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**VOICES AND VISIONS:
TRANSFORMATIVE CREATIVITY IN A NORTHERN CONTEXT**

by

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B.A., University of Northern British Columbia, 2008

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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IN
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an arts-based, qualitative examination of the phenomenological reality of individuals who practically and/or theoretically live on the edge of society in Prince George, British Columbia. The primary group consists of homeless women living in an emergency shelter in downtown Prince George, British Columbia and grew to include students and social justice activists. Though the primary discussion is centered on the women from the shelter, quotes and contributions from the other groups are included to highlight some of the common threads. The research project is an investigation of the potential of art as a powerful mechanism for theorizing about the structures of oppression which mediate everyday experiences; however, it also became apparent that there was a connection between the creative process, feminine solidarity, and healing while creating a model for community arts-based research that can contribute positively to the individuals, agencies, and research institutions who participate.

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GLOSSARY

Activism is used to denote a deliberate individual or collective action that is counter to prevailing structures of oppression which is intended to initiate or support change for the betterment of community.

Art in this context refers to a product that is the result of a heart/mind interaction by a person who may or may not be academically trained in the fine arts. It is a product that is representative of self expression and social commentary, and it may or may not be aesthetically pleasing or unified.

Artist is a potentially contentious term, but here I will use it to mean anyone who works creatively. The projects that came out of this work, may or may not fit an academic definition of art; the women who participated from AWAC referred to their work that way, possibly for lack of a better term or possibly because the result of their creative process was worthy in their context to be referred as such. These works critique structures considered oppressive by the women who made them and therefore they follow in the spirit of feminist art.

Auto –ethnography is a method of research in which self narrative produces increased understanding of self and others, however, it does not imply a cultural understanding of self and others. This cultural understanding must come about as a direct result of “in depth cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang, 2008).

Collage is an image made by pasting an arrangement of items with different textures, colors and shapes onto a back ground (Avis, Drysdale, Gregg, Neufeldt, & Scargill, 1983). In the early twentieth century, the Avante Garde artists, Dadaists in

particular, found this to be an ideal way to create anti – art for the purpose of social commentary. Shock value was the point of creating random mixes of unrelated items. The development of psychology led surrealists to see collage as a revelation of unconscious thoughts brought to the surface through the random selection and placement of materials. Many of the collages formulated in this project served both of these functions (Brommer, 1994). Janson and Janson (2003, p. 584) wrote that though Dadaism preached non-sense and anti-art, there was calculation in its irrationality . The only law respected by Dadaists was that of chance and the only reality, that of the imagination however they were deliberating using the irrationality of the process to critique the intellectual rationalization of WWI (Drucker & McVarish, 2009). Collage as a medium of expression was chosen for this project because there was no need for formal art training. This of course appealed to participants due to the fact that the intimidation factor was minimized.

Consciousness raising is integrated in this project to introduce ideas and general education/awareness in a two-way format. The intention is that there is a non hierarchical exchange of knowledge. Academics learn the phenomenological reality of marginalization—drugs, street life, blow jobs/ violence, and abject poverty with the occasional comfort of clean sheets in a not so clean dorm where no one really sleeps. Women accessing the shelter learn about the processes of colonization and the vocabulary to aid in deconstruction and intellectual/emotional rebellion.

Feminism incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women and an ideology of social transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equity. It recognizes the historical oppression of women and their exclusion from public lives

(Peplau & Conrad, 1989). Feminism incorporates various methods of analysis and theory, consciousness raising being the quintessential method (Humm, 1989).

Feminist art, generally speaking, systematically challenges and deconstructs traditional concepts of art and aesthetics; this term usually refers to work produced from the late 1960's to approximately 1980; however, even work that is now considered 'post feminist' builds on the work of earlier feminist artists in regard to socially constructed issues of gender and body (Korsemeier, 2008). Though the women participating in this project are not technically trained artists, some did take on these highly controversial topics.

Marginality describes the social and material reality of many women in the world today. In a feminist context, marginality is seen as a relational concept, since the perception of marginality depends, at any time, on the space one occupies (Moi 1985 in Humm, 1989). Humm notes that some scholars such as Elise Bolding (1977 in Humm, 1989) and bell hooks (1984, 1995) have called for more positive interpretations of marginality that are hinged on our outsider stance and key positions in the family, thus leverage to initiate positive social transformation.

Northern Context There are a multitude of nuances regarding "northern context" that need to be recognized in understanding the significance of women, primarily First Nations women, making art/working creatively on a Sunday afternoon in a homeless shelter in the downtown. Services such as mental health, addiction, and legal support are challenging for women to obtain in the north due to the corrosion of perceived importance (Alexander, 2008). Often, as women chatted around the table at art sessions, the ridiculous frustrations of trying to get adequate support were ranted about and

ridiculed with a heartbreaking acceptance. In the northern rural areas, the combination of poverty, stress, boredom, and alcohol and drug use may contribute to the overall stress levels of families, creating conditions that promote increased levels of violence (Grama in Alexander, 2008). There is, in fact, a greater severity and rate of violence in the north, particularly in the aboriginal population (Grama 2000; Shepherd 2001 in Alexander, 2008).

The concept of **Truth** denotes the phenomenological reality according to the perception of the individual experiencing the event/s.

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To the “snow angels” whose wise and courageous contributions and participation
gave meaning to the project

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and to Jessica, Anna, Aaron, Jacob, Christopher, Miriam, and Aeden –
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the Province of British Columbia is also in order.

Thank you.

Introduction

Feminist Pedagogy follows through experience, reflection, judgment, action-

Joy James

I will begin with a story because making art, as engaging in the creative process is really about telling stories. It is about a heart/mind engaging with materials to form a product which has the potential to engage with the mind or emotions of another and it is an event that I engaged in with a woman who was accessing the emergency shelter at which I worked in the winter of 2008.

It had been a difficult week, the cold, unpredictable weather wearing on the patience and health of the homeless women who accessed the shelter and on the resources of the shelter itself. To make matters worse, the first real snow of the year was beginning as I pulled into the parking lot. The dynamic inside was tense and cranky, the women snapping at each other and the staff.

Surprisingly, a woman who usually had a good rapport with everyone was having random outbursts, pushing furniture, and picking fights with the other clients. According to policy, she was warned that she would have to go for a walk if she could not control her temper. In a fit of anger, she rushed out into the inclement weather.

After dinner as I was shoveling the sidewalk, K appeared out of the falling snow and I asked her if there was anything I could do. About to yell at me, she stopped suddenly and said, "give me a job so I don't hit someone." Realizing it was not the moment to talk, I quietly handed her the shovel and went back into the shelter.

The snow kept falling heavily, and two hours later, I was at it again, when K turned out of the alley behind the shelter. I called her name, said that I had a gift for her. She shook her head and rolled her eyes, as I shuffled my way through the fresh blanket of snow and created a trench in the shape of a heart.

"You are crazy" she said.

"But I love snow, it's beautiful! Come and play!"

Reluctantly, grumpily, K followed me around the parking lot, making spirals and hearts, until finally, laughing, we

leaned back into the softness that covered the pavement and made snow angels, forgetting that we were adults, that she had no home, that I was at work, forgetting everything except the feel of the coldness and the softness and the sound of our laughter under the streetlight. Jumping up, I led K to the top of the fire escape overlooking the parking lot. Gazing down on the patterns in the snow, I told her about spirals, how since the cave paintings they have been a symbol of emergence, a symbol of life and regeneration.

Reluctantly we descended the stairs, but as I put my key in the door, she stopped me and said, "Thank you for making me laugh. I lost my baby this week. No one knew that I was 5 months. I was chopping wood at my sister's house and I thought it was my fault. Thank you for showing me that there may be a reason for everything."

An hour later, as I looked out the office window, the parking lot was echoing with laughter as K led a trio of women making spirals in the snow.

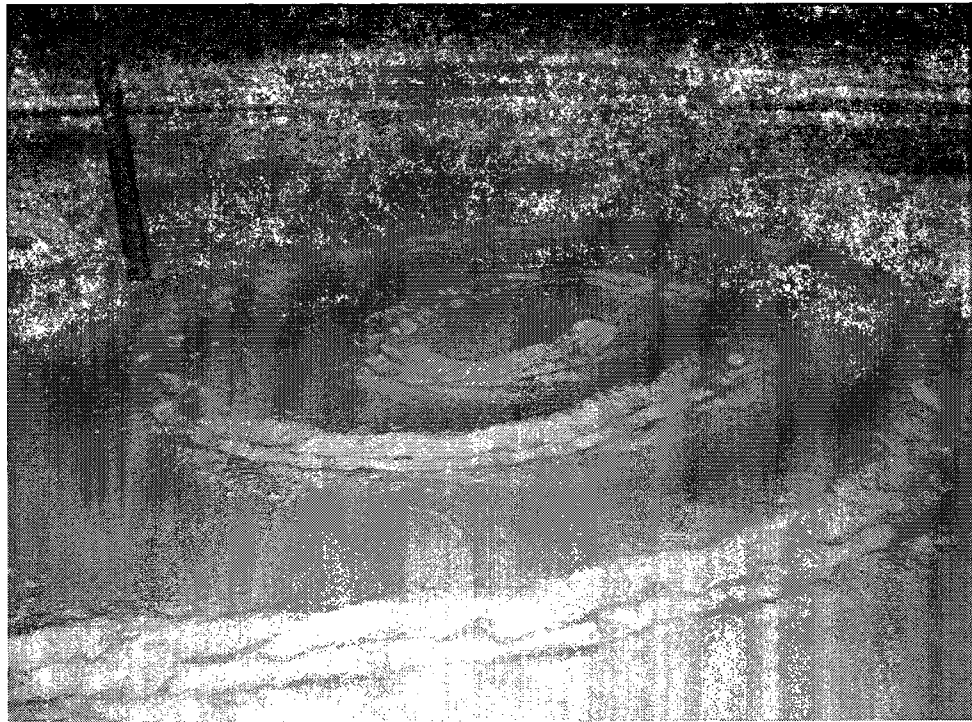


Fig. 1. "Emergence" -- photograph by the author. Location: College of New Caledonia; recreated and photographed after the event at AWAC due to the fact that the snow plow did not wait until there was a camera on hand.

CHAPTER 1

Evolution and Overview

Contrary to popular belief, art is not a mystery that is the result of genius. All art is the direct result of a creative process which is simply a series of conscious and unconscious decisions regarding form, materiality, and (sometimes) concept. This process is available to anyone with energy and access to materials, and as we know from watching very young children, it can be argued that no formal training is required. The thesis of my research is that individuals who are marginalized in society can use visual art making processes to articulate their identity and their experiences of “living on the edge”. In doing so, there exists the potential for valuable contributions to a feminist analysis of marginality from a phenomenological perspective. This work is about border crossing and weaving together of theory, critical analysis, case studies, and a summary of the initial indications of further professional practice.

There are populations such as ethnic minorities, those with disabilities, or the homeless who immediately come to mind when we think about “marginalization”. However, even those individuals, who at first glance appear to be part of the mainstream, may have a sense of being pushed out by the various criteria which define the norm in their personal circumstances. In western culture our definition of dominant culture is primarily middle class, healthy, Caucasian and heterosexual (feminists would argue that “male” should also be in that category of distinction). Whether by nature or by choice, anyone deviating from this construction may find themselves on the outside looking in. This positioning as outsider can be fraught with dangers, difficulties and barriers including, but not limited to, poverty, decreased access to services, education, etc., high

risk lifestyles that may include substance use and exploitation. It is a profoundly difficult thing to identify the elements of a hegemonic value system, and though it is often difficult to be on the edge, those on the margins are best placed to offer cultural critique and to engage in problem solving processes (hooks, 1984).

Though this project began with only one population, it has evolved to include an informal group of approximately 80 participants. The group originally contained 28 homeless women, many of whom have less than a complete secondary education. Since the initiation of the project they have been joined creatively by a group of approximately 20 social justice activists who had congregated at the Northern Women's Conference in Quesnel, British Columbia in 2009 and a group of 30 UNBC graduate and undergraduate students in the first ever arts-based research course offered at UNBC. After hearing about my research, and having experienced the profound alternative learning process inherent in creative process, the students generously permitted me to include their comments in this project as did the social justice activists who were participating in a self care workshop at the conference. Emphasis will be placed on the contributions of the women from the shelter due to the fact that they were the original demographic, and I have included contributions from the other groups because self care/healing and engaged learning were both aspects of the dynamic of the shelter group. Practically, theoretically and thematically, there was really interesting crossover that should be at least summarily addressed in the interest of further research.

Women living in shelters typically do not have access to academic language that encapsulates notions of colonization, marginalization, disempowerment and other terms related to the liminal spaces in which they live or to the structural and theoretical origins

of those spaces. Though many of the women have clear insights and well formulated thoughts, they rarely have a place to articulate their thoughts and observations in a way that anyone can hear or relate to, let alone in a way that might contribute to tangible changes that directly benefit them.

Creative process contains the powerful potential to be an alternative voice for sub-altern populations. Phenomenological art/visual ethnography counters traditional definitions of art. It appreciates the power of creative process and pays homage to the origins of the feminist art movement. Feminist art and art criticism are grounded in political activism, social analysis and self knowledge thereby underscoring the validity of voices which may have been marginalized due to race, class, gender and sexuality.

Joy James, an Australian feminist educator, contributed an essay to *Radically Speaking* (Bell & Klein, 1996), in which she articulated the framework for her own feminist pedagogy: “Experience>reflection>judgment>action.” The development of my own feminist art practice has developed in a similar fashion. Personal experience became fodder for the creative process and, when initiated into public space, had the potential to become a politically charged product that contributed to positive social awareness. This in turn provided new experiences, new angles of reflection, and so on.

By situating my perspective as feminist artist and researcher, I share my *experience*. *Reflection* on my personal experiences, the theoretical writings of feminist artists and critics and conversations with feminists who have been influential in the development of my feminist consciousness and activism reveals the development of a feminist practice. *Judgment*, or critical thinking about alternative perspectives regarding research and art frame a discussion about the relevancy of this project both to my immediate goals as a

researcher, for other graduate students invested in ABR, and to the longer term possibilities for the agency that has generously allowed me to co-opt space for the duration of the project. Most importantly, I am hopeful that there will be potential benefits to the women who have participated, and perhaps will in the future participate. The development of a personal ethic of care and activism in both my art and research are a direct, relevant result of this process and will be discussed in the context of the project (*action*). It is my hope that the research project will continue to benefit the clients and staff of AWAC and, by association, contribute to the collaboration of community organizations and local academic institutions. The research demonstrates that arts based programming is inexpensive and beneficial to clients and staff. It is proof for potential funders that there is short term and long term benefits for a small amount of investment. This is exemplified in the immediate improvement in mental health/quality of life for the women and as a long term contributor to decolonization through a contribution to rediscovery of identity and culture among aboriginal women, reduction of stereotyping in the community, and as a basis for follow up research.

Personal Statement

In order to contextualize this thesis, it is important for me to situate myself and my experience, and to outline any biases and potential spaces of contention. I am a female, Anglophone Canadian. Life experience has given me the opportunity to view the world from social class standpoints that range from upper middle class United States where I spent 10 years as a youth to being single mother of six (6) children struggling below the poverty line in Canada again. The realities of racial and gender inequality were clear and

present dangers at different times through the years in a variety of contexts ranging from the racially charged high school environment of a small Southern town to working in the shelter system and on the gritty streets of a Northern pulp town..

My initial interest in this topic originated in the concept of art as a mechanism for healing. An experience of severe post partum depression after the birth of my fifth child in 1996 redirected me back to the painting I had loved as a youngster. Facilitation of creative workshops and input from fellow artists further reinforced my belief that creative process is actually a form of research with therapeutic value on a number of different levels. When I say “research”, I am implying that it is a form of inquiry and an attempt to explain or explore a topic in a non linguistic process so that other nuances may be appreciated and explored.

I began my activist journey as a shelter crisis worker in a transition house. Formerly a coffee house employee, I was enrolled in gender studies and realizing the theoretical significance of my lived experiences. In 2007, just prior to beginning my Master of Arts in Gender Studies and, incidentally beginning research on a thesis tentatively titled “Art as a Mechanism for Healing,” I began a similar position at the Association Advocating for Women and Children (AWAC).

Shelter Context – An Association Advocating for Women and Children (AWAC)

This agency is a 24-hour emergency shelter for women and transgendered individuals who live as women. The clients come from a variety of ethno-cultural heritages, though the women are primarily of First Nations descent. The shelter is comprised of three sections: “drop in” is where the women can get a bed to sleep for an

hour or a night; “24-hour” is where a client they maintain the same sleeping space for as long as they need as long as she does not stay out for three nights; finally, “second stage” is comprised of individual bedrooms located around common living rooms, shared baths and a shared kitchen/dining area. The general atmosphere of the shelter ranges from restless, to chaotic, to outright violent, and it always depends on the matrix of mental health issues, addiction issues, street dynamics, temporal location within the “(social assistance) cheque cycle” and the weather or staff/client dynamics. It is a rewarding and challenging place to work and a difficult place to live, as it is basically the last stop before the street or one of the first agencies to be accessed on the way back in from the street. Many of the women who access this facility roam in a space that incorporates the street and other crisis agencies/contexts like AWAC. The challenges of this liminal space of marginality will be elaborated throughout the paper, in the stories and images of the women portrayed herein.

Here at AWAC, in the context of being a front line shelter crisis worker, I experienced a significant insight. The shelter was very busy one evening, but as I was walking through the drop in center, I noticed a woman sketching on a napkin. She had drawn a large penis shape, at the base of which were several stick women. In that moment, as I was going to assist another staff member with an incident that was developing down the hall, I realized that the anonymous woman, whom I would later find out was a survival sex worker, was actually theorizing about gendered power in her world. This realization altered the course of my research in a completely unexpected way.

My initial intention to investigate art as a mechanism for healing framed art as the subject of the research and the participants as a means to understanding how creative process could contributed to the healing of marginalized individuals. The incident described above altered my perspective—suddenly, the women were the active subjects and the creative process was the means to the end. Below, I have included a painted rendition of the sketch, in order to give credit to the original anonymous artist.



Fig. 2. “Who’s in charge?” (Acrylic painting, 16” x 20”); by the author) inspired by a sketch by an unknown shelter client (previous page)..

This painting, (done later as an explanation to a shelter participant who asked me how I started into “this whole thing”) is barely a caricature of the original sketch. It does not contain the anger, frustration and dead certainty of the original artist and it is further compromised by the fact that my version slipped off the table before the paint was dry.

With humorous dismay and discussion, the consensus of the group was that worship of the penis did indeed distort women's perceptions of ourselves and each other, and we should leave the damaged painting as it was. In the laughter of this moment was the beginning of solidarity. Later in the summer of 2008, a student in the Arts Based Research class would comment that the creative process had created a community in the room (BC, personal communication, UNBC, August 15, 2009). The role of humor as a cathartic and useful tool in community social activism is underscored in Felshin (1995).

Reflection

To create means to relate. The root meaning of the word "art" is to "fit together" and we do this everyday.

---- Corita Kent

I began to reflect on my own artistic journey, and to expand my reading to include material that was more inclusive of the development of the feminist art movement and the concept of art as activism. It was here that I realized that there could be a meeting of my intrinsic (potentially selfish) desire to paint and my personal sense of obligation to work toward inclusion and improvement in the lives of marginalized women. Painting is a process that is challenging and emotionally rewarding, but which I have struggled justify financially and temporally in the busy life of a single parent family. It seemed, that there was not enough time to contribute to the changes I want to see in my community and have the time for quiet and contemplation that is required for my own creative process.

I feel strongly that creativity and art can contribute to the process of decolonization by challenging stereotypes, countering racism, speaking out against violence, etc. For

me, the time has come that we can no longer engage in activities that use resources and exist only for themselves. If I am going to use materials that are potentially toxic to the environment to create artifacts that may find their way to the landfill within a couple of generations, I feel that they need to be useful on some other level. Understanding the dynamic emotional and psychological transformations that are possible through the creative process leads me to investigate how I can maximize the use of the resources required to create art.

Lucy Lippard sums up the potential of feminist art/process by encapsulating feminism itself: “feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it”(Lippard, 1995 in Korsemeier, 2008). Feminist and post - feminist artists have challenged the ideas that aesthetic is of ultimate importance, that art is for contemplation rather than use, that it is the product of genius, and that it is merely a commodity; particularly, they have challenged notions such as gender and sexuality (Korsemeier, 2008).

Many creative women are still engaging with the important topics rooted in the feminist art movement of the sixties and seventies even as some would say that feminism is over and post modernism has come into vogue as a mode of criticism. Part of the problem with post modernism, however, is, as Catherine McKinnon (in Bell & Klein, 1996) would say, “the relation between theory and practice is discourse unto death”(p. 45). As a student, artist and social justice activist it was/is vitally important to me that somewhere along the way, the theoretical discourse must give way to **praxis** and it seemed to me that perhaps changing the angle of the lens to view activism as the goal and the process of creativity here in the north might just be the way to move in the right direction regarding inclusion and decolonization.

Art and aesthetic qualities are not merely theoretical subjects; they are cultural products with considerable authority to frame and to perpetuate social relations and values (Korsemeier, 2008); these cultural products have a substantial effect on quality of life of many people. For women in the world (and, honestly, for all genders), “the gap between theory and practice is the gap between practice and theory” (McKinnon in Bell & Klein, 1996). This is to say that lived experience locates them *before* the possibility of theories of resistance. It is here that I believe the reflexivity of creative process shines as a precursor and as a product of cultural resistance. An individual may begin to create as a way to make a statement, and as their understanding becomes more nuanced, the work evolves to reflect both the new meaning and altered intention.

Catherine McKinnon argues that to engage in theory that is so immediately connected with phenomenology is to be aware that theory must identify and criticize, rather than reproduce social practices that recreate the existing hegemony. She posits that “this kind of theory requires humility and it requires participation” (Bell & Klein, 1996, p. 46), both of which feminist artists must have in order to practice, especially those who engage in activism that involves and affects marginalized populations. This project revealed that creative process was an effective mediation between phenomenological reality and theoretical critique. As the women in all three groups created work about their experiences, the vast majority were able to connect those experiences with overarching structures of oppression in society.

What is the Edge and who is living there?

As soon as a population is defined as marginalized there must be a discussion of what/who is at the center of power (hooks, 1984). Both within feminism generally and certainly within feminist art, there have been ongoing conversations about who makes the rules, who can break them, and at what cost. This thesis locates all women who visually express and/or comment on their lived personal or collective experiences in a visual way as artists in an attempt to reduce further marginalization. It is true that men can be feminists, and in fact there were a few involved in the project; I am focusing here on women or men who choose to live as women, since that is the demographic served by AWAC. Also, since the women referred to themselves as artists as a direct result of their engagement in creative process, I have decided to use the same term. It is essentialist, in a way, to do this and it is not intended to minimize the efforts of those individuals who dedicate a large portion of their lives to the making of art; the term becomes a necessary category of analysis because there needs to be a common locus held by such a potentially large and varied pool of individuals.

CHAPTER 2—Literature Review

The combination of art, research and activism is a broad, organic and interdisciplinary prospect. There are a variety of theoretical perspectives which could frame this discussion and I have decided to limit the theoretical analysis while fully understanding that there are many sources which concur and/or contradict my own experiences and findings. I have selected the works that I determined to have the most bearing and I acknowledge that the breadth of themes is challenging in terms of integration. They are brought together here to acknowledge that theoretical development is a fundamental part of feminist practice.

The literature review will be roughly divided by theme, however it should be noted that there is often overlap between categories and the list is by no means exhaustive. The relationships between the themes are visible in the conversations about feminist art that were going on during the second wave of feminism. The argument that culture and identity formation is reciprocal process is not a new one, but the argument from feminists was that the reflexivity inherent in this process created a wide open space to engage with ideas about gender, identity, art, etc. This process was itself a form of activism and the space itself was one that allowed the tools of colonization to be used against the oppressive structures of the time.

The work for this project contributes to activism by inviting women traditional considered cultural outsiders to create work that can reframe and transform the way that mainstream society sees homeless women. Additionally, the process affects how the women see themselves as active players in the formation of culture.

Art and Activism

For this project, it is necessary to create a relationship between art and activism in general and, specifically, here in the North. There are a few northern feminist artists, Betty Kovacic, for example, who actively work toward the eradication of misogyny and other forms of oppression. Very little has been written in this regard it is a gap which I intend to remedy with future research. The broader perspectives of *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art and Activism* (Felshin, 1995), *Wild Fire Art as Activism* (Barndt, 2006), *Making Art Together: How Collaborative Art-Making Can Transform Kids, Classrooms and Communities* (Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006) and *The Arts and Social Justice* (Clover & Stalker, 2007) underscore the role of art as activism in a broader sense. These collections of essays cover a wide variety of projects and demographics; they all take up the challenge of using the transformative power of creative process in the pursuit of social justice. The idea of transforming art and creative process from the category of lofty, esoteric ideal to the gritty reality of changing the world, not just as a form of cultural criticism, but as a catalyst for change in communities, in education, and the transformation of hegemonic values is not new. These issues are addressed not only in theory but, perhaps most importantly, in practice. These authors influenced how I facilitated, reminded me about the dangers of unexamined biases, offered comfort when it seemed that all would be for naught and inspired ideas for future projects. Optimism and creativity can be strengthened by the knowledge that there is a shared value system at work.

Feminist Aesthetic

I developed an understanding of feminist aesthetic via Judy Chicago's "Woman as Artist" (1972) and Marjorie Kramer's "Thoughts on Feminist Art" (1971). Other authors writing on this topic include Pat Mainardi (1972), Judith Stein (1972), Silvia Bovenschen (1976), Michele Barrett (1982), Luce Irigaray (1990), Hilde Hein (1990), and Belinda Edmonson (1992). All of these essays were found in a single, indispensable volume titled *Feminism-ART-Theory* (Robinson, 2001) and they illustrate the "train of thought" which was the conversation about feminist aesthetic during the second wave of feminism. Underscoring this conversation, is Carolyn Korsmeyer's (in Korsmeyer, 2008, p. 1) clear and articulate article, "Feminist Aesthetics", which offers up historical background, notions of 'creativity and genius, Aesthetic categories and critiques, feminist theory and praxis and the body in art and philosophy'.

Issues such as skill development, conflict with mentors, and emotional bonding which arose in Judy Chicago's Fresno experiences as described in *Through the Flower My Struggles as a Woman Artist* (2006) also occurred on a smaller scale in the groups who participated in this project. Other authors, including Damon (1972), Wolverton (1979), West-East Coast Bag (1972) and the Heresies Collective (1976) were read to gain a sense of his/her story. Again, all of these essays were found in *Feminism-Art-Theory*. This volume was indispensable, because it brought together many of the conversations which, as a researcher, I was trying to assimilate. In addition, Bell and Klein's *Radically Speaking* (Bell & Klein, 1996) included essays by Joy James (1993) and Susan Bellamy (1996) which addressed the crucial component of community in a feminist context.

Even if there is no formal dialogue, I would argue that it is possible for women who do not have access to formal theory to participate in theoretical conversations about marginality, gender, class and so on. The discursive process could occur entirely in a visual language, each articulation informed by the previous work, and each becoming clearer and/or more complex, though not necessarily moving in a linear fashion. Artists can integrate themselves in a dialogue with other work that may or may not exist to reinforce the existing social paradigms. The process becomes exponentially more powerful if the verbal/visual dialogue occurs, as this creates the possibility of clarification and empowerment of identity with relation to the work in the broad framework of issues being addressed.

Foundation

Brian Murphy's small and unassuming paperback titled *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World: an Open Conspiracy for Social Change* (Murphy, 1999) became a critical part of the ethical and philosophical foundation for my research process, for the project itself and, hopefully, for the work I will choose as a social justice activist in the years to come. This book underscored my optimism that there can be an "open conspiracy" by a collective that includes anyone who wants to contribute action toward the transformation of the status quo for the good of society as a whole. He underscores the power of creativity and the strength of the imagination to provide impetus for change and my life experience, conversations with other creative people and my research support his thesis.

Gender

As this thesis project involved participants, researchers and observer participants who were all women or Male to Female trans gendered individuals, it goes without saying that gender was of primary importance in terms of the theoretical analysis. In an interview with Alice Jardine and Anne Menke in “Je tu nous: Toward a Culture of Difference”, Luce Irigaray addresses the notion of writing as a woman, its validity as a construct and whether or not it is addressed in her writing practice. Irigaray’s answer is, conceptually, if not literally, relevant to the question of gendered art being created in the project sessions. She answers by saying

. . . I write with who I am. Why wouldn’t that be valid, unless out of contempt for the value of women or from a denial of a culture in which the sexual is a significant subjective and objective dimension? But how could I on the one hand be a woman, and on the other, a writer. . . .

. . . in order to write things that will be inscribed into and remain in the memory of the 20th century, just being in an institution is not enough. It sometimes enables thought to be spread rapidly, but that gives no indication of what its historical impact will be. It’s quite possible that many of the women who are allowed into institutions talk about a culture that has already passed and not about what will remain as a trace of the elaboration of the present and the future (1987 in Robinson, 2001).

The relevance lies in the fact that everyone lives gendered lives. Anyone who is involved in creative pursuits must necessarily bring their gender, their personality, and their life experiences to the process. It may be found in the image content, in the type of work they engage in, or the manner of working. There is not necessarily a direct gendered connection to any of these elements of creative process however, it must be

considered; in the case of this project, gender and gendered experiences were frequent themes in the images themselves. In an e-conversation with a colleague of mine, this topic came up as I was worrying about the products of the early sessions which seemed at first glance to be superficial. My colleague commented, “Are those incidents not inextricable from our being? Are we not made up of our experiences?” (CG, email correspondence, February 8, 2009).

In the end, my doubts were unfounded, and the women did wind up creating images that are powerful and relevant to the lives they live now as influenced by the past, be it gender, violence, cultural identity, family history, etc. Irigaray’s analysis is a credible underpinning to my conviction that women do not need to be in the Establishment to create work (literary or otherwise) that is a significant cultural or theoretical contribution (in Robinson, 2001).

Feminist/ Theory

Joy James and Susan Belamy are two of the major influences for the form and content of this paper, respectively, and both essays are drawn from *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Bell & Klein, 1996). Joy James writes about developing a formula for feminist pedagogy which mirrors my experience of the development of my own feminist art practice; Belamy articulates the “narrow bridge of art and politics”, that is, the tangential relationship between the two, that gives power to both, and which has the power to create a fertile soil of feminist solidarity. The topic of feminist solidarity stimulated by creative process is also written about by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in a number of sources, including “The Education of Women as Artists: Project Woman

House”(in Robinson, 2001) and Through the Flower (Chicago, 1975, 2006). Safety, collaboration, mutual respect and shared cynicism characterized the groups in this project, as they did in the early days of the feminist art movement. Though this group was not working under the auspices of ART, many of the dynamics and benefits were very similar. Power dynamics, ideas of “expert”, social insecurity, and lack of resources were all very similar barriers between the Chicago’s Fresno years and this fledgling ABR project.

In a similar vein, but from a different perspective, there is Tina Grillo’s essay, “Anti - Essentialism and Intersectionality: Tools to Dismantle the Master’s House” (in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006). Grillo writes that intersectionality and anti - essentialism are important guides in feminist academic, political and spiritual[/artistic] work because they aid in the deconstruction of paradigms that “are so powerful we find ourselves unable to talk at all, even or about those things closest to our hearts”. The power of hegemonic processes is subverted if there is a different way to communicate those realities. My project seeks to offer spaces for individual voices to contribute to decolonization. The project is anti-essentialist by its nature and Grillo provides theoretical underpinning for it.

I have attempted to address some key points, particularly in the context of defining/understanding feminist art and feminist art theory via the writings collected by Raven, Langer, and Frueh in *Feminist Art Criticism* (1991) and Lucy Lippard in *The Pink Glass Swan* (1995). A postmodern perspective is also broached through Suleiman’s *Risking Who One Is: encounters with contemporary art and literature* (1994). Joan Borsa’s essay “Frida Khalo: Marginalization and the Feminine Critical Subject” (in Bell

& Klein, 1996) addresses the closed loop of reader and authorship, shifting social locations and feminine subjectivities, all of which are relevant to the project from a variety of viewpoints. Zolberg and Cherbo (1997) and Rebecca Solnit (1991) present essays regarding “outsider” art and contested/ contesting boundaries in contemporary culture which is relevant in light of the fact that the participants in this study are marginalized by virtue of their choices/unchoices of where to live, addictions, mental health, etc, or by their philosophical/political perspective. This is congruent feminist theory in that it does not simply deconstruct, but places agency as a central principle.

Identity and Representation

... Naming is part of the game. From whose tongue flows the sound, for what strategic purpose, in whose interests? If I can be named into being, can I be named out? I think not. The key is the agency of the naming. Naming myself gives me extended being. Another person un-naming me just makes me mad (Bellamy 1996,(p. 126).

Identity and representation are significant concepts with regards to implicit and explicit meaning, resistance and reframing. Race, class, gender, sexuality, political orientation—on and on goes the list of loci from which creative individuals work. Few individuals are aware enough to be able to clearly articulate where one element ends and another begins, as if this is even possible. This is especially true for cultural workers who might be limited educationally and circumstantially. For example, if an First Nations woman is homeless, drug addicted and working in the survival sex trade, many observers and very likely the woman herself, will find it challenging to determine the cause/effect relationship, if there is any. Racial stereotypes indicate that First Nations women living

downtown are all drug addicted homeless hookers, ergo, the race/class/sex matrix that does not actually indicate any specific Truth. Most observers would not look past the reality and it is difficult to blame the woman herself if she can not muster the resources to see past the current reality that she is as much a product of a system as of her own choices. This perceived lack, however, does not in any way detract from an ability to clearly and powerfully articulate an individual's experience. By objectifying that experience through the creative process, there is the possibility that an individual may be able to relate the personal to the political in an entirely different way.

bell hooks (1984) disputes the totality of the knowledge and theory that comes from those who do not have a knowledge or understanding of lives at the margin and therefore, whose theory is lacking because it does not have the comprehension of experience as its foundation. Her suggestion that women who do have an experience of marginality, but who now exist at the center, have a responsibility to contribute—this, she says would remedy the issues of narrowness. I do agree with hooks to a certain degree, however, I believe that women should not have to be in positions of power before they can contribute. It is our responsibility as academics to provide venues and mentorship to that inclusion is possible at any time. In this thesis, and in ongoing work, I wish to assist bringing insights from the margins to the center and vice versa. As a reflexive, participatory researcher, I am in the position to be a conduit for this exchange of knowledge.

Here, I offer up another story for the sake of illustration:

On another evening in the shelter, I was helping an older client to make bannock at snack time. As we were frying up enough bannock for 30 women there was a heated argument in the hall. Five women were coming nearly to blows and I intervened.

As the women dispersed, I continued the conversations with the woman cooking the bannock and the conversation moved to a discussion as to whether there should be sugar or not (for women who live dangerously, some of them hold surprisingly close to the predictable). I suggested that we could, democratically, split the bannock, half sugar, half plain.

From around the corner, came a soft voice, “what does democratic mean?” One of the young women who had been involved in the earlier altercation entered the kitchen and I prepared myself for the ridicule which was a common response to my penchant for interesting diction.

I shrugged and explained the definition while arranging the bannock, to which the woman replied, “Why do you use such big words?”

With my usual lack of tact and to her amusement, my unfiltered response was “because it works better than ‘fuck’ most of the time.”

Her initial surprise was followed by laughter and the conversation meandered for another hour around topics of feminism, democracy, and patriarchy. D’s engagement in this conversation, the perceptiveness of her questions and her observations indicated that she was experiencing a paradigm shift.

The beauty of the moment was watching the light go on in D’s eyes as she realized that her locality on the margins had as much to do with factors beyond her control as it did her own choices.

Education

There is much work regarding creativity in the fields of education and visual literacy and I have pulled from some challenging thinkers such as Arthur Cropley (2001), David Dart (2004) and dian merino (1996) in regards to creative pedagogy and how it alters both teaching and learning. Dart (2004) was of special interest to me because his research explores how engagement with social issues through the examination and production of visual culture impacts students’ understanding and awareness of those social issues and actually encourages community engagement. Dart is working from a background in education and curriculum studies, but his thesis gives an excellent model

for a combination of visual ethnography, a/r/t/ography/ bricollage, action research, and hermeneutics in a relational approach to explore meaning making and understanding of large social issues by high school students whom I would presume to be more naïve than the women living close to the street. I would hardly call my participants naïve in the same way however, developmental, emotional, psychological and social naivete's exist that are a direct or indirect result of various kinds of trauma. These traumas range from residential school experiences, violence of many kinds, chronic homelessness, long term addiction, extreme poverty, mental illness and/or learning disabilities. Even the university educated participant observers had their own surprising forms of naiveté, usually regarding the lived experience of the shelter clients, but sometimes relative to each other and to the reading of each others' work.

Choosing to make art with a relatively uneducated (art-wise) population could open up a debate as to whether or not the resulting product is actually art. I have encountered the question as to whether or not this question is actually valid in 2010, however, the criticism this project received from professionally trained artists, tells me that there is still some friction in this regard. Nina Felshin's edited volume, *But is it Art?* (1995) is a collection of 12 essays regarding the question whether activist art is actually art and sets forth how art engages community for a cause in a number of different cities and circumstances. The essays are relevant to my thesis because my project is fuelled by a need for proactive participation in the improvement of the lives of women living at AWAC (activism) and informed by feminist art theory. Here in the North, the idea of what is art is contested space as much as it was before feminism challenged the boundaries of modernism. Debora Barndt's *Wildfire: Art as Activism*

(2006) completes the survey of literature in this subject area. Her collection of essays on art and activism describes contemporary projects which involve art in unconventional and effective ways, along with describing some pitfalls and challenges of dealing with these strange bedfellows.

Liesel Silverstone's (1997) therapeutic techniques and theoretical approach to client centered phenomenological art making clarified the correlation between creative process and healing that I have observed personally and professionally. I considered it prudent to include readings that touched on the topic. Mc Niff's *Art Heals* (2004) and *Trust the Process*(1998), and Eric Maisel's *Van Gogh Blues* (2002) contain essays which challenge the reader to dialogue with and through art regarding everything from the mundane to the cathartic. Maisel argues that meaning making is crucial to creative people, and the fragmentation of meaning is often a source of ill health which can affect even those who are high functioning. This group is a small sample of scholars who realize the capacity of art to be a crucial role to play in the psychological/ emotional well being of individuals and community in a variety of ways.

Several other works on this topic were particularly important for my own research/activism process including Fyre Jean Graveline's *Healing With.in Art: HeArt* (2006) and *Healing Wounded Hearts* (2004), as well as Duran and Duran's *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (1995). Graveline's manuscript specifically explored the holistic nature of the creative process both as a method of decolonization, and as a way to heal the ravages of colonization individually and collectively. In doing so, she exposes the risks of Eurocentric practices as an additional tool of colonialism if not considered critically. Duran and Duran examine the general problems with Western

psychology in the context of healing intergenerational pain in non Western contexts. It was helpful to see issues such as alcoholism and mental health addressed in a culturally appropriate manner. Both of these sources validated my initial reluctance to examine this project in a therapeutic context, despite the fact that there was a therapeutic element in the results. That being said, the project has clearly shown that the tools of colonization can be used in an ethical and considered manner in the process of dismantling oppressive hegemonic value systems.

These theoretical spaces are a natural segue to art as alternative voice. In the interest of finding literature relative to the predominantly northern aboriginal women who participated, I accessed a local author. As mentioned above, Fyre Jean Graveline (2006) explores the potential for healing and empowerment that is inherent in the creative process, specifically visual art. She is writing from an indigenous perspective and emphasizes the wounds of colonization which have wreaked havoc on the well being of aboriginal women. As noted earlier, long term cultural, emotional and psychological violence have degraded and/or altered the coping strategies of the women living in the shelter system. Initial observations from this project lead me to believe that recovery of cultural and personal identity through creative process could be significant and culturally relevant steps toward recovery for First Nations peoples struggling with the negative impact of colonization.

Eric Maisel's books (1995, 2002) focus on alternative perspectives for dealing with anxiety and depression via creativity. Both emphasize the individual's voice as a validation of self and a way to create place in the world. By virtue of their survival on the street, there is evidence that these women are highly creative; now the question

explored in my research: *can they, will they translate that creativity to articulate their experiences and explore what the causes of marginalization might be?* Mullaly's *Challenging Oppression: A critical Social Work Approach* and *The New Structural Social Work* (Mullaly, 2007), and Anne Bishop's *Becoming an Ally* (2002) offer alternative ways to ally with marginalized populations and to engage in "social" work in a creative, compelling way that is outside the box, and which offer up theoretical underpinning for finding empowering ways of helping marginalized populations interact with the dominant society. In the immediately preceding pages I have summarized how my research is inspired by and "co-constructed" with ideas from many educators and activist scholars.

Background knowledge

Background understanding of theories and definitions within cultural theory and feminism has been drawn from Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (1989). Lyon-Callo's *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance* (2004) provide an explanation of the political realities which create the phenomenology of the stakeholders in the war against poverty. In addition, Lyon-Callo's observations about the challenges for non-compliant homeless individuals underscored my own observations at AWAC. These resources were crucial to understanding the subtleties/complexities of various theoretical and practical elements of this project while respecting the poly-vocality and phenomenological reality of the participants.

Visual literacy

A broad survey of reading and looking at art in general, and especially at feminist art, was particularly useful. Parson's *How We Understand Art* (1989) consisted of visual literacy combined with theory and biographical information of the artists included in the text. It also offers a theory of the development of our understanding of the visual arts while considering the differences between meaning in art and in science. Edward Lucie-Smith's *Race, Sex and Gender in Contemporary Art* gave me further understanding and appreciation of how culture is made and reinforces itself at the same time. Trinh's *Framer Framed* (1992) considers visual creativity in context of documentary film. *The Art of Mary Beth Endelson* which surveyed Endelson's career, along with interview excerpts from the time frame, 1960 –1980 offers an intimate glance into the life and times of a woman who has been directly connected with the making of second wave feminist art/movement. This book was purchased when I attended the WACK exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in January 2009 with the generous assistance of the Gender Studies department here at the University of Northern British Columbia. This traveling exhibition of Feminist art (1968-1985) gave me a fuller understanding of the feminist politics, aesthetics and sensibilities about which I had been reading.

Alternative Research Methodologies

- Feminism is a perspective, not a research method.
- Feminists use a multiplicity of research methods.
- Feminist research involves an ongoing criticism of non-feminist scholarship.
- Feminist research is guided by feminist theory.
- Feminist research may be trans-disciplinary.
- Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person.

- Feminist research frequently attempts to develop a special relationship with the people studied (in interactive research).

(Reinharz, 1996, p. 240)

As a direct result of my concern for finding a research method that contributed to decolonization and inclusion, I looked for authors whose subject matter concerned alternatives to traditional quantitative/qualitative methods both theoretically and practically. Reinharz, quoted above, concisely summarizes my own practice/assumptions about feminist research. The following authors/researchers elaborate on similar themes and practices. These authors' contributions will be discussed in a later chapter, but are summarized here as Leavy (2009), Chang (2008), Sullivan (2005), Smith (2006) and Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin and Lydenberg (1999).

The notion of art as a means of political discourse is not a new one in the academy, however many marginalized artists do not have a language other than the visual; that is to say that they may not have access to academic language. The physical elements of the work must become a platform for expression. Maria Schor (,1997, p. xi) points out that language has been used by academics and professionally trained artists as a means of exclusion. She is arguing here that the point of the art is to initiate political discourse that it is possible to bridge the gap between those who have the language and those who do not.

I am arguing that the work itself is discursive, and that to relegate it to a symbol of the discursive is to continue to marginalize the process itself; theory and materiality cannot be isolated from each other, and to consider them as separate entities is to give partial credit to the possibilities of either (Schor, 1997). In my personal experience as an

artist, the process of creating is a form of theorizing that has the potential to be illuminating and transformative as does engagement with the final product.

dian merino (1996, p. 27), wrote of her intention to work as a transformative intention with transformative results, even though at that time in her life, she had no clear theoretical basis for her work, only the intuitive need to do so:

I also think there was a wildness that came from my intuitive self and a curious and justice oriented part of me that wanted hurt and pain to be healed and not denied.

Angela Davis' analysis of female blues artists and audiences (in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006), who formed a collective working class identity both through performance and participation (itself a collective performance of affirmation) can be held up to the work of many feminist visual artists. As with the blues, this creative venue allows a working out of the complexities of identity in a historically and collectively significant way. Even the most basic of visual musings with ordinary, everyday found objects, can, as Davis says about the blues, "explore experiences from various vantage points. . . [become] complex visions—reflecting the complexity with which reality is perceived—[and which] can always be uncovered" (in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006, p. 26). For the purposes of this argument, it is critical to realize that in any creative process, visual or otherwise, the unconscious reality of the creator will always manifest itself in implicit and explicit ways. This is the reason that creative process works so well in a therapeutic context. As the artist objectifies their inner reality, the distance created by the materiality allows for the development of context at a conscious level.

It is virtually impossible, then, that any piece of phenomenologically expressive creativity (abstraction being the possible exception) would not reflect the location, if not

the identity of the artist. bell hooks considers that these implicitly articulated locations of identity are fundamental to creating a cultural context where meaningful solidarity between women artists can be strengthened (in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006). This is not as simple as an initial reading might indicate. The implication of situatedness is that it necessarily must alter itself if any of the anchoring loci also change. Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes

To challenge the regimes of representation that govern a society is to conceive of how a politics can transform reality rather than merely ideologize it. As the struggle moves onward and assumes new, different forms, it is bound to recompose subjectivity and praxis while displacing the way diverse cultural strategies relate to one another in the constitution of social and political life (Minh-ha, 1992, p. 165).

Susan Bellamy also contributed to this conversation when she noted that the first meaning of the catch phrase “the personal is political” in radical feminism is to be able to ask “what do I keep? What do I leave behind? . . . A retrospective dream still has potency if it informs the actions of the present” (Bell & Klein, 1996, p. 129).

The catch-22 of trying to represent a constantly changing subjectivity brings this discussion to the equally important subject of meaning:

Poetic production is conceived as the site in which the split between instinct and representation exists in a culturally communicable form: the speaker reaches this limit, this requisite of sociality only by virtue of a particular, discursive practice called ‘art’ (Butler, 1990, p. 116) .

“Meaning” is a loaded concept and even a simple examination will reveal why it is a powerful concept in the discussion of art. As a mode of expression, art must

necessarily communicate something. The subject of representation as symbolic of what is intended to be, or actually is, expressed either conceptually or materially as a nonlinguistic cultural correlate is what could generally be referred to as “meaning.” Accordingly, by virtue of the ‘intendedness’, meaning is grounded in subjectivity. There is another concept of meaning, which I would like to approach because I believe it addresses this issue. Antonio Gramsci’s definition of conjectural meaning, as used by artist/activist/educator dian merino, is thus:

To see meaning as conjectural is to suggest that what are normally described as “objective truths” are better understood as events or moments in which we are looking at or experiencing a unique coming together of particular forces, of relations and their history, and of space-time frames—and that all of these elements can vary according to how we adjust our lens (in merino 1996, p. 11).

Graveline (2006) and Duran and Duran (1995) both address this in the context of how creative process can be a powerful tool in the personal and collective process of decolonization and healing from the (soul) wounds of colonization; conversely, “art therapy” as a Western process, with the elevated status of the therapist in a one on one relationship can actually be a tool for continued colonization, because it does not take into account the community context of healing for First Peoples, nor does it give credence to First Peoples Knowledge.

Additionally and just as problematically is the concept of art. For instance, if a shelter client doodles on a napkin, it may not be considered by most to be Art if the woman does not have the accoutrements accepted by the establishment. However, if those doodles reflect the temporal, historical, spatial, emotional reality of the woman who created them, they are an expression of Truth and, therefore, have meaning. This

meaning, of course, is the overlapping of the woman's life, some form of materiality, and her process, and is, according to Lippard (1995) implicitly feminist, regardless of whether the woman even knows what the word means or would claim this label for herself.

The existing binary of Art and art is problematic for a number of reasons, primarily because, if taken in a historical context, they are two different things. Historically, the Art world has been dominated by men and women have, with a strange combination of skill and denigration, been confined to art (read "craft"). According to Lippard (1995), Feminist art is about the overlapping of women's lives and women's art. It can be argued that involvement in production was directly related to (read "overlap") women's lives.

How art is talked about or written about is just as important as the work that is made, and in fact is crucial to what continues to be made. Increasing the critical theoretical value of phenomenological art, political art, activist art is counter hegemonic. It is possible to be intensely committed to aesthetics without discarding a critical awareness of visual politics or, that is, "the way race gender and class shape art practices (who makes art, how it sells, who values it, who writes about it)" (hooks, 1995). However, it is also important to remember that it is the making of the work, not its acceptance that is the political act, along with the witnessing of each other's creative process. Phenomenologically subjective work that examines over arching structures of oppression is itself theorizing work.

The materiality of art contributes to its meaning, because the permanence of the media allows it to be reconsidered, reframed and increasingly nuanced in a way that the spoken word does not. Due to its materiality, the visibility gives a form of permanence

that is an alternative to the spoken word, and it continues to proffer meaning at whatever level the viewer is able to be receptive. The materiality of the image potentially projects the personal to the political (Silverstone, 1997), thus altering its previously singular purpose of aesthetic gratification. In 1969, Susan Sontag wrote:

The moral pleasure peculiar to art is not the pleasure of approving of acts or disapproving of them. The moral pleasure in art, as well as the moral service that art performs, consists in the intelligent gratification of consciousness (in Murphy, 1999, p. 42).

To move from notions of meaning to the concept of resistance to hegemony, it is useful to continue the discussion of Susan Sontag's idea that works of art are "living autonomous models of consciousness" (Murphy, 1999, p. 143). It is appropriate here to note that the word "models" can be seen as noun and as verb. This is to say that "art" can be a representation of a singular or collective consciousness and also as a singular or collective transformative force (as in "to model") of consciousness. Art then represents the consciousness of the artist and/or the existing or imagined hegemony, and creates a catalyst change.

Creativity as Resistance

To talk about creativity and the resulting product as a form of hegemonic resistance is to necessarily talk about what is being resisted. It is important to realize that the voice of phenomenologically expressive work art which is deliberately resistive, regardless of form and content, has historically been represented by silence brought on by censorship which is imposed by social/cultural mores or by the establishment. The

average person is not trained to read the silence of elision and so there is little in the way of understanding except to recognize what is not here, if the absence is recognized at all.

Art of any kind should require no permission from the establishment to participate in critical discourse, let alone to be allocated value on the basis of its level of acceptance according to who creates. This value, of course, apportions weight in the discourses of power. Brian Murphy (1999, p. 148) quotes Susan Sontag who argues that any “approach which considers works of art as living autonomous models of consciousness” can only be untenable if form and content are held to be different things. If the binary between Art and art is erased, there is no longer an issue of power regarding the inclusion of voices”.

It is the existence of this Art/art binary that disallows non ‘professional’ or non ‘accredited’ artists the prerogative to be included and acknowledged in the consideration that material process is a form of theorizing. In her book *Art on My Mind* (1995, p. xii), bell hooks argues that marginalized populations (that is non-white artists and critics, and [creative, productive individuals in general, and especially the women who live on the margins of the margin], must persistently deal with a world entrenched in a “politics of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal exclusion”, our relationship to art and aesthetics can be submerged by the effort to confront and transform the current construction. At the same time, it is critical to address the reality that many creative and dynamic individuals are circumventing the establishment either out of ignorance of its historical significance, frustration, or out of dis-respect/rebellion, and they are making art despite being ignored or unknown to that establishment.

Feminism itself came under internal criticism for its original focus on white, western women's social situations, a familiar critique in feminist circles that has a presence in aesthetic debates. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the energies of feminist and post feminist artists of diverse racial and national backgrounds have made the presence of women in the contemporary art world today powerful and dramatic (Korsemeier, 2008).

Art workers who are marginalized or ignored by the establishment *are* resisting that establishment, just by continuing to create, whether they do it consciously or not. That act of rebellion (against establishment, family, society, deadhead job, etc) is a political act *because* it overrides the priorities of our capitalist insistence on financial gain and imagines something else, some other object, some other reality into being, at the very least, a process with no “useful purpose” at the end. Ugly, beautiful, overtly political or not, those artists swim against the tide of practical realities to carve out time and space to create. The relationship to art is actually intensified because the rebellious process is itself a form of criticism of the establishment and not the necessary submersion that hooks argues. hooks (1995, p. xii) describes the co-opting of critical work of women artists of all races by powerful male artists, but she also holds out for the case of optimism in the face of overwhelming political superiority by saying,

It occurred to me then that if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete. Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation.

It is no accident that the essential “woman” and creation have been mixed up and tied up metaphorically for so long. Necessity, survival, joy and rage, among a

host of other elements, have channeled through us and manifest themselves in a multiplicity of ways and are often necessarily counter hegemonic (Mohanty, 2005) and infinitely creative. Acknowledgement of the reality, the naming of it and a consideration of that reality bring us to a place of decision.

Judgment

It is entirely possible that the creative capacity for transformative thought, and by extension, transformative action, via a visual process of expression, is borne in what Brian K. Murphy terms the “artistic character of human experience and creation”:

the combined power of intellect and emotion.. .
the expression of the emotional integration of
perception of aesthetic and moral values, of
enduring beauty and knowledge. Art is the
expression of human vision. Art personalizes life
and reality, infusing existence with passion and
significance. Art is on the avante guard of human
psyche, continually breaking ground on the frontiers
of human expression, reinterpreting the past,
redefining the present, recreating the future before
its time. . . art tells us who we are, and could be
(Murphy, 1999, p. 48).

Though lengthy, I have included the full text here, because it encapsulates for me the powerful beauty and potential of art. The reason art has the potential for critical theorizing, for problem solving, for therapy, for transcendence is because its process and product, whether validated or not by something external, is a vehicle and a mechanism for Hope. Friere says that “hope is grounded in concrete performative practices, in struggles and interventions that espouse the sacred values of love, care, community, trust and well being ” (1999, p.69, unknown source). In the case of this research project, the

individuals that coalesced into creative community, the solidarity that formed therein and the art/activism that has become an outgrowth have all been grounded in the hope that the stories from the margins could find a new expression. Perhaps even more importantly, that expression has shown that it has the potential to be a catalyst for change at a variety of levels.

In her landmark book, *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 49), Simone de Beauvoir wrote that “life is a relation to the world”. That relation takes place within a social and political context which exerts a unique kind of behavioral control in two forms: persuasion from above, i.e. the ruling class, and consent from below (that is, the lower classes). Hegemonic control is not necessarily conspiratorial-- everyone is socialized (Sullivan in merino, 1996). Even if the full ideological space is not overwhelmed, by definition hegemony still radically limits what is thought throughout the culture, thereby establishing a social order (Gitlan in Clark and Crystall in merino, 1996).

Creativity is defined by its nature which is necessarily the opposite of passive, narrow, and fatalistic. Especially in the context of “fatalistic”, an artist may be expressing fatalism, but the fact that they have energy to express that implies energy to resist, reframe, and transform. Here lies the crux of creative process as a vehicle for hegemonic resistance.

In the presence of inequality and injustice such as that found in our current system of capitalist patriarchy, it is imperative that processes which encourage counter hegemonic criticism are engaged with and valued. It is no accident that creativity is involved in critical thinking and in the production [of art] (Clark and Crystall in merino,

1996). Under the current hegemony, as was the case when feminism was breathing fire into a “women’s art” movement, it can be very difficult to think “outside the box” and to criticize the structures of everyday life. This is especially true for those in the outposts of marginalized populations who exist at the various and cumbersome intersections of race, class, gender and sexual oppression. Every marginalized person has the right and ability to see and describe the world from their own point of view.

In theorizing about her own creative/ activist/ education/educator journey, merino articulates the destructive power of hegemony and the supposedly benign institutions that carry out the destruction of authenticity and the ability for critical thought:

Where did I learn to interpret myself in a less than empowering way? All those everyday spots—the family, school, media, work, even play—persuaded me to see the world from someone else’s point of view, without questioning how it might work differently from me (1996, p. 20) ?

Often, individuals consciously and/or unconsciously theorize about the structures that are oppressive, but there is no platform for articulation, even if there is a vocabulary. In many cases the lack of vocabulary itself is another obstacle to countering hegemonic processes. The production of art is an alternative way to speak about individual experiences/meaning and also an alternative place to speak from.

The complex hermeneutics of art have their own power laden complications, but the positive attributes, as dian marino (1996) attests, [theory] “gives me flexibility between the personal and the social” (p. 20) and “[Art is] the language of transformation and play”(p. 7) surely compensates, at least in part, for those difficulties by offering alternative vantage points from which to launch counter hegemonic interactions.

Random everyday materials can become powerful tools for problem solving, visualization, and contextualization of the personal in the political as well as a simple vehicle for self expression. A beautiful, rough edged example is Rosalind B. Penfold's book, *Dragonslippers* (Penfold, 2005). This is a compilation of drawings assimilated into a kind of animated articulation of her experiences of an abusive relationship. She describes a process of resorting to drawing to express her misery, reviewing the work to gain understanding and then publishing them as activism against violence. The process and the product are as powerful as they are deceptively simple.

Art making is an alternative voice, the power of which is acknowledged by feminist theorists and artists and the changes they have engendered, and which presents an alternative narrative to the current patriarchal hegemony. Feminist and post modern theory "involve messiness and disruption" (Clark and Crystall in merino, 1996, p. 6) which is completely at home with the art making if one conceives of the creative process as disruption/re-creation of narrative and problem solving. In relation to post modern theorizing, feminist art also acknowledges the power of language and attempts to create new narratives while attempting to remove the object of the process from an existing narrative and the language in which it was embedded. In regards to art as activism, dian marino notes that art as a process of decolonization allows an expression of "transformative visions" and alternatives (merino, 1996, p. 7).

Imagination/ creativity can be seen as a catalyst and actor, as Andrea Dworkin says, in the discovery of "new meanings, forms, complex and empathetic values and acts. The person with imagination is pushed forward by it into a world of possibility and risk" (1987, p. 48). With her customary forcefulness and eloquence, Dworkin also cites James

Baldwin: "To be affirmative about anything which one refuses to question; one is ----to remain inarticulate about anything which one hasn't by an act of imagination, made ones own" (1987, p. 48). Accordingly, art, as the product of imagination, is accessible to anyone because the occasion of doing and seeing can be, but are not necessarily, exclusive of each other (Murphy, 1999).

dian merino (1996) referred to this as processing locations of oppression. The idea of "dealing with issues" implies an active articulation and sorting of elements in a problem solving process, something which anyone with imagination does on a regular basis--different individuals, different media/language, but still the same development. The power in visual language is that it does not disappear once it has been "spoken". The expression continues to take up space in the same way as written language, and, may in fact be accessible to a greater number of people due to its ability to connect intellectually and/or emotively. That is, even if an audience or the artist themselves do not have access to the language of critical theory, they can still communicate in a kind of sign language which can be understood at multiple levels. This does not preclude individuals who are selectively "deaf" [read elitist] or artistically illiterate which by definition should not include the theoretical elite or the heretofore male dominated establishment.

There is no essential feminist critique of a capitalist patriarchal hegemony, nor is there a common set of goals to characterize the feminist movement in any of its manifestations. Within the feminist art movement and within feminist activism there are dissident voices within the inevitable internal power structures. This hierarchy is important to consider regardless of the aims/goals of an organization. Activists especially have been shunned from the ironic feminist art establishment due to elitism

and individualism of conventional art practices as well as internalized oppression (Barndt, 2006). Barndt articulates a transition toward the valuation of process over product popularized in the mainstream by artist and writer, Julia Cameron (Cameron, 1992, 2002;1996), and which is characterized by a much needed reintegration of art into daily life. Barndt argues that even with the acceptance of the need for reintegration and the practice of that reintegration, these voices are not being acknowledged and art is continually and increasingly being commoditized in the global market place. Even as more and more extraordinary people are choosing to question and to process the phenomenology of oppression in femininity and domination (Bartky, 1990), there is less respect for alternative forms of expression. Instead, as Barndt points out, many artists and activists who use art as a means of protest are questioning the previous categories for political action, considering that the end justifies the means, in a sense, that is that stories are the most important priority, and the mode of transportation so to speak, should not be co-opted by the powerful (2006).

Action

Over 60 years ago, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “to paint, to write, to engage in politics—these are not merely “sublimations”; here we have aims that are willed for their own sake”(1989, p. 51). Criticism of hegemony in any form, regardless of whether accepted as valid, is crucial to self actualization. Self actualization can be imagined in a way that is separate from and counter to the existing discourses of power. In point of fact, living well and fully might be considered the best revenge for marginalized people can achieve. Art allows a form of communication and growth that can articulate,

communicate with, and engage others in a way that does not need to dominate (merino, 1996). Because the artist can dialogue with self or others, choose to show the work or not, the viewer can remove themselves from the presence of the work and engage with it, or not, according to their choice. It is an ideal venue for resistance to hegemony because it is ultimately a process of empowerment.

The disruption of the hegemonic is what gives power to symbols of resistance. The loci of gender, class, sex and race create a plethora of “framework[s] of differential analysis and a primary way of signifying relationships of power”(Scott in Butler in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006, p. 543). How this is represented in art is as varied as the artists themselves. Often, especially among populations who have had minimal or disrupted formal educational opportunities, there is only implicit reflection on this, and cultural reading may take into account what is not there, and may also attribute symbolism that was unintentional. It should be noted, however, that it is often true in the case of art making that what is unintentional is also often the most accurate because creative choices are made without the pressure of self awareness. Self-censorship can be attributed to hyper sensitivity to the possibility of ridicule, criticism, censorship, and even personal endangerment which may exist in politically unstable areas. This unintentional accuracy may fall victim to a kind of hegemonic violence due to the potential ambiguity of its representation.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology and Design



Fig. 3. “Specimens for academia” (multi – media on canvas, 8” x 8”) by the author. This painting explores the idea that research subjects, in this case, women, are often taken out context, and shredded according to the question at hand, as if that single question can be attended to without acknowledging the complexity of the whole person. Here, the woman is represented as a butterfly specimen pinned down by classic Western research paradigms.

The intention of this chapter is to provide a philosophical, theoretical and ontological framework for the project. I will locate my self and the research within this framework. That framework will be followed by a description of the design and methodology as it attempts to challenge the elision of voices from the margins. The project is an inquiry as to whether or not creative process can be a mechanism for theoretical analysis among individuals who have traditionally been excluded from conversations about marginality. This project is implicitly practical, rather than theoretical because:

Real women, real lives, real struggles—radical feminists do not go off into an elusive theory and forget their activism, but balance action with the exploration of new ideas and forms where ever we are drawn. . . . And this was another core principle: being prepared to risk going to unlikely places to find what you needed to know, and making the process visible.

---Susan Bellamy (in Bell & Klein, 1996, p. 129)

Susan Bellamy's words have stayed with me in the years since I began reading about art and politics, and they have inspired me to explore alternative methods of research, writing, and analysis which have affected not only my academic practice, but also my painting practice. Like Bellamy, I believe that personal, professional and artistic growth requires a constant questioning, a constant winnowing of the extraneous, a constant readjustment of awareness and intention in order to achieve longevity and authenticity of identity and purpose. So it is, that my research and my art practice have moved from following the direction of others, into a space of curiosity, of compassionate and respectful inquiry, and most importantly, of authenticity to the way that I question, understand and express how I see the world.

Social justice movements of the 1960s and 70s challenged and reframed many of the questions previously asked, as well as the corresponding approaches to research. Fundamental approaches, both theoretical and methodological, changed to include a “re-examination of power within the knowledge building process, the context of discovery, and the reality of situated knowledge and truth” (Haraway in Leavy, 2009).

This art-based, participatory action research project has a primary purpose of giving marginalized women the spaces to describe their lived experiences, to explore how various life experiences have impacted their lives and to explore these ideas within the safety and solidarity of the working group. In doing so they have the opportunity to

discover new insights by being attentive to their own process via the form and materiality of the pieces they create. This is particularly useful because visual art process allowed all of the participants (activist, student or AWAC client) to communicate information about their experiences which were often incongruent with stereotypes.

Additionally, images are visually evocative and they have an emotional proximity (Leavy, 2009) which can rarely be ignored. It is nearly impossible to avoid the alchemy of emotion and intellectual engagement when faced with simple, often blunt truths that belie the fabrications we use to keep ourselves comfortable in a culture which *claims* equality and justice.

The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves through another's life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing the place for the first time.

--Jessica Hoffman Davis (in Richardson, 1997)

Sample Selection

Arts – based research and auto-ethnography are inclusive of such a wide variety of techniques and methodological approaches that it is entirely possible that any number of project designs would have been possible and potentially effective. This project was set up in the context of understanding AWAC clientele via the year of employment which occurred prior to the beginning of the project. In that year, I developed cooperative relationships with the staff and developed trust with many of the clients who access the agency.

The shelter demographic is characterized by a chaotic intersection of mental health, addiction, and chronic homelessness issues. It is simultaneously static and transient. It is static in the sense that there is a core group of women that I have known who over the year and a half have made AWAC their primary space of habitation. It is also transient because the women come and go randomly to de-tox, home to the reserve, to work camp jobs, to sleep by the river in the summer, home to their families, or sometimes to jail, and then back to AWAC when the job is done, the addiction has reared its head again, the family is too dysfunctional, or the boyfriend again becomes violent. In addition to that core group, individuals who are not local, who may normally access other agencies, who slip through the cracks of the system, or who call AWAC as an initial outreach but who do not stay for longer than the duration of a meal.

Being intimately connected with the dynamics of the women and the organization over that year allowed me to create a project that was reasonably likely to be successful in terms of maintaining a participant base; however, it should not go unsaid that the entire project was risky in a variety of ways, simply due to the matrix in which it was located. In the interest of the emotional safety of the women during the art sessions, I resigned from my position at the shelter, so that my job as worker/disciplinarian would not intrude on the emotional safety I was trying to create for the women. After my resignation in December, I continued to visit regularly and put up posters advertising the initiation of the art sessions. It was my intention that the project be as inclusive as possible and so any woman was invited, as long as she was not a threat to anyone. No limitation was made regarding whether or not someone was under the influence. By excluding these women there would be further marginalization in the refusal to hear the stories of those

who wanted to share as well as a heavy reduction in the number of potential participants. In the end, evidence of substance use was really only evident in the work itself, not in the actual behavior of the women. In these circumstances, consent was an ethical issue to be considered. Stories and work were only used for the project if the woman returned on another day to sign the form.

In February 2006, I began facilitating art workshops in the activity room at AWAC. I still had trepidation about how many women would come, if they would engage with me and with the materials, or if there would be enough artwork and conversation to create a thesis. I especially wanted to demonstrate to the community that the women had meaningful things to say in the dialogue about marginalized women in the downtown.

PART I

The project is actually designed around two parts. The first portion consisted of ten Sunday afternoon art sessions, facilitated by me, with the permission of Marianne Sorensen, the Executive Director of AWAC. The sessions were two (2) hours, not including prep time and clean up and they lasted over a 10 week period in order that individuals could develop a sense of competency with the materials and a comfort with the group. Sunday afternoon was chosen due to the fact that there is often an empty lull at AWAC on that day. Somehow, the traditional family day leaves many homeless women in an emotional limbo, and I hoped to create a positive space for them to engage with each other and, perhaps, with their own ponderings while they participated in the creative process.

Many of the women at AWAC have long histories of addiction, mental health issues, violence, and abuse of various kinds, and through my relationships with them as an employee, I knew many of their stories. As a direct result of my own experience of art making, teaching and facilitating, I was aware of the cathartic possibilities of the creative process and I worried that as a facilitator, I would be unable to deal with potential emotional issues and still help the other women in the group.

I made two decisions which challenged traditional notions of dual relationships in this project. The first, of course, was choosing the position of insider researcher. The second involved my supervisor, Dr. Si Transken. Knowing that Dr. Transken has long experience in arts based therapeutic techniques, clinical counseling and previous relationships with the women from AWAC as a result of earlier research at the shelter, I invited her to be a participant observer in the art sessions along with Katherine Ens, a registered social worker and candidate for Master of Social Work at the University of Northern British Columbia.

The purpose of the participant/observer was to support women who addressed emotionally sensitive issues during the sessions so that I could continue to facilitate the rest of the group. Both women consented to support the project, and agreed to journal before and after the sessions for the duration of the project. I felt that having three observers would add to the validity of the observations and, more importantly, maintain an emotional safety net for the women.

This decision to invite my supervisor into this role was potentially sticky, because in the six years that I have known her, Dr. Transken has been my teacher, my colleague in various social justice capacities, and my comrade in a number of creative projects.

Now that she was also my thesis supervisor, there could be an additional layer of power in the art sessions and in the contexts of our other relationships. Any unpredictable power dynamics had the potential to alter the dynamic of trust that I had cultivated over the year prior in order to establish myself as a feminist insider (read “former employee”) researcher. The reality is that in the complex social dynamic of the shelter, establishment of personal power is a common behavior/survival skill engaged by the women and any conflicts in this area were a potential threat to the success of the project due to the hypersensitivity of the women to these kinds of issues. Hours of conversation and exploration of ownership, control, and belonging encouraged clarity and minimized the periodically sticky moments that occurred as we navigated a project in which we were both emotionally engaged.

Location of the sessions was also significant to the emotional safety of the women. The obvious choice in the shelter was the activity room on the premises at AWAC. This location has a separate entrance from the rest of the shelter and is private, with little risk of distractions from the common area. As well, the room is large and bright room for a single large configuration of tables or multiple work spaces to accommodate personal interaction, need for privacy, or the possibility of an unexpected number of women. This space was ideal and so different from the dark hallways of the shelter itself. My own experience of the space paralleled the experience/observation of Shaun McNiff (2004, p. 17) when he wrote about his first light filled studio in the 1970’s when he worked with mentally ill clients:

We always begin in an empty space that we fill with people and images. The place is transformed and ensouled as soon as the images arrive and as we relate to them with empathy and imagination. Guided by the values of deeply felt experience, we

establish a community of creation through the most basic actions of working together and reflecting on one another's expressions.

So it was at AWAC. We opened the blinds to let the light pour in, we opened the windows to encourage spring to infiltrate the space (and to let the fumes out), and we lined up the images as they were made in order to revel in the productivity and in the creative celebration of the group.

Demographic and Participation

The potential number of participants was one of the large risk factors in this project. Even though it had been well advertised in the shelter, there was no guarantee that any one would come, or if they did come, if they would consent to share their product and process with me, an educated, white, "real" artist. Because of my unwillingness to exclude anyone from the potential benefits of the art making process, the invitation to participate was extended to women regardless of whether or not they wanted to be involved in the actual research project. This was my way of contributing to the women as a group, but also to AWAC for allowing me the freedom to use the facilities and for supporting the project.

The women were invited on a drop in basis with no obligation to stay for the duration of the sessions. They were invited to stay for as long or short a time as they liked and to participate, or not, as they felt comfortable. As well, to accommodate the women who felt too shy to make art in public, there were a variety of ongoing projects left in the drop-in center and collected by me on a regular basis.

In addition, the women have been invited to create art on their own time, and then to participate in the other parts of the project, that is, the interview follow up and/or the

exhibition (also to be discussed later). Consent forms and information sheets were provided to all participants, with the understanding that only one needed to be signed, and attendance after the initial session could be equated with consent unless otherwise indicated. Some women were excited to participate and agreed verbally, however, were reluctant to sign any paperwork/documents produced by social workers, court workers, landlords, etc., who are not perceived as trustworthy by the AWAC clientele. This is common for individuals who have become embroiled in a complex system. All women were informed that they could withdraw from any portion of the project at any time and still continue to attend the sessions. It was confirmed with all participants that confidentiality would be maintained as best as possible given the fact that it is impossible to control in a group setting.

Finally, of course, refreshments were provided by the researchers each week. Originally, I tried bringing healthy snacks, such as crackers and cheese, fruit and veggies, etc. I was quickly told that I would have more participants if I changed the menu. In fact, it did seem that the number of participants grew as word got out that there was pop and chips being served.

PART II

Since the point of the project was to find an alternative voice for marginalized women to communicate their lived experience, it seemed to me that there needed to be a way to include the women in some kind of dialogue, if they were interested to do so. Homelessness Awareness Week occurs in Prince George in October and it seemed a natural time to mount an exhibition of the group's art work and to invite an exchange

with members of the community at large. Following is a brief description of my intention/hope to launch a full scale exhibition, however, a more detailed explanation of this process may be found under the section titled, “Reality Check”.

It is my intention that those women who wish to be involved will have the opportunity to plan, publicize and hang the exhibition. Anonymity will be protected according to the wishes of each artist and everyone is invited to participate or not as they choose. As a working artist, I will provide as much technical and creative advice as is needed or wanted, and I am content to have the women decide whether or not to include my work in the exhibition. They will have the opportunity to welcome policy makers, service providers, the downtown community, the academic community, and the Prince George community at large to engage in meaningful dialogue verbally, on a planned “graffiti board” installation, or in the guest book.

There are some challenges with this part of the project as well. An initial inventory of gallery spaces showed that few were within walking distance of the shelter, and I was unwilling to marginalize the women farther by installing the artwork in a place which was inaccessible to them and their families or to add to their vulnerability by placing them in a situation where stereo typing may be used against them. I am confident that the women will respect the chosen location in the same way that they respect the belongings of the staff who work at the shelter, in part because they realize that this space has been created for them and by them. However the women behave, the power of stereotypes will work against them if any thing (say, shoplifting) happens, and they are in the vicinity. The possibility has also been raised by staff of the city of Prince George that there may be warehouse space available in the future.

Until a suitable space has been found, an alternative, smaller scale event was necessary. Serendipitously, Kathy Plett from the College of New Caledonia came forward before the project was even completed to offer exhibition space in the month prior to Homelessness Awareness Week. This additional month of exhibition time increased publicity and awareness of homelessness as a social issue and gave the women an additional venue in which to “tell” their visual stories. The exhibition was covered by CBC (interview and “Talk Back”), local radio, newspapers and television. I received positive comments from media staff and the public as a direct result.

Funding is always a challenge for artists, and I am hopeful that there may some day be financial resources available through the City of Prince George, the British Columbia Arts Council and the Gender Studies department at UNBC to help defray the cost of a full scale exhibition. Judging by the attendance of some of the clients at the UNBC Coffee Night, it does not seem as though “appropriate” dress is an issue, but in the event that it is needed, I am hoping that we may get clothing donated for women who may not feel that they have proper attire.

Arts based Research (ABR), auto ethnography and narrative research are extremely compatible as research methods as they all find evidence of different (and sometimes overlapping) aspects of story. Holman Jones writes that auto ethnography is:

setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation...and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)

This choice to pull together the personal, the political, the objective, and the emotional is a fundamentally creative space that invites the observer to engage, relate,

and to interpret. Imaginative creative writing, of which there are several examples throughout this thesis, has been criticized for confusing fact and fiction (Chang, 2008); however, inserted into work that explains and interprets larger issues in a social context, it allows for an intimacy and immediacy that engage in a way that pure, more detached quantitative research rarely can.

ABR is about situated knowledge. It is a created perspective that must open up a variety of meanings because of the dynamic interaction that must be engaged in every time there is another viewer (Leavy, 2009). Given the fact that all art is influenced by the time and place it was created it can be seen as an invaluable tool for contextualizing the particular knowledge of the artist. Warren (in Leavy, 2009) noted that due to this factor, art can be seen as a “barometer” of social change while it can be used as a tool to confront, dislocate and deconstruct stereo types and outdated beliefs (Leavy, 2009).

It is here that my intention for “Voices and Visions” connects with ABR as a technique. My personal connection, history of meaningful interaction (both positive and negative), and belief in the validity of all human persons regardless of their social position demands that I find a new way to communicate with and for the women at AWAC. Everyone has something of value, some knowledge that can contribute to the betterment of our understanding and thus to the elevation of phenomenological ways of knowing.

This kind of research is also about a belief in social justice and the potential for cultural transformation that exists if there is a basis of respect and a willingness to challenge the current hegemonic reality of our time. We have an occasion to provide an opportunity for the rewriting of the prevailing narratives as we inject the personal into the

historical and social frameworks that have shaped the way that marginalized people have come to see themselves in the mirror of the dominant culture. Walsh (in Grace and Wells in Barndt, 2006) considers that this is an opportunity to understand how we come to see ourselves and others in a way that has not been defined in the first person.

DATA

Data for this project was considered from a number of sources. First and foremost, the original art works themselves are the fragmented stories, ragged bits of phenomenology, eloquently distilled wisdom, and lovingly, passionately constructed wishes. They were digitally photographed so that those women who wanted to keep the originals for themselves or to give as gifts could do so. For a variety of reasons, many of the women generously donated the original pieces to be collected with work from subsequent projects so that a body of work could be created. The works were analyzed visually according to themes which are implicitly and explicitly stated. Photographs of the works will also be included in this analysis due to the fact that many of the works changed dramatically over the weeks of their creation, and many of those changes are significant with regards to shifts in consciousness which occurred during the time span of the project. It was not uncommon for the women who participated in multiple sessions to mull over a problem of representation one week and come to the next session with materials from their own realm of existence which were better suited to the problem at hand. For example, one client had difficulty expressing the idea of the different aspects/time frames/ contexts of her life and the next week arrived with pieces from a jigsaw puzzle.

I will also consider the auto-ethnographic visual work that I created during this time as data for two reasons. Visual processing is a kind of journaling for me and served as a way to order and articulate my thoughts. My own work frequently segued from themes that were being articulated collectively; also, I was interested in consciously exploring themes which others were exploring without really considering why they were making those choices. There were emerging themes such as mother-daughter relationships and intergenerational links to AWAC, the sex trade, addiction, etc. which were tangentially relevant to this project but which also deserve to be addressed more deeply in another context or in follow up research.

On the following page are two examples of a series begun from this curiosity. Each has a background taken from a discarded dress pattern, chosen partly for its lovely aesthetic, and partly to allude to hegemonic ideals of femininity. In many ways the symbolic values are trite and overused; however, there was some necessity to choosing easily recognized icons in order to stimulate conversations about form and materiality with a group who, as a whole, have little visual literacy and who are sometimes intimidated by or defensive about “smart” people and their perceptions of homeless women.

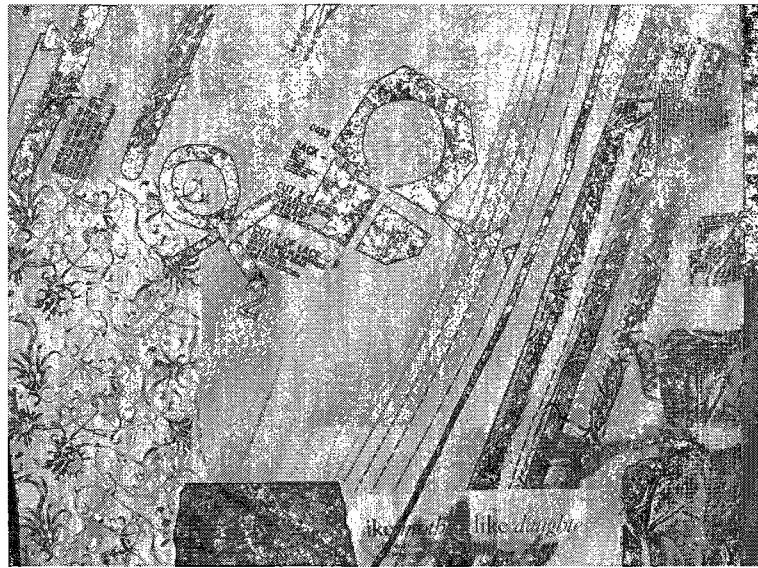


Fig. 4. “Like Mother Like Daughter” (multi-media on canvas, 16” x 20”) by the author. Traditional dress patterns began to emerge for me as a “base” in the pieces I created during the sessions. The patterns represent the hegemonic processes that order the socialization of each person, every individual experience overlaid and woven into this deeply ingrained belief system. This piece explores the intergenerational patterns that are experienced by many aboriginal women in the shelter system and the stereotypes that often define the un/choices they make.

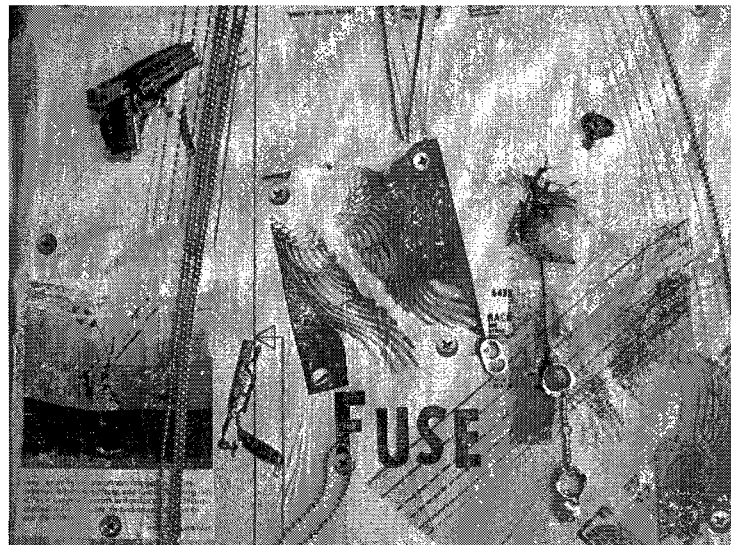


Fig. 5. “Snow angels”, 20” x 16”, multi-media on canvas, by the author. Again using the dress pattern as a base, this piece explores the destructive nature of traditional ideas of beauty and notions of “good woman/mother/daughter”. The traditional expectations are often emotionally, psychologically and/or physically scarring to women who do not fit into this value system and the enforcement of them is a kind of violence that may or may not be overt.

Secondly, it was important to work in a medium other than my own (acrylic paint on canvas) in order to decrease the obvious differences in training between myself and the other participants. This has created significant and delightful changes in my own practice. At least for a time, the works that I am creating have come to include alternative media/second hand images, text and imposed theoretical constructs.

Digitally recorded and transcribed interviews of the artists which consist of open ended questions and any proffered stories/explanations regarding the art were analyzed thematically. This is due to the fact that the women's verbal stories often are not as elaborate, or are quite different from the more permanent stories of the art work.

All written commentary (open ended survey questions and guest book) from the exhibition (and or various other public events which occurred between writing and the defense) were analyzed in relation to the themes as will the journals of the participant observers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with permission of the participant and then returned to the participant for confirmation. Necessary changes were made to the transcripts. Most of the women were more interested in making art and were willing to talk in the session but did not want to commit to a later meeting. In these cases, hand written notes were made with the woman's permission as she shared stories with me or the group.

Additionally, workshop evaluations/participant feedback, participant – observers' journals and my own field notes were all part of the physical data. This ongoing feedback allowed for a reflexive process which provided a malleable space for the women to negotiate, to participate or not, to contribute in ways that were comfortable for them (some women shared stories, but refused to share art). The long process of building

relationships prior to the project showed its worth when personality differences or sensitive topics/painful memories arose, or obstacles such as a lack of culturally appropriate materials became apparent.

Chapter 4

Findings:Voices and Visions: Discussion of Participant Demographics, Images and Narrative

In this section, I will discuss the findings of the project, emerging themes and unanticipated benefits.

Twenty-eight (28) women in total participated in the AWAC project. With the exception of the academics who came and went from the group, only two of the participants were Caucasian, the rest were First Nations women. All had been clients of AWAC at some time in the recent past, though there were two who were not currently living at the shelter. As mentioned earlier, many of the women suffer from addiction and mental health issues along with engaging in high risk behaviors such as survival sex and drug use/dealing. It became apparent after the sessions were over that one woman was even on BC's Most Wanted list for assault with a weapon, though we never experienced any problems or indications of violence. Seven of the twenty-eight women came to three sessions and three women came to five sessions. One woman came to nine of the ten sessions. The majority of participants were single attendance drop-ins.

The transience of the group very much characterized the dynamics of the shelter itself and the chaos of the women's lives in general. It should be noted, that the women who came to half of the sessions are all individuals who are fairly stable in their lives, and who have been long term clients. That is, they tend to come and stay for duration of time, and then return to the reserve or to a job for a similar length of time. The one woman who came to all sessions is no longer a client of AWAC. She lives in her own home and comes to AWAC for meals and outreach.

Women who came repeatedly often arrived early and stayed to help clean up. They took a sense of ownership by suggesting which refreshments would tempt more participants to attend the sessions; they were generally helpful to newcomers regarding the use/location of materials and care of tools. Especially interesting was the general lack of hoarding which is often a trait of the women who live in poverty at AWAC. They will hoard food, clothes, and beauty products— anything imaginable. It could be surmised that the participants did not see the materials as valuable enough to hoard, but the recurrence of helpful suggestions (“ I saw a picture that would be perfect” or “hey is this what you are looking for” or “ this _____ would be perfect!”) and sharing seemed to indicate that the community process and perceptions of the members’ success was at least as important as the individuals’ projects.

As the women were empowered to create, to make choices, to be decision makers, they developed a sense of ownership, responsibility and belonging. This was especially true for women who attended more than 3 sessions, and it seems to repeat observations by McNiff (2004) and Jones (Jones, 1982 in McNiff, 2004). Jones observed that the transformation was created by the “social ecology”, which involved “flexible and open interaction, listening and sharing in decisions, learning from mistakes, trust in people, and a pervasive sense that process was more important than the goal” (in McNiff, 2004, p. 18). This process became apparent by the end of the second session as the women adapted to and emulated the communication modeling by the participant observers. This is not to say that the women had no previous communication skills, as they can be extremely politically adept, however, the characteristic bluntness which had been

apparent and disconcerting in my early days at the shelter seemed to be mediated by a respect for the process and the sensitivity of some topics.

Additional women came and went, stopping to sample treats, to watch the activities, or, in one case, to steal some supplies. Those who initially came to participate would watch and then tentatively join in, but after the first few sessions, most just engaged immediately in the process and freely asked questions about the materials or the project in general. Often the group as a whole engaged in conversations that in Judy Chicago's time would have been considered 'consciousness raising'. We talked about body image (physical alterations such as augmentation/reduction, weight), health (one woman has breast cancer; STD's, danger of /reality of abuse, violence from other women, addiction), obstacles the women face in accessing services, and street dynamics. We spoke of family histories and how family matters in helpful and hurtful ways. We laughed about the strangest and most bizarre things.

The conversations were spontaneous, animated and honest, with infrequent but organically mediated disagreements. It was naturally presumed by everyone present that each individual could be themselves without threatening another. Only when we attempted an extremely structured activity (creating a hand made book) was there tension and disagreement. Issues of control and the rigidity of the process seemed to cause tension among the women, indicating that the free process of intuitive creativity provided a healthy sense of self efficacy. It is also of note that the participants in the book making workshop were a different crowd than the original group which had participated earlier. Given that there was more waiting to share tools and more of a set pattern of steps, which required certain skill sets (measuring for instance), the activity seemed to cause a

considerable amount of stress rather than providing a place for relaxation. It was interesting that the need to create a “good” product or “straight” line was much more obvious with this group/activity than with the others, suggesting that the women felt pressure to follow the rules and “do good”. One woman, who was on parole at the time, with a condition to not be found with a weapon, adamantly refused to even use scissors. This caused considerable consternation for other women waiting for assistance. In fact two women left in frustration before their projects were completed. Additionally, some of the coping mechanisms such as stealing were counterproductive to my tiny budget and to the trust that was developing in the group.

The situation described in the previous paragraph lends itself to an extra layer of examination. It is obviously different from the original group in the participant demographic and also in the overall feeling/outcome. The structured nature of the project did not allow for general, rambling, comfortable conversation and this set the stage for a kind of opportunistic attention seeking. One client began the session feeling very proud of her self for staying clean (drug free) for 14 days; however, the spotlight was taken by another client who was proud of her varied drug experiences and used the session as an opportunity to share stories. This was extremely upsetting to the first woman, who chose to leave the session along with a friend who was clearly supportive of her attempts to withdraw from substance use. It was unfortunate that the mood was broken by a poor choice of activities and this highlights the importance of choosing volunteers and activities which take the needs of the women into account.

The stories and art work regarding the women’s personal experiences of living on the street mirror the results of two interesting studies regarding this particular

demographic. The first, “Women on the Rough Edge: A Decade of Change for Long Term Homeless Women” (CMHC June 2000) considered trends in the profile of women’s homelessness in Toronto from 1988 to 1996. The second was titled, “Me, I’m Living it” The Primary Health Care Experiences of Women who use Drugs in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (Summary of Findings from the Vandu Women’s Clinic Action Research For Empowerment Study (February 2009).

Without going into specifics, in those years covered by the first document homelessness in Toronto increased 13% and fewer of those women were able to access to subsidized housing (CMHC June 2000). In 2009, on the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, British Columbia, the population reflected the national trend that Aboriginal women are proportionately higher in representation among Canada’s poor (VANDU 2009). This disproportionately high number of aboriginal women is observable at AWAC, both in the general client population and as a participant demographic. In the Sunday sessions many of the works produced as well as a solid proportion of the conversation was located around themes such as “home”, “comfort”, “safety” or the accoutrements of home. According to the observations of shelter service providers in Toronto, the longer women were homeless, the less able they were to adapt to a stable home environment (CMHC June 2000). Here in Prince George, during February and March there were approximately five aboriginal women to complete the intake process in comparison to every Caucasian woman (AWAC statistics as provided in October 2009). It is important to use these statistics as indications only because of the varying factors regarding repeat intakes, percentage of “drop in”, as opposed to actual bed usage, etc. The numbers do compose a clear picture in relation to the larger centers and the national

statistics on poverty and homelessness. In addition, there are a few residents who have been accessing AWAC for the better part of a decade or more. Interestingly, the women who had been in the shelter the longest were more likely to create work about the street reality or their sense of identity, or even their addiction, than they were to explore notions of a physical home.



Fig. 6. “Connections to Home”, photograph by the author. Anna with a project that has continued since her move to the shelter. This small blanket has been the inspiration for a larger project involving multiple clients. We are putting together proposals to have the completed tribute to Judy Chicago’s “Woman House” exhibited in a local gallery.

Anna was the participant most recently accessing the shelter. It is notable that she did not stay long in the emergency short term, but moved almost immediately to second stage housing where she will have a room of her own for duration of up to a year. All of

her artwork and creative process focused on the solidity of having a home except the last of 3 pieces, which considered personal aspirations and identity. Anna made the comment that she was “finally realizing that her home was who she was, not what she had” (Interview February 12, 2009). As well, Anna already engaged in knitted arts before she came to the shelter and was excited to get the women in second stage involved in a group project.

The Toronto findings suggest that, despite the diversity of the group as a whole, the greatest concern is the increase in the frequency of severe mental illness and substance abuse (CMHC June 2000). In the Sunday sessions, all but one participant from the shelter environment were at the time or in the recent past dealing with addiction issues. Additionally, the trend for long term homelessness has moved from socially isolated, older alcoholics to the more serious issue of crack cocaine (and crystal meth in the North), now among younger women (CMHC June 2000). The VANDU women CARE Study indicated that 83% of the respondents smoked crack, and 85 % of women who reported injecting drugs also reported smoking crack. In Vancouver the drugs are reported to be used for a variety of reasons ranging from emotional pain and trauma, physical pain, pleasure, as a coping aid and for harm reduction or health care purposes (VANDU 2009); anecdotally, this seems to mirror the situation for the women at AWAC. To complicate matters, the drugs are changing rapidly which also affects street dynamics and shelter relationships (CMHC June 2000).

From this perspective, women who visually depicted their addictions did so both in the context of its current reality, or as an inspiration to continue recovery:



Fig. 7. “Reality Sucks” (10” x 8”, multi-media), by a participant depicts her personal reality of drugs and alcohol.

Tanya came to one session with two sisters and a niece. All are repeat clients, often accessing at the same time. This family was the most obvious example of intergenerational use of the shelter system. Tanya, though suspicious at first, created this piece in approximately 30 minutes. Though the other sisters’ pieces reflected the classic alcoholic myth of the perfect family, Tanya told the truth as she sees it—a life of alcohol, drugs and violence that have resulted in serious chronic physical illness for her and a dysfunctional family life for the group. This truth telling was characteristic of Tanya’s role in the family—she often instigated infighting by “calling Bullshit” (interview March 13, 2009).



Fig. 8. “I Will Get Through This” (6” x 4”, multi media) client artwork depicting her addiction, the barriers to recovery, her reasons for going into treatment and the statement of her goal.

Pinklady came to one session and created a response to the question “what is it like to live in the box or outside of the box?” In many ways, this art piece exemplified all that was good about the project: she stated the problem (addiction – ergo the crack pipe in the foreground); she stated her intention (recovery and reunification with her children-they had resuscitated her when she overdosed-symbolized by the letters MOM on the top and the hearts in the corners); she stated the obstacles (everyone watching and waiting for her to fail-her family, the Ministry of Children and Families, unsympathetic health care providers, the dealers, etc.). Pinklady was so excited at the successful completion and its inherent humor (the white pebble dug from the snow, put in the end of the pipe to represent the “rock” that was her vice), that she even showed it to the workmen completing the exterior renovations on the shelter.



Fig. 9. “white label” (30” x 30”, acrylic and mixed media on canvas) by author. Explores the traumatization of cultural displacement.

Considering the phenomenon of addictions and the pervasive reality of forgetting the individual who is often overshadowed by the demon, I created a painting titled “white label” (located above). So many issues are subsumed in the category “substance abuser”. Many women self medicate because they can not get adequate treatment for chronic physical pain or for the lingering emotional/ psychological pain of sexual abuse. Past and current sexual and physical violence was reported as pervasive among the AWAC clientele and similar to Toronto and Vancouver. The majority of women interviewed cited these as reasons for leaving their birth homes early, and street violence had increased over the years included in the study (CMHC June 2000), cultural abandonment, societal disenfranchisement, loss of identity, etc. were all cited as contributing factors to homelessness.

The primary symbol in the painting mentioned above is actually a photocopy of an old Greyhound bus ticket. The directions on the tag emphasize that the white label must be removed upon arrival at the destination. Anecdotally, women who live in the shelter often struggle with the transition between town and the reserve, between “tradition” and modern assimilation, between internal and external identity. It seems that there is a difficulty in negotiating through the raft of labels required to fit in, to access services, to negotiate often painful histories, etc. These challenges of negotiation were extremely painful for me to observe as a shelter worker, as a researcher, and mostly, as another human being. It seems that the individuals who have the fewest skills have the most complex negotiations and those that are successful are often deemed dysfunctional because their coping mechanisms are socially inappropriate. The painting makes the point that there is a human spirit struggling inside of this complex and dangerous process. As a feminist artist, these products of my own creativity are a way of laying out/sorting through hegemonic value systems that I help to recreate if I do not dare to name and challenge.

Naming/ challenging barriers and forms of structural oppression were often easiest in the context of informal discussion. Diversity of participants often helps in the generation of conversation, and the AWAC art sessions had diversity in spades. Despite the fact that the majority of the women were First Nations and living in poverty, there was a wide range of life experiences, attitudes, personalities, etc. represented in each session. Race, class/former class, gender, previous occupations, current occupations/pastimes and even age all contributed to the richness of the group.

Everyone who indicated an interest to participate, including two eleven year old girls, was welcomed. One child was the niece of an AWAC client who gave permission for her to make art but did not want her to participate in the research project itself. The other was my own daughter. Though the group as a whole was rough around the edges, and the subject matter was rarely altered by their presence, the women instinctively respected the girls by reducing the levels of profanity and by speaking in euphemisms if a topic seemed particularly sticky. The shelter clients were gracious in the presence of the children, inquiring about their creative process and generally interested in what the girls had to say.

Though I had no interaction with the other child, I believe that my own daughter was profoundly and positively impacted by her experience with the women. On the way home from the first session, M- said to me, “I don’t know why the homeless women are treated so badly, Mom. They are like everyone else; they just don’t have a home”. It seems to me a powerful thing that the solidarity and commonalities that were so apparent to me were also apparent to a child. Incidentally, months after my part of the AWAC art sessions have been formally concluded, M is asking to attend the next set of sessions (which will be facilitated by MA candidate Reeanna Bradley and Dr. Si Transken, with the generous support of AWAC) because she enjoyed the company and the creative process of this diverse and vibrant community.



Fig. 10. “this is my life” (autobiographical collage, 20” x 16”, multi-media on canvas) created by a participant.

Self representation was a theme for nearly all the women who participated in the project. Many represented their clan or their family name either directly, symbolically or verbally—“I have used a frog here, because I am from the Frog Clan.”; “Frog and wolf as totem animals”, (Anna, April 1, 2009). Other clients used representations of artifacts of their particular culture such as drums, drum sticks, and second hand images to indicate identity and belonging. By February 29, there had been 29 canvasses created and six had explicit First Nations references. On a slightly divergent note, I was surprised that cultural images were not more common and I wonder if the lack thereof does not indicate the sense of disenfranchisement and postcolonial trauma that is directly related to the women’s current physical circumstances. Though there were not a lot of magazine images that represented First Nations culture, the women freely asked me to search the internet for specific images. Additionally, the women combined materials such as feathers and leather to create culturally appropriate images and symbols. Many women

used their names or images they specifically chose because they felt that it was an appropriate representation of them:



Fig. 11. 20" x 16", multi media, auto biographical collage on canvas created by a participant.

In the image above, Deirdre represented herself as a butterfly (which, incidentally is the Japanese symbol for womanhood (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994); an additional multicultural note is that in the culture of my own Celtic tradition there is no word for blue—it translates loosely to “that which is yet to be manifest”. Considering that Deirdre was creating a piece that imagined a better future for herself and her children, these are wonderfully intuitive coincidences that she also appreciated. The discussion that followed this observation (on my part) enveloped the density of personal symbolism and transformed into the complexity of self as seen by self or as seen by others.

Often the works related to the land—the reserve the women are connected to, or their place of birth. In Anna’s case, an unexpected locator was differentiation between the places and spaces of abuse or relative peace.

Location of the women in the “now” was significant in the kinds of conversations the women engaged in during the sessions as well as the kinds of images they made. In “Women in the Urban Landscape” (Martinez & Stuart, 2003), Caroline Andrew wrote of the significance of the material reality of urban space and to representations or discourses created about the space. She noted that the environments that contain us and the conditions we live in frame and channel behaviors and so does representation (189). During the weeks at the AWAC activity room, it became apparent that the safeness of the space allowed for a dynamic of behavior that was different than the one on the street or even in the main part of the shelter. Modes of behavior (violence, extreme profanity, posturing) changed as the space/sessions became defined as “fun”, “relaxing”, “gives you something to do”. During the duration of the project, three women who were wanted for violent crimes came to sessions, and there were no indications that they were violent at all. The fact of their infringement with the law was only discovered after the fact in the Prince George Citizen.

Reframing and Transformation

“it’s a measure of our worth, our own sacrifices”
(Anna , AWAC interview April 1, 2009).

Theorizing about previously marginalized and overtly elided feminist art and the creative people who courageously articulate dissonance either by their method and/or subject of production, their way of being, or their way of theorizing about said product, has its own special problems. These themes have been explored in earlier chapters but a few additional concerns will be stated and/or re-summarized here.

Notions of *artist* (Clark and Crystall in merino, 1996, p. 7) (or non artist) need to be examined and if not rearranged then completely discarded. Without a formal category and the existing hierarchy of the art establishment it would be much easier to examine notions of counter hegemonic visual/creative resistance that comes from those whose voices are not heard, but who theorize in quiet transformative ways in their everyday lives. Feminism helped expand the definition of feminist artist to include women working at their kitchen tables or in the corner of their husband's studios (Lippard, 1995). Stereotypically, that definition is still a negative one, somehow equated with 'radical feminist bitch', or some more eloquently articulated equivalent. It also does not necessarily include those who are not married or who do not have kitchen tables. Joan Borsa (in Robinson, 2001, p. 272) articulates a similar position when she writes,

To speak about and search for a 'politics of location' is not to desire a final resting place, an essence that we can comfortably attach ourselves to, but a 'position' that works against disembodiment, immobilization and silence. . . a position from which to productively articulate and represent our concrete and structural differences .

Those artists who do come from a privileged space have to be sincerely appreciative of the locality of marginalized women artists. Patronization and intellectualization will get nowhere in terms of organized momentum, as we have learned from postcolonial feminisms: we must learn to understand, to feel, the language of silence in a way that lends itself to action rather than pity or complacency. There needs to be an emphatic effort which recognizes the importance of the politics involved in examining one's own location, inheritance and social conditions (Borsa in Robinson 2001; Grillo in Hackett and Haslanger 2006).

The participants in the project courageously stepped into this space at a variety of levels. They spontaneously accepted each other's lived experiences and found commonalities, even though to an outsider, the participants may have seemed worlds apart. For example, the grad students and UNBC faculty who participated are, to all outward appearances white and privileged, but they were accepted by the aboriginal women based apparently on the fact that there was a willingness to *see* the women and to listen to the stories. Also, all parties recognized that we were *all* voluntarily in these spaces and vulnerable with regards to self disclosure.

There were commonalities regarding struggles with mental health issues ranging from anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, etc; the vast majority of participants had experienced some kind of sexual or physical violence. As one participant put it, "there is a strange, casual intimacy when you see the person sitting next to you, exploring issues of incest or residential school abuse, and as you ask her to pass the 'podge' (clear drying glue used in crafting), you say or think, "Yeah, me too." During the course of the art sessions the group was building a subtle and powerful sense of solidarity which has manifested itself in a unanimous willingness to create an exhibition of the work created during the eight weeks. This is significant, because a significant number of the women have included identifying features within their work. Anonymous or not, the women are willing to say, "this is my life, this is what I think brought me here, these are some of the social issues that are partially responsible."

Sierra came to the second to last session. As a shelter worker, I had known her for a year prior to the beginning of the sessions, had chatted with her about my research, and had invited her to participate because she was intuitive and insightful though not

always easy to get along with. The day she decided to come, she was on crutches with a broken foot, having slipped on the ice in the street (at the same time, there were two other women with similar issues staying on the premises). Once she understood the dynamics of the question of marginalization, it took Sierra less than an hour to create a collage which was disturbing and clearly articulated.



Fig. 12. “Scum from the Bottom”(20” x 16”, paper on canvas) auto ethnographic collage by a shelter participant.

In an interview a few days later, Sierra told me about the second hand images she had included and the significance that she attached to each of them. Sierra summarized the piece by saying:

Basically this is about being molested. Sexual abuse is why we is all here, why there is violence. Girls work the street and why there is so much addiction. This here (the image of the child in the top left) is being molested, with the hands grabbing out of the dark to say ‘don’t tell’. The hand picture is about me being a member of a boy gang back when I was a tom-boy. 3 of them are dead now and no one misses them except us-everyone else just thinks 3 down, however many left to go, because (and she

points to the top right image) we all have our price and men have more money so they get to be on the top and this leaves everyone feeling angry and dangerous. . . (Sierra, April 1, 2009).

Existing hegemonic processes and agents of socialization must be understood and dismantled. An understanding of and willingness to work at deconstructing entrenched boundaries among and between disciplines (Homer –Dixon in Transken, unknown date) is crucial to improving inter- and intra-disciplinary appreciation of counter hegemonic practices such as those which are not currently appreciated by the elitist approaches of the academy and the art establishment. West and Stalker (Clover & Stalker, 2007) observed that the fabric artists who participated in an artistic inquiry into bi-racial identity did not consider themselves educators, however, they were acknowledged as

“key players”(p. 131) in the “process of cultural identity formation” because the artworks they created “revealed issues regarding Maori culture, multiculturalism, decolonization, and cultural imperialism. . . they help us to identify, deconstruct and un-learn our prejudices, biases and assumption. . . [and] can help us, as a nation, to create a (bi) cultural identity more sensitive to social justices and injustices. In this respect, [the participating artists] are activist adult educators (p. 132).

In processing their own realities, women at AWAC are able to create a framework for the presentation of their lived experience—how it is, how they would like it to be-how they see it, live in it, represent it, define it. All of this involves the invention of a new language of symbols or a creative *anti-historical act* (Butler in Hackett & Haslanger, 2006, p. 543). Though Butler is using this term in a negative way, I would argue that feminist art workers co-opt this mechanism to usurp power from the prevailing

hegemonic reality. dian merino (1996) writes that art allows us to define our own frame and that the potential for a multiplicity of answers is to be found in the unexpected, and that we can invent a sort of “creative non-fiction” (Transken, class lecture, 2006) in order to create new and invigorating ways of looking at what we know in a way that is not just intellectual, but also emotional. The sketch below is a case in point. What a different way to consider sexual violence, not only in the context of the individual, but also generational and cultural violence perpetrated by individuals and institutions. It is at once the story of one woman, but also the story of many women and their children. It is important that though this image depicts a male perpetrator, women may also be perpetrators though with much less frequency.



Fig.13. “Flash back”10” x 8”, ink on paper, by the author.

In the interest of planning an exhibition of artwork for homelessness awareness week, I asked the women in the drop in center to compose a letter to the johns/bad “dates”. These letters will become part of an installation piece around the lived reality of survival sex workers. Only two were handed in to the office, though I was told later that

the basket with the supplies had been stolen. On the next page is the full text of both letters:

I feel like I'm a bomb tick, tick
I'm ready to blow. Every ten, fifteen minutes
the tears start to flow.
I want to sleep and never wake up
I want to die.
Don't matter what I do or say, it wrong
Or a couching lie. And you can't argue
with someone who thinks they know it all.
My heart is broke and my self esteem is gone
I don't think I've ever felt so scared and
Alone very fucking small. No where to
Run, all's I do is cry No one I can call.
I'm dead inside my heart my mind my felling have died
I have to get away. I will wither away
Or kill myself if I stay.
I've never been hurt so much by one man or felt
So alone in my life. I want to lay down
close my eyes don't dream any more
/time for me to ay bye, time to sleep
Someone hand me my knife. Fuck you all
And this life.

Anonymous (February 2009)

Bad Dates/John's,

Please, always remember that we are first of all
human Beings. We need and want to be treated with
respect, kindness and courtesy. Just because you pay for
our services, it isn't giving you the right to hurt or abuse or
take advantage of us. We are only there to be a temporary
companion for you. We are special!! Whom else would
put up with you. . . so please remember to take the time to
be courteous, respectful and kind. .. Or soon there will be
no girls left to go out with you.

One Whom will be missed. . .

Through these lenses, there is an increased ability to appreciate the challenges of
living in the world as a marginalized woman who is participating in survival sex, and to

frame those experiences in a way that is useful as a contribution to the dialectics of power. These letters also spontaneously contributed to the necessary solidarity of creative communities in explicit and implicit ways. Reading each others' thoughts while the authors remained anonymous allowed the women to feel that they were not alone; it deepened my commitment to challenging the social isolation of women who work in the sex trade. Following is an excerpt of an interview from a woman who was recently a client at AWAC, but who is now living successfully on her own:

- Interviewer And do you think this could be an effective way for people who don't necessarily have strong vocabulary you're very articulate but there are some women who don't--Who aren't educated and don't have a strong vocabulary. My experience in these sessions are that some of the women communicated really powerful ideas. Do you think that what you learned about your self changed in the process or that people that see it will change how they see women who live down town because of this
- Client Yes, I believe so because, well, it's a good way to basically meet the person without actually meeting them.
- Interviewer Because it's very authentic right?
- Client Yeah.
- Interviewer There's lots of really honest things here. are you nervous about . . .
- Client Well, I don't find it scary find it actually wow kind of a good idea because well the more people know about homeless people the more they'll understand maybe find more effective solutions to end the homelessness problem

The following description was created by a woman who attended five of the eight sessions. She looked forward to coming, was usually the first or second arrival, and stayed late one hour late in the last session to complete one of her pieces. Lilith took delight in playing with ideas of “living on the edge”, reasons why women/First Nations find themselves there, and her pieces and stories were clear examples of theoretical analysis.

In a Canadian Geographic magazine, Lilith found a collection of photographs taken in the Cowichan Valley during the early 1920's. Among those photographs, she selected one that had the caption “Cowichan Squaw, Vancouver Island”. Lilith identified with these photographs, as her family and ancestry are from that area. As she was rooting around in the various boxes of creative paraphernalia to segue from this sheet of photos, her agile mind found connections between a small, clear acrylic Cinderella slipper, some leather, a wooden spoon and a variety of other objects.

Lilith initially began working with ideas about her own aboriginal identity (ergo the drum, stick, and wolf to represent her clan), but very quickly moved into a verbal comparison of First Nations and Western concepts of princess. She said,

“in our culture, ‘squaw’ meant princess. If you were a squaw, you were seen to be strong and revered in your community. You had a position of responsibility. Then white men came along and twisted the word to be derogatory and an insult. As if their idea of a princess was any better. Now there is just this Walt Disney idea of these thin, helpless women who need to be rescued all the time. These ideas about beauty and rank are not anywhere we [as aboriginal women] can ever go and we are killing ourselves trying to be something we were never meant to be in the first place” (personal conversation at AWAC, March 21, 2009).

Lilith's comments sparked a dialogue within the group that lasted for more than 30 minutes, regarding naming, claiming of identity and social stereotypes and their side effects as barriers to successful outcomes.

Interestingly enough, though Lilith created 4 canvases that were very strong visually and theoretically, her confidence was readily apparent, and she was a leader in the group, she was the one to withdraw her work from the project (ergo no image with this discussion) though not the story. Initially, I was told by shelter staff that Lilith was afraid for the pieces to be seen in public and would I mind returning them to her straight away. This was certainly understandable, given the powerful commentary regarding the role of the Church in the cultural downfall of the First Nations Peoples, and as a researcher, I was confident that I could theoretically address the issues of internalized oppression, long term effects of colonization, etc. The day I returned the last piece to Lilith (one I had not initially recognized as hers), she told me the full story with her characteristic wide smile and sparkling eyes: the Band had offered her a substantial amount of money for the pieces and they would hang in the Band office.

Suddenly, creative process turned to Art and now suddenly, there was an entirely different theoretical conversation to be had. The nay sayers in the art community who had argued that the work the women were making was therapy, not art, would suddenly have to contend with the fact that a homeless woman had just made more in a day than most Canadian artists made in a year. Irony aside, this is a conversation for another day.

Reality Check

In terms of my hopes for an exhibition, the constraints of time, money and energy have made it necessary to create a scaled back version of the exhibition so that there can be one in time for the project to be defended in due time. As a result of not having enough completed works to create an entire gallery size exhibition, I have contented myself for now with a formal display in the Bentley Center in conjunction with the Bridges Festival at the University of Northern British Columbia in June 2009 and in the library at the College of New Caledonia in October 2009.

The Bridges Festival was intended as a celebration of the arts and community and so I felt it relevant that the research be presented there. Due to the fact that there were two exhibitions of “Art”, that of UNBC and CNC art students just adjacent to our location, and a juried exhibition in the rotunda, I was extremely sensitive to the possibility that the naiveté of the women’s work would garner criticism or ridicule. With the help of Dr. Transken and Vienna Bouillon, we hung a huge 10 x 10’ mosaic of the work, edge to edge. The pieces were interspersed with my work, Dr. Transken’s work, and that of the participating grad students in order that no one piece could be isolated and criticized. Having had many conversations about the validity of the women’s work as Art, I was feeling very protective and determined that they would not be made more vulnerable.

This protectiveness on my part was interesting to the researcher in me, because it made me aware of how emotionally I was connected to the women and also aware of my preconceptions about their vulnerability. These women have more survival skills than I ever will. Their lives have been one complexity, one physical danger, one step away

from injury or death after another, and I was worried that their feelings would be hurt or that they could be seen in a negative light because of my invitation to participate in something so trivial as art.

This moment astounded me. I have sacrificed so much to inhabit this identity of “artist”. I believe to the core of my being that creativity and its artful byproducts in whatever manifestation are the salvation of our humanity, and I was worried that it would all seem trivial. In that moment I realized again the power of hegemonic values not only regarding art, but, more importantly, regarding homelessness. I was terrified that what had been produced by the emotional, social and creative synergy in that downtown shelter would be belittled, further reinforcing the perceived lack of importance of each of these women who I knew to be so incredibly unique.

Attendees to the conference included a wide variety of local artists, diverse researchers, community members, art professionals, students. As I stood beside the display, ready to defend it and the women who created the works, I was overwhelmed by the care and respect that were offered regarding the project in general and the contributions of the women specifically. Only one person, an artist here in the community, asked which pieces were created by a formally trained artist. He noted that his inability to discriminate reinforced his respect for the insight and innovation of the women regarding the collective body of work. After the presentation of the research project and synthesis of the preliminary findings, there was general agreement from the audience (and individuals after) who responded positively to the work, agreeing that the involvement of marginalized women and the stories they have to tell was indeed a

powerful means of altering the general perception of homeless women as well as an important contribution to the theoretical analysis of marginalization in general.

Incidentally, this was also the response when I made a similar presentation at the National Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities in May 2009 and in fact that presentation led to an invitation for the women to exhibit work at St. Mary's University, Calgary, AB. This small liberal arts college has a mandate for social justice and activism at a number of levels. Attending faculty were impressed at least as much by the women's work as by my presentation/project, thus academically confirming the validity of the voices. I must admit that this was gratifying to me as a student researcher, empowering to me as a woman, and deeply, profoundly pleasing to me as an individual with emotional ties to the women who had participated.

A more specific response was garnered when the display was created in the library at the College of New Caledonia. Knowing by this date that there would not be enough work for a full scale exhibition from which to gather input from the community at large, I placed a small "Exhibition Attendee Survey" in close proximity to the display case. A closed box with a slit in the top was placed on the same table, and I collected the anonymously completed forms every three days for the duration of the month of October. In the end, there were only nine written responses; however, library staff commented that the display had generated a noticeable amount of discussion. I am curious to know if the low number of respondents is related to a general lack of concern, a lack of awareness, or an introversion that is peculiar to students.

An initial reading of the responses shows, not surprisingly, that few individuals see past the "homeless" aspect of homeless women. All nine responses exhibited

surprise at the women's potential for creativity, for hope, and the diversity of individuals as demonstrated by that in the canvases. One person noted, "I never thought of them as talented, but they are." Another wrote, "I understand the injustices of homelessness and poverty, but seeing the personal side of the story gave it all much more dimension."

Eight out of nine said that the exhibition of work changed the way that the viewer perceived homeless women; five out of nine said that the Exhibition of work changed the way the downtown community was perceived, though the ones who answered "no" were individuals who lived or worked in the downtown core and have a sense of familiarity with the individuals who frequent the streets of downtown.

Only two of the nine respondents felt that the exhibition did not change the way they perceived themselves in relation to the downtown community. For some this was articulated as an inability to "help" because they do not go downtown. The majority felt that the work increased an awareness of their own personal privilege or gave them ideas on how to work with specific clientele.

Finally, when asked if viewers thought that creative process/art is an effective way for marginalized people to communicate, the response was a universal and often emphatic "yes!" This response was summed up by one respondent who wrote, "absolutely. There is real power in these pieces, as if some inner spirit was released." Another respondent noted "Extremely effective and cathartic, enlightening - makes me ask, 'where do these women go from here?'"

It is interesting to note that even those who answered "no" to the questions on the survey often had positive things to say about the work. For instance, for some, the exhibition did not change how they perceived the women, but noted that the work

“powerfully reinforce[d] and inform[ed]”, and “it made me more aware of my own privilege”. As to whether or not the work changed their perceptions of the women, the downtown community or their perceptions in relation to the downtown community, they still felt that creative process was an effective way for marginalized people to communicate. Those respondents still felt that the work was “very powerful”.

An unexpected snowball effect

UNBC location

Thirty –two students from five disciplines converged in a one week intensive course titled “auto-ethnography and arts based research”. Only two of the students were male and six of the groups were graduate students. They were from disciplines ranging from Education, Counseling, Psychology, English, First Nations Studies, Social Work, and Gender Studies. They had from zero years of activism to 20+ years of activism. There were 3 who self identified as First Nations or Métis. There were (anecdotally) 3 immigrants. Only two or three identified as having a substantive background in art.

It is significant that though the students were in fact exploring their own topics of interest, rather than a specifically posed question as was the case at the shelter, many of the themes were the same. An argument could be made that due to the fact that most of these students are coming from “caring” professions, they have priorities similar to those of the homeless women. The fact that most of the students chose to use the week to explore areas of personal interest or self care, the parallels are significant in the context of solidarity and hegemonic resistance. They were as enthusiastic about creativity/auto ethnography as a research method that all but one student consented to have their final presentation videotaped and gave permission for use in this project.

Northern Women's Conference Quesnel. BC, April 17-19, 2009

A third group which has come to be tangentially included in the voices and visions project is a demographic of social justice activists ranging in age from 18 to 70. The Northern Women's Conference invited women from a variety of walks to converge and focus on violence against women, poverty, housing and addictions. These were considered to be the issues of highest concern to northern women, as based on a needs assessment questionnaire that was distributed to women from the Yukon Territory to 100Mile House, BC (<http://www.whrm.ca/aprenews309.html>).

Over 150 women attended and approximately thirty attended the self care workshop, which was modeled after the AWAC sessions. The participants were invited to create collages in the context of their worst and best days/moments of working on the margins for marginalized women. The data is less specific here, due to the fact that participants were invited as an after thought, to give their thoughts about the process. A video recording was made, with permission of the women, by a local television station, but efforts to procure the tape have been unsuccessful. As a result, only survey questionnaires and anecdotal evidence in the form of notes were available for data. Perhaps most heartbreaking to me was a woman who, after working quietly for the entire session, rose to leave at the end and said, "Thank you, I would like to give you these. You may use them for your project." The one below is the first, a common example of women who come to social justice activism through the rabid jaws of experience though it is unknown as to whether or not the poems are autobiographical:

My Song was Born
A wretched Birth
No one can run away from
The tunes of inner girth. . .

Almost die by the sword
Stabbed into my jellied brain
Sometimes I believe I lived
Sometimes I know I was slain. . .

“Pull down your pants” (underwear too
Humiliation boils, shame brews
Hurting lil children cuz you hate self
Makes toxic multi generational stews. . . .

Who the fuck are those Daddies??
And why didn’t they stay
And they run around cravin breast milk
In their insatiable way. . .

Due to the fact that the explicit purpose of the workshop was actually self care and that the comments and images are biased in that direction, only a few responses from the survey form do relate directly to the over arching questions of creative process as an alternative voice and a method of theorizing.

For many women who work with marginalized populations the overwhelming task of managing the deluge of human need can be exhausting. With families to care for as well, there is little time for self care or clarification of the causes of the need for this grinding effort on their part. Though some of them initially did not take the process seriously, they found that the process clarified for them why they do the work, allowed them to process deep, “almost primal” emotions and realize that “verbal communication is not the only means of communication, especially if you already feel belittled by society” (K.P, Quesnel, BC, April 18, 2009). A woman named R concurred, when she wrote, “I believe that it can replace speech and can be felt at a different level. . . seems

more approachable. A woman who signed her survey form by her secret name said, “from inside to revelation, from incubation to its Sundance time on the Praries!!! Renewal” (Quesnel, April 18, 2009).

Discussion

I should state again, that this project was designed for the women accessing AWAC. The project was never intended to consider a comparison of other demographics. The eagerness of the women in the UNBC student group and in the group of social justice activists to share their experiences led me to some interesting observations. The most significant observation of all was the commonalities in themes between the three groups despite the diversity of the overall population. The themes were not analyzed quantitatively due to the fact that the data was not collected in a consistent fashion; however, the nature of the similarities does deserve some attention because interesting questions arise from them. Nineteen general themes emerged from the combined groups but the discussion here will be limited to the most significant.

Reconnection with family/self

Emily, a social justice advocate from the Quesnel Conference, wrote that she felt “emotional [at the end of the art session] because of the close connection made with my child who is in great grandmother’s care”. Judging by the significant number of individuals in all three groups who included images/representations of family either as a dominant subject or as an additive, familial connection or loss thereof seems to be significant in how individuals cope with/in the world.

Additionally, the creative process, however disorderly, seemed to help individuals realign their personal priorities, notions of self, reflections on goals and place in family histories particularly in relation to the men (especially perpetrators of abuse) in their lives. Some women envisioned romantic relationships based on equality after recording abusive/dark relationships from the past. Victims came to see themselves as proactive participants in the present; activists came to re-realize the importance of the day to day hegemonic resistance that is so exhausting and heart breaking.

Stereotypes

Social roles such as ‘mother’, ‘homeless person’ , ‘perpetrator’ and “woman = nature” were often portrayed in stereotypical fashion, even though the lived reality was different. For example, individuals often portrayed mothers as loving caregivers, even though the verbal story/interview (sometimes in the form of text in the image) attached to the image was not necessarily the congruent. Debbie, an AWAC client, represented her mother with a black and white image of a mother cheerfully serving her family dinner, but told me in an interview that her mother called her names, and her family was an alcoholic nightmare.

Anna used insects to represent the homeless, “because that’s what the public views homeless people as just pests” (April 1, 2009 Interview). She continues on, saying ‘Well, “we hear you” with the X across it basically says that people don’t hear well.’ People that are trained to revitalize downtown aren’t listening to the people that live down here . . . want basically what city hall wants not what the people who live here want.” An activist who portrayed a theoretical instance of sexual abuse as a way of

exploring a potential research topic regarding why women find themselves in survival sex had a visceral and emotional reaction to the image she created. So much so that she had to leave the room, because she thought she might be ill.

Often women associated nature and femininity in contexts of care giving and spirituality. The common association in the three groups recalled Sherry Ortner's article, "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974). The connection reinforced for me the power of socialization and culturally ascribed associations.

Participants often commented visually and verbally on the reality of expectations, which in a way relates back to stereotypes. Good daughter, good mother, good woman, good wife/husband, etc., all create pressure for the individuals who exist within the parameters as well as those living on the outside who try desperately to fit into those stereotypes. This is exemplified by Lilith's comment that it is impossible for aboriginal women to be seen as beautiful, not only because they do not fit the western aesthetic definition of beauty, but also because they are often unable to shake the negative stereotypes around sexuality and social impropriety which are related to the high numbers of aboriginal women who work in survival sex.

A social justice activist from the Quesnel session noted that "I generally observe, because of my work, how other participants choose the media/supplies/materials available. The choosing is a part of the process in addition to the final product/piece. It is also a process that often challenges the fears of making a mess or causing disorder. This is a wonderful challenge to society's expectations of us" (April 18, 2009).

Solidarity

As mentioned before, it was noted among all three groups that the creative process was transformative in context of building a community out of a group of strangers in a very short time. Comments such as “Circled us UP where we belong!” Meequetah (Quesnel, April 18, 2009); “I love the connections and conversations in a room full of women expressing themselves (RC, survey, May 12, 2009). A participant/observer at AWAC journaled:

I feel privileged. Safe. Potent. Effective. At peace and in my element. Feel proud of our collective evolution. I’m liking it that Lillith has returned too (her and Anna don’t live here but come just for the art). There are spaces of tenderness. Among women and between them and us and tenderness for self. Conversations of forgiveness (ST, February 15, 2009).

Another entry on the same day showed that solidarity does not necessarily mean a sense of safety:

People using false names rather than their real names, (which we know from working in the shelter) and multiple spaces of “owning” or “protecting” selves. People here do not introduce themselves to each other or ask names (ST, February 15, 2009).

Nor it seems do they give each other up when they know false names are being used. Susan Bellamy’s observation (in Bell & Klein, 1996) that the transformative processes in which women engaged in through creative communities did not continue outside of those communities seemed to be somewhat accurate in that there were no dramatic shifts in general behaviour or risk reduction; however, I am not convinced that the awareness gained through the process does not lead to personal growth and the potential for change.

Self Awareness

Significantly, nearly every participant in all three groups felt that the creative process allowed them access to their own answers. As one academic so aptly quipped, “artifact=art + I +facts. Art can help me learn facts about myself that I am afraid of; don’t want to know, but in a way that is gentle” (Quesnel, April 18, 2009). Anna from AWAC noted that “sometimes people need to see the truth in order to see how bad their decisions are” (April 1, 2009 Interview). It follows that knowledge can set the foundation for action as mental and emotional process are objectified, reframed and internalized in a different context.

Emotions

Through my own professional and personal experience, I have learned that the creative process is often cathartic, ergo my reasoning to have a clinical supervisor on hand for the most vulnerable women participating. There was general agreement among all three groups that creative process was a good way to process emotions ranging from anger to hope to sadness. Anna commented that “It’s a good idea cuz basically it’s a good way to get what you want off your chest in an artist way” (Interview, April 1, 2009). A really significant observation about differences in emotional processing was that the student group was far more emotional than either of the other groups. In 10 weeks, there was not a single incident of tears in the AWAC group, though righteous anger periodically emerged. In Quesnel, the women’s emotion seemed to be an outlet for stress overloads but only one woman was openly emotional in the two days of the workshops.

The students on the other hand were extremely emotional-frustrated at the process or life events, angry about injustice to them or others, grieving lost loved ones, personal injury, or foreshadowed loss. There were tears every day of the course; however, the creative process seemed to mend as much as it unexpectedly unraveled in these blossoming intellectuals.

Unfortunately, the internalized oppression of creative women still manifests in reluctance by many phenomenologically expressive women to refer to themselves as artists whether their work is explicitly resistive or not. In her auto-biography, Through the Flower (2006, p. 65), Judy Chicago wrote, “How could I make my voice heard, have access to the channels of society that allow one’s work to be visible, and be myself as a woman?” The reality is not much different now for the average “privileged” artist, let alone women who are further handicapped by mental illness, addictions, and chronic homelessness, and the stereotypes that accompany these handicaps.

A significant obstacle to the acceptance of creative work by marginalized artists is the misconception that a lack of formal education necessarily precludes the ability to theorize and communicate the product of that understanding. Willingness to creatively employ alternative languages (music, art, drama, etc) and alternative spaces to articulate one’s place in the world and to express, by making one’s self and one’s own experience the subject of one’s own gaze is a powerful and empowering act (Bartky, 1990). It also grants access by others to the powerful knowledge within each artist. An elderly woman who attended the Northern Women’s Conference gave me a hand written note after listening to the women in the room talk about the collages they had created:

I must greatly appreciate all of your time. It's being very overwhelming; I know more about the needs of each individual. Thank you.

Sincerely

P. L. P.

It is with deep gratitude that I close this chapter with a second poem by the beautiful, anonymous woman in Quesnel who also wrote the poem on page 87:

My Drum is a hollow nest
Full of resonance

Empty Dreams
Secret horrors
Sprinkled with seeds to stop the bleeding
The marrow is still sweet
inside of me
Just like a honey comb Home
Struggling, churning, never stagnant
Bursting, busting, thrusting, I Renew
Soil 'oh Precious Earth
I want to eat you
 breath you
 beseech you
 be a connecting pulse
Hand me my measure
Embrace me my wealth!

CONCLUSION

At the Vancouver Peace Summit on September 29, 2009, I had the honor of listening to two separate panel discussions which were loosely based on the theme of “Educating the Heart”. The basic motivating premise of these conversations between such notables as His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, Eckert Tolle, Sir Ken Robinson, Murray Gell-Mann, Maidread Maguire and Stephen Covey was that creativity and the nurturing of creativity is basic to the formation of a more compassionate and altruistic global community. The group eloquently argued that it is only through the internalization of these values that we can raise leaders who will not “stumble on the future” (Sir Ken Robinson). Inherent in these ideas of compassion and altruism is the idea that all voices matter, that the elimination of the dichotomy between “us” and “them” and that the “I” must be located in the “we”. It is on these premises that this project was conceived more than two years ago.

At the most basic level, my question was answered: the women at AWAC did contribute to my academic understanding of marginality through their stories, their conversations and most importantly through their art. There were women who theorized about the over arching structures of oppression along with the women whose personal stories gave examples of how oppression has affected their lives.

Art and activism have been “relating” for a few decades now, and it is not surprising that the results of this project have been similar to a number of others (Felshin 1995; Barndt , 2006; Cooper and Sjostrom, 2006; Clover and Stalker, 2007). Along with answering the original question, the creative process itself has done a number of things which have the potential for positive long term results as well as the short term benefits

we already see. Anecdotal reports by staff indicate that the collective creative process in the agency setting reduced conflict (in the shelter setting) for hours after the session, increased solidarity among the participants and improved morale in all of the settings. On an individual level, there was self reported improved affect in all of the participants (either increased happiness/satisfaction or decreased stress), increased pre-planning in all groups to the effect that behaviours were changed so as to increase the possibility of future participation. This was most stark among the alcohol and crack cocaine users. Perhaps most valuable for future research was the increased clarity regarding personal and cultural identity. This directly impacted the individuals, the groups as a whole and also public perception of the marginalized women which resulted in break down of stereotypes.

The process has created connections between a numbers of diverse players. Clients who do not usually interact help each other and socialize in the environment of the actual sessions themselves, as well as finding the experience itself along with some additional empathy in common outside of the sessions. Clients and researchers connected in a new, respectful and empathetic way, both changing and adding to the knowledge of the other in a symbiotic process. Reports of the participant observers, the women themselves and by the reports of participants to staff, conversations that transpired where honest, empathetic, respectful inquiries into the realities of women as a group and as individuals.

The atmosphere created by this honest communication also created a space for healing; women articulated stories of trauma and somehow transformed the tragedies, into sacred wounds. They witnessed each others' experience with compassion and

integrity. It was not as though we did not articulate our outrage and hurt and sadness for those who had been hurt, but somehow the environment created a softness and strength in which to hold the experiences. At the same time, it was a place of transformation as strife, angst, danger and pain fell away in the face of ringing laughter, quiet comfort, tragic stories and chocolate.

The works themselves created a venue for communication at a number of levels. Personal narratives were paramount in the project as each woman said, “This is who I am.” Some of those works also became explicitly political messages, as a few of the women stepped out of personal narrative into a theoretical critique.

The works themselves and the process of having an exhibition, even the scaled down version with which I have begun this process is beginning to create connections between the women and the community at large as it erodes the perceptions of women who live on the street. I am looking forward with great anticipation, to presenting this work at the community level, and giving it the recognition and celebration that it deserves.

Art has allowed us, in our collective curiosity, to ask who we are, why we have been pushed to the side, why we lash out. Yes, it is a distraction from the reality of everyday, but it is also a way to talk about the everyday in a language that is difficult to ignore because it bypasses the logic center of the brain. This process has allowed us an outlet for frustration and pain but it has also offered a space for the expression of hope and joy.

Hopefully, a long term connection has been made between AWAC and the University of Northern British Columbia. The two organizations are in a wonderful position to participate in an academic and grass roots collaboration in research that contributes to decolonization. I am confident that the findings from this small project will contribute to a case for funding, that the women and the overall community may continue to benefit in concrete ways as we continue to include and encourage the voices of the women who live on the edge as we edge toward a larger movement of inclusion and inquiry. Other graduate students have been inspired by the authenticity of the women's participation and have chosen to continue the project with questions related to their own interests. A course in arts based research has been initiated at UNBC as a direct result of the success of this project, and a variety of creativity circles have been seeded in a variety of academic, community and social justice contexts.

It has been an unusual project in a number of ways. Throughout the year, there have been issues of dual relationships such as supervisor/student/participant (as in the case of Dr. Transken and myself) and ex-employee/researcher (as in my case), boundary crossings with regards to roles in the project. Doubt and frustration could have derailed the project at any time due to withdrawal of participants, uncertain/preconcieved numbers of participants, etc., but successful resolution of these issues led to an unexpected complexity and potential for ongoing benefits for the women who access AWAC, for graduate students at UNBC and for the community as a whole.

This process of theoretical analysis with its attenuating discussion of meaning, hegemonic resistance, obstacles to resistance, and transformation will hopefully lead to an increased understanding and appreciation by the community, academia and the women

themselves, as to how women who identify as marginalized theorize about their lives. Doing so allows a transcendence of limitations with respect to socially constructed marginalization. It is important that the power of hegemonic critique is taken into account in order to create a richer, deeper understanding of women's experiences and to appreciate the incredible potential for social transformation. This transformation must necessarily acknowledge the powerful contributions of every woman simply because we each stand alone at a unique intersection of oppression and potential. Creative process allows access to intellectuality and the construction of understanding in ways that may not otherwise be accessible to vulnerable women, and which also creates a venue for collaborative communication between those women and the artist researchers who are trying to make a difference in the dynamics of the community.

This project has reinforced what countless other "artist" projects have experienced in the past: that art creates connections between individuals, organizations and communities, and that it creates spaces for empowerment, healing and communication. It could be strengthened by a quantitative component, perhaps statistics regarding decreases in incidents of violence, number of substance users participating, etc. I am inspired to continue this project at the doctoral level as I see that with the integration of courage, wisdom and wit, the women at AWAC used creativity to tell stories, theorize about the structures which shape their lives and most importantly, allowed their contributions to become a part of the larger conversations about life on the edge.



Fig. 14. “Saoirse”, (8” x 8”), multi-media on canvas by the author. This work is the concluding piece in a series which explores the nebulous journey of healing and personal growth which hopefully culminates in integration. The title, “Saoirse”, is a gaelic word which translates to “freedom.”

My Drum is a hollow nest
 Full of resonance

Empty Dreams
 Secret horrors
 Sprinkled with seeds to stop the bleeding
 The marrow is still sweet
 inside of me

Just like a honey comb Home
 Struggling, churning, never stagnant
 Bursting, busting, thrusting, I Renew
 Soil ‘oh Precious Earth
 I want to eat you
 breath you
 beseech you
 be a connecting pulse
 Hand me my measure
 Embrace me my wealth!

--Anonymous author

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APPENDIX A: Art Workshop Consent Form

Located at Association Advocating for Women and Children, 144 George Street, Prince George, BC

Dahne Harding, MA Candidate, Gender Studies

I understand that Zandra Dahne Harding, who is a UNBC student is conducting art sessions and oral interviews as part of her studies leading to a Masters of Arts in Gender Studies. The purpose of the interview is to collect information to construct a visual and oral expression of the participants' experiences of marginality that will assist in understanding the gap between theoretical descriptions of marginality and the actual lived experiences of the women who access AWAC.

I understand that I was chosen as a participant in this study because I have self identified as a marginalized woman. I will be interviewed by the student based on a series of (4) open-ended questions and by my participation in the art sessions Material generated in the interview and art sessions will be used as primary data for a thesis project.

1. This consent is given on the understanding that Zandra Dahne Harding will use her best efforts to guarantee that my identity is protected and my confidentiality maintained, both directly and indirectly, and that this information will be used solely for the purpose of this research project. I do this freely and understand that I may terminate the interview or my participation in the art sessions at any point and can withdraw from the research process at any time.
2. I understand and agree that the information I have given to Zandra Dahne Harding in our interview(s) of the following date(s), _____ will be treated in the following manner:
 - (a) hand written notes and or tape recording will be taken during our discussion
 - (b) this data will be stored securely by Zandra Dahne Harding , only in a secure location in her private residence or in a locker in the Teaching and Learning Center at UNBC.
 - (c) the data will be used only by Zandra Dahne Harding , and only for her thesis project; Dr. Si Transken will also have access to the material for supervisory purposes.
 - (d) the data will either be turned in to Dr. Si Transken to be shredded at the end of this project, or will be returned to me in December 2009, as indicated here.
3. I understand that if I have any comments or concerns I can contact Dr. Si Transken at 250-960-6643, or the Vice President Research, UNBC at 960-5820.
4. A copy of this agreement will be retained by all parties to the interview.
NAME: _____ SIGNED: _____ DATE: _____
RESEARCHER: _____ SIGNED: _____

APPENDIX B : Information Sheet

ART SESSIONS

- Art sessions will be held once a week (Sunday 1-3pm) in the activity room at AWAC. Anyone is welcome and you may leave at any time.
- You may create what ever project you like and/or you may bring your own to the session.
- This is a research project, but you do not have to share your work or your stories if you do not want to.
- You may participate in the interview process regarding art you made, , however, this is not required for you to make art.
- Confidentiality is impossible to maintain due to the group format, however, care will be taken to respect anonymity outside of the working group.
- **Consent forms need only be signed at the first session attended. Completion of survey questions or contribution of story directly to a researcher will constitute consent at all sessions thereafter.**

What Happens in an Art Session?

- **Introduction of researcher and project**
- **Hand out consent forms to newcomers**
- **Presentation regarding project of the day/invitation to work freely with materials provided**
- **Closing discussion about work produced**
- **Completion of questionnaires verbally or in writing; recording of stories for those who would like.**
- **Invitation to return the following week**

DATA

- **Will consist of photographs and stories told by the participants of the art group. You can withdraw work, stories or actual participation at anytime.**

EXHIBITION OF WORK

Any participant who is interested, may participate in an exhibition of work during homelessness Awareness Week, October 2009. If you are interested in participating, you may leave your name with the Outreach Worker at AWAC, or let the researcher know directly. Reminders will be posted at AWAC in September.

Photographs of art and recordings of stories will be taken only with permission of the artist. All photos and stories will be returned to the artists by December 2009.