women’s lives to the public can this identity begin to change.

**Feminist Scholars’ Framing of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women**

The main argument of this thesis focuses on how missing and murdered women’s lives have been represented in art projects. It is vital to consider the work of feminist scholars whose research sheds light on why certain lives have been devalued. Differing theoretical frameworks in scholarly works outline how to understand the marginalization
of indigenous women’s lives. The last section articulated how the media has described missing and murdered indigenous women as leading “deviant” and “high risk” lifestyles (Razack; Young and Jiwani). Prominent feminist scholar Judith Butler uses the terminology “precarious” to shift a focus to a broader understanding of how lives are framed. Research on how marginalized lives are mourned is pertinent to how missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives are framed.

In *Frames of War* (2009) and *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler outlines how some human’s lives are ascribed more value. Butler describes this framework as the difference between a precarious life versus a grievable life (“Frames of War” 1). She explains that without grievability, a life is not given value, also pointing out that the state does not provide adequate social and economic conditions in the case of marginalized lives (“Frames of War” 14). The lives that are not considered grievable are understood to be precarious. Butler confirms that “specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” (“Frames of War” 1). Racialized women’s lives are devalued due to socially constructed stereotypes about human value (Butler; Dean; Rosenburg; hooks). Butler asks “how do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss? After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?” (“Precarious Life” 32). People who are racialized do not represent the cultural normative understanding of being a human, and their lives are not given the same value (Butler, “Precarious Life”; hooks)
Negative framing of indigenous women illustrates how they have become faceless victims of violence. Sharon Rosenburg’s and Melissa Blais’s research on public memorializing adds to Butler’s research. They suggest that it is problematic to erase the differences between individuals who have been affected by violence. One should not understand missing and murdered indigenous women as a collective, as they are all individuals whose identities should not be erased (Blais; Rosenburg; Dean). Citing Rosenburg, Amber Dean makes the important point that “when particular deaths are made to stand in for all deaths among individuals who share specific markers of identity (i.e. “women”), a host of differences between such individuals are necessarily and troublingly downplayed or erased” (126). For example, understanding missing and murdered indigenous women as a statistic dehumanizes them (Linda Smith; Razack; Dean). I confirm these scholars’ arguments and maintain that art has the ability to engage in respectful memorializing by not erasing the unique identities of the women. Case studies in this thesis will highlight how some projects have been able to capture the unique identities of missing and murdered indigenous women in differing ways including through symbols beaded onto moccasin vamps, personal artifacts and storytelling.

Butler reveals how a life can be framed to the public at large. She places a great deal of importance on the naming of those who have been killed or gone missing and the manner in which their stories are told. She uses the example of 200,000 Iraqi children killed during the Gulf War to explain the social reality that some deaths do not become publically grievable and remain unnamed by the media (Butler, “Precarious Life”34). The lives of the children were negated and deemed not worthy of being mourned publically. This conveys how some lives are not seen as worthy of being part of a national public
discourse because they are “dehumanized” and “unmarkable” (Butler, “Precarious Life” 34).

How indigenous women are labelled is important to the public’s perception of them (Dean 74). Amber Dean has applied Judith Butler’s theory of precarious and grievable lives to missing and murdered indigenous women. She illustrates that the missing persons in a RCMP taskforce poster are identified as having precarious lives due to their gender, race and prior criminal behaviour. The inclusion of mug shot photographs of indigenous women Cindy Beck, Andrea Borhaven and Inga Hall in a RCMP Missing Persons Task Force Poster is problematic as it portrays them in a negative light and labels them as criminals (Dean 78). This relates back to Judith Butler’s argument that how lives are framed by gatekeepers (in this case the media, the police, the state) affects whether or not the lives can be considered publically grievable (Butler, “Precarious Life” 12).

Amber Dean emphasises that when approaching the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women, we need to contemplate the “challenge of inheritance” (32). This concept refers to the way that the Canadian public can “grapple with how we are implicated in the social conditions and arrangements facilitating the disappearance of so many women” and reflect how social constructs and frameworks inform how we view lives as grievable or ungrievable (Dean 32; Butler, “Precarious Life” 12). Rosenberg and Blais would agree with fostering a deeper understanding of violence and loss of life. They have written about various memorials for the École Polytechnique that illustrate how the mainstream media responds to the issue of violence against women. Rosenberg suggests that “Public remembrance practices can be understood, therefore, as practices of teaching and learning; attempts to prompt and engage people in the development of a historical
consciousness that might affect their perceptions of, feelings about, identifications with, and the meanings they attribute to, the massacre” (10). This signifies that the public can build a positive or negative narrative around violence against women though outlets such as protests, vigils, newspapers, films and books.

Blais introduces the idea of collective memory building by the mainstream media in her book *I Hate Feminists* and argues that “the study of newspapers proved a most interesting way to think about collective memory, since they were at the same time key sources of information, spaces for the articulation of representations of massacres and vectors of memory about it” (122). She finds that public discourse in the mainstream media on the Montreal Massacre has been used negatively to critique feminists (121). Blais focuses on the Canadian context and presents the example of how after the film *Polytechnique* was released there was a discussion by journalists regarding the Montreal Massacre to excuse the “radical” and “deviant” feminists to instead promote a false idea of post-feminism that encourages the public to focus on men’s experience of violence (Blais 121-122). The feminists who remained angry about the events of the Montreal Massacre and did not pay attention to “male distress” and were shunned by journalists (122). When linking Blais arguments to Dean’s “challenge of inheritance” a barrier to the public’s understanding of missing and murdered indigenous women is that the mainstream media continues to feature problematic coverage of violence against women that misleads the public to think that equality between men and women has been achieved. This shows how the mainstream media can negatively influence conversations on violence against women.
Dean asks how the public can come to terms with the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women and go beyond solely an “empathetic and compassionate” understanding of their lives. Audra Simpson affirms that understanding indigenous women as solely “victims” is harmful. Anishnabee scholar Jill Carter supports Simpson’s assertion and cites that the “performance of sympathy” and empty promises of reconciliation does little to erase the magnitude of abuses suffered by indigenous peoples (415-416). Carter’s arguments stem from her perspective as an indigenous woman. She does not want to have her experience of racism in Canada seen as trivial or be pitied by non-indigenous people (415). In contrast, Amber Dean describes her own experience as a member of settler society to convey how non-indigenous people are capable of recognizing their place within ongoing colonialism in Canada (10). Both viewpoints are needed to outline how indigenous and non-indigenous scholars have drawn conclusions about the need to move past witnessing the violence done to indigenous people (Dean 4; Carter; Audra Simpson).

Art and Activism

Art has the ability to “decenter” the artist and the viewer from a place where they have no agency, and instead encourages a questioning of reality (Knill 183). Art can act as a catalyst for social change and add to political movements. This section outlines the multiple intersections associated with activist art. I begin by discussing the challenging questions, what is art and what is the relationship between the artist and the viewer? I outline scholars’ theories on how art is framed to the public through difficult mediums including paintings and photography. Art can be ether and individual endeavor or a
community project. I discuss famous activist art projects including the Aids Quilt that have paved the way for other social justice initiatives. I look broadly into research on political activist art and then focus on the Canadian context. Research that outlines how indigenous artists have been able to critique mainstream politics in Canada reveals how art can empower marginalized groups.

It is important to note that there is no fixed definition to accurately describe art as each person forms their own interpretation of an installation. It has had various adjectives applied to it such as “inventive”, “shape”, “perspective”, “symbolic”, “composition” and “observation” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art n.p.). It is up to the artist to create an aesthetic response to their chosen subject matter and also for the public to create their own interpretation. How does the public understand art? This is a complex question that is inherently problematic because there is no fixed definition of “the public”, and people interpret art in differing ways (Wyman 109). Artist Anna Deavere Smith asks, “Is there also the possibility that after we have performed, the audience can go away and dream or think, so there's also the space that art, I think, wants to make if there's really going to be a change of attitude? Because a change in the way that you think is so personal. You can have other people help you, but it's like any kind of conversion; in the end, it's in your heart” (37). This passage illustrates how the viewer can form his or her own opinion of an artist’s work. Performance artist Guillermo Gomez Pena has argued in relation to his own activist work to not “assume one clear political position in the performance… I think what we are trying to do is open up spaces of ambiguity” where the audience can critically analyze “contradictory voices and contradictory ideas” and form their own conclusions about a work of art (176-177). This is a fascinating way to interpret the
relationship between the artist and the viewer. Pena recognizes that it is up to the public to divulge deeper meanings from art that may have been different from the original goal of the artist.

Sight is powerful as it shapes the way that we view the world around us and embodies “a way of seeing” (Berger 9-10). Prominent art critic and novelist John Berger confirms that “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (7). There is a lot of power within a single image. The way we view a work of art is tied to “learned assumptions including beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form, status and taste” (Berger 11). Perception of an image is therefore not necessarily attached to reality, but is instead socially constructed and impacted by history as perceived by the artist (Berger 11; Sontag).

Recent writing on the philosophical framing of art conveys the power of artists to shape an understanding of their selected subject matter. The framing of art, which can include the writing that accompanies a work of art, the placement of the artwork in a gallery, as well as reproduced images of the piece, affects how the viewer will interpret that artwork (Berger; Sontag). An artist can choose how they want to portray their subject matter and can choose to “mystify” or “clarify” the past (Berger 11). This is an indicator of how much power an artist has to potentially shape the way the viewer understands their artwork. For example, Berger uses the copy of the painting Wheatfield and Crows (1853-1880) by Van Gogh as an example. In his book he asks the reader to study a copied
image of the painting on page 10 without any accompanying words. On page 11 he once again shows the image but with the words “This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself” (28). He describes how this immediately changes the way the viewer interprets the original painting. Words and reproduced images therefore can have an impact on the viewer’s perception.

Sontag, whose writing on photography has influenced understandings of art, emphasizes how a photograph can present a distorted view of reality. It is the photographer who chooses what to keep within the frame while selecting what to leave out. She uses the example of war photography and affirms that “if we admit as authentic only photographs that result from the photographer’s having been nearby, shutter open, at just the right moment, few victory photographs will qualify” (56). She uses the example of the staging of American flag on Iwo Jima which where the photographer used a larger flag to change the impact of the photo (56). Indigenous scholar and curator Gerald McMaster argues that viewing art is not an “innocent” endeavor but instead is tied to political motivations of the artist, museum or gallery (“Object (to) Sanctity” 3). McMaster supports Sontag’s research conclusions and draws attention to how museums can change the perception of an artwork by placing it behind glass, which creates a sense of distance from the work (“Object (to) Sanctity” 258). This can transform one’s experience with an artwork behind glass as a “polite and aloof activity” (McMaster, “Object (to) Sanctity” 258). Sontag and McMaster thus both convey how artistic choices can change the emotions and reactions of the viewer.
Berger and McMaster also comment on how art is situated according to our own experiences. Berger states “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (9). It is therefore possible for an artist to use images as a mode of activism to change the viewer’s opinions on a political topic. McMaster confirms this and describes how art can create a “conscious sense of self and agency” to combat authority and stereotypes of gender, race and class within society (“Museums and the Native Voice” 5). This is conceivable because as Berger verifies, it is possible for the viewer to connect the subject matter of a work of art with their own lives (9).

The space that an art piece is installed in and the specific time when the viewer takes in the work affects their interpretation. English professor Sophie Ratcliffe argues that “feelings are arguably shaped by immediate, time-bound — and partially commodified — concerns” (Ratcliffe 24). When viewing art, people’s impressions of the work are affected by varying factors including how much time they have to view the piece and if they are able to touch the work (Ratcliffe 24). Ratcliffe gives the example of how her initial impression of the Victorian sculpture Constance and Arthur changed because she was given the “privilege” to touch the artwork. She describes how this interaction with the sculpture “opened up different ways in which the statue had been curated — and different ways in which it could be interpreted and felt” (Ratcliffe 24). Ratcliffe problematizes feelings of art which are subjective due to varying factors such as the curator’s choice of how the art is displayed in a particular space (19). My own interpretation of each of the case studies featured in this thesis has been affected by
existing frameworks that shape my view of reality (Beckett 23). When viewing the artworks, I was specifically looking to develop an understanding of how each installation subverts harmful media stereotypes of indigenous women.

Art not only affects people “emotionally, it also has the capacity to change our understanding of ourselves and the world around us” (Levine 26). Activist art can be viewed as a form of resistance to the state. Art can create space for the community and individuals to challenge the status quo and dominant narrative perpetuated by the media and the state (Scholette). Philosopher Herbert Marcuse has asserted that through a cultivation of imagination the public can engage in critical thinking and see contradictions within society. His student, cultural critic Carol Becker, has built on this and affirms that the mass media is to blame for influencing the public to conform to ideals within popular culture. Art can inspire the public to imagine a different reality, engage in radical thinking and possibly influence them to become social justice advocates (Marcuse, Becker and Cohen-Cruz). Terri Lyn Cornwell, a professor in communication studies argues that “arts participation serves as a kind of democratic practice that gives citizens the necessary confidence and sense of empowerment to participate in other aspects of community life, including politics.” Activist art can therefore be a form of “participatory democracy” and “experimentation” (Sholette; Lippard).

The rise of community art projects changed how we think of an “artist” (Cohen-Cruz; Levine). Collaborative community projects depend on a collective effort rather than the creative energy of one individual. For example, two of the case studies in this thesis, Walking With Our Sisters and Shades of Our Sisters are community projects. The
feminist artwork titled *The Dinner Table* (1974-79) by Judy Chicago is another example as more than 400 volunteers helped to create the installation. The collaborative nature of community art fosters positive relationships because people become “more responsible to one another” (Cohen-Cruz). The rise of community art as a tool for social justice stems from key moments in history when members of the public came together to challenge human rights violations. The counter culture movement in the 1960s brought forth the creative power necessary to realise how art, community and education could intersect and inspire change (Estrella; Rodgers; Levine 43).

The creation of activist projects like the influential Aids Memorial Quilt (1985) was a catalyst that inspired many other community arts projects and well as research in the field of art and activism (Hawkings; Blair and Michael; Sturken). This project is a massive quilt that commemorates those who have died of AIDS to foster a greater understanding of the disease. It “may be seen as a barometer of contemporary commemorative culture” because of the scale of the project and its impact (Blair and Michael 596). The idea for the quilt originated in 1985 and was displayed at the national mall in Washington D.C. in 1987. Due to the massive public support for the project the quilt currently features more than 48,000 panels which have been donated by the public.

The Aids Quilt is an example of how art has the ability to convey loss and be a form of collective mourning. Art therapy researcher Dan Hocoy asserts that “images can concurrently heal personal-collective wounds while demanding a response to justice” (22). Art be used to heal communities by promoting the public’s ability to recognize how they can fight against social injustice (Cleveland; Eberhart). Psychiatrist Judith Herman
argues that “The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgement of the traumatic event and, second, upon some form of community action.” (70). Herman uses the example of the Vietnam War Memorial (1982) in Washington, D.C. to demonstrate the importance of collective healing. This memorial that featured the names of those who died during the war has allowed the public “engage in rehabilitation” to come together to grieve and remember the lives that have been lost (Hawkins 796; Herman).

There is a tradition of scholars conducting research in art, social justice and memorializing, focusing on an analysis of case studies. For example, the article “Art and the Ones Missing” by Matthew Ryan Smith suggests that there are links between how the artists Ai Weiwei, Rebecca Belmore and Christi Belcourt engage in political resistance (32). Smith suggests that these artists have created memorial projects that counter state narratives. These artists strategically used social media and volunteers to make their projects a reality and did not rely on government grants. Smith states that these art projects can act as a “means for knowledge, healing, and accountability” (33). He indicates that it is the stories and acts of remembrance that are successful in raising awareness of these human rights violations (Ryan Smith 33). Smith’s article supports my argument that art projects can reframe marginalized people’s lives to the public and humanize them.

Within the Canadian context artists Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge have worked together to foster a dialogue on the political nature of art. Their installation It’s
Still Privileged Art (1975) which was shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1975 features cartoons and text taken from recorded discussions Conde and Beveridge had where they question the formal art market and its motivations (Conde and Beveridge, “It’s Still Privileged Art”). In many of their art installations they worked with trade unions and community organizations in order to subvert the “perception” that stories about the working class are insignificant (Conde and Beveridge, “About”). Conde and Beveridge’s art has sought to bridge the gap between the arts and members of the general public to challenge divisions of labour within Canadian society. They critique the idea of art as being exclusive to the upper class and that it should conform to mainstream culture (Conde and Beveridge, “About”).

Conde and Beveridge’s activist art highlights how there is a tension between the formal art world and political activist art. Professors in visual arts, Kristy Robertson and J. Keri Cronin, suggest that “the role of art and visual culture in activism in Canada... is a fraught one, cut across with complexities, disagreements, and debate” (1). There is a question of whether or not the “institutionalization of activist art” can generate “real political impact” (Roberston and Cronin 5). Theorist Susan Buck-Morss upholds that “the institutionalization canon of the work of political artists threatens to become just another art genre” (15). This suggests that when an artwork becomes a commodity and is tied to the capitalist market, this affects the work’s ability to challenge mainstream political ideology (Raven). Jessica Wyman supports this criticism of political activist art and states “Even in resistance, we often find ourselves embedded in precisely the mechanisms against which we struggle, such as those of capital and reproduction” (109). This outlines the challenges associated with the creation of political activist art.
There is a contrast between activist art that is shown in a private gallery space and works that are displayed in public locations outside. In the book *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Mary Jacob, Brenson, and Michael Eva Olson analyze art projects that have resisted being associated with mainstream galleries and instead want public art to be brought "into the lives of real people, real neighborhoods" (20-21). They assert that community based art projects can fight against “institutional stereotypes, by building bridges between people pitted against one another… to develop the ability of art to respond directly to social situations and appeal to a sense of collective responsibility as a means to personal redemption and power” (21). They give the example of the city of Chicago’s art initiative Sculpture Chicago that created the program Culture in Action. This initiative fostered a greater respect for community building by working with different neighbourhoods in the city (21). Through Culture in Action members of the public created an ecological monitoring station, a neighborhood block party, sidewalk monuments to famous women and a storefront hydroponics farm (21). This example shows how art can respond directly to the needs of the public and subvert traditional ideas of artists working with mainstream galleries.

A shift to community based art as a form of political resistance is demonstrated by the artists collective Group Material that was active from 1989 to 1996. This group wanted to create a unique space to question mainstream culture and dominant political discourse. Specifically, these artists wanted challenge the viewer to think about “culture we have taken for granted” (Avgikos 86). They created installations such as the AIDS TimeLine Project (1989) and the Democracy Project (1990) that focused on how mainstream culture has labelled people with AIDS and has taken democratic processes
for granted. As Group Material gained popularity they became further ingrained in the formal art market (Avgikos 114). This presents the contradiction of the art collective’s identity as both radical and a capitalist commodity. If activist artists gain a certain level of notoriety the overall meaning of their work potentially can change and be reinterpreted.

Historically there has been a deliberate “exclusion” of indigenous art in galleries and more broadly within western academia due to dominate white settler narratives (Houle 70, 71; Crosby). Art historians Tony Bennett and Douglas Crimp uphold that this is largely because galleries have been “nationalist projects” that are meant to adhere to hegemonic ideology that discriminates against indigenous peoples. Professors Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Linda Martin Alcoff, Leslie Brown and Susan Strega contend that these disciplines need to be decolonized, meaning that space needs to be made for indigenous writers and artists to challenge systemic racism.

It was only in the 1980s and the 1990s that more indigenous artists and artists of colour held large exhibitions in Canadian art galleries (Gagnon). Robert Houle, an artist from Sandy Bay First Nation, describes how during the 1980s there was the emergence of a “new aesthetic tradition” (3). Houle writes that this was a shift from viewing indigenous art as craft or beadwork to understanding that indigenous art that can be political and be “a critique of that culture” (3). This acted as a catalyst for indigenous artists to have the ability to begin to create “a discourse of cultural difference in many different cultural locations- independent, institutional, and mainstream- riddling Canada’s cultural topography as it has for the last decade” (Gagnon 21). Allan Ryan highlights how in the
1980s there was a shift by artists to critique an understanding of indigenous people as “living museum pieces” (14). This challenged “romantic and clichéd” understandings of indigenous peoples.

Public galleries should support contemporary indigenous art in order to fight against historical marginalization (Martin 22). Gagnon supports this statement and outlines the importance of cultural race politics, defining this term as the “process of self-identification and the self-organization of Native artists and artists of colour into communities, with the goals of making interventions in the larger Canadian cultural domain” (23). Indigenous peoples should be able to tell their own stories about their history which applied to how they are framed within the museum space (Gagnon).

A theoretical framework for understanding how indigenous artists create political activist art was created by Allan Ryan. “The trickster shift” is a philosophy that is credited to Ojibway artist Carl Beam who has asserted that the public’s understanding of indigenous art as solely being “mystical and legend bound” must be challenged because it can also include “subversive practise, aesthetic production, spiritual truth and cultural wisdom” (Ryan 1-3). The trickster is a figure that appears in many indigenous stories and can take on many forms. The trickster shift can be described as “serious play, the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in viewer perspective and even political positioning by imaging alternative viewpoints” (Ryan 5). Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor upholds that the trickster should be understood as an active figure that engages in “doing” and not “being” (Vizenor qtd. by Ryan 5). The trickster can undermine art institutions occupied by white privilege through unexpected vehicles including humour (Ryan 92). Allan Ryan
argues that “visual artists employ trickster tactics to undermine institutional practise and expectation, breaking from formula and breaking out of the program in ways both familiarly and radically unknown” (92). The trickster can be reinterpreted and viewed differently over time (Ryan 7). I draw on the trickster shift framework to help understand the political and ideological motivations behind images.

There are many indigenous artists that utilise the trickster shift. Allan Ryan’s research provides various examples including the work of Six Nations artist Bill Powless. In the paintings _Beach Blanket Brave_ (1984) and _Home Of The Brave_ (1986), Powless depicts the stereotypical image of an indigenous man in a traditional outfit but accompanied with unusual objects, including a Pepsi can and a flamingo lawn ornament (Ryan 15). Both of these artworks “express native participation in contemporary consumer society and their bewilderment with it” (Ryan 15). It also speaks to the lingering resistance by mainstream galleries in Canada to fully accept contemporary indigenous art and the trickster shift mentality (Ryan; McMaster; Martin).

**Conclusion, Where My Thesis Fits Within the Broader Research Landscape**

This thesis is the only research that compares _Vigil_ (2002), _REDress_ (2011), _Walking With Our Sisters_ (2013), _The Forgotten_ (2011) and _Shades of Our Sisters_ (2017). There is a very limited amount of literature in this area of study. I respond to the calls from scholars including Amber Dean and Laura Moss for more research to be done in this field. The trend in existing journal articles has been for scholars to analyze an art project individually. For example, two feminist scholars Stephanie Anderson and Laura Moss each focus on analyzing one case study. I briefly summarize and then engage in a
deeper analysis their articles to illustrate how researchers have approached art on missing and murdered indigenous women.

“Is Canada Postcolonial? Re-asking through ‘The Forgotten’ Project” by Laura Moss outlines controversy generated by Pamela Masik’s *The Forgotten* (2011) through a postcolonial lens. She uses this framework to “contemplate the forms of responsibility an artist has to her subject matter and, by extension, consider the ethics of representation of violence” (49). Moss asks who has the authority to paint missing and murdered indigenous women. Should *The Forgotten* have been cancelled from being shown at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver? She problematizes who will profit from *The Forgotten* when it features portraits of women who have been marginalized. Moss relies of Sharon Rosenberg’s construction of public memory and notes how “a public remembrance practice can be understood as something that attempts to bring the living in a particular relation not only to the dead but also to each other” (49). She asks what will occur when in the case of *The Forgotten*, people did not want to be brought together to form a community. Moss questions what is at stake when real people’s lives are turned into art projects to raise awareness for “the greater good” (50). She addresses what some of the problems are when an artist’s vision does not reflect the wishes of family members of missing and murdered indigenous women. For example, some of the family members did not like that their loved ones were groups together as a homogenous group in *The Forgotten*.

Laura Moss’s article reveals far more questions regarding memorialization in art than answers. She remains on the fence about the cancellation of *The Forgotten* at the
Museum of Anthropology. She states that she wants to “employ the controversy as a springboard for posing further important questions that reach beyond this single exhibition” (60-61). Moss argues that this is a trend that exists in research on “memorialization of victims of violence in Canada” (60). I understand that the complexity of how violence is represented to the public makes it difficult to form resolute conclusions. However, I am still unsure if this is the best approach as it is frustrating to be left with so many unanswered questions. I think her ambiguity and attempt to quickly address too many debates related to art and activism takes away from thought provoking questions that Moss posed. I will attempt to follow up on some of the ideas in the article that are not fully developed including the question of “who should speak for whom” (Moss 56). This thesis case study on The Forgotten pointedly asks if the controversy surrounding this installation boils down to whether or not non-indigenous people should be able to create representations of missing and murdered indigenous women in art.

“Stitching through Silence: Walking With Our Sisters, Honoring the Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada” by Stephanie G. Anderson discusses the healing aspect of making the moccasin vamps in the project Walking With Our Sisters (2013). She outlines how personal connections were forged between beading groups and also though social media that aided the process of mourning (94). Anderson describes in detail the traditional beading practices used to create the vamps. For example, she includes this statement from Belcourt who is recounting having received a pair of moccasin vamps “Amy Malbeuf your vamps arrived. And I love the note: ‘If tuftings become flattened revive with gentle brushing (toothbrush or hair comb) or gentle steaming.’ I honestly didn’t know until now the way to revive tufting. So, thank you for
that as well!” (94). Anderson is specifically drawing attention to how the creation of vamps has allowed the sharing of knowledge to continue traditional cultural practices.

Anderson argues “The project as it has evolved demonstrates the myriad forms that social togetherness, political agency, and the labor of healing can take, and the potential potency that emerges in the space of conversation between material making and more transient modes of community building, protest, and activism” (94). The main argument in the article is that the creation of vamps has allowed for participants and viewers to begin the healing process regarding the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. Anderson views the creation of vamps as a form of “memory making” to reflect on the loss of life. She argues that there needs to be more protests and action to raise awareness as it is vital to foster a sense of togetherness to promote the growth of indigenous communities.

I support Anderson’s arguments that reveal the significance of members of the public sharing traditional knowledge to create vamps for Walking With Our Sisters. However, the main weakness of Anderson’s writing is that she does not problematize the installation in any way and is only positive about the work. This does not allow for a deeper discussion of how Walking With Our Sisters could have been made more inclusive. In my chapter on this project I will outline criticisms regarding how the project frames gender and possibly oversteps a boundary when asking viewers of the installation to follow ceremonial protocols.

My thesis adds a unique perspective to the debate on how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women by contrasting different examples of art projects. The
projects are analyzed to show how they have framed this politically charged topic to the public and what conversations have been sparked as a result. This thesis reveals certain trends in artistic choices of how to memorialize missing and murdered indigenous women. I argue there is no one perfect approach in how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women. Instead it is the collective efforts of artists that use varying approaches and have different goals that collectively reveal how the public can begin to question the media’s negative stereotyping of indigenous women.

The majority of academic articles on how missing and murdered indigenous women have been represented are fairly positive. The one exception to this has been intense criticism of The Forgotten by Pamela Masik in books and journal articles. Masik has been criticised for painting portraits of missing and murdered indigenous women that focus on the violence they experienced (Moss; Dean). The case studies Walking With Our Sisters and REDress that have each had one negative article written about them while almost all of the articles about The Forgotten have focused on problems with the installation. I include a review of the positive and negative aspects of each of the projects in order to engage in deeper analysis of representations of missing and murdered indigenous women. This has not been attempted in the majority of books or journal articles that I have read in this subject area.

The following chapters discuss how each of the case studies have framed the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women. I address what the artists’ goals for the projects are, how each of the installations have affected conversations of missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives and how they fight against negative media
representations. I address gaps in existing research on activist art on missing and murdered indigenous women that does not consider the connections between different projects. I attempt to move past a disjointed analysis of a single art project and instead focus on threads between the installations. Ultimately I argue that together the artworks have the ability to question Canadians understanding of the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. Art challenges the viewer to think about how their lives were impacted by settler colonisation. I consider what justice for the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women looks like and how to “grapple with our differing inheritance” of this problem (Dean 151).
Chapter 3
Rebecca Belmore’s Vigil (2002): Transforming the Downtown Eastside though an Embodied Performance

Rebecca Belmore’s Vigil (2002) was originally performed on June 23rd, 2002 in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside on the corner of Gore Avenue and Cordova Street. Parts of her performance include Belmore scrubbing the street on her hands and knees, yelling the names of missing and murdered indigenous written in black marker on her arms, lighting candles for each woman and nailing the red dress she wears to a telephone pole and then ripping it from her body as she pulls away. Vigil is a powerful performance piece that subsequently inspired other artists to create commemorative projects. It was recorded as a thirty-minute video titled Named and the Unnamed, which was then projected onto light bulbs in an installation in Vancouver at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in 2001 (see photo Fig. 1 taken below). A shorter video of the performance is also featured on Belmore’s website making the art work accessible to this day.

(Fig. 1. The Named and Unnamed. Rebecca Belmore. 2002. Dragonfly Canada. Art and The Art of Memory Making)

In this chapter I will discuss Belmore’s artistic career and my reaction to watching a video of Belmore’s original performance of Vigil. The importance of embodiment and
indigenous identity in *Vigil* and significance of naming in the performance piece will then be discussed. Transforming colonial space is one of the key themes of this chapter. I argue that Belmore reframes missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives through an embodied performance and by engaging in naming. This relates back to my argument that visual artists play an important role in highlighting the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women for the Canadian public in order to encourage them to reject racist and sexist stereotypes in the media that dehumanize and ‘other’ indigenous women.

**Indigenous Knowledge Sharing Through Art**

Belmore has been grappling with questions of authenticity and what constitutes indigenous art over the course of her artistic career that began in the 1980s. Her artwork often highlights themes of identity, history and place through different media including photography, sculpture, performance, installation and video (“Rebecca Belmore”). Belmore was born in Upsala and raised in a large Anishinaabe family. She is currently based in Vancouver, Canada. Belmore gained notoriety as Canada’s official representative at the Venice Biennale and is well known internationally. She won the 2013 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts and in 2016 was given the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, which included the opportunity to have a solo exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (“Rebecca Belmore”).

Rebecca Belmore’s artwork challenges the benign image that many Canadians have of indigenous art. For example, in a performance piece titled Artifact 671B (1988) she questions the use of 500 indigenous artifacts being put up on display at the Glenbow Museum to coincide with the 1988 Winter Olympics and Shell Canada’s sponsorship of
this installation. In this performance Belmore sat outside the Thunder Bay Art Gallery during the winter in 1988 with the intention of drawing attention to the “hypocrisy” of Shell Canada sponsoring an indigenous art show when the company is in a long-held dispute with the Canadian Government over polluting indigenous land (“Rebecca Belmore”). This political stance challenges stereotypical understandings of indigeneity in art that includes images of totem poles and dream catchers that emphasize aesthetics and spirituality rather than a focus on political resistance. Belmore chooses to create art that is tied to her own identity, confronting difficult topics such as violence against indigenous women. Belmore has stated “I’ve been described as making political performance pieces. That’s a way of speaking about it. I had no choice. It was a way for me to have control and create an autonomous space for myself” (Rebecca Belmore: Fountain). Belmore’s work weaves a compelling story tied to indigenous peoples fight against a colonialism.

In “Culture Vs. Capital: The Rebecca Belmore Case”, India Young, a researcher on print media and contemporary indigenous art, argues that Rebecca Belmore’s performances should be understood as a form of indigenous knowledge. She believes that indigenous knowledge is not fixed but can be loosely defined and is always changing. According to anthropologists L. J. Slikkerveer, David Brokensha, Wim Dechering and Dennis M. Warren in “The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems” that indigenous knowledge is “the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems” (479). Belmore’s art fits this description as her work functions as an expression of her indigenous cultural identity.
Through her artwork, Belmore communicates to the public that they should question colonial power structures. This is supported by the cultural and political motivations for Vigil that convey the Canadian government’s failure to address violence against indigenous women. The government ignored violence against indigenous women because of racist stereotypes that labelled them as drug addicts, runaways and criminals (Jiwani 6-8; Dean 78). Belmore decided to use performance art as a way to resist the marginalization of indigenous women. In Vigil, she asserts her own indigenous identity in the space of the downtown eastside and empowers women to vocalize their anger that so many women have gone missing and been murdered.

My Reaction to Vigil

After viewing the recording of Vigil I was struck by the role water plays in the performance. At the beginning, Belmore is shown scrubbing the concrete ground with water and soap symbolizing an effort to cleanse the space of the Downtown Eastside. She is unable to fully complete this task and only washes a small section of the ground. Belmore also rinses her mouth with water and washes her face immediately after shouting women’s names, dragging a rose with thorns through her mouth and putting on a red dress. This conveys the notion that water is connected to the process of healing. The significance of women’s connection with water and has been reinforced by Idle No More (an ongoing indigenous protest movement) and indigenous scholars including Leanne Simpson. I interpret Belmore’s decision to stop in order to cleanse with water as a metaphor for women who have experienced violence trying to move on from their
traumatic experiences in order to heal. This section of the performance is also a reprieve from the more violent aspects of Vigil.

Belmore is visibly angry throughout the performance. Vigil conveys the sorrow that many indigenous women bear from the acts of violence against them during the course of their lives. They may have tried to escape from their abusers, but could not break entirely from the cycle of violence around them. The most challenging parts to watch in Belmore’s performance are when she causes herself physical pain. For example, when she rips a rose with thorns through her teeth and summons all of her strength to nail her red dress to a pole and rips it piece by piece from her body. These acts are difficult to watch but they are an important visual interpretation of the violent acts that have previously taken place in the Downtown Eastside.

Vigil calls on us to ask ourselves difficult questions and engage in critical reflection. Belmore wants the viewer to consider why a performance that critiques violence against women is challenging to watch. Clearly people do not like to see others in pain and distress. I personally find Belmore ripping her red dress from a telephone pole difficult to watch because I am angry and unsettled by the fact that indigenous women continue to experience violence because of sexism and racism. It is unjust that they are vulnerable due to their identities as indigenous women. Vigil prompted me to consider what the experience of feeling intense racial prejudice would be like. Belmore calls on viewers of the piece to think about how to stop the cycle of violence. I see this performance as a call to action challenging the colonial state and the mainstream media that has ignored the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women for so long.
Naming and an Embodied Performance

Naming is an essential element of *Vigil*. Belmore’s website describes how in the performance “After each name is called, she draws a flower between her teeth, stripping it of blossom and leaf, just as the lives of these forgotten and dispossessed women were shredded in the teeth of indifference. Belmore lets each woman know that she is not forgotten: her spirit is evoked and she is given life by the power of naming” (Belmore *Vig.*). This is, in essence, a critique of the Canadian media that largely ignored the disappearances and murders of indigenous women until very recently but also of social apathy more generally.

One of the names that Belmore shouts in *Vigil* is Felicia Solomon’s. She was from Norway House Cree Nation and was sixteen years old when she disappeared in March, 2003. Her family claimed that they received no help from the police force in finding their daughter. Very little media coverage was given to Felica’s disappearance and her family members were left to issue missing person posters by themselves (Amnesty International 17). Some of her remains were eventually found in June 2003, but no charges were laid for her murder. “You know they label Aboriginal people right away” is what Soloman’s mother had to say about the police in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Amnesty International 17). In *Vigil*, Rebecca Belmore is drawing attention to Soloman and how racism and sexism have negatively affected indigenous women like her. She uses naming as a powerful form of activism, drawing attention to the violent and tragic impact of racism on individual lives, their families and communities.
Embodiment is central to many of Belmore’s art projects and she feels that her identity as an indigenous woman conveys the meaning behind much of her work. She explains that “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 qtd. in Williams). These words resonate in *Vigil* where her identity is central to the performance. Claudette Lauzon, a professor at the Ontario College of Design (OCAD) who has published many articles about Belmore’s art, states that in this performance “Belmore’s is a body that refuses to vanish from a space in which women’s bodies are expected to vanish without a trace” (83). Belmore asserts that missing and murdered indigenous women have not been forgotten. Their memories are connected to indigenous communities that continue to resist colonialism.

In Belmore’s performance piece embodiment is tied to naming. Stephanie Spriggay asserts that Belmore “does not claim to speak “for” the missing women, nor about their lives and experiences, but rather weighs heavy with the flesh of the body” (5). In *Vigil* she writes the names of 51 missing and murdered indigenous women in black marker on her own body. This speaks to the connection between Belmore’s body and the bodies of the women who experienced violence. Amber Dean maintains that by writing the names of the missing women on her body Belmore “implies a proximity” to the women due to her own indigenous identity (132). When watching *Vigil* I came to a similar conclusion and felt that the artwork’s main theme is embodiment. Similarly, Sprigay describes how *Vigil* “articulated, opened and embodied” the 51 women who were named. She also claims that the performance gave a physical form to the women as
the ‘other’ (7). Missing and murdered indigenous women as the other remain an ambiguous subject, but in reality they all have names, identities and connections to people still living. Belmore is able to expertly convey this through her performance.

The underlying racism behind violence against indigenous women is highlighted in Belmore’s performance. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, a historian and expert on indigenous art, describes how in Vigil “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” (730). Amber Dean agrees with this analysis and argues that Belmore’s identity in this performance as an indigenous woman conveys that violence is racialized (132). In “An Ethics Of Embodiment, Civic Engagement and A/R/Tography: Ways Of Becoming Nomadic In Art, Research And Teaching” Professor Stephanie Springgay states that “Belmore’s works become living maps, a transformative account of the embodied subject” and “account for power-relations, agency, and corporeality” (1). I agree with this interpretation of the piece as I view the imagery of ripping a red dress nailed to a pole from her body as Belmore’s critique of the media’s stereotype that indigenous women are victims. This aspect of the performance illustrates that indigenous women are powerful and are able to fight back against acts of violence. Significantly, it conveys that using embodiment in performances can challenge sexism and other forms of prejudice.

Researchers including Springgay, Young, Dean and Townsend-Gault have formed similar conclusions about Belmore’s art. They praise how Vigil is able to memorialize the women who have experienced violence in the Downtown Eastside through an embodied
performance. Collectively they argue that Belmore has the authority to create art to memorialize the women because of her closeness to them as an indigenous woman. The only author who provided a potential criticism of *Vigil* is Dean who states that Belmore groups all of the women together and does not highlight their different identities as mothers, sisters, etc. (134). However, she ultimately concludes that Belmore did this intentionally to highlight the vulnerability of all indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside and does not ‘collapse difference’ in *Vigil* (135). I feel that the research on Belmore’s art is limited by the lack of critical debate on her work. It is possible that Belmore’s notoriety and identity as an indigenous woman has led to a lack of questioning of her art. Why is Belmore able to create representations of missing and murdered indigenous women in her art without there being significant criticism? Other indigenous and non-indigenous artists who represent missing and murdered indigenous in a violent way through art have been heavily criticized. The chapter in this thesis on *The Forgotten* discusses backlash to this project and provides examples of art installations that have not been supported by members of the public. It is important for viewers to take both a critical and positive lens to Belmore’s projects that intentionally try to provoke and unsettle the viewer.

**Transforming Public Space**

Belmore strategically uses public spaces to disrupt colonial narratives. She stated in an interview with Wanda Nanibush, who is an Idle No More organizer from Beausoleil First Nation that “Public space as a material is a good way of seeing my approach to making work, especially performance works. I take off my shoes, stand, and momentarily
imagine how it must have been before Europeans made it theirs. My physical being becomes conceptually grounded, my female Indian-ness unquestionable” (215) Belmore leaves her mark on a particular space and it is transformed into a place of resistance.

*Vigil* features moments of silence, disruption of space and acts of violence. This is done intentionally by the artist to make the viewer uncomfortable while watching the performance. As described in the first section of this thesis, Belmore’s visible pain while shouting the names of missing and murdered indigenous women is meant to unsettle the observer. It conveys the problem of the “bystander effect” where often those who witness violence do not act to help the woman in distress. Belmore is critiquing those who have idly witnessed acts of violence and have not taken action to help indigenous women due to racial and classist prejudice.

Ingrid Mayrolfer, an artist and curator based in Hamilton, Ontario, describes how Belmore’s “Vigil obligates viewers to collectively witness unspeakable atrocities and to take part in building a temporary monument to the victims” (n.p). This underlines the importance of analyzing the relationship between the artist and audience. It also notes how a Downtown Eastside street corner was changed into a memorial. The presence of an audience is symbolic of the Canadian public that for decades ignored the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. The audience is placed in an observer role as those who randomly happened to witnesses *Vigil* most likely did not know the meaning behind Belmore’s actions. This is a critique of the fractured relationship between settler society and indigenous people, one that has not engaged in a reciprocal relationship of knowledge sharing and community building.
It is important to consider what the viewing public’s reaction may have been to *Vigil*. It is possible that, after being a spectator of Belmore’s performance piece, the public might view the Downtown Eastside space in a different light? Hopefully, viewers may reflect on the violence towards indigenous women that has previously occurred in the space. As is the nature of art, the viewer chooses what to take away from the performance. They may be moved by different visual elements of the performance, for instance when Belmore yelled the names of the women or when she nailed a red dress to a telephone poll. The individual viewer’s reaction is subjective, however I think it is important to recognize and consider Belmore’s intent. Clearly, she performed *Vigil* out of anger and frustration because very little was being done by the media, the police and Canadian government to address the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. I believe that *Vigil* helped Belmore to release some of her pent-up emotions and engage in a form of self and community healing. This is one of the powerful motivators for creating activist art.

**Conclusion**

In performing *Vigil*, Rebecca Belmore is able to embody the trauma experienced by indigenous women living in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. There are many powerful elements in her performance, highlighted in the moment she rips a red dress from her body to convey how indigenous women are trying to escape from racial and gender prejudice. Belmore channels her anger into *Vigil* and calls on the Canadian public and government to take action by addressing the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. Belmore resists the settler state by creating indigenous art that
confronts Canada’s colonialist framework. She has accomplished this by promoting indigenous knowledge and political resistance in her work, not only in Vigil, but in its wider dissemination and impact. *Vigil* has inspired other artists such as Jamie Black (featured in Chapter 2) to create activist art addressing violence against indigenous women. *Vigil* fights the cycle of violence by framing art to transform colonial spaces into places of public reflection.
Chapter 4
Jamie Black’s REDress (2011): Public Response and Political Protests

The REDress project by Jamie Black (2011) features a collection of approximately 600 publically donated red dresses representing missing and murdered indigenous women. The dresses are a visual representation of indigenous women’s lives prematurely stolen. They evoke a “presence through a marking of absence” (Black). The goal of the project is for members of the public to reflect on the racist and sexist nature of violence against indigenous women (Black). Jamie Black’s intention was to “allow viewers to access a pressing and difficult social issue on an emotional and visceral level, but before they put up their guard, before they dismiss” (Black). She sees art as a vehicle that can change public perception of missing and murdered indigenous women (Black).

Black is a Mètis multidisciplinary artist living in Winnipeg. She has taught at the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in The Pas, Manitoba and has created curriculum for the art center Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art. She also aids other artists by taking part in the initiative called Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA). REDress is her first touring exhibition and major project. She originally intended to display the work as a guerrilla art project and personally assemble it at night (Black). She changed her mind and decided to install the dresses on campus after receiving support from the Women and Gender Studies Department at the University of Winnipeg. Given the success of the installation, other universities volunteered to host the project both outdoors and in their art galleries. Recognition from various universities helped Black to reach a much wider audience. Black hopes to continue to mount the work REDress in a wide variety of public spaces in Winnipeg and other locations in Canada.
Black has cited different influences that led to the creation of REDress. Helen Betty Osborne’s murder had a large impact on her as she previously worked near The Pas, Manitoba where Osborne was from (Johnson, Shelly and Santos 105). Black was also influenced by an event she saw in Bogata, Colombia. She took in a four-hour public performance by 300 women in Place de Bolivar (the city’s main public square) that was meant to raise awareness on the state’s unjust politically motivated arrest of friends and family members (Johnson, Shelly and Santos 105). The 300 women wore red dresses in their performance, an image that clearly remained fixed in Black’s consciousness (Johnson, Shelly and Santos 105). It is likely that Black also drew inspiration from Rebecca Belmore’s artistic choice in Vigil to wear a red dress that symbolized the violence experienced by indigenous women.

I analyze REDress and discusses reactions to the project in order to assess the work’s impact in reframing the lives of indigenous women. The project has inspired many groups to hang red dresses on trees during political protests on violence against indigenous women. This is significant because it shows that REDress has influenced and encouraged public discourse on this critical problem. This chapter provides evidence of Black’s assertion that through art, people can access the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women in a way that differs from reading a pamphlet or newspaper ("Artist Jamie Black and the REDress Project."). Art naturally prompts emotional and physical reactions in a different way from simply reading text. This chapter conveys how art is an alternate means of communicating information that is less likely to cause the viewer to close one’s mind to learning more about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women ("Artist Jamie Black and the REDress Project.").
The Symbol of The Red Dress

Black explains the symbolic nature of the red dress in this quotation: “I think the symbol of the red dress is both subtle and compelling and also very very simple and accessible. People are attracted to the dresses and often connect to them before learning what the project is about, what the dresses represent” (Black). She suggests the importance of reclaiming the red dress to inspire change because it is an item usually used to sexualize women and increase their vulnerability. Red dresses can evoke very different interpretations. They can express femininity, strength, life giving, power, violence and vulnerability. The colour red has historically been tied to political protest since the time of the French Revolution. The colour is seen in the flag of many communist countries including China and Russia and also by social democrats including the French Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Red dresses are therefore imbued with different possible meanings. Artists such as Rebecca Belmore and Jamie Black have specifically chosen to use this symbol as an instrument to protest violence against indigenous women. They strategically use a red dress as an activist tool to draw in the public.

An article that highlights the significance of the red dresses as an activist tool is “Unsettling Spaces: Grassroots Responses to Canada’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, During the Harper Government Years” by history professor Samira Saramo. She discusses the effectiveness of the REDress project in drawing attention to violence against indigenous women. She upholds that the symbol of the red dress in this installation causes the viewer to “pause to consider the visibility and invisibility of missing and murdered Indigenous women” and concludes that the dresses are “hung
without embodiment” (Saramo 214). In the quotation she is drawing attention to Black’s artistic choice of leaving the dresses empty to symbolize the notable absence of the women’s lives. Saramo argues that REDress prompts the viewer to think about why this problem has been rendered invisible in Canadian society.

Authors Johnson, Shelly, and Alessandra Santos discuss the importance of Jamie Black’s project in “REDressing Invisibility and Marking Violence Against Indigenous Women in the Americas Through Art, Activism and Advocacy”. They describe how the choice of the colour red “portrays both Indigenous femininity and sexuality” and the “spilled blood” of the women (106). When asked about the decision to use the colour red, Black stated that it is a “very important sacred colour” -- not only for her, personally, but for many other indigenous groups across Canada as well (red) is really a calling back of the spirits of these women and allowing them a chance to be among us and have their voices heard through their family members and community.” The art installation holds deep meaning and can evoke a feeling that the women’s presence can be felt within the red dresses. However, the overall effect is subjective. The scholarly work of Susan Sontag affirms that art provokes different reactions in viewers according to their perception of the work and is influenced by their own personal beliefs and values. Red dresses can therefore impact the viewer in differing ways and will be further discussed in the following section of this thesis.

**Reactions to the REDress Project**

*REDress* reframes the lives of the missing and murdered indigenous women and has inspired different reactions from the public. This section begins with an account of my own experience viewing the art installation and then includes the perspective of some
members of the public. I travelled to the University of Toronto to view *REDress* which had been installed on campus at Philosopher’s Walk in March 2017. The dresses were hung on trees in a very visible part of the campus that students routinely walk through. Below is a photo (Fig. 2) I took of a red dress at the University of Toronto installation.

![Photo of a red dress](image)

(Fig. 2. *Redress*. Yasmin Strautins. 2017)

I found *REDress* to be a very haunting representation of missing and murdered indigenous women. It was startling to see the red dresses hanging on tree branches and to contemplate how they were purposefully left empty to represent loss. The bright red colour of the dresses grabbed my attention immediately and I felt drawn to the work but was also unsettled. I noticed the shadows of thorned and dead branches that fell on the dresses and became part of the art work. I felt that these shadows conveyed motifs of entrapment and death and could be linked to how the women could not escape from violence. This shows that the way the dresses are displayed in different physical spaces
affects the work. How the project is installed can possibly change the overall impact of the piece and evoke different feelings from the public.

When viewing *REDress*, I was aware of the fact that the installation was on the settler occupied space of the university. I learned from reading an information sheet about the project that *REDress* was intentionally installed at Philosophers Walk to draw attention to how the space was once a called Taddle Creek, a fishing and trading site for indigenous communities (Edwards). The project has consciously worked to “cross boundaries between First Nations reserve spaces and settler-claimed space, unsettling assumptions about who belongs where” (Saramo 216). To better understand the significance of the project occupying settler claimed space it is important to consider Karyn Recollet’s theory of spatial tagging. Recollett argues that “The enactment of spatial tags allows us to critique whiteness as a construction that continues to affect our spatial relationships within a settler colonial condition.” This statement reveals that art projects such as *REDress* that engage in spatial tagging, challenge the power hierarchy where the white colonizers are dominant. Spatial tagging is an activist tool that works to question settler claimed spaces (Recollet 131). It encourages us to think of how the land was taken from indigenous people. *REDress* is able to disrupt public spaces through the hanging of red dresses transforming them into sites of contemplation on the effects of colonialism. This challenges settlers to start conversations on why there are so many missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada.

Black maintains that *REDress* is very accessible because the dresses have been displayed outside rather than solely in a gallery space. The dresses are a simple and yet effective means of attracting the attention of people who may have never heard about the
project before. I noticed that the dresses displayed outdoors caused a displacement of movement on the University of Toronto’s campus as some members of the public would purposefully stop to look at the dresses. Some passersby would also read information sheets about the project that had been tied to trees. This indicates how some people were intrigued by the red dresses and were interested enough to take the time to learn more about the project. There is a connection between a viewer’s personal background and their understanding of the artwork’s subject matter (Sontag). Those who feel a personal connection to the image of the red dress will be more likely to devote the time required to take in the art installation (Sontag).

It is important to note that it is not possible to fully understand how a work of art will affect the viewer. Each person has their own unique beliefs and values that will impact what they take away from the installation (Berger; Sontag). A viewer’s understanding of REDress will be different depending on whether they have heard of the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women before and from what kind of news source. It is difficult to fully solve this problem but I have attempted to include a sample of reactions from different members of the public in order to inspire thought provoking questions about REDress.

When viewers of REDress choose to ask questions and subsequently find out that the dresses represent missing and murdered indigenous women, they may leave with a different understanding of the problem. The art project aims to humanize the women through the red dresses. Jamie Black has talked about an instance when “A police officer came on a tour of the installation at the University of Winnipeg and by the end of the tour he had tears in his eyes and he shook my hand for a very long time, thanking me for
allowing him to understand these women as women, as loved and valued and missed and not just as statistics. That was one of my proudest moments, that is what I want viewers to take away from viewing the project” (Black). This reaction shows that the viewer understood how missing and murdered indigenous women have connections to friends and families which is a way of humanizing them. This illustrates how the REDress project has the potential to profoundly affect members of the public and spark conversations about violence against indigenous women.

A professor in the nursing department at the University of Saskatchewan, Cindy Peternelj-Taylor, has written a powerful description of her experience viewing the REDress project. She published an editorial in the Journal of Forensic Nursing where she details a firsthand account of seeing the REDress project installed at her university. The fact that this story was published in a nursing journal speaks to the widespread appeal and power of this project. Peternelj-Taylor recounts the numerous times she saw the installation and the lasting impact it had on her:

My response to the dresses, however, was a visceral one. I was emotionally stirred in a way that I didn’t quite comprehend, even though I was uncertain of their purpose or what they represented. I couldn’t keep my eyes off the dresses—some were frumpy, others were flirty, some were short, others were long—they came in all shapes, styles, and sizes. I was mesmerized by their presence. Some hung perfectly still against the backdrop of the campus, whereas others were suspended in the air almost ghost like. (185)

Her reaction to viewing the installation speaks to the power of REDress to capture the attention of members of the public. The project spurred Peternelj-Taylor to have conversations about racism, sexism and colonialism at the university. She was also moved to contemplate how to talk about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women with people who “fail to understand the impact of marginalization, oppression,
racism, and stigma, or, worse yet, how to engage those who are indifferent to the violence that so many women encounter in their daily lives” (Peternelj-Taylor 185). This reveals how the project might influence the viewers to take an active role in educating others about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. REDress has attempted to make a difficult topic more approachable in order to help achieve the goal of changing viewers’ understanding and inspiring them to become activists.

There are some negative consequences to having a public installation displayed for a lengthy duration. Peternelj-Taylor describes how, over time, she became somewhat desensitized to REDress.

Following the first 2 weeks of the exhibit, I returned to campus after the weekend and was bewildered to discover that I was half way across the campus before I realized that the dresses were still on display. I was shocked by my response. I physically had to stop and look to see if they were still there; it was almost as if I had become desensitized to their presence, and I wondered if this is how society responds. Do we get so wrapped up in our own lives that we no longer take note of such significant events around us? Do we tune out the events that have no impact on us personally? Do we secretly blame women for their life circumstances that may put them in an “at risk position”? How do we respond as men and women? (186)

Her words speak to one of the challenges of an outdoor installation that members of the public have no choice but to encounter. People may be distracted by their daily tasks and if in a hurry are much more likely to completely ignore the red dresses. I would assume that when Peternelj-Taylor first experienced the REDress campaign, she was not in a rush and had time to consider the art work. The revelation that she had almost become desensitized to REDress is connected to how the public can ignore pressing problems that they are constantly exposed to. People are much more likely to be outraged when they first see an image of a horrifying human rights violation or political problem but over time they may think this less and less about the issue (Sontag). I believe that even though
it is possible to become desensitized, compassionate and caring individuals like Peternelj-Taylor will take the initiative to start conversations about the project. It is unrealistic to think that everyone who views REDress will be profoundly impacted, but there will be people who engage in self-reflection and have conversations about the effects of racism and sexism on indigenous communities in Canada.

There are other critiques that address problems associated with the REDress project. A recent article published in the Huffington Post titled “If I’m Murdered Or Go Missing, Don’t Hang a Red Dress For Me” by Terese Marie Mailhot who identifies as an indigenous mother asks “if there are enough dresses or symbols in the world to signify that pain and distress for Indigenous people”. Mailhot decries how the popularity of the red dress symbol has led to it becoming “impersonal”. She sees the dresses as “artistically stunning” but also describes them as “ghostly” in a negative sense. Mailhot questions why missing and murdered indigenous women are represented by “an image with no features, or life, or blood, or viscera”. This highlights the possible repercussions of using non-violent imagery and she argues that this artwork will not necessarily prompt critical debate. She asks why red dresses are used rather than human faces in stories about missing and murdered indigenous women. Mailhot also questions the use of a symbol that is usually associated with femininity and depending on the viewer can be seen as a symbol of power or fragility. She upholds that she supports art projects that attempt to memorialize and create symbols but that they should be open to criticism.

The article by Mailhot raises many questions about whether or not works of art should represent missing and murdered indigenous women. Is a work of art enough to inspire prolonged critical discussion amongst members of the public? The author seems
torn on these questions despite being very critical of REDress. Ultimately I think art should not be the only form of imagery to represent the women and certainly not just REDress by itself. Photographs along with the names of the women should be featured in stories about missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives if that is the wish of their family members. There is no one perfect approach to memorializing indigenous women whose experiences in life greatly differed from one another. Instead, varying methods of representation in artist’s projects will prompt a more complex understanding of missing and murdered indigenous women.

**Public Protest and The Impact of the REDress Project**

REDress has encouraged members of the public to hang red dresses at protests and vigils to raise awareness on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. This supports the goal of Black’s art which is to “create a dialogue around social and political events and issues, through provocation or creating space for reflection” (Black). Some members of the public have consciously borrowed from the REDress project while others have appropriated the symbol because it has become a widespread method of representing missing and murdered indigenous women. A catalyst for the use of the red dresses in protests might have specifically been a one-day display project by Jamie Black. This initiative asked members of the public to hang red dresses in their home or work places on the National Day of Vigils (October 4th 2015) to honour missing and murdered indigenous women. Jamie Black has stated “I'm hoping that community groups will take on and start doing public installations and using that as a tool to have the public have more of an understanding of missing and murdered women” (Black qtd. in
Suen). The goal of the one-day initiative was to educate the public about the problem and also to build a sense of community. Black hoped to encourage reflection on the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women and use the symbol of the red dress as a form of political resistance.

There has been media coverage of not only REDress but of other installations inspired by the project. Native studies students at St Joseph’s College (a Christian school within the Toronto District School Board) were asked by their art teacher to create red dresses to then be pinned on a pyramid shaped structure and displayed outside the school (“Year of the Parish”). Members of the larger community were also invited to participate on the night of Nuit Blanche (a yearly event held one night that features public art installations) to create red dresses to be shown along with the student’s creations (“Year of the Parish”). The CBC published the article “Red dresses appear around Yellowknife for missing and murdered Indigenous women” in May 2017 that recounts how the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) created a Red Dress Day in Canada that has inspired members of the public to hang red dresses outside of houses and schools or to wear a red dress in order to raise awareness of this problem (Hwang). Chief Bobby Cameron of FSIN has stated that “When someone suffers a violent death or goes missing it hurts the integrity of our families and our communities…When we wear the red we acknowledge that they are still here in spirit; in our hearts” (“Red Dress Day”). This verifies that some members of the public have interpreted the symbolic meaning of a red dress differently from Black who never suggested wearing the dresses. Despite this the activist projects led by St Joseph’s College and FSIN share the goal of raising awareness on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women with the REDress project.
The reclaiming of the symbol of the red dress directly confronts media stereotypes of indigenous women by changing the established narrative. Black has been openly critical of the media and maintains that “I think what happens often is the media misrepresent missing women and I hope this project will help inform people about, you know, the humanity of these women and the fact that they are very important and very good people and have made mistakes…but they are valuable people” (Black qtd. in Solway). Resistance efforts challenge understandings of missing and murdered indigenous women as having lived dangerous and high risk lifestyles. They struggle against the notion that these lives are worthless. Instead, *REDress* shows that the women are remembered, loved and are connected to the community. The protests that have been inspired by the *REDress* project highlight the significance of art projects in helping to raise awareness of missing and murdered indigenous women.

**Conclusion**

*REDress* uses a recognizable symbol to mark the devastating loss of the women’s lives and to convey that the women are valued and remembered. The incorporation of red dresses in many political protests shows that Jamie Black’s art installation has affected public discussion of violence against indigenous women. It has served to inspire some members of the public to engage in activism and criticize the Canadian government’s inaction to seriously address the problem. This underlines the importance of political art in shaping public dialogue towards thinking critically about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. *REDress* has made its mark by changing the conversations
about the problem from a focus on statistics and descriptions of violence to talking about the women’s lives and the lasting effects of this loss.
Chapter 5
Pamela Masik’s The Forgotten (2011): Controversy and Public Debate

Pamela Masik’s project The Forgotten (2011) features 69 paintings on eight by ten foot canvases. They include Masik’s painted interpretations of photographs taken of missing and murdered indigenous women from a RCMP Missing Women’s Task Force Poster. Masik’s goal for the project was to raise awareness of violence against indigenous women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Masik is currently working from Vancouver and has created not only paintings but also sculpture and performance art. Her work has not been shown at any mainstream galleries but has been purchased by private collectors (Masik, “About”). Many of her paintings include themes of gender and sexuality and she has a history of focusing on the themes of violence against women in her art. For example, in her collection titled Caged Bird (2010) she includes photographs of herself mixed with painted images. In some of the paintings she is naked and looks like she is in distress which highlights her vulnerability (Masik, “Caged Bird”). One of the paintings titled Never Go Back displays fragmented female body parts. These works appear to be drawing attention to how society sexualizes the female body.

This chapter begins with an analysis of how The Forgotten has framed missing and murdered indigenous women. I then address the backlash that the project has prompted from scholars and indigenous activists who have worked to raise awareness of violence against indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside. This is followed by a discussion of how Pamela Masik’s decision to not accept input on her art project from indigenous community members is problematic. I include an outline of differing perspectives on allyship to analyze whether non-indigenous artists should consult with
indigenous peoples before beginning their projects. I argue that the controversy of *The Forgotten* has helped to reframe the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women to the public by fostering deeper conversations on how to represent the women in art projects.

**My Analysis of The Forgotten**

Before I viewed *The Forgotten* I first read about the controversy inspired by the project in journal articles. My view of the work has been affected by what has been written. I feel it has been more difficult for me to form an opinion about this art work in comparison to other case studies because I was already aware of negative reactions to the project. However, I still feel that it is important to outline my response when viewing images and videos of *The Forgotten* (these are available on Pamela Masik’s website, titled Confessions of An Artist) in order to clearly state my impression of the work.

I find the 69 portraits featured in *The Forgotten* collectively unsettling and disturbing to look at. This is mainly because the eyes of the women in the paintings appear to be soulless, possibly because of Masik’s choice to use dark colours. The paintings contain “somber imagery” and the women are shown “with knife slashes, broken bones, blood, newspaper clippings, cellophane and garbage bags embedded on and in the portrait” (Moss 51). In videos advertising the project, Masik is seen violently hitting the canvas with her paintbrush and tearing painted representations of the women. The colour tones used in the portraits make the women appear unusually pale and some of the faces seem to be partially covered by a shadow. The women’s facial expressions are mainly those of anger and sadness. Some portraits have red paint splashed on them
and certain women appear to be bruised. The overall effect of the paintings conveys the impression that these are women who have experienced violence and appear trapped by this identity. There are no motifs in the paintings that address the personalities of the women in order to differentiate them. This is troubling because they are grouped all together and identically displayed as victims of violence.

When analyzing the project, it is important to contemplate Masik’s artist statement which closes with her assertion that “These women may have been victim’s to a brutal violence, Due to social apathy, But today I like to think of them as heroes, Who will inspire social change, And never truly ‘forgotten’” (Masik, “The Forgotten Project”). Masik maintains that through her project she wants to celebrate the lives of the women and show that they are remembered. Her intention was also to present the artwork as a critique of the media’s portrayal of missing and murdered indigenous women (Masik, “The Forgotten Project”). The Forgotten does challenge the viewer to consider the impact of violence by presenting portraits of women who are bruised and bloodied. However, I do not think the overall effect of the paintings demonstrates that the women are “heroes” because of the dark and somber imagery that seems to affirm their identities as “victims”. There is a disconnect between the artist’s intended goal and how the art comes across to the viewer. I have mixed feeling about this project. It is problematic that Masik has grouped the women together as a homogenous group rather than illustrating that they were individuals who had their own lives and experienced different types of violence. However, I can understand the artist’s decision to paint the women using dark imagery to highlight how the media has dehumanized them. There are many contrasting views of this project which are discussed in the next section. The criticisms of the work help to
illustrate that *The Forgotten* has changed public discourse on how to represent missing
and murdered indigenous women in art.

**Critiques of The Forgotten**

*The Forgotten* has been the most controversial art project on the subject of
missing and murdered indigenous women. Controversy initially intensified at a
conference at Simon Fraser University in the summer of 2010. Masik responded to the
negative public responses to *The Forgotten* in a blog post titled “The Conference Was Hijacked”.

Last night I spoke at a National Conference at SFU talking about ‘The Forgotten”
Project. There was so much hostility in the room by a group of women from the
DTES [Downtown Eastside]…These women are so drowned in their own stories
and take claim on the loss of lives, passionately taking ownership of any of the
inherent problems that were the cause of this tragedy… These women are so blind
and deaf to any greater perspective on the issues, that illustrate they are not theirs
to own. (Masik, ”The Conference Was Hijacked.”)

Masik is arguing that the group of women who critiqued *The Forgotten* do not have the
right to stop artists from creating projects to raise awareness of missing and murdered
indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside. The blog post reveals that Masik has
portrayed members of the community who did not agree with *The Forgotten’s* message as
hijackers. Masik belongs to a different social class than other women in the Downtown
Eastside because she can afford to have a large art studio in Vancouver. Dean and George
argue that as a member of a wealthier social class, Masik finds herself positioned as an
outsider to the Downtown Eastside and they maintain that she lacks legitimacy as an
artist to paint images of missing and murdered indigenous women. This speaks to how
artistic controversies within the public sphere of art are linked to existing power
dynamics related to the context of the work (Howells; Schachter).

One of the repercussions of tying art to politics is that it “may be exposed to
various forms of political interference” (Devereaux 212). This shift to understanding art
as political rather than focusing on aesthetics can promote “tyranny of public opinion”
(Devereaux 213). This can lead to censorship of art that does not conform to a “standard
of decency” because it is viewed as “obscene, indecent, unpatriotic, racist, misogynist
and so on” (Devereaux 213). For example, The Forgotten was censored because the
public considered the project to be harming rather than helping the community of the
Downtown Eastside. The backlash was due to Masik’s lack of communication with
activist groups in this neighbourhood that were already working on raising awareness on
violence against indigenous women (Dean; Moss). Mary Devereaux argues in the book
Protected Space: Politics, Censorship, and the Arts that “art has become a litmus test of
beliefs about sexuality, public decency, obscenity, and the limits of tolerance” (208). The
Forgotten was seen by the public as crossing a boundary into the realm of the obscene
due to violent imagery shown in the paintings (Moss). This presents a challenge to free
speech and the modern construct of art as a “protected space” that should not have
government oversight or other forms of restrictions (Devereaux 213).

The controversy inspired by The Forgotten has changed conversations on how to
represent missing and murdered indigenous women in art. Dean begins her book
Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women by critiquing The Forgotten. She notes
that due to the backlash against Pamela Masik’s work, the Museum of Anthropology at
the University of British Columbia decided to cancel an exhibition of the work in 2011. The director of the museum informed the public that the institution did not want to cause “further distress” to the family and friends of the women depicted in the paintings and it was felt that *The Forgotten* would not foster productive conversations because of backlash against the project. (Lederman). Controversy remains over whether or not the museum should have cancelled the exhibit. Dean’s arguments suggest that she agrees with the Museum of Anthropology’s decision to cancel *The Forgotten*. Laura Moss, author of “Is Canada Postcolonial? Re-Asking through ‘The Forgotten’ Project” (2012) is very critical of the work but remains undecided if the Museum of Anthropology did the right thing in cancelling the exhibition because it was a form of censorship. Moss affirms that artists have the right to create, but must also be cognizant of a victim’s right to be remembered in a “dignified manner” (60). Moss questions why Masik focused on violence in the paintings if *The Forgotten* was meant to be a celebration of the women’s lives. I disagree with the museum’s decision to not show the installation because the differing viewpoints on *The Forgotten* spark an interesting conversation on how the women should be represented. I view the cancellation of the project as an infringement upon freedom of speech which can be traced back to the public’s rejection of *The Forgotten*.

Feminist scholar Amber Dean argues that the title of Pamela Masik’s project “*The Forgotten*” is problematic as it reiterates stereotypes in the media that construct missing and murdered women’s lives as ungrievable (54). Dean takes issue with the title of the exhibit, stating that the women were not forgotten by their family and friends. She argues that many relatives worked tirelessly, campaigning for the police to search for
their missing loved ones. Feminist scholar Laura Moss supports Dean’s view stating “The underlying—and somewhat grotesque—assumption in this statement is that the women were without a community that might mourn their losses un-obliviously, and they needed Masik’s representational grief” (54). This suggests how unnecessary it was for Masik to act as a spokesperson on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women through *The Forgotten* project. Dean argues that labelling them as forgotten can serve to erase the over twenty years of activism on the part of the annual Women’s Memorial March that has been raising awareness about women disappearing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (5).

A documentary film called The Exhibition (2013) focuses on *The Forgotten* and examines the project from Masik’s point of view. It was made by Damon Vignale, Miho Yamamoto and Daryl Bennett who shadowed Masik for six years while she was creating *The Forgotten*. The film is not easily accessible, but the trailer is on Masik’s website. When analyzing the trailer from the perspective of Amber Dean’s and Laura Moss’s writing, there are many possible critiques of its subject matter. The film portrays Masik as a spokesperson of the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women, but this is problematic (Moss; Dean). Moss argues that the work done by the Women’s Memorial March illustrates that there was already a public voice raising awareness on the subject. Dean and Moss both agree that Masik is an outsider to the community of the Downtown Eastside and does not have the full authority to speak on behalf of missing and murdered indigenous women. Marlene George, who is the Chair of the Women’s Memorial March Committee remembers that Pamela Masik only came to one meeting and then never returned (George qtd. in Parkatti). She suggests that Masik’s work exploits missing and
murdered women from the Downtown Eastside as well as the five women in her paintings who either died of natural causes or are still alive (George qtd. in Parkatti).

George states that Masik’s “realm of experience is so different from that of women from the Downtown Eastside – those two worlds could never, never meet. She has no clue, presenting herself as being from the community, speaking on behalf of women from the community” (George qtd. in Parkatti). Concerns about class and racial differences are raised because Masik is a white artist from a more prosperous area of Vancouver and yet she was publically situating her experience as being tied to the women in *The Forgotten*. Moss suggests this may have been a form of appropriation because Masik did not ask permission from indigenous community members when creating the project (60). In my view, these critiques of the project are valid, as they foster an important discussion on how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women in art. Masik should have made an effort to speak with and primarily listen to the concerns of indigenous women in the Downtown Eastside in order to not put her own values and beliefs above theirs.

Pamela Masik claimed that despite criticism of the project, one of the inspirations for *The Forgotten* was a desire to bear witness for the 69 women who were marginalized even in death. She states “‘I know that there were some ... organizations that felt that I was exploiting these women... but I saw my role as an artist was to really acknowledge and bear witness to what went on ... and I personally don't think that not showing these paintings is going to make any change. It's almost as if we're repeating a pattern within society that we're just going to ignore the issues’” (Masik qtd. by Lederman). Amber Dean is very critical of Masik’s claim that she is a “witness” to missing and murdered indigenous women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (3). Dean argues that bearing
witness is a “more limited approach, the witness despite good intentions, tends to collapse
differences between themselves and those who suffered violence first-hand, erasing
complex histories in ways that make it difficult to see how wider social contexts are
related to the injustice or violence being witnessed (4). Dean affirms that recognizing the
inheritance of what remains from the murders and disappearances of indigenous women
can create more “ethical encounters” than witnessing as seen in the work by Pamela
Masik (5). Although it was not Masik’s intended goal for the project to inspire a
conversation about indigenous consultation and witnessing, the resulting conversations
have been productive. There is now a larger body of scholarly work on how to represent
missing and murdered indigenous women in art because of strong reactions generated by
*The Forgotten*.

There have been other controversial projects by non-indigenous and indigenous
artists. While *The Forgotten* by Pamela Masik used media images of missing and
murdered indigenous women, another controversial artist named Evan Munday who does
not identify as being indigenous, chose to use caricatures to represent eight indigenous
women. Evan Munday’s caricatures (2015) were considered disrespectful by some of the
women’s family members because he had neglected to ask for their consent (Wheeler).
Munday decided to prematurely halt his art project despite the fact that his original goal
was to raise awareness by tweeting the pictures to Stephen Harper.

Tracey Mae Chambers who identifies as Ojibwe and Métis created the
controversial artwork “mine is but a tear in the river” which represents missing and
murdered indigenous women through a collection of more than one thousand photographs
that are recreated crime scenes (Fantoni). This work has been shown at different locations
including the Ontario College of Art Design and at the Ojibwe Cultural Centre in M’Chigeeng First Nation. She put herself in many of these photographs to replicate how a dead body might be found (Laskowski). She was drawn to create art on this topic because she has experienced violence herself. Chambers’ goal for her art project is to raise awareness of the reality of violence against indigenous women and has stated “I understand that it's very visceral and it's very uncomfortable... but sometimes a little discomfort is necessary” (qtd. by Laskowski). Her project has been critiqued by members of the Canadian public who find the recreation of crime scenes to be troubling and unnecessary.

In undertaking their projects, Pamela Masik and Evan Munday have been criticized for not first seeking input from indigenous people. A review of the critiques reveals that there has been consensus on non-indigenous artists’ need to consult with indigenous community members if they are hoping to focus on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women in their art (Dean; Moss; George). However, the backlash to Chambers project shows that there has also been criticism of indigenous artists’ projects. This discussion can be taken further when considering the literature on allyship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. The next section of this thesis focuses on relationship building in order to convey how artists have a responsibility to consult with indigenous people if their work relates to indigenous issues and studies.

What does it mean to be an ally to indigenous communities?

Critiques of The Forgotten prompt the question, what is good allyship in the context of advocacy work for the rights of indigenous people? Numerous social
advocates have developed their own definitions of what constitutes an ally to indigenous communities. Dr. Lynn Gehl (who is an artist, writer and advocate and identifies as Algonquin Anishinaabe) has written an “Ally Bill of Responsibilities” outlining sixteen points that include:

1. Do not act out of guilt, but rather out of a genuine interest in challenging the larger oppressive power structures; Understand that they are secondary to the Indigenous people that they are working with and that they seek to serve. They and their needs must take a back seat; Do not take up the space and resources, physical and financial, of the oppressed group; Do not take up time at community meetings and community events. This is not their place. They must listen more than speak. Allies cannot perceive all the larger oppressive power structures as clearly as members of the oppressed group can. (Gehl)

Gehl is arguing that members of settler society who want to be allies must be willing to learn from the group they are trying to help and not assume to know the needs of people who are marginalized. The non-profit group Indigenous Action Media supports Gehl’s arguments for the need to consider the motivations behind an individual’s decision to become an ally (Indigenous Action Media). Indigenous Action Media reasons that “Meaningful alliances aren’t imposed, they are consented upon.” Those who want to be allies to a community must therefore work together with the community they are trying to help. They argue that those who do not consult fit into a group of organizations that have become non-profit capitalists that have profited and advanced their careers at the expense of those they are advocating for. Some non-profits have created workshops that clients pay to attend in order to acquire an “allyship badge” without actually helping the people they are advocating for (Indigenous Action Media). This reinforces how in order to be an ally one must engage in relationship building with the marginalized group they want to work with.
Gehl’s description of an ally can be tied to the arguments made in the article “Non-White Settler and Indigenous Relations: Decolonizing Possibilities for Social Justice” by feminist scholar Jo-Anne Lee. The article critically analyzes the term ally and suggests that when used improperly, it encourages members of settler society to remain witnesses to the concerns of indigenous peoples instead of working with them towards confronting colonialism. Lee states “I wonder how positioning indigenous worldviews might transform our understanding of possible models and discourses for anti-racist, transnational, feminist, decolonizing activism” (15). This suggests positive outcomes for consultation with the indigenous communities that are being advocated for if a project is going to be effective in addressing their concerns. Jo-Anne Lee claims that “indigenous and racialized activists must claim spaces of connection inside social movements so that critical dialogue, as yet only known through yearning, can be generated” (22). In effect, Lee is saying that there should be a consultation between non-indigenous and indigenous peoples.

If you call yourself an ally but do not engage with the people you are trying to help, then it is a shallow use of the word. A clear understanding of allyship must also apply to artists who want to raise awareness on the topic of indigenous rights. Paulette Reagan who is a Euro-Canadian scholar and academic liaison to Truth and Reconciliation Canada maintains the need for non-indigenous peoples to engage in allyship.

Settler violence against Indigenous peoples is woven into the fabric of Canadian history in an unbroken thread from past to present that we must now unravel, unsettling our comfortable assumptions about the past. At the same time, we must work as Indigenous allies to “restory” the dominant culture version of history; that is, we must make decolonizing space for Indigenous history—counter-narratives of diplomacy, law, and peacemaking practices—as told by Indigenous peoples themselves. (2)
Reagan’s arguments support critiques of The Forgotten because Masik did not ask for input on her project from indigenous community members. Artists have a duty to consult in order for their projects to be able to move past witnessing. If they create works that relate to missing and murdered indigenous women, they should work in cooperation with indigenous groups who do advocacy work related to this problem.

There are many complexities associated with how non-indigenous peoples can engage in relationship building with non-indigenous peoples. Non-indigenous artists are put in a difficult position when creating artworks that are meant to show solidarity with indigenous peoples in Canada. The Forgotten is an example of how the intended goal of an artwork can be read very differently by members of the public. Arlene Raven who wrote the book Art in the Public Interest asks “How can we separate the good intentions of artists from the value of their work?” (1). Raven reveals a tension that exists between an artist’s work and the political implications. If a non-indigenous artist wants to consult with indigenous peoples it is important to recognize that they are affected by existing power dynamics. Albert Memmi argues in “The Colonizer and the Colonized” that “Colonial relations do not stem from individual good will or actions; they exist before his arrival or his birth, and whether he accepts or rejects them matters little” (38). This highlights how historical factors cannot be ignored in non-indigenous people’s efforts to engage in solidarity. Shiri Pasternak argues in “The Colonizer Who Refuses” that there are “sympathetic colonizers” who “will construct the colonized to suit their own myths and continue to pursue their own program. But for the sympathetic colonizer who decides to abandon her political principles and accepts the position of the colonized
whole-heartedly, she will also discover, crushingly, that she cannot and will not adapt to their customs and language” (145). This reveals how “misunderstandings” will occur when non-indigenous allies want to engage in solidarity with indigenous peoples because of cultural differences and miscommunication (Leanne Simpson, “First Words” xiv).

How can non-indigenous artists engage in ethical relationship building with indigenous people? The book *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships* by Lynne Davis poses the question is it possible for non-indigenous peoples “to work in solidarity with indigenous peoples without replicating the continuing colonial relations that characterize the broader frame of indigenous / non-indigenous relationships in Canada today” (2). Davis argues that there are many different views on how to build solidarity and there is no consensus among academics (9). She maintains that it is worthwhile to engage in this debate despite existing challenges associated with non-indigenous peoples becoming allies. Davis states that relationship building is necessary in order to fulfill the goal of seeing “longstanding injustices resolved and a mutual respectful future realized, whatever the complexities of getting there” (10). Therefore, it is worthwhile to encourage artists who want to address missing and murdered indigenous women in their art to consult with indigenous communities.

**Conclusion**

The impact of *The Forgotten* has gone beyond Masik’s original intention to critique the media’s coverage of missing and murdered indigenous women. Instead, the controversy surrounding the project has fostered in depth conversations within academic research on the responsibility of artists to consult indigenous peoples if they are creating
art that focuses on violence against indigenous women. *The Forgotten* serves as an example of how an artist’s lack of direct association with a community they choose to feature in their work can bring about a backlash but this does not mean that artists should always shy away from criticism, or stop creating. The controversy surrounding *The Forgotten* has had a positive outcome because it has led to scholarly discussion about responsible and acceptable representation of missing and murdered indigenous women in art and the need to move past witnessing. There is a greater understanding of the responsibility of indigenous and non-indigenous artists to keep an open dialogue with the community their work is connected to.
Chapter 6
Walking With Our Sisters (2013) by Christi Belcourt: Symbolism in the Moccasin Vamps

Walking With Our Sisters is a commemorative art installation created by Christi Belcourt in 2013. The project relies on community, featuring over 1810 pairs of moccasin vamps that represent missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, and 118 pairs of childrens’ vamps symbolizing those who died in residential schools (Walking With Our Sisters). The installation is currently touring numerous galleries and community spaces in many different cities and indigenous reserves in Canada. Belcourt states that “this project sets out with one main goal, and that is to do the act of honouring and to come together as a community of honour… The result of inaction is more death” (Sandals). She envisions her work as a memorial to the women. The project has received input from elders, community organizers and members of the public in order to help realize Belcourt’s vision.

Christi Belcourt is a Métis artist whose family ancestry is connected to Mantiou Sakhigan (Lac St. Anne, Alberta). She is well known for her intricate acrylic paintings with different indigenous motifs that appear as though they have been beaded into the canvas (Belcourt). Belcourt’s art has received wide recognition and she has won the Governor General’s Innovation Award and 2016 Premier’s Award in the Arts. Her work is featured in the National Gallery of Canada, The Art Gallery of Ontario, The Canadian Museum of History and on Parliament Hill. She is currently one of the head organizers of the Onaman Collective which promotes the “resurgence of indigenous language and land based practices” (Belcourt). Her artwork often includes themes of nature, indigenous spirituality and traditional Métis medicines.
Walking With Our Sisters features community involvement, which has been key to realizing this ambitious project. Planning committees have been created in each location that the installation visits. For example, in Edmonton where the exhibit first opened, the planning committee consisted of Tanya Kappo, Tara Kappo and Tracy Bear. Volunteers have been vital to the project. They have helped to set up the installation, welcome visitors, explain the significance of the work and act as a support if a member of the public is emotionally triggered by the subject matter. Tanya Kappo has described how the memorial as had a “profound spiritual impact on many”. Public involvement has created a unique space in which one can engage in personal reflection.

Walking With Our Sisters addresses the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women through a multifaceted approach. This chapter discusses themes of artistic symbolism, naming, indigenous knowledge sharing through beadwork, input from Elders, donations from the public, and participation in the project by many volunteers. This case study outlines how this art project has been able to confront a very difficult topic by transforming a regular gallery or community space into a place of ceremony through participation from the public. Walking With Our Sisters asks those who view the installation to not act as voyeurs or witnesses who collectively mourn the lives of indigenous women. Instead, it is vital to recognize the women as individuals who had different experiences as First Nations, Métis and Inuit. This shift is necessary to transforming one’s understanding of missing murdered indigenous women from an abstract concept. They should be understood as people who had unique identities and whose lives ended prematurely due to the lasting effects of institutional racism and sexism, perpetuated not only by the mainstream media but also by a colonial state.
This chapter begins with an account of my experience viewing *Walking With Our Sisters*. It then discusses how the women have been represented in the installation and the impact of public participation in the creation of the project. I then outline the importance of ceremony in transforming a space and the power of indigenous knowledge sharing through art. My main argument is that the beaded moccasin vamps express missing and murdered indigenous women’s unique identities as First Nations, Métis or Inuit which fights against understanding them as a homogenous group. This combats the trend of describing missing and murdered indigenous women as statistics and reframes their lives to the public.

**My Experience Viewing the Installation**

I was fortunate to visit *Walking With Our Sisters* together with a group of Trent University students at the Carleton University Art Gallery located in Ottawa when it was showing there in 2015. My experience viewing the exhibit inspired me to research visual art created on the topic of missing and murdered indigenous women. On arrival at the gallery we were greeted by the volunteer Barbara Hill of Kitigan Zibi First Nation, who spoke about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. She outlined the protocols to follow when walking through the installation. Students were informed that the gallery had been previously smudged which is a traditional practise where tobacco (a traditional medicine) is burned to purify a space. I recall Barbara Hill indicating a box of tissues provided should we feel the need to cry while walking through the installation. She explained that the souls of the women were being held within the space, and as we moved through, we would be walking along with the women whose spirits were present.
Hill told us that because the missing and murdered indigenous women were not able to live full lives, they would be unable to travel to the afterlife at the time of their death. She explained that the women’s lives were being honored in the installation in order for their spirits to pass onto the next life. Hill said that the women were not to be pitied, instead the installation encourages the viewer to celebrate their lives.

The Trent University students visiting the gallery were then told to enter the installation space once they felt ready. Upon entering and viewing the donated moccasin vamps, I felt very emotional. Walking into the gallery space was transformational as I felt a part of ceremony because I was walking along with the spirits of the women. The sheer volume of moccasin vamps representing the missing and murdered women had an emotional impact. It successfully conveyed the gravity of the problem in ways a written statistic could not.

**The Importance of Public Participation and Community Building**

The moccasin vamps that are displayed in the memorial are purposefully left unfinished (Walking With Our Sisters). Gabby Richichi-Fried who volunteered for Walking With Our Sisters at the Carleton University Art Gallery explains that “vamps usually get sewn into moccasins. But they're to symbolize lives that have been cut short” (Rice). Each vamp has different symbols beaded into the fabric. The symbols featured contain meanings understood by individual bead workers and many are tied to indigenous knowledge.
The vamps that are displayed in *Walking With Our Sisters* reinforce the idea that missing and murdered indigenous women’s lives have never been ignored or forgotten by their loved ones and community members. They counter the harmful stereotype that the women’s lives were not of value because all of the vamps were donated by members of the public who care about this problem. Sixty-five beading groups were created across Turtle Island (North America) and a group from Aberdeen, Scotland also participated, receiving guidance via Skype from mentors. Members of the public came together in community centers, universities, correctional facilities and elsewhere in order to help create the vamps (*Walking With Our Sisters*).

Christi Belcourt began the art project by informing potential volunteers about her projected work through Facebook and requested vamps for donation. *Walking With Our Sisters* is powerful because of Belcourt’s determination to include the public in the creation of the project. In her article “Stitching through Silence: Walking With Our Sisters, Honoring the Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada”, Stephanie G. Anderson (currently a PhD candidate in Art and Visual Culture at Western University) discusses the importance of public engagement through the collection of beaded vamps and online engagement on the *Walking With Our Sisters* Facebook and Twitter page. She maintains that a connection was forged in person and online between the various participants who created the vamps and shared their knowledge of beading techniques with one another (94). Stephanie Anderson notes that “Most of the vamps are beaded using traditional methods, some featuring embroidery, quillwork, pine-needle weaving, birch-biting, fish-scale art and button-blanket techniques from the Northwest coast” (94). This conveys the important point that *Walking With Our Sisters* has been inclusive of the
teachings of many First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. The creation of the vamps through beading successfully promoted the sharing of traditional knowledge among members of the public who identify as indigenous and non-indigenous.

The response to *Walking With Our Sisters* has been mainly positive with an outpouring of support for the creation of the vamps for the memorial. The donations from communities across Canada shows a widespread acknowledgement of the need to reframe the lives of indigenous women to the public. I have chosen two images of vamps created for *Walking With Our Sisters* by the artists Papatsi Anrango-Kotierk and Karen Anderson to showcase the reflection and activism that members of the public have demonstrated with their decision to contribute to the art installation. The pictures are accompanied by brief descriptions of intent that the artists wrote when creating their works. These two examples relate to the main argument of this chapter by highlighting how missing and murdered indigenous women have unique identities and connections to their communities.

![Moccasin Vamps](image)

(Fig. 3. *Moccasin Vamps*. Papatsi Anrango-Kotierk. *Walking with Our Sisters*. 2013)

Papatsi Anrango-Kotierk created the vamps shown in the picture above (Fig. 3). Anrango-Kotierk has described how she “beaded ulus and little purple saxifrage flowers.
The ulu is a woman's knife and I wanted to incorporate the purple saxifrage flower because it's the official flower of Nunavut” (Walking With Our Sisters). This example as well as many others in the installation connects symbols with a specific indigenous community. Anrango-Kotierk chose to connect the traditional Inuit tool and flower with the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. She may have selected the ulu to illustrate how this problem has impacted their communities. The premature loss of life has made it impossible for the women to share their life experiences with future generations making it much more difficult for indigenous knowledge sharing to continue.

(Fig. 4. Moccasin Vamps. Karen Anderson. Walking with Our Sisters. 2013)

“Unfinished Sash” is the name given by the Métis artist Karen Anderson to the vamps depicted above (Fig. 4). Anderson states “these two represent our young Métis girls who have gone missing or were murdered, and never got to wear their sashes. The bigger one has 16 rows, but it’s to indicate that the girl was taken during her 16th year. The smaller one is for a 5 yr old girl, like Tamra Keepness. Although I know she is First Nations, she does represent our young girls who have gone missing” (Walking With Our Sisters). Anderson is referring to five year old Tamra Keepness, originally from Whitebear First Nation, who disappeared in 2004 from her home in Regina, Saskatchewan. Anderson chose the image of the sash to represent the impact of the loss...
of indigenous women’s lives in her Métis community. Within the context of *Walking With Our Sisters*, her vamps are also connecting how Métis, First Nations and Inuit communities have all been affected by women and young girls being taken from them.

*Walking With Our Sisters* was subject to rigorous planning in order to reflect specific local indigenous communities. The installation has been displayed differently in the many locations it has travelled to. These photos show two examples of how *Walking With Our Sisters* was displayed.

(Fig. 5. Walking With Our Sisters in Thunder Bay. Christi Belcourt. The Media Co-op. An Installation Honouring Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. 2013.)

(Fig. 6. Melody McIvor. Walking With Our Sisters. Walking With Our Sisters at Carleton University Art Gallery presented in partnership with Gallery 101. 2013.)
In Thunder Bay the vamps were displayed in the shape of a turtle lodge to specifically reflect the land base (Fig. 5). The Carleton University Art Gallery displayed a canoe in the center of the memorial (Fig. 6). Transformations of the installation have allowed it to adapt to urban and non-urban locations and meet the needs of a wide audience. Indigenous and gender studies scholar Karyn Recollet asserts that this “manifests unique symbologies and forms dependent upon the knowledge holder’s vision in each traditional territory it enters” (132). This statement describes how the creators of this installation consulted with different indigenous communities to show that First Nations, Inuit and Métis have unique traditional symbols that differ from one another.

The symbols used in Walking With Our Sisters convey to the viewer that the women are not homogenous group as portrayed by the media. The installation highlights how missing and murdered indigenous women have different experiences and ties to their communities.

As seen in this example, the vamps not only represent the women using symbols, but some also display their names.
The artist Bridget Gloade decided to dedicate these vamps to the memory of Tanya Jean Brooks (Fig. 7). By representing the women with a beaded name or symbol, this art installation prompts the viewer to consider specific women’s identities. Collectively, the work emphasizes the gravity of the lives that were ended prematurely. Jill Carter, a Toronto-based theatre practitioner emphasizes the importance of naming in her article “Discarding Sympathy, Disrupting Catharsis: The Mortification of Indigenous Flesh as Survivance-Intervention” (423). Carter states “To articulate loss, to name aloud those who have been lost to us, and to name ourselves as bereft are the stuff of a necessary cathartic rite through which we reclaim our humanity and imagine ourselves as beings who endure now, and whose endurance will continue into the future” and that “Silence—enforced or self-imposed—is the way of isolation, exile, madness, and finally death” (423). In the context of Walking With Our Sisters the names displayed in the installation are vital to memorializing the women because (as Carter points out) this is part of an individual’s identity. Naming is an essential to the process of memorializing encompassed in this art installation.

There is one article that presents critical views of Walking With Our Sisters and critiques how gender and indigenous identity are constructed in the installation. “Indigenous Criticism, On Not Walking With Our Sisters” by David Garneau, begins by describing how indigenous artist Rebecca Belmore (who created Vigil) declined to enter the Walking With Our Sisters installation. Garneau states that Belmore “was not keen to experience “Walking With Our Sisters” because it meant having to pass through a protocol gauntlet that required women to put on a skirt and all to smudge—or refuse to do so—before entering the exhibition. She explained that she did not participate in ceremony
and did not appreciate the gendering of the exhibition space.” Belmore disagreed with being forced to comply with gender norms in order to experience the installation. Her refusal to wear a skirt is a rejection of “idealized features of masculinity and femininity” that govern social interactions (Schippers 91). When I saw the installation at the Carleton Art Gallery my experience differed from Belmore’s and participants were not asked to wear skirts. Organizers at each location the artwork is displayed will have different conceptions of how to perform gender when experiencing the artwork. *Walking With Our Sisters* can be critiqued for not allowing visitors to freely express their gender identities at some of the cities and towns it has travelled to. A weakness of the project is that some participants were made to feel unwelcome because they were not free to express their gender identity.

Garneau highlights in his article that Cree curator and writer Richard W Hill critiqued the use of stereotypical images on some of the vamps in *Walking With Our Sisters* including dream catchers, the medicine wheel and phrases such as “Mother Earth” and “Great Spirit”. Both Hill and Belmore challenge “traditional” images of indigenous peoples in their critique of this art installation (Garneau). Garneau describes how it is progressive and exciting that these critiques convey public resistance to traditionalism within indigenous art. He also recognizes that this is “risky” and could lead to a break down in a “fragile indigenous solidarity,” meaning that there are already fractures within indigenous communities on how to represent indigenous culture to the public (Garneau). I view criticism of art projects on missing and murdered indigenous women as an opportunity to reflect on how every individual will have a different experiences of the art installation. This is especially apparent in *Walking With Our Sisters* as my experience of
the work was very different from Hill’s. My attention was not drawn to questionable phrases written on vamps that promote stereotypical understandings of indigenous culture. Instead I was drawn to intricately beaded vamps that display symbols that are associated with specific indigenous communities.

Reflecting on Colonialism and Transforming a Space Through Ceremony

*Walking With Our Sisters* asks the viewer to think about the lingering effects of colonialism in Canada. The project draws attention to Canada’s colonial legacy by including children’s’ vamps to represent those who died in residential schools. These schools promoted assimilation, leading to a subsequent loss of indigenous language and culture. *Walking With Our Sisters* connects how residential schools in Canada’s history are tied to the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. They fragmented indigenous communities and many indigenous women experience a loss of connection with their culture because of the lasting effects of the schools.

*Walking With Our Sisters* not only asks the public to contemplate Canada’s history of colonialism, but fights against its legacy by promoting the continued practice of traditional forms of indigenous knowledge. It also challenges the concept of settler witnessing which encourages sympathy. Witnessing is dangerous as it encourages passive reflection on a topic rather than promoting direct action. Jill Carter argues that it is vital to reject “the narratives of victimization” and instead recognize how indigenous peoples have worked to maintain their language and culture (415). *Walking With Our Sisters* promotes indigenous knowledge sharing by including indigenous ceremony in every element of the installation. Belcourt has described how “everything follows these very
strict protocols, which is really interesting. It’s a way of melding ceremony with art that I’m not sure has been done to this extent before, involving this many people” (Sandals). The creation of *Walking With Our Sisters* was overseen by an Elder to ensure that protocol was followed when a gallery or community centre received the vamps and when volunteers displayed them. Maria Campbell who is Métis and resides in the Prairies is the national advising Elder. In each location the installation visits there is a regional Elder to oversee local protocol. Tracy Bear has described the importance of Campbell’s input using the example of the insistence that all 1,810 pairs of the vamps would have to be displayed (224). Bear has also said that Campbell’s presence created a “strong sense of community” that “elicited a sense of calm and wellbeing” (224). Christi Belcourt, along with the volunteers for the installation, followed Campbell’s advice by smudging all of the vamps and placing traditional medicinal sage on the floor. The space is set up similarly to how a lodge is prepared for ceremony. This contributed to the transformation of a regular gallery using what Tracy Bear has called “ceremonial immersion” (226). Lead volunteer Tanya Kappo has described how “From organizing exhibits, to donating to the efforts, to hosting events, to visiting the exhibits – the spirit remains strong. With this in mind, the ceremonial and sacred aspects of the installation are what makes this a transformational experience, and not just an art show”. This conveys how successful *Walking With Our Sisters* has been in transforming the traditional gallery space and moving past a state of witnessing. By incorporating ceremony the public is asked to engage with the memorial in a very different manner from most art installations. 

*Walking With Our Sisters* challenges the viewer to think about indigeneity, colonialism and violence. It accomplishes this by creating a space in which the viewer
can engage in personal reflection on these themes. In “Glyphing Decolonial Love Through Urban Flash Mobbing and Walking With Our Sisters”, Karyn Recollet discusses how the installation features spatial tagging, acts that can disrupt the rhetoric of the nation state that promotes colonialism (129-130). Recollet claims that spatial tagging can effectively subvert “the influence of multiculturalism’s narrowly defined Indigeneity, and offer up geographies of resistance which manifest in relationship with traditional caretakers of the land -within distinctive Indigenous urban spaces” (142). This conveys how Walking With Our Sisters can challenge the construct of Canada as being a cultural mosaic, one that is inclusive of indigenous peoples. Canada’s colonial history has created the present culture where indigenous women are murdered and go missing due to lasting racial and sexist prejudice.

Native Studies Professor Tracy Bear asserts that Walking With Our Sisters is a ceremony that fosters a new indigenous theoretical framework (223). This stems from the fact that the installation is centered on an indigenous worldview as the project has followed the guidance of elders and indigenous community members (Bear 223). This framework is tied to “ceremonial paradigms founded in elements of accountability, memorialization, protocol, stories, relationships, kinship circles, reciprocity, and responsibility” (Bear 223). Walking With Our Sisters has been able to foster stronger connections between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples by having art act as a form of ceremony (Bear 226). Bear relies on author Shawn Wilson’s description of ceremony in his book Research is Ceremony stating that “the purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves. And that ceremony provides a raised level of consciousness and insight into
our world” (11). This definition can be applied to Walking With Our Sisters as Bear’s article reiterates that Christi Belcourt treated her art project as ceremony in order to honour the missing and murdered women and assert that they are loved and missed (226). Bear is arguing that Walking With Our Sisters can forge a deep relationship with the viewer because he or she will experience total ceremonial immersion (226).

As I described from my own experience of viewing the installation, volunteers discussed traditional medicines with visitors and described how to follow traditional ceremonial practises before entering the installation. They also spoke with visiting groups who wanted to know more about the problem of residential schools and missing and murdered indigenous women. There were designated volunteers at the galleries ready to talk to any participants who might be emotionally triggered by the experience and need assistance. The large support network of local volunteers and the customisation of Walking With Our Sisters for specific communities was important so that participants could recognize that they play a role in the “inheritance” of missing and murdered indigenous women (Dean.).

Conclusion

(Fig. 8. Moccasin Vamps. Karen Anderson. Walking with Our Sisters. 2013.)
The artist Karen Anderson who beaded this pair of vamps (Fig. 8) called “Christi’s Fire” has stated that “This pair is for Christi Belcourt. They signify her spark that ignited a fire within everyone that has participated in this incredible project. Much as no two fires ever burn the same, neither are these vamps the same, and neither are any two of the girls that were taken from us. As the flames burn, so too does everyone’s passion for this project, which is why I also painted a “silver lining” around the vamps for its edging” (Walking With Our Sisters).

*Walking With Our Sisters* is a laudable example of the power of art to bring together many people from different communities and lead them to activism. The project has been created partly due to Belcourt’s initial vision for the project, but could not have been realized without the direct action of so many members of the public from indigenous and non-indigenous communities. The process of beading to create the vamps required input from Elders and the incorporation of ceremony led to a transfer of indigenous knowledge to participants in the project and visitors to the installation. The individual vamps include symbols and some include names that convey the unique identities of missing and murdered indigenous women. *Walking With Our Sisters* promotes personal reflection on the loss of women and girls from indigenous communities: not only on the part of artists who created the vamps, but, also by community organizers and the public who viewed the installation. *Walking With Our Sisters*, through its use of ceremony, traditional knowledge, naming and indigenous symbols can challenge those who belong to settler society to think of indigenous women’s lives as intrinsically complex rather than the one dimensional portrayal depicted by the mainstream media.
Chapter 7  
Shades of Our Sisters (2017): Fostering Reconciliation through Art

*Shades of Our Sisters* (2017) is an art project that celebrates the lives of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter by humanizing them through a collection of their possessions and telling stories about their lives. It is a particularly accessible project available both as an exhibit and as an online experience. *Shades of Our Sisters* was originally created by Ryerson University media studies students and produced by Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter. The work also features the *Feathers for Our Women* Project (2017), a large mobile with more than 1,200 paper feathers representing the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, originally created by Cree artist Waylon Goodwin of Kashechewan First Nation (“Who We Are”). The producers of the project are family members of the murdered indigenous women Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter. The installation was originally displayed at the First Nations reserves that the women are from. The lives of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter are reconstructed for viewers by “preserving memory through artifacts, documentaries, and soundscapes” (“Who We Are”). The goal of *Shades of Our Sisters* is to honour all missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, transgender and two spirit peoples (Hopper).

The project was named *Shades of Our Sisters* by the families of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter according to an Ojibwe teaching that “Shades are said to be what is left behind on this earth when a person’s spirit passes to the Land of their Ancestors” (“Who We Are”). The project organizers want “those who attend to become an active part of reconciliation in ways that extend beyond the passive consumption of short form
media” (“Who We Are”). This chapter argues that *Shades of Our Sisters* is an example of reconciliation through art because it has input from the families of murdered indigenous women as well as non-indigenous community members. It illustrates how *Shades Of Our Sisters* represents the women and encourages the public to challenge the media’s negative framing of indigenous women’s lives. I begin the chapter with an account of my experience viewing the installation and a discussion of the online component of the artwork. It features an in-depth description and discussion of the *Feathers For Our Women* project and reactions to *Shades of Our Sisters* in various newspaper articles. The focus rests on the importance of the artifacts used to represent the lives of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter and I outline the significance of storytelling in the installation as a method of resistance. I then discuss contrasting definitions and opinions of the contentious term reconciliation and ultimately find that *Shades of Our Sisters* serves as a positive example of relationship building between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

**Reactions to Shades of Our Sisters**

I went to see *Shades of Our Sisters* in July 2017 at the Ukrainian Canadian Congress building in Toronto. The installation begins with two twenty-minute videos that tell Patricia Carpenter’s and Sonya Cywink’s stories through interviews given by family members about the two women’s lives. Patricia’s mother Joyce Carpenter states in one of the film clips “This isn’t about how she died so tragically, this is about how she lived. And I’ll say it over and over – this is about her life” (Meet Patricia). In *Shades of Our Sisters* Patricia is represented by two cabbage patch dolls that were her favourite
childhood toys, a notebook she kept filled with her poems, a creative essay that she wrote about her newborn Dakota and a green wallet with a video that shows her mother describing its contents and their significance. The storytelling for Sonya Cywink focuses on the land that she loved and includes videos of her father telling the story of how Sonya cared for the dock at Whitefish River, her sisters recounting how they would pick strawberries with their sister by their house and play by a willow tree, a reading of one of Sonya Cywink’s poems and a sound clip of her sister reading one of the last letters she wrote to her father.

While viewing the installation I was approached by Joyce Carpenter who was volunteering at Shades of Our Sisters. The first words she said to me were “this is my daughter.” She then described how she agreed to take part in the project because one of the goals of the installation would be to celebrate her daughter Patricia’s life rather than to speak about the circumstances of her death. Joyce said it was difficult to give interviews that are used in the installation. When she was asked to take part in Shades of Our Sisters and looked for artifacts from her daughter’s life she was surprised to find Patricia’s wallet and uniform which she didn’t know she still had. She told me she has volunteered at almost all of the showings of Shades of Our Sisters. It struck me that the installation has allowed for Joyce to heal after the loss of her daughter. The project presents an opportunity for family members of missing and murdered indigenous women to choose how they want to tell the stories of their loved ones.

Shades of Our Sisters includes the original cross from Sonya Cywink’s gravesite in Whitefish River First Nation Cemetery and was surrounded by candles. A video of
bird’s eye landscape shots of the reserve was projected onto the wall behind the cross. The imagery of the cross made me feel that I was attending a funeral. The installation prompted feelings of grief for the two women whom I have never met. Though *Shades of Our Sisters* I have come to an understanding of what kind of people Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter were. I find the installation to be very personal and accessible as I share many of the interests that Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter had during their lives. I can tell that both of the women had a strong connection to their friends, families and communities and that they are loved and missed. The installation has successfully achieved the goal of providing engaging documentation of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter’s lives to the viewers of the project.

The online component of *Shades of Our Sisters* that is available on their website in addition to the physical installation allows the viewer to form a personal understanding of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter through images of artifacts, videos and sound recordings of music and poetry that tell the story of their lives. It features a multimedia work where the viewer unveils different aspects of the women’s experiences in two separate links that begin with buttons labelled “Meet Patricia” and “Meet Sonya.” They feature media including poems and letters that are also featured in the physical installation.

On each of the more than 1,200 paper feathers featured in the *Feathers for Our Women Project* are “thoughts on violence garnered from a questionnaire sent to schools and communities across the country” (Erskine n.p.). An example of some of the feathers that were made for this initiative as seen in the photo below (Fig. 9).
The project is still accepting more donations and encourages the public to send in feathers and create educational opportunities by hosting workshops at conferences, writing lesson plans and organizing social gatherings. There is also the option of directly submitting a response on the project’s blog that will then be featured on a feather. Here is a list of the pre-selected questions and directives for the feathers on their website:

“1) In one word, what is something that makes a woman in your life special?
2) What is something that a woman in your life has taught you?
3) Describe the importance of love within communities.
4) How can you promote non-violence in your community?
5) What does being a compassionate person mean to you?”

(Shades of Our Sisters, “Feathers For Our Women”)

The emphasis here is clearly on personal reflection. Online components make it easy for the public to participate and serves as an educational tool that sparks a conversation about missing and murdered indigenous women. The project might help participants to feel empowered as leaders in their own communities to educate others about violence against indigenous women. The downside of an online section to the installation is that the viewer could choose to quickly click through the pages of the installation rather than taking time to process each curated section.
As *Shades of Our Sisters* is a very recent installation, there are no scholarly resources available about the project. The media coverage of the installation conveys very positive responses from journalists. The mainstream media’s reactions describe how the project does an excellent job of celebrating the women’s lives though artifacts and soundscapes and emphasizes the significance of the input from family members of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter. Barb Nahwegahbow author of the article “Shades of Our Sisters installation receives overwhelming support” published in the *Anishinabek News* states that “Their stories are told with sensitivity and compassion, focusing on their relationships with family and friends, and on the lives lived.” Michael Erksine writes in the *Manitoulin Expositor* in an article titled “Shades of Our Sisters celebrates the lives behind the statistics” that “Getting to know Sonya and Patricia as people, not faceless numbers, we become engaged with their fates, by getting to know Sonya and Patricia on a personal level, we cannot help but to care deeply about the fate of these two young women.” This supports this chapter’s argument that the project reframes the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women by humanizing them.

A critique of the installation that is left out of any media coverage is how similar the installation is to a memorial that could be for the death of any individual. It is common for family members and friends to tell the stories of their loved ones after they die and preserve some of their artifacts. However *Shades of Our Sisters* can be differentiated because it focuses on missing and murdered indigenous women whose lives have been negatively stereotyped by the mainstream media. This installation subverts the understanding of the women as a homogenous group and instead focuses on the identities of two indigenous women. While the media has largely focused on telling stories about
the deaths of missing and murdered indigenous women this project focuses on their lives. The interviews given by the family members specifically focus on the women’s connection to the land and their indigenous communities. The next section in this chapter will discuss how important it is for indigenous people to be able to tell their own stories that counter negative stereotypes in the mainstream media.

**The Impact of Storytelling**

*Shades of Our Sisters* incorporates storytelling about Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter with the goal of celebrating their lives and conveying their unique personalities. The hope is that if the viewer can empathize with the loss of Sonia and Patricia, they will be more likely to become activists and further educate themselves about the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada. Storytelling is traditionally a teaching tool as First Nations have a long history of oral tradition (Qwul’sih’yah’maht 252). It is also a method of resistance and “crucial to cultural and political resurgence of indigenous nations” (Corntassel Ind. 137). Lyackson scholar Qwul’sih’yah’maht (Robine Thomas) suggests “Sharing stories validates the various experiences of the storytellers but also has the ability to give others with similar stories the strength and encouragement, and support they need to tell their stories” (252). Paulette Regan supports this argument and maintains that storytelling can create “decolonizing spaces” for indigenous voices and act as a form of “peacemaking”. Leanne Simpson argues that “Spiritual and social practices such as storytelling, the oral tradition, ceremonies, feasting, and gift-giving are designed to bond people together toward a common understanding” showing how storytelling can build community
(“Politics based on..”). It is a powerful tool that is a key component of *Shades of Our Sisters*.

*Shades of Our Sisters* engages in digital storytelling which has been defined as “the process of illustrating personal narratives and stories with photographs, artwork, music, voice-overlay, video clips, and text—a first-person mini-movie of sorts” (Wilcox, Harper and Edge). This is a very accessible form of knowledge sharing that can bring people together to celebrate and respect other people’s experiences (Wilcox, Harper and Edge 142). This is also a methodology that can challenge dominant power structures (Qwul’sih’yah’maht). Researchers for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation Marlene Brant Castellano and Linda Archibald Mike DeGagné argue that Indigenous stories can challenge “the grand narrative of Canada” and play a role in changing the public’s understanding of what it means to be Canadian (409). Storytelling can effectively “recover” the voices of suppressed groups (Gluck and Patai 9). Feminist scholars Gluck and Patai provide the example of residential school survivors telling stories of their experiences that challenge the dominant narrative in Canada labelling indigenous people as “others” (11). Qwul’sih’yah’maht (Robine Thomas) agrees and states that “storytelling creates space for the other or those voices that have been excluded or erased, to be included in the dominant discourse. Storytelling fills the gaps in the present documentation of the lives of First Nations peoples” (244). Storytelling also acts as a “powerful strategy” to give people a voice who are normally marginalized and silenced by mainstream discourse (Wilcox, Harper and Edge 142).
Indigenous people must be given the opportunity to tell their experiences in their own words (Hendry). Qwul’sih’yah’maht affirms that a project is only ethical when the storyteller has control over the editing process (250). This is essential as otherwise their story could be taken out of context by an editor. *Shades of Our Sisters* features Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter’s letters and poems to give the viewer an accurate account of their lives. It also places an emphasis on having family members who were very close to the women share their reflections. Since the family members were also producers it gave them control of the editing process. The Ryerson students who originally envisioned *Shades of Our Sisters* knew how crucial it would be to the project to include stories from the point of view of the women and their families. Executive producer for *Shades of Our Sisters* Laura Heidenheim has asserted “We saw an issue with the representation of Indigenous women in the media, specifically indigenous women who’ve been killed. It seemed that the language used when their stories are covered is totally insensitive. Most times you can tell that the families weren’t actually consulted about how they want their stories told. The media just went for it and we wanted to do something to help that” (Heidenheim qtd. in Nahwegahbow). In this statement Heidenheim refers to how the mainstream media did not feature indigenous voices and instead had journalists decide how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women. This relates to the intention of the creators of the project to create spaces where storytelling from the families could act as a method of resistance to narratives in the media.

The telling of stories “fosters inventions and discoveries, facilitates simple improvements to people’s lives and uplifts … spirits” (Linda Smith 158). The producers of the project, Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter have described how
sharing their stories and celebrating the women’s lives has fostered collective healing. For example, it has helped them to process feelings of grief. African novelist Ben Okri states that “people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers can make their nations sick. And sick nations make for sick storytellers” (Okri qtd. in Parkinson 31). In the context of stories about missing and murdered indigenous women this speaks to the importance of positive narratives such as the ones found in *Shades of Our Sisters*. They celebrate the lives of murdered indigenous women very differently from upholding harmful stereotypes that have been presented in mainstream media. In the article “Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance” Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes assert that “If stories are archives of collective pain, suffering and resistance, then to speak them is to heal; to believe in them is to reimagine the world” (V). *Shades of Our Sisters* promotes healing in indigenous communities by telling the stories of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter.

**Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a process of relationship building and has been described as “restoring good will in relations that have been disrupted” (Castellano, Archibald, DeGagné 3). Anishinaabe Elder Fred Kelly upholds that it can be both personal by fostering self-reflection and societal by bringing people together (Kelly qtd. in Castellano, Archibald, DeGagné). *Shades of Our Sisters* engages in reconciliation in two different ways. *Shades of Our Sisters* is as an example of a collaborative project between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples that engages in knowledge sharing. It also calls
on members of the public who view the project to take an active role by taking part in personal reflection on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women.

Reconciliation “raises the issue of relationship between peoples and the establishment or re-establishment of dignity and mutual respect” (Castellano, Archibald, DeGagné 386). *Shades of Our Sisters* serves as a positive example of a joint effort between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples to address the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. Producers of the exhibit Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter have shared their stories and experiences with some of the indigenous and non-indigenous Ryerson students who helped create the project. An important element of *Shades of Our Sisters* is how the project emphasizes the need for indigenous people to tell their own stories. Executive Producer for the project Laura Heidenheim has maintained that *Shades of Our Sisters* “is really their project” in reference to Maggie Cywink, Alex Cywink and Joyce Carpenter (Heidenheim qtd. in Skinner). I view reconciliation as more than reciprocal knowledge sharing between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. It is vital to recognize how indigenous people’s voices in Canada have historically been erased and silenced. Therefore, it is essential that indigenous people can tell their own stories rather than having members of settler society speak for them.

It is important to note that there are scholars including Jeff Corntassel who critiques reconciliation as a western concept. Corntassel argues that reconciliation has “religious connotations of restoring one’s relationship to God” and does not promote a reciprocal relationship with the state (145). Corntassel upholds that reconciliation has
“served to legitimize and reinforce colonial relationships” because it does not focus on the importance of indigenous community centered resurgence (155). Glen Sean Coulthard agrees that reconciliation is problematic when used by the state as an empty promise to allow the country to carry on as usual (155). He states “By ignoring or downplaying the injustice of colonial dispossession, critical theory and left political strategy not only risks becoming complicit in the very structures and processes of domination that it ought to oppose, but it also risks overlooking what could prove to be invaluable glimpses into the ethical practices and preconditions required for the construction of a more just and sustainable world order” (12). Coulthard is arguing that the state rhetoric of reconciliation is harmful as it suggests the falsehood that Canada is “transitioning” out of being a settler claimed territory (22). I argue that an understanding of reconciliation must therefore be shaped by indigenous people rather than from the colonial state. The term reconciliation is complicated by varying interpretations but I see it as a word that can be reclaimed from the liberal state’s rhetoric. It can be used to engage in further discussion on how to approach ethical relationship building between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. African conflict mediator Hizkias Assefa supports this assertion and argues in The Meaning of Reconciliation that indigenous people must “have meaningful participation in the design, administration, and evaluation of the reconciliation process so that it is based on their local culture and language.” I uphold that reconciliation is not possible when “one party imposes decisions on others without hearing from or considering the other party” (Rice and Snyder qtd. in Castellano, Archibald, DeGagné 46).

The creators of Shades of Our Sisters argue that making feathers for the installation is an example of becoming “active in reconciliation” (Skinner). It is hoped
that the process of making feathers will inspire reflection on the topic of violence against women to move past a “passive consumption” of information (“Who We Are”). Amber Dean argues that the public should avoid acting as a witness to violence against indigenous women and instead consider what inheritance of this problem looks like (4). *Shades of Our Sisters* reveals the identities of two missing and murdered indigenous through storytelling and artifacts of their lives. The project asks the viewer to reflect on the impact of their loss and to encourage them to become activists on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women (“Who We Are”).

**Conclusion**

*Shades of Our Sisters* is an ambitious project that has been able to reframe the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women by showing that they are loved and missed. The lives of Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter are humanized and revealed through a collection of their letters, poems and artifacts. The viewer can feel the profound loss of their lives when listening to personal stories recounted by family members. The indigenous and non-indigenous creators of the installation were able to engage in reconciliation by working together to educate the wider public and encourage them to become activists looking to address the problem. *Shades of Our Sisters* has challenged the public to engage in personal reflection in order to recognize that all Canadians play a role in building relationships with indigenous peoples.
Chapter 8
Conclusion

The media’s coverage of missing and murdered indigenous women has constructed their lives as invisible and precarious through the use of negative labels and by leaving the women unnamed and unknown in news headlines (Jiwani and Young; Gilchrist; Butler). My research has sought to show that art projects can reframe the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women and challenge existing stereotypes. It has considered how artists represent the lives of missing and murdered indigenous women and how to “grapple with our differing inheritance” of this problem (Dean 151). It also addressed the questions posed by Laura Moss: “What happens when the rights of the community to learn about violence butt against the rights of individual victims? What does respectful memorializing look like? What is the role of cultural productions in shaping both cultural memory and political vision?” (61). My research has responded to these questions by engaging in an in-depth analysis of art projects that represent missing and murdered indigenous women. Each case study has analyzed the impact of art in changing public conversations on violence against indigenous women. Collectively, the art installations assert that missing and murdered indigenous women should be understood as unique individuals rather than faceless statistics, and each project has achieved this goal in different ways.

Walking With Our Sisters (2013) and REDress (2011) have represented the women's lives as important to society through the use of powerful symbols. Christi Belcourt professes that she sees “art as contributing to the collective voice of indigenous people who are calling for justice” (Belcourt qtd. by Benjoe). Walking With Our Sisters
utilizes personalized symbols beaded into moccasin vamps to express the individuality of missing and murdered indigenous women conveying that they are unique individuals but they share the experience of violence in different ways. REDress features hanging red dresses that appear ghostlike when suspended in trees. The impact of the installation can be understood in the public’s strong and diverse responses. Walking With Our Sisters received donated moccasin vamps from more than a thousand members of the public to help create the installation. The symbol of the red dress is now used as a tool for resistance and has been incorporated into numerous political protests that address missing and murdered indigenous women. Jamie Black supports the public’s use of the symbol and has stated that she does not want to have sole authority over the iconic red dress. She suggests that “It’s about people using their own talent and creativity to interact with the symbol and create connections in their own communities” (Black qtd. in Edwards).

REDress and Walking With Our Sisters have represented the women through meaningful symbols that have contributed to the public conversation on missing and murdered indigenous women. Christi Belcourt and Jamie Black’s installations reveal how art can reframe the women’s lives in order for the Canadian public to see them as human beings who are grievable (Butler).

Red dresses are central to two of the case study projects. In REDress by Jamie Black they are hung in trees to mark the absence of missing and murdered indigenous women while in Vigil (2002), Rebecca Belmore wears a red dress and presents an embodied performance to represent the lingering presence of the women in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. In Vigil, as Belmore “struggles to free herself, the dress is torn from her body and hangs in tatters from the nails, reminiscent of the tattered lives of
women forced onto the streets for their survival in an alien urban environment” (Belmore, “Vigil”). Jamie Black states that “Red is a really powerful colour in Indigenous communities. It’s the colour of life and blood. It’s what connects all of us to each other. It’s a very sacred colour, and it also represents the violence that these women are facing” (Black qtd. in Edwards). Both artists have effectively used the red dress to convey in striking terms the gravity of violence against indigenous women.

Pamela Masik’s The Forgotten (2011) is unique when compared to other case studies because of the artist’s controversial decision to not consult indigenous communities about her work. The critiques of Masik’s decision to disengage from the broader community highlights the problems associated with non-indigenous people acting as spokespersons on indigenous topics. If an individual from settler society wants to engage in relationship building with indigenous peoples, they must be willing to learn from those are trying to help and not assume they know the needs of people whose voices have historically been silenced and erased. They must also consider that each indigenous community has different views on how non-indigenous peoples can be allies. Discourse on how to represent missing and murdered indigenous women must consider the criticism generated by The Forgotten. Non-indigenous artists who want to portray missing and murdered indigenous women should receive input from indigenous community members or their projects might be subject to public backlash.

Walking With Our Sisters (2013) and Shades of Our Sisters (2017) both rely on oversight from indigenous community members. These inspiring projects would not have been possible without their guidance. Shades of Our Sisters features storytelling by families of missing and murdered indigenous women while Walking With Our Sisters is
supported by advisory committees that consult with indigenous elders. The sharing of stories and experiences in these installations are a powerful educational tool that creates opportunities for deeper discussions on the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women. Walking With Our Sisters and Shades of Our Sisters serve as examples of how collaborative art projects can foster community building and act as a form of reconciliation because they feature relationship building between indigenous and non-indigenous volunteers.

The case studies have purposefully chosen to depict indigenous women though specific mediums including artifacts, dresses and paintings. This relates to the broader theme of representation, especially in art meant to politicize and raise awareness. Each of the pieces utilizes different strategies of representation, yet there are some similarities, as well as differences between them. Some of the projects, for example, resist the commodification of art while others do not. The Forgotten features canvas paintings, which are commonly found in commercial galleries while in contrast, Rebecca Belmore’s Vigil cannot be sold because it is a performance piece that is tied to the specific location of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Notably The Forgotten is differentiated from the other artworks because the painted representations of missing and murdered indigenous women can be sold for a profit and consumed by the public. This provides evidence that Masik could exploit the experiences of indigenous women for her own gain. REDress, Walking With Our Sisters, Shades of Our Sisters and Vigil, in contrast, engage in resistance by using more unconventional mediums to raise awareness.
Each of the artworks utilizes space strategically. Belmore’s *Vigil* is a performance piece that must now be viewed online, yet the original taping her performance in front of a crowd in Vancouver highlighted her message to and engagement with a ‘settler’ audience, suggesting they must become more aware of the pain and violence Indigenous women face. In *REDress*, Jamie Black has hung the dresses to elicit free movement though the installation. *Walking With Our Sisters* requires the most rigid and planned participant actions in a gallery or community center as the viewer is required to walk in a specific direction alongside the display of moccasin vamps on the ground. When comparing the use of space in *REDress* and *Walking With Our Sisters*, it is apparent that Black has allowed for greater freedom in how the viewer interacts with the dresses while Belcourt has intentionally restricted the actions and therefore reactions of participants. It could be argued that *Walking With Our Sisters* promotes a passive audience by manipulating a member of the public’s experience of the installation in a predesigned manner. *REDress* encourages active moment as the participants are able to view the dresses from different angles depending on how they choose to walk through the installation. An artists’ use of space and the relationship between the artist and the ‘viewer’ will ultimately prompt the viewer to experience different emotions and reactions to the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women.

A key element in all of the projects, with the exception of *REDress*, is naming as a means of changing the dominant narrative, as a means of resistance. This is likely due to the fact that names are intrinsically tied to individuals' identities. In the art projects the womens’ names are stitched into moccasin vamps, painted on portraits, written on the body and attached to artifacts and stories. Together the case studies show how missing
and murdered indigenous women, when viewed as the “other,” experience a devaluation of their identities. In reality, they all have names and important connections to people still living. The case studies have been able to humanize the women through the process of naming.

Connection to the land is an integral part of art projects on missing and murdered indigenous women. REDress and Walking With Our Sisters reclaim indigenous spaces in settler territory through the process of spatial tagging (Recollet). Walking With Our Sisters is unique in how the installation changes and incorporates different motifs to reflect particular local indigenous communities. Shades of Our Sisters outlines in letters, poems, personal testimonies and video clips how vital a connection to the land and community was to the two missing and murdered indigenous women Sonya Cywink and Patricia Carpenter. Vigil and The Forgotten are tied to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and raise awareness about the high number of women who have disappeared and been murdered in the area (with dramatically differing levels of acceptance from the local indigenous community). Each project occupies land as a method of countering the public’s understanding of settler claimed spaces. This promotes a questioning of mainstream ideologies that have contributed to the silencing of indigenous womens’ voices.

Art projects on the subject of missing and murdered indigenous women can transform a difficult topic into one that can be engaging and accessible to the Canadian public. All of the artists discussed in this thesis have created projects that challenge negative framing of indigenous women’s lives in the mainstream media. The goals of the projects are similar in that they aim to bring justice to the families of missing and
murdered indigenous women through increased public engagement. Together, the art installations illustrate that missing and murdered indigenous women are not statistics but individuals who are loved and missed. The hope is that increased visibility of activist art will serve to counter both entrenched sexism and racism. The case studies highlight the importance of public participation and community engagement as a form of reconciliation. They reveal how art is a powerful activist tool that has the ability to inform and unsettle the viewer and to reshape former perceptions of missing and murdered indigenous women.
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