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IMAG(IN)ING THE FEMININE: *WOMEN'S CREATIVE PORTRAITURE AS DEMONSTRATIONS OF INDIGENOUS BECOMINGNESS*

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IMAG(IN)ING THE FEMININE: *WOMEN'S CREATIVE PORTRAITURE AS DEMONSTRATIONS OF INDIGENOUS BECOMINGNESS*

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

I have chosen four works of art from four different women artists who have different relationships to and engagements with Indigeneity that are represented in their works: Sister (2016) by Kaska Dena/Jewish photographer Kali Spitzer, Loba (2017) by Mestiza mixed-media artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Untitled: Imagén de Yagul (1973) by Afro-Cuban performance and earth work artist Ana Mendieta, and Interrelation: Maqtukwek (2020) by L'nu mixed media and performance artist Meagan Musseau. Not only are these artists from different tribal/cultural communities, they hold different nationalities and represent multiple continents, and their art practices encompass an array of different mediums, processes, and styles. However, their work manages to interrogate the same systems of heteropatriarchal settler colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women. Their rich and complex representation of themselves, their community members, and their land relationships establishes a creative practice that allows them to be seen and understood on their own terms, pursuing their own Becomingness in that process.

Analyzing their works from both the perspective of the maker and that of the audience, it is evident that each artist upholds a contextually specific protocol of relational accountability that is reflective of Indigenous Feminisms and the infinite possibilities of how to Become an Indigenous woman. I argue that their works of portraiture, specifically, demonstrate an artistic mode through which Indigenous women are able to engage with understandings of the feminine self and inject these felt experiences into their current spatialities, disrupting colonial rhetorics of various disciplines wherein the Indigenous feminine is impacted. These women artists are able to utilize the woman's physical image which has so long been commodified, exotified, and dehumanized to critique and resist the very systems that made it so. By engaging with the treatment of the feminine body in connection to issues of land, political and social stratification, and violence, Spitzer, Friedemann-Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau are subverting the image of the woman and feminine to rehumanize and decolonize the spaces they occupy, contributing to a narrative of Indigenous Becomingness through which they work towards personal healing and community futurity.

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Introduction

In the Spring of 2023, I visited the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collection with Anishinaabe Ojibwa/Potawatomi/Lenape scholar Mary Deleary's class on Native American Women. During this visit, I was shocked by the amount of artwork created by Indigenous women that was severely understudied. When going through the histories of Indigenous men in the archive, each and every element was cataloged and elaborated upon. A whole entry in the collection was given to a single photograph of men on horses, with names, tribal affiliations, ages, and community roles included. Due to misogynistic patriarchal values entrenched in the western academic institutional tradition, this kind of attention was not given to materials seen as feminine. A folder of beading appliques held the folded tracing paper patterns and nothing else - the woman who designed them, drew them, cut them out, used them was lost to history. Beading diagrams were painstakingly drawn out by an Indigenous woman for a white ethnographer who did not care to ask where the Indigenous woman learned to bead, or which woman in her community taught her. There was a photograph of a group of Indigenous women standing in a war camp that caught my eye in particular. Their tribal affiliation was speculated, but not known. On the back, the name of one woman was written in pencil. Her date of death was recorded, but no date of birth. Question marks were penciled in where the other women in the photograph stood. This lack of care for Indigenous women artists within western art historical canon was upsetting, as I understand Indigenous women artists to be central to Indigenous material culture practices and artistic expression. Further, Indigenous women's art practice is indicative of the

polyvalence of Indigenous femininities and engagements with womanhood. This multiplicity does not immediately surface because of the lack of care for Indigenous women's stories, historically and today. However, Indigenous women artists are very actively asserting the diversity of their own identities and ways of being and Becoming. In this thesis, I examine four woman artists who engage directly with issues of indigeneity and Becoming in their work. Using a critical Indigenous studies lens, I apply concepts of relational accountability, Indigenous Feminisms, Felt Theory, and Kincentricity to discuss how their work and artistic practices operate to enact Indigenous women's futurity and demonstrate the polyvalence of Indigenous feminine identities.

In 2023, I attended a natural dyeing workshop taught by Dakota/Nakoda scholar and artist Jessa Rae Growing Thunder. During this workshop, she emphasized that her knowledge of natural dyes and the use of natural material in her contemporary work was passed onto her by her *uncibi*, and that her women ancestors had developed a rich and complex cultural technology of aesthetic that required them to be master mathematicians, chemists, botanists, philosophers, theorists, and more. She held a basket of porcupine quills dyed with cochineal and explained how the materiality of quillwork was a visual index of the power of Indigenous women artists and makers. In my own research, I have been constantly considering the role of women in Indigenous societies and how understandings of Indigenous femininity have changed over time. Seeing the photograph in the Western History Collection, I asked myself, why are we not more curious about these women? What would this photograph look like if Indigenous women were in control of their own portraits? What would this archive look like, were that the case?

Through my own experience, scholarship, and personal practice, I have come to understand art as an inherently Indigenous communication system. The thoughtfulness of sourcing and choosing materials, the relevance of space and place in the evolution of skill and style, the emotional vulnerability required by artistic practice, an artist's commitment to understanding and manifesting the conceptual and spiritual idea in visual form, the value of non written communication of ideas; these are all aspects that are essential to the creation of art and are also all aspects prioritized in Indigenous epistemologies. Art also strikes me as a prime tool with which women are able to express feminisms, even when dominant societal discourse privileges masculinity. From a western perspective, art and women are often synonymized. Both are seen as objects to be viewed by men, treated as muses for men's creativity, and whose primary value is being decorated or decorative in accordance with the male gaze. In many Indigenous communities, however, women held the knowledge of craft. I learned to bead from a woman who learned to bead from a woman, for example, but this is true for mediums like quillwork, weaving, pottery, the creation of clothing, etc. There is power and medicine understood to be embedded in these creative practices that are directly tied to femininity and the development of a feminine Indigenous identity.

As an Indigenous woman artist, myself, I have experienced the growth of my cultural connection and understanding of my indigeneity and my womanhood through my art practice. My mother came to the US as a refugee from Vietnam after the Vietnam war, and my father is mixed Irish white and Chickasaw. His family underwent relocation, boarding schools, immigration, substance abuse, poverty, and a myriad of other traumas that can be traced back to the impacts of settler colonialism and slowly led to a fracturing of our Chickasaw cultural connections over time. Growing

up separated temporally and geographically from my communities, I turned to art practice in an effort to recontextualize my identity and discover what I felt was missing from me. My desire to learn cultural art forms or engage with culturally relevant material and motif opened the door for me to rebuild relationships with my Chickasaw community, to understand aspects of my family history in a new way, and to learn what it means to be a Chickasaw woman. Over the course of my life, art practice has continued to be where I take my creative questions about identity and has supported me on my journey of Becoming - becoming an Asian/Indigenous person, becoming a woman, becoming an advocate for the future of my community, becoming myself.

Approaching my thesis, I found that I was returning again and again to my curiosity about the role of creative practice in the development of Indigenous women's identities in the broad scheme. How were Indigenous women artists using their work to raise questions, discover the answers, and communicate their experiences? How did creative practice tie into the process of Becomingness for those from different tribal backgrounds and homelands, with colonial or settler colonial contexts, different cultural understandings of womanhood and indigeneity? How could the differences in creative practice represent these nuances? What does it mean to be able to see, visually, the stages of Becomingness?

In my research, I have chosen four works of art from four different women artists who have different relationships to and engagements with Indigeneity that are represented in their works: *Sister* (2016) by Kaska Dena/Jewish photographer Kali Spitzer, *Loba* (2017) by Mestiza mixed-media artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, *Untitled: Imagén de Yagul* (1973) by Afro-Cuban performance and earth work artist Ana Mendieta, and *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* (2020) by L'nu mixed media and

performance artist Meagan Musseau. I choose these particular artists and pieces because of the robust story of Becomingness they have to tell. Becomingness, or the process of developing, embodying, and enacting one's identity, has been established and developed by multiple scholars including, but not limited to, Judith Butler[1], Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides[2], Audra Simpson[3], Fred Moten[4], John Dewey[5], R. G. Collingwood[6], and Henri Focillon[7]. With their collective exploration of how marginalized peoples navigate landscapes of identity as my foundation, I identify this process of Becomingness being engaged by Spitzer, Friedemann-Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau. Although they are from different tribal/cultural communities, they hold different nationalities and represent multiple continents, and their art practices encompass an array of different mediums, processes, and styles. However, their work manages to interrogate the same systems of heteropatriarchal settler colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women. Their rich and complex representation of themselves, their community members, and their land relationships establishes a Visual Sovereignty that allows them to be seen and understood on their own terms. Analyzing their works from both the perspective of the maker and that of the audience, it is evident that each artist upholds a contextually specific protocol of relational accountability that is reflective of Indigenous

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[1]Butler, Judith and Cristan Williams, "Judith Butler Addresses TERFs and the Work of Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond," *The TERFs*, May 1, 2014, http://theterfs.com/2014/05/01/judith-butler-addresses-terfs-and-the-work-of-sheila-jeffreys-and-janice-raymond/.

[2]Bey, Marquis, and Theodora Sakellarides. "When we enter: The blackness of Rachel Dolezal." *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 4 (2016): 33-48.

[3]Simpson, Audra. "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' And Colonial Citizenship". Junctures: 67-80.

[4]Moten, Fred. "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 180. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.0.0062.

[5]Dewey, John. 1934. Art as Experience. New York: Minton, Balch & Company. Minton, Balch & Company, or Perigee Books.

[6]Collingwood, R. G. (1938). The principles of art. New York,: Oxford University Press.

[7]Focillon, Henri (1942). "The life of forms in art". Oxford University Press.

Feminisms and the infinite possibilities of *how* to become an Indigenous woman. I argue that their works of portraiture, specifically, demonstrate an artistic mode through which Indigenous women are able to engage with understandings of the feminine self and inject these felt experiences into their current spatialities, disrupting colonial rhetorics of various disciplines wherein the Indigenous feminine is impacted. These women artists are able to utilize the woman's physical image which has so long been commodified, exotified, and dehumanized to critique and resist the very systems that made it so. By engaging with the treatment of the feminine body in connection to issues of land, political and social stratification, and violence, Indigenous women artists are subverting the image of the Indigenous woman and feminine to rehumanize and decolonize the spaces they occupy.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature

In order to properly orient the selected artists and their work within the scope of my thesis investigation, it is necessary to introduce the foundational theories and frameworks that guide my analysis. My thesis intentionally centers the experiences and stories of Indigenous women, and I am operating with an understanding that gender, in a contemporary context certainly but extending into the settler/colonial interruption of Indigenous lifeways, is a political identity. Diné scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale has suggested that including an analysis of gender is necessary in transforming the contemporary Native society, as women are "primary actors in the configuration of Nation."[8]

[8]Denetdale, Jennifer. (2006). Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition, 21. Wicazo Sa Review. 9-28. 10.1353/wic.2006.0004.

Indigenous women have been treated by the settler/colonial project as an access point to Indigenous communities and Indigenous lands, and the abuse of the Indigenous woman is a result of this dynamic. Denetdale writes that the idea of a Nation within a settler/colonial context relies on the language of family, casting motherhood as women's primary role and tasking them to be "bearers of the Nation."[9] She asserts that to analyze politics without a gender analytic is to "render women invisible" in the establishment and continuance of a Nation, "biologically, culturally, and symbolically."[10] I take this to mean that denying that gender has a mutually influential relationship to politics and associated lived consequences is to deny that women have been singled out as a demographic of concern in the carrying out of settler/colonial political systems, and is to additionally deny that women have had to reclaim their agency and power from these systems to survive. As we can see from the rampant sexualized violence, forced sterilizations, discriminatory and subtractive policies of Indian recognition and intermarriage, and more, settler/colonial nations carry a long tradition of patrolling the bodies of women as producers of future generations. Denetdale argues that the Indigenous woman's body has become a literal site of surveillance upon which is projected the settler/colonial nation's anxieties and beliefs around race, morality, chastity, virtue, etc.[11] The power of Indigenous women in reclaiming Indigenous values with respect to these same phenomena (of race, morality, virtues, etc.) requires that they are recognized as women. With this in mind, perhaps my current understanding of who qualifies as an Indigenous woman or who is included in Indigenous feminine identities consists of those who have suffered as women under settler/colonial violences. This

[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*

would, indeed, also include those Indigenous peoples with non-binary, queer, and nonconforming gender identities, as they too suffer under the violence of heteropatriarchy. These identities also, sadly, are often mistreated within Indigenous communities today as a result of the permeation of settler/colonial epistemologies and ontologies. Here is where I see the intervention of Indigenous Feminisms.

Denetdale and Tonawanda Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman write about the false dichotomy of Feminist/non-Feminist, referring to the fact that Feminism, like most political ideas, exists on a spectrum - similar to the way there is not a racist/not-racist dichotomy and that anti-racism is an ongoing project for people who have been born into and live in a racist system. They state that "...a monolithic approach to a Native Feminism is not possible and [the] false dichotomy of feminist and nonfeminist is oversimplified and undermines Native women's approaches to decolonization...the very simplified manner in which Native women's activism is theorized has made it difficult to articulate political and scholarly projects that simultaneously address sexism and promote indigenous sovereignty."[12] Indigenous Feminisms must be diverse and specific in their diversity to be effective in the way that western, white Feminism is not. Indigenous Feminisms differ from white Feminisms in that white Feminisms are primarily concerned with patriarchal structures as they are understood in a western colonial context; whereas Indigenous Feminisms understand that concerns regarding the Indigenous female body extend to Indigenous male and non-binary bodies and, even further, are derivative of settler-colonial practices against lands and peoples. Where white Feminism primarily aims

[12]Goeman, Mishuana R., and Jennifer Nez Denetdale. "Native Feminisms: Legacies, Interventions, and Indigenous Sovereignties." *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 9-13. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0035.

to protect white women, either at the expense of queer and racialized minority women or where protection of those women is a happy accident, Indigenous Feminisms understands that the protection of the Indigenous woman is connected to the protection of the Indigenous man, non-binary person, child, to that of non-Indigenous persons, and to that of all lands and non-human entities. White Feminism was founded with the intent to incite change in legal structures where women are impacted. Indigenous Feminisms address with the law, but are holistic in their engagement with all aspects of the lived experience of Indigenous communities and acknowledge a nuanced understanding of "the feminine" as something that is integral to community epistemologies and is greater than the physical female body alone. Indigenous Feminisms are unique in that they are truly *de*colonial more so than anticolonial, and are sometimes more focused on reindigenizing than decolonizing, as they turn their focus inwards to the unique experiences of every Indigenous woman and community.

Denetdale and Goeman's discussion of Native Feminisms also speaks to the anxiety that many Indigenous women have around western Feminism, as they may see it as a threat to the respect of Indigenous men within their communities. Reciprocity and care for both masculine and feminine identities, and for both men and women who hold one or more of those identities, is integral to the societal balance that many Indigenous communities value. Working within Denetdale and Goeman's discussion of Native Feminisms in conjunction with Denetdale's discussion of a gender analytic and political context as necessary, we can see that protection of Indigenous women against violence is not equivalent to the persecution of Indigenous men, even when Indigenous men are perpetrators who are facing accountability. Violences against Indigenous women and Indigenous femininity *are* equivalent to violences against Indigenous cultures. That is an important aspect of framing conversations about

internalized colonialism and patriarchy within Indigenous communities. Indigenous Feminisms could be defined as a theory and practice of Feminism that is intersectional; examining the role and treatment of femininity in connection to Indigenous sovereignty, decolonization, and the Indigenous body. Indigenous Feminisms engage the lived experience of Indigenous peoples with regards to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, homelands, environment, legal policy, culture, and community from a historical standpoint, a current perspective, and a concern for Indigenous futures. Indigenous Feminism - and the holding of an Indigenous feminine identity, whether that identity coincides with an Indigenous woman identity or not - is inherently a form of activism in the same way that the existence of Indigenous peoples is a form of activism. The definition of activism is important in determining qualifying characteristics, but it can be said that just as the presence of Indigenous lives are antithetical and thereby resistant to the foundation of a settler colonial state, Indigenous Feminism is antithetical and thereby resistant to all forms of subjugation under that state. We know from past weeks that the colonial errand directly attacks the land, and through Indigenous understandings of the land as feminine uses attacks against the Indigenous female body as a metaphoric weapon to possess land. Reestablishing Indigenous Feminisms is a threat to this practice, and could be considered activism as a result. Not all Indigenous feminists see themselves as activists in the larger political arena as they work for decolonization in their own homes, kinship circles, tribes, towns, etc. and believe that work to be their cultural obligation as opposed to an act of resistance. Some Indigenous feminists address reservation experiences while some address urban experiences. Indigenous Feminisms defy a monolithic definition and therefore cannot be assigned an all encompassing “inherent” quality such as activism.

Therefore, the way that I will respect the practicing of womanhood and femininity in various communities as I write my thesis is to not define it. The historical and contemporary context of every community is incredibly diverse, and could even be actively changing within individual communities themselves. We see this in the very works I study - how Indigenous women are constantly interrogating their identity and their relationship to womanhood/femininity while continuing to uphold the systems of care and accountability that Indigenous Feminisms call for. While their womanhood remains central to their work and thus remains central to my analysis, the core of my selected works rests in these woman artists' ability to activate and generate cultural knowledge as creative practitioners.

In their book, *From the Skin*, Elise Boxer (Dakota) and Jerome Jeffery Clark (Diné) propose and develop the term "practitioner-theorist" and its accompanying practitioner theory to describe Indigenous individuals who theorize and practice their various disciplines within "the constellation of Indigenous knowledges"[13] in order to defend Indigenous ways of being. Boxer and Clark stipulate that practitioner-theorists ground their every-day work in their cultural and communal lives, adopting and creating intellectual practices as they go. This positioning follows a precedent set by Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (Wahpetunwan Dakota) and Michael Yellow Bird (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara) in *For Indigenous Eyes Only*, where they call the volume's authors as "practitioner-activists"[14] to describe how they take political positions that stand in opposition to the colonial structures impacting their

[13]Clark, J. Jeffery, Elise Boxer, and Nick Estes. "Introduction: Practitioner-Theorists of Indigenous Studies." In *From the Skin: Defending Indigenous Nations Using Theory and Praxis*, edited by J. Jeffery Clark and Elise Boxer, 14. University of Arizona Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.7533914.4.

[14]Wilson, Waziyatawin Angela and Michael Yellow Bird, eds., *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook,* School of American Research Native America Series (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research, 2005), 3.

community members. By expanding upon Wilson and Yellow Bird's scholarship, Boxer and Clark offer Practitioner Theory as a legitimization of the embodied knowledge production activated by Indigenous peoples in their daily lives. They write that the process of coming to *know* the Indigenous experience, which includes both ancestral contexts and colonial conditions, is an embodied practice. By creating knowledge within this space, practitioner-theorists are recovering and animating Indigenous intellectual traditions. Because Indigenous practitioner-theorists work from the things they witness, it is necessary to theorize from a "position of knowledge and experience".[15] They insist that practitioner-theorists understand the application of theory to be dependent on the context of their lived practices, and is best developed in action. As they embody and practice their cultural ontologies, so too do they theorize them. Here we see that theory and practice are intertwined, and within the context of Indigenous Studies, interdependent. Under an Indigenous Studies paradigm, knowing and doing are partnered experiences. This is the root of the embodiment of Indigenous knowledges, and the reason that Indigenous theorists must live their theory.

This stands in direct connection to Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million's Felt Theory.[16] It is a theory that exists within Indigenous Feminisms, and has served as the foundation for theories like Felt Power (originated by anthropologist Catherine Whittaker), and *Keeoukaywin*, or Visiting[17] (originated by Métis scholar Janice C. Gaudet). Felt Theory legitimizes emotional interpretation as a

[15]Clark, J. Jeffery, Elise Boxer, and Nick Estes. "Introduction: Practitioner-Theorists of Indigenous Studies." In *From the Skin: Defending Indigenous Nations Using Theory and Praxis*, edited by J. Jeffery Clark and Elise Boxer, 15. University of Arizona Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.7533914.4.
[16]Million, Dian. "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History." *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 53-76. https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0043.
[17]Gaudet, Janice Cindy. "Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way - Fostering an Indigenous Research Methodology." *aboriginal policy studies* (2019).

way of knowing and as an intellectual source, and emotional exploration as a form of scholarly analysis. It reasserts the emotions of Indigenous women as the core of Indigenous communities, and considers the ways Indigenous women *feel* the impacts of colonization in our everyday lives to be important scholarship. It encourages us to bear witness to these feelings and share them as valuable experiential knowledge. Felt Theory removes the barrier between the personal and the political. It brings problems like patriarchy, misogyny, violence against women, and oppressive colonialism out of the abstract and humanizes them as lived realities. Felt Theory encouraging Indigenous women to tell their experiences helps us understand that systematically oppressive conditions did not happen to Indigenous communities by choice. Prioritizing emotion during the tellings helps to realign Indigenous values, and resists colonial beliefs that intelligence and apathy are mutually inclusive.

The intimacy of Indigenous knowledge is expanded upon further within Practitioner Theory, as Boxer and Clark write that Indigenous practitioner-theorists offer models of "relearning, recovering, and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems" to "create a body of knowledge that is important to self, community, and nation, and through these efforts they ensure the existence of their nations".[18] The work of Indigenous practitioner-theorists is the work of Indigenous futurity. Indigenous futurism is inspired by Afrofuturism, coined in 1994 by Mark Dery, referring to science fiction works that explore the intersection between the African diaspora and technology. Afrofuturism centers Afrodiasporic experiences and cosmologies across a vast range of themes, offering alternatives to Western views of Africa and of the African. Popular media scholar and author Grace L. Dillon first

[18]Clark, J. Jeffery, Elise Boxer, and Nick Estes. "Introduction: Practitioner-Theorists of Indigenous Studies." In *From the Skin: Defending Indigenous Nations Using Theory and Praxis*, edited by J. Jeffery Clark and Elise Boxer, 18. University of Arizona Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.7533914.4.

coined the term "Indigenous futurisms" in 2003, describing a movement of art, literature, games, and other forms of media which express Indigenous perspectives on the future, present, and past. She argues that Indigenous futurisms "involve discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post–Native Apocalypse world."[19] Indigenous futurists express their ontologies in various forms, and as Grace Dillon puts it, "our ideas of body, mind, and spirit are true stories, not forms of fantasy." Mvskoke scholar Laura Harjo defines futurity as sustaining spaces to dream, imagine, speculate, and activate the wishes of our ancestors, contemporary kin, and future relatives in a present space.[20] Futurity pushes us to create in the present moment what our ancestors, ourselves, and our future relatives need and desire. Indigenous experiences, practices, and theories generate four concepts fundamental to futurity: sovereignty that emphasizes Indigenous kinship; community and body knowledge; collective community power; and imagining, constructing, and accessing Indigenous spacialities. Indigenous futurities operationalize our cultural knowledges and ways of knowing. We need Indigenous futurities to give us a framework for keeping our cultures alive. Being mindful of the experiences of our ancestors, what we need right now, and what we want our descendents to have helps us carry our communities forward in a good way.

To realize Indigenous futures, Indigenous practitioner-theorists move against colonial institutional and theoretical structures in what Boxer and Clark describe as *unsettling*. Unsettling describes actions taken by practitioner theorists to "disrupt, make visible, and eliminate" colonial

[19]Dillon, Grace L., eds. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction.* Tucson, AZ. University of Arizona Press, 2012.

[20]Harjo, Laura. *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*. University of Arizona Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh4zjdg.

systems that seek to erase Indigenous peoples. Framed as an anti-colonial project, I offer that unsettling is a response to *settler colonialism*, not colonialism, and that to unsettle a space is to reindigenize it. Working from Lorenzo Veracini's foundational article, *Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,* we understand that settler colonialism and colonialism are dialectical but separate phenomena.[21] Within the engaged countries of my selected artists, ranging across the continents known as the Americas, we see multiple manifestations of colonialism (Canada) and settler colonialism (the United States, Cuba, Columbia, Mexico) taking place. While the experiences of Indigenous peoples under these two systems are very similar, they require different types of engagement and potential courses of action for Indigenous peoples to regain and maintain sovereignty. As Veracini writes, decolonization is not possible in settler colonial territories. Decolonization is a response to colonization, and where settler colonialism has ensued, colonization has ended. Veracini offers a different oppositional binary from colonization/decolonization for settler colonial states: settlement vs. indigement. In response, I posit that where decolonization is not possible, indigenization and survivance are our only ways forward. As the existence of Indigenous peoples is already antithetical to the settler colonial project, which requires Indigenous peoples to be replaced by settlers to meet its completion, our reclamation of spaces that have been impacted by settler colonial structures is essential. This reclamation requires a level of creativity and futurity to be sustainable.

Indigenizing art spaces and reclaiming Indigenous visual language through creative practice engages with what Diné/Seminole photographer, curator, and museum director Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie expands upon Tuscarora art historical scholar Jolene Rickard's term Visual

[21]Veracini, Lorenzo. (2011). "Introducing." *Settler Colonial Studies*. 1. 1-12. 10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648799.

Sovereignty.[22] In her 2007 essay "Visual Sovereignty: A Continuous Aboriginal/Indigenous Landscape," Tsinhnahjinnie explains within an art historical study, Visual Sovereignty is "divorced from its fixation on the effects of colonization."[23] She argues against the perpetuation of settler colonial logics within Indigenous art practice, and instead reclaim territory and cultural spaces. To do this, Indigenous artists and art historians must not be concerned with reacting or speaking against "centers of symbolic power", which would only serve to legitimize them, but instead to focus on the "peripheries dialoguing amongst one another."[24] Visual Sovereignty calls us to engage with naming, kinship networks, and the inclusion of Indigenous visual languages that do not conform to "colonial demand for visual indicators of Indigenous identity."[25] In this way, Tsinhnahjinnie supports the creative, innovative, and autonomous self representation of Indigenous artists. When using artistic and visual practice to reinforce Indigenous autonomy and Visual Sovereignties, Indigenous artists are "grounded in shared visions of an Indigenous past, present, and future" that actively realize sovereign Indigenous futures.[26]

In her essay, "Making Our World: Thoughts on Native Feminine Aesthetics," Chickasaw/Choctaw scholar heather ahtone proposes that these sovereign futures are created in conjunction with Indigenous ontological order through contemporary creative practice.[27] She

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[22]Rickard, Jolene, et al. "Sovereignty: A Line In The Sand." Aperture, no. 139 (1995): 50–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24474915.

[23]Tsinhnahjinnie, H. J.; "Visual Sovereignty: A Continuous Aboriginal/Indigenous Landscape," 2007, in *Diversity and Dialogue*, Eiteljorg Museum, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 15-23.

[24]*Ibid.*

[25]*Ibid.*

[26]*Ibid.*

[27]ahtone, heather (2008). "Making Our World: Thoughts in Native Feminine Aesthetics". Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis. 37.

identifies Kincentricity as an ontological foundation in Indigenous communities, tying us to all non-human life relatives through the earth, and goes on to assert that our cultural drive to make things with earth-derived materials is part of our inheritance as Indigenous peoples. By highlighting the correlation between birth and the earth, ahtone implicates the earth as the originary feminine body and the core of Indigenous women's creative practice. Based in both the need to survive and to mark our place and moment in the continuum of life, making is how we engage with the world and become cultural peoples. Citing Shawnee/Sac and Fox/Mvskoke/Seminole scholar Donald Fixico's concept of "fusion," wherein Indigenous artists are incorporating new materials and tools into existing aesthetic systems to create art that is indiscernible from traditional works, ahtone establishes that the retention of traditional art practice and these new fusion practices are ways that we connect to the cyclical making of memory, place, and future.[28] I believe ahtone offers a strong foundation of feminine context to support her ideas. It is indisputable that for many Indigenous communities, the responsibility of maintaining cultural aesthetics is held by women. Even after the imposition of colonial societal structures, women have upheld craft practices and the continuance of our visual languages. Though ahtone positions the practice of making and these ancestral traditions of speaking visual language with the earth as an innately feminine practice, her discussion is not exclusionary. The central purpose of ahtone's essay is to highlight the relationship between artistic processes, Indigenous Feminism, and Indigenous futurisms. Building on ahtone's work, I argue that we can read our artistic and creative objects just as one reads textual resources, translating cultural knowledge systems through visual language. ahtone frames not only Indigenous ontologies but epistemologies through the making of

[28] *Ibid, 38.*

Indigenous feminine aesthetics by firmly situating traditional art practice as a technology for cultural continuity in both literal/physical and theoretical/epistemic senses. Further, she suggests that the evolution of ancestral practices to fit modern contexts is how we invigorate and perpetuate our cultures forward and engage with the futurism of our peoples.[29] By describing artistic practice as an inheritance from our earth mother, she builds an artistic genealogy that is inherently matrilineal.[30] Opening her paper with an artwork depicting concentric circles of belly button, ahtone's description the artistic practice of Indigenous women is evocative of descriptions of pregnancy and birth. When ahtone shares the knowledge of Diné ts'aa' basket designs, she says the baskets have been made living by human hands.[31] Is it not traditionally a woman's power, to bring forward life? Not necessarily to create it from nothing on her own, but to carry it, protect it, help it form and grow through her own labor. Biologically, when a woman is born, she is born as an infant with all the eggs her body will carry already inside her. This means that as my mother grew in my grandmother's womb, I too was growing inside my mother. ahtone offers that Indigenous women's creative responses are able to remember (our histories), portal (viewers into our lives experiences), and project (and imagine our shared future). As women's bodies serve to connect our past, present, and future peoples - through these layered concentric circles of belly buttons - so too does Indigenous women's artwork serve to connect our past, present, and future temporalities through a markedly feminine Indigenous visual aesthetic.

As I theorize, through my own artistic and scholarly practices, about the future of Indigenous peoples, I remember a conversation I had with Ópata/Xicano/Picunche/Chileno scholar Dr. Daniel

[29] *Ibid, 40.*
[30] *Ibid, 37.*
[31] *Ibid, 38.*

Ahuicapahtzun Cornejo-Warner in 2021 about what he termed "Mosaic Theory."[32] Under Mosaic Theory, Indigenous cultures are metaphorically represented by a piece of pottery. It is beautiful, made traditionally, serves a cultural purpose, and holds water (our peoplehood) within it. The process/event of colonization and the structure of settler colonialism have broken this pot and scattered the pieces. Mosaic Theory argues that while we could pick up as many of the pieces as we could find, and try to put them back together as similarly to its original state as we can, the reality is that the pot will not be the same. There will be cracks, or microscopic pieces missing that we aren't able to pick up, or maybe we mix up where some of the pieces go, and so on. If we are insistent upon not changing anything about the pot, water will always leak. However, if we change our mindset, we can take the same sacred pieces and create something beautiful but new, using these original pieces in a way that allows them to serve us while allowing us to retain them. When I think about the fluidity of identity, the ways our communities have internal battles over how to connect different moments of the spiral of time, troubling out how we simultaneously carry out the fantasies of our ancestors and the fantasies of colonizers, , I turn to the Mosaic Theory and wonder how we take these beautiful shards rooted in the wealth of our cultures and the care of our ancestors to create a new thing, a unique thing, a thing that specifically addresses our current time/place/needs/wants/futures that does not saddle us with the paralysis of a cracked and leaking jigsaw pot. Putting Mosaic Theory in conversation with Indigenous futurities points to the idea of fusion within contemporary Native American art, wherein Indigenous artists use modern materials while pulling from ancestral techniques, or vice versa, to create something

[32]Dr. Daniel Cornejo Warner in discussion with the author during a meeting with students at Fort Lewis College as part of the Native American & Indigenous Studies faculty search, 2021.

that is distinguishable neither to their cultural visual tradition or to a western visual tradition but is a completely unique and responsive to the multiplicity of their current reality.

Mosaic Theory is strengthened when put into conversation with Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's Radical Resurgence Theory. Simpson introduces Radical Resurgence Theory in her book, *As We Have Always Done*, as a retreat from the settler colonial state and towards our communities, cultural practices, and processes with the intention of recentralizing our indigeneity. Simpson discusses how integral concepts of change, flexibility, fluidity, and reflection are to our understanding of "tradition", and how the work we do in our communities on an intimate scale are more important in many ways than larger external politics.[33] Together, these ideas indicate how a return to the Indigenous tradition is really a return to our ability to listen and understand our community as it exists today and to use that understanding to focus our eyes as we look into our futures. Simpson also describes this process as *biiskabiyang*, or the process of returning to oneself, reengaging with things left behind, and unfolding from inside out with respects to one's individual relationship with their cultural community. In relation to my current engagement as a scholar, it is important to remember that while the academy does provide a space and some opportunity to learn, grow, challenge, and instigate change, it is necessary to move beyond thinking in and of itself and into cultural engagement if I want to truly produce knowledge. [34] In 2024, I had the pleasure of meeting heather ahtone when she visited a class I took on 20th Century Native American Art Historiographies.[35] During that visit, Dr. ahtone spoke about in the context of Indigenous peoples

[33]Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 3.
[34]*Ibid, 20.*
[35]20th Century Native American Art History, OU School of Visual Arts, Norman, OK February 3, 2024.

pursuing work that took up space in traditionally non-Native areas; paraphrasing from my notes in class that day, she said "don't worry about the resume or the intellectualism. Find what calls to you and pursue it. You will find what you love and what you are good at and what you enjoy by doing, and continue to chase those things. [Indigenous people] are so few in these spaces that even mediocrity, if that is what you're afraid of, is a success." I connect this idea from ahtone to Simpson referring to our presence as Indigenous peoples as a weapon.[36] "Existence as resistance" is a phrase commonly used to encourage language revitalization movements, where there is more priority placed in speaking our languages to the best of our ability than there is in speaking "perfectly", because language is living and growing and is allowed to change as part of that liveliness. This, too, points us back to concepts of fluidity as an Indigenous tradition Simpson mentioned in *As We Have Always Done*. As an artist, the continuance of material culture practices and visual languages - such as beading, weaving, quillwork, knowledge around natural dyeing methods and significant patterns or motifs - are so crucial, but so is using these practices and procedures in new, innovative ways. This is what staves off the stagnation of our cultures and keeps them dynamic in their animacy and agency. Simpson states that "we live our understanding of our rights."[37] In the case of Radical Resurgence Theory, the change required of Indigenous peoples is to engage in *biiskabiyang*; to change our own understanding of our rights and bounds by unapologetically retreating to our communities and to ourselves.

Framing change and innovation as central to carrying Indigenous cultures into the future pulls me back to the foundational role of creativity in the process of Indigenous Becomingness. Within my

[36] *Ibid, 6.*
[37] *Ibid, 4.*

thesis, I define *Becomingness* as an Indigenous person's constantly evolving journey towards understanding their intersectional identities and attached nuanced lived experiences in an effort towards realizing their place within their cultural continuums and current contexts. Becomingness is explored in various ways, albeit using different terms, by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson in her work around Indigenous voice and ethnographic refusal,[38] American philosophers John Dewey and R. G. Collingwood through their studies on Process Theory,[39,40] and art historian Henri Focillon;[41] proving that this idea is not exclusive to Indigenous Studies/Indigenous Art History nor to Indigenous peoples. In her work about trans-exclusionary radical feminists, scholar Judith Butler writes that the performance of racial identity is "is a series of acts—speech, bodily, visual, political—that culminate into an identity. It is not something one *is*; it is something one *does*, over and over again. It is the perennial becomingness of identity."[42]

The delineations between performed, embodies, and perceived identity are explored further by Black Studies theorist and poet, Fred Moten, who writes about the troubled relationship between the fact versus lived experience of racial identity. Of Blackness and "the Black," Moten posits that the difference is the ontological separation between "being" (verb) and "beings" (noun).[43] While his exploration of engagements with Blackness is more philosophical than my conversation about Indigenous Becomingness will be, Moten does assert that the investigation of what it is to be Black -

[38]Simpson, Audra. "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' And Colonial Citizenship". Junctures: 67-80.

[39]Dewey, John. 1934. Art as Experience. New York: Minton, Balch & Company. Minton, Balch & Company, or Perigee Books.

[40]Collingwood, R. G. (1938). The principles of art. New York,: Oxford University Press.

[41]Focillon, Henri (1942). "The life of forms in art". Oxford University Press.

[42]Bey, Marquis, and Theodora Sakellarides. "When we enter: The blackness of Rachel Dolezal." *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 4 (2016): 33-48.

[43]Moten, Fred. "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 180. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.0.0062.

that is, the lived experience of Blackness within an American context - is best pursued through an exploration of the politicization of Black identity. The same can be said for Indigenous identities, although in the inverse. Where Blackness, in the United States and other settler colonial nations who perpetuated chattel slavery, is treated as an expansive political identity, indigeneity is treated as a subtractive identity.[44] This is evidenced in the contrast of United States policies on racial descendancy for Black and Indigenous peoples: Virginia's 1662 one-drop rule, wherein any mixed person with even "one drop" of so-called Black blood or lineage was considered Black, and blood quantum policies, wherein the legitimacy of one's indigeneity in the eyes of the settler state is diluted or reduced with each subsequent generation of mixing. These contradicting policies ultimately serve to support the ascendency of the settler population.[45] Here I draw from Moten's work to emphasize that "Becoming Indigenous" is preceded and necessitated by the fracturing and erasure of Indigenous identities starting in the 15th century that forces Indigenous peoples in the Americas today to navigate extremely complex political geographies. Traversing these geographies requires encounters with colonial and settler colonial impositions such as capitalist/wage economy structures, issues of nationality, movement, and diaspora, racialization, the distortion of gender and sexuality by heteropatriarchal hegemonic systems, cultures of rape of human and land bodies, among others. Each of these systems and structures work to damage the cultural and political strength of Indigenous communities, creating a crisis of identity for Indigenous individuals. As Indigenous peoples confront the challenges of realizing the fullness of their indigeneity within the unique intersections of their experience, they take

[44]Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
[45]*Ibid.*

up the process of Becoming. For Indigenous artists who engage with identity, culture, and lived experience in their work, *Becoming* itself becomes creative practice and praxis.

Scope and Objectives

For my thesis, I hope to build upon each of these theories and frameworks to situate Indigenous women artists as practitioner-theorists who utilize artistic practice to interrogate the process of *Becomingness* to Indigenous womanhood within their lived contexts. Reflecting upon Becomingness, I have identified seven stages in how its development is manifested throughout my chosen artworks: Erasure to Emergence, Gazing Back, Subversion, Inserting and Interrupting, Discovering, Rebuilding, and Becomingness. My analysis within this thesis will follow the same journey as I hope to explore a holistic perspective on how art practice can incite, encourage, and be a tool for this process. I would like to note that while this path through my identified stages is one I have chosen for the particular narrative I build throughout this thesis, Becomingness is not linear. Exploring what is known and unknown about one's identity is complex and disorienting. Becomingness is also not cyclical, because progress is always occurring. I would offer a visualization of Becomingness as aspiral, that can move divergently. At the beginning of the narrative I have identified throughout my four selected works, we are confronted with the erasure of Indigenous women's identities and autonomy. This erasure solicits a re-Emergence of Indigenous women's identities, wherein Indigenous women artists resist the mistelling of their stories and reintegrate their perspectives and embodied knowledges into their practice. Following Emergence, Indigenous women artists are able to reverse the

white/settler gaze to hold their oppressors to account, Gazing Back and using their work to call attention to harmful systems. Gazing Back often leads to a Subversion of popular methods, materials, motifs, or concepts that are known within the settler colonial artistic canon. Repurposing and reindigenizing art spaces is a powerful part of Becomingness, as Indigenous women subvert systems and visual languages intended to harm them and reclaim art practice as a continued embodiment of Indigenous futurities. Subversion enables Indigenous women artists to re-Insert themselves into artistic narratives and Interrupt narratives of settler colonialism. These insertions and interruptions are further actions of indigenizing and futuring, allowing Indigenous women artists to tell their own stories and regain autonomy of their experiences through art practice. Through the development of agentified and exploratory creative spaces, Indigenous women artists are discovering their questions. In my own experience as a practicing artist, I embark upon a creative project with a question. It could be a simple question, like "I wonder if this shade of red and this shade of purple would compliment each other." There is also the potential to ask big questions, about identity, about family history, about an imagined future. The goal of the creative project is not so much to answer the question, although that is a possible outcome, but moreso to be a method of investigation and expression that allows for felt and embodied knowledges to come to the forefront. In discovering their questions, Indigenous women artists discover parts of their own identity. Once Discovery is underway, Rebuilding can begin. Rebuilding occurs when Indigenous women artists integrate their felt and embodied knowledges, lived and theorized practices, questions, and self into their work to create a robust and emboldened re-presentation of an Indigenous feminine identity that is true to them. Rebuilding may require artists to revisit past temporal places and spaces, to ask questions in a new way, or trace a different path

forward. This process of growth and ongoing negotiation of identity and experience in order to live a full and robust Indigenous life is Becomingness.

I will use the selected artworks as case studies for the different experiences of Indigenous women across cultural communities, nation-state boundaries, citizenships, and multiplicities of Indigenous feminine identity. Further, the works will be case studies for how the stages of Becomingness are manifested and represented through visual art practice. By including the feminine body in some capacity as a subject in their works, Spitzer, Friedemann-Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau reinforce the idea that the body is central to how we sense not only the natural world but the violence of colonization. Individually, each piece is the product of the artists troubling some aspect of the lived experience of Indigenous women. By exploring the process of Becomingness within an Indigenous feminine context, these artists are generating unique and innovative embodied knowledges. Together, the pieces form a story of the process of Becomingness through the medium of artistic practice. Utilizing art as a method and medium for said exploration demonstrates how artistic practitioner-theorists create and enhance Indigenous futures through their work.

Case 1: *Sister* (2016) by Kali Spitzer

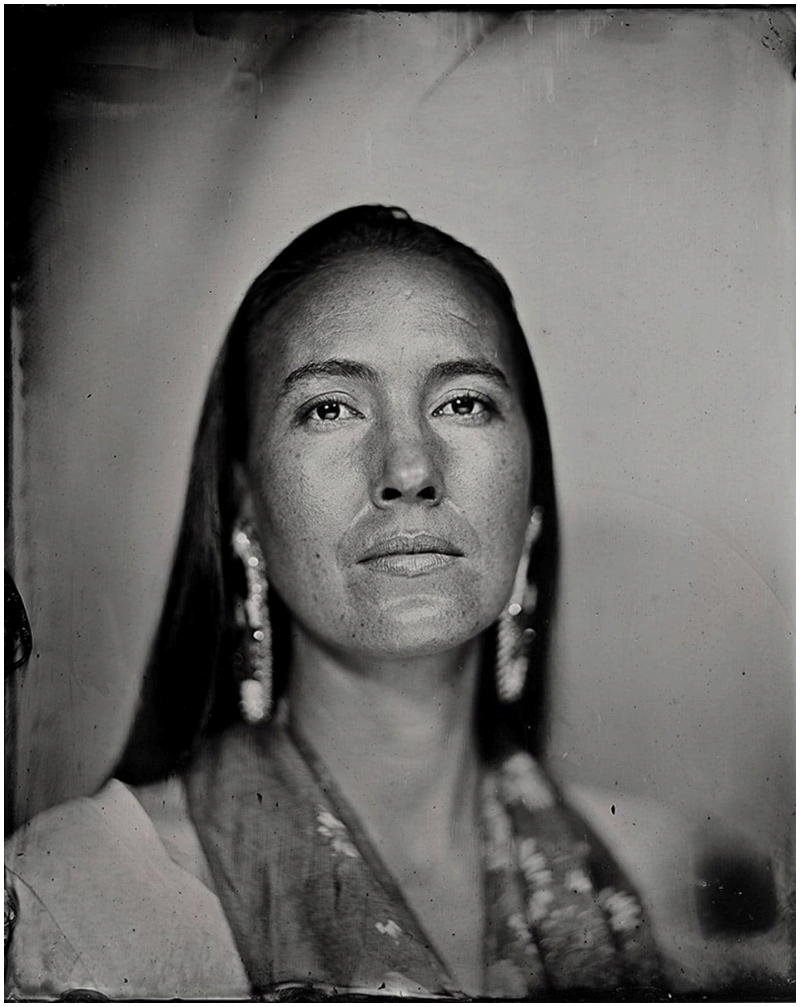
Erasure, Emergence, and Gazing Back

Indigenous women use portraiture to emerge from and resist colonial violences of erasure. Kaska Dena and Jewish photographer Kali Spitzer, in particular, centers her artistic practice on reversing colonial voyeurism of Indigenous/BIPOC and queer bodies through her portrait work.

Spitzer's body of work at the time of this paper contains portraits, figure studies, photographs of her community, and cultural practices. She most frequently shoots with film, but often uses the wet plate collodion process, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in ethnographic or salvage anthropology documentation.[46] Spitzer describes her documentation of community members, cultural, and traditional practices as having a "sense of urgency, highlighting their vital cultural significance."[47] The use of a photography medium whose visual effect is associated with a period of exploitation of Indigenous peoples being used by an Indigenous woman to document her community with loving and respectful intent is in itself a resistance of colonial practices, made exponentially more powerful by the trust and vulnerability offered by the subjects of Spitzer's portraits. Spitzer considers her subjects to be in collaboration with her, performing equal labor by making themselves available to be photographed in such intimate ways, driven by a mutual desire to "rewrite the visual histories of Indigenous bodies beyond a colonial lens."[48] Her portraiture subjects never subvert their gaze or hide from the camera when posing, going so far as to pose naked. This inclusion of the whole naked body is clearly not gratuitous, sexualized, or fetishized. Rather, Spitzer's portraits create representations that are self determined. One of Spitzer's photographs, *Sister* (2016) stands apart from her other portrait work as is a prime example of a portrait's potential to embody defiance against the colonial gaze amidst abuse and erasure of Indigenous peoples. In *Sister*, Spitzer and the portrait's subject reclaim Visual

[46]Dowling, Stephen. "The 20-Year Project to Shoot 21st Century Native Americans on Wet Plate." Kosmo Foto, February 5, 2020. https://kosmofoto.com/2020/02/shane-balkowitschs-northern-plains-native-americans-a-wet-plate-perspective/.
[47]Spitzer, Kali. "About." Kali Spitzer Photography. Accessed May 7, 2024. https://www.kalispitzer.com/about.
[48]*Ibid.*

Sovereignty while upholding the values of accountability and protection of our communities in response to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) crisis.



Sister (2016). Wet plate photograph by Kali Spitzer.

Sister is a wet plate collodion photograph of an anonymous Indigenous woman, identified as the sister of a victim of MMIR related violence. As a wet plate photo, the image is in monochrome grayscale. Dark discoloration stains the top, left, and bottom edges of the photograph, fading into the light gray background like smoke. The background is bare and nondescript, rendering the subject locationless. Wet plate photography rose in popularity in the early 20th century as a method of

ethnographic documentation, fed by settler colonial appetites to consume rhetoric framing Indigenous peoples as a vanishing race that needed to be salvaged for posterity. Perhaps one of the most famous wet plate photographers of the salvage era was Edward S. Curtis, a non-Native photographer in the late 19th through early 20th centuries who played a significant role in perpetuating misinformation and stereotypes of Native peoples and the myth of the "Vanishing Indian" through his photographic work. Curtis heavily doctored and romanticized his imagery, using the public sentiment surrounding photography as a medium through which to capture an objective truth to tout his photographs as scientific/ethnographic scholarship; earning him critical acclaim and his work wide dissemination and publication. Notably, Curtis did not conduct his own research but did retain "educated" Native Americans as "cultural brokers, informants, and interpreters" to further legitimize the fantasy he contributed to.[49] Wet plate photographs from this era effectively stagnated Indigenous communities in the eyes of the United States public, casting them as relics of a time gone by and supporting false assertions that the territory of North America was no longer stewarded by Indigenous inhabitants and was therefore available for settler colonial expansion. Spitzer's reclamation of this wet plate medium which has previously been used to perpetuate harmful rhetoric about her own communities is a powerful act of survivance, showing not posed or caricaturized images of Indigenous peoples; instead depicting Indigenous peoples very much alive, active, and as they would wish to be seen.

In *Sister,* Spitzer framed the woman in the portrait from the shoulders up, her face situated in the center of the rectangular visual frame. She tilts her body from the camera at a three quarter angle,

[49]Gidley, Mick. *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian Project in the Field.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 1-29. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/11661.

with the left shoulder closer to the lens and the right shoulder further and out of focus. She wears her hair straight, tucked behind her ears and brushed behind her shoulders, disappearing behind her back. She wears a loose shirt made from a thin, pale fabric cut in a way that shows her upper chest. A darker colored scarf with a floral pattern hangs from behind her neck to cover the curve between her neck and shoulders and her collarbones, creating a V shape below the hollow of her throat that follows the muscles of her turned neck. From her ears hang beaded earrings that reach the middle of her neck, blurred and out of focus but distinguishable by the glint of individual beads in the camera flash. They appear to be beaded using a flat stitch technique to create some pattern or image from darker beads with a white or light-colored edging. The woman sets her shoulders back, and turns her head slightly to stare down the lens. Her face is the only part of the photograph that is fully in focus. More focused, even, than the common high definition photography that has been made available with digital cameras and camera phones. Any pore or freckle is revealed. The collodion process has picked up every detail of her face; every indicator of her emotions, the physical evidence of a life lived. Fine lines to the outer lower edges of her eyes and parenthetical lines to either side of her mouth are evidence of a ready smile and full laugh. Two scars on her forehead appear clearly, surely with stories to be told. Small lines around the top of her lips suggest they have been pursed with anger or worry, as does the wrinkle between her brows, pointing towards them being furrowed often. The flash gleams off the tip of her chin, which is slightly raised in defiance. She tips her nose upwards as she stares down the lens at the viewer. Her gaze is calm, steady, and piercing. Her eyes are clear, the flash illuminating their depth. She tenses her orbicularis muscles with a discerning focus. Emotion can be felt by the firm set of her mouth

and the subtle arch of her eyebrow, seemingly daring the viewer to maintain eye contact with her. Her expression is solemn, grief only thinly veiled underneath the surface.

Sister was taken as a collaborative work between Spitzer and Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota multimedia artist Cannupa Hanska Luger for his installation piece *Every One* (2018). For *Every One*, Luger invited community members from across North America to handmade 4,000 two-inch clay beads, which he then fired, dyed, and strung to create a pixelated representation of the *Sister* portrait.[50] The piece's intent was to be in solidarity with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives movement, which works to rectify and reduce gendered, sexualized, and racialized violence against Indigenous peoples. With *Sister*'s contribution to Luger's work and this larger MMIR movement, we are able to better understand the portrait as a standalone piece.



[50]Luger, Cannupa Hanska. "Every One." Works - Social Engagement, 2020. https://www.cannupahanska.com/social-engagement/every-one.

Every One and *Sister* at the Gardiner Museum. 2019. Rachel Weiner for the New York Times.

MMIR, and adjacent movements MMIW (Women), MMIWG (Women and Girls), MMIP (Peoples), MMIWQT (Women, Queer, and Trans peoples), and MMIW2S (Women and Two Spirit peoples) address the violence against Indigenous peoples, especially women and woman-presenting peoples, that is pervasive both in the broad scheme and within Indigenous communities at a disproportionate level. A 2008 report from the National Institute of Justice showed that Native women face murder rates at more than ten times the national average in areas of high Indigenous populations in the United States.[51] A 2016 follow-up report, Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men, found that more than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced some form of gendered or racialized violence in their lifetime, and that more than half of these women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.[52] The same report shows that 96% of these American Indian and Alaska Native female victims have experienced violence from a non-Native perpetrator.

According to a study conducted in 2017 and published in 2018 on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls issue by the Urban Indian Health Institute, rates of violence on reservations can be up to ten times higher than the national average.[53] Until 2017, no research had been done on rates of sexualized, gendered, or racialized violence among American Indian and Alaska Native women living in urban areas despite the fact that 71% of American Indian and Alaska Natives are

[51]NCAI Policy Research Center, Statistics on Violence Against Native Women 2 (2013).

[52]Finn, Kathleen, Erica Gajda, Thomas Perin & Carla Fredericks. Responsible Resource Development and Prevention of Sex Trafficking: Safeguarding Native Women and Children on the Fort Berthold Reservation 40.1 Harv. J.L. & Gender 1 (2017).

[53]Lucchesi, Annita, and Abigail Echo-Hawk. Rep. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls: A Snapshot of Data from 71 Urban Cities in the United States. Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018.

considered urban. In their study, the UIHI was able to identify 506 MMIWG-related issues over the course of a year, and acknowledge that this data pool is nowhere near a comprehensive account. Based on the data collected, the youngest victim was under one year old and the oldest was 83 years old. 135 cases were victims aged 18 or under, and the mean victim age was 29 years old. 96 cases that were tied to broader issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, police brutality, and lack of safety for sex workers. Of all cases, 8% were domestic violence related, and 14% of domestic violence fatalities were victims aged 18 and under. Three victims were pregnant at their time of death. At least 6% of all cases experienced sexual assault at the time of disappearance or death. Eight victims were identified as homeless, six were trans-women, and seven were victims of police brutality or died in custody. Of the perpetrators UIHI was able to identify, 83% were male and 50% were non-Native. 38 of the perpetrators were convicted, nine were never charged, four were acquitted, one had a mistrial, and one committed suicide. 28% of these perpetrators were never found guilty or held accountable in any way.

The data also illuminates that violence against land and women is directly correlated - when projects involving violence to land occur, violence experienced by Indigenous women increases. In 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics completed a study on violent victimization known to law enforcement in the Bakken oil-producing region of Montana and North Dakota, where increased reports of crime coincided with the socio-economic changes brought to that area by the oil boom.[54,55] Oil booms or other wide scale extractive resource projects of this nature tend to attract privately hired

[54]University of Colorado. (2020, January 29). Violence from Extractive Industry "man camps" endangers indigenous women and children. First Peoples Worldwide.

[55]Dustin Monke, The Boom's 'Epicenter:' Oil Patch Hub Watford City Adjusts to Burgeoning Population, Financial Questions, Dickinson Press (Mar. 2, 2014).

manual labor workers to carry out extraction processes. These workers are housed in temporary living facilities in the rural areas near extraction sites, also known as man camps, which tend to border or infringe upon Indigenous lands or areas with high Indigenous populations. The vast majority of the workers at man camps are non-Native. Because of the limits of criminal jurisdiction in Indian Country, tribes cannot prosecute them for any acts of criminal violence, including sexual assault and trafficking. Since man camps are localized, the localized rise in violence has a potential to intimately impact entire communities. This area is home to the home to the Sahnish, Arikaree, Ree, or Hundi (Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara); the Yanktonai, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Hunkpapa, Mniconjou, Itazipo/Sans Arc, Shiasapa, Oohenumpa, Oglala, and Sicangu (Lakota/Dakota/Nakoda); Ojibwe/Annishinabe (Chippewa) and Annishinabe and Métis (Little Shell Chippewa); Nokoda/Nakona (Assiniboine), Niitsitapi/Pikuni (Blackfeet), Ne-i-yah-wahk (Plains Cree), Apsáalooke (Crow), A'aninin (Gros Ventre), Ksanka (Kootenai), Tsetsêhesêstâhase and So'taa'eo'o (Northern Cheyenne), Qĺispé (Pend d'Oreille), and Sélish (Interior Salish) peoples. During the Bakken oil boom, violent victimization by strangers increased by 53%. Acts of SRV against Black and Native Americans was 2.5x higher than corresponding rates for whites, and women experienced a 54% increase rates of reported statutory rape.

These statistics are incredibly overwhelming. When inundated with a barrage of numbers as the last two paragraphs illustrate, data stops embodying people with lives, communities, and stories and begins existing numerically in the abstract, effectively negating the individuality and humanity of those represented. This is a serious problem, addressed by Spitzer in *Sister* as she rehumanizes and returns agency to a woman and attached community impacted by MMIR-related violence. The realization of how tribal communities are specifically impacted on their reservation lands lends a deeper

understanding to the context within which *Every One* was conceptualized and how *Sister* was formulated.

The subject of *Sister* is unnamed, identified only as someone whose sister was murdered.[56] Beyond that, any personal details and Spitzer's relationship to her are undisclosed. This is uncommon in Spitzer's practice, who publicizes when photographs are taken of her family members, community members, or friends. Rarely, if ever, are subjects identified as strangers, as Spitzer's photographic ethic of accountability in her work usually includes her identifying and contextualizing her subjects. The ambiguity of *Sister*'s subject's identity underpins the message that MMIR is an issue that can impact any and all Indigenous women. Spitzer says of her own work that she is "committed to capturing intimate portraits of Indigenous women and queer, trans, and non-binary peoples" in efforts to resist phenomena of fetishization and colonial voyeurism.[57] Through this ambiguity of *Sister*'s identity, the subject is representative of all Indigenous women who are impacted by MMIR and reinforces the understanding that MMIR-related crimes can and do impact every Indigenous person regardless of our individual lives. Further, the fact that she is only identified by her connection to a murdered relative and that this information is not enough to reveal her identity as a living woman is indicative of the widespread nature of this issue and highlights the ways in which Indigenous women are dehumanized when they are recognized only as statistics within this crisis.

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[56]Des Moines Art Center [@desmoinesartcenter]. Photo of Every One. Instagram, Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. May 5, 2023. *Caption: The beads re-create a photograph by Kaska Dena and Jewish Artist Kali Spitzer: a portrait of an anonymous Indigenous woman whose sister was murdered.*

[57]Freeman, Morgan E., Courtney M. Leonard, Sequoia Miller, Anya Montiel, Rose Bean Simpson, and Roxanne Swentzell. Form & Relation : Contemporary Native Ceramics. Edited by Jami C. Powell. Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, 2020: 97.

The subject's gaze is a perfect visual example of Indigenous women "gazing back" through creative practice. Within Visual Culture Studies, "the gaze" defines a "historical, cultural, and political mode of observation and reception of images by active observing subjects."[58] Under the paradigm of the gaze, the image is able to simultaneously be observed from outside and look back at the viewer, "returning the gaze in the form of power and desire."[59] The gaze is related to the phenomena known within Feminist Theory as the male gaze. Coined by Laura Mulvey to describe portrayals of women in film, the male gaze is the active and involved voyeuristic spectacle of a woman by larger society, who treats the woman subject as a passive object of male erotic desire.[60] This idea is further complicated by the white gaze, spoken about at length by author Toni Morrison.[61] Similarly to the male gaze centering men's desire and dehumanizing women subjects, the white gaze positions white experiences and perspectives within American society as the standard and dehumanizes and marginalizes Black peoples and their lived realities. While expanded upon most robustly within Black Studies, the white gaze is applicable to any racialized group marginalized within a white supremacist societal structure. Gaze is always historically and culturally contextualized, and in each of these cases, women and people of color are devalued and abused. "Gazing back," then, is a resistance by the oppressed subject, refusing to be passively seen and instead becoming an active participant in their portrayal, turning "the gaze" back upon the artist or audience who is viewing them. When the subject of *Sister* turns her own piercing gaze back at the audience in her portrait, she is not only holding the audience to account but is

[58]Bertolini, Michelle. "Gaze," International Lexicon of Aesthetics, vol. 2 (2019). 1.
[59]*Ibid.*
[60]Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, "Screen" 16:3 (1975) 6-18.
[61]Morrison, Toni. "Toni Morrison on Writing for Black Readers Under the White Gaze," The Connecticut Forum. Panel filmed May 4, 2001. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP_-m7V58_I

asserting her agency and control over how she is being portrayed and what the audience is allowed to know of her.

From a purely visual standpoint, *Sister* is a striking portrait. The mental and emotional strength inferred from the subject's body language is palpable when viewing it, to such a degree that the portrait garners attention rivaling the monumental *Every One* installation when displayed next to each other. *(Fig. 10)* In 2019, *Every One* and *Sister* were jointly displayed at the Gardiner Museum. In an interview with the New York Times, Chief Curator Sequoia Miller described the impact of the work:

> He gestured across the museum's 1450sqft lobby to the glass doors of the main entrance from Queens Park, a busy thoroughfare in Toronto's Yorkville neighborhood. "You'll be able to see it from the street," he said. "This is a way to make her presence visible." The "her" he referred to was a tintype image of an Indigenous woman who stares at the camera with an expression that Mr. Miller called "serene, but resolved. A little mournful, but also resilient."[62]

Clearly, *Sister*'s conceptual density and its aesthetic impact are equally stunning, both capable of making an impression upon an audience. *Sister* encapsulates the propensity of Indigenous women's portraiture to simultaneously venerate femininity, celebrate indigeneity, protect and defend our communities, and rebuke the mistreatment of these entities by oppressive powers. The portrait resists the erasure of Indigenous women's felt and lived experiences, standing as an Emergence of Indigenous women's agency in their own representation. In this way, *Sister* acts as a case study of the early stages of Indigenous Becomingness. As *Sister*'s subject resists the erasure of the western colonial gaze, she emerges as a living woman with heartbreakingly real experiences as an Indigenous woman in today's

[62]Hanc, John. "Illuminating the Plight of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women." The New York Times, October 23, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/arts/design/indigenous-women-toronto.html.

society. Through this emergence, she forces the audience to see her as she is, and to consider their role in larger systems of violence against Indigenous peoples. Additionally, *Sister* emerges as a woman with agency, capable of choosing how much of her image to allow larger audiences to see.

Case 2: *Loba* (2017) by Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez

Subversion and Insertion

Dissecting colonial technologies of oppression requires that we critically analyze the imagined futures of imperialist powers. Writing about Indigenous futurity, Dr. Laura Harjo explains that the systems we create today should adhere to the original instructions of our ancestors to realize their unmet desires. She suggests going back to the creation stories of Indigenous peoples to assess what values serve as the foundation for the lived ethics of a community. The same can be said for non-Indigenous and colonial bodies. When looking at creation stories, specifically the Christian creation story, a fraught narrative regarding land relationships emerges. The book of Genesis describes God creating mankind and instructing him to rule over the land, with every non-human thing existing to serve him.[63] There is a truly domineering and exploitative nature to this land relationship, and it does not contain any semblance of equity or harmony with the non-human or even between humans themselves. The first woman, Eve, was created for the explicit purpose of serving her male counterpart, and was created from a piece of him to symbolize that obligation.[64,65]

[63]Genesis 1:26-29 New International Version

[64]Genesis 2:18 NIV

[65]Genesis 2:20-23 NIV

God had forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge so that they would not know Good nor Evil.[66] Satan, in the form of a serpent friend to Eve, convinced her that knowledge was valuable, so Adam and Eve ate the apple from the Tree.[67] After discovering His creation's disobedience, God punished them with a life of hard work and suffering to survive. Blaming Adam not for his own conscious choice but for "listen[ing] to [his] wife", God promised that the earth would resist them, and that they must toil and sweat to cultivate food that would now be fraught with thorns and thistles.[68] Further, he cursed Eve specifically with painful and dangerous childbirth, and the desire for a domineering husband.[69] When considering the beginning and end of this story in connection to each other, there is a competitive relationship between human and non-human as well as between human men and human women. One always has to exist in control and one in subjugation.

A lack of reciprocal or symbiotic exchange in relationships changes conceptions of community responsibility. Adam was the sole benefactor of the non-human's service to him, contributing to a narrative that lacks any teachings about the importance of community. As a result, those who base their world view within this creation story expect relationships to have a domineering hierarchy and fight to be the dominator in their relationships. There is a strong sense of individualism, and the idea that one person's loss is another person's gain, or vice versa.

Cultural values of individualism and uneven power dynamics become exceedingly clear when examined within the context of Spanish colonization of the Indigenous peoples of North America.

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[66]Genesis 3:5 NIV

[67]Genesis 3:6 NIV

[68]Genesis 3:17-19, 3:23 NIV

[69]Genesis 3:19 NIV

The *Requerimiento* and Papal Bulls blatantly forced Indigenous peoples to submit to Spanish values under threat of violence.[70,71] We see the reverberations of this clash of values from contact through the colonial Mission era and into today. Esselen/Chumash writer Deborah A. Miranda describes how her own ancestral community were made to elect one of their own as a leader and middle ground between themselves, as neophytes, and the padres in the missions of California.[72] This individual would sometimes be put in charge of minor forms of discipline, like caning for petty offenses. It was not common, before Spanish colonization, for Indigenous peoples to take violent action against other people unless it was war time, and even then there were strict customs of combat that retained respect for the other party as human beings. By forcing Indigenous peoples to choose one of their own as a leader and then expecting that leader to enact violence against other Indigenous bodies, Catholic colonizers created an environment where Indigenous peoples built respect for a violent authority as well as normalizing violence against one's own people. Just as in the story of Adam and Eve, the consequences for noncompliance to these policies were violent and cruel.[73]

This is furthered by the way colonial settlers conducted, and continue to conduct, agricultural practices. They domesticated animals - forcing animals to abandon their natural habits and submit to human masters - and then allowed them to graze freely; which was harmful to the land and to Indigenous peoples as it resulted in overgrazing, opening the door for Europeans to replace indigenous plants with foreign ones, as well as a severe overharvesting of grasses and acorns that Indigenous

[70]Pope Alexander VI. *Inter caetera* [Division of the undiscovered world between Spain and Portugal]. Bull, May 4, 1493. Papal Encyclicals Online. Accessed October 12, 2022. https://www.papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm.
[71]Council of Castile. *El Requerimiento*. 1510. National Humanities Center.

[72]Miranda, Deborah A. *Bad Indians: a Tribal Memoir.* 33-35. Heyday, 2013.
[73]*Ibid,* 12-15.

peoples were dependent on. Spanish agricultural approaches also disrupted water systems and wild animal habitats, which endangered Indigenous hunting patterns and the life of all non-humans.[74] We see these practices continuing today despite dissent from Indigenous communities, resulting in catastrophic climate change and damage to ecosystems on a global level.

European behaviors directly opposed the Indigenous approach to interpersonal relationships. Indigenous peoples, in accordance with ethics of Kincentricity, placed an emphasis on community-centric behavior and attempted to build mutually beneficial relationships with the Spanish. This is evidenced by gift giving practices, their instigation of trade relationships, and their willingness to share information about the land and how to live on it with Spanish invaders.[75] In adherence with their foundational ethics as prescripted by their own original instructions, however, the Spanish were set on subjugating Indigenous populations for their own gain. Themes of exploitation are also found in the structure of race-based systems during the colonial era.

An Indigenous artist that is subverting colonial systems of gendered and racialized class systems through multidisciplinary practice is Columbo-American (Mestiza) artist Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez. She grew up in Colombia as the child of an Indigenous Colombian and a United States citizen, and migrated to the US as an adult. Her work interrogates the curious and intense experience of having physically migrated, yet still having being rooted in her homelands linguistically, culturally, and racially. Friedemann-Sánchez is currently creating an intersectional feminist visual novel containing paintings, sculptures, objects, and mixed media works that together—and in different voices—create a discourse

[74]Atkins, Damon B, and William J Bauer. Essay. In We Are the Land: A History of Native California, 61-62. University Of California Press, 2021.
[75]*Ibid.*

about hybridity and cultural ownership. In one chapter of this novel, Freidemann-Sánchez explores and challenges the casta painting genre.

Casta paintings were a form of visual journalism that emerged in Mexico City, Puebla, and Peru in the early 16th century. The Spanish were some of the first to import enslaved Africans, among other racialized minorities, to their colonies in the New World. The conglomeration of Spanish Europeans, Africans, Indigenous peoples, and others in a new territorial area with shifting socio-political boundaries naturally resulted in interracial relations. In fact, over a quarter of the population of Mexico was mixed by the 17th century. Casta paintings were intended to give the Spanish crown a clear overview of the people under its rule. Over 100 full or partial sets of casta paintings are documented as of today, evidence of both the Spanish "culture of curiosity," as well as elite's anxiety over the so-called porosity of race.[76]

Casta paintings are large oil paintings detailing a rigidly delineated system of class based on racial mixing. The majority of casta paintings depict sixteen castes, but there were well over sixteen recognized racial identities based on the incredibly complex and compounded history of mixing in one's lineage, the degrees of blood of each race present in one's mix, the country of origin of mixed people in one's lineage, etc. Paintings consist of either sixteen small individual canvases or one large canvas portioned into sixteen compartments. Each compartment depicts a man, woman, and child; and the compartments were spacialized according to the hierarchy of race and status. Status is also represented by the activities and occupational clothing worn by the families, which is another indicator

[76]Deans-Smith, Susan. ""Creating the Colonial Subject: Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain," Colonial Latin American Review 14, no. 2 (2005): 169-204.

of race. Each compartment in the paintings are numbered, and the racial mixes explicitly identified. The didacticism of each painting varies widely, but the general systems elucidated remain the same.



Las castas. Casta painting showing 16 racial groupings. Anonymous, 18th century, oil on canvas, 148×104 cm, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico.

Casta paintings were commissioned by the Spanish Crown from Spanish Europeans or Mestizos that were loyal to the Crown as progress reports of a colony's progress; therefore the paintings intentionally romanticized or idealized New Spain, failing to encapsulate the dystopian racial and class castes and related conflicts - of which there were many.[77] Casta paintings were feeding into the colonial

[77] *Ibid.*

contest, despite being created by colonial artists.[78] Part of what makes Casta paintings so unique and intriguing from an identity standpoint is that the paintings simultaneously fueled European conceptions of the "exotic Other" and portrayed authentic images of The Self (that is, the colonial subject of New Spain in all its complexity).[79] It was because of their presence in natural history collections during the Enlightenment period that Casta paintings acquired a meaning that specifically related to an assumed ethnographic value.[80] This value, as well as the European obsession with rigid systems of ethnographic categorization, can be traced back to 18th century Swedish biologist Carl Linneaeus. Linnaeus is best known for the development of his Linnaean taxonomy, a hierarchical classification system for biological organisms that separated them into groups based on observable shared characteristics. developed by Carl Linnaeus, is a hierarchical system for classifying organisms, organizing them into groups based on shared characteristics.[81] While I hesitate, with no training in biology, to comment on the scientific basis for this system, I can confidently assert that it was inaccurately weaponized to support the racialization of Indigenous peoples and other peoples of color throughout European colonial conquest, providing a contrived, pseudoscientific, and corrupt basis for the dehumanization of racialized peoples as an alibi for colonial violence and land theft. Within colonial New Spain, images of tribal members, cultures, and landscapes intersect in ethnographic illustrations of the colonial era in line with this baseless hierarchical system. Casta paintings did not

[78]Carrera, Magali M. Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings. University of Texas Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.7560/712454.

[79]Katzew, Ilona. "Casta Painting: Identity and social stratification in Colonial Mexico," in New World Orders: Casta painting and colonial Latin America (America's Society Art Gallery, 1996), 8-29.

[80]Katzew, Ilona. "Changing Perspectives: Casta Painting in the Era of the Bourbon Reforms, 1760-1790," in Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 110-161.

[81]Broberg, Gunnar, and Anna Paterson. *The Man Who Organized Nature: The Life of Linnaeus*. Princeton University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv34xx5sc.

fully reflect the nuances of the cultures it claims to represent; but remained solid visual references when determining the values of colonial Spanish society and politics by analyzing what was represented and how.[82]

As a mixed Indigenous Colombian and white, or *mestiza*, woman, Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez takes this history of harmful representations of Indigenous and other racialized groups by colonial powers to task in her own casta series. Living in the United States and being married to a US citizen, Friedemann-Sánchez' works explore migration, ensuing encounters between Europe and the Americas, and the continued impacts of colonization on those experiencing diaspora today. Engaging with precolonial and colonial art practice as well as modern materials and original techniques, Friedemann-Sánchez' casta paintings are actions of futurism - dissecting the past, responding in the present. She intends her work to be cross cultural, prioritizing Latina and feminist communities in the United States and Latin America.

[82]Kroeber, Theodora, Albert B. Elsasser, and Robert F. Heizer, "About the Pictures," "Tribes of the Southern Missions," and "Tribes of the Northern Missions," in Drawn from Life: California Indians in Pen and Brush (Ballena Press, 1977), 17-20, 53-72, 73-106.



Casta Paintings series. 2017-2020. Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez. Mixed Media on Tyvek. 80in x 40in.

The *Casta Paintings* chapter of Friedemann-Sánchez' *Mestiza Dos Veces: A Visual Novel* "re-contextualizes the historic practice of taxonomic recording of miscegenation" through the racial profiling in casta paintings. In her Casta Paintings, Friedemann-Sánchez invited 16 Latina women to pose for silhouetted portraits that were altered with consideration for the women's skin color, racial mixing, and cultural background. Being traced, each portrait is life size, resisting the tendency in historical portraiture to diminish or alter the appearance of women in paintings to adhere to the colonial rhetoric of the time, and insisting that viewers appreciate the space women take up in its entirety, literally and metaphorically. The result is a collection of portraits that return agency to the women in them by subverting the erasing, dehumanizing, and stratifying casta genre. While I will only analyze one portrait, *Loba,* for the scope of this thesis, even this piece alone contains a robust index of the felt experiences of Latin American Indigenous women and the reclamation of their identities through self-representation.



Loba by Nancy Friedemann-Sanchez. 2017. Ink on Tyvek, Spanish comb, mask. 80"x40". Photograph taken during installation at The Union for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska. Photo from Friedemann-Sanchez' website (https://www.nancyfriedemann.com/chapter-6--casta-paintings/view/1070438/1/1070459)

The central figure in *Loba* is the silhouette of a body. The body could be read as feminine, with its chest tapering along internally diagonally angled ribs to a thinner waist curves slowly before flaring out again into wide, rounded hips. The base for the silhouette appears to be a long sheet of paper-like material laid over Tyvek. The sheet is buckled from the liquid mediums used to compose the figure, its texture revealed as its topography shines in the light. The sheet is creased vertically down the middle of the piece once, with three more horizontal creases spaced evenly down the sheet, dividing the work into a total of eight proportionally equal sections.

The silhouette is vertically situated across the 80x40in Tyvek base. The figure's legs are spread, with the tips of each foot reaching the two bottom corners of the sheet. The figure's arms are bent with its hands reaching above its head, evoking the posture required when passing through U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) check points in U.S. airports. This posture is also evocative of the "hands up" posture demanded of private citizens during altercations with U.S. police officers. The TSA pose is evocative of the harsh and, frankly, racist and xenophobic, United States laws restricting the entrance of immigrants from Latin countries. Between the figure's arms is a rounded shape of the figure's hair, defined by a varied scalloped border, which can be assumed to be curly and voluminous.

The use of silhouette as subject can be read on two levels here. First, the intersections of the issue of violence against woman and against non-human (land via extraction, expansion, damaging agriculture practices, etc.) being conjunctively represented in *Loba* contributes to what scholar Mieke Bal refers to as the "rhetorical displacement of rape" - the idea that ontologically, rape cannot be visualised because it "takes place inside" and, more interestingly, "makes the victim invisible" by

physically covering her body and damaging her self image.[83] By removing the ability to clearly identify the identity of the woman in *Loba*, Friedemann-Sánchez is confronting the erasure of South American Indigenous women who have experienced the violence of colonialism and settler colonialism which seeks to make them invisible. Concurrently, Friedemann-Sánchez' use of silhouette serves as a subversion and interruption into these systems of invisibility by restoring agency and respecting the consent of the subject to be seen in a capacity chosen by Friedemann-Sànchez and the subject collaboratively. Translucent silhouettes of the limbs emerge from the sides of the figure's arms and legs in slightly different locations, caused by intentionally repeated repositioning during the tracing process to create overlapping silhouettes. These repositioned limbs are in motion around the more opaque, still limbs of the central silhouette; and, therefore, suggest the animacy of the silhouetted figure. This kinetic quality resists a reading of the subject as object, and the capturing of the silhouette of a body utilizes the absence of nudity to retain the figure's humanity. The agency visually identified in the portrait is furthered by the agency of the portrait's subject herself; who, similar to the subject of Kali Spitzer's *Sister*, is choosing how she wishes to be seen. She is an active participant in this portrait, imbuing it with the details of her body and identity, but asserts agency in maintaining her anonymity. Friedemann-Sánchez, of course, upholds her own responsibility to the portrait's subject and protects her by not publicizing information about any of the casta portrait subjects' identities.

Blotchy, uneven ink fills the figure's body. In areas of high concentration, the dried ink is orange in color. It fades from orange to a light yellow, and from the light yellow to a warm cream color

[83]Bal, Mieke. 1990. "Visual Poetics: Reading with the Other Art" in *Theory between the Disciplines: Authority/Vision/Politics*, edited by Martin Kreiswirth and Mark A. Cheetham, 135-150. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

in areas of lower concentration. The cream areas appear gray as they deconcentrate and become translucent over the black base. The pattern of the ink is similar to that of a spotted animal pelt, most reminiscent of a cheetah or leopard with its colors inverted, referencing the Catholic Church's assertion that darker skinned people "lacked a soul and were stained."[84] This speaks to dehumanization of racialized peoples under colonial systems, where they are often treated similarly or worse than animals. The Spanish casta system went so far as to name multiple racial identities after animals. *Loba*, for instance, is the title of one of Friedemann-Sanchez' *Casta Paintings* portraits. The word *lobo/a* directly translates to *wolf*, but refers to someone who comes from *Salta atras* and *Mulata* parentage. A *Mulato/a* person is mixed *Español/a* and *Moro/a - Española* meaning white Spanish and *Mora* being a cognate of moorish, referring to someone who is Black-skinned but not African, implicative of further undisclosed mixing. *Salta atras* refers to someone whose parents are *Chino/a* and *Indio/a*. *India* refers to Indigenous peoples. *Chino* refers to someone whose parents are *Morisco/a* and *Española*. *Morisco* refers to someone whose parents are *Mulato* and *Española*, or a light-skinned *Mulato* person. Just this singular case of the *Lobo* label demonstrates the lengthy pedigree held in a casta identity, further illustrating the complexity and, frankly, the ridiculous and contrived nature of the casta system. Casta paintings are one of the only genres within art historical discourse where issues of governmentally imposed systems of blood quantum are explicitly discussed. While the Spanish casta system did not legislate degrees of racial identity through the quantity of racialized blood one contains the way the United States federal government does with Indigenous peoples currently - which is a weak

[84]Friedemann-Sanchez, Nancy. "Chapter 6: Casta Paintings." Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, 2020. https://www.nancyfriedemann.com/chapter-6--casta-paintings.

concept scientifically, even for pseudoscience fields like ethnography - the rigid racial categories were very real in colonial Spanish society and held deeply felt impacts over all members of society, white or otherwise.



Loba, close-cropped view of torso.

The pattern of the ink is additionally similar to water systems and water patterns, merging the human, nature, and animal. Friedemann-Sánchez also sees the animal patterns as representative of "the merging of the human & animal and the human & nature."[85] This merging is related to human/non-human relationships that are crucial to many Indigenous communities, evidenced in theories such as Kincentricity, among others.

The light ink meets a hard boundary of black that demarcates the boundaries of the figure's body. In contrast to the organic pattern of the majority of the ink, it settles into the creases of the base sheet in straight orange and yellow lines, splitting the body itself into eight parts; vertically down the

[85] *Ibid.*

middle, and then horizontally through the neck and shoulders, the hips, and the knees. The segmentation of the body is evocative of the compositional structure of casta paintings themselves, and could be visualizing the multiple "parts" or intersections of casta identities.

In place of a face, the figure sports a wooden mask. The mask is modeled after the head of a large cat but does not strictly adhere to a cat's biological anatomy. Instead, it is almost figural with its depiction. The top of the mask has two soft waves moving horizontally, and the sides follow these waves straight down vertically and curve inwards twice, once to suggest cheekbones and another time to meet in the middle, at the base of what appears to be the tip of the cat's nose. The mask is convex. Its forehead is relatively even, with a distinctly carved brow bone. There are two shallow craters carved into the lower third of the mask that lead into the eye holes. The edges of the craters rise to meet the brow bone along the top, the cheek bones along the outer sides, and the nose bridge in the middle. The nose bridge of the mask is raised, and ends in a rounded ledge at the mask's base. The mask is most likely made of wood, made evident by the uneven edges at the top, a split to the left of the middle, and what appears to be a knot in the middle towards the top of the forehead. The wood is polished at its high points and riddled with carved pock marks along its sides and at the high point of the base of the nose. It is a warm, light orange, very similar in tone to the ink of the silhouette's body. A warm brown stripe with soft edges runs vertically down the middle of the mask, from the top of its head to the tip of the nose. Painted along the brow line above the eye holes are two black arches, mimicking the shape of a human woman's manicured eyebrows. Short, straight black lines radiate outwards along the bottom of the eye holes, mimicking mascaraed eyelashes. Masks were chosen based on imagery that resembled or referenced race. Friedemann-Sánchez acquired the masks from a third-party seller on Ebay, "brought

over at some point from Latin America with little additional information."[86] She felt the lack of provenance or care for the items' histories, with them being removed from their countries of origin and being sold on Ebay and "not an auction house that celebrates their cultural significance" was an apt metaphor for the exploitative and appropriative consumption of Indigenous cultures in the Americas. In the casta portraits, they are shown in place of the labels for racial mixings included in original colonial casta paintings, demonstrating that the intermixing of two "dissimilar species" was akin to animal breeding in the eyes of the Spanish elite and underscoring Friedemann-Sánchez' subversion and interruption of the casta painting genre and the societal systems it upholds.



Loba, close cropped view of animal mask head.

Above the mask is a peineta crown that almost reaches the top of the figure's hair. The peineta is made from a polished tortoise shell, carved with a lace-like pattern. The brown, black, and warm taupe colors of the tortoise shell interact very similarly to the color of the uneven ink of the silhouette,

[86] *Ibid.*

so much so that the peineta would blend into the figure were it not for it being slightly darker and shiny, as opposed to the matte ink. The Peinetas "represent the colonization of these figures, gendering them and acting as the crowning of Spanish conquest."[87] *Peinetas* were hair combs worn by Spanish women in the 19th and 20th centuries, handmade from the shells of Caribbean sea turtles by artisans who worked in individual styles or to commission.[88] They were designed specifically to hold up *mantillas*, the lace or silk shawls that cover a woman's head and shoulders. *Peinetas* were initially symbolic status, as they were synonymous with the wealth of Spanish trade in the Caribbean and South America. *Mantillas* originated as hand made Chantilly lace head coverings for Catholic women to be worn during Church services or ceremonies, and were symbolic of modesty, respect, and a deep connection to one's faith. *Peinetas* as adornments intended to secure *mantillas* in conjunction with their indication of status meant that *pienetas* came to symbolize a woman's individuality and entrance into society. Friedemann-Sanchez' use of the *peinetas* on each portrait is powerful when we consider that most of the women depicted in the portraits would not have been in the position to own a quality *peineta* during the colonial period. Further, they were not women who would have been accepted into high society due to their race and social pedigree. By placing a *peineta* over each portrait, Friedemann-Sanchez is introducing to modern society women who have historically been dehumanized and oppressed, openly assigning them status and indicating the wealth of their identities.

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] Mieri, Magdalena. "Peinetones: High Combs, High Fashion." National Museum of American History, May 5, 2014. https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/peinetones-high-combs-high-fashion.



Loba, close-cropped view of peineta crown.



Peineton, Collection Museo Historico Cornelio Saavedra, Buenos Aires, Argentina



Silk mantilla from the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Charlotte R. Stillman, 1951. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Flowers are painted sporadically across the composition, more concentrated across the figure's hair, chest, and thighs, but also falling against the black base to the sides of the figure's abdomen and legs, and under its feet. The flowers have dark green, almost black leaves and stems. The petals are a blend of white, light pink, mauve, and magenta. The loose, looping brush strokes allow some of the orange ink to be seen through the flower petals and leaves, blending with the flowers' paint in some areas. The placement of the flowers appears haphazard at first glance, but upon a closer inspection

seems to model how flowers fall after being tossed or thrown upon a person who is being honored and celebrated. By simultaneously referencing death and celebration, Friedemann-Sánchez makes multiple statements. First, she acknowledges the women who were victimized by Spanish colonialism during the colonial era and draws connections to the ways that South American women continue to suffer under colonially-imposed oppressive systems of violence and misogyny. Additionally, she celebrates the survivance of these same women and celebrates contemporary South American women who continue to represent themselves on their own terms and resist the colonial gaze.

In her *Casta Paintings* portraits, Friedemann-Sanchez speaks to the casta painting genre's immense history of Spanish colonial conquest in South America and the impacts said conquest had on South American societies under Spanish rule. Friedemann-Sanchez' works are extremely intelligent in their direct and intentional commentary on the dynamics of South American Spanish colonies and the ways the womanhood developed under those conditions while also connecting historical dynamics to the current day socio-political realities for South American women when it comes to cultural values as well as issues of racism, sexism, religion, violence, migration, and femininity. By challenging and remaking the casta painting genre into an Indigenous response to colonial abuses, *Loba* in particular serves as a case study of Indigenous women's portraiture's ability to both subvert colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous identity and reinsert an authentic Indigenous perspective and presence through creative practice. When Sánchez includes South American Indigenous women of various identities as subjects in the work, and visually depicts their agency, she is encouraging and honoring their process of *Becoming* Indigenous women despite and in spite of Spanish colonial disruptions to Indigenous womanhood and femininities.

Case 3: *Untitled: Imagén de Yagul* (1973) by Ana Mendieta

Interruption and Insertion

Land is central to Indigenous Becomingness, as Indigenous identity is directly tied to historical and current kinship relationships with homelands. Considering Indigenous experiences with displacement and migration under colonial and settler colonial systems, it is critical to include diasporic relationships to land and homelands in our conversations of kincentric relational structures. Kincentricity is the idea that Indigenous peoples exist in an all encompassing ecological family that shares ancestry and origin, where all living beings are our direct relatives. Originated by O'odham/Chicano/Anglo ecologist Dennis Martinez to describe Indigenous ecological approaches to sustainability, and the role humans do, can, and should play in global and local kincentric ecosystems.[89] Kincentricity has since been expanded to encompass a multidisciplinary, epistemological approach to understanding the world around us, and has been explored by Rarámuri anthropologist Enrique Salmón[90], Chickasaw/Choctaw artist and scholar heather ahtone, and many others whether directly or indirectly. Kincentricity is decisively place-based theory. Through Kincentricity, we understand that Indigenous land relationships are tantamount to Indigenous cultures and communities. By recognizing the non-human as relatives, we are privileging their rights to exist and acknowledging their agency and animacy, as well as our reciprocal relation with them. We are caring for them the same way

[89]Hall, David E. "Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Dennis Martinez." Edited by Price McCloud Johnson and Michelle Emery. Native Perspectives, January 3, 2008.

[90]Salmon, Enrique. (2000). Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the HumanNature Relationship. Ecological Applications - ECOL APPL. 10. 1327-1332. 10.2307/2641288.

we care for our grandparents, parents, siblings, or friends, because our communities would not be complete or healthy without them. As a theoretical or epistemic approach, Kincentricity is also defended by Indigenous artists, and is visually identifiable in the works of artists who engage with land in a myriad of ways; whether it be focusing on land as a subject, utilizing natural material as a medium, or including the land in their creative practice. Works that highlight Indigenous relationships to land and interrogate the impact of colonialism on those relationships effectively interrupt colonial degradation of Indigenous kincentric networks.

The health and treatment of Indigenous bodies is indeed correlated to that of the land and vice versa, which I will address subsequently. It is important, though, to speak against the conflation of land with Indigenous bodies. In the 18th and 19th centuries, ethnographic academic material coming out of European colonial empires such as England, Spain, and France established Indigenous peoples as "Sons and Daughters of Nature," hierarchically situating them in the same plane as the flora and fauna of the New World. This was ultimately a dehumanizing act on behalf of Europeans, as they believed themselves to be superior to the natural world.[91]

This idea is contrasted by Gretchen Bataille's account of Ojibwe Chief Oshawana stating that whites turned to Christianity because they failed to respect the "blessings of [their] ancestor" the way Ojibwe people had.[92] Through these two simultaneous historical events, it can be discerned that Indigenous peoples placed an emphasis on community-centric behavior and attempted to build

[91]Stankovic, Ana Kocic. "Visual Representations of Native Americans in Colonial America," Visual Arts and Music 7, no. 1 (2021).

[92]Bataille, Gretchen M. "Reversing the Gaze: Early Native American Images of Europeans and Euro-Americans," in Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations (University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 214.

mutually beneficial relationships with settlers. European settlers were deliberately blind to their own cruelty, as seen in an engraving presented by Serbian scholar Ana Kocic Stankoviç wherein Indigenous peoples are depicted carrying out a senselessly violent raid that was actually instigated by settlers stealing Indigenous food stores.[93]



The 1622 Massacre of Virginia Settlers, Matthaeus Merian, 1628. Public Domain.

It is striking how obvious it becomes, when taking into account these differing perspectives, as to the strategy of the colonial powers to attack Indigenous female bodies in the quest to obtain Indigenous lands. If Indigenous peoples view themselves, and most especially human women, as extensions of First Woman, and see human women and First Woman as intertwined, we have essentially tied the Indigenous female body to our religious/spiritual health and the foundations of our land claims. Physical subjugation of Indigenous peoples is devastatingly effective in damaging our

[93]Stankovic, Ana Kocic. "Visual Representations of Native Americans in Colonial America," Visual Arts and Music 7, no. 1 (2021), 83.

spiritual health, allowing for conversion to western religion and consequently schools of thought, as well as our connection to land as a relative, paving the way for the colonial project to assume ownership of land and perpetuate genocide on a physical, spiritual, and cultural level.

This is explored through a radically feminist lens in Ana Mendieta's performance and earthwork series. *Siluetas*, in particular, was a long-term project with over 200 pieces. In the series, Mendieta spent five years photographing silhouettes of her body that she made in various landscapes, "documenting their ephemerality and presence via absence."[94] She made accompanying short films exploring the same concept by showing the ritualistic process of working with and becoming part of the Earth as she created each silhouette.

Born in 1948 in Havana, Cuba to a politically prominent family, Medieta immigrated to the United States at age 12 through Operation Pedro Pan. Operation Pedro Pan was a program run by the US State Department in collaboration with Catholic charities in Miami, Florida from December of 1960 through December 1962 in response to political turmoil in Cuba as a result of the Cold War.[95] Initiated for families who were fighting against Fidel Castro, it soon opened up to any Cuban parents who were concerned for the future of their children as Castro rose to power. Under Operation Peter Pan, over 14,000 unaccompanied minors between the ages of 4 and 16 were sent from Cuba to Miami under visa waivers coordinated between the US and the Catholic Church.[96] The children were allowed to bring only one 40lb bag of personal items. Most of the children thought they would be reunited

[94]Morgan, Abby. "Siluetas Series 1973-78" Ana Mendieta, February 20, 2015. https://blogs.uoregon.edu/anamendieta/2015/02/20/siluetas-series-1973-78/.
[95]Anderson, Maria. "Pedro Pan: A Children's Exodus from Cuba." Smithsonian Story, July 11, 2017. https://www.si.edu/stories/pedro-pan-childrens-exodus-cuba.
[96]*Ibid.*

with their families in Cuba quickly, but for many it took years before they saw their families again, and many never returned to Cuba. Mendieta, herself, did not return to Cuba until 1980. Without her parents, Mendieta spent her adolescence moving between orphanages and foster homes. This context is critical in understanding Mendieta's relationship to her identity, as the country she spent most of her life in was responsible for the conflicts that instigated her removal from her homelands. Without her parents, Mendieta spent her adolescence moving between orphanages and foster homes. Her displacement left her feeling "cast from the womb (nature)."[97]

Mendieta's traumatic separation from her homelands eventually led her to a fascination with Indigenous art and land relationships. While non-Indigenous, Mendieta held a strong connection to Afro-Cuban tradition. In a 1977 artist statement, Mendieta states that "[Indigenous] cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge with gives reality to the images they have created [in their art]."[98] Mendieta often explored issues of displacement and societal abuse of women in connection to the earth, but engages directly with indigeneity in the first piece of her Silueta series, *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul* (1973).

[97]Mendieta, Ana, Rio, Petra Barreras del, Perreault, John, and New Museum of Contemporary Art. Ana Mendieta: a retrospective / Petra Barreras del Rio, John Perreault, guest curators. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987.

[98]Mendieta, Ana. (1977) Artist Statement, Corroboree Gallery of New Concepts (The University of Iowa, IL).



Untitled: Imagen de Yagul (1973) by Ana Mendieta.
First photograph in *Silueta* series (1973-1975).

In the photograph *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul*, Mendieta lies flat on her back, with her legs close enough together that her ankles could be touching. Her arms are straight along her sides, with her elbows curving in against her waist and her hands cupping around the sides of her hips. Most of her fingers are not clearly visible, but the index and middle finger of her left hand appear to be separated with her thumb angled naturally out. Mendieta is lying on the cool brown dirt of an ancient Zapotec civilization, her particular site being a cavity, once built but now pitted into the earthen ground.

The top of the cavity is shrouded in a dark shadow that reaches to cover the right wall, suggesting the sunlight is coming from the right side down at an angle as it would during mid morning or mid afternoon. This angle of sun lights the high points of Mendieta's body, shining almost white against her left shoulder, the tops of her thighs, and long her shins, more prominently against the right shin than the left. It also creates a shadow beneath her body along the left side down, with her left hand and hip, her left calf, and underneath her feet being thickest with shadow. The visual impact of the shadow makes it so that Mendieta's body rises up from the earth, not quite in contact with the ground beneath her. At less than five feet tall, Mendieta fills most of the cavity. It extends approximately less than twelve inches beyond her feet, less than twelve inches from her left hip, and less than twenty four inches from her right hip. The deep shadow at the top of the cavity makes the space above Mendieta's head is difficult to assess, but it could be reasonably estimated that it extends between six to twelve inches above the top of her head. Pebbles and twigs litter the floor of the site. Short, leafy plants sprout in a vibrant green intermittently across the cavity floor, with a more concentrated growth to the right of Mendieta's feet and a sparser growth up alongside her right arm. Moss grows along both sides of the cavity from Mendieta's feet to her knees.

The cavity is barricaded by large stones stacked into a wall. The stones are wide, with only five to six spanning the longer edges of the cavity and two to three spanning the shorter edges. The photograph is angled to capture two layers of stone on the left wall, three to four layers of stone on the right wall, three layers of stone on the top wall, and only the top layer of stone on the bottom. The stones are old and weathered, with uneven coloring and surface textures. They range from bright white to yellow-brown to deep gray, and are marked by black mold growth, dark gray staining along their cracks and ridges from settled dirt and minerals, and moss. The cavity walls were most likely mortared with a mud or clay based mortar that has since become almost indistinguishable from the stones themselves.

Reminiscent of common burial practices in the United States where caskets are covered in flowers, messy bundles of flowers are placed over much of Mendieta's body. A bundle starts with its yellow-brown root base between her heels, resting between her closed legs. Its stems quickly become a light green around her ankles and get darker along her shins, with its leaves stretching to tickle her. Flowers begin to bloom around her knees. The flowers are small, and the camera is not able to capture their individual petals. Instead, they appear as soft bursts of white light. These bursts continue to bloom up her legs and across her thighs, falling over along the sides of her body at certain points. At the apex of her thighs, a new bundle begins. This bundle is not clearly in bloom. Its stems reach out in a "V" shape to cover her pubic area and lower stomach, though a small gap in the stems leaves a dark shadow reminiscent of a belly button. Four bundles sprout skyward along Mendieta's upper body, two placed on either side of her upper hips and held in place by her forearms and wrists, and two placed on either side of her chest and held against her ribcage by her upper arms. These four upright bundles arch

over Mendieta's body and meet in the middle above her, creating an archway of green stems, leaves, and white flowers that shield her stomach, breasts, neck, head, and face. We can only see flashes of Mendieta's light, warm brown skin between the gaps of the flowers. All of the flower bundles' base roots hide in between Mendieta's limbs and body, appearing to grow out from the earth around her. There is a sense of protection from the flowers on Mendieta's behalf, as they shield particular parts of her body and identity from the viewer's gaze. The consumption of her body by the flowers is also symbolic of regeneration, the old contributing to the new, and the return of the human body to the earth after death. When taking into account other works in the Silueta series, it could be further extrapolated that Mendieta's reference to regeneration and regrowth in an environment of decay could also imply some level of expulsion as necessary in the regenerative process - similar to menstruation, where the expulsion of deoxygenated blood, unfertilized eggs, and uterine tissue is cleansing and necessary for the health of the menstruating person. Invigoration of life through expulsion of death, to some degree, where life and death exist not as a binary but in a cyclical, symbiotic relationship.

This effect is aided by the stillness of Mendieta's own body and the deliberate lack of faciality in the image, with the viewer's ability to perceive Mendieta as a woman in action obfuscated. In this way, the photograph is decisively not an idealized nude. By participating in nudity while denying to engage in nakedness, Mendieta resists being objectified or exotified. The presence of Mendieta as an artist in the visual field calls attention to the process of the portrait's production. This becomes another point of obfuscation, however. With the cavity site being built centuries ago, Mendieta's smooth and clean body is in stark contrast with her environment. She seems almost alienated from the site in this way,

but simultaneously a part of it due to the color composition of the photograph and the flowers around her body.

The tension presented by the contradiction of land and body, of life and death, of growth and decay, evidence the performance's grappling with the "exilic qualities of identity," as described by Jane Blocker, or the "sense of being tied to, and yet separated from, the usual 'categories' of gender, race, ethnicity, nation, colony, exile, and home."[99] Mendieta's feelings of displacement lead her to communicate her experiences through the context of loss: "[There is] no essence, only the search for essence; there is no identity, only the search for identity; there is no origin, only the cinder."[100] These feelings of loss and displacement are clear in the visual qualities of Untitled: Imagen de Yagul, and Mendieta's struggle with identity and belonging exemplified in the image can also be easily transferred to the Indigenous experience with the post-colonial Native Apocalypse, as described by scholar Grace L. Dillon.[101] The Native Apocalypse encompasses the idea that Indigenous people are already existing in a post apocalyptic dystopia, and that our apocalypse occurred through colonization and associated cultural genocides beginning in the 15th century. Dystopian narratives in science fiction are typically characterized by harmful treatments of land, general warfare and genocidal behaviors, food deserts, mass human exodus from homelands under duress, and abusive hegemonic governing systems - all issues that Indigenous people experience currently. Harmful treatment to land, in particular, is where

[99]Blocker, Jane. 1999. Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile (Durham: Duke University Press)
[100]*Ibid.*
[101]Dillon, Grace L., eds.. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction.* Tucson, AZ. University of Arizona Press, 2012.

Untitled: Imagen de Yagul exercises a real connection to indigeneity via Mendieta's choice of location for the image.



Cucurbitaceae seeds excavated from dig site. Photo courtesy of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

The archaeological site Medieta visited in the Tlacolula valley of Oaxaca is home to the earliest known evidence of domesticated plants in the continent: over 10,000-year-old Cucurbitaceae seeds, an early variation of maize.[102] These seeds were discovered preserved in a small, sealed clay vessel, indicating a relationship between Indigenous societies, land, and clay that has been preserved through cultural practice for centuries. In many societies, seeds are considered to be wisdom keepers and story tellers in the same way elders are - they carry the history of a society's sustenance. The seed is also feminine, carrying the ability to create life in the production of more seeds and contribute to sustaining the societies who cultivate and consume them in the future. As such, seeds are also protected relatives, as evidenced by the careful protocols observed in preserving them. The Oaxaca region is also home to

[102]Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "Prehistoric Caves of Yagul and Mitla in the Central Valley of Oaxaca." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1352/.

the Yalálag peoples, whose ancestral practice of burying their umbilical cords at the place of their birth underscores the relationship of mutual belonging between Indigenous peoples and the very land Mendieta laid down in.[103] Further, the umbilical cord is representative of the importance of femininity and womanhood in Yalálag communities, as it is biological evidence of the nurturing tie between mother and child, and, through the burial, Earth as mother and human as child. Desecration of these lands, of umbilical cords, and of seed vessels due to western archaeological disturbance is yet another demonstration of how the western academy damages Indigenous kincentric relationships to land and non-human kin to further their own institutions.



Archaeological dig site of Zapotec society in Yagul, Tlacolula valley, Oaxaca, Mexico.
Photo courtesy of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

[103]Fabián, Citlali. "Where My Belly Button Is Buried." 2021 Photography and Social Justice Fellowship, 2022. https://www.magnumfoundation.org/where-my-belly-button-is-buried-citlali-fabian.

The representation of land in *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul* in conjunction with Mendieta's censoring of her own identifying features presents land as a central and involved subject in the work, which is especially poignant considering the clay vessels that held the seeds excavated from Yagul. These clay vessels, while utilitarian in purpose, do evidence creative artistry and the significance of clay as an organic, land based medium. Connecting clay, body, land, and the life of Indigenous communities, Osage curator Jamie C. Powell references Kincentricity using a quote from Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday in her publication, *Form & Relation: Contemporary Native Ceramics*: "Events take place…[and] bear meaning in relation to the things around them. And I, too, happen to take place, each day of my life in my environment. I exist in a landscape, and my existence is indivisible with the land."[104] The description of his sense of self as indivisible from the land encapsulates succinctly the intrinsic connection between Indigenous relationships and clay as an artistic source. Clay as a medium of figuration propels through art the biological narrative and blood memory that ties Indigenous bodies to Indigenous epistemologically centered ways of experiencing history. When applying Momaday's theology of humanity/landscape connections, artists Karita Coffey (Comanche) and Anita Fields (Osage/Mvskoke) suggests that we can understand clay as a material to be a carrier of blood memory: it responds to touch, allowing artists to imbue ideas and expressions of experiences and world views into it, with the clay willingly communicating those ideas and expressions by holding its shape.[105]

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[104]Freeman, Morgan E., Courtney M. Leonard, Sequoia Miller, Anya Montiel, Rose Bean Simpson, and Roxanne Swentzell. Form & Relation : Contemporary Native Ceramics. Edited by Jami C. Powell. Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, 2020: 25.

[105]Hegert, Natalie. "Belonging: Contemporary Native Ceramics from the Southern Plains Speaks to Both Ancestors and Future Generations." Southwest Contemporary, February 2, 2024. https://southwestcontemporary.com/belonging-contemporary-native-ceramics-from-the-southern-plains-speaks-to-both-ancestors-and-future-generations/.

Historian Christine DeLucia's concept of memoryscape in multidisciplinary artistic practices provides an additional layer to the nuance of the clay seed pods in Yagul. Speaking about clay as a structural element to visual memoryscapes, Fields emphasizes clay's capacity to evoke land, water, and knowledge in the hands of Indigenous creatives.[106] The use of clay incorporates the land as an artistic voice. The land is then able to communicate the stories that it has accrued over the course of time immemorial, transforming a clay object from a materially neutral object to one that is emotionally and politically infused.

Zapotec communities burying their umbilical cords, the seeds that sustained them, and their dead relatives within the same land that Mendieta laid in for Untitled: Imagen de Yagul makes the memoryscape built into the portrait all the more powerful. Clay becomes the literal, physical common ground that holds the memory of a long, intergenerational line of human engagement with land - from the original Zapotec inhabitants, to western scholars disrupting their homelands, to Mendieta using the evidence of said disruption to critique the cycles it creates. As an organic body that holds memory, the disruption of the land at these various stages serves as a microcosm of systems of environmental rape while simultaneously symbolizing the corporeal abuse of the missing or murdered Indigenous person it was formed to represent. Representations of the physical body, blood memory, and of the process of healing manifest through the use of clay as earth, demonstrating Indigenous knowledges and the intimacy of Indigenous land relationships.

[106] *Ibid, 27.*

I do not believe Mendieta was aware of the Yalálag umbilical cord burial process or the kincentric networks between maize, seeds, clay, land, and Indigenous people in the Tlacolula valley during her performance of *Untitled, Imagen de Yagul.* While these intersecting contexts may be coincidental, the fact remains that this site holds memory, and is manifesting these kincentric relationships and dynamics that Mendieta's work pulls to the forefront. This is made all the more complex by Mendieta's own diasporic identity. While she references her exposure to Indigenous cultures during her childhood in Cuba as instigating a love for art, she described Cuba as a place whose culture is an amalgamation of Spanish and African communities.[107] This statement does not acknowledge the Taíno, Ciboney, and Guanahatabey, the Indigenous peoples of the Cuban islands, and their impact on the social and political landscape of Cuba, pointing towards the history of erasure of Indigenous peoples and cultural practice. Mendieta's strong connection to Afro-Cuban spiritual and cultural tradition places her in a challenging position within the socio-cultural dynamics of Cuba. With African peoples being brought to Cuba by force through the slave trade, and Mendieta being exiled by force from Cuba, her identity as a person of diaspora runs deeper than her immigration alone. A diasporic relationship to land or a relationship of removal with the land are still land relationships that should be carefully considered. Learning from Indigenous land and visual practices, Mendieta identified her art as "the way [she] reestablish[es] the bonds that tie [her] to the universe."[108] Clearly, her engagement with indigeneity and Indigenous issues is intentional and core to her work as an artistic practitioner-theorist. I would further argue that Mendieta is using her work explicitly as a tool towards

[107]Ana Mendieta (1977) Artist Statement, Corroboree Gallery of New Concepts (The University of Iowa, IL).
[108]Warhol, Julie. "Performed Invisibility: Ana Mendieta's 'Siluetas.'" Smith College Museum of Art, January 10, 2013. https://scma.smith.edu/blog/performed-invisibility-ana-mendietas-siluetas.

her own Becomingness, exploring the complexities of her felt experiences and embodied knowledge through her practice.

In *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul*, Mendieta was able to truly engage in and respond to Indigenous issues through self representation in the documentation of her performance. While the focus of the image is her physical body, she was able to concurrently represent intangible qualities of self: the beauty of femininity, regrowth, homelands, nuanced histories of displacement, experiences with colonial intervention in Indigenous spaces, intimate connections to land, and the complexities of existing in a female body, including birth and mother/child relationships. She interrupted the extraction of settler colonialism by entering the archeological dig, and created a presence that reinserts Indigeneity and femininity into the dialogue around the site, reinstating the kincentric relationships between land, ancestral practice, and Indigenous women despite the barriers of diasporic identity. Portraiture, in the context of *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul*, was an extremely effective medium as focus was not spread thin in attempts to address each of the previously mentioned topics; rather, the intimacy of the self portrait direction the viewer's attention to Mendieta, allowing her to speak from a place of felt knowledge and understanding, and it is through interrogating her experiences and feelings as they appear in the work that nuanced conversations emerge. In interrupting western extractive practices that would otherwise harm Indigenous kincentric networks and reinserting a living presence into the dig site, Mendieta herself is embarking upon a process of Becomingness with regards to her relationship to her body and between her body, the land she was participating in, and the lands she had left.

Case 4: *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* (2020) by Meagan Musseau

Rebuilding and Discovery

The ultimate goal of engaging Becomingness is to understand one's intersectional identities and attached nuanced lived experiences in order to orient oneself within one's cultural continuums. When expanding this concept beyond one individual to include community relationships, it can also be described as a process of rematriation. Rematriation is the act of reclaiming matriarchal, community-driven protocols and cultural practices intrinsic in specific Indigenous kincentric networks. While the term rematriation has become prevalent as a way to talk back to the consequences of heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, Christian, colonial/imperialist hegemonic structures, its tenets have existed far beyond the historical marker of colonization and/or first contact. Notably, rematriation stands as a counter to repatriation. Where repatriation takes an inherently decolonial approach, rematriation takes an anticolonial approach; demonstrating a very specific understanding of the settler colonial, heteropatriarchal landscape that Indigenous peoples exist within. However, to center rematriation fully in this dynamic of loss and conflict serves a deficit narrative and does rematriation a disservice as a movement. Rematriation challenges us to move beyond the saying "look at this dispossession, this harm, rectify this" and pushes us forward to ask "what aspects of our communities have been changed throughout these hardships? How can we come together again? What elements of our cultures would help us heal? Let's radically reinstate these elements." It is essential to understand that rematriation, while used liberally as a term in general Indigenous issue movements, is actually

highly specific. In order to be engaged in a meaningful way, the *type* of rematriation needs to be identified. To practice rematriation is to respect the variation and specificity of different tribal communities.

Practicing Becomingness by enacting rematriation as an aesthetic praxic is demonstrated beautifully by the performance work of L'nu artist Meagan Musseau. Meagan Musseau is a L'nu (*Mi'kmaw person*) woman, artist, and dancer from Elmastukwek (*"going away from the river," referring to the Humber River and Corner Brook, in the Bay of Islands, West Coast Newfoundland*), Ktaqmkuk *("land across the water")* territory, currently living in Unama'kik (*"the land of the fog" - Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.*).[109] She was born in 1990 in Corner Brook, Ktaqamkuk (Newfoundland), Canada, and is of L'nu and French ancestry.[110,111] She nourishes an interdisciplinary arts practice by working with customary art forms and new media, such as basketry, beadwork, land-based performance, video and installation.[112] Musseau explores the history of relationships between the Mi'kmaq, Beothuk, and colonial and settler colonial nations through a lens of Indigenous

[109]Hill, Brenna. "Creative Minds: Exploring Materials in Contemporary Art with Meagan Musseau - Agns: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia." Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, September 14, 2023. https://agns.ca/event/creative-minds-exploring-materials-in-contemporary-art-with-meagan-musseau/.
[110]"Meagan Musseau." Meagan Musseau - Biography, 2019. https://centrevox.ca/en/artists-and-researchers/meagan-musseau.
[111]"Meagan Musseau - Tapestry Opera." Tapestry Opera, December 12, 2019. https://tapestryopera.com/bios/meagan-musseau/.
[112]Musseau, Meagan. "Biography." Biography - Meagan Musseau. Accessed March 22, 2025. https://meaganmusseau.com/Biography.

survivance.[113] Her work particularly interrogates relationships to land, framing land and landscape as pedagogy.[114]

In *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*, Musseau and fellow L'nu woman Jenelle Duval stand within a site called Maqtukwek *("Man in the Mountain")*, where a river *(Maqtukwek Ziibi)* flows through a valley at the base of a mountain peak towards Elmastukwek, where Musseau is from.



Meagan Musseau and Jenelle Duval during the performance of *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*. Photo documentation by Candace Kennedy. Posted to Meagan Musseau's website: https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Maqtukwek

[113]"Meagan Musseau." Portland Museum of Art, February 24, 2022. https://www.portlandmuseum.org/magazine/meaganmusseau.

[114]Power, Craig Francis. "Resource Extraction: Meagan Musseau - Exploring Memory, Language and Our Relationships to the Landscape." Visual Arts News Magazine, January 17, 2019. https://visualartsnews.ca/2018/09/resource-extraction-meagan-musseau/.

The photograph is split loosely into the thirds vertically and horizontally, capturing much of the Man in the Mountain. The mountain rises in the left third of the photograph, descending towards the valley's meander in the middle third, with the rolling hills that bracket the river spreading across the right third of the visual field. The mountain itself appears to be largely stone, though sandy earth slides from its midpoint down to meet the treeline. The rock is multihued, its many ridges striated with shades of black, brown, gray, and taupe. Trees cover the top of the mountain like moss, indicating its deceptively monumental size. Vertically, the top third of the photograph is taken up by a wide blue sky, interrupted on the left by the mountain peak and on the right by clouds stretching from the top right corner of the photograph down diagonally to meet the descending mountain. The bottom vertical third of the photograph is filled by lush greenery; grasses, shrubbery, and flowers alike. This third is separated from the expansive landscape in the background by intermittent glimpses of the asphalt and guardrails of a public highway in the midground that lead to the edge of a concrete bridge built over the river valley. The foreground envelops the viewer initially, with blurry yellow flowers and thin grasses rising in the bottom left corner of the photograph.

In the center of the photograph stands Musseau on the right, and a short coniferous tree on the left. Tied around the base of the tree are several long, fluorescent pink strands of flagging tape that have been tightly braided. The bright pink of the tape starkly contrasts the rich greens, robust yellows, and soft blue and brown colors of the valley.



Flagging tape wrapped around a tree for the performance of *Interrelation: Maqtukwek.* Photo documentation by Candace Kennedy. Posted to Meagan Musseau's website: https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Maqtukwek

Following the braid from left to right, the viewer's eye turns to Musseau. She wears a black tank top and a magenta ribbon skirt. The fabric appears to be patterned in a darker color, and the ribbons band around her shins and thighs. The ribbon pattern, from top to bottom, is as follows: thin bright red, thick white, thin bright red, medium cobalt blue, medium black.

Ribbon skirts, themselves, are a statement of survivance in Indigenous communities and a testament to the strength of Indigenous woman makers. Métis artist and founder of the Ribbon Skirt Project, Kaija Heitland, traces the origins of ribbon skirts back to trade between colonial settlers and Indigenous peoples during the 16th century, where Indigenous Canadian women acquired colonial women's broadcloth skirts and ribbons.[115] The combination of colonial disruptions to Indigenous natural resource practices and easy access to trade led to a shift in Indigenous fashions away from furs,

[115]Heitland, Kaija. "Origins of the Ribbon Skirt: An Introduction." The Ribbon Skirt Project - from Indigenous Nouveau. Accessed April 4, 2025. https://www.theribbonskirtproject.ca/history#:~:text=The%20origins%20of%20the%20Ribbon,call%20the%20Ribbon%20Skirt%20today.

skins, or handmade natural fabrics and towards these imported fabrics. As ribbons became more available on the trade market, Indigenous women incorporated them in applique practices. Hetiland notes that within what is now known as Canada, the L'nu were particularly respected for their ribbonwork.[116] Through Indigenous women's creative practice, these colonial garments were transformed to a symbol of power. Today, Indigenous women consider the wearing of ribbon skirts to be emblematic of this ability to adapt and create beauty under colonial systems.[117] Recalling ahtone's concept of fusion as well as her proposal of an Indigenous women's aesthetic that is based in the ability of Indigenous woman creatives to innovate, support, and maintain creative practices that carry cultural knowledges, ribbon skirts are a direct product of Indigenous agency, survivance, and sovereignty.

In addition to her ribbon skirt for the *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* performance, Musseau has parted her hair down the middle, brushed smooth, and braided down her back. She faces the tree and stands several feet away. Her left leg steps forward, her knee bent into her task, while her right leg braces straight behind her. Her right arm stretches out to hold the braided tape. Her left arm reaches slightly behind her, untangling the individual strips of tape as they move in the wind to catch along the tall grasses and purple flowers that grow around her. She focuses intently on her act of braiding, her cheeks hollowed as though breathing from exerted effort. Similarly to past performances in the *Interrelation* series, the 7-meter strands of flagging tape take Musseau approximately two hours to braid.[118]

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[116] *Ibid.*

[117] Wuttunee, Kari-Dawn, Jennifer Altenberg, and Sarah Flicker, "Red Ribbon Skirts and Cultural Resurgence (kimihko sîmpân iskwêwisâkaya êkwa sihcikêwin waniskâpicikêwin)," Girlhood Studies 12,no. 3 (January 2019) : 63–79.

[118] "Interrelation: Ekpahak." Land\Mark, 2018. https://landmark.connexionarc.org/artwork/interrelation/.



Meagan Musseau braiding during *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*.
Photo documentation by Candace Kennedy. Posted to Meagan Musseau's website:
https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Maqtukwek

The materiality of plastic flagging tape in all of Musseau's *Interrelation* performances has a dual reading that greatly enhances the dialogues created by the work. Initially, the tape references the restriction of Native peoples from our sacred sites due to colonial extractive projects, and references the idea of the Native post-apocalyptic dystopia. Flagging tape is used in the colonial assessment of land to survey its potential as an exploited resource, to demarcate areas of extraction and of violence, and to build barriers between Indigenous peoples and the land. The second reading of this materiality is activated by Musseau's act of braiding. Musseau has described braiding as a ceremonial, wherein each strand connects the mind, spirit, and physical body of L'nuk. Musseau braiding the tape in her ancestral lands is not only a movement towards reconnection but a degradation of colonially imposed barriers and a reestablishment of land relationships despite colonial violences. The finished braid acts as an umbilical cord between Musseau and her lands, lending a physical representation to L'nu land

relationships. Through the physicality of braiding, Musseau is re-activating her cultural knowledges within the Man in the Mountain. Musseau has spoken about the resiliency of Indigenous artists being communicated through materiality, saying "...that in most instances, regardless of our in access or lack of time to collect original materials, Indigenous artists will always find a way to create new and meaningful work within their communities. If there is no more access to black ash in the future, I am confident that artists will not let that stop them from creating baskets and other wood crafts."[119]

Returning again to heather ahtone's positioning of fusion in Indigenous creative practice, Musseau changing her choice of material in response to a colonial tradition of violence to the land is emblematic of rematriation as the materials and processes pursued in Indigenous art-making shift to accommodate for our lived realities over time. The flagging tape braid not only represents continuance, survival, inheritance, and rematriation of sacred practice regardless of the state of our physical world; but also serves as a warning of said state and the impacts of colonial extraction and depletion of sacred resources. In *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*, Musseau is using her creative practice to challenge the legislative and political atmosphere that surrounds resource extraction in Canada, highlighting that the impact of such violence has dire consequences for the natural world, and, in turn, customary community creative practices. She additionally heals her relationship to Man in the Mountain and offers a solution for other Indigenous peoples moving forward. Braiding the *Interrelation* performance is an embodied practice, and the endurance required to finish the braid by the end of the performance draws upon and is generative of a deep relationship to the land. The use of plastic as a braiding material

[119] *Ibid.*

is in itself an action of futurity and resilience as Musseau maintains and reclaims her cultural practice in any possible manner.

Continuing within the photograph's composition to the right, the viewer's gaze follows the tangled length of pink tape behind Musseau to meet Duval, who stands slightly further back and out of focus. Duval is watching Musseau braid and appears to be singing over her, her face raised and red lips parted in song. She holds a flat drum made of organic material in her left hand, raised up to cover her abdomen and much of her white tee shirt. The drum is wide, round, and shallow. The top hide is a warm, russet brown, stretched and secured by cooler toned straps over a yellow-ochre colored wood frame. Duval, too, wears a ribbon skirt. Her skirt is a navy blue, with the pattern around her calves and shins red, white, blue, and black like Musseau's although much more complex. Intricate geometric patterning creates large diamond shapes that repeat around her skirt. The diamonds are backgrounded by horizontal ribbons, the red top and bottom ribbon creating a boundary for the interior gradient that starts white at the top edge and moves to a light blue, medium blue, dark blue, and black center before fading back to white at the bottom.

Duval is not the artist in focus for this piece, but her role within the performance work should not be minimized. Jenelle Duval is an L'nu woman from Seal Rocks, Ktaqmkuk (St. George's, Newfoundland, Canada). She is well known across Canada for her work as a singer and drummer as part of the ensemble, Eastern Owl. Eastern Owl is a group of eight women, Jenelle Duval, Stacey Howse, Kayla Stride, Danielle Benoit, Natasha Blackwood, Jaime O'Leary, Rebecca Sharr. and Joanna Barker, who describe themselves as an "Indigenous-led all nations group of women who blend the

styles of First Nations Drum Music and Contemporary Folk to create their own innovative sound."[120] The group often includes the L'nu language in their song lyrics and titles. Duval, individually, is known to center her music around contemporary L'nu relationships to land, identity, language, and culture. She is credited as a co-creator of the performance piece.[121] During *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*, Duval sings and drums a song in Mi'kmawi'simk to the Man in the Mountain. It has not been specified by Duval or Musseau as to whether or not this song has been passed down ancestrally or if the song was written by Duval for this performance. However, the fact remains that Duval is engaging in her L'nu relationship to Man in the Mountain through the use of her language.



Jenelle Duval singing and drumming during the performance of *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*. Photo documentation by Candace Kennedy. Posted to Meagan Musseau's website: https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Maqtukwek

[120]Duval, Jenelle, Stacey Howse, Kayla Stride, Danielle Benoit, Natasha Blackwood, Jaime O'Leary, Rebecca Sharr, and Joanna Barker. "Bio." Eastern Owl, August 2, 2020. https://easternowl.wordpress.com/bio/.
[121]Musseau, Megan. "Interrelation: Maqtukwek." Accessed May 25, 2024. https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Maqtukwek

This action is a direct example of Indigenous efforts in "re-naming," a response to what Ngāti Awa/Ngāti Porou Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as Settler Naming and Claiming.[122] During the exploration period, European explorers conducted so-called observational research on the Indigenous inhabitants of the lands they believed they found. This research largely consisted of comparisons to their home regions. Comparative methodologies, especially when conducted in conjunction with observational methodologies, reinforces the imperial gaze and imperial ideologies because it situates imperial experiences and knowledges as the standard for other societies and knowledge systems to meet. Knowledge, in this context, was defined as only what was previously known by explorers via imperial academic institutions prior to their experiences with Indigenous lands and peoples. Throughout the exploration era, European people travelled Indigenous lands and took it upon themselves to rename the world, thereby claiming the world and "claiming those ways of viewing the world that counted as legitimate" as argued by Paulo Freire.[123] This naming and claiming is further connected to the linguistic genocide experienced by Indigenous peoples internationally. Maqtukwek is a prime example the wealth of place-based knowledge held within Indigenous languages - knowledge about how to live with the land, kincentric systems of survival, how to navigate place and space, and stories about relational structures - as it indicates a deeply held and intimate relationship between the L'nuk and this particular place. When Indigenous languages are at risk, Indigenous ways of being are also at risk. The movement to regenerate Indigenous languages is key to the continued existence of

[122]Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. Decolonizing Methodologies. 2nd ed. London, England: Zed Books.
[123]*Ibid, 84.*

Indigenous peoples as it revives these place-based and embodied knowledges and allows us to connect to our ancestors' original ontological instructions.

For this reason, Duval's use of Mi'kmawi'simk in her song and Musseau's use of the Mi'kmawi'simk name for the Man in Mountain is incredibly impactful. This impact is further elucidated by understanding the wider context of Mi'kmawi'simk use in the provinces of eastern Canada, which are part of the traditional territory of the L'nuk.[124] On April 7, 2022, the Mi'kmaw Language Act was introduced in Canada. It was put into action on October 1st. The Act formally recognized Mi'kmawi'simk as the first language of Nova Scotia, another eastern province of Canada that is part of the migratory L'nuk's traditional territory. The Act also established a committee dedicated to the regeneration of Mi'kmawi'simk, which only recorded 9,000 active speakers at the time.[125] These details build a broader understanding of the context within which Duval and Musseau are utilizing their language. By entering Maqtukwek, calling their relative by his name in Mi'kmawi'simk, performing a song in Mi'kmawi'simk for him, and engaging in this braiding practice using the flagging tape, Duval and Musseau engage with Indigenous place-making practices to rename, reclaim, and recenter L'nuk past, current, and future realities. They are participating in a larger cultural and national movement to rebuild the cultural relationships that were disrupted by linguistic and cultural genocidal policies enacted by the British and Canadian governments, and rediscover healthy kincentric systems. When Duval and Musseau rematriate this particular site to their community through the performance, *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*, they engage with the relational accountability

[124]Pastore, Ralph T. "Traditional Mi'kmaq (Micmac) Culture." Newfoundland Heritage Website, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Accessed 1998. https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/indigenous/mikmaq-culture.php.
[125]"What the Mi'kmaw Language Act Means for Indigenous Languages." ALTA Language Services, April 19, 2022. https://altalang.com/beyond-words/nova-scotia-mikmaq/.

between the L'nuk and this site and bring forward the Man in the Mountain as an animate relative on behalf of their larger community.

While the two women could have interrupted the landscape they stand in, the performance itself and the composition of the documenting photograph actually works to flow with and through them, further activating the Man in the Mountain's animacy as an equal subject in the work. The line of the mountain's descent points straight to the top of Musseau's head, and following the implied trajectory of said line leads us to Duval and then to the drop of the valley floor down to the unseen riverbed. After following the line of the valley to the edge of the photograph, the viewer's eye is drawn to the pink tape. The tape leads us back to Duval, and back to Musseau. Musseau's leg is braced behind her as she leans into her braiding pushes the eye to the braid she is holding, which we follow to the tree the braid is tied to. The tree points straight up, leading us to the peak of the mountain, where we can begin this spiral again.

As Musseau and Duval work in harmony with the surrounding landscape, the Man in the Mountain comes to life. The inclusion of plant and non-human life is key to rematriation efforts. Resource reclamation within the context of rematriation is often conceptualized as an effort in opposition to colonial extractive processes. *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* teaches us to reorient our fight for land as something that comes not only from our knowledges on how to best care for and exist in harmony with land, but as something that is necessary because the land is a member of our community in a way that is real and not abstract. The Man in the Mountain's face is strong in the mountain's summit, his body at ease as his back rests down the mountainside. His arms stretch along the valley's horizon line, and his knees bend to form the valley peaks. His hand lifts up through the tree, holding

the braid steady for Musseau as she works. His presence is evident, and it is easy to imagine the clouds moving around him as he listens to Duval sing. Ho-Chunk/Red Lake Band Ojibwe scholar Kendra Greendeer argues that Musseau's occupation of the space where Man in the Mountain lives during her performance is an alteration of the state of colonial history.[126] By interrupting the space's colonially prescribed usage while engaging in ceremonial, feminine practice like braiding, Musseau is altering the history of colonial impacts on her lands. This is in line with Musseau's creative process. When conceptualizing a work, she performs research by simply walking through the land around her home, listening to the land and responding to it. Musseau describes these conversations as a different type of resource extraction.[127] As Greendeer situates Musseau's engagement with the land in performance as an alteration of colonial history, Musseau including the land as an active participant in the development of her creative projects frames the act of walking through the aldn as a political response; perhaps even a political resistance, as she returns agency to the land in this way. As Musseau and Duval perform an offering to the spirit of Man in the Mountain, he is alive and present. *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* indexes an Indigenous place-making practice that rebuilds kincentric networks of care in spite of settler colonial commodification of land resources.

In reframing her conceptions of ceremony and womanhood within creative place-making practices, Musseau exercises a temporal sovereignty that carries her community into the future. *Interrelation: Maqtukwek* as a performance is an index of Indigenous Becomingness, as Musseau is

[126]Greendeer, Kendra. "Re-Emergence: Megan Musseau and the Practice of Materializing a Future Rematriation" (presentation, University of Oklahoma Native American Studies Guest Talk, Norman, OK, April 25, 2024).
[127]Power, Craig Francis. "Resource Extraction: Meagan Musseau - Exploring Memory, Language and Our Relationships to the Landscape." Visual Arts News Magazine, January 17, 2019. https://visualartsnews.ca/2018/09/resource-extraction-meagan-musseau/.

rebuilding and discovering relationships and practices that are core to her identity as an L'nu woman and artist. Through her performance, Musseau reclaims L'nu women's creative practice and generates an Indigenous feminine visual tradition.

Audience and Relational Accountability

I offer that each of these works demonstrates a relational accountability to community through the artists' intended audience. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson identifies relational accountability as a form of ceremony between Indigenous peoples.[128] Situationally and contextually determined, relational accountability requires Indigenous peoples to uphold values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in our lives and in our work. Wilson describes relational accountability as paradoxical because of its dependency on context, as separating it from the lived context of those engaging with it depletes its ceremonial value. Indigeneity is not only ethnically defined, but is a political and cultural identity, and is therefore developed through community relationships which require community-centered values and ethics, relational accountability chief among them and perhaps all-encompassing.

Through upholding various and diverse Indigenous ethics, artists engage with Becomingness as they learn from and contribute to the generation of embodied Indigenous knowledges and kinship systems. D. Y. Begay - a prolific Navajo weaver - writes about weaving as integral to Diné womanhood and peoplehood.[129] Not only is it a matrilineally carried art form, but it serves to communicate the

[128]Wilson, Shawn. 2008. Research Is Ceremony : Indigenous Research Methods. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing: 99.

[129]Begay, D. Y. "A Weaver's Point of View," *All Roads Are Good* (1994) 80-89.

stories and experiences of a community internally and externally. Weaving is a long and committed process, physically in terms of practice and emotionally in terms of praxis: through wool selection, womanhood, dye harvesting, tools, and so on, weavers must carry the roles of artist, mother, wife, teacher, rancher, and more concurrently. All of these roles require relational accountability to one's tribal community. At one point, Begay describes how the completion of one woven rug demonstrates long term care of sheep, the labor of shearing their wool and processing it into yarn, the labor harvesting the natural materials to dye it, the chemical knowledge required to dye it successfully, the mechanical knowledge required to select the proper tools and use them, and community engagement in the learning and sharing of these knowledges.[130] In this way, Begay demonstrates how weaving is intrinsically tied to living as a Navajo woman. Every piece woven tells stories of kincentric relationships, and that the role of the artist is to find ways to draw those connections. Begay's assertion is that the artistic practice of weaving is not only as a manifestation of Diné womanhood but as a process that carries Diné womanhood into the future. She expands to say that weaving is a traditional practice and should be respected as an embodiment of Diné knowledge systems, but that innovation and experimentation as necessary to bring weaving into the future. These same ethics of engagement with community, materiality, embodied knowledge, and futurisms are present and active in Spitzer, Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseaus' creative practices, both in their protocols of making and the audience their work intends to communicate with.

Within Spitzer's creative practice, she has openly established that her audience is her community of loved ones. She photographs people, places, and practices that are core to her identity as

[130] *Ibid.*

a queer person, a woman, and a Kaska Dena person. For *Sister*, specifically, this audience grew. While the larger work, *Every One* by Cannupa Hanska Luger, was displayed for the general public, the process of making the work was opened to Indigenous peoples who had experienced MMIR-related violences themselves, in their families, or within their larger communities.



Every One community installation at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe.
Drone photograph by Cannupa Hanska Luger.
Posted to Luger's website (https://www.cannupahanska.com/social-engagement/every-one)

The audience, then, are survivors and relatives who are seeking to heal. This places Spitzer in a position of accountability when photographing *Sister*, to show her as her community would wish to see her, and as she would wish her community to see her. *Sister*'s anonymity takes on another layer within this framework, as we can understand Spitzer to be a protector of the subject's identity and in active defense of her autonomy in maintaining her anonymity. Often, in situations of MMIR-related violence, the victims and survivors are strangely and simultaneously over-exposed and under-represented. This has been evidenced very recently with respect to young Emily Pike, a 14-year old missing and murdered Indigenous relative from the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona. The

details of her hardships in life were decontextualized and given unproportional media attention, and morbid attention was paid to the violences she experienced, but very little media attention was given to her true identity - her passions, personality, her refuges, her relatives. The anonymity of *Sister* is a political choice to protect the subject of the photograph and the sister she lost, bringing awareness to this problem while giving care to the real women who are deeply feeling and have felt these violences and what they mean in the most tangible, community sense.

In a different way, the same can be said of Sánchez' work on *Loba* and her entire *Casta Paintings* series. Similarly to *Sister*, the *Casta Paintings* series have been publicly displayed and are viewable online to an indiscriminate audience. However, the primary audience under consideration for Sánchez in the making of the works were fellow South American Indigenous women of diverse and diasporic identity. Sánchez' procedures of collaboration with the subjects of her portraits as well as her response to current and casta-era societal contexts experienced by South American peoples in the visual language of the work make it very clear that the portraits are intended to speak to and be translated by her community members. Sánchez' approach to anonymity in her portraits also reflects her operating with relational accountability. A silhouette is not a passive non-presence. It is actively both a presence and an absence. In inviting South American Indigenous women of multiple complex and intersectional identities to pose for the portraits, Sánchez is making present their bodies and their lives. In keeping these women anonymous, Sánchez prioritizes upholding the value of their lives and identities without subjecting them to an ethnographic gaze. Factoring in that each of the portrait subjects are women Sánchez personally knows, she is protecting her friendships and their network of care.

The relational accountability of protection by withholding physical features is applied in Mendieta's *Untitled: Imagen de Yagul* as well, although to a different end. Mendieta was open about the fact that she used her own body in her *Siluetas* performances, so there was no need for anonymization of identity. However, by denying the image of her face and the intimate parts of her body by way of the flower bundles, Mendieta shifts the focus away from her Self and instead emphasizes her presence in the land. Contradictingly, I do believe that the intended audience for *Imagen de Yagul* was Mendieta, herself. As she has described feeling unmoored and the need to thrust herself into nature, *Imagen de Yagul* is merely the documentation of this exercise of reconnecting to the earth and understanding her own felt experiences - an exercise in Becomingness. Although the portrait has been seen by a wide audience, the practice of arranging herself and posing for this portrait was only witnessed by her photographer, who is unknown, and only experienced by Mendieta and the land. The land and the archaeological dig site become subjects in the photograph as her body. Privileging her relationship to the land indicates some accountability by positioning the site as an equal participant, with a story and memory worth paying attention to. She upholds the relational accountability of kincentric connections to land by maintaining her own anonymity within the visual field of the work.

Musseau continues the tradition of bringing the land forward as a subject in *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*. While the immediately identifiable action in the performance is coming from Musseau and then Duval, the documentation of the performance overwhelmingly centers the physical site of Man in the Mountain. Musseau and Duval are quite small in proportion to the vast mountain and valley that make up Maqtukwek, reducing them as the primary subject of the documentation and

thrusting Man in the Mountain to the forefront. In Musseau's previous Interrelation series performances, *Interrelation: Ekpahak* (Ekpahak being the Peskotomuhkati-Wolastoqey word for "where the tide ends" or "the head of the tide," referring to the site of a village upriver from Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada within Wolastoqiyik territories)[131], *Interrelation: Mohkinstsís* (referring to a site where the Elbow river flows and meets many other great streams in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and where the Niitsitapi's creation stories begin)[132], and another iteration on Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain in Treaty 7 Territory,[133] audiences consisted of the Indigenous communities who were in relationship with the lands she was performing on. They would gather, watch Musseau braiding, and listen to the singer from their community who Musseau invited to collaborate (Glen Bernard and Curtis Running Rabbit-Lefthand, for *Interrelation: Ekpahak* and *Interrelation: Mohkinstsís*, respectively).[134,135]

[131]Francis, David A, and Wayne A Newell. "Eqpahak." Peskotomuhkati-Wolastoqey Language Portal. Accessed April 4, 2025.
[132]Musseau, Meagan. "Interrelation: Mohkinstsis." Accessed March 22, 2025. https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Mohkinstsis
[133]*Ibid.*
[134]Musseau, Meagan. "Interrelation: Eqpahak." Accessed March 22, 2025. https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Ekpahak
[135] Musseau, Meagan. "Interrelation: Mohkinstsis." Accessed March 22, 2025. https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Mohkinstsis



Performance of *Interrelation: Mokhinstsís*, 2019. Photo documentation by Nicole Kelly Westman. Posted to Meagan Musseau's website: https://meaganmusseau.com/Interrelation-Mohkinstsis.

During *Interrelation: Maqtukwek*, however, no audiences were documented as being in attendance aside from Musseau, Duval, photographer Candace Kennedy, and Maqtukwek himself. In this way, Musseau and Duval are their own community audience during the performance, maintaining the intimacy of the community tie they have to Maqtukwek. Reflecting on the photograph, this work is truly a portrait of Maqtukwek. Musseau and Duval maintain a strong sense of relational accountability by recognizing that although they are not anonymous as the performers and creators of this work, their role is to support the repair of L'nuk land relationships and the rediscovery of their relative, Maqtukwek. In fact, it is their lack of anonymity that seals their relational accountability and allows them to truly be(come) Maqtukwek's relatives.

In these cases, the women artists at work are speaking to some collective, in most cases their own community, about large cultural or structural issues. Through their creative practices and products, the artists are responding as community members and demonstrating to the collective how

the artists are acting with solidarity and accountability on their behalf. I argue that community care is itself a value of Indigenous Feminism, and the artists' demonstrations of accountability and care are contributing to their processes of Becoming.

Conclusions

Individually, each of these artists and their works demonstrate the infinite ways to engage with Indigeneity, femininity, and womanhood. Their creative practices serve to activate and generate embodied knowledges that are highly specific - to their racial and ethnic identities, nationality, spiritual practices, gender and sexualities, relationships to land and place, and to the specific experiential contexts within which they practice. Individually, the visual diversity within Spitzer, Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau's work are case studies not only of the diversity of Indigenous women's experiences but the diversity of responses these experiences solicit. Each of the works reinforces the notion that the body is undeniably central to how we, as Indigenous peoples, experience the world; as well as the fact that the body is central to how we experience colonial systems of violence. Further, the works have proven to demonstrate the various stages of Becomingness identified throughout this thesis.

As these artists and their depiction of the feminine body constantly evolve towards a more nuanced understanding of their intersectional identities and felt experiences, the artists and their audiences are realizing their place within their cultural continuums and current contexts. Themes of Indigenous women emerging from erasure, resisting the colonial gaze by gazing back, subverting settler colonial misrepresentations of Indigenous women, interrupting these misrepresentations by inserting authentic self-representations, rebuilding cultural relationship and knowledge systems, and discovering the nuance of Indigenous femininity are all manifested and accessed through Spitzer, Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau's creative and visual practices. By including the feminine body in some

capacity as a subject in their works, Spitzer, Friedemann-Sánchez, Mendieta, and Musseau reinforce the idea that the body is central to how we sense not only the natural world but the violence of colonization. Individually, each piece is the product of the artists troubling some aspect of the lived experience of Indigenous women. By exploring the process of Becomingness within an Indigenous feminine context, these artists are generating unique and innovative embodied knowledges and telling a story about the polyvalent nature of what Indigenous femininity and womanhood is and can be.

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