

apihkêw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)

by

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apihkêw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)

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Abstract

The exhibition *apihkêw* (s/he braids) consists of the installation, *The Length of Grief: The Daughters of Métis Mothers*. The installation consists of video, audio, two aluminum prints, a log, and a sod of prairie grass. *apihkêw* investigates the female body and ancestral narratives in relation to land. Methodologies and epistemologies of a land based research journey, Cree and Métis world views, Cree language, and an examination of inwardness were employed in the writing of this thesis and in the making of the creative work. The stories and contributions of Métis women's lives and experiences are often omitted from Métis history and culture. The paper and exhibition present personal, familial, and ancestral narratives in order to explore Indigenous feminism and Indigenous concepts of time as they relate to the strength and resilience of Métis women and artistic practices.

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Dedication

Dedicated to the women of my family.

Chapter 1 Introduction

tân'si Amy Malbeuf nitisîyihkâson âpihtawikosisâniskwêw nîya ekînihtâwikiyân amiskwacîwaskahikanihk ohci nîya Rich Lake, Alberta. Evelyn Cook ni-mama nehiyaw-âpihtawikosisân ekwa opîtatowew ekwa Jim Malbeuf ni-papa michif. ninisitohten nehiyawewin apsis.

Hello, my name is Amy Malbeuf. I am a Métis woman, born in Edmonton, from Rich Lake, Alberta. Evelyn Cook is my Mother she is Cree, Métis, and Ukrainian and Jim Malbeuf is my Father he is Métis. I understand the Cree language a little bit.

I begin this thesis by introducing myself in nêhiyawêwin, the Cree language, as Cree ways of knowing are an important part of who I am, how I come to know, and, of most relevance to this thesis, an intrinsic element of my artistic practice. Through out this thesis I will utilize many Cree, Métis, and other Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. In reading Poka Laenui's "Processes of Decolonization" I was reminded of the very first time I directly put voice and tears to the effects of colonization on my life. I will not share the the explicit details or the entire reasons of my grief in that moment but I will share that a small part of the emptiness I felt had to do with my disconnection to the Cree language. My Grandfather, whom I saw everyday as a child, spoke Cree and Michif fluently yet I did not hear either language once from him.¹ I did not know that he even spoke those languages until after he passed on. I am uncertain about my Grandmother's relationship to the Cree language but I know she descends from Cree-speaking peoples. Neither of my parents speak Cree or Michif, but they were taught English by their parents who understood these languages so the English was passed down embedded with Cree values and beliefs. The more I come to know the Cree language, the more I realize I already know the the language, as I already hold the world view and some of the structure of the Cree language within my understanding of English. I have spent the past few years trying to learn the language as much as possible. I am not a fluent speaker or writer of the Cree language but I am

¹ Michif is language spoken by Métis peoples and dialects vary from region to region. The dialect my Grandfather spoke is approximately 20% French origins and 80% Cree origins.

committed to learning and that is why strands of Cree language and epistemologies are woven through out this thesis work.

In many Cree and Métis world views, knowledge originates with the land. It is this way of knowing that has informed my creative practice and the research for this thesis. Drawing on the methodology of Indigenous scholars such as Kathleen Absolon and Cam Willet, who envision the research process as a journey, I made a physical journey in which I visited with the land in several sites my ancestors inhabited. I have also utilized Neal McLeod's concept of "Cree Narrative Memory" in both the physical journeys across the land and the creation of this paper. It was through this physical journey that I realized all the knowledge I wanted to explore was already within my inner space and thus turned to thinkers such as Willie Ermine and Neal McLeod to illustrate these ideas.

Chapter 2 mestakay (a single strand of hair)

2.1 The Grandmother Ancestors

“One cannot maintain a distinct identity without knowing the past; one will simply have a distorted sense of one’s place in the world, shifted and transformed by a colonized understanding of the world wherein the memories and narratives of ancient ancestors are shrouded.” (McLeod 92)

This thesis is a part of my own process of decolonization in which I have attempted to remove what I am calling “the shroud of the Grandmother Ancestors,” that is, an uncovering of what has previously been concealed. I am a result of all the ancestors before me; my Grandmother Ancestors live in my veins. This thesis was created to acknowledge my matrilineal ancestors as it is their story that does not get told in history books.

I wish to name the Métis Grandmother Ancestors of whom this thesis is about: Vivian Whitford, Olena Whitford, Edith Whitford, Charlotte Henderson, Rachel Bangs, Jessie Cardinal Kepeztah, Lizette Cardinal, Mary Nancy Spence, Christiana (Cree), Elizabeth Anderson, Christiana Whitford, Mary Ann Desmarais, Mary Henderson, Charlotte Garston Yorkstone, Christiana Spence, Frances Thomas, Sarah Sally Atkinson, Liza Laliberte, Elizabeth Bourdon Brabant, Virginie Fisher, Marie Ross, Mary Robillard Lagmodiere, Charlotte (Indian), Sarah Short, Bethsy (Saulteaux), Marguerite Allard, Marguerite Chalifoux, Marguerite Laframboise, Josephette (Assiniboine), Marguerite (Saulteaux). These are the names that I know of my Grandmother Ancestors; many others have had their lives recorded with labels such as Indian wife, Indian unknown, Métis, etc. There are also many Grandmother Ancestors whose names are beyond memory, whose names are unknown, or whose histories I have not yet discovered. I do not know very much about any of these Grandmother Ancestors, but I feel them in blood and I wish I knew their stories. It is because of their forgotten stories that I have shared a small part of my story.

The artwork I have created, *apihkêw* (s/he braids) *The Length of Grief: The Daughters of Métis Mothers*, “imagines the future within the context of present experiences and past

histories” (Hopkins et al.). Although much of the development of our “past histories” is due to the creative output of women, it is this part of history that does not get told. Through this exhibition and writing I access my personal, familial, and ancestral narratives to tell my story as a Métis woman. I am indebted to the writings of Settee, Maracle, and Green for their critique of the colonial writing of Indigenous women’s history and lives. Settee in particular has illuminated the important concept of *Âhkamêyimowak*, “or persistence, that provides the strength for women to carry on in the face of extreme adversity. *Âhkamêyimowak* is a Cree word and embodies the strength that drives women to survive, flourish, and work for change within their communities” (p III). *Âhkamêyimowak* provides the context for exploring Indigenous feminism as the recognition of the strength of Indigenous women. Indigenous feminism is the need to restore Indigenous women’s importance back into our own cultures, histories, and contemporary lives due to the diminution of our significance through the imposition of violent colonial and patriarchal structures over Indigenous bodies and lands for generations. I explore Indigenous feminism as it relates to Indigenous women’s art practice, with a particular focus on the strength and resilience of Métis women’s identity and culture.

The installation is an envisioning of the future of Métis arts practice through investigating the female body and ancestral narratives in relation to land. The artwork depicts the living descendants of Métis women whose lives and histories have been intentionally forgotten. I am interested in how traditional Métis art forms may be activated beyond representations of the present and be used as a means to envision the future potential of not only the art forms, but Métis culture at large. How can representing the strength of Indigenous women in creative practices assist with grieving and healing processes within the context of decolonization? These are the questions and concepts that I explore throughout the visual and written components of this thesis: *apihkêw: The Length of Grief*.

2.2 knowing the land/the land knowing

As an Indigenous method of contextualizing knowledge it is imperative to locate myself and my history. I grew up on a beef and wheat farm in Rich Lake which is the County of Lac La Biche,

Alberta. It is Treaty 6 territory which includes the traditional land bases of Cree, Dene, Métis, Nakota Sioux, and Saulteaux peoples, including my Mother's people. My parents' farm is approximately fifty kilometers away from the town of Lac La Biche and the nearest neighbors are about a kilometer away. It is where the prairie meets the boreal forest. It is a mixture of open fields, dense bush, small lakes, and muskeg. Growing up, this was my playground and this was the place where I came to know. It is in the many quiet contemplative moments either alone or with family on this land that I developed understanding and appreciation of the land. My parents taught me to respect the land and all living things, that the land is sustenance and to never abuse it or take too much from it. My mother always taught me to revel in the beauty of the land and sky and the natural processes of life. It is through observing and witnessing the way my parents interacted with the land that they passed down their knowledge. This is a knowledge that was not often spoken of as it was and is a knowledge that they embody. It was through observing the way my parents interacted with the land and all beings that they passed down this knowledge that was shared by example.

Though Métis and Cree values were expressed culturally in my family, there was no sense of pride or cultural recognition as to what being Métis meant in our home. I always knew that I was Métis but it was never directly discussed growing up. My Mother is half Ukrainian and any cultural pride was directed towards that part of my heritage. Reflecting on my younger years now my parents joke with me: "We tried to make you Ukrainian but you turned out Métis!". This joke is mostly in regards to the time they enrolled me in Ukrainian dance lessons and, as a five year old, I protested by Métis jigging in a corner by myself at Malanka (Ukrainian New Year celebrations)! I was protesting the singularity of celebrating one part of my cultural heritage over another part. I embrace all of my ancestry. In addition to this, there was rare opportunity to realize my identity through difference as many people in the region are Métis. In my young, colonized mind, the presence of Métis Settlements made me think that I was not Métis or not Métis enough. It is not until I was sixteen years old that I began to consciously grasp what it meant to be Métis. This was when I started asking my parents questions about being Métis and it was then that I had the opportunity to be a part of cultural camps and spend time with Elders. One of the most formative times was a summer student job I had as a part of the Aboriginal Junior Forest Rangers, a program for Non-Status and Métis youth. It was not this program itself

but a few moments and happenings during the program that had a significant impact on me. As a part of this program we spent some time at Métis Crossing along the North Saskatchewan River near Smoky Lake, Alberta during the time it was being launched as a cultural centre. As students in the program we assisted with preparing the site for the summer gathering. We also received cultural teachings and did beadwork. As a disengaged teenager I did not pay attention or care for the cultural teachings as much as I should have. But one thing I do remember very clearly is feeling a sense of ease on that land, understanding that land, and knowing that the land understood me. I was uncertain as to what this feeling was at the time and it was not until over ten years later that I understood what had happened to me then. It was long after the fact that I realized these were the river lots lived upon by my maternal Great-Grandparents and my Great-Great-Grandparents and who attended the school at Victoria Settlement. When I realized this I instantly remembered the land knowing me and I knowing it when I was a teenager. I have felt this very same feeling at many places along the physical journey that I took as a part of this thesis research and at many other moments in my life.

Even more striking, in learning about the location of my Great and Great Great Grandparents' river lots is that the time in which they lived is within very recent history. Their lives exist in the memory of people who are still living today but it is the project of ongoing colonial violence from which the "obliteration of memory was a deliberate strategy of oppression" (Smith 147). This explains my interest in recalling the histories of my ancestors, particularly the Grandmother Ancestors and the relearning of the Cree language in order to contextualize these histories. I want to remember my ancestors not as a means to connect to "a golden past but more specifically to the re-membering in terms of connecting bodies with places and experience, and, importantly people's responses to that pain" (Smith 147). It was this need to remember my ancestors and my deep connection to the land which prompted me to conduct a land-based research journey to connect to other ancestral lands that I had not yet to know.

I set out on a physical trip to follow my ancestors' diaspora through various locals across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. It was my hope and ambition to connect to some of my ancestral homelands in order to engage with the repositories of unrealized narratives. I, along with my husband, visited places where my ancestors inhabited — places where they were born,

lived, married, passed away, and cemeteries where they were buried. We also visited the rivers and the waterways that connected all these places as they once were the main mode of transportation. We started in Winnipeg and drove, following the route of the diaspora of my Father's ancestors, from Winnipeg to St. Francois Xavier to Portage La Prairie to the Qu'appelle Valley. On the way to Duck Lake I decided to stop into Batoche as it is nearby. After visiting Batoche, after what just happened to be my second time there in less than a month, I could not continue. I was emotionally exhausted from the process of visiting cemeteries and then finally the battlefield and cemetery at Batoche where many of my ancestral relations fought or died during the final battle between the Métis Provisional Government and the Canadian Government in 1885 also known as e-mayahkamikahk (where it went wrong). Afterwards, I decided to spend more time with the living and drove straight to my parents' farm. I drove past many places I had intended to stop but could not continue onto any longer and instead visited with my living relations, my family in the Lac La Biche area.

After this journey was finished, I realized that this method was incredibly flawed. I realized that I was tackling something much larger than the scope of this thesis project could allow. I could not possibly process all the emotions and teachings learned from visiting the land and then convey this knowledge through an artwork within such a short time frame. Also, much research needs to be done about the stories and lives of my ancestors and the specific histories of many of the communities they inhabited. There are readily available histories about some historical communities, but like many aspects of Métis peoples' histories, many have been forgotten. Many places do not exist any more. To attempt to convey the complex histories of these places and the people that inhabited them without several years of research would do their narratives an injustice. This approach is further flawed because it was not physically possible to visit all the places my ancestors inhabited between Winnipeg and Lac La Biche within the allotted time frame. In addition to this, to start in Winnipeg is to denounce a much longer history of my ancestors and is disrespectful of my ancestors lineages that are thousands of years deep into Turtle Island, England, France, Scotland, and Ukraine.

Despite not utilizing much of the knowledge gathered on the research journey in this thesis, it was the trip on the land itself that made me receptive to recognizing that "Aboriginal

epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self” (Ermine 108). I became aware that what I needed to know to create, what I needed to create, was already apart of who I am. Ermine writes: “knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing” (108). It is in this way that I see the research journey as an experience that enabled me to become “receptive to knowing”. I am the knowledge of all of my ancestors combined and in order for me to mamâhtâwisiyihitapicikêyân ôtê-nîkânihk or ‘tap into the powers to conceptualize the future’ I had to first trust my mamâhtâwisowin or ‘exercise my own inwardness’. It was then that I realized that to express the resiliency of my Grandmother Ancestors in this artwork, I must do it through the physical embodiment of contemporary Métis women.

2.3 Fulfilling the “Prophetic Obligation”?

Métis history has been predominantly written by non-Métis men about Métis men. Recent Métis scholarship has begun to address this race and gender imbalance, but the prevailing histories privilege men’s history. Much of the development of our past histories is due to the creative output and labour of women, women’s part of history does not get told. The historic Métis people, my ancestors included, is one of the most well documented nations in the world; however, “While there is considerable information about the men, little is known or recorded about the women they married” (Green 163) with few exceptions. For most Canadians, and even for Métis people themselves, their understandings or scope of Métis histories is limited to one man and one event — Louis Riel and the Northwest Resistance of 1885. Riel’s life and events associated with e-mayahkamikahk have overshadowed the way in which Métis people define themselves but also how we are defined by others. Though this is an incredibly important part of Métis history and has very much shaped who we are in our present experiences it should not be the only history that stipulates who we are as we have much more that defines us. Riel recognized the importance of Métis women within our society yet our culture is so obsessed with him that we only discuss him and the men around him, but never the women’s involvement with these events or any other part of our history or culture. In response to some of Riel’s writing Farrell Racette reflects: “What struck me was the importance of women in his personal life, his

belief system, his symbology. He saw the Métis nation as a woman. He saw death as a beautiful Métis seductress. During his final weeks in a prison cell in Regina, a pregnant Métis woman appeared to comfort him” (52). This is one of few examples in which Riel's perspectives of women is written about. Our history, identity, and culture, including our material culture, has been shaped through the women of our nation and this continues on in our contemporary society. This has been largely undocumented except through the evidence of our historical material culture which has been largely produced by women. But like the historical material culture from most other Indigenous nations the artists' names were rarely recorded, contributing to the erasure of Métis women from all aspects of history.

In Garneau's essay “Contemporary Métis Art, Prophetic Obligation, and The Individual Talent”, he discusses at length the “prophetic obligation” from Louis Riel: “My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back” (n.p.). This quote has been widely used as inspiration for Indigenous artists and cultural workers internationally, yet as Garneau mentions in his footnotes, the source of it is unknown which has caused some to be critical of this quotation. Regardless, its widespread use proves it to be motivational for our people and other Indigenous peoples. Garneau states: “Riel casts artists as warriors and sages. If it is the ‘artists who give them their spirit back,’ then artists must either be sages, keepers of ‘the spirit’ during the century of sleep and are waiting for the right time to share it, or they do not have it and are warriors who must seek, capture, and share it as a boon. In either role, Riel mandates the artist to serve the community” (Garneau n.p.). In recent years there has been a shift, an awakening, towards more artists creating art form a Métis-specific context.

Contemporary Métis artists predominantly work in one of two ways. The first is an investigation of the past through replicating and mimicking designs, styles, and specific works from the past. The second is the making of work about broader concepts of Indigeneity as illuminated by Garneau: “There are ‘artworld‘ artists for whom being Métis is defining but not limiting. They tend to engage issues of aboriginality— post-colonial, stereotype smashing, Indigenous worldview-promoting etc. — but they rarely produce Métis-specific art, that is art whose subjects or designs are identifiably Métis” (n.p.). Métis artists are also often homogenized into First Nations art exhibitions. In addition to this, there have been only two exhibitions to date related

specifically to Métis art in Canada: in 1985 at the Glenbow Museum a largely ethnographic exhibition was mounted, and in 2011 at the Batoche Historical site an exhibition of Métis art entitled Resilience/Resistance: Métis Art 1880 – 2011. There has also been very little writing about contemporary Métis art as a whole. This lack of Métis specific art coupled with minimal writing about Métis art, along with a lack of criticality in our contemporary understanding of our own history affirms the necessity for Métis artists and cultural producers to create work that envisions the possibilities of our future trajectories both as individual artists but also as a collective. At the forefront of Métis artists creating “images that bring us to sight; stories that call us to mind; songs that sing us into being” (Garneau) are Métis women artists creating critical dialogue surrounding Métis identity and community.

There are many exemplary Métis women artists creating Métis specific art and working to keep our material culture vibrant. Some of these women have long established careers while others are emerging artists. These artists are creating works depicting Métis women’s lives, experiences, and bodies as sites of cultural investigations and who are utilizing traditional forms in new and innovative ways: Jaimie Koebel’s paintings and beadwork is imbued with Cree and Métis ways of knowing; Christi Belcourt keeps connections to floral motifs alive; Jennine Krauchi is known for exquisite floral beadwork but also for replicating artifacts to share age old designs with younger generations; Katherine Boyer utilizes the traditional floral motifs and images from satellite mapping to depict her ancestral lands and connections to territories; Dayna Danger boldly depicts nude Indigenous women through photography as a means to question gender roles and sexuality; Amanda Strong utilizes film and animation as a medium to convey narratives of indigenous womanhood; Jessie Short utilizes film and other media as a means to create critical dialogue about Métis identity and gender; Leah Marie Dorian has revived the Métis art form of lobster pole making which had been lost in some regions for over a hundred years²; Sherry Farrell Racette paints Métis history, histories that are often buried or unknown, filling important voids in our history as many of these lesser known histories are about the women of our nation. Tannis Neilson depicts herself and her ancestral connections through painting and video works. Of particular interest is her video work *not forgotten!* which depicts her Mother and

² A lobster pole is a type of territorial marking pole created from a single tree, in which symbols, stories, names, and dates are carved into the pole (<http://www.leahdorian.ca/pdf/Lobstick%20Article.pdf>).

Grandmother and examines Métis matrilineal ties and the “severe colonial policies that attempted to erase and obscure the existence of many Aboriginal peoples”(Dion Fletcher and Short 3). Rosalie Favell is an artist who has utilized herself and her family as the subject of much of her playful and critical photo and video based works. She often uses the collaging of family photographs with found imagery to convey complexities surrounding Métis identity. These diverse Métis women artists have storied, imaged, imagined, re-imagined and created works that convey a continuance of our Grandmother Ancestors lives and art forms. Their works are created from the histories and knowledge of our ancestors but within their contemporary contexts as Métis women. Because of the creative accomplishments of these women artists I am inspired to insert my own voice and familial/ancestral narratives into creative works that facilitate a future that is inclusive of Métis women’s voices, identities, ideas, and art forms.

2.4 Tuft Life

Caribou and moose hair embroidery have been done by Indigenous women in North America since time immemorial. In the late part of the nineteenth century what is now known as the contemporary form of tufting was “born around the Bouvier/Lafferty kitchen tables in Fort Providence NWT” (Farrell Racette) by three Métis women Catherine (Beaulieu) Bouvier, Celine Laviolette Lafferty, Madeleine (Mrs. Boniface) Lafferty. Celine Lafferty taught the art form to Sister Beatrice Leduc who used it in the residential school curriculum. It is in this way and through community and familial relations that tufting spread throughout the north. Tufting is an artistic process where “a small bunch of 20-25 moose hairs are placed on the working surface, usually black velvet backed with canvas, and is secured with a loop-stitch taken over the hair, one quarter inch from the end. The stitch is pulled tight and knotted, making the hair stand on end, forming a tuft. The hair is sculpted into smooth hemisphere shapes with scissors.” (Barkwell and Troupe 113). Images are created from repeating this process over and over again into a desired design. Historically designs were floral but have also included animals and landscapes. Another technique used with caribou hair is sculpturing or sculpting. A figure or design is drawn onto the back of a caribou hide in reverse. Then the design is cut out using a knife. Then scissors are used to relief carve the hair until the figure or design is apparent.

I learned tufting from Ruby Sweetman a Cree woman who is an expert in many Indigenous art forms from northern Alberta. Since learning in 2012 tufting has become a very important part of my arts practice and I have created many bodies of work utilizing the technique. Schenstead writes “Like many craft practices, tufting is often taught in person, by way of hands on and oral transmission. For many people, the stories shared while crafting is just as important as the techniques exchanged. This is how cultural knowledge is passed on from one person to another, from one generation to the next” (5). The connections made between people while learning tufting are just as important as learning the skill itself. Through sharing stories and laughter important cultural information and ideas are learned or re-affirmed. It is for this reason that teaching tufting and sharing it with others has also become a large part of my process. Tufting has become so important to my practice I had the words “tuft life” tattooed on my knuckles while writing this thesis. I did this partly as a joke but mainly as a reminder of my commitment to the art form and it is after this that this section is named.

At present, most often tufting artists depict simple floral motifs, animals, and sometimes landscapes. In the 1980s the Arctic Trading Company made available a kit that could be purchased to make a single framed floral tufting at home.³ This was initiated to encourage artists to continue the tradition of tufting as very few artists were tufting at the time. It was a successful endeavor as it prevented tufting from becoming a lost art but it popularized the petal flower so much that current tufting artists have been primarily repeating a five-petal floral image or other standardized designs. Though a petal flower is a prominent motif utilized in art forms by many Indigenous nations of North America it is not the only important floral design. Many of the contemporary designs are overly simplistic in comparison to many of the historical works from the early twentieth century. In addition, there is a limited number of Indigenous women artists practicing the art form of tufting and an even fewer number who have received any significant recognition for it. Due to the prominence of standardized designs and the minimal number of tufting practitioners in recent years there has been little innovation within the practice of hair tufting and sculpturing. It is for this reason that through my tufting practice I aim to expand the visual vocabulary of tufting.

³ This is widely known by many tufting artists and the kit is still available today from The Arctic Trading Co.

Through experimenting with support mediums, scale, and utilizing language and my own personal floral designs as content I aim to expand and further develop the art form of tufting. An example of an unprecedented tufting project I completed is the work *kayâs-ago* (2014). I utilized caribou hair sculpturing and tufting to create a large installation that consists of eighteen circular light panels ranging from one to three feet in diameter each. Each panel depicts hair tufted and sculptured quotes derived from Indigenous artists, academics, authors, friends, and family members and is an act of self-portraiture as well as a portrait of multifarious Indigenous people. The words are tufted in English, Cree, and Michif Languages. This work as a tufting is unparalleled in scale and support mediums. It is an accurate representation of my world, as a Métis woman artist at this moment in time. This moment being a time in our society where technologies, materials, and supplies are readily available and accessible. This moment where I speak English, really terrible Cree, and long to speak Michif. This moment in time when ideas, information, and connecting with people is incredibly accessible via the internet and social media. *kayâs-ago* is a reflection of my contemporary reality in relation to all other times. This thesis work is similar in that I am capturing this moment of grieving and healing and utilizing my own hair as the tufting medium. In order for hair tufting to have significant meaning for us in the present the art form must be envisioned and shaped to reflect contemporary ideas and issues, ensuring the future survivance, to use Vizenor's term, and continuance of this important Indigenous women's art form.



Figure 1 “kayâs-ago”, installation detail, sculptured and tufted caribou hair on light panels, 2014. Top left: R.W. Hill, 2 foot diameter, Top right: Otipemisiwak, 1 foot diameter, Bottom: L. Riel, 2 foot diameter.



Figure 2 “kayâs-ago”, ôma (this, non-animate), detail, sculptured and tufted caribou hair on light panels (un-illuminated), 2014.

2.5 apihkêw (s/he braids, s/he weaves, s/he knits)

Braids have been the subject of many Indigenous artists' works. Some notable works are da-ka-xeen Mehner's *My Indian Braid*, Jude Norris' *Braided Series* (2002-2008), and Nigit'stil Norbert's, *Representation* (2009). da-ka-xeen Mehner's *My Indian Braid* is part of a larger body of work titled *Blood Work*, in which the artist cut his braid off and presented it as an artifact. This body of work is an examination of the United States government's use of measuring blood quantum to regulate who can or cannot be a registered Indian. Jude Norris' works are braids composed of various materials, including wool, grass, rubber, and copper presented as sculptures or wall hangings. The braids are an expression of her spirituality and wellness from the context of a Plains Cree person. Gwichin artist Nigit'stil Norbert's video work features a stop motion depiction of a stereotypical Indian doll being bound and covered up as the artist's hair is unbraided. This work is an examination of colonial history, outward identity, and braids as "a physical representation and extension of our [First Nations] thought and of our spiritual essence, our strength" (Norris).

In 2014 I created the work *iamthecaribou/thecaribouisme* which features two braids on buckskin. It is a small work, 9" x 8". One braid is of strands of my hair and one is strands of a caribou's hair. This work is about the reciprocal relationship that humans should have with the four-legged beings such as the caribou. Jude Norris writes of her own braided works: "The strands of these braids also become metaphor for a healthy way of life. In some traditional teachings, the three strands of the braid represent the balance between mind, body and spirit. This symbolism was originally applied to braids of hair or sweet grass" (Norris). I have received similar teachings and my thesis project has been created with notions of interconnectedness amongst mind, body, and spirit across generations of women. All of these artworks speak to the braid as a symbol of Indigenous identity, culture, and spirituality from each artist's personal and cultural contexts.



Figure 3 “iamthecaribou/thecaribouisme”, caribou hair and the authors hair on elk hide, 8 x 9 inches, 2014.

2.6 The Daughters of Métis Mothers and the rolling, layered, flux

The work of Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore has been a strong influence through the development of my artistic practice. Her ability to convey difficult Indigenous histories, particularly those of women is hauntingly beautiful yet profound. She often uses herself as the subject in her performances, videos, and sculptures, and if not herself, other Indigenous women. “Trauma in Aboriginal performance art practice implicitly reveals the precariousness of any established Aboriginal history. In the reenactment of trauma — individual pain confronting collective pain — performance art does not make meaning or create closure” (Crosby 81). Much of the trauma faced by aboriginal women is so painful to speak of that meaning is difficult to make; however the meaning is made through the telling of our traumatic stories in whatever way that may take form, perhaps it is in the form of tears. These stories need be told through mediums such as performance as it is too difficult to simply write or talk about through plain explanation.

Crosby says of Rebecca Belmore's work *White Thread* which depicts Aboriginal women shrouded or bound in cloth: "these people are also rendered faceless, anonymous, echoing the history of Aboriginal peoples who have been represented as people without history" (83). In this work Belmore effectively replicates this history; however, in most of her works the subject, most often herself, looks out, confronting the viewer directly placing the subject in a position of power. I have utilized this visual strategy in the video component of my own MFA project, where the subjects confront the viewer by staring directly out at them. Though the subjects are emotively expressing vulnerability, they are in a position of power by gazing outward, and in one instance intentionally averting this gaze.

Lori Blondeau, a Métis/Cree/Saulteaux performance artist, is another artist who has greatly influenced my own art practice. Taunton writes of her work "The process of re-naming and re-telling histories in performance art can reconstruct and transform the representation and therefore the identity of Aboriginal women" (98). In Blondeau's work she also employs this strategy of confronting the viewer directly. The re-naming or re-telling of histories of Indigenous women by Indigenous women is an act of Indigenous feminism. Being seen as Indigenous women who are seeing back, informs the audience that we are strong despite the legacies of violence against our bodies and minds. Like in Belmore and Blondeau's works this active looking out implicates the viewer in the violence and trauma faced by Indigenous women.

The Length of Grief is comprised of two looping video projections, various 'remnants' from the video, and a photographic representation of hair tufting. Like strands of a braid these components form a cohesive whole. The impetus for the creation of the work *The Length of Grief* was the physical response both my cousin and I had in regards to our hair when her Mother passed away. My Auntie is my Mother's younger and only sister. In the Cree language your Mother's sister is called nikawis which means little Mother or other Mother. This aptly describes my relationship with her, she is essentially my secondary Mother and her daughter is my sister. Her loss was monumental to me. Very few people apart from my Auntie have cut my hair. Close to a year after she passed my cousin and I disclosed to each other that neither of us could bring ourselves to cut our hair since her Mother's passing, as her Mother was the last person to cut our hair. In our process of mourning, this is what each of our intuitive responses were without the other

knowing. At a later date I asked my cousin if we could make an art work to document the length of our hair and she said yes. The video she and I created depicts the two of us sitting on our familial land in northern Alberta, staring out at the viewer with our long hair whipping in a strong wind. This component of the work was created collaboratively with my cousin and many other family members. It is a continuous single shot, shot from a stationary position. There is much movement in the video as our hair is whipping in the wind and the clouds are rolling above us, however; our bodies remain as fixed as the land appears to be. It represents both stillness and constant flux. In the gallery installation this video is positioned across from the second video.

The second video depicts another relative braiding and cutting my hair. This video depicts a broken but linear set of actions suggesting a real-time based narrative. As a performance artist informed by the legacy of artists such as Belmore and Blondeau, I initially envisioned getting my hair cut as a live performance but due to the emotional and spiritual reasons for cutting my hair I decided to capture it through video instead. In both videos, though, there is a directness of gazes from the subjects — the directness of the action is mediated though the lens of the camera and the manipulation of real time. Because these videos are a response to difficult lived experiences, I utilized video as a medium more removed from reality than performance to protect everyone involved in creating the work spiritually and emotionally. The tears shed in the video are real tears and these tears are knowledge.⁴

Time is a central concept in this work, not just in regards to the simple labour of time — the time it takes to write these sentences, the time it takes to make a tufting, or the time it takes to create a video — though this is an important part of it, it is more complex than that. Linear time is represented in the happenings of the sky captured in the first video and in the actions of the second; however, the videos are edited and presented in such a way that they never begin and never come to an end. The videos are both presented on loop and the first video is edited so that the second half of it is a reversed version of the first half so it is a loop that rolls back onto itself. If I am to discuss time in a linear way, I would state that this artwork took three years to make. My Auntie cut my hair for the last time in January of 2013 and in January of 2016 I completed

⁴ Wanda Nanibush stated in her research seminar of my thesis work that “Tears are knowledge”. Nanibush was the Cultural Studies Annual Visiting Speaker at UBCO in 2016.

editing the videos and sewing my hair onto buckskin. The linear time in this work represents the grieving and healing processes and my other lived life experiences that occurred between January 2013 - January 2016.

In regards to time, what I am most interested in is a rolling, layered, flux of time present in the art work. The installation acknowledges a transcendence of time and the animate nature of the world, an important concept within Indigenous knowledge systems. I first must begin by explaining a bit about Indigenous concepts of time. A concise way to describe it is to share the words of Leroy Little Bear:

All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance, and space is a more important referent than time... The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns... Constant motion, as manifested in cyclical or repetitive patterns, emphasizes process as opposed to product. It results in a concept of time that is dynamic but without motion. Time is a part of the constant flux but goes nowhere. Time just is. (77-78)

It is this constant flux that enables my artwork to participate in a multiplicity of histories and moments. It makes it possible to address the past, present, and future simultaneously. It is how I am able to regard and represent generations of Indigenous women who have lived before me and who will live after me.

The hair tufting was created after the videos were shot by sewing my braids of hair into buckskin. The hair tufting that consists of my own two braids is an extension of my caribou and moose hair tufting practice. Though tuftings, appear as static objects I see them as “animate imbued with spirit, and in constant motion”. When I utilize caribou or moose hair I see the work as an extension of that animals body and spirit which illustrates the importance of a reciprocal relationship amongst the four-legged beings and the two-legged beings. The braids are an extension of myself, as these strands of hair from my head were a part of my physical, mental, and spiritual self. They also embody my grief as these strands of hair were grown during a period of mourning. A single strand of hair contains all of this knowledge. Most importantly, these

single strands of hair represent the force of âhkamêyimowak as discussed earlier. The strong Indigenous women in my life, mainly my Mother and my Auntie, have imbued in me the capacity and strength to be resilient. It is unfortunate that it is the difficult circumstances of Indigenous women's lives that have required us to constantly be engaged with âhkamêyimowak. The Length of Grief depicts Métis women, land, and hair, all of which carry countless generation's spirits and knowledges. It is in this way that I see the tufting of my own hair as a representation of the spirit and lives of Métis women. It is the resiliency of Métis women written in a literacy of Métis women.



Figure 4 “The Length of Grief: The daughters of Métis Mothers”, Video Still 1, 2016.



Figure 5 “The Length of Grief: The daughters of Métis Mothers”, Video Still 2, 2016.

2.7 The Length of Grief

In Laenui's "Processes of Decolonization" he describes the five stages of decolonization as rediscovery and recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action. In my own journey of decolonization I feel as though I continually repeat each of these stages. "Each phase can be experienced at the same time or in various combinations... these phases of decolonization do not have clear demarcations from one to the next" (Laenui 152). I am interested in the possibilities of art as a means to assist in moving beyond this continual state of mourning.

In reflecting upon the affects of the colonial legacies of residential school and other forms of assimilation on Indigenous women, Maracle writes: "Should we have been invited not as inferior sub humans, but as people with great contribution to make to the creation of a new nation, death would not haunt us as it does. More, our disappearance from the realm of history – the lingering realization that to most Canadians we do not exist – would not be our intimate agony" (67). Indigenous women have much to mourn. The colonial trauma, abuse, and violence we face presently coupled with our historic and ongoing erasure from the land is only a broad summary of the injustices faced by Indigenous women. Indeed, we are haunted. In an earlier version of this thesis I made a list of all the things that I grieve for. Though it was a long list, I realized afterwards that I did not name or rather, that I could not name the things I grieve for most. These things are simply too difficult to write about as I lose my ability to put it into language; however, the naming of this pain is important as Roy states:

Until our collective community has named and worked through our historical abuse and its residual abuse we will continue to live with violence and community discord. Given the forms of structural violence which have been imposed on us, we must be concerned and act on issues such as abuse and trauma. Our communities are full of broken people and we must begin with the fundamental steps of healing, the building of self esteem, community pride, relationship mending and correcting the power imbalance between the genders (76).

It is for this reason that, as Indigenous women, the naming of our grief is important even if it is not named explicitly through language, but through artistic practice or through whatever means we feel are appropriate. An important component of Indigenous feminism is having the

autonomy, as Indigenous women, in deciding what is best for us in times of grief or other difficult times. This is an important step towards healing ourselves and our communities. The narratives of grieving and healing are expressed through the visual language of the installation, within the bodies of the Indigenous women represented in the art work. It is about the possibilities of healing and moving forward from the violence against Aboriginal lands and bodies. *The Length of Grief* is just as much about the healing from trauma as it is a form of naming that trauma through visual language.

Chapter 3 Conclusion

Naming the Ancestor Grandmothers and self-location has been an integral element in beginning (and in closing) this thesis; it is what enabled me to research within familial, cultural, and historical contexts of Métis women's histories, lived experiences, and artistic practices. The physical land based journey I embarked on did not go as planned and I did not find the type of knowing that I sought; however, what I discovered was that I needed to trust e-mamâhtâwisowin, my own inwardness and to mamâhtâwisiyihapicikêyân ôtê-nîkânihk, tap into the powers to conceptualize the future. Being on the land allowed me to access and experience these knowledges and stories within the land. Moving through grieving processes has been a central theme in my previous art works, and an integral component of this thesis, and will continue to be an important element of my art practice as I move forward. This looking back at the land, the ancestors, and my own life is an important part of this grieving process:

In order to reclaim our heritage we must look back. We must examine and acknowledge both the good and the bad remember the injustices done to the women of this country by the colonizers, by society and by our own families, for the parts they played in denying us our own birthright and the opportunity to know our own identity. It is only by reclaiming our heritage that we can gain an understanding of who we are and enable us to achieve our full potential, as Aboriginal women (Green 172).

Engaging in mamâhtâwisiyihapicikêyân ôtê-nîkânihk as process allowed me to create this installation of deeply personal and familial narratives that reflect who I am as a Métis woman. Earlier in this thesis I referred to ê-kî-mâyahkamikahk, where it went wrong. Through the installation *The Length of Grief* I have presented a movement towards a “future era where we revive our languages and culture as "ê-ati-miywakamikahk"-- where it begins to go well” (McLeod). There is much work to be done to ensure a future of ê-ati-miywakamikahk but this concept is present in the artworks of many Métis women artists and other Indigenous artists and cultural practitioners who are portraying the stories of our contemporary lived experiences and histories for our future generations.

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