Revolution Songs:
Stories of Prostitution

by
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Abstract

Exhibited in a feminist centre, this installation uncovers women’s stories hidden beneath layers of occupation. Large-scale backlit photographs depict places in Vancouver of significance to four anonymous women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have been prostituted or affected by prostitution. These women’s stories are suspended as verbatim transcriptions. On the back of the transcriptions, and facing a wall that displays the visual herstory of the feminist collective inhabiting the space, each woman shares her political analysis of prostitution. An additional photo-text image is visible from the street. The backlight images reference the lights and consumerism of the city, sites where women who were once considered objects now become subjects, actively transforming memory into story and illuminating alternative ways of thinking and the possibility of social change. A public forum and online installation extends the work in other formats, provoking discussion and contemplation on the subject of prostitution in Canada and beyond.

Keywords: Indigenous; prostitution; feminist; installation; memory; storytelling
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandparents, Nellie Blankinship and Victor Rettenbacher. Gram and gramps, I can't thank you enough for your teachings, love, and support.

I dedicate this work to my mother, Linda Smiley, and my sisters Ronnie, Sunny, and Katy. You each inspire me everyday with your strength and courage.

I dedicate this work to my late Aunty Cherry Joe, a brave woman and artist who constantly inspired me. I know she would have been with me through this process – exchanging ideas and talking about the project, helping me with construction, and dancing together when we needed a break.

I dedicate this work to my late friend, Skyler McClelland, who supported and encouraged me through high school and my undergraduate degree.

I dedicate this work to the four women who participated in this project, and to all women who fight for our freedom.
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To all my friends and allies, especially Trisha, Jackie, Eden, Lara, Jax, Jean, Aurea, Keira, Meghan, Rocio, Asia, Jess, Ane, Easton, Shae, Ishama, Michelle, Erin, Katie – thank you for supporting me through this process.

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Chapter 1.  Artist’s Statement:

Revolution Songs: Stories of Prostitution

The Installation

Exhibited in a Vancouver feminist centre, this installation consists of colour photo-text images of places in Vancouver that have significance to women who have been prostituted or affected by prostitution. The 24” x 36” exhibition title board hangs in one of the two front windows of the space. In the other front window is a 24” x 36” panel that includes a photograph of the Regent Hotel and transcribed text from a prostituted woman’s experience in that location. Clearly visible from the street, the story evoked by this location in Vancouver’s infamous Downtown Eastside details the anonymous woman’s “lucky break” – the time she broke her ankle and was raped at the hotel by a trick – and her subsequent escape from prostitution. Inside the organizing centre are four 6’ x 2’ backlit photo-text images of additional Vancouver locations: the former location of the Princess Rooms in the Downtown Eastside, the corner of Franklin Street and Salsbury Drive, a coffee shop at the corner of Commercial Drive and Broadway in East Vancouver, and the former location of the Nelson Hotel in the city centre. The story-memories of these locations as told by the four anonymous participants begin in text in the photographs. They continue on 24” x 36” suspended panels hanging opposite the lightboxes, where the women’s memories of the locations have been transcribed verbatim. On each panel, the woman is identified by her age, gender, and Nation. The non-Indigenous participant is identified by her age, gender, and motherhood. Each story recognizes the location of the interview as occurring on unceded Coast Salish territories. On the opposite side of the 24” x 36” panels, each of the women shares her analysis of prostitution by offering her thoughts on the decriminalization of pimps and johns, again transcribed verbatim. The analysis sides of the panels face a wall where the visual herstory of the feminist collective that inhabits the space is displayed. The location,
donated for the exhibition, is currently the organizing, meeting, and training space of Canada’s first rape crisis centre, Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter – an organization offering a transition house for battered women and their children escaping male violence and a feminist organizing centre that advocates for women’s equality. The space is also a writing centre, where the herstory of the organization is being compiled into a book. This visual herstory of the organization was on display in the space prior to the installation of Revolution Songs as a visual aid in the book-writing process. A final 24” x 36” panel containing acknowledgements and a short statement introducing the installation hangs at the far end of the Centre, opposite the front door. The work was installed with the awareness that the location was and would be used for multiple feminist activities during the show, thus situating the work in a contemporary and active politicized context.

A public forum on Canada’s current situation in regard to prostitution was presented in the same physical space as the installation, encouraging active public engagement with the political and social issues raised by the piece.

An online blog, revolutionsongs.wordpress.com, will launch in April 2014 to move the exhibition into the public space of the internet. This website will feature images from the installation, additional stories and photographs that have been collected but not yet made public, politicized writings on prostitution, and links to activist websites and information. In addition, I will continue to interview formally prostituted women and women affected by prostitution in Vancouver, in other cities across Canada, and internationally, adding their stories and images to the website as they are collected.

The Process

My artistic practice intersects with my activism, with my lived experiences as an Indigenous woman in contemporary Canada, and with feminist theory. As a Nlaka’pamux (Thompson) and Dine’ (Navajo) woman, my traditional teachings construct a worldview that encourages balance and integration. My art practice connects with all other areas of self: my personal life, academia, spirituality, activism – my approach is inherently holistic.
For the past six years, my activist work has been focused on prostitution in Canada, especially the prostitution of Indigenous women and girls. I see prostitution as a form of violence against women that is also an expression of colonialism, capitalism, and racism, and I approached the project that became this installation with this radical framework. The backlit images in the installation reference the lights and consumerism of the city, urban sites where women who were once considered objects now become active subjects. In the installation, my goal was to both illuminate the stories and political analysis of women in prostitution and affected by prostitution, while encouraging viewers of the exhibition to slow their pace, to take the time to read and engage with lengthy text, and to awaken to the hidden layers of experience and memory present in locations we move through so quickly.

I began the process by asking women I knew who had been prostituted or affected by prostitution if they would be interested in participating. I outlined the process I intended for the interviews, audio recording, and photographs, explained the goals and intents of the project and installation, and assured the confidentiality of each woman’s participation. I was fortunate that the women agreed to participate, and I set up times to meet with each woman individually. At each meeting, I asked the woman to take me to Vancouver locations that had significance to her in relation to her prostitution or the prostitution of her loved one. Standing at the location, I recorded her stories. I let her determine the length, the content of the story, and how many locations we would visit. After the interview, I photographed the location with the woman present, and then she and I would share a meal or a conversation, talking about our experiences of the interview and making sure we were both emotionally okay. As a woman who has engaged with the issue of prostitution for many years and as a front-line anti-violence worker, I had thought I would be prepared for any emotional fallout during the development of this installation – I wasn’t. Gathering the stories, photographing the locations with a new understanding, transcribing the stories into text – I was surprised by how difficult the process was for me emotionally. Being gifted with these stories triggered in me my own memories and experiences of male violence, bringing to the forefront of my mind the reality and pain of the colonial destruction we endure as Indigenous women. Keeping the anonymity of the participants and checking in with their emotional wellbeing was and continues to be a central component of this project.
The Context

Situated in a feminist activist space, this installation has been expressly political from the start. Inspired by Suzanne Lacy’s New Genre Public Art, this work similarly seeks to intersect, “…activism, education, and theory” and to, “…inform and engage diverse audiences with issues relevant to their lives.”¹ The Canadian government is currently in the process of deciding if and what new legislation Canada will adopt regarding the legality or illegality of prostitution. As a result of the Canada v. Bedford case, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down three of the current laws criminalizing all parties involved in the prostitution exchange on December 20, 2013.² Some organizations and individuals advocate for the full decriminalization of the sex industry, including prostituted women/people and pimps and johns, while others advocate for a fully legalized model regulated by the government. Still others advocate for all persons involved in prostitution to be criminalized. As an activist, I advocate for the adoption of the Nordic Model (the Women’s Equality Model) that includes:

- Criminalizing pimps and johns and decriminalizing prostituted women/persons
- Implementation of a robust and comprehensive array of preventative and exiting services (such as safe and affordable housing, livable welfare/guaranteed livable income, women-only detox and recovery on demand, job training, counseling, education, child care, and recognition of the inalienable rights of Indigenous women and girls to our lands, languages, and cultures)
- A feminist-led public education campaign that targets the male demand for paid sex and that educates the public about prostitution as a form of violence against women and as an expression of colonialism, racism, and capitalism.³

To address these issues directly, and under the framework that understands the system of prostitution as a form of male colonial violence against women and girls, a panel

featuring Indigenous women activists, women who had been prostituted, anti-violence workers who work with prostituted women and girls, intervenors in *Canada v. Bedford*, and racialized women working on the issue of prostitution was hosted in the physical space of the installation, with the general public invited to attend, listen, and ask questions of the panelists. This served to create a space for education, learning, and questioning, and to reaffirm the contemporary and interdisciplinary nature of the work: this installation is not intended to exist temporarily and disappear, but to serve as a continued catalyst for discussion, debate, and social change.

It was important for me throughout the process of the work, and in the installation itself, to acknowledge the inherently politicized nature of the subject matter, and as an activist, to approach the subject matter with courage and an informed opinion. My goal is to create a space that allows for the viewer’s sensitization to the experiences of prostituted women and women affected by prostitution, and to prompt alternative ways of thinking that are so often buried under the status quo.
Chapter 2. Revolution Songs Documentation

Image 1  Installation at the feminist centre, view 1

Image 2  Street view of the Installation
Image 3  Installation at the feminist centre, view 2

Image 4  Installation at the feminist centre, view 3
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Image 6  Installation at the feminist centre, view 5
Image 7  Four lightboxes

Image 8  View of the herstory wall
I don't know much about my mother's experiences in prostitution.

We're at Franklin and Salsbury, where it all kind of went down for years and years and years.

This was mine and _____'s corner.
Image 13  Panel documentation, held on Sunday March 9 2014, view 3
References


Appendix.

“Our Stories Are Our Life Blood”: Indigenous Feminist Memory and Storytelling as Strategy for Social Change

Introduction

“First Nations/Indigenous stories about Coyote the Trickster often place her/him in a journey mode, learning lessons the “hard” way. Trickster gets into trouble when she/he becomes disconnected from cultural traditional teachings. The Trickster stories remind us about the good power of interconnections within family, community, nation, culture, and land. If we become disconnected, we lose the ability to make meaning from Indigenous stories.”

Like Coyote, I tend to learn my lessons the “hard” way. Sometimes, I am overwhelmed by the demands of being an Indigenous feminist woman in a colonial patriarchal public education institution. Sometimes, I feel like I’ll never understand theories so foreign to my ways of seeing, thinking, and being in the world. I recall moments in my studies at various institutions where I was told that I don’t know how to write or speak about my body of work, times where I was told that I do not have the right to make or show publicly the pieces I had created, times where I was told to “keep my comments to myself” and that voicing my opinion and cultural teachings amounted to attacks on my classmates, as if my “savageness” could not be contained, even in the classroom. I blamed myself for these supposed inadequacies, and felt as if I had done something wrong in my inability to relate to these institutions “correctly.” It was during these moments of self-doubt that my connections to myself, to my People, and to my lands were stretched so thin that I felt as if I was floating. What a frightening place to be in, filled with uncertainty, self-hatred, and fear. In these moments, it was my stories, my Grandmother’s stories, the stories of my Ancestors and of the women around me that grounded me, comforted me, and strengthened the inherent connections to self, to my People, and to the land that I carry as a Nlaka’pamux (Thompson) and Dine’ (Navajo) woman.

1 Jo-ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem), preface to Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), ix.
As an Indigenous woman, I have learned to tell stories in a variety of ways, through oral tradition, song, written text, and the visual arts. Sometimes in my work the story is more obvious, as in Nicola. In this piece, I photographed Nicola Lake, a body of water in my traditional territories near Merritt, British Columbia, with a 35mm black and white film camera. Transcribed verbatim text accompanies the images, telling the Nlaka’pamux story of the Woman and the Man that live at either end of the lake, as told to me by a Nlaka’pamux Elder. In other work, the story is less textual and more image-based, such as in the triptych 1876, a collage that addresses the sexism and colonialism in the Indian Act and the ways in which Indigenous women and girls resist these oppressions. Similar to many other Indigenous artists, my family and community members and the stories they tell feature prominently in my work. Stories, especially those told by women, are a central component in my practice as both an artist and Indigenous feminist activist. How and what we remember in the telling of our stories is an important consideration: What are we trying to say? Who are we saying it to? What are we trying to teach? Using Indigenous epistemology and feminist theory, this essay will describe the ways in which memory transforms into story, and how the acts of remembrance and storytelling can be used as part of a strategy for social change.

Memory

“The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using these images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.”

Telling stories is intimately connected to memory, as how and what we remember is essential in the telling and retelling of stories. When we, as Indigenous women and girls, remember ourselves, we are able to construct and share self-defined identities that more accurately describe our lived realities, worldviews, and complexities as human beings. When we remember ourselves, we are able to reject the imposition of

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non-Indigenous dehumanizing identities such as “squaw” or “Indian princess”. In our stories, we carry memories of events and of people and things that are not necessarily ours, but that have been given to us by our Ancestors. Our stories communicate the memories we have of who we are and where we have come from, allowing us to situate and define ourselves despite the hostile territories and occupied spaces we move in today. These memories are central to our identities as Indigenous women and girls, and thus central to our survival and vital if we are to move toward positive social change.

bell hooks describes the term “politicized memory”, referencing a statement from the Freedom Charter: “Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.”

hooks distinguishes politicized memory from nostalgia, describing nostalgia as, “that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act...” Nostalgia focuses on a return to a time that never really existed, as nostalgic memories are selective and focus only on moments remembered with fondness, ignoring the negative and less-desirable experiences. As such, an incomplete picture of the past – a reality that never existed – is constructed and there is nothing to “return to.” In comparison, hooks describes politicized memory as a way of remembering, “that serves to illuminate and transform the present.”

Politicized memory creates space for the redemption and reclamation of the past, including triumphs and victories, but also painful legacies and suffering. We use these memories to reflect on the past as it was, as opposed to the past as we would have liked it to be. We connect these memories and collective memories to the present, allowing us to examine our lived realities and the realities of others in a historical context. This creates spaces where we can begin to transform our current situations in empathetic, informed, and positive ways.

indigenous women and girls to recall a full range of colonial experiences, including not only the memories of our survival and resistance, but also those memories that are


4 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” in Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, ed. bell hooks (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 205.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 204.

7 Ibid., 204 – 205.
horrific and painful. We transform those memories into stories that we use today to define and represent ourselves as connected to historical pasts that influence our present. In this way, we can begin to move toward a more positive future.

As my mother, Linda, states, “our stories are our life blood.” In this sentence, this Nlaka’pamux woman is referring to the concept of “blood memory”, an idea that has problematic connotations that derive from a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. However, this idea is very useful in describing the connections between memory, story, and social change for Indigenous women. The concept of blood memory, as an Indigenous concept, is often confused or miss associated with the idea of “blood quantum.” Blood quantum is a non-Indigenous concept that is used as a colonizing agent against Indigenous peoples, especially in the United States. Blood quantum refers to an American federal government policy that is used to determine racial identification and “Indian” status in order to divide and, “subsequently [alienate] collectively held Indian lands.”

Blood quantum is a way for the American federal government to define who is and who is not an “Indian” according to government-defined criteria. This attempts to remove the ability of Indigenous peoples to define their own identities and membership, causing incredible harm. The fear or refusal to engage with the idea of blood memory or blood relationships and the ignorant or purposeful misinterpretation of these concepts causes further harm to Indigenous peoples. As Nancy Marie Mithlo, a Chiricahua Apache curator, teacher, photographic archivist and critic states,

“In an age in which hybridity is celebrated, any sense of biological determinism is automatically charged as essentialist, regressive rhetoric. Heritage thus becomes either solely decorative or dangerously close to racially determined logic. Calls to blood relationship, either in a corporeal or abstracted sense, are negated in contemporary academic discourse, thus prohibiting the exploration and legitimization of indigenous knowledge systems.”

8 Linda Smiley, telephone conversation with author, August 28, 2013.
Discussion of the Indigenous concept of blood memory is misunderstood as racist or dismissed as irrelevant, further marginalizing the worldviews and voices of Indigenous scholars, activists, and artists in academia.

Contrary to the colonial concept of blood quantum, blood memory is a complex and useful way to describe memory and storytelling among Indigenous women in our struggles for life, culture, and lands. As Mithlo states,

“Blood relationships reference not only the common understanding of what is considered biological heritage or race but also in an expanded sense, the internalized memories of communal history, knowledge, and wisdom. Blood memories are powerful political tropes mobilized to call attention to the legacies of colonialism in contexts as diverse as battlefields, boarding schools, and sacred sites. This common tribal value of multigenerational remembrances runs directly counter to prevailing Western traits of individual achievement, lack of transgenerational memory, and transcendence of one’s genealogical fate and place of origin.”

Blood memory is a way of remembering that intimately connects an Indigenous person to self, to People, and to the land. Blood is a carrier of those connections for Indigenous women and girls. At times, due to the very real colonial forces that we struggle against on a daily basis, including, but not limited to violence, sexual violence, poverty, criminalization, mental health issues and suicide, high rates of child apprehension, unemployment, disability, addiction, and racist attitudes, we can feel as if we have lost these connections – but we haven’t. At times, because of the ongoing problems colonialism has presented in our lives and because of the ongoing colonial solutions we are offered to alleviate that pain and suffering (for example, drugs and alcohol), our connection to self, to People, and to land, can become stretched very thin. So thin, that it can feel as if our connections have been severed and we are floating, lost and groundless. Even though we may feel this way, our memories are carried in our bodies and in our blood, and we remain connected. We are able to turn to that connection in

11 Ibid., 106.
times of pain and struggle, and to strengthen that connection in the reclamation of ourselves, our cultures, and our homelands.

Affirming and strengthening these connections are integral in the creation of positive social change, and is an Indigenous process that can and should be used by non-Indigenous peoples in the movement toward a more connected, holistic, and loving world. Glasgow-born feminist artist Nicky Bird’s photography project *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place* addresses histories that are connected to changing landscapes. The project is comprised of photographs of four different locations in Scotland, overlayed and accompanied by family photographs of individuals who have a connection to that particular location.


As Bird states in an interview, “it’s always trying to keep the past and present in a relationship with one another, so it’s not just like the past is over here, the present is over here, and that’s it.” In this piece, Bird uses artifacts such as family photographs to inspire memories of a particular location, thus revealing “hidden” or layered histories.

She encourages contemplation of the connections between past, present, and future: How do individuals connect to themselves, to their families and family histories, and to the histories of these particular locations/lands? As Bird states on her website, *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place*, “…explored the physical and emotional effects of economic change and regeneration in Scotland.”

The memories revealed and shared in the stories encourages the viewer to reflect on one’s own memories, histories, and spaces inhabited. In this way, the piece speaks to reconnection between the past, the present, and the future and reconnection to one’s self, one’s family/People, and spaces/lands. Although Bird is a non-Indigenous woman, she is using Indigenous women’s processes to encourage remembrance, storytelling, and strengthened connections.

**Storytelling**

Stories serve many purposes in Indigenous communities. They can teach us lessons about ourselves, our cultures, and our relationships. They can help us learn to be better people, teach us about our traditions, and give us guidance and direction. Sometimes stories are very old, and reach us after being passed down many generations. Other times, we create new stories and share among family and community members, preparing these stories to be handed down to future generations. Stories themselves, as well as the lessons taken from stories, change and shift over time. For example, I take different lessons from a story I am told at ten years old then I do when I am retold the same story at thirty years old. The re-telling of stories so that they are committed to memory is also an important part of storytelling. In this way, stories, cultures, traditions, and ways of knowing, thinking, and being, are handed down through generations. Simon Ortiz, quoted in Jo-Ann Archibald’s *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, states,

“The oral tradition of Native American people is based upon spoken language, but it is more than that too. Oral tradition is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral

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tradition is the consciousness of the people...oral tradition evokes and expresses a belief system.”

Although traditionally passed through spoken stories, Indigenous peoples have created new ways to tell stories through song, written text, visual arts, and now through new media including digital photography, video, audio recordings, and the internet. As Tuscarora artist Jolene Rickard states,

“... I believe photographers ‘show’ what they think. This takes on a weighty responsibility in relationship for me, as an image maker, and as a Tuscarora...the basis for my inspiration is the teachings of my people. From that point I build my image – sometimes making visual reference to our relationship to the people outside of my beliefs and often working within the logic of our beliefs. If we don’t strive to deal with the meanings of what we [Indian people] think, then what is the point?”

In this way, visual images, such as Rickard’s photographs, embed themselves in Rickard’s stories, which include the narratives but also the worldviews and philosophies of the Tuscarora people. These stories and philosophies are central in her art practice, art making, and in the images she produces. For Indigenous women, stories are never “just stories”. They carry with them lessons, traditions, and complex worldviews and belief structures, allowing our cultures to survive, to thrive, and to display resilience, strength, and courage in the face of historical and contemporary injustices caused by colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

The power of stories to reconnect one’s self as an Indigenous woman to myself, to my People, and to the earth, cannot be underestimated. Given the enduring history of colonialism experienced by Indigenous Peoples on a global scale where Indigenous women and girls have been especially targeted, Indigenous storytelling has become in itself, an act of resistance. While true for Indigenous peoples, this is especially true for Indigenous women and girls, who face the “double bind” of oppression both because of

15 Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiiem), Indigenous Storywork, 26.
our “nativeness” (colonialism and/or racism) but also because of our status as women in an imposed patriarchy (sexism). Indigenous women and girls in Canada face disproportionate levels of violence, sexual violence, disability, poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, criminalization and incarceration, prostitution, apprehension by the foster care system, and mental health issues. Indigenous women and girls face exceptional levels of violence at the hands of non-native men and also from native men in our own families and communities in the form of incest, emotional abuse, neglect, physical and sexual assault, and murder. Given the harsh realities Indigenous women and girls confront on a daily basis, it is no surprise that our storytelling describes not only traditional practices, cultures, and worldviews, but also the lived realities of colonialism. Nance Ackerman is a Mohawk Canadian photographer and multimedia artist. Her exhibition, Wathahine – Photographs of Aboriginal Women by Nance Ackerman, tells the stories of Indigenous women from across Canada who are making positive changes in their own lives and in the lives of others. The work is comprised of black and white photographs accompanied by descriptions and interviews with the women in the images. Ackerman has chosen to make contact with a variety of Indigenous women, from activists to artists to Elders, gathering their stories as she travelled across the country. In the artist’s statement that accompanied the images, Ackerman writes,

“Thousands of miles and hundreds of rolls of film later, I would like to think I have gained some wisdom through the journey, forging a new connection with my ancestry. Mostly, I am left in awe of the resiliency and strength. It was the thread that held these very different women together. This exhibition is a tribute to that strength.”  

In the exhibition, Ackerman honours the resiliency and strength she encountered when interviewing and photographing the Indigenous women she met. This resiliency and strength is reaffirmed and handed down from generation to generation in our stories; it is how we find courage and connect to ourselves, to each other, and to our lands.

The text that accompanies the images in the exhibition reference acts of resistance led or participated in by Indigenous women, including the Odeyak journey to protest hydroelectric development in Northern Quebec, and the Oka crisis, an armed standoff that occurred near Oka, Quebec.\(^{18}\) In 1990, the Mohawk people refused to allow the construction of a golf course on sacred Mohawk land. After an armed standoff that included the Canadian military and great amounts of national and international media attention, the Mohawk people successfully defended their land and the golf course was not constructed.\(^{19}\) In addition to that success, the Oka Crisis inspired Indigenous peoples across Canada and the world to act in solidarity with our Mohawk sisters and brothers. I remember being very small and hearing my parents speak about how important this struggle was for our lands, and how brave the women and men were who were risking their lives to defend their territories and culture. I remember my mother making sure that my sisters and I knew the important role Mohawk women had in this struggle, even though the media did not always tell that story. This collective memory of struggle and resistance by the Mohawk people during the Oka Crisis continues to be passed down to younger generations in our stories. Ackerman’s work actively references the Oka Crisis and other acts of resistance, speaking to the courage Indigenous women and girls showed in that moment and before and after that moment, in their work and in their lives. Ackerman has weaved these narratives together in a show of strength and pride, calling on those viewing the work to recall or learn about the Oka Crisis and other acts of resistance, to engage with the stories told by the women in the images, and to learn from Ackerman’s own journey to recover connection to herself, her People, and her lands.

In similar ways to Indigenous women, non-native radical feminists have used the power of storytelling to address issues of paramount importance to women and girls, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. In this context, storytelling once again serves many purposes, including bringing to light previously ignored histories, exposing inequalities, and as acts of healing for the storyteller or storytellers. The strategy of using consciousness-raising in both the process of art making and in the product or

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 3-4.

performance of artwork has been a primary component of the feminist art movement. Coming to prominence in the 1970s and connected to the politically organized women’s liberation movement at the time, feminist artists addressed a variety of issues that impacted the lives of women and girls, such as rape, abortion rights, and issues of identity and representation, among other things. Aagerstoun and Auther have described feminist activist art as,

“simultaneously critical, positive, and progressive. By critical we mean work that seeks to expose underlying ideologies or existing structures that have a negative effect on women and their lives; by positive we mean work that takes a stand, expressing its maker’s faith in achieving results or positing alternatives; by progressive we mean a belief in the feminist tenets of equality and inclusiveness, a better world free of sexism, racism, homophobia, economic inequality, and violence.”

Consciousness-raising, a political tool of the women’s liberation movement, was also used as a process and outcome in the feminist art movement of the 1970s. The consciousness-raising process is based on the storytelling of women. To engage in the process, women gather together to discuss their oppression as women, revealing to each other stories and details of their lives. Topics included a wide range of women’s experiences, ranging from street harassment to the gendered division of labour to experiences of rape and sexual assault. Women shared experiences, thoughts, and feelings from their own lives and, as a result, were more able to see the ways in which these seemingly “normal” everyday experiences worked together to oppress all women and girls. As Anne Forer explained,

"In the Old Left, they used to say that the workers don't know they're oppressed, so we have to raise their consciousness. One night at a meeting I said, 'Would everybody please give me an example from their own life on how they experienced oppression as a woman? I need to hear it to raise my own consciousness.' Kathie was sitting behind me and the words rang in her mind. From then on she sort of made it an institution and called it consciousness-raising." 


In consciousness-raising circles and practice, the “personal became political”, and women were able to more clearly define the ways in which they were oppressed and more able to connect with other women. As a result, the women’s liberation movement was strengthened. Judy Chicago used feminist consciousness-raising process in her programs, the Women’s Art Program at Fresno State University and as part of the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of Arts, “Part consciousness-raising (CR), part group therapy, part studio art, Chicago’s classroom practices took aim at the femininity that psychologically restrained her female students”. In these contexts, stories were shared for a political purpose, as a way to engage with each other as women and to build a shared analysis regarding men’s oppression of women. Similar to the use of stories among Indigenous women and girls, consciousness-raising among feminist women has helped women to connect to themselves, to connect with a women’s history, and to create space for the possibility of social change.

Social Change

When the concepts of politicized memory and blood memory are transformed into stories, the intention or at least the possibility for positive social transformation exists. The harsh realities that confront Indigenous women and girls, and the constant battleground we find ourselves on in a struggle for our right to live and to define and to love ourselves and each other, the art we make always exists in a context of colonialism, survival, and resistance. As Mi’kmaq and Onondaga writer and artist Gail Tremblay wrote,

“\When Native children are taught that they are not equal, that their cultures are incapable of surviving in a modern world, they suffer from the pain that haunts their own lives. For an Indigenous person, choosing not

to vanish, not to feel inferior, not to hate oneself, becomes an intensely political act."\(^{23}\)

Thus, an Indigenous woman choosing to represent herself through image or sculpture, to define herself as an Indigenous woman and not allow others to define her according to patriarchal colonial ideology, becomes a political act in itself. As Indigenous women artists, we cannot and should not attempt to avoid the inherently political context of our work. Rather, acknowledging this context allows for a step toward positive social change, a step toward non-Indigenous acceptance of the inherent rights of Indigenous women and girls to our bodies, identities, cultures, and lands. Upper Cayuga and Mohawk writer Emerance Baker describes the responsibility we hold to ourselves and to each other as Indigenous women artists and writers,

“I am reminded that while some of us are doing more than surviving the cultural genocide informed by and enforced throughout Canada’s colonial trajectory, not all Native women are surviving the most invasive moral, physical, emotional and material control of our bodies, selves, and imaginations that governments, social institutions, and our own communities have imposed upon us. For those of us who have not survived, for those of us who continue to struggle, and even for those of us who have “made it”, our responsibility as Native women and storytellers remains the same, to create a loving space for Native women, regardless of where that space exists.”\(^{24}\)

While I would argue that Canada’s colonial history is one of attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples, not only cultural genocide, Baker makes an important point about resistance through the use of story, and the ways in which Indigenous women and girls can counter colonial ideologies through loving ourselves and each other as women and as Indigenous women. A radical act in the context of patriarchy and imposed patriarchy in Indigenous communities, where women and girls are taught to hate ourselves, to hate


and to compete with other women and girls for male attention, and to accept the violence we are subjected to as warranted and inevitable.

In similar ways, non-Indigenous feminist women artists have used memory and visual storytelling as a strategy for social change. Suzanne Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May* was a performance piece and installation in 1977 that brought rape and male sexualized violence against women into the American public discourse. *Three Weeks in May*,

> “marked the establishment of New Genre Public Art, a socially engaged, interactive cultural practice that deploys a range of traditional and nontraditional media in public spaces for public audiences, intersecting activism, education, and theory. Lacy’s activist-aesthetic tools, which emerged from her strong commitment to feminism and political activism, have become classic lexicon artists seeking to engage political issues now use as an ‘expanded public pedagogy’ to inform and engage diverse audiences with issues relevant to their lives.”

The feminist art movement combined aesthetics and politics to work toward social change and to alter the material conditions and social status of women and girls. Firmly rooted in the lived reality of women and girls and intimately connected to the women’s liberation movement, the feminist art movement was and is challenging the status quo in a struggle toward freedom and equality for all women and girls. Contemporary New York artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh applies the strategies of Lacy’s New Genre Public Art in her current work, *Stop Telling Women to Smile*. *Stop Telling Women to Smile*, “…attempts to address gender based street harassment by placing drawn portraits of women, composed with captions that speak directly to offenders, outside in public spaces.”

In this project, Fazlalizadeh meets with women in various cities across America, gathering stories of street harassment from women who wish to share and participate in the project. Fazlalizadeh collaborates with these women, drawing their images attached to bold captions such as “My name is not baby” and “Women do not owe you their time or conversation”. These images and accompanying text are then pasted into public spaces


on sides of buildings, mailboxes, and fences in order to call the general public to pay
attention to an issue (street harassment) that affects the ability of women and girls to
participate safely and fully in public spaces.\textsuperscript{27} The artist, when showing her work, will
also often hold a forum where local feminist activists participate to expand the discourse
around street harassment and other issues that have a direct impact on the lives of
women and girls. Fazlalizadeh has created an important work that is seeking to
illuminate an issue of inequality and create public awareness and discussion in order to
work towards improving the material and social conditions of the lives of women and
girls. The artist collaborates with the participants, creating space where women’s
memories are transformed into stories that are shared among each other in the initial
telling, and then shared among the wider public in the form of the pasted image. These
works encourage public discourse on the issue of gendered street harassment and calls
for an end to this public violation of the human rights of women and girls.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Like Coyote, I tend to learn my lessons the hard way. At times, I feel as if I am
floating, even though I have been gifted with the knowledge, the memories, the stories
that tell me I am not. This knowledge, these memories that I carry in my blood and that I
learn and share in the form of story, ground me. They sustain me and give me strength
and courage, connecting me to myself, to my People, and to my lands. The power of
these stories opens up spaces where we can begin to imagine a world where systemic
oppression does not exist.

When Indigenous women use politicized and blood memory and articulate these
memories through story, we are able to reconnect with ourselves as Indigenous women,
reconnect with our People, and reconnect with our lands. We are able to articulate our
own identities through our stories, songs, text, and artworks. Our memories transform
into stories that we share in spaces occupied by harmful, sometimes deadly, colonial,
patriarchal, and capitalist forces. These forces stand in opposition to Indigenous
worldviews, propagating a neoliberal “I” mentality that works to disconnect us from

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
ourselves, each other, and the land. Indigenous worldviews speak to a collective “we”, that includes ourselves as peoples, but also our non-human relatives: the animals, plants, earth, rivers, oceans, and sky. When we remember and when we share our memories in the form of stories, we, as Indigenous women and girls, commit a revolutionary act. We resist individualized, competitive ways of thinking and dehumanizing systems that disproportionately target us for violence and death. In this sharing of memories and stories that contain our worldviews, belief systems, and knowledge, we reclaim our identities and strengthen our inherent life-affirming connections, fulfilling our collective responsibilities to each other, to our lands, and to our non-human relatives.

These processes of remembering, storytelling, and reconnection are Indigenous processes that have been, can, and should be used by non-Indigenous peoples in a movement toward a more equitable world. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist women’s groups and artists have used memory and storytelling in the creation of work that has courageously addressed inequalities and suggested hope in the face of oppression. Through our politicized memories we are able to reclaim our histories as Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and girls, remembering our struggles, achievements, and resistance. We transform these memories into stories, sharing knowledge that is so often forgotten, ignored, or actively destroyed. Our stories ground us and sustain us, connecting us to the past in the present, and allowing us to open spaces to hope for the future.
Bibliography


