REPRESENTATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE: ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE, VANCOUVER

by

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ABSTRACT

In the context of aboriginal women living in Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, I explore the relationship between power, representation, and the body and consider: how do discursive productions of visual culture inscribe and discipline subjectivity and space; and how do aboriginal women negotiate and resist the material consequences of those representations? Addressing these questions I use mixed feminist methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and popular education workshops. I first explore aboriginal women’s conflicting perceptions and experiences of the Downtown Eastside ‘community’.

Through a consideration of gender, race, class, sexuality and nation, I argue that a unified or cohesive aboriginal women’s experience of community is disrupted. Given this complexity I examine how photography exhibits, a poster, and documentary film essentialize subjectivity and space. I argue that the exhibit Heroines: Portraits of Women in the Downtown Eastside reaffirms criminalized identities by portraying women as drug addicts and prostitutes. Against these representations, I analyze a community public arts project She Counts. Committed to the politics of self-representation, this photography exhibit offers a more nuanced understanding of women living in the Downtown Eastside by offering a complex cultural reading of aboriginal culture and actively confronts aboriginal women’s experiences of discrimination and racism. It also destabilizes the tight borders of the inner city by portraying women’s flexible use of urban space. Produced by the Vancouver Police Department, the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and the documentary film, Through a Blue Lens, in contrast, map tight boundaries of the inner city community, inscribing it as a homogenous space of deviance. However, unlike the poster, Through a Blue Lens provides a nuanced reading of subjectivity on the Downtown Eastside, by humanizing its residents. Drawing upon critical theorists of representation, I argue that representations are not totalizing and therefore provide an “excess” of meaning through which resistant readings are
possible. Finally, I explore the ways aboriginal women negotiate essentialized representations of their bodies by exploring the ways they are rendered visible and invisible by police officers. My research suggests that although they may be marked in similar ways (due to their gender, race, and class) women experience discrimination and racism differently, revealing that both visibility and invisibility are representational and embodied strategies of resistance.
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CHAPTER 1. Introduction: The Politics of Representation

D: I heard a lot of the way that some people were talking. Some of them were saying “did she jump yet?” I don’t know I can’t really say how people were reacting up further this way, but that’s how the people were reacting down here [near Carrall Street].

J: How did you feel when people were talking like that?

D: [Sigh] I don’t know, I can’t really talk. I didn’t pay much attention to the way people were talking. I was listening to them but I didn’t really pay attention… What did you see when you were down there watching it? (my emphasis)

Objectivity cannot be about fixed vision (Donna Haraway).

As I walked into the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, an organization where I volunteer, my friend Irene told me that an aboriginal woman had climbed out of a Hotel Balmoral window onto a sign and was threatening to end her life. This news brought sadness and shock to the Women’s Centre, where women hurried to the Hotel to give their support. This support was urgent as women felt that the Police had not done enough to secure this woman’s safety. From the accounts of witnesses, I was informed that nothing had been placed below her in case she jumped. In response, residents of the hotel had dragged their mattresses onto the sidewalk.

This happened to be the day Irene had generously offered her time and knowledge to give me a walkabout of the social service organizations in the Downtown Eastside. When we walked towards Hastings and Main, the center of the Downtown Eastside community, I saw the woman, five stories high, holding onto a sign cable with one arm while leaning over emergency crews below. Hastings Street had been blocked off by police officers in yellow jackets; crowds, contained by plastic ribbing, had gathered along the boundaries. At that moment we encountered other friends of Irene’s, who were both angry and saddened by the spectacle. As they spoke it became clear they strongly felt that
the Police do not care about Downtown Eastside residents. In particular, they explained that the Police stereotype all Downtown Eastside residents as junkies, which thereby renders their bodies expendable.

As we stood, however, it was clear that others were equally inconsiderate. Perversely amused by the threat of death, insensitive onlookers shouted “jump!, jump!” only to incite furious insults from our small group on the sidewalk. I later learned from other bystanders that police officers were placing such individuals in the paddy wagon, indicating that the police were concerned about the woman’s safety.

Later that afternoon, as we sat at a red leather booth at the local Ovaltine Café, Irene noticed a police officer sitting behind us. Full of questions from our previous conversations, she inquired politely about the lack of protection on the sidewalk underneath the woman. Aware of her critical inquiry he answered, in an emotionally distanced tone, that a device was in place on which she would “bounce like a marshmallow” if she jumped. Unsure whether to feel relieved because of this new safety device or horrified by his insensitive comment, we sat in silence and finished our lunch.

That evening I sat with fashion photographer Lincoln Clarkes and his assistant Kat, with over 300 photographs of women with drug addiction from the Downtown Eastside covering the wall in the background. I asked him whether he knew of the terrible situation that had transpired in the afternoon, with the knowledge that she was now safe. He responded that he didn’t. Reflecting his interest he inquired whether TV crews and photographers were present. Kat then asked, Lincoln you didn’t photograph her?

A month later a group of women from the Downtown Eastside wrote an article in the newspaper Kinesis which articulated their criticisms of the police and ambulance
service's response to the attempted suicide. Women wrote angrily of the police officers' apparent lack of concern for the woman. This was partially explained by the inability of the police to effectively communicate with Downtown Eastside residents. Others felt the police did not do enough to intervene more concretely. Accompanying this critique, others emphasized the strength and support among Downtown Eastside residents, contrasting this generosity to the ambivalence of the media, police, and social workers. One woman wrote, "some of us may have taken another road in life [from yours], but we at least care for one another! This was not a freak show!! This is a woman from our community!!"

It is clear that there are very different reactions to and representations of this horrific event, from the perspective of a police officer, photographer, a group of women and myself, an outside researcher. During that journey through the streets of the Downtown Eastside and on public transportation, one could hear remarks referring to the earlier incident that were sensitive or degrading. Upon hearing these public strands of gossip I was struck by the very different ways this event was framed and discussed.

I begin with this detailed fieldwork moment to introduce the central theme that travels throughout this thesis: the politics of representation. Accordingly, this surfaces through critical discussions on the production of space and subjectivity, power, and visual imagery. My focus is on how discourses of space and subjectivity produce and/or limit knowledge about the Downtown Eastside and urban aboriginal women. I am critical of how certain representational practices glaze over the complexity of inner city spaces and women's subjectivities. Signifying systems, such as photography or film, organize and constitute social relations; that is, visual images have material effects that partially
constitute women's everyday lives. Unfolding throughout this thesis is a series of discussions that are committed to creating spaces for aboriginal women's voices and experiences. I explore first aboriginal women's conflicting interpretations of the Downtown Eastside 'community;' second, competing visual representations of aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside; and third the material consequences of these visual representations. Each of these discussions attends to the production of space and subjectivity, specifically to the production of partial knowledges about aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside. Interrogating the relationship between power, space, and the body, this thesis traces a local politics of representation by exploring diverse interpretations from many of the characters in the fieldwork moment above.

Aboriginal women's experiences in the Downtown Eastside are rarely addressed by those in powerful political positions, such as academics, policy makers, or band councils. With a commitment to multivocality, I hope to create spaces for aboriginal women's voices through their stories, criticism, social commentary, and visual images. Although framed by painful circumstances, the aboriginal woman on the Hotel Balmoral sign demands the attention of the public, academics, artists, the media, and policy makers. As she stood above Hastings Street, her hyper-visibility symbolically highlighted the difficult social conditions aboriginal women negotiate in the inner city. While some aboriginal women living in the Downtown Eastside find themselves in hard circumstances, I want to emphasize that women's stories are not dictated by experiences of victimization. Speaking to what it means to live or work in the Downtown Eastside aboriginal women actively challenge our stereotypes about inner city life, and not least my methodological, intellectual; and moral research politics. While poverty, lack of
adequate housing, violence, and racism are among many interrelated structural elements that shape women's lives, aboriginal women are creatively making their own spaces of resistance, through employment, education, and the creation of community.

As a brief demographic context, Vancouver's aboriginal population, tabulated by Census Canada (1996), is 31,140 comprising approximately 2% of the metropolitan population. Vancouver has the third largest urban aboriginal population in Canada, next to Edmonton and Winnipeg. Within Vancouver the majority of the off-reserve population resides in the Downtown Eastside and Grandview Woodland areas (see Map 1). It is difficult to determine a precise number of aboriginal residents in the Downtown Eastside, as the community is highly mobile, primarily due to poor housing. However in a special run of the 1996 Census, the City of Vancouver has approximated the number of aboriginal residents in the sub-areas of the Downtown Eastside, of which I include Victory Square, Gastown, Oppenheimer, and Stathcona/Hastings (Map 2, Figure 1). While the Chinese population comprises the largest visible minority in each of these sub-areas, aboriginal people constitute a significant proportion: almost 20% in Victory Square. Men outnumber women three to one in most areas, particularly in Oppenheimer, Gastown, and Victory Square.
Map 1: Aboriginal Population, Vancouver, CMA, 1996. Arrow points to the location of the Downtown Eastside (DES) community.
Map 2: Downtown Eastside/Chinatown/Strathcona-Hastings Sub-Areas, Vancouver.

Figure 1: Downtown Eastside Aboriginal Population

Figure 1: Downtown Eastside/Gastown/Strathcona-Hastings Sub Areas.
The Downtown Eastside has not been historically associated with women or First Nations. Following WW II, Vancouver’s so-called slum district was popularly referred to as skid road, a space long connected to the working class male and the resource economy, where it 

... denote[s] a district in the city where there is concentration of sub-standard hotels and rooming houses charging very low rates and catering primarily to men with low incomes. These hotels are intermingled with numerous taverns, employment agencies offering jobs as unskilled laborers, restaurants, serving low-cost meals, pawn-shops, and second-hand stores, and missions that daily provide a free meal after the service.

As traced by Jeff Sommers, the Downtown Eastside has been socially constructed as a space of "pathological masculinity" until activists and residents redefined skid road as the Downtown Eastside in the 1980s. However with increasing reserve-urban migrations of aboriginal people, beginning in the 1960s and peaking in the 1970s, many Canadian skid rows began to be associated with the so-called destructive behaviour of the urban ‘Indian’, who was stereotyped as unable to adjust to urban modern life.

This occurred primarily in the academic literature where places such as 'skid row' were described as fixed and static entities rather than dynamic spaces constituted by the subjects that interpret and represent them. While much of the social science literature on urban aboriginal communities in the 1990s has moved away from simplified understandings of culture, poverty, and urban space, more recently attention has shifted to aboriginal organizations, to which many people turn for ‘traditional’ practices (powwows, potlatches). Although this addresses an important part of the urban aboriginal community, I primarily focus on the individual, for the ways in which gender, class, sexuality, and nation influence women's experiences within aboriginal communities have rarely been explored. Considering the critiques of this earlier research, I follow the work of geographers Kay Anderson and Jane Jacobs, exploring how aboriginal women
with different subject positions experience and interpret the Downtown Eastside community. With a focus on representational strategies, I build upon this analysis throughout the thesis by examining how aboriginal women negotiate competing public, media, and institutional discourses that seek to define and discipline their bodies and the inner city spaces they move within/between.

With this brief demographic and academic context in mind, I want to elaborate on the three primary discussions in this thesis. The first discussion focuses on conflicting interpretations of community. Reflecting on the fieldwork moment, it is evident from the way that gossip travelled through the organizations and streets that this tragic situation unified the Downtown Eastside community, albeit in a discontinuous way. Given that this public suicide attempt is uncommon in the Downtown Eastside, it not surprising that it prompted widespread narrative commentary even by those who did not witness the predicament. However, one could also argue that the Downtown Eastside community is quite fractured, given the extremely disparate ways people reacted. The differences I observed are symbolic of a larger, ongoing dispute on the nature of ‘community’, whereby residents and ‘outsiders’ of the Downtown Eastside have different interpretations. Tensions are clearly demarcated by residents and activists on the one hand and planners, developers, City officials, business owners, and merchants on the other. While the latter consider the Downtown Eastside and its residents an obstacle to successful business endeavors, one of the most powerful community organizations, the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) has been committed to improving social conditions for its residents. By educating and mobilizing the community about its rights, DERA fought hard to transgress the negative ‘skid road’ image (popularized in the
1960s) and to empower the district to be recognized as a residential neighbourhood\textsuperscript{17}. Drawing upon rich social memory, embodied in architectural history (such as monuments to the male working class and resource industries such as logging, mining, railroad, strong labour unions), persuasive leaders of DERA, such as Bruce Erikson and Jim Green, lobbied the City and Provincial governments for better services. Alongside the help of the media\textsuperscript{18}, DERA's "discourse of community" successfully enabled the rezoning of the Downtown Eastside into a neighbourhood-improvement area. Naming and determining the boundaries of the Downtown Eastside community, however, has never been a neutral act\textsuperscript{19}. Attempting to appropriate spaces of the Downtown Eastside in 1996, the City mapped its borders in such a way as to acquire land for upscale development in the adjacent Victory Square and Gastown communities. Local activists took offence, realizing the material consequences of this symbolic erasure. Thus at different scales the symbolic and material manifestations of community are interpreted, debated, and negotiated by diverse interests. In this local cartography of reinvented meanings and shifting borders, the presence of planners, city officials, business owners, and community activists is predominant. But like the gossip travelling through my walkabout of the Downtown Eastside, I want to ground this discussion of 'community' with its residents. Opening up space for other voices, I shift attention from these actors to the perspectives and experiences of First Nations women who are writing their own interpretations of space, marking and inventing meanings that render the Downtown Eastside familiar and meaningful. Yet like these actors, I argue that First Nations women have competing perspectives on what the Downtown Eastside 'community' means, and thus do not represent a unified group or voice. Their stories and experiences are
polyvocal and thereby challenge fixed interpretations of the Downtown Eastside, as signified in recent photography exhibits and documentary film.

Second, in addition to presenting oral narratives, I critically examine a series of visual representations of First Nations women living in the Downtown Eastside. Just as the woman on the Hotel Balmoral sign became a spectacle, women from the Downtown Eastside have increasingly become the focus of attention within local media. While women’s experiences have remained largely invisible throughout academic and public discussions of community, their bodies have been increasingly rendered visible by photography and documentary film. Within the last few years particular images of women and the Downtown Eastside have been widely distributed, crossing international borders. Due to immense local and national attention, fashion photographer Lincoln Clarke’s exhibit of drug-addicted women, entitled Heroines: Portraits of Women of the Downtown Eastside, has begun to tour internationally. Comprised of 31 photographs of missing women from the Downtown Eastside, the Vancouver Police Department’s Missing Women’s Reward Poster found its way onto the Reality TV show, America’s Most Wanted, to appeal to international audiences in order to locate the individual(s) responsible for their disappearances. Also produced by this disciplinary institution, Through a Blue Lens --a documentary film on the relationship between police officers and Downtown Eastside drug addicts-- appeared on public television programs throughout Canada, the United States, Australia, and Europe. The explosion of these images raises immediate political questions regarding the representation of subjectivity and space and the relations between seeing and knowing. How does the photographer or filmmaker’s positionality influence their visual texts? In what ways do these images
accumulate and produce power? How do discourses of sexuality, disease, and discipline reflect and inscribe power relations? How do different audiences interpret these images? What are the political and social consequences of these images for aboriginal women? These questions become pertinent particularly when these visual texts are read against other images produced by women living in the Downtown Eastside. I explore the competing representations of each set of photographs and the documentary film and their interpretations from the perspective of the author(s), audiences, subjects, and the media.

My argument focuses on the premise that the Heroines exhibit and Missing Women's Poster reinforce essentialized identities of women on the Downtown Eastside, through the depiction of women as drug addicts, prostitutes, and criminals. While Through a Blue Lens disrupts this reading of subjectivity by offering a more complex understanding of women in the Downtown Eastside, like the other two texts it constructs the inner city as a tightly bounded, homogenized deviant space. Against these representations I consider the politics of self-representation by analyzing a low-profile community public arts project, She Counts, which exhibited photographs of the Downtown Eastside taken predominately by First Nations women. These photographs signify a more complex cultural reading of women in the Downtown Eastside by portraying First Nations' experiences of the inner city and a strong supportive community with fluid, contested borders. Tracing these various constructions and responses, I consider the possibilities for resistant readings of visual images that offer a more nuanced understanding of aboriginal women’s everyday lives.

A third thread of this thesis considers the material consequences of these visual representations in aboriginal women’s everyday lives. While Lincoln Clarkes and his
assistant expressed interest in capturing the woman standing on top of the Hotel Balmoral sign with visual technology, I am interested in how such representations may contribute to subordination or antisubordination. Resisting a mere textual reading of visual images, I explore how aboriginal women negotiate narrow representations (stereotypes) of their bodies and communities in the context of police relations on the Downtown Eastside. I argue that aboriginal women are rendered visible and invisible in multiple ways, mediated by their experiences of racism and discrimination from police officers. It is clear that aboriginal women experience the visibility of their bodies differently, which in turn relates to their diverse experiences with racism. Certainly the act of researching and writing simultaneously renders women visible and invisible in complex ways, where I, the principal researcher and author, undoubtedly create another layer of interpretation, influenced by my own political goals and objectives.

My argument throughout the thesis moves through these three discussions: conflicting perspectives on community, competing visual representations of aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside, and the material consequences of these visual images. Central to the politics of representation is the construction of knowledge by the researcher and writer. As one of my participants asked, What did you see? While the fieldwork event was interpreted in numerous ways, the account is ultimately filtered through my own emotional and intellectual lens, offering at best a partial perspective. As I have argued, visual texts are constructed and interpreted in remarkably different ways, each with different political outcomes. This too is the case with the production of an academic text. This was cleverly illustrated by feminist anthropologist Margery Wolf, who deliberately constructed three different ways of discussing a series of events during
her fieldwork in Taiwan. Thus it is important to be reflexive during the research process, and in the so-called research product - the text - in order to account for and be accountable to the political outcomes of one’s work. With the understanding that seeing and knowing are mutually constitutive, I now consider how my research performances - as volunteer, interviewer, researcher, writer - influenced the research process. My arguments and analyses are influenced and developed by qualitative feminist research methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and popular education workshops. Acknowledging the flexibility of these methods, I briefly recount key moments in my fieldwork experiences that illustrate the complex power negotiations that are inevitably embedded within any research process.

Flexible Research Methods

After volunteering at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre for seven months and completing the university’s ethics review forms, I began to approach women (indirectly) to inquire whether they would be interested in participating in my research project. I had established a presence in the Women’s Centre, through my participation in camping trips, Healing Gatherings, political marches, and other activities. It took a long time until I felt comfortable enough (and sensed other women’s comfort) to extend my research methodology beyond participant observation. As Wolf describes it, initial fieldwork experiences are laden with “self-doubt, boredom, excitement, disorientation, uncertainty, exhaustion, bullying, being bullied, cajoling, being cajoled...” The process of eliciting interviews was incredibly slow. Most women living in the Downtown
Eastside do not have household phones, and have very busy lives, making it very difficult to get in touch with them. Over the course of six months I conducted twenty interviews with ten First Nations women. Each open-ended interview lasted approximately two hours. Yet for a feminist geographer committed to nonexploitative and participatory methodologies the interview process was ultimately unsatisfying. Accompanying this particular methodology were uncomfortable moments of intrusion, vulnerability, painful memories, and cross-cultural confusion. While power was camouflaged in ways I have yet to understand, power also saturated the interview process in ways that directly challenged my research politics. Speaking to the underlying reason why she agreed to an interview, one informant bluntly explained,

But there’s nothing to talk about in my life - it’s pure survival… And I’m hustling everyday it’s to get food on my table. Hustling, mean, like this. Like I get twenty dollars from this but it puts a full meal on my table tonight. And that’s the only reason why I do these things ‘cause I’m doing good both ways. I’m helping my family eat and I’m enlightening you on what the problem really, really is. (Lana)

Power imbalances seeped through every fieldwork moment, and I became distinctly aware of my own privilege as a white, middle-class, university educated woman. Women were also aware of my privilege, which structured our relationships in ways that made me uncomfortable. For example, although I was a volunteer at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, alongside approximately 35 other women who lived in the community, I was often considered staff. Even though some women knew I was a volunteer, they would ask me questions or favours that only a staff member was qualified to answer or perform. Although I was often positioned in more powerful positions because of my educated speech, middle-class dress, and whiteness, I quickly realized that I directly contributed to this positioning unknowingly. Attending my first volunteer meeting at the
Women’s Centre early in my fieldwork I noticed an interesting comment written by an
aboriginal woman sitting next to me.

After dinner we go around the tables and introduce ourselves and say a little about why
we wanted to volunteer at the Women’s Centre. All the women before me say they are
here to give back to the community and to keep out of trouble. When my turn comes, I
share that I am here because of the inclusiveness of the Women’s Centre and position
myself as “an advocate of women’s issues.” At that moment I do not realize the power of
the word “advocate” (in the context of inner city social service circles) until Hanna, an
aboriginal woman beside me, quietly exclaims “ooh!” and writes in the margin of her
notes: “Jennifer = advocate.”

Marked as a middle-class social worker, this situation illustrates how my education, class,
and race structured asymmetrical power and social relations with many First Nations
women. But some of my informants directly challenged this privilege, questioning my
very ability to “advocate”. Critical of my lack of experiential knowledge one woman
often demanded answers she knew I would not have, “you’re an educated person, what
do you think!?” At other moments critical comments targeted my racial privilege. As
Lana rightly observes, “In any group meeting if it’s headed by a white person, no matter
what the Indians say, the white person takes credit for it.” At other times I was made
aware of my inability to make a concrete, material difference in my participants’ lives.

When discussing racism on the Downtown Eastside, Lana comments,

So who can we tell? This tape here ain’t going to go no place. It ain’t going to change.
Who can we tell? Who can our kids, they don’t feel safe with us because the cops take
away our importance so their kids are protected.

While I negotiated these complex moments of power throughout the research process, I
also experienced moments of vulnerability, aside from the insecurities associated with the
‘beginnings’ of fieldwork. In one instance my voice was interviewed, tape-recorded,
transcribed, and analyzed by one of my participants.
As I settle into the sunny morning with my research 'condiments' on the breakfast table—tape recorder, notepad, cookies and tea—Theresa asks me for a favour before we begin the interview. Happy to return the generosity she has given me I undoubtedly say yes. As a student in social work Theresa has an assignment where she must conduct a client intake process in order to practice (and analyze) her sensitive questioning and listening skills. A proposition follows this explanation, 'Would you be so kind to be the 'client'?'. Taken aback by the sudden reversal of power I can hardly refuse. While she retrieves her research instruments (incidentally we both have identical tape recorders) I am to think of a 'problem' to bring to the social worker. Recognizing the trust I have established with Theresa, I decide to talk (strangely enough) about a most vulnerable subject—my current research dilemma—the difficulty of finding aboriginal women to interview. As a 'social worker' she is interested, affirming, and supportive. In a theatrical way, I am able to unleash the burden of my anxieties as a researcher in an unfamiliar community—without resistance or challenge. If I am not careful I could be easily tempted by the power of our performances.

As my fieldwork notes suggest, this initially appears like a vulnerable position, a place where I experienced a so-called subordinate position, where my emotional and intimate details were exposed, recorded, and presumably analyzed by a group of people elsewhere. However, to focus on this apparent vulnerability would ultimately camouflage the fact that I am privileged in ways this aboriginal woman is not. Although I was committed to an interview process that focussed more on interactive dynamics than information gathering, I wanted to engage more thoroughly with feminist methods, hoping that a participant action oriented model would produce more accountable research.

As I began to consider questions of visual representation, I was encouraged to think carefully about interpretation and audience reception. I was also concerned with the ways I was reading particular texts, worrying whether I was becoming increasingly removed from the lives of women in the Downtown Eastside. Out of serendipity, I was invited to collaborate on a month of popular education workshops on the media and the Downtown Eastside at the Women’s Centre. My research on institutional representations
of women (the Missing Women's Reward Poster and *Through a Blue Lens*) happened to correspond with the popular education group's recent discussions on police harassment. The popular education workshops enabled me to show the visual texts I was analyzing to the very women they portrayed. They also provided another forum (other than interviews and informal conversations) to inform women of my research. It was an exciting series, as women felt passionately about the photographs and film because they knew many of the women represented. The popular education workshops provoked critical discussions of the social conditions of the Downtown Eastside. Conversations migrated from women's safety in the community, current welfare legislation, harm reduction, single parenting, to the experiences of discrimination and racism. This dialogue reflected one of the goals of popular education: educating oneself to affect social change. Women became more aware of the different ways their community is represented and began to think critically about the role of the photographer or filmmaker, and the consequences of particular visual images. They also began to think of ways to challenge these representations by creating their own. Unfortunately, because of my time constraints and the conflicting goals of the popular education group, our series could not continue; this jeopardized our ability to organize effectively around some of the issues that arose. While popular education provided a more interactive and emancipatory feminist methodology I felt unable to disentangle myself from the power imbalances that were found in my interviews. Because we were unable to organize around issues that affected women and their community beyond the boundaries of the popular education group, I realized that research and action remained separate. One of the objectives of participatory research, on which popular education is based, is to transform power structures and relationships.
Throughout the workshops I was ultimately in control of the research process and chose not to invest more time into developing a more collaborative model; however I feel I was able to transform certain aspects of power relations in the research process. While time constraints proved to be the most significant barrier, popular education workshops certainly offer a participatory and collaborative research methodology that has the potential to empower women to understand and change aspects of their everyday lives. Working in a more interactive, praxis-orientated environment, women become more active in the research process, directing projects in ways that immediately effect and improve their circumstances. Based on the goals of participatory research this could ideally lead to a transformation of societal relationships.

Throughout this thesis, my desire to work with mixed qualitative methodologies provided insight into the ways power moves through different strategies. Experiences in “the field” enabled me to explore in-depth interviews, participant observation, and popular education workshops. Each methodology provided me with very different data and knowledge, which in turn influenced the distribution of power between the researcher, researched, and the research. I explored different qualitative methodologies by working through selective fieldwork moments that speak to the strengths and weakness of each research strategy. These moments spoke to the different ways power worked through all of my relationships in the field, particularly how I was positioned and positioned myself. Despite my desire to eliminate inequality throughout my research, it is clear that feminist methodologies are inevitably marked by betrayal and inauthenticity. Acknowledging this, feminist scholar Judith Stacey negates the existence of a “fully feminist ethnography, but [argues] there can be ethnographies that are partially
feminist." By reflecting upon how each qualitative methodology produces power, we can push for new critical scholarship and ways of knowing that can better transform oppressive power relations. Part of the research process is re-evaluating our research critically, in order to engage in more socially relevant and ethically responsible methods with each successive project.

The politics of fieldwork incite debates around authority and representation. As this chapter has outlined, this thesis focuses on the politics of representation. Building upon my critical discussion of the research process I explore the multiple voices of ten aboriginal women living and working in the Downtown Eastside in Chapter 2. Drawing upon in-depth interviews, aboriginal women speak to the conflicting ways they perceive and experience the Downtown Eastside community, revealing that there is no unified consensus. Chapter 3 moves from oral narratives of community to a discussion of visual representations of women and the Downtown Eastside. Exhibited at the Helen Pitt Gallery in 1998, the first photography show, Heroines: Portraits of Women in the Downtown Eastside, essentializes women’s identities as drug addicts and prostitutes, and the spaces they move within/between. The Downtown Eastside, represented primarily by the back alley, is signified as a site of deviance and disconnection. Against these photographs I analyze She Counts, which consists of photographs taken mostly by aboriginal women living in the Downtown Eastside. This technology of self-representation offers a more nuanced understanding of women’s lives in the Downtown Eastside. Chapter 4 focuses on two visual representations produced by the Vancouver Police Department. I explore how the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and the documentary film Through a Blue Lens construct women’s subjectivity and the space of
the Downtown Eastside. But in this chapter I move from the text to the embodied
everyday lives of women, to analyze how women are negotiating and resisting the narrow
representations signified in these texts. Aboriginal women are rendered visible and
invisible in complex ways, which relate to their different experiences of racism. Finally,
in the concluding chapter I speak to the political importance of thinking critically about
visual representations of the Downtown Eastside. I also reflect on how my subjectivity as
a researcher on the Downtown Eastside influences a critical reading of these visual
representations.

This thesis explores the different ways the Downtown Eastside is produced,
inscribed, and interpreted. Visual representations ultimately obscure and generalize the
complexity of women’s everyday lives. But these representations structure and organize
social relations within and outside of the Downtown Eastside, and certainly inform and
influence diverse publics’ perceptions of and interactions with the community. Residents
and activists in the Downtown Eastside are constantly fighting to have their community
recognized as a supportive, dynamic, and resourceful one. Despite their insistence, others,
particu1arly business merchants, developers, and planners, have their own ideas about this
space, where gentrification and revitalization have become euphemisms for resident
displacement. So I begin with aboriginal women’s conflicting experiences of
‘community’ in the Downtown Eastside, so others may begin to appreciate that the
Downtown Eastside is never as it seems.

1 Deborah, Personal Interview, January 27, 2000. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of aboriginal women participants, as well as their family members and friends.
The boundaries of these subareas are defined by the City of Vancouver, but are also challenged by different actors. For example, Gastown and Victory Square are considered a part of the Downtown Eastside community by residents and activists. These boundaries are contested by City officials, Gastown merchants, and developers. The spatial politics in the historic heart of Vancouver are complex. In the name of ‘revitalization’ the City attempted to define name and create boundaries between the Downtown Eastside, the heritage, market-orientated Gastown, and the newly created neighbourhood, Victory Square. While the Downtown Eastside claimed both Gastown and Victory Square within its boundaries, Gastown refused to associate because ‘East’ or “Eastside” is considered to signify drug abuse, crime, and poverty that are ultimately bad for business. See N. Blomley and J. Sommers, “Mapping Urban Space: Governmentality and Cartographic Struggles in Inner City Vancouver,” _Governable Places: Readings of Governmentality and Crime Control_ ed. R. Smandych (Ashgate: Dartmouth, 1999) 261-286.

Community Services, City of Vancouver, _The Downtown Eastside, Chinatown, Gastown, Strathcona Area: Data from the 1996 Census_, May 1999.

Community Services, City of Vancouver, May 1999. This Census Canada data is taken from the “Aboriginal Group Designation” where ‘aboriginal’ includes North American Indian single response, Metis, and Other Aboriginal (including multiple responses).

D. Bogue, _Skid Row in American Cities_, (Chicago: Community and Family Study Center, University of Chicago, 1963) 1.


See C. La Prairie, _Seen But Not Heard: Native People in the Inner City_, (Department of Justice, Ottawa: Communications and Consultation Branch, 1994) 16. Using the census for a more detailed understanding, it is revealed that 17% of status Indians were living off reserve in 1951, a decade later this number grew to over 30%, and by the early 1970s, nearly 40%. See D. McCaskill, “The Urbanization of Indians in Winnipeg, Toronto, Edmonton, and Vancouver: A Comparative Analysis,” _Culture_ 1:1 (1981): 82-89.

Considering the role of gender, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) noted that women are often moving to cities because of “community factors”. Physical and sexual abuse, loss of status (upon marrying a non-Indian before 1985), and the lack of a meaningful political voice are a few examples. Despite this contribution, a report funded by the Status of Women Canada, _Aboriginal Women in Canada: Strategic Research Directions for Policy Development_ (1998) reinforced that aboriginal women’s migration experiences are not well understood. Migrating women outnumber men in all four categories (on-reserve, rural (off-reserve), urban, non-CMA, and urban, CMA). In total women comprise 56.8% of all migrants. Please refer to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, _Perspectives and Realities Volume 4, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples_, (Ottawa: Canada Communications Group, 1996) 573.

In earlier social science literature (1970s-80s) skid road has been associated with the so-called destructive behaviour of the urban ‘Indian’, that is constructed as being incapable of integrating into the modern Canadian metropolis for a number of reasons. The degree of Indianness, where traditional reserve values were considered at odds with modern urban values, lower class status, and destructive behaviour as a passive form of political resistance to dominant white society were often used to explain ‘maladjustment’ to urban society. For example, A. Morinis, “Skid Row Indians and the Politics of Self,” _Culture II 3_ (1982): 92-105; A. Morinis, “‘Getting Straight’: Behaviour Patterns in a Skid Row Indian Community,” _Urban Anthropology_ 11:2 (1982): 193-211; E.J. Dosman, _Indians: The Urban Dilemma_, Toronto: McClelland and Steward Ltd., 1972). For an ethnography of a prairie skid row see H. Brody, _Indians on Skid Row_, (Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1971).

Recent work on urban aboriginal communities has focussed on the history and development of ‘major’ institutions (such as Friendship or Indian Centres). In F. Sanderson, and H. Howard-Bobiwash, _Meeting Place: Aboriginal Life in Toronto_, (Toronto: Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1997) the Toronto Indian
Centre's evolution is traced through personal narratives. The recent work by anthropologist Joan Weibel-Orlando in Los Angeles argues that "ethnic organizations are the context of community structure". Taking an ethnohistorical approach she traces the evolution of LA's aboriginal institutions. See J. Weibel-Orlando, *Indian Country, L.A.: Maintaining Ethnic Community in Complex Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991). While this is a useful contribution to social science literature it ultimately limits a flexible understanding of community. Through my fieldwork it has been made clear by women and youth that formal institutions are not necessarily the preferred site of social interaction, which she argues is the primary site that binds a dispersed aboriginal community. For example, in Vancouver many aboriginal youth identify with alternative political publications and affiliations such as *Redwire Magazine*, the Urban Native Youth Alliance, and the Native Youth Movement which challenge racism, colonialism, and heterosexism without compromising their commitment to aboriginal culture. Alternative spaces for political/social gatherings are often established at Hip Hop venues (Soul Survival in Vancouver) or slam poetry/open mic events.

14 This is not to de-emphasize the political, social, and spiritual importance of an indigenous collective identity that can be ruptured by the (depoliticized) use of poststructuralist theory, as some indigenous intellectuals, such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, have argued. Rather I focus on the individual to offer a more nuanced understanding of how women with different experiences and identities (class, nation, sexuality) imagine and experience the Downtown Eastside in their everyday lives. See E. Cook-Lynn, "Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," *Natives and Academics: Research and Writing About American Indians*, ed., D. A. Mihesuah (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

15 Here I am thinking of the special issue of the American Indian Culture and Research Journal (1998). Offering important insights, some of the papers move beyond a description of urban Native Americans, such as research on representations of urban life in Native American literature (Miller), and remind readers of the constructed boundary between reserve and city (see Straus and Valentino). Notable exceptions include Bonita Lawrence's Ph.D. dissertation *Real Indians and Others: Mixed-Race Urban Native People, the Indian Act, and the Rebuilding of Indigenous Nations*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, April 1999.


17 D. Ley, "The Downtown Eastside: One Hundred Years of Struggle," *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*, S. Hasson and D. Ley (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994) 189.

18 Ley's observation is interesting, as in later chapters it is clear that the media have played a significant role in reaffirming the 'skid row' image. However it is important to recognize the conflicting interpretive character of the media, as it responds to different political climates and issues.

19 Blomley and Sommers 262.


21 This was done indirectly through a third party member. Typically I gave copies of my research proposal and intent to individuals in two women's organizations, which were then distributed to interested women. Women then contacted me to communicate their interest.

22 Wolf 128.


24 Lana, Personal Interview, December 9, 1999.


26 Fieldnotes, February 27, 2000.


28 The goals of Popular Education at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre are to encourage women to help themselves through cooperative strategies by becoming aware of the social conditions that continue to
oppress them. Once becoming aware of these conditions, women are encouraged to work together to improve and change their circumstances. Paulo Freire is one significant person to encourage consciousness raising, particularly among the poor, in order to affect social change. Adult education is one model of participatory research.

30 Lather.


CHAPTER 2. Narrating Community: Experiences of the Downtown Eastside

Geographers have explored the ways in which the Downtown Eastside has been socially constructed, but their narratives have repeatedly overlooked the voices, experiences, and struggles of both women and First Nations. Many researchers have analyzed the ways in which the Downtown Eastside has been mapped, transformed, and reinvented by different actors, as the community contends with “new global realities.” Studies of organizational histories, such as the Downtown Eastside Residents Association, territorial struggles over local space (between activists and gentrifiers), and changing discourses of masculinity are among many that have questioned the different ways inner city space has been imagined, represented, and produced. In this chapter I open up space for different voices, exploring the conflicting ways ten First Nations women, living and working in the community, imagine and participate in the Downtown Eastside. Working with interviews, participant observation, and popular education workshops, I move through the symbolic and material meanings attributed to the problematic of ‘community’.

Following Kay Anderson, my objective in this chapter is to disrupt a unified or homogenous representation of First Nations women’s experiences of community in the Downtown Eastside. Women have radically different perspectives on their immediate community, influenced by their diverse personal histories and subject positions. While some women feel there is no unity or meaningful social connections in the Downtown Eastside, others experience and foster such connections at various scales—most often in organizations or on the streets. This chapter is a response to requests (formal and informal) by friends and participants to talk about the intimate everyday social relations of the Downtown Eastside. These requests evolve out of many concerns—one being that the media tends to primarily focus on the hyper-visible, public sphere. One of the consequences of this selective visibility has resulted in the wide circulation of pejorative stereotypes of the Downtown Eastside: drug addiction, crime, and
poverty. Places or people that diverge from or challenge these narrow representations are thereby rendered invisible. Although the discourse of visibility attempts to stabilize boundaries between public-private domains, it recognizes a silence within the media, public domain, and academia: First Nations women’s voices and experiences in the inner city are rarely acknowledged. Therefore I begin this chapter with a brief description of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre from my own perspective, a place that is of central importance in many women’s everyday lives. It is within its walls that many First Nations women, with different subject positions—class, nation, sexuality, and education—find a sense of belonging and acceptance in the Downtown Eastside. Second, turning to in-depth interviews I begin by exploring the ways three women express a sense of belonging in the Downtown Eastside, which they relate to their experiences at the Women’s Centre. Although these three women live outside the Downtown Eastside they move fluidly through its borders. However, due to their privileged class positions this mobility is not without its tensions. Third, I explore another set of representations of the Downtown Eastside, from the perspective of those who live within its borders. Using the rhetoric of individuality, survival, and self-reliance, some First Nations women are critical of the notion of community by maintaining they do not belong to any social groups in the Downtown Eastside. Ironically, they simultaneously feel accepted within its borders. Through narratives of familiarity and home, these women express a fluid ambivalence in their descriptions of the Downtown Eastside community. Against these narratives, I discuss how other resident women have a strong sense of community, notably expressed through unique mother/daughter street relationships. Together these layered and conflicting narratives provide rich ethnographic examples as to how inner city spaces ultimately resist any essentialized representation. Defining and re-defining inner city space in meaningful ways First Nations women are creating space for themselves within the inherently complex and challenging material circumstances in the Downtown Eastside, from within and without its borders.
Seeing Faces, Hearing Stories: Conflicting Narratives of Community

C: We don't see the women here in the Centre, we don't see the volunteer work that's being done. We don't see anything that goes on behind these walls. I was joking when [I suggested that] we ought to take parasols get ourselves all dressed up and go take over Pigeon park...

B: More pictures should be taken of the Women's Centre.

A: Or show the nice things that go on.

C: Which is what I was talking about where this is getting press, this is going out all over. [We need]... opportunities that can be taken for documentary [so] people can... hear from you and you and you and you and you. But not just talking to each other. When I was here with the TV station [we] wanted some feedback about what it is like [living on the Downtown Eastside]. Our voices need to be heard. People need to see our faces, and know how people live down here. And that's the thing that will change the impression. Oh there's women living down there with families. There's people like Annie here. People see what they see on the bus everyday⁶ (my emphasis).

The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre is hard to find. The outside windows are made of textured glass as to prevent passers-by from identifying who is inside. Marked as women's only space, it creates an inner city retreat (for some) from Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SRO), bars, and the streets. Breaking up the Centre's long, narrow, and dark space, green couches are clustered to create a gathering place as one walks in. Women are sleeping, drinking coffee, reading horoscopes, doing crossword puzzles, and talking. Donations of clothing and other domestic items are freshly stacked near the door. A desk volunteer reminds you to sign in - for funding statistics. Legal, mental health, victim services, and counselling offices are lined along one side of the Centre. A small kitchen, which serves over 150 women on hot meal days, is tucked at the back, accompanied by a bathroom, shower, and laundry facilities. A series of black and white photographs of the February 14th march, commemorating women who have died of violence on the Downtown Eastside, draws attention to the political organizing of the women who live in the community.

My first day in the Women's Centre is an initiation of sorts- into the volunteer position, volunteer meeting, and not least into a complex social world of this space. Laurie, a kind and gentle woman, is to train me on the desk. As I sit with her, observing to learn, she exudes satisfied excitement about acquiring five pairs of colourful, roomy sweatpants in the clothing
room. As the new member, I am soon swept into volunteer politics, where I am warned at different times by different women to “watch out for that one.” In addition to personal insults and accusations, complaints about the quality of floor cleanups, delegation of volunteer work duties, clothing room privileges begin to test my patience. Initially I feel overwhelmed, distinctly aware that the circulation of negative energy could easily discourage one from returning.

But as my time at the Centre intensifies, I witness and participate in an entirely different atmosphere. Often I walk into the Women’s Centre and find the desk volunteer generously passing out fresh fruit, yoghurts, and other special foods to the women sitting on the green couches. Women, aware of who is in greater need of resources, then redistribute food to women with children or elders. Entering with my bike, women joke about wanting to ride or steal it—teasing me that they will sell it for five dollars worth of rock. Humour I learn is one of the most important gifts one can offer in this crowded and often tense space. One afternoon, a woman dressed as a horse (or cow—it was rather ambiguous) walked from the kitchen to the front desk, bumping into the walls and (in jest) kicking other women. Drawn into the playfulness of her antics, consumed by the lightness of laughter it brought, women transformed the Centre into an intimate living room.

One soon learns that there are days of closeness and other days of distance, when women retreat inside themselves to grapple with personal difficulties or manage their busy lives. Other days are simply chaotic, when tensions build exponentially and, at times, compromise the safety of women. These days often surface at the end of the month when there isn’t enough money from social assistance to purchase basic necessities let alone many women’s staple, cigarettes. These are days when one needs to be mindful of the little salt and pepper packages scattered on the tables from lunch, to determine whether their presence indicates a taken seat. Sitting at one of the long tables is a privilege. Conversations meander between the most pressing topics of the day and lighter issues: doctor’s visits, fashion, travel dreams, family members, Welfare problems,
provincial politics, the quality of the hot lunch, medication, personal achievements, and bargains at the Army and Navy. It is through these conversations and their accompanied silences where a sense of community is built, in unpredictable, complex, and shifting ways.

It is here at the Women’s Centre that many First Nations women have found a strong sense of belonging, established through close friendships and a commitment to social change. Rebecca, Cree woman from northern Manitoba who actively participates in the wage economy, is such a woman. Born into a business family, economic self-sufficiency has always been an important personal goal. With her business background, she has become involved in addressing and attempting to relieve the constraints of poverty on her reserve and in the city. Living outside of the Downtown Eastside her interaction with its aboriginal community primarily depends on the informal gatherings of women at the Women’s Centre. Describing the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community as the “forgotten people,” Rebecca relates that through her involvement with the Women’s Centre she finds a strong sense of belonging.

I like volunteering down here because it’s what I like doing most... Because I see a little broken here and there everyday. You know women willing to make that step, may not happen overnight like I said, but they’re chiseling away at it and making progress little by little. It’s nice to see the volunteer sheets fill up [laughs]. So that’s why I like volunteering down here. And I like working at the Women’s Centre. If I’m away for two or three days I start missing it [laughs].

Celebrating the determination of women to improve their difficult personal circumstances, Rebecca describes the fulfillment of encouraging and witnessing positive change. Rebecca considers her role in the aboriginal community to help poor women achieve their goals so that they may be “recognized for their achievements rather than be stereotyped as jugs or drunks on the Downtown Eastside.” With her experience and knowledge in the arts community Rebecca hopes to encourage a larger aboriginal presence in both the arts and business communities. But at the same time she positions herself as an “outsider.” Separating herself from the aboriginal women she works with, Rebecca articulates her frustrations with their apparent lack of agency, which she argues perpetuates negative stereotypes of aboriginal people.
When I first heard that term [jugs] it just upset me more... Like my own native people because I figured they let us down, the ones that were trying hard were working hard to get to where they’re at. And here they’re just destroying our [reputation] by going on a drunk and not making use of their culture and themselves and skills and what’s put in front of them. Like they could get an education without any problem with their status and that... And I put the blame on the native side because they’re using the white race as a [scapegoat], being badgered by them just like their drinking. And then I said well if you have any... dignity in front of you, you’d stand up for yourself and stand up and be counted- not let yourself be downtrodden...

Mobilizing the rhetoric of work ethic and the entitlements associated with Indian status, Rebecca reveals her disappointment in women who fail to become economically self-sufficient.

Experiencing the stereotypes that she herself is placing upon other First Nations women, she asserts that negative stereotyping has created barriers to her own efforts to be economically independent. Thus while she feels a sense of belonging in the Downtown Eastside through her volunteer work at the Women’s Centre, she also maintains a degree of separation because of her class privilege.

Also committed to social change, Theresa, a 30-year-old, middle-class Nisga’a woman, has fostered a meaningful connection to the Women’s Centre. Theresa’s education and vocational interest has also led her to the Downtown Eastside to work with the aboriginal community on issues such as substance abuse, poverty, and child apprehension. Her experience in the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community has focused on working and volunteering with different agencies, while living outside the community. Theresa expresses a sense of belonging to the Women’s Centre.

The fact that... that is where I want to be. Because there’s a lot of native women down there, and that’s who I want to work with. I want to work with them to give them, to help them find some direction, way out of there... and there is the fact that there’s no judgement laid in that place... Yeah that’s one of the most important things for me because I grew up being judged by all these upper class people, so-called upper class people. But yeah that’s one of the things that is a deciding factor for me and whether I’m going to be involved or not [in the aboriginal community].

Not only is the Women’s Centre an important place to Theresa because it encompasses the type of work she wants to do, but it also offers a non-judgmental atmosphere. While the Women’s Centre is a place where Theresa feels comfortable and accepted for who she is, (the Centre’s
mandate is to create a non-oppressive, inclusive atmosphere for all women regardless of race, class, or sexuality) it is not entirely open and accepting in practice. There are shifting boundaries of acceptance, which varies with each person. Despite its mandate, racism, homophobia, and discrimination against those with mental health issues persist.

There is a contradiction, however, between working with less advantaged aboriginal people and the enjoying the ability to remove oneself from that community. Theresa lives outside the denser concentration of First Nations people in both the Downtown Eastside and Commercial Drive communities, where native housing is common. Underlying her decision is the perception that the wider aboriginal community is not healthy. Articulating some of own her stereotypes, she explains:

...We’re not trying to be insulting but that’s a fact you know. If you want to see native people you just go out on Welfare Day and they’re all over the place. And a lot of them may be intoxicated if you ride the bus on Welfare Wednesday evening or anytime up until Saturday or Sunday when it’s all spent. And it’s not a good feeling to be a native person that hasn’t got as many problems and is trying to live a healthy lifestyle. And then to be surrounded by all these people on a particular time. And they’re either high and being obnoxious on the bus... I want to do something for my people. I want to work with them so they can work towards being healthy... But if I’m living right in the middle of them it would probably be too depressing or make me feel too hopeless which I don’t like to think. There is hope, I know there is for my people.

Although her work is directed towards helping her aboriginal community, Theresa separates herself, like Rebecca, both geographically and symbolically. This strategy attempts to avoid the pervasiveness of racialized stereotypes that are associated with poverty. Privileged because of her participation in the wage economy, Theresa has the ability to avoid the daily stresses that many urban aboriginal people deal with in the Downtown Eastside. Although her connection to the Downtown Eastside is motivated by her concern for social change in the aboriginal community, and is strengthened through her support at the Women’s Centre, it remains a tenuous one.

Kate, a 42-year-old mixed blood Nisga’a, also embodies an inherent tension through her connection to the Downtown Eastside. Committed to women’s issues in the community, it is through her experiences of sexual discrimination that she feels excluded from the aboriginal
community. Although Kate lives outside of the community she finds there is a strong sense of unity in the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community, fostered by a common concern for other First Nations who find themselves on the street. She explains that this is particularly apparent through large community gatherings that surface because of a common sense of loss and anger. A most recent example is the concern precipitated by a recent murder of a young First Nations woman in the Downtown Eastside. Challenging the ‘outsider’s’ perception of the Downtown Eastside Kate explains, “...the sense I get that’s for First Nations people who do live in the Downtown Eastside do have the common ties of watching out for one another and having to find a place in the Downtown Eastside to fit in. It’s about holding onto whatever commonalties that they have.”

Despite her geographical ‘outsider’ status, Kate has forged strong relationships with other aboriginal women in the Women’s Centre, by connecting through similar family histories. It’s been interesting for me because I’ve always connected with other First Nations women... And then coming to the Women’s Centre where it’s has a higher percentage of First Nations women... So that’s really comforting that being in the city and linking up with other First Nations women... and realizing that so many women are living in poverty here and that they are displaced from their reserves... [Spending time at the Women’s Centre is] a learning experience because it’s really interesting to find talkative women that are probably from Ontario, or Northern Ontario, or from the Prairies, or even different parts of B.C. [To discover] what traditionally... we have in common and what are the differences is really interesting; [commonalties being] our upbringing, like what our family dynamics are.

The Women’s Centre is a meaningful space where Kate finds space to share personal histories with other women living on the Downtown Eastside. Irrespective of the life experiences she shares with women in the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community, the issue of her sexual orientation continues to create and sustain divisions. “[Participating in] the lesbian community is a big part [of my life]. And that’s another divisive factor in the First Nations community. It’s that there’s a lot that don’t embrace homosexuality or understand it and they have biases and discrimination against lesbians and gays. And I think it’s probably from the Residential Schools in terms of the teachings.” Consequently she tends to avoid the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community beyond her professional responsibilities. More comfortable within the lesbian
community in Vancouver, Kate feels a greater sense of belonging to neighbourhoods where an open gay identity tends to be more accepted—such as the West End and Commercial Drive communities. Describing this sense of belonging Kate explains, “I participate in community events and cultural events, different arts and things like that. It is feeling more of an acceptance because it feels bonding because we all have the same kinds of experiences from the larger community. So [the lesbian community] does feel like it’s more united.”

Experiences of discrimination based on her sexual orientation have caused her to feel isolated from the aboriginal community in the Downtown Eastside. Rather, she finds support from women in the lesbian community who have experienced similar forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Kate also feels the lesbian community is more open to difference, knowing “that if there was some issue that came up or something that I would be able to speak out.” Consequently she feels her voice and subjectivity are affirmed and celebrated within the lesbian more so than the aboriginal community. While her social and professional commitments lie within the Downtown Eastside, and she has developed strong friendships with aboriginal women in the Women’s Centre, Kate ultimately feels a greater sense of belonging elsewhere, in spaces and social networks that affirm her lesbian identity.

All three of these women feel a sense of belonging to the Women’s Centre, through their friendships and social commitments to improve women’s life circumstances in the Downtown Eastside. Despite the fact all three live outside of the immediate borders of the community, each has dedicated much of their time to establishing meaningful connections with women who use the Centre. Whether it’s the non-judgmental atmosphere, self-motivated women, or the possibility of social change each are drawn to the Women’s Centre for different reasons. Yet the issue of class presents barriers for Rebecca and Theresa who want to preserve the image of their success in the wage economy to avoid the stereotypes associated with many aboriginal people who rely on social assistance. They create distance in their attempts to maintain personal
boundaries between themselves and the women they want to support. However there are some important differences, as boundaries are *created for* Kate in the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community. Identifying as lesbian has created personal discomfort among those who do not accept her sexual orientation. Although they choose to loosely define themselves as “outsiders”, it is clear that this label does not account for their complex and competing feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and ambivalence within the aboriginal and women’s communities of the Downtown Eastside.

Competing feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and ambivalence are not merely associated with those aboriginal women who live outside of the Downtown Eastside. Women who have lived in the community have very different interpretations of what living in the Downtown Eastside means to them. Framing their stories around street spaces, in addition to places like the Women’s Centre, it is clear that a unified imagining of the Downtown Eastside community is disrupted. Deborah a 32-year-old Interior Salish woman with homemade blue tattoos scattered across her arm, big eyes, and a friendly smile, has lived (on and off) in the Downtown Eastside since she was 14. Despite spending time living in other cities and towns, Deborah explains that she is always drawn back to the Downtown Eastside. “I don’t know, to me ever since I started coming down here it’s always been my home. You know there’s nothing that attracts me to keep on coming back. It’s just a place where I feel that I’m accepted and a part of.” Yet Deborah distinguishes between her sense of belonging and acceptance by the community. Emphasizing her independence, she clarifies that it is only the twenty-year *familiarity* with the Downtown Eastside that influences her decision to stay. Using the survival rhetoric of self-reliance she resists being included in a larger, accepting community.

Yet the Downtown Eastside is a meaningful place where powerful memories linger in a distinctly personal geography. “I’ve got good memories, bad memories. Just places where I met people, places where I lost. It’s somewhere I’ve lost people and found people. And a lot of
friends I’ve lost down here and a lot of friends I’ve met down here.” The loss and gain of different relationships infuse the spaces of the Downtown Eastside with meaning. Yet the meaning of community is contingent on the cohesiveness of her social relationships. With a unique understanding of how the Downtown Eastside has changed in the last two decades, she offers her perspective on one particular aspect of the Downtown Eastside- the aboriginal community.

Deborah speaks as if the aboriginal community, which she describes as her street family, no longer exists. Citing the rise in hard drugs (particularly crack cocaine) since the early 1980s Deborah explains that the community she once depended on for housing, personal security, and emotional support has given way to an independent, self-involved street culture.

Before everybody, all the natives, used to always stick together but now it’s like nobody gives a shit about anybody anymore... I’m not going to really blame it on anybody but it’s just that ever since the cocaine and the heroin’s gotten bigger down here... Like when I first hanging around down here it was everybody stuck together no matter what. You know even though there was heroin down here but I never really see all that much of it but since the rock and the powder came around its like nobody gives a shit about anybody anymore.

In contrast, before drugs seemingly fractured the community, Deborah remembers the Downtown Eastside differently.

...back then Hastings was OK to hang around because you had family. I had street mothers all over the place, and street fathers, and street sisters, and street brothers. I don’t think I was ever stuck for a place to stay... [The aboriginal community] was pretty good and pretty strong in my eyes anyway, quite a while ago... Everybody was helping everybody down here. Away from down here I can’t really say how it was because I never really hung around away from down here... Back then I didn’t have anything to worry about because I had people looking out for me you know. Old native people they would always if I was stuck for a place, which I always was, and so I’d sit on welfare. They helped me out quite a bit like I said everybody stuck together back then but now it’s like you know if you don’t have a place to stay who gives a shit now. It’s not like it used to be.

Deborah attributes the individualized nature of the Downtown Eastside to hard drug-use, which she feels has severed meaningful connections among aboriginal and non-aboriginal people living in the community. This sentiment is shared by Lana, a 52-year-old Blackfoot woman, who goes even further to link the emotional and physical isolation of some Downtown Eastside residents to difficult family situations on the reserve.
I see a very dysfunctional community of native people. Totally dysfunctional. To me this is death row. This is where the next step is death. And this is where they come because everything is rampant. The drugs are rampant. You can get it easy and you can be stoned every day on it. So they come here because on the reserve it’s a little bit hard to get a hold of these things especially if you’re a chronic addict. And for a lot of them they come to this city because they don’t get along at home. They’ve got alcoholic families, but they don’t have the skills to survive so they end up downtown. And because of their insecurities and you know there’s no family support or anything down here. There’s no support here at all for families.

Both Deborah and Lana reinforce that street relationships are founded on a mutual interest in survival. Speaking from her life experience, Lana believes that incarceration (she includes Residential School) has influenced the preference to be alone and the difficulty of connecting on a “deeper level.” Rather she suggests that aboriginal people on the Downtown Eastside establish superficial connections by sharing similar stories and life experiences. But she emphasizes that this unity is not based on “a connection of the soul. It’s just connection of survival and a little bit of comradeship intertwined, but nobody trusts each other.” However the lack of trust is not only the result of substance abuse or the history of incarceration. Both Deborah and Lana speak of the painful experiences of not feeling wanted or included in various social groups—particularly with respect to their immediate family and larger reserve community. Given this experience of exclusion, Lana argues the concept of ‘community’ is meaningless to her. “I have no sense of community. Because where I come from [there] is nepotism, I’m not included. I’m not included in any aspect of my family or self in this world. I’m by myself totally. Even if I have kids.” Despite this discourse of self-reliance there remains a feeling of being a part of something in the Downtown Eastside community. While both do not recognize a cohesive aboriginal community Deborah and Lana claim to feel at home either because of their long history of living on the Downtown Eastside or because of the accepting and non-judgmental atmosphere of a lower class community. When I ask Deborah what attracts her to the Downtown Eastside she laughs and responds, “Don’t ask. I don’t know. To me ever since I started coming down here it’s always been my home. You know there’s nothing that attracts me to keep on coming back. It’s just a place where I feel that I’m accepted and a part of.” Lana also reveals her tenuous sense of
belonging. “Maybe at one time I feel at home here, because everybody’s dressed shabby
sometimes. They are down-to-earth. They’ll sit anywhere without brushing. They’re just natural
people down here. They’re poor. There’s a lot of humour, a lot of stories and survival. There’s
comradeship here.” There are infinite invocations of home, but for Deborah and Lana home is
conceptualized as a ‘structure of feeling’ associated with the emotional comfort familiarity
brings. However, through their narratives both of these women express ambivalence towards
belonging to or being accepted in the Downtown Eastside community. In contrast, other women
living in the Downtown Eastside invoke a stronger sense of belonging, as described through their
experiences with organizations and in-depth street relationships.

For Nadine, a 43-year-old Nisga’a woman who has battled with drug and alcohol
addiction since she was a teenager, the Downtown Eastside is her home. Her sense of belonging
is fostered through a feeling of acceptance in the Downtown Eastside, particularly because of its
oft cited, non-judgmental atmosphere. Nadine seems to place more emphasis on organizations
that foster her sense of belonging in the community. The unique caring environment of her SRO
hotel, which is run by the Portland Hotel Society, is one such place. After living in other run-
down hotels, the sensitivity and support of the Portland staff contribute to her comfort in the
community. “[The Portland Hotel Society] run[s] methadone programs and things like that.
Really, they’ll do anything to help you. They’ll find anyway they can to get almost anything you
need. They’ll find it for you. They’re really good that way. They’re really caring people that
work for them…” The staff at different agencies seem to make a positive difference in her
everyday life. On her busier days Nadine typically travels between her hotel and different
organizations and appointments but is sure to visit her two favourite places, the Women’s Centre
and Food For Thought. The latter is an organization that provides meals for people living with
HIV/AIDS, which Nadine finds is particularly non-judgmental of personal histories or current
lifestyles. Conscious of the stereotyping of women with HIV/AIDS she explains her attraction to this organization.

And those people that are in the same condition as me don’t really ask a lot of questions... It’s like everyone just kind of accepts who we are and what’s happened and everything. So you don’t really have to explain yourself. [They] Accept [who] you are and sometimes just out of the blue just tell you [how they contracted HIV/AIDS], you don’t even have to ask. If they feel like saying they do. But they never question you. You always feel comfortable and welcome. They always make you feel welcome right away.

Feeling welcomed is incredibly important to Nadine’s sense of belonging on the Downtown Eastside, particularly when society stigmatises (amongst others) poverty, disease, and lifestyles that do not conform to middle-class values. These organizations are only one aspect, however.

Nadine emphasises that the non-judgmental atmosphere of the Downtown Eastside can be found within bars and the adjoining corridors of the streets.

Just because they’re the people and it doesn’t matter what you do. If you just drink or do dope or whatever, they accept you. They don’t make a big deal about what you do. They just let you be. That’s what they do. They just let you live. Probably they don’t mind your business whatever you do is your own.

While the open, accepting character of the Downtown Eastside is a definitive aspect of the community, she is less certain about the nature of social relationships. Observing the slipperiness of social interaction she notes that people in the community, with reference to the aboriginal community in particular, are continually reconstituting their social groups. Explaining this fluid interaction she offers, “Different moods, different days. Whatever’s happening with them. I have no idea why that is. Even I do that myself. Just whoever I come across that’s who I spend my time with.” Reflecting on whether residents in the Downtown Eastside are close she explains,

Yes, in a sense they are. Everybody says hi to each other because they know each other. They see each other all the time. [That’s] probably the only thing I see about the closeness. They’re friendly, they know you to see you. And it’s surprising. A lot of people are getting to know my name from just other people saying hi to me on the street. And I notice that when they call me by my name and lots of them I don’t even know their names. They just know.

Her understanding of closeness differs from Lana or Deborah who insist that familiarity, while comforting, does not produce close social relationships. Rather, they would argue, these street relationships are constituted by mutual self-interest that does not tend to develop into long lasting
friendships. Yet it seems that this familiarity is important to Nadine and contributes to a sense of what another informant referred to as ‘comradeship’. Nadine still has a few close friends who grew up with her in her northern village and have survived decades living in the Downtown Eastside. Although Nadine focuses more on organizations as a central aspect of her sense of belonging in the Downtown Eastside, other women living in the community speak about their sense of belonging through in-depth street relationships.

I would often see Olivia, a 53-year-old Nisga’a woman, sitting with younger aboriginal women at the Women’s Centre, smiling and teasing over lunch. While she enjoys going to the Hey Way Noqu Healing Circle, chatting with people in local bars, and trying her luck at different Bingo Halls, she spends most of her time at the Women’s Centre, meeting friends and utilizing some of its resources - message board, phone, and lunches. Olivia, a mother of five, has lived on and off the Downtown Eastside since the early 1980s - the time in between spent in her northern village. The non-judgmental and down-to-earth atmosphere of the community reminds her of the northern villages because aboriginal people, she claims, “have adopted the Downtown Eastside. It’s very much like home, in a way like the villages where we don’t have to worry about dirtying the streets or worrying about screaming around down the street…” However, the Downtown Eastside is not “home” since her sense of home remains strongly tied to her village. Since the death of her husband, and other family difficulties, however, she does not want to return. In response to “not having a home” there have been times when she has relied on “heavy drugs and alcohol.”

The initial impact of I’ll never be able to make it home. All of a sudden I realized this was reality. You know I have no home and probably never will. I missed my first husband. I felt bad about my second husband I had to divorce. My parents were mad at me because it was all my fault.

When Olivia feels she is missing home she socializes with other aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside. It is through formal and informal gatherings of aboriginal people where Olivia speaks of the “natural bonds” she inherently has with other aboriginal men and women.
Olivia feels these bonds are established through shared histories and experiences, particularly displacement from families and communities. “It’s just something that’s understood. When you’re abused and you’ve been through rough times you end up down here... There’s a lot of them down here. And it’s all understood that whoever is down here is here because we’re by ourselves. So naturally all of us women we just kind of [bond]. We’re partners, we’re friends, we see each other through this, see others through that.” Recognizing the difficult life histories of many Downtown Eastside residents Olivia acknowledges, like the latter two women, the difficulty of establishing relationships in a community where extensive drug and alcohol abuse exists. Through metaphor Olivia describes a common type of social interaction while living in the Downtown Eastside.

It’s like living out in the wilderness because you don’t really know who all those trees are around you [laughs]. That’s the one thing, the way my grandmother would have put it. Those people around you are just trees. They’re all on drugs. They don’t even feel you, or hear a word you’re saying. They’re not interested in you, but if you have money on you, yes they’ll be interested in you for that little bit of time. If you’ve got a bottle on you, if you have drugs on you, you’re a good friend for a while and then it’s gone.

Drawing upon the reality of drug and alcohol abuse Olivia uses the term “skid row” without hesitation, a term which connotes the very opposite of a residential community and thus rejected by activists and some City officials, but uses it to describe the Downtown Eastside as a community.

It’s probably what I can see now. I mean this place has never changed. Skid row is always going to be a skid row. It is pretty much, you could say, in those sort of four bars that are in there. After a while the people that come everyday that live in the area they get to know each other. And it does become a community when one person dies and was so well known in the area. They have memorials for them in those pubs that they used to hang around in. I think that’s what you’d call community spirit. In a way single women living down here I found that a lot of the well mannered guys that live down here have lived down here all their lives... There are some really neat guys that do help out. They know which women to help out and which ones not to. So I was helped quite a bit because I wasn’t on the drugs or anything.

In contrast to Lana and Deborah, Olivia does not resist referring to people with alcohol or drug addictions as a community. Though her sense of community is certainly not restricted to this aspect of the Downtown Eastside. Olivia has developed strong relationships with aboriginal people through informal street networks that contribute to her sense of belonging and
community. Speaking of her experiences with the aboriginal community in the Downtown Eastside she observes,

Natives to natives they seem to just bond together automatically. If there happens to be a native in trouble, if some native is getting beat up somewhere you’d be surprised how fast other natives will come around and check out what’s going on… There’s a lot of natives down here that help each other out. We all lead each other to different places to get good shelter, to get good human resources...

The concern for each other’s physical safety and security is described as ‘inherent’ among aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside. Despite the discourse of naturalization she suggests that these acts are not motivated by self-interest, as Deborah and Lana described their understanding of street relationships. For example, Olivia describes a unique relationship between women. As an older aboriginal woman spending time on the Downtown Eastside, younger women are drawn to her for advice and support.

...If something is bothering one of my girls, I call them my girls. If something is bothering one of them and they’re having a hard time talking about it I just walk up and say spit it out, pretend he’s all naked and just spit it out all over the place. And then they burst out laughing and it’s that laughter just relaxes them just like that. They sit down and talk about it, if I can help them, I can help them. If not, I’ll just give direction. But it helps and they make me feel good. Like they see me down here and I’ve had quite a few [bad days] in the last few days… this time I’m the one sitting like this, not really socializing or anything. Just kind of in a daze and they’re coming up to me, what’s happening? You’re not happy, bubbly, happy you. And I just tell them… And they’re understanding and always, want a beer, want a smoke? Nah, not really. I say that most times, saying not really.

Although Olivia is offering emotional support to younger women, these relationships are characterized by reciprocity. They too support Olivia during her own difficult personal times. Yet there is a distinctly important role an older woman plays in the lives of younger women, particularly if she has lived in the Downtown Eastside for a longer period of time. In addition to emotional support, many mother/daughter street relationships facilitate the transfer of critical knowledge regarding street safety, such as how to identify potential abusers.

That’s another thing why young women about you have to be very careful with who you make friends with especially if they’re strangers and if you’re thinking of taking them home with you, please be careful. And I always say that, if he’s the least bit, I sometimes point out little pointers of how to detect an abuser. Like my husband who abused me. I learned all about abuse and the different little things that trigger abuse. And how abusers behave around their victims. Things like that those young women have to listen to. They don’t hear it anywhere else.
While these relationships are important in enhancing the safety of young women who have recently moved to the Downtown Eastside, these informal networks are not necessarily confined by gender. Olivia explains that young aboriginal men often keep an eye out for older women, accompanying them as they wander from bar to bar.

A lot of these young guys are really good that way, our native young guys. I call them our braves. If they see one of us women, older women, wandering from bar to bar, they’ll walk me there. You know they keep an eye on us. Walk and talk and that’s how we get to talking. They come and tell me all that they’ve got themselves into and in the meantime they’re doing me a favour by walking me.

Although this seems to be a fleeting relationship based more on mutual self-interest and survival, as described by Lana and Deborah above, it is clear that Olivia’s other relationships with women are marked by increasing degrees of history and commitment. Spending time with her older friends, who share similar life histories, at Bingo Halls or the Women’s Centre, and with “her girls” in multiple places, together offer Olivia a strong sense of community in the Downtown Eastside. Community, as Olivia describes it, is “where everybody gathers to be together, share whatever.” Negotiated in complex and shifting ways, Olivia describes her sense of community in the Downtown Eastside through the value of these daily interactions.

Experiencing the other side of mother/daughter street relationships, Patricia, a 30-year-old Nisga’a from northern B.C., speaks similarly of the Downtown Eastside community. Her perception of the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community is that it is both strong and semi-close knit. Patricia speaks of the informal mother/daughter street relationships as an important dimension of her community. Speaking of the Downtown Eastside she relates,

... it’s sort of like a feeling of a second home. Home away from home where everybody has natural caring for other people and their well being. And it’s like some of the women that come to the [Women’s] Centre they kind of adopt you as their daughter... It’s kind of neat. You see some of the older women that are in their 50s and they adopt the younger girls like especially the new ones that come in, the ones that they feel close to or they feel they can trust. They kind of take them under their wing and whenever it is when any of the girls need anything, they give whatever they have.
Within two days of arriving on the street from her northern community she met an older aboriginal woman at the Women’s Centre who soon adopted her as a daughter. Patricia had spent three weeks without shelter soon after she arrived in Vancouver. During that time she would rely on her street mother for a change of clothes and a meal twice a week. Performing a role akin to Olivia’s, her new street mother also shared important information about the Downtown Eastside, offering advice to ensure Patricia’s safety.

It was in respect to looking out for what kind of drug dealers were here and there, and who was who, like in regards to some of the girls that work on the streets- who their pimps were or stuff like that... It was her way of looking out for my best interests if I was ever walking on the streets by myself. So that helped me out. Especially when I didn’t know exactly what streets were whose on the streets.

Obtaining information about “heavy” drug areas helped Patricia to feel more comfortable walking alone in the Downtown Eastside upon her arrival. While Patricia finds many points of connections with older aboriginal men and women in the Downtown Eastside, through the sharing of life stories, she maintains the community is “semi-close knit”. By this she describes the community similarly to Lana and Deborah, alluding to the mutual interest in survival that structure fleeting relationships.

The sense of relying on each other for whatever habit that they may have at the time... Say there’s a group of people and they want to work on getting a bottle or something to drink, lets say a bottle. And there’s like maybe a couple of elder people and about three or four younger people so everyone’s working together. Two may be out gathering cans or something, and the other two are keeping an eye on the older ones. And then there’s one that’s out there hustling trying to get change. And if there’s one person that doesn’t put forth to help out...if they don’t come back with their whatever it is they made, they kind of get sent out [shunned]... [It’s semi-close knit because] they’re out for their own deal or whatever it is they’re doing.

Patricia recognizes that these types of mutually benefiting relationships are common if one has an addiction to drugs or alcohol. However, after successfully working her way through an addiction, Patricia explains that she imagines and participates in the Downtown Eastside community somewhat differently.

Patricia’s understanding of a community is “people being together, surviving in whatever neighbourhood it is they’re in. To me like the community I come from back home everybody’s
either related or knows each other because of how small it is. Everybody knows what each other is doing… I would say [the Downtown Eastside] is a community.” In contrast to the specific relationship she recounted above, Patricia talks about her sense of belonging to the Downtown Eastside, describing it as her “second home.”

I would say it’s because of having been down here for such a length of time that you meet people that are from different walks of life and you get to find out what their lives are about. It’s kind of like, it makes me think of whenever I talk to somebody that’s older than me, it makes me think about my grandparents whenever they used to talk about it way back when and you know. It kind of gives you that real warm feeling that these people are human beings and they have or have not gone through rougher times than I have. But the sharing that goes on and the interaction amongst these others I find is warm and comforting to be a part of.

While the familiarity of the Downtown Eastside influences her sense of belonging, she explains that is also strongly related to the openness and acceptance of diverse “nationalities” and “races”, and the willingness to respect each other “out in the street.” The respect that she encounters on the street is also found within social service organizations (which Nadine clearly articulated), which she explains are important aspects of the inner city community. Patricia continues,

I would say the different organizations down here, trying to help out the people that live in the hotels and that, or even the people that are living out on the street. Having meetings and that about what’s going on in the community. Trying to keep people informed about what’s going on and sharing information. More or less trying to be there for others who may not know or have the means of surviving.

Organizations, such as the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, while providing important services for low-income women, are sites for initiating different types of community involvement. Beyond the close and fleeting relationships, established in both formal and informal gathering spaces, Patricia talks about her connection to the Downtown Eastside community through her increasing commitment to social activism. Upon moving to Vancouver she has been active with other members of the Women’s Centre in women’s marches such as Take Back the Night which protests violence against women in public spaces and empowers women to reclaim spaces that have been saturated with fear. Patricia also participates in International Women’s Day and the February 14th Memorial March on the Downtown Eastside, a march that honours women who have died of violence in the community (many of whom are
aboriginal). The importance of participating in these marches is to visibly demonstrate her support for issues that face women and men in the Downtown Eastside. “It’s stating the fact, OK I’m aboriginal and this is my way of showing my support for whatever the cause may be. And just being a part of it and in itself is an honour especially if you have elders around you... it kind of gets me energized in the sense of taking part in community activities.” Through her mentoring relationships, friendships with older street folks and women at the Women’s Centre, alongside her active participation in women’s organizing, Patricia articulates a strong sense of belonging to the Downtown Eastside community.

Patricia’s commitment to the Women’s Centre is shared, though in different ways, by the following two women. After enduring varying battles with drugs and alcohol Mandy and Irene successfully overcame substance abuse through healing circles at the Women’s Centre, education, and employment. While this is an intersecting commonality, each woman continues to have quite different attachments to the Downtown Eastside community. Mandy focuses most of her energy around her responsibilities in the Women’s Centre while Irene has had increasingly less involvement with the Downtown Eastside due to her family’s preference to live in southern Vancouver. As a Nisga’a mother of four, Mandy has lived in the Downtown Eastside community for many years. Part of the attraction to the Women’s Centre is the atmosphere of women’s only space which gives her a feeling of safety and comfort; a feeling that has been compromised due to her past experiences with abusive men. Women’s only space is actively defended by most women who use the Centre. Forming a network of observers, desk and floor volunteers keep an eye out for male visitors, making sure they do not pop their heads in the door when they inquire about a woman’s presence. If they do women will often chastise the visitor by harassing him and/or telling him off. Protecting the anonymity of women in the Centre, volunteers are made aware as to which women are avoiding which men.
After losing her son to violence, Mandy was first introduced to this safe(r) space through one of the Healing Circles, which carried out with special attention to aboriginal spiritual practices and rituals. Isolating herself for years from family, friends, and community, Mandy had dealt with this personal loss through increasing levels of substance abuse on the Downtown Eastside. She describes her life at that time:

It was really, really awful. Because I didn't know anything about, I knew about God, but I didn't really have much to do with the Creator and my Grandfathers and Grandmothers. [They are] looking after my son, that's where he is now. And praying to the Creator and knowing about the healing circles. I think if it wasn't for that, and how much alcohol and drugs I did at the time because of the loss of my son, all the anger and resentment that I felt to people around me, pushing them away, I don't think I'd be alive today.

Many women, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, attend the Healing Circles at the Women's Centre. In addition to the evening program, the Healing Circle group often attends sweat lodges and feasts for additional cleansing and strengthening on an urban reserve in North Vancouver.

The Healing Circle was also the most important attraction to the Downtown Eastside for Irene, a 42-year-old Metis from Northern Alberta. Upon moving to Vancouver, Irene began visiting the Women's Centre for one of the special evening groups. Grappling with racism, unemployment, and loneliness during her transition to Vancouver, Irene considers the Women's Centre an extremely important place.

I used to come for support groups once in a while. And I still do once in a while. That's the Thursday night group is called the Healing Circle and she implements native culture with that. She smudges everybody down with the Eagle Feather and sage and just says a prayer in Cree. And I'm Cree so it's really nice! First time I went there she spoke in Cree and wow I'm coming back here, it was so moving I was just touched. I was so touched. So I started coming back to the Healing Circle Thursday nights, and I've been for only about two years off and on. Sometimes steady and sometimes I don't go there for a month and sometimes just sporadically.

The Healing Circle at the Women's Centre is particularly meaningful to Irene as it celebrates and incorporates cultural traditions and a language with which she is familiar. This is especially meaningful in a large urban centre where hearing one's indigenous language and taking part in cultural rituals are often more difficult to encounter. While the Healing Circle is Irene's only connection to the Women's Centre, Mandy has accessed many other programs that have helped
her overcome low self-esteem, linked partially to her substance abuse. Upon gaining specific
skills (such as computers, Life Skills, First Aid) she explains that she increasingly felt more
accepted in the wider community. The process of completing programs and meeting friends
through them is strongly linked to her sense of community in the Downtown Eastside.

J: Is the Women’s Centre a community to you?

M: Yeah.

J: In what way?

M: Just by all the programs they have available, other things down here besides hanging out on the
street. There are a lot of people hanging out there not being aware of programs... [The Women’s
Centre] has a lot of things visible. There are instructors [who] enjoy their job, which is good. It
makes you feel more welcome.

In contrast to the time when she was dependent on drugs and alcohol and spent most of her time
alone, the Women’s Centre has provided a strong social network of women, many of whom have
gone through a series of similar programs. Mandy considers the Women’s Centre a community,
one that has supported and continues to support her and one in which she feels appreciated for
her contributions.

Through our conversations Mandy suggests that her involvement in a women’s
community is the basis of her sense of belonging in the Downtown Eastside. Attracting her to the
Downtown Eastside is the intimate, down-to-earth atmosphere of a lower class, culturally diverse
community. “Everybody knows everybody’s name... And there’s nobody that’s really snotty...
[Not like] higher class... people. And I just think no matter what kind of job a person has I don’t
think they have the right to be snotty. Cause everybody’s a person, everybody has feelings.” Like
many women, Mandy is attracted to the open, accepting atmosphere of the community, which
she attributes to its lower class profile. Acknowledging the extensive need for diverse services in
the Downtown Eastside she reflects on her personal role in the community, “The special thing
about it is, that women are feeling down and out and that I’m here for them. I’m here to help
them. I’m here to serve them. I’m there to make them feel good... So a lot of things make me
feel good down here that I can be here for other people, talk to them, and listen to them.” Her commitment to bettering the everyday life circumstances of women living in the Downtown Eastside reflects that of the Women’s Centre, which is one of the reasons she feels a sense of belonging to the organization.

The Women’s Centre means a lot to me because I’m just so thankful that they have such a place for the women to come to. They have all kinds of groups and support groups during the weeks. Judith, for instance, she’s an aboriginal Elder, teacher who has an adult learning class every Monday, and she’s a big inspiration in my life, very big. I started going to her classes and she’s the one that really encouraged me, by looking up to her, to get out and do what I’m doing today. And she really knows how to encourage people without telling them what to do… She’s the one that got me out, get up and go.

Beyond committing her time and energy into helping women at the Centre, she has recently become active in the public domain. Like Patricia, Mandy has begun to participate in women’s marches, such as International Women’s Day (March 8th) as a visible act of protest and solidarity.

[Participating in the march] meant a lot. I felt so good. It felt good to be doing something for the public, to be out there especially for the women that do need the help, that are violated, that are put down and that men or whoever think that they’re not worthy of who they are. And here [in the Downtown Eastside] the women do go through a lot. They do go through a lot, and it’s not very often [they’re recognized].

Mandy’s social commitment is not solely tied to women’s issues. Although she doesn’t seek to be part of an exclusive aboriginal community she has a strong commitment to the development of services for urban aboriginal people. Mandy expresses her interest in providing services for First Nations who migrate to Vancouver from reserves. As well, recognizing the needs of aboriginal families for aboriginal day care services, Mandy is motivated to fill that gap. While she has worked hard to obtain multiple certificates (e.g. First Aid, Life Skills) that have enabled her to work in the service industry, she wants to refine her skills in order to meet the professional requirements for a private service facility. Determined to create her own employment opportunities founded on rich experience and knowledge in the Downtown Eastside, she continues to build on her sense of belonging which has much to do with being needed by and helpful to a diverse a group of women.
While both Mandy and Irene have very close ties to the Women’s Centre, Irene perceives the Downtown Eastside community differently. After a few years of living within its borders with her young family Irene began to feel the community was “too depressing.” Speaking directly of the aboriginal community in the Downtown Eastside, her opinions seem to iterate the sentiments of both Deborah and Lana. Describing her neighbourhood of three years Irene explains:

Well I notice when they moved in they were happy to have a place. And then about a month or two months later they’d be drinking, and then more drinking and more drinking and more drinking. It’s depressing living there. It really is. I don’t know what it is about. It’s just the way the people make you feel there. Like you just don’t belong anywhere. You don’t feel connected… It’s really closed and there’s no neighbourliness, just a lot of closed off people. I think there was just too much paranoia about the area itself, because it’s just drug infested. And there’s a lot of criminal activity during the day and more at night. So everybody’s sort of leery of each other, and they just think well they’re doing drugs, she’s a hooker, those kids are going to grow up that way. A lot of assumptions and pointing fingers.

This experience in the Downtown Eastside contributed to the feeling that the community was not connected. Instead she feels it is fractured in multiple ways due to overlapping issues of substance abuse, racism, and cultural segregation. Using the metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle, Irene describes the consequences of these issues.

There’s a lot of it just seemed so confusing over there. Really confusing and jumbled. It was like a puzzle and everything, like somebody just came along and lifted up and there was just pieces all over the place here just scattered. It just never felt right there… There was so much racism. There was a mixture of Asian, Vietnamese, Spanish, Native, white, coloured people, blacks… but it seems that [the BC Housing Corporation and local community centre] keep them separated. You know like they had classes for only Chinese, and things for only these people. They didn’t really have programs that were for all… I just really felt like an outsider.

Her experiences of racism and cultural segregation contributed to feelings of exclusion and prevented her from feeling connected to her immediate neighbourhood. After enduring prostitute stereotypes by housing staff she decided that the Downtown Eastside was not a healthy environment in which to live. To create a new beginning Irene recently moved to southern Vancouver with her family.

While the Downtown Eastside provided her with important social services during difficult times of unemployment (when she first moved from her northern Alberta community)
Irene's strongest sense of community and belonging is expressed at a different geographical scale—her workplace. Graduating from a two-year program at the Native Education Centre (NEC), an adult education institute, Irene was able to find a job in the service sector. Her institution's rhetoric of multiculturalism, and its commitment to anti-racism, gives Irene a sense of belonging among a multicultural staff. Ironically, the metaphor of the multicultural puzzle that she negatively used to describe her Downtown Eastside neighbourhood is used to describe her workplace.

I: I feel really connected there. I feel like I belong there. I feel like one of the team.

J: What creates that atmosphere?

I: The people I work with. It's just a mixed batch its great. There's East Indian, French, English and Spanish... Indonesian, Philippine, and Japanese, and Korean Chinese. I feel like a... [piece of] a puzzle and I'm just fitting in. A little jumble pack [laughs].

Enduring isolating struggles with unemployment, alcohol abuse, and racism, Irene looks to the political commitment of anti-racism in her workplace as a meaningful invitation to belong to a community. Through this commitment Irene feels her Metis identity is acknowledged and appreciated. Because of this Irene is becoming more involved with the Metis community in Vancouver. Her desire to get involved is encouraged by her positive perception of Vancouver's aboriginal community, which she considers is "changing fast." Like Irene, many aboriginal people are improving their lives through education and employment. "They're just starting to take control of their lives now. Yeah, that's what it is. It's just starting to have a voice. Starting to realize that knowledge is power. Education, you know." However, like the middle-class privilege of Rebecca and Theresa, Irene can afford to move outside of the Downtown Eastside in order to avoid the difficult day-to-day realities that many aboriginal people confront. Thus, Irene has established more of a tenuous connection to the Downtown Eastside, through her occasional visits to the Women's Centre.
Anti-essentialism and the Construction of Community: Concluding Thoughts

Aboriginal women's perceptions of and participation in the Downtown Eastside community disrupt any temptation to essentialize subjectivity and space in the inner city. Their diverse narratives also resist any temptation to categorize or fix the meaning of community or home. With different subject positions (class, sexuality, nation), aboriginal women imagine community in different ways, as expressed through multiple geographical scales and different social networks. Yet each woman speaks about the sentiment of belonging or acceptance. These feelings of (not) belonging shape ideas about 'community' in relation to what is meaningful in their everyday lives—whether a street family, women's organization, or political cause.

Aboriginal women are inscribing legible spaces for themselves, creating meaning through different aspects of social interaction. Although these women do not actively participate in a unified, homogenous aboriginal community in the Downtown Eastside they are redefining urban space and community in variety of ways.

Challenging the stability of inner city borders, the first three women expressed a strong sense of belonging despite living outside of the Downtown Eastside. It is through the Women's Centre that they each find a meaningful connection to aboriginal and women's communities. Distance is created however, due to their middle-class and lesbian identities. In part this distance is a self-conscious strategy to avoid and overcome negative stereotypes (that they too propagate) of urban aboriginal people. In a different way this distance is also reinforced by members of the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community, who maintain clear boundaries as to what characterizes a normative sexual lifestyle. Therefore these three women have complex imaginings of the Downtown Eastside, as mediated by their subject positions, which in turn affect their level of comfort and participation. Others that live inside the Downtown Eastside have radically different interpretations about the nature of community. This seems to partially
depend upon the subjective reading of the influence of drug and alcohol addiction on social relationships. However, the idea of community is defined in ambivalent ways, regardless of whether a woman is battling substance abuse. Two women expressed no sense of belonging to the Downtown Eastside community because of the presence of drug and alcohol addiction, which they maintain fosters individuality, self-reliance, and survival. Yet at the same time they felt a tenuous sense of home. Others felt a stronger sense of belonging, as described through important relationships with organizations, street friendships, or women’s political organizing. Another woman was also in the process of withdrawing from the Downtown Eastside because of the fractured nature of the community, despite her strong connection to the Women’s Centre.

The purpose of this chapter was to first explore the ways aboriginal women create and inscribe meaning in the Downtown Eastside community, meanings which have been predominately overlooked in academic and policy discussions. Second, it provided an anti-essentialist account of how aboriginal women imagine and experience the Downtown Eastside. Both of these goals establish a foundation for a more focussed discussion of representations of aboriginal women living in the Downtown Eastside. Furthermore it begins to formulate the basis of my primary argument that extends throughout this thesis: visual representations of women in the Downtown Eastside essentialize and naturalise their identities and spaces they move within/between. Given the complexity of aboriginal women’s voices and experiences it is important to critically reflect upon how particular representations move through and constitute women’s material lives and in turn how women negotiate or resist these representations.

In her reflection on the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate, feminist scholar Sherene Razack suggests that the question “to essentialize or not to essentialize?” must be accompanied by another. Addressing the recent critiques of anti-essentialism by feminist and Marxist theorists Razack urges us to consider: “How does essentialism or anti-essentialism contribute to antisubordination?” Considering the benefits of an anti-essentialist approach in the context of
visual representations, I interrogate how representations are constructed, by whom, and for what purpose. The political importance of an anti-essentialist strategy - "the complex tracing of the social narratives that script how women experience their gender [or culture] and how others respond to it" - is to identify the intersecting relations of power that ultimately perpetuate the marginalization of women. With this in mind Razack encourages us to revise our political strategies. An anti-essentialist strategy, she writes, must move beyond the "politics of inclusion". Rather,

We can no longer devise political strategies that start with something we might call women's experience, on to which we would then graft the special strategies that would apply to women with disabilities, women of colour, or lesbians. To do so is to install a norm that privileges one group of women at the expense of others. A more fruitful approach is to ascertain how, at specific sites, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism interlock to structure women differently and unequally.

Anti-essentialism enables critical feminists and geographers to locate the shifting relations of power that police the boundaries of inner city communities. These diverse narratives, which articulate the complex interconnections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation, illustrate the Downtown Eastside as a "complex site of difference". Resisting a unified aboriginal women's voice in the inner city, these narratives enable community members, researchers, and activists to begin to recognize the "specific sites" where patriarchy, racism, capitalism, neo-colonialism, and heterosexism sustain and hierarchies of subordination among women. Moving through the next two chapters I turn to a more focussed discussion on power, representation, and aboriginal women in the Downtown Eastside. In the following chapter, I pay attention to the ways in which certain photographs are embedded in discourses of truth and disciplinary power. I also consider the politics of self-representation, exploring the ways the photographer, subjects, and audience imbue visual texts with authority, but also how self-representation enables a more complex reading of subjectivity and space in the Downtown Eastside. Throughout these next two chapters I follow Edward Said and argue that each visual representation is "implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth" which itself is a
representation". In particular, I speak to how visual texts, as specific sites, inscribe social meanings upon aboriginal women's bodies and the inner city spaces they move within/between through shifting relations of power.

4 I recognize that the idea of 'community' is continually reinvented and remapped in different places, at different times, and for different social and political purposes. However, I refer to the Downtown Eastside community as a geographical space with loosely defined borders (which may or may not include Victory Square and Gastown, depending on the perspective of activists, merchants, city planners, or residents). These borders are (roughly) marked by Richards Street to the West, Burrard Inlet to the North, Clark Drive to the East, and just north of Terminal Avenue to the South- with the exception of the Strathcona Neighbourhood that maintains a separate identity. For helpful reading on the complex nature of 'community' please refer to B. Wellman and B. Leighton, "Networks, Neighbourhoods, and Communities: Approaches to the Study of the Community Question," Urban Affairs Quarterly 14:3 (1979): 363-390.
5 In a recent oral history project (Carnegie Community Centre Association, Hastings and Main: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987)) initiated by the Carnegie Community Centre only four of the twenty life histories are women's. The authors address this imbalance by stating that the biographies proportionally reflect the Downtown Eastside's current demography. While this project affirmed that the Downtown Eastside is a residential community by disrupting the "skid row" image with oral histories of long-term residents, women's voices remain marginalised. However a couple of texts offer a women's perspective. See S. Baxter, Still Raising Hell: Poverty, Activism, and Other True Stories, (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1997) and S. Cameron, Downtown Eastside Poems, (Vancouver: Lazier Press, 1998). And of course the Carnegie Community Newsletter is an excellent forum for Downtown Eastside residents to express their views and opinions on issues that affect them.
6 Excerpt from our popular education workshop discussions on two photography exhibits. See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion.
7 "Rock" is the more popular term of a type of smokeable cocaine ("crack" is another common name). It now sells extremely cheaply on the Downtown Eastside.
8 There are considerable difficulties when attempting to classify and distinguish economic categories among women. I avoid the term middle or lower class, as it is a relative term with slippery connotations. Rather I describe women's economic status in ways that generally refer to the division of labour. I do so with the awareness of the troubling discourse of dependency that arises when one distinguishes between the wage economy and social assistance. I do not intend to frame women as either dependent or independent of the welfare state; rather I move away from categorizing women on the basis of class in order to avoid misrepresenting their economic circumstances.
9 The anger was also directed to the media's portrayal of Lisa Grapevine, the First Nations woman who was killed on the Downtown Eastside in April 2000. Please see the introduction of Chapter 4 as it offers a brief account of this recent (May 2000) community meeting.
11 Portland Hotel Society is a non-profit organization that administers four hotels (Regal, Sunrise, Washington, and the New Portland Hotel) in the Downtown Eastside. With the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA)
they identified a gap in housing for individuals that are “hard to house.” These include individuals with HIV/AIDS, drug and alcohol addictions, or mental health issues. The philosophy of the Portland Hotel Society is to guarantee tenants a room to ensure greater housing stability. The society, once supported by the Greater Vancouver Mental Health Services Society, is now supported by the Vancouver Richmond Health Board, alongside the Ministry of Health, BC Housing, DERA, and other private funders.

12 As a specific example, Olivia notes that students of Residential School have their own community. Having attended Residential School is a source of connection for many women living on the Downtown Eastside.

13 This is a fascinating comment, as many First Nation activists and leaders have been cautious of multicultural policy in Canada as it can potentially undermine the political goal of settling land claims. However as Sneja Gunew observes, indigenous and ethnic groups have found many points of connection due to the shared experiences of racism as ‘visible minorities’. See S. Gunew, “Multicultural Multiplicities: US, Canada, and Australia,” Meanjin 52 (1993): 447-461. The shared commitment to anti-racism between Irene and her ethnic minority co-workers is where the sense of belonging for Irene originates.


15 Razack 158.

16 Razack 159.


CHAPTER 3. Photographing Women and the Downtown Eastside

A large gathering of young, white, middle class women marked the courtyard of the Vancouver Art Gallery as a protest space for the annual *Take Back the Night* march in late September. The crowd grew organically as giant puppets, stilted women, and banners soared above, while activists passed out pamphlets on everything from environmental to immigration injustices. I stood with a small group of women from the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, all of whom were frustrated that so few women had come to participate—despite the free pizza dinner and promised ride to the site. As the shadowed evening fell, speakers offered thanks to the Burrard, Musqueam, and Squamish First Nations for the honour of using their territory. One of the most disturbing aspects of the gathering was the absence of women of colour and women from the Downtown Eastside. This absence is not surprising. Through my fieldwork I have learned that few women from the Downtown Eastside feel comfortable moving outside of its borders because of the marginalization they suffer at the stares and comments by those on its fringe. Upon critical reflection, this observation can essentialize women and the places they live, thereby limiting a complex understanding of women’s agency and neighbourhood identity.

Situated within this white space of intellectual activism, I am challenged to question simplified representations of women and the Downtown Eastside. Further, I am challenged to critically reflect on how my own subjectivity structures a partial knowledge of inner city gender, power, and spatial relations. During the march I held a sign, covered in plastic, handmade by women at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC). It was a picture of a missing woman, one of 31 to have disappeared from the streets of the Downtown Eastside since 1975\(^1\). Her name is Jaquilline McDonnell, born 1976, missing January 1999. Her image represented the decorporealized presence of the very women who are experiencing an increase in both symbolic and material violence. This image, one of many visual representations of women on the
Downtown Eastside, has been circulated widely in both Vancouver and North America—owing to the extensive coverage to the Reality TV program, *America’s Most Wanted*.

In this chapter I explore two photography exhibits of women living in the Downtown Eastside, images that have garnered media attention due to the politicization of the missing women tragedy. First, I examine *Heroines: Portraits of Women on the Downtown Eastside*, produced by artist and fashion photographer Lincoln Clarkes—shown at the politically active Helen Pitt Gallery, located in the gentrified community of Yaletown, south of the Downtown Eastside. Second, I analyze another photography exhibit at the Helen Pitt Gallery, *She Counts*, a community public arts project, was a collaboration between artist Ritta Beiks and the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre. Through the reiteration of visual representations within art magazines, community and international newspapers I explore the accumulation of social meanings inscribed upon women’s bodies and the inner city spaces they move within/between.

My argument has several layers. First, while recognizing the strategic political goals of visibility, made possible through these visual and discursive representations, I contend that the *Heroines* exhibit tends to reinforce simple and naturalized identities of women on the Downtown Eastside. In particular, it serves to reinforce victimized subjectivities characterized by deviant and criminalized behaviours such as IV drug use and prostitution. Secondly, these representations also speak to the spaces women’s bodies move within. As Elizabeth Grosz has argued, the body actively produces, transforms, and reinscribes spaces of the city, which in turn produces and reflects the body\(^2\). Following Sibley’s work on exclusion, I argue that the reproductions of visual and media discourse delineate tight boundaries of/within the Downtown Eastside. These boundaries homogenize the space of a criminalized ‘Other’ through the depiction of heroin-addicted women in back alleys, spaces within the Downtown Eastside that are associated with crime, deviancy, and violence. These essentialized images eradicate the dynamism of a politically active community of which these women create.
I argue that these essentialized subjectivities and spaces are reinforced by the discursive productions of 'real' images. As photography critic John Tagg has argued, realism has become a dominant mode of signification that creates a picture and reflects 'reality' through continual repetition. Deconstructing this mode of signification, critical theorists of representation have argued that photographs cannot be understood as a mere reflection of a pre-discursive 'real'; rather they are representations embedded in layers of competing discourses, constituted by grids of social and power relations. My reading of the Heroines exhibit argues that women are eroticized through the totalizing gaze of the urban voyeur. However, I also explore the agency of photographed women, who clearly elicit and respond to this gaze through a performance of idealized femininity. This performance/gaze produces images that inscribe a binary of disgust and desire: the spaces of the Downtown Eastside portray a ravaged "heroine hell" while containing beautiful women as survivors. Situated within a regime of disciplinary power this visual production limits multiple readings of identity.

Finally, against these discursive representations I analyze photographs taken by women from the Downtown Eastside as exhibited in She Counts. These alter/native strategies of self-representation do not reflect a more 'truthful' image of women- they too are situated within a particular discursive frame, articulated by the political objectives of artist Ritta Beiks. However I argue that they provide a more complex reading of subjectivity and space on the Downtown Eastside by decentering the identities represented in the latter visual representations. While they also increase the visibility of women's issues on the Downtown Eastside, they signify a dynamic, supportive community whose boundaries are fluid and contested. The photographs are accompanied by women's words, many of which refer to particular First Nations experiences of the inner city, thereby offering a complex cultural reading of the inner city- one that has often been ignored or silenced.
The Voyeur and the Heroines: Making Femmes Fatales Visible

*Photographs are not just a stake in a political struggle but also a site of that struggle: the point where powers converge but are also produced*.5

Lincoln Clarkes’s exhibit *Heroines: Portraits of Women on the Downtown Eastside* was hailed by some reviewers as “one of the most remarkable visual art events in 1998”6. It showed in both Vancouver and Victoria7 and attracted intense media attention, including seven weeks coverage in Vancouver’s *Georgia Straight*, a local community arts newspaper. Emphasizing the ‘insider’ view, he contends that it was natural to begin photographing women on the street since he had lived and worked in the neighbourhood for twenty years8. He positions himself as a member of the community, and as someone who has been around long enough to see women “come into this town when they were pretty sweet young things from some little town from the sticks…and now ten years [later] completely ravaged [with] teeth missing”9. Clarkes’s sincere concern for and interest in these women motivated him to document their portraits. His goal was to make the “war” of drug addiction (heroin and crack cocaine), prevalent on the Downtown Eastside (a “national problem”), visible to outside communities.

I want people to have some understanding of these women… I want these photographs to be a slap in the face… introduce the world to them. The world doesn’t see them. All the world sees is a statistic. They don’t look into the eyes of the women 10.

Photographs privilege the human eye/I as a technology of power in the accumulation of knowledge11. Clarkes’s prime objective was to give a human face to women bearing a history of drug abuse, HIV, poverty, and violence. Naming the exhibit “Heroines” he reflects the double meaning of his intentions. This echoes art/media rhetoric regarding people living with AIDS. In light of growing statistics and impersonal facts about AIDS, art-photographers sought to “bring AIDS home” and give AIDS a dignified face12. This photographic approach trails the legacy of photo-documentary realism that is situated within a “rhetoric of immediacy and truth”13. Art critic and activist Douglas Crimp has explored the instability of this discourse in his analysis on media and artistic representations of people living with AIDS. Crimp notes how artistic
photographers seek to establish an ideological distance from sensationalistic media images. Artists argue that their portraits bring a human face to a devastating illness and they develop “intense” personal relationships with their subjects- in contrast to the impersonal images portrayed in the media. Despite the urge to separate the ideologies of both mediums, Crimp argues that artistic portraits often depict the static representations of disfigured, lonely, hopeless individuals circulating in the media. Whether or not Clarke’s photographs endow women on the Downtown Eastside with a magical humanity, it is clear that representing ‘true-reality’ is paramount. Creating a distinction between art and photography he comments, “this whole show is beyond art. These are portraits and photo-realism. They are photographic evidence of a subculture milieu.” This perspective marks a clear boundary between a pre-discursive ‘real’ and mediums of representation. Consequently, as Griselda Pollock observes, “the real is always present as the criteria against which images are assessed, a real which is never interrogated as itself a product of representation. The image becomes the true or false reflex of the real, and thus, posed in a hierarchical relation, the real precedes and determines the image.” Photo-realism gains its power by seemingly reflecting a pre-discursive ‘truth’. Critiquing this idea, many have challenged that the Heroines photographs glamourize the destitution of women on the Downtown Eastside. In response, Clarke naturalizes his photographic techniques: “I am not glamorizing anything. I’m shooting it the way it is...And when I’m taking these photographs, these women feel gorgeous for a brief moment.” Despite the attempt to write himself out of the visual text, Clarke is actively constructing representations that are situated within a moral discourse. Not only does Clarke want women to feel attractive but he also hopes the “disturbing” portraits may change their lives. Relating a story of personal metamorphosis, he describes how one woman decided to leave the Downtown Eastside upon seeing her photograph. In some ways, this echoes the reform discourse that circulated within the asylum in the 19th century, where portraits of institutionalized individuals could potentially cure “mental
aberration". Positioned as an ‘insider’ with the privilege of ‘seeing’ things as they ‘really’ are, Clarkes wants both to transform the political priorities of the City by increasing the visibility of women on the Downtown Eastside and hopes to help women escape heroin or crack addiction. Given that women are outnumbered by men on the Downtown Eastside, and that it is described as a masculine space due to its history as a working-class neighbourhood, this technology of vision could be argued to be an unprecedented instigator of social change. Clarkes believes that “this whole show really brought up the Downtown Eastside to the mainstream, because it’s been a really hot topic ever since my show.”

While I recognize the importance of instigating political debate and commitment by increasing visibility for underrepresented groups, I am critical of the exhibit’s narrow representations of subjectivity and space- as these representations have material effects. My reading of the exhibit is that women are sexualized in particular places. For example, it is curious that most of the photographs are taken in back alleys. Following geographer Phil Hubbard’s analysis of red-light districts, I argue that back alleys are sites of desire and disgust, due to their association with heroine drug use and prostitution. The trope of the prostitute is exaggerated through the sexual gesturing of women themselves, many of who are playing to an idealized performance of femininity under the gaze of the camera lens. This is an excellent example as to how both bodies and cities reproduce each other through representation. Materially, these visual images describe a gendered geography of the inner city, where women’s bodies are bounded ‘in place’ to the back alleys of vice rather than the sidewalks of ‘accepted’ public behaviour.  

Darlings (Figure 2) is one of the first photographs Clarkes took. It garnered attention and travelled to the cover of the popular art journal Artichoke. The photograph is framed to include three women sitting on stairs in a dark corner of an alley. Hair tumbles down over the shoulder of the woman in the middle, whose painful and forlorn eye contact immediately catches the attention of the viewer. Her gestures and expression suggest that she is pleading for help.
Figure 2

Figure 3
Source: Lincoln Clarkes, Helen Pitt Gallery, Figs. 2-8.
This message is exaggerated through the signification of boredom, exhaustion, and misery of the two women sitting next to her. Clarke's photograph seems to have captured the desperation of street life. This image narrates Clarke's description of these women in his interviews as it reveals the corrupted bodies of "pretty sweet young things" now weary and thin from drug use. At once, these three women communicate apathy, neglect, sadness, and boredom through direct eye contact that is often avoided when non-residents walk through the inner city. However Clarke describes his affects of his photography differently.

I do it by photographing them and making them look as good as possible. Like I don't photograph them with their hair hanging in their eyes and a needle in their arm, in a disheveled hotel room or in a garbage heap with graffiti on the walls. I mean sure I photograph them in dirty little alleyways and stuff, but they're looking strong. They're looking right into the lens. And they're looking beautiful. They're confident, they're standing, and they're confronting the camera. And they're not so victimized in my photos. One person said to me, you know Lincoln women never look at me the way they look at me in your photographs.

However confident women appear in the portrait series, many photographs signify a narrow world of prostitution and poverty. First, it is evident that the photographer actively constructs these images through the staging of the portrait. Aesthetically framed and subjects centered geometrically, women embody binary subjectivities: the angry, tough survivor and the innocent, desperate victim (Figure 3 and 4). These essentialized identities are also eroticized through their gesturing posture and how they are 'placed': the lone, exposed woman on the street suggests an economy of prostitution. Thus these photographs, while attempting to reiterate the performative beauty of women survivors, emphasize their loneliness—reiterated by the fact that most women appear alone. However, this set of gendered power relations is not uncontested. Each woman interacting with the camera is exerting her agency and subjectivity, thereby contesting a regime of hegemonic power embedded in this technology of vision. This eroticism is also exemplified in the photograph printed on the front cover of a community newspaper, Taxi, whose text declares below the photo "I am still beautiful".
Figure 6

Figure 7
The woman is clearly flirting with both the photographer and the camera by exposing her chest, performing (what she may consider) an idealized trope of femininity and sexuality\textsuperscript{26}. Throughout the *Taxi* article, photographs portray women applying makeup—signifying the performance of 'authentic' femininity – one that is associated with fashion photographers, glossy portraits, and gallery pictures (Figure 5). Clarkes observes this performance noting, “within a minute she’s tucking her shirt in, she’s got a broken piece of mirror that she’s found in the alley and she’s putting on lipstick, the end that somebody’s thrown out and she’s going up to a car. Instead of looking into the rear view mirror of the car to see where to stick a needle into her neck, she’s fixing her hair”\textsuperscript{27}. Following this photo, a woman dressed in tight clothing with her arms outstretched suggests an open sexuality associated with the geography of alleyways and isolated streets (Figure 6). Beneath is a photo of a pregnant woman, who has undone her pants to reveal her belly pregnant with new life—a photo that also appeared in the *National Post* (Figure 7)\textsuperscript{28}. Although women play an active role in constructing these representations, the photographer draws out each woman’s sexuality by articulating the performative “your beautiful”. In the *National Post* article, Clarkes and the author comment on the beauty of each woman. The author remarks that Clarkes is drawn to the beauty of the women, who then replies, “I’m not involved with any of them. Never. That would be...insane. But you have to wonder sometimes if you could be. If only they weren’t...” “desperately screwed up” replies the author Mark Hume\textsuperscript{29}. A tension between sexual attraction and repulsion is clearly present within the photographs and the discourse surrounding these productions.

Within the production of visual representations, the situatedness of the ‘author’ within a set of gendered power relations needs to be considered. On CBC Radio’s *North by Northwest*, he relates, “I was living in film noir, [a] 3-D scratch and sniff horror film in technicolour”\textsuperscript{30}. This particular experience provides an important entry into a discussion on the social construction of these visual texts— I argue that the production of the *Heroines* photographs provides a way of
understanding how certain representations are maintained, and ultimately unchallenged. Although Clarkes is an artist attempting to shed light on a social crisis, I also position him as an urban voyeur who seeks to uncover the dangerous secrets of Vancouver’s deep streets. It is the latter trope that I want to interrogate further.

Rosalyn Deutsche has argued that discursive productions of visual representations are technologies for understanding and knowing the city. In her provocative essay “Boys Town”, she critiques urban geographer David Harvey in his uncritical privileging of what Donna Haraway calls the “god-trick”, defined as the ability know or understand the city in totality from an objective, distanced view (the city as panorama). Following de Certeau, Deutsche argues that this position entails *pleasure* in viewing the city as a whole. She argues that through this distant and objectifying gaze, the city is eroticized. If one maintains that the city and representations constitute one another, then as Deutsche argues,

> the image of the city is indissolubly bound up with vision and therefore with the subjectivity of viewers and if, as the metaphor of voyeurism makes clear, vision is mediated by fantasy and implies relations of power and sexuality, then urban analyses can no longer ignore what are in fact the constitutive elements of images and landscapes...

Through my reading, Clarkes attempts to represent holistic images of women on the Downtown Eastside, without reflecting upon how these representations are embedded in particular social relations of power. Through the technology of photo-realism, he attempts to provide ultimate visibility. The reference to film noir is an interesting one. The narrative of noir is known for its very limited gender representations: the masculine urban detective seeks to unveil the hidden truths of the “mean streets”. These dark streets are presented as dangerous, constituted by the foreboding sexuality of femmes fatales who are eventually killed. In some ways, Clarkes, among others, narrates a localized script of this very genre. Male police officers are scurrying about trying to unearth the links between 31 missing women, while other (male) photographers and documentary filmmakers seek to raise awareness about drug addiction. Sexuality and subjectivity are the two principal themes around which noir is structured.
Clarkes’s portraits drew 2,800 people in two weeks, the largest gathering of viewers the Helen Pitt Gallery has had for one exhibit. While it is crucial to understand how representations are constructed within the media, it is instructive to reflect upon how spectators received the images. Comments on Clarkes’s exhibit were scrawled on blank pages of a scrapbook at the gallery, therefore it is possible to obtain a general idea as to how spectators reacted. It is interesting to note that many of the viewers commented on the grotesque/beautiful heroine- the ironic tension that lies within many of the portraits. Many comments addressed one of the main objectives of this exhibit- making the women or the ‘reality’ of Downtown Eastside issues visible: “Lincoln, thank you for seeing the unseen”. “You’ve brought these people back to life for me”. “You depict the reality of life with these photos”. “I’m glad to see these stories being told and these people legitimised, if only in a photo and a gallery”. Problematising the act of making others visible, someone bluntly stated, “Voyeurism is nice”. However, the majority of visitors were indebted to Clarkes’s work. Viewers felt the subjects were “humanized”, “dignified”, and the photos “touching”. A review in The Marltet, a community paper in Victoria, reiterated these praises, declared the “outcome of Lincoln Clarkes’s exhibit can only be positive”\(^3\)\. Very few of the gallery comments suggested difficulty with these representations.

One entry, directly addressed this lack of criticism by other spectators:

In previous comments patrons have commented that the “realism is palpable” and that you’ve given them “beauty”- these views are almost as shocking as the photos. I admire your skills of compassion and creating a tangible connection between the subject and viewer (you are an excellent ‘medium’) but I too have trouble with the subject matter. The narrative is not done. We are left with a “now what?” emptiness. Government seems to be content to wait quietly while they all die. Your photos, while capturing a mesmerizing sense of spirit do not challenge this view- it’s almost like looking at photos of ghosts...

Another was astute at taking into consideration the framing of each photograph:

I wonder at the choices of background for some of the women. “Vacancy”, “open”, “our work is valuable by your satisfaction”. If ironical, it’s degrading, if unintentional it’s perhaps irresponsible on the artist’s part. If intentional, it’s insulting and exploitative of the women. Do they not already suffer enough?\(^3\)
Another site of reception was a popular education group at the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre. Co-facilitating a series of popular education workshops on the media and the Downtown Eastside, I gave a slide show of both the Heroines and She Counts exhibits. Upon seeing the photographs, a group of eight women who live in the community discussed what the photographs signified and meant to them. Threading through the discussion was a debate on whether the photographs signify a stereotypical representation or material reality. The reception to the Heroines photographs was mixed. Many women felt they had little to criticize in the photographs as they had seen far worse on the Downtown Eastside, and in some ways were surprised by the lack of realistic “grim scenes”. Carey and Wendy both comment,

C: I didn’t find that the pictures were that critical frankly, or harsh. Quite the opposite. He seemed to be emphasizing the working girls a lot and he didn’t take pictures that he could of some of the more grim scenes that you see women down here that are totally out of it walking down the street.

W: Tweaking, needling.

C: Or unconscious or shooting up. I think he caught many characters but he seemed to be emphasizing more the working girls and the prostitution. One of the first shots that we saw was a woman out on the street, out of it... So I don’t find as much to criticize about his depictions as I what I would have expected. I think the... pictures I would take are more harsh. Those are the things I just see on the street.

Some women felt the photographer of the Heroines exhibit intentionally created a sharp juxtaposition between beautiful women and the harsh inner city to make a positive statement about their humanity. Angela explains,

I also thought that he showed that here’s a group of women and most of them are very attractive and good looking and like some of them could very well come from very good families. And I think he wanted to show them even though they lived in such harsh neighbourhood, even though there is prostitution, even though there is drugs. But he also wanted to show they’re beautiful people too, that they’re human beings [who] got lost along the way. And it could happen to anybody, you know.

Most women commented on the age of women in the portraits. Observing that many pictures are of young working girls, women steered the discussion to the highly emotional issue of legislation and child prostitution on more than one occasion. Considering how they received the visual message of the prostitute, Carey explains, “[it’s] the dresses some of them are wearing. They’ve obviously got a uniform, with the boots and the short skirt.” Partially agreeing with her
comment, Angela speaks of the geometrical framing of women “being in the center.” Yet Angela also complicates this reading by acknowledging, as Clarkes has, the agency of the women in the photographs.

I didn’t get that automatically, working girls. I got sadness. I got OK they know where they’re at and some guy is going to take a picture of them. And it’s flattering in a way that someone wants to take a picture of them, so they’re going to try and be pretty. They’re going to try and some of them [show] toughness, some of them did show hookery types, and some of them showed sweetness. And you saw those three girls [Figure 2]. One of them showed complete whatever. The other one worried as all hell, and the other one whatever. I got sadness was my main thing out of that whole thing.

Certainly not all women felt that the photographer eroticized women on the Downtown Eastside. At other moments in the discussion women felt that Clarkes was genuinely sympathetic to women’s circumstances and sought to portray them in the most positive way. To give a sense of the complexity of interpretations, women are quoted at length.

A: The Downtown Eastside has never been exposed by anyone but by that man. And I see a compassionate man showing women. That’s my opinion and I’m an optimist and I think he’s letting people know in a compassionate point of view on the Eastside. And he’s grown up in the Eastside. He’s lived in the Eastside.

B: My opinion is when he did it out there, you remember I told you there’s a guy out there taking photographs of women. What he did was not ask but show the five [dollar bill], as soon as the girls would see it they grabbed it. OK I’ll take your picture. That’s all they did it was for money. They couldn’t give a shit.

C: I kind of get the impression that he seemed to like the women, want to paint them as well as he could. And the juxtaposition with these sometimes very pretty women in this awful setting or against the trash was very jarring. It’s like how could this pretty woman end up here? That’s the impression I got. And I thought he was sympathetic to the women that he presents.

D: I think he could have done a better job by not only showing them beside garbage cans, but also showing them cooking in the kitchen. If he was really sympathetic he would have went all around not just in the alley beside a garbage can. I mean to me that’s really degrading because in my mind I have pictures of people being tossed in garbage cans. I remember about a man dying in one of those Smithrights in the wintertime because he crawled in and fell asleep... If he really thought about it he would have not only had women in alley ways with garbage all around them, but everywhere.

L: The photographer should have taken a picture not only in the alleys where there’s garbage or in the slum area. It’s happening everywhere. Why didn’t he divide it into different scenes and groups of women, not only in one area, like the Eastside. Garbage in the background, or a brick wall in the background. I mean what is that supposed to mean. And it’s not only skid row that has [problems]. He’s gunning down the Eastside or wherever the alleyway is. That’s the only place a person gets HIV, no. You get HIV from hospitals, we can get HIV just accidentally poking ourselves from a dirty needle. It doesn’t matter where.
Sifting through these perspectives it is clear that women tend to disagree on the predominant message of these photographs. Particularly the popular education group debated the extent to which the photographs depict the ‘reality’ or a stereotype of the Downtown Eastside as a site of drug addiction and prostitution. The former two women express a common concern regarding the stereotyping of place. Frustrated that drug addiction and prostitution are continually associated with the poor of the Downtown Eastside, they question why professionals or businessmen are not exposed in a similar way. Daina questions, “and what about all those men that come down to take these women... Why don’t you take a picture of a man in a car dressed in his suit coming to pick up one of the girls down here. Where is our art show of that? Where is that? I’d like to see a bunch of men in suits.” Daina’s questions address the complex social system that maintains poverty and prostitution in the Downtown Eastside and ultimately challenge the political consequences of the *Heroines* project.

Photography is a technology of knowledge and power. The tensions in the multiple audiences in the gallery and the popular education group illustrate the potential material effects of Clarke’s visual reproductions. Whether intentional or not, it is clear that particular representations can irresponsibly degrade or exploit the very women and community the photographer aims to help. As Tagg has argued, photographs have often been the privileged mode of signification when describing difficult social issues as the camera is invested with a particular authority in communicating the authenticity of everyday life. Reinforcing this authority is its “objective mechanism” which naturalizes the positionality of the active photographer. However, as I have argued visual representations are constructed by the subjectivity of the photographer, the viewer, and the discursive field in which they are situated. The predominant discourse of both the photographer and viewer is that of visibility, but it is a limited visibility - one that traces stereotyped images.
While visibility is an important political goal, feminist scholar Peggy Phelan has been deeply suspicious of the binary between the “power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility”. She wryly argues, “If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture”\(^{38}\). Yet as sociologist Luana Ross argues, invisibility perpetuates structural inequalities particularly in relation to imprisoned women of colour\(^{39}\). I have difficulties with Phelan’s argument, as I have witnessed increased attention and concern by Vancouver’s municipal government to the issue of IV injection drug use on the Downtown Eastside over the last year (discussed in/after the November 1999 civic election). Although I find his images highly problematic Lincoln Clarkes’s work has aroused national and international concern about women’s issues in the inner city. Accumulating political power, one of his photographs was used by Democratic Party MP, Libby Davis, for her Christmas card- a visual demonstration of her social commitment to the riding of Vancouver East\(^{40}\). The importance of raising society’s social conscience is articulated by Deborah, a First Nations woman who has lived on/off the streets in Vancouver for 23 years and had her picture taken. Having been addicted to drugs and alcohol at different times of her life she felt it was important for people outside of the Downtown Eastside to know what street life is like. While discussing what it is like to be an aboriginal woman living in Vancouver I asked:

J: Did you see, do you know of the man who is taking photographs on the Downtown Eastside of women?

D: The one that gives 5 dollars out? Yeah, I let him take my picture.

J: What did you think of that?

D: What did I think of it? Ok. Then again this, this, I don’t know if back then if I would have done the same thing I am doing now. But and then you know I, I probably would have let it because it gives more knowledge to people out there to what it is really like on the street. And the lady that was with him she even asked me how long I was down on the street and I told her about 23 years. And she said you look very clean and healthy for someone that’s been down here that long. And I said well, I’ve cleaned up here and there. And then messed up here and there too...\(^{41}\)

Deborah did not object to her portrait being displayed in a gallery\(^ {42}\). Like Clarkes, she felt it was an important opportunity to enhance the outsider’s knowledge of the Downtown Eastside.
Although she has never seen her portrait, she believes that these photographs bear witness to “what it is really like on the street”. At this stage of her life she considers visibility an opportunity to initiate social change, especially as she struggles to heal from drug abuse, poverty, child apprehension, and racism. The more people who learn of these women’s struggles, it is hoped that funding and support will materialize—especially in relation to women’s organizations. But whether Clarkes intends to or not, his exhibit reproduces disciplinary power that erases multiple representations of identity. From the above interview it is clear that Deborah’s life is dynamic and shifting. Travelling between cities she has “cleaned up”, moved away from Vancouver, “messed up” and returned. Turning to another text, I analyze the representations of women on the Downtown Eastside through a community public arts project. My interpretation of the visual representations in the She Counts exhibit complicates the narrow images of women produced by modes of disciplinary power in the Heroines exhibit.

Self-Representation: Complicating Bounded Identities and Spaces

It is appropriate that I begin this section of the chapter on the eve of December 6th, ten years after the massacre of fourteen women at L’Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal: a date which now marks Canada’s National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. Ritta Beiks, in collaboration with nine women from the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, produced a community public arts project for December 6th discussions, entitled She Counts. I want to use this project to offer a more complex reading of visual representations of women on the Downtown Eastside. While theorists, such as Phelan, are highly critical of visibility politics, I argue that the She Counts photographs offer an alter/native strategy of self-representation. While I agree that increased visibility does not necessarily equal increased power (political/social), I argue that visibility politics can be transformational. Phelan contends that visibility politics is predominately additive, and thus lies prey to the feeling that one is not addressed if one’s
mimetic likeness is not represented. I would argue that upon critical examination of this self-representational strategy, it is clear that women living in the Downtown Eastside deeply respect and appreciate this strategy: it is one of the meaningful ways their perspectives are heard and it ultimately disrupts essentialized images of their community. Furthermore, women participating in the project were empowered and felt they created new spaces of solidarity and community. While this strategy provides multiple readings of subjectivity and space, these photographs are representations embedded in particular grids of political and social power. While it is important to reflect upon the agency of each photographer one must also consider the positionality of the artist who clearly, yet reflexively, mapped the project to meet her own political goals.

Ritta Beiks has been politically active in the issue of violence against women, engaging in subversive public art projects in the downtown core of Vancouver for the last four years. To initiate her third public arts project surrounding December 6th, she contacted the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre. Although initially hesitant, the Centre agreed to participate. What was different about Beiks’s project was that women had the opportunity to tell their own story to people outside the community. Beiks gave nine women, six of who were First Nations, disposable cameras with which they would photograph everyday life in their community. Each woman would shoot a roll of film and meet each weekend for a month to discuss emerging themes. Two main themes surfaced. That is: we count no matter who we are, where we live or what we do; and we have a strong, supportive community. Given those themes a photograph was chosen for a Transit Shelter poster that was to be seen throughout the city. Ritta’s main objective was to use the community public arts project as a medium for the women to tell people in other communities what life in the Downtown Eastside community is like.

She Counts exhibited 500 4x6 coloured photographs at the Helen Pitt Gallery in December, six months after Lincoln Clarkes’s exhibit (Figures 9-11).
Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Source: Ritta Beiks, Helen Pitt Gallery, Figs. 9-16.
Although there was concern about the fact the gallery represented an elite space in a gentrified upper-class neighbourhood, it was the only gallery (after a year and a half of inquiring) that would exhibit the community public art project\(^47\). The pictures remained unframed but were mounted on rails that created two thin lines of photographs on the walls of the gallery. Beiks stated that this prevented the photographs from becoming an art object on their own. Situated above and below the line of photographs were words spoken by the women themselves. Equally, this exhibit was a staged presentation. To deny this is to advocate that these productions are less constructed than those that are framed or taken with high quality equipment. Located within the elite space of an art gallery, attention is immediately drawn to their elevated status as ‘art objects’ and perhaps reinforces the nature of their constructedness.

Many of the pictures are portraits of members who live in the community, members taking part in special dinners, protests, and festivals. Some are photographs of nearby parks, women frolicking in pools of water, and men rollerblading. In addition to these more ‘positive’ images are those of poverty, drug abuse, and horrific living conditions. Line ups to social service agencies, women passed out on couches, and the rundown conditions of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels are among many images that signify complex social issues within the Downtown Eastside. Politically overt photographs capture two police officers checking on a man sleeping in a park and prison protests (Figures 12 and 13). All of these photographs are constructed representations, with each woman selectively choosing the images to narrate life in the Downtown Eastside community. For example, Beiks related that one woman only took photographs of attractive young men- primarily outside the boundaries of her immediate community. Not only did each woman construct each image but the artist had considerable influence on the images each photographer took.
Reflexively, Beiks positions herself:

Certainly I had a lot of influence probably in how I presented it to them. The photos that I maybe focussed on more than some of the other photos that they had taken. The photos that were selected for the poster and for the postcard. So there was a collaboration there and certainly I was trying to put forward what I wanted people to know. And that partly I am a white middle class person. I grew up in Dunbar and I hear what people in my community have said about people in their community. So that was a bit of my political agenda. When there was discrepancies between Beiks’s agenda and the photographs, she would continually remind each photographer to consider what they want to communicate to other communities about life on the Downtown Eastside. Positioned as an ‘outsider’ in a landscape of power, Beiks was an active agent in the production of meaning and knowledge. Yet the arts project remained a collaborative effort, where representations were constitutively negotiated between community photographers and the artist. Through multiple relations of power, knowledge was mediated between class, gender, race, and sexuality and visually inscribed.

My argument follows that the She Counts exhibit decenters the dominant images of the previous visual texts. The combination of words and visual images in the She Counts exhibit offers a nuanced reading of women’s lives on the Downtown Eastside. By no means are these representations totalizing, nor do they establish “real-truths” through the power of self-representation. If we travel between these two visual frames, Heroines and She Counts, one can see how She Counts destabilizes the naturalized identities of women and the Downtown Eastside. Particularly, it is the static subjectivity of the drug-addicted, lonely prostitute, and the essentialized spaces of the crime-ridden, ‘heroine hell’ streets that I want to challenge. I want to discuss three interrelated themes that surfaced within the exhibit: family/community, First Nations culture, and mobility. These themes challenge assumptions of identity and place: women lack a supportive community or move solely within the boundaries of the Downtown Eastside. Family emerged as an important theme within the photographs—many depict multi-generational First Nations families, smiling and relaxed (Figure 14). When I asked Beiks whether she had
observed differences amongst the photographers in the group she immediately brought up the issue of family.

You know what the difference was actually? Family. A lot of the First Nations women had family in the community. And other family members and their children. Whereas the other women, one woman was from El Salvador and then the other two were white and they didn’t have family... But they were single women in the community. Whereas the First Nations women had other relatives and family. That was a big difference. This is my brother, this is my aunt, this is my cousin, and here is one of my 12 brothers and sisters. That sort of thing.

This is an observation I too have made throughout the last year of fieldwork on the Downtown Eastside. First Nations women often have numerous relatives living within or near the neighbourhood. Social service agencies, such as the Women’s Centre, serve as meeting places for mothers and daughters, cousins, and aunts. In contrast to the *Heroines* exhibit, in which women signify the lone survivor of tragedy, this exhibit portrays a dynamic community with complex and embedded social networks.

To take this argument further, I contend that *She Counts* offers an important cultural reading, illustrating the large presence of First Nations in the Downtown Eastside. This is evident through the words spoken by the First Nations women who participated in the project. As Bud Osborne, a poet and activist writes,

And in our situation in the downtown eastside the single weapon we wield
like the weapon native indian prophets
like the weapon ancient hebrew prophets
used in situations of vicious displacement
and threatened destruction of their communities
was the word
words against the power
of money and law and politics and media
words against a global economic system

Most of the commentary in the exhibit illuminates experiences of cultural dispossession, racism, and discrimination. “Just because you’re Indian doesn’t mean you have to act like one”. “Hope is in me, finding my past, what it means to be First Nations. Don’t call me Squaw”; “How the fuck do you cook when all you have is bread, water, and a sink. If you don’t like me, get off my land. I lost my parents, I lost my culture, fighting for the truth”; “We protect each other, take
care of each other. I went to the hospital after I was raped, but they treated me like shit because I am First Nations and an addict.” These words are powerful testimonies of women actively resisting and challenging violence against women. Although these phrases are excerpts from taped discussions, compiled by artist and writer Illona Beiks, and thus construct a particular representation of women participants and Downtown Eastside residents. But what is interesting, and also evident in many of the photographs, is the exposure to a particular cultural perspective about life on the Downtown Eastside. Although First Nations women are portrayed in the Heroines exhibit (Figure 8) they often signify a destitute lone subject. In the She Counts exhibit words actively attend to the experiences of dispossession and racism experienced by First Nations women. This addresses the silence surrounding diverse First Nations urban experiences and alternative representations of family and community or spiritual rituals within the boundaries of the Downtown Eastside. Predominant public images of aboriginal people on the Downtown Eastside articulate stereotypes such as the drunk Indian or the sexualized “Squaw” prostitute. Deconstructing these images, spectators are exposed to multiple readings of First Nations subjectivities on the Downtown Eastside- particularly through the large numbers of images of families and relatives. In addition, sacred First Nations places, such as the sweat lodge and fire in the local Strathcona Community Gardens, illustrate sites of self-determination and healing (Figure 15). Signifying empowerment, these images contradict commonly held media assumptions that the Downtown Eastside is a site of moral decay.

While She Counts offers alternative readings of subjectivity on the Downtown Eastside, the exhibit also challenges an outsider’s view of the community as a homogenous, tightly bounded space. Recent redevelopment debates in Vancouver’s inner city have focussed on a systematic attempt to separate and exclude the ‘undesirable’ Downtown Eastside from gentrifying neighbourhoods, such as Gastown and Victory Square. Recognizing the political importance of a bounded territory in resisting erasure and subsequent gentrification it is
interesting that many of the photographs, which were meant to visually represent each woman’s immediate community, depicted places beyond the formal borders of the Downtown Eastside.

For example an Indo-Canadian family is shown on the Skytrain, a transit location that is far from the Downtown Eastside (Figure 16). Another is of a park in a gentrified area south of the Downtown Eastside. These are places women visit, utilize, and enjoy; places that may be imagined as ‘their community’. Curiously these images contradict a common assumption- that many women hesitate to leave the Downtown Eastside due to experiences of discrimination. Complicating the narrative of immobility, these self-representations raise important questions regarding the relationship between subjectivity and place in the inner city. Ultimately, these images deconstruct the bounded territories that women move within/between. In contrast to the Heroines exhibit, the spectator sees a complicated spatial network represented- one that reveals movement across the imagined borders of back alleys and at a larger scale than the Downtown Eastside. The homogenous space of the Downtown Eastside implodes as its territory fails to contain its undesirable ‘Others’. Women are representing the inner city as a flexible space, where bodies transgress and deconstruct its borders and those of other communities.

Ultimately, these photographs challenge the taken-for-granted spaces associated with inner city women- such as the back alley site of drug/street deals. Perhaps these photographs deconstruct what Deborah referred to as “down here”- the “low track” or the “bowels of the sickest area in North America” as it has been described in recent media discourses. This raises some important questions about the dialogical production of space and subjectivity. How rooted are women to the immediate streets of the Downtown Eastside? What other spaces constitute their subjectivity? How do women perceive and interact with places beyond the Downtown Eastside? I would argue that this exhibit, while challenging the view that women confine themselves to a limited geography, encourages geographers to think flexibly about space and identity within the inner city.
While it is often common practice among academics, planners, and city officials to essentialize the identities and spaces of poor urban communities as skid rows or heroine ghettos, opportunities for self-representation open up spaces for alternative readings and transformative politics.

Similar to the Heroines exhibit, spectators of the exhibit were overwhelmingly positive. However, some people had problems with the photographs, one in particular articulated that the photos were

pornographic- meaning that with little other context of these women's lives and the women in the photos lives, their pain, their addictions, etc. are all put on show here. The result is a feeling of "wow, its really bad over there" and no feeling of what these women are doing, how they are self-organizing, or what made their lives like this in the first place. More context is absolutely necessary for any discussion (photographic or otherwise) of poverty, addiction, sex trade work and so on.

Another viewer had difficulties with the exclusionary space of the art gallery, and thought it would be more appropriate to hang them in the Women's Centre. Issues surrounding authorship were paramount. The logic being that if women from the Downtown Eastside took these photographs they should be displayed for them as well.

In the popular education workshop women were extremely positive about the She Counts exhibit and framed their comments in relation to the Heroines exhibit in interesting ways. As mentioned earlier, throughout our discussion women debated whether the Heroines photographs represent the reality of their community. This is clearly articulated in a series of exchanges between Carey and three other women. Emphasizing the naturalized connection between the technology of seeing and reality Carey begins a debate.

C: What do you see!? What do people see!?  
A: Exactly.  
C: We've got to clean up the damn streets down here. Even the merchants. This is the filthiest city, the filthiest part of town I've ever seen. Have they ever heard of pressure washers? They won't wash the god dam canopies. No business will even move into this neighbourhood. And this is what you see. I wouldn't get off the bus down here. I wouldn't. Because it looks that threatening, people who are filthy, doing drugs, shooting up and everything. And this area is not going to get any respect until it starts cleaning up the streets, there will be no respect for the people... Well as
long as there is *highly visible*, and that’s all you see is the *open* drug dealing and people with dirty
clothes and nodding off and falling down in the street and everything and that’s all people *see*.
That is going to be their impression of this area. And those pictures were kinder than they could
have been.

A: This is one of the conscientious neighbourhoods I’ve lived in. We not only stand up for our
neighbourhood and the things that go on in this neighbourhood but neighbourhoods around the
world, in Third World countries also. It’s one of the most conscientious. Who gets people all the
way from South America, well whatever. But I’ve never been more in tune to a lot of whether you
want to call it political, cultural, whatever, things in this neighbourhood.

B: The windows are filthy. I don’t even think they ever clean them, because they don’t. There’s
bird shit all over them. People are sick with HIV, you know they need a cleaner environment. And
this government so-called building, why the fuck don’t they look after instead of having their
garbage. They’re getting money for this shit and it’s about time. I went into that office three times
and I said you fucking make sure we get our windows fixed.

L: We must be something here that all the actors admire. They always come here on Cordova
Street with their vans and projectors...

J: What were the messages that you were getting from the second exhibit?

B: It needs a clean up!

D: More connection between the people. You saw people interacting with each other on a more
personal level. Where in the other ones it was very singular, like very disconnected from the next
person. Where in the second set of photographs people were connected to each other.

C: And you saw children, you saw the young children here and the connection that wait a minute
there’s families there. And that people actually lived here, not just trafficking. People with *real*
lives in the second set... You’re inside some of the homes where those children were taken OK.
You’re inside the buildings and you’re seeing people who maybe have more of a life than just
spending 24 hours a day on this cycle of drugs and how to get the money for it you know. It’s
showing more the interrelation with one another, the friendship. More the togetherness that are
going on inside. Like the kitchen here, and the volunteering and some of the activities. There’s
more of that that’s needed (my emphasis).

There is clearly a moral dichotomy between what is considered visible (filth, drugs, prostitution)
and invisible (families, volunteering, community commitment) in the Downtown Eastside. There
is also a tension between what women consider a representation and reality. Carey articulates
this explicitly. At times she speaks of a visible reality, constituted by open drug dealing and what
she considers unacceptable public behaviour. But later she defines the *real* people in the
Downtown Eastside as those who refrain from such open, unacceptable behaviours yet remain
invisible to larger society. Clearly the debate over reality and representation is an important one
for women living in the Downtown Eastside: the consequences of essentialized representations
have painful, material consequences. Many times throughout our workshop discussion the issue
of stereotyping was raised. Women explained that they often feel stereotyped because of where they live. Articulating personal experiences, some women argued that living in the Downtown Eastside has prevented them from obtaining particular social and public services—prompt 911 attention and hospital care for example. However at different moments other women would refute the stereotyping factor. Rather they offered other plausible explanations as to why their friends did not receive the services they were expecting.

What is important in the She Counts exhibit however, is the space made for women’s representations which ultimately offer a more nuanced understanding of their community. Women living on the Downtown Eastside feel very strongly about the ways in which their identities and community are aesthetically and politically represented. In my interviews with aboriginal women conflicting views were expressed on this issue. Some felt aboriginal women weren’t represented at all, others felt they were represented negatively, and others thought they were represented positively. However, when women felt they were represented positively they attributed it to aboriginal women’s agency in changing society’s views about urban women and poverty. The following interview excerpts are in response to the general question: how do you feel aboriginal women are represented in the media? Rebecca, a Cree woman from northern Manitoba, felt that aboriginal women are rarely represented in the media and when they are the focus is predominately negative.

R: Zilch. You never hear too many women. I don’t see any coverage... about native women anywhere that may get in the community. Only the negative stories... reporters work on stories that sell [laughs]. That’s their major goal to sell their ratings and their papers... I don’t think they have any representation at all.

J: What about in terms of how women of the Downtown Eastside are represented in the media? Do you feel there is a certain representation of women on the Downtown Eastside that’s portrayed in the media?

R: If the women didn’t take action, they wouldn’t have any representation. So in saying that, they wouldn’t have any representation in the media if they didn’t push for it. Like the marches that they have and the rallies and that. So I don’t think they’d ever be known or heard of.
Olivia, a Nisga’a from northern B.C. echoes Rebecca’s comments regarding aboriginal women’s agency.

Not very well in fact. Like the only time you see native women is when they’re having the march or something like that. There’s people that do really pay a lot of attention to the native women down here. But the media I hear a lot, especially native women at the Women’s Resource Centre complain because they say when native women are put, or when something goes wrong like if there is alcohol abuse or drug abuse, they’ll put a native woman on there. Whereas if there’s something to do with skid row, they’ll put a native woman on there. Why native? They feel like there’s a lot of pressure. There’s just this thing I guess they felt like they’re being put down. And with these Residential School things I don’t know, it’s changing the attitude of a lot of people towards us now as women.

Kate, also a Nisga’a from northern B.C., articulates the very sentiments of Rebecca and Olivia:

Very negatively. I don’t think they focus enough on the positive things that First Nations people offer and bring to the larger society because they want to focus on the welfare person, the one that has the substance abuse issues... they want to put the negative spin on those things.

While Irene, a Metis from northern Alberta, spoke passionately about some of the negative ways aboriginal people are represented in the media, she distinguishes between the different ways the media (in this case newspapers) talks about race.

From *The Province* not very good, not very good at all. Just I think they’re bias and racist. But from *The Sun*, they write the story about this woman from Winnipeg I was reading the paper this morning... and they just say a woman’s kids were abducted and they didn’t say white or native or Asian or anything. And I really like they’re style of writing. Whereas *The Province* they wouldn’t even think twice about saying a native woman, or a white woman. You know they just go ahead and say a native woman’s kids were taken away you know... That draws really thick black lines. That really does, that just makes people point fingers more when something is written like that.

The consequences of representations that essentialize or categorize, as Irene observed, may only reinforce stereotypes about aboriginal women. Rebecca and Olivia felt that political activism is one effective way to rupture such stereotypes, as marches and rallies draw media attention to complex social issues. Capturing such attention can be considered an act of self-representation, where women from the Downtown Eastside have more control over the ways in which their identities and communities are represented.

To the women participating in the community public arts project, the creative, political process was an example of how they are organizing and fostering solidarity. All the photographers found the experience extremely positive. Visual representation was a rare medium of communication to voice their stories and experiences to other communities. Gillian Rose has
noted how community arts practices have the potential to break down the binary between the powerful and powerless, by suggesting that ‘outsiders’ may be able to hear what community ‘insiders’ have to say. Debbie Benson commented that “people need to come down here and realize it’s not all terrible...I found this very empowering. This shows what the Eastside is all about”. Marion Dubick echoed her comments, “It’s not all derelicts down here...this fostered a sense of pride in our community.” Julie Cyr, mentioned how she overcame hesitation, “I was really scared because I went all over to take pictures...I live at the Regent Hotel and people put us [First Nations] down, but I’ve come a long way and I’m proud of it." Ritta Beiks also spoke about the transformative affect of the community public art project, which echoes that of the Heroines project. One of the women became an eloquent spokeswoman to media and documentary crews, relating that it was important for her to do the project to show other women from the community that anybody could participate in a similar way. Ultimately, this strategy of self-representation sought to resist erasure, by challenging limited media discourses of identity and place.

Concluding Thoughts on Translation

Representing women’s experiences through visual methods engages a powerful tool of knowledge. As we have seen the Heroines and She Counts exhibits offer multiple stories of women’s lives on the Downtown Eastside. Narrating these texts are different authors and subjects, interacting with one another in shifting relations of power. Both projects attempt to illuminate the complex lives of women struggling to survive in a poor neighbourhood and hope to instigate some kind of meaningful political transformation. My intention throughout this chapter has been to emphasize the constructedness of identity and place through the visual field. In particular, I argued that representations of women in the Heroines exhibit tend to reinforce sexual and deviant subjectivities, while confining women to the tight boundaries of the inner
city. My analysis situated this text in a discourse of disciplinary power. Despite this criticism, it is clear that the *Heroines* exhibit has incited important public and government discussions around the serious issues of drug addiction and poverty. It also has contributed a disturbing but important public service—documenting women from the Downtown Eastside who are particularly susceptible to violence. Understanding the current situation on the Downtown Eastside, Clarke notes that women have been willing to have their photograph taken, in part because “they could be missing the next day.”

Although critical of the *She Counts* exhibit, I also explored how strategies of self-representation have opened up alternative readings of women’s identities and inner city spaces, revealing the presence and importance of families, First Nations culture, and flexible community boundaries. Ultimately this collaborative public arts project contributes a more nuanced interpretative layer. Yet certain interpretations are privileged. It is important to recognize the ways in which the discourse of authority seeps through the *Heroines* exhibit, which, by no fault of its own, overshadowed the public’s reception to *She Counts*. The power of the professional artist lures the attention of galleries, public, media, and government in ways similar to the power of bourgeois culture in the process of gentrification. Though, as Rosalyn Deutsche has noted, projects such as *Heroines* (intentionally or not) run the risk of aestheticizing poor neighbourhoods, and specifically in the case of the Downtown Eastside, heroin addiction. In the following chapter I turn critical attention to two visual representations of women living in the Downtown Eastside that are infused with a different kind of authority and power. Produced by the disciplinary institution, the Vancouver Police Department, the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and documentary film, *Through a Blue Lens*, offer another field of vision to interpret women’s subjectivities and the Downtown Eastside community. Contrary to the *Heroines* exhibit in their emphasis on the anti-aesthetic, these visual representations de-glamourize the lives of women and the Downtown Eastside by taking a ‘hard core’ glimpse at the serious social
tragedies of the community. However, in complex ways these representations are also embedded in a discourse of disciplinary power that also essentialize women's subjectivities and spaces they move within/between.
Four women have been located since a special team at the Vancouver Police Department begun an intensive investigation on the missing women from the Downtown Eastside.


5 Tagg, 148 (original emphasis).


7 In Victoria the exhibit was shown at the Community Arts Council Gallery September 3–23.

8 In the 1980s, Lincoln Clarkes was known as the “phantom” outdoor artist. He initiated volumes of random street art in Vancouver, such as chalk outlines of bodies on sidewalks and geometrical shapes on cement/wood in underused areas of the city. However, when he was unable to make a living through his artwork, he switched to fashion photography.


12 Crimp 118.

13 Tagg 8. Carol Squires notes that photojournalism was first recognized in galleries and museums as discrete artistic works in the late 1970s and early 1980s. See Squires (ed.) *The Critical Image*.

14 Crimp 120-121.

15 Soodeen, (my emphasis).

16 Pollock 203.


18 In an interview on CBC Radio’s *North by Northwest*, Lincoln Clarkes relates to producer David Greirson that he does not want to do “pretty pictures” but images that disturb him.

19 This was argued by Dr. Hugh Welch Diamond, a superintendent of the Female Department of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum in Britain. Following Foucault in a critical genealogy of institutions, Tagg notes that photography is rooted within the factory, hospital, asylum, reformatory, as a technology of power. Tagg 77.


22 Most newspaper articles on the *Heroines* exhibit refer to the women as drug-addicted prostitutes, despite the fact that each woman’s history or contemporary experience is never discussed or contextualized.

23 While the sidewalks of the Downtown Eastside are associated with diverse public performances, not acceptable in neighbourhoods elsewhere, it is clear that the back alleys of the Downtown Eastside have an infamous reputation of explicit social ‘problems’: drug use, prostitution, and crime are marked by hypodermic needles, used condoms etc. The idea that the alleys are somehow ‘worse’ than the main streets of the Eastside is evident in media discourse.


25 I recognize that the focus of Clarkes’s work is on portraits. However, these photographs serve as representations of the Downtown Eastside community.


29 Hume D3.

30 *North by Northwest*.

31 Deutsche 213.

32 Christopher Grabowski is another professional photographer who has exhibited black and white photographs of Downtown Eastside community members. A recent documentary film, *Through a Blue Lens*, was aired on CBC Television’s *The Magazine*, and soon will be broadcast internationally. The documentary follows the lives of six heroine addicts on the Downtown Eastside over a period of one year, with the intention of educating high school
students about the tragedy of drug addiction. Footage was taken by the Odd Squad, a group of seven police officers from the Vancouver Police Force, and directed by Veronica Mannix.

34 Paul Beard (signed), Helen Pitt Gallery Reception Book.
35 I will return to this particular debate later in the chapter.
36 Tagg 63.
41 Deborah, Personal Interview, Nov. 6, 1999.
42 Deborah is a pseudonym.
43 It was Bill C-202 that was passed to honour a day of remembrance and action.
44 Phelan 7.
45 Frustrated that December 6th had faded from public consciousness Ritta Beiks first project (a graduate project at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design) mocked the Globe and Mail’s Report on Business Section. Instead of stock figures and business articles, photographs of 14 murdered women appeared alongside commentaries on what is violence against women, stories about violence against women, and the names of women who had been murdered since 1989. Her mock page was slipped into 1000 newspapers in Vancouver's Downtown core. The following year she tied giant white ribbons to lamp posts in commemoration of December 6th. Both projects generated enormous attention- and through her manipulation, discussions on violence against women. The community public arts project, She Counts followed in the spirit of these two previous ‘installments’.
46 She Counts photographers were Doris Bigjohn, Julie Cyr, Patricia Dawson, Amalia Dorigoni, Marion Dean Dubick, Christine Hutchinson, Debbie Lincoln, Beverly Nelson, Sheila Nyman, and Lori Pelletier. A similar project was undertaken by a news agency photographer in Vancouver. He gave cameras to inner city teenagers in the early 1990s. See R. McLaren, “The View from Down Here,” Vancouver Echo Volume 80:21 (1997): 3. A provocative book about life in Chicago’s public housing projects, Our America, was produced through a similar collaborative process. LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, two kids from the inner city, worked with David Isay and told their story about growing up in the projects using tape recorders, diary entries, and photographs. See L. Jones and L. Newman with D. Isay, Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago (New York: Scribner, 1997).
47 In an interview, Ritta Beiks discussed the constructed division between community public art and public art. The prime difference being the professional status of the artist(s). Community public art is produced by the community and not by an artist. Therefore it is not considered 'real' art. There seems to be an 'appropriate' geography to this binary. Public art belongs in galleries while community art belongs in community centers. Beiks describes this ideology to explain the resistance by most galleries to the She Counts project.
48 Ritta Beiks, Personal Interview, Nov. 9, 1999.
50 Phelan, 2.
52 Ilona Beiks, Ritta’s sister, tape recorded their meetings and compiled this text. The words are from the women themselves, though arranged by Ilona Beiks.
53 I thank Lila, a First Nations student in Gerry Pratt’s 357 class, for raising this issue by questioning the meaning of the phrase “Just because you’re Indian doesn’t mean you have to act like one.”
54 This is an especially interesting portrait as the sign in the background is a handwritten message announcing that another woman has gone missing.
55 The caretaker of this sweat lodge and fire permitted this photograph to be shown in the She Counts exhibit. She also permitted this photograph to be used publicly in other mediums, such as this thesis.
58 Olivia felt strongly that the recent, open public discourse on Residential Schools was enabling non-aboriginal people to understand and empathize with those who suffered. She explains further. “So that’s one way the people are having more, sympathize with us. They’re not so mean towards us. They’re not calling us dumb Indians anymore... They’re feeling sympathetic towards all of us who were abused.”
The Province and The Vancouver Sun are two major newspapers published in Vancouver. The Province tends to be sensationalistic and is known to be politically very conservative.


This is measured by art galleries’ refusals to show the She Counts project, low public attendance, and sparse media attention. As mentioned earlier, this is primarily due to the fact that the nine women from the Women’s Centre are not professional photographers.

CHAPTER 4. Making In/Visible Bodies: Police Representations

BRIAN STEWART: Tonight: an extended edition of the Magazine; the mean streets of a Vancouver's skid row.

UNIDENTIFIED: Buddy, mind your own fucking business. He's a trick.

STEWART: Promising lives ruined by drugs.

UNIDENTIFIED: I can tell you one thing, if I wanted to quit and just leave town now I couldn't, because I'd die.

STEWART: But amid this hell, a sense of hope...

UNIDENTIFIED POLICE OFFICER: You want to be part of the solution.

STEWART: And a very powerful message...

UNIDENTIFIED POLICE OFFICER: It's our goal to provide young people with real life images and information about the effects of hard core drugs (my emphasis).

CBC TV Magazine (introductory montage/commentary to Through a Blue Lens)

I was invited to attend a community meeting to discuss the Downtown Eastside aboriginal community’s serious concerns surrounding the most recent death of a young First Nations woman, Lisa Grapevine. The long and narrow room had been moulded by two circles of chairs the majority taken by aboriginal women. A police officer from the local Neighbourhood Office, well known and respected within the First Nations community, stood inside the circle. The police officer was fielding questions and responding to critical comments on the nature of Lisa Grapevine’s case, other Missing Women files, and the role of the Vancouver Police Department in these unsolved murders/disappearances.

Women spoke angrily of the consequences of media stereotypes. Of central concern was the media’s emphasis on prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, which a few women argued, served to justify the lack of effort to find missing women from the Downtown Eastside. These women’s critical comments focussed on how media representations rendered women and their community invisible to the police department, whose mandate is to “serve and protect” all citizens of the nation-state. Yet one woman collapsed the seemingly disparate roles of the media
and the Police Department; blurring the boundaries between these two institutions, she argued that the police have caused a "media frenzy", by feeding the media labels of drug-addiction, prostitution, and alcoholism. While the police officer attempted to maintain the border between his institution and the media, other instances were cited where this was not the case.

As suggested at this community meeting, the Vancouver Police Department has been actively producing representations of aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside community. In this chapter I analyze two widely circulating visual representations of women and the Downtown Eastside through the media of photography and documentary film. First, the Missing Women’s Reward Poster consists of 31 photographs of women that have gone missing from the Downtown Eastside. Second, the documentary film, Through a Blue Lens, explores the relationship between six drug-addicts and ‘beat’ police officers as they collaborate in a drug awareness and education project for youth. I argue that the two visual texts, both produced by the Vancouver Police Department, are located within relations of disciplinary power. Following Michel Foucault, photography critic John Tagg argues for a critical analysis of the discourses and institutions in which visual representations are embedded in order to understand how they produce power/ knowledge. These visual texts enable me to address the two following questions: how do discursive productions of visual culture articulate, inscribe, and discipline subjectivity and space; and how do aboriginal women negotiate and resist the material consequences of those representations, mediated through their multiple subject positions, gender, class, nation, and sexuality? In addressing the first question, I argue that the Missing Women’s Reward Poster serves to essentialize subjectivity and space. Aboriginal women are portrayed as criminalized subjects (prostitutes, drug addicts) whose bodies are confined to the homogenized space of the deviant ‘Other’- the Downtown Eastside. While Through a Blue Lens offers a more complex reading of subjectivity by humanizing drug-addicts, I contend that it reinforces rather than subverts essentialized representations of inner city space. In addressing the second question I link
aboriginal women’s experiences of visibility and invisibility to the stereotypes that are signified in the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens. Here I draw upon feminist theorist Peggy Phelan, along with numerous other feminist theorists, who challenges what she refers to as the “ideology of the visible”- the assumption that increased visibility (representation of mimetic likeness) equals increased political power. Phelan argues for a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between power, representation, and the body. Exploring this relationship carefully, I argue that aboriginal women are rendered visible and invisible in multiple ways, as mediated by their experiences of racism from ‘beat’ police officers. In particular, my interviews suggest that women experience the visibility of their ‘race’, and thus their experiences of racism, in very different ways. I draw upon Phelan’s concept of “excess”, that being the excess of meaning conveyed by visual representations, which enable multiple readings of representation and (here I would extend her argument) the embodied experiences of negotiating these representations in every day life.

Disciplinary Practices and the Visual Field

There is a clear set of intended effects of the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens. Among them are locating the person(s) responsible for 31 disappearances, and stopping drug abuse among middle-class youth. Yet there is another set of effects that bear upon aboriginal women’s everyday lives. The material consequences are related to the disciplinary practices of the Vancouver Police Department, particularly how they produce and inscribe women’s bodies in the inner city. As photography critic John Tagg reminds us, “it is not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth”. While there is a vast literature on the function and effects of photography used for disciplinary practices in the inner city it is useful to briefly recount this project’s early evolution. In the late
19th century technology delivered photography to the masses with the invention of the hand
camera, initially referred to as the detective camera. While this new invention exploded amateur
photography, moral reformers used it to document concealed, deviant behaviour (objectifying,
typically, the working class as unhygienic, lazy, drunk, and sexually promiscuous). This act of
visual documentation is part of a discourse of masculinist imperialism, whereby bourgeois men
would penetrate the urban slum under the cover of darkness to expose the underworld of vice
staining the white sheets of modernity. Alluding to a consequence of visual documentation,
which I argue has direct implications for aboriginal women, John Kasson writes,

   Regarding this “underground story” as a dark continent, populated by “primitive” natives, urban
   explorers typically set out upon their safaris at night, accompanied by police officers and lanterns
   to map the region of poverty, vice, and crime as a first step to eradicating it.

Yet with the transformation of the gaze in the 19th century from the casual flaneur to the
penetrating surveillance of the detective, as noted by Walter Benjamin, police officers moved
beyond the passive role of accompaniment into the active role in producing visual maps of urban
areas. Through the production of mug shots, and the use of surveillance cameras to render certain
publics visible, while remaining invisible, police, and their representations, are inevitably caught
in a discourse of reform- idealized and scripted by white, bourgeois values. The values
accompanying representations of urban identities and spaces acquire greater power when
articulated by the police. With this context in mind I want to first turn to an analysis of how the
Missing Women’s Reward Poster inscribes and disciplines aboriginal women and inner city
space.

Visualizing Mug Shots

   In the summer of 1999 the Police and BC Attorney General Ujjal Dosanjh offered a
$100,000 reward for any information leading to the arrest of those responsible for the
disappearances of 31 women from the Downtown Eastside. Accompanying this reward was a
poster depicting the faces of the missing women, their file number, name, date of birth, and date they were reported missing (Figure 17). In biggest font at the top of the page, "$100,000 Reward" looms over women's faces in red lettering, beneath it, "Missing Downtown Eastside Women". What I find striking about these photographs is that the majority are mug shots taken at a Police station upon arrest. The *Vancouver Sun* published 18 photographs of the missing women four months prior to the high gloss poster, entitled "The missing: Tragic portraits of women from the Downtown Eastside". Clearly playing off of Lincoln Clarkes's exhibition title (Chapter 3), these portraits are far from glamourized.

Such photographs are used for the purpose of identification but Tagg argues that these pictures function for more than this purpose

> [They are] portrait[s] of the product of the disciplinary method: the body made object; divided and studied; enclosed in a cellular structure of space whose architecture is the file-index; made docile and forced to yield up its truth; separated and individuated; subjected and made subject.

Police photographs were and are used as proof of deviancy. Tagg emphasizes the way in which bodies are represented. Through an analysis of other disciplinary regimes of visual technology, Tagg identifies common themes; ones that recur in the Missing Women’s Reward Poster. Bodies are isolated and fixed in a narrow space to magnify physical features, and are then subjected to an un-returnable gaze.

In the Missing Women’s Reward Poster, each face is produced to take up the entire geometrical frame of the institutional portrait. Supposedly this is to allow diverse publics to scrutinize each woman, in hopes that someone may recognize them. They are not flattering portraits. Some women’s faces appear beaten up, bruised, or marked with sores common to heroine users. Together they play out the familiar visual performance of a “Wanted” poster. The very images the Police use to convey an unsolved tragedy also portray these women as criminals.
The Ministry of Attorney General and the Vancouver Police Board have authorized a reward of up to $100,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the unlawful confinement, kidnapping or murder of any or all of the listed women, missing from the streets of Vancouver. Upon the arrest and conviction of a person or persons responsible for the unlawful confinement, kidnapping or murder of any one or more of the women listed as missing in this reward poster, a reward will be decided by the Vancouver Police Board, in its sole discretion, and that decision is final, binding and not reviewable.

Only those people who come forward and volunteer information which is received by the Vancouver Police Department on or before May 1, 2000, will be eligible to receive a reward.

Any persons having information regarding the unlawful confinement, kidnapping or murder of any of the missing women listed in this poster are requested to communicate that information immediately to the Vancouver Police Department, Missing Persons Unit.

North America at:

tel. 1-800-386-3796

in the Vancouver Area at:

tel. 604-717-3454

Call your local police agency or you can remain anonymous and call:

GREATER VANCOUVER CRIME SToppers

Additional details and larger photos are available on the Vancouver Police Department Web site at: www.vpd.vancouver.bc.ca/police

Figure 17: Missing Women’s Reward Poster. Source: Vancouver Police Department.
While it is known that many of these women have engaged in the economy of prostitution, these representations only reinforce essentialized identities of drug-addicted deviants—authorized by the power of infallible Police records. Could it not be argued, therefore, that few citizens would be genuinely concerned with the disappearance of women who are obviously involved in a complex network of crime? The argument has been made that Reality TV shows attempt to capture not only criminals but the public. Isolating the key factor that sells episodes of America's Most Wanted to the public, Michel Linder explained to TV Guide, that “if a man brutalized innocent children, that adds points. A drug dealer who shoots another drug dealer is not as compelling as someone who preys on society at large.” However, in the poster the effect is that of separation rather than inclusion; the poster shows “Missing Downtown Eastside Women”, women who are not considered members of ‘society at large’, particularly because this neighbourhood is considered to cradle the worst of society within the collective (middle class) imagination. These criminalized ‘portraits’ establish the need to further discipline the bodies and spaces signifying deviance. One could argue that this has materialized by increasing the number of community police officers on the Downtown Eastside, and by the City’s proposal to install video cameras to survey street activity at various locations.

These representations of women on the Downtown Eastside may explain the slow Police/City response to the missing women case(s). Anger, disbelief, and frustration flow through the streets, agencies, and politicized marches. Each time I walk into the Women Centre I seem to notice another piece of paper announcing the terrible news that another woman has not been seen in weeks. Anger boils among women in the Downtown Eastside community due to the lack of urgent Police and City action. This was heightened when Vancouver City officials granted a $100,000 award for any leads on a series of home invasions and West Side garage robberies. This clearly indicates, as some would argue, class discrimination, as the City appeared oblivious to the escalating number of disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside.
As a recent article in the *Georgia Straight* contends, if these were 31 missing women from either the University of British Columbia, or the high class Shaughnessey neighbourhood there would be public uproar, extensive media coverage, and rewards\(^\text{18}\).

The Downtown Eastside is perceived as a homogenized space, whose borders are traced by technologies of exclusion. On the socio-spatial construction of 'outsiders' Sibley has argued that a strong classification of liminal space influences the perceptions and representations of the 'Other'\(^\text{19}\). Defined against the Self, the Other is that which is foreign, different, and threatening. Minority groups, in particular, are often perceived as the 'deviant' Other by dominant society and are associated with marginalized spaces. Constructions of aboriginal criminality have a complex historical geography, which is rooted in a loss of sovereignty\(^\text{20}\). At the time of colonial contact indigenous women's sexuality was considered one aspect of this criminality. In British Columbia, aboriginal women who asserted their autonomy were often constructed by Euro-Canadians as immoral deviants in need of patriarchal discipline\(^\text{21}\). In order for Euro-Canadian men to tame aboriginal women's sexuality it needed to be framed in the public discourse of prostitution. There are material consequences when women's agency and sexuality are defined in the context of prostitution. Geographer Phil Hubbard, in a discussion on contemporary constructions of commercial sex workers, argues that the mass media has typically reiterated images that portray prostitutes as "fallen women"\(^\text{22}\). He further argues that the marginal status of working girls has been mapped onto particular sites in the urban sphere through complex grids of power, space, and gender.

In a network of discursive and material production, local and national media have inscribed the bodies of the missing women onto the spaces of the Downtown Eastside, while unruly spaces have defined and produced women's subjectivity. These bodies are further criminalized as they are described as prostitutes and drug addicts. Reiterating the image of drug-addicted prostitutes from the Downtown Eastside, tight boundaries are enclosed around women's
identities and the spaces they move within/between. “It’s all about terror”, one reporter claimed, “The cruel, cold facts are frightening enough. At least 31 drug-addicted prostitutes have disappeared off Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside red-light stroll streets”. This statement implies that the Downtown Eastside is predominantly a red-light district, conveniently ignoring the fact that prostitute(d) women have been forced to leave the community to further, isolated industrial spaces to work. Dominant media discourse on the missing women issue has focussed on criminalized behaviours such as prostitution and hard drug use, avoiding a more complex reading of these women’s lives. Reading against this text, the documentary film Through a Blue Lens succeeds in disrupting essentialized representations of subjectivity, but like the Missing Women’s Reward Poster it fails to subvert narrow representations of inner city space.

“White Icing”: Framing Through a Blue Lens

The director Veronica Mannix explains that the opening scene of Through a Blue Lens portrays an intentional parody on cop shows, a genre of Reality TV. In this genre, viewers ‘flirt with the forbidden’ and are invited to share the cop’s point of view as we experience dangerous events, police chases, and convictions, only to turn off the TV, convinced that ‘the system works’. The initial footage of Through a Blue Lens is a montage of faceless panhandling, crack smoking, drug deals, and needle injections. A lonely steel guitar whines in the background (a Ry Cooder feel) giving the inner city a purposeful wild-west groove. As Mannix explains, the Downtown Eastside is like an untamed frontier: a place of good guys and bad guys, cowboy cops and outlaw addicts. There’s no place like this in Canada, and as CBC’s Brian Stewart tells us, nothing like this on Canadian television. Designing the opening to mirror a Reality-TV cop show, Mannix focuses on feet and hands to show the anonymous texture of (poverty) the Downtown Eastside—dirty pants, broken shoes, rough hands, bare feet. Juxtaposed to these images, Mannix directs the camera to the clean pants and polished shoes of two police officers.
marching in stride on their turf. From the foot-ware of authority, the camera then shifts to reveal an unexpected scene: the cops are joking with Nicky, the central subject of the film. Mannix hoped that the stylized introduction would initially reinforce the audience's stereotypes about police and addicts, manipulating them into thinking this documentary focussed on the tension between them. She then wanted to twist the assumptions of the audience as the opening scene unveiled the relaxed, amicable relations between the police and the drug addicts. The audience is prompted to realize that this is a different sort of (film) territory- the cowboys and outlaws are friends.

I begin this section with this reference to Reality TV for two reasons. First, I do so because the two visual texts I analyze have interesting connections with the genre. The Missing Women's photographs have materially travelled into the domain of Reality TV. Appearing on America's Most Wanted, a "novel hybrid of telethon, newscast, and police drama"²⁷, and inspiring the series Di Vinci's Inquest, these mobile images have also blurred the boundaries between police document(s)/ary and Reality TV. But most importantly their connections to Reality TV raise some important questions regarding institutions, power, and the politics of representation, with which I ground my analysis of the documentary film. Speaking on photography, Tagg has inquired, "How is [documentary] discourse related to those privileged discourses harboured in our society and caused to function as true, and to the institutions which produced them?"²⁸ What mechanisms or techniques within documentary or photographic discourse produce the illusion of truth? By what configurations of power is truth constituted and maintained? And most importantly, how does this bear upon aboriginal women's everyday lives?

Through a Blue Lens evolved through the collaboration between seven beat officers, known as the Odd Squad, six drug addicts, director Veronica Mannix, and the National Film Board (NFB). The process began when Constable Al Arsenault shared his slides of overdoses, dead bodies, and knife wounds that he had been taking throughout his policing career on the
Downtown Eastside. His partner Constable Toby Hinton, needing visual aids for his drug prevention and education program, decided the photographs would be a useful tool and began to use them in schools. Yet their interest in this visual medium expanded to videography (Figure 18 and 19) when they met Veronica and Dan Mannix who were filming the documentary *Down Here* on the Downtown Eastside. Explaining this shift Al comments,

The reason why we wanted to do an education piece on drugs in the first place is that we got tired of seeing kids coming to the Downtown Eastside and the skids and get hooked on drugs. And in the most simplistic form, I mean it didn’t exactly happen this way, but it’s like kid wanders down, we’re beat men, we grab the kids and say ‘what are you doing here?’ ‘Well I’m just experimenting on drugs’- through the veils of bullshit that’s the bottom line. And then we grab the first drug addict walking by and say hey this kid wants to experiment in drugs, whether we know the addict or not (just anybody) and they tear a strip off this kid. Say what are you nuts!? And then the kid would go away. The addicts would want to kick their ass out of the skids... Then we’d stand around talking about it later, ‘don’t you hate seeing kids down here?’ ‘Yeah me too, what can we do, you know?’ Well hey we’re doing these lectures in schools about drug abuse and the conditions down here, but we’re narrating the slides and I’m sure... you can speak to it better than us because you’re living this.

Although there are many alternative approaches to representing reality, more traditional documentary film is structured around an argument about the historical or natural world. Images and sound provide ‘concrete evidence’ to convince the audience of the argument. In *Through a Blue Lens* spoken narrative, particularly in the context of an unscripted, ‘natural’ dialogue, conveys powerful elements of truth and objectivity. The Odd Squad privileged this opportunity to “speak to” the negative experiences of drug addiction in order to construct an effective drug prevention program. However Veronica Mannix, providing feedback on their amateur video, quickly realized that their footage was more than an educational vignette. Given the diverse stories, experiences, and backgrounds of each addict, she made a trailer and pitched it to the NFB. Marking it as a unique documentary, the NFB immediately agreed to fund the project, with the intention of airing it on CBC Television, and distributing it widely on video. Mannix was not interested in doing an exploitative, sensational, or voyeuristic film about drugs.
Rather she (alongside the NFB) was interested in the relationship between the officers and the drug addicts, where each drug user's voice was privileged, thereby humanizing the subjects. To achieve a richer story Mannix accompanied the Odd Squad's footage with her own, carefully building a subplot on each of the six addicts. Therefore *Through a Blue Lens* was constituted and interpreted by multiple participants. Given this layered practice of knowledge construction, I turn to reflect upon the relationship between power, representation, and the body.

I critique *Through a Blue Lens* by analyzing how it employs, although unwittingly, certain elements of Reality TV to convince the audience of its truth. *Through a Blue Lens* provides locational realism, threats to human life, and neutral commentary designed to reduce revulsion from the audience. First, one of the prime characteristics of Reality TV is its transparent presentation of immediate dangerous events and actual police cases. Second, in doing so episodes travel to the borders of sensationalism, where the body becomes the focus of harm or violence. Third, to relieve the audience of disgust, the narrator reduces the visual offence by using what Nichols refers to as “ideological reduction”- a strategy that makes the unfamiliar unremarkable. I focus my critique of *Through a Blue Lens* by reflecting on how these three interrelated techniques structure the representation of subjectivity and space of the Downtown Eastside.

How does this documentary inscribe and discipline women's subjectivity and space? To address this, I would first like to analyze the process of how subjects were selected for the film- as it addresses the central question of power and representation through the remarkable absence of aboriginal women (and men) as juxtaposed to the presence of white women (and men).

Subjects of the film were chosen by police officers, but the final decisions were made by director and editor, Mannix. Nicola and Randy were chosen primarily for their accessibility (they both lived on the street and were well known in the Downtown Eastside community) and for their identifiable middle-class and sports backgrounds (representing idealized gender roles,
Nicola rode horses and Randy was a NHL hopeful). Others were chosen for the compelling intensity of initial footage. Shannon was selected because the Odd Squad had before and after addiction photographs, providing visual ‘evidence’ of a successful reform story. As in Reality TV, viewers are continually shown visual evidence of bodily (and mental) harm, but are then pacified by the commentary of the front-line police officers. In this way viewers are invited to relate to and share the perceptions of the middle-class, white officers that narrate the film. Through the live, interactive taping of police emergency calls and inner city walkabouts the documentary becomes endowed with the power of realism, immediacy, and transparency.

Focussing on disturbing bodily harm, Carlee was chosen because of a gaping wound in her arm, Curtis for his back alley overdose, and Debbie for her public psychosis. The Odd Squad looked for subjects in “their worst throws of addiction” in order to send a strong educational message. In effect, the Odd Squad subscribes to the production of truth where, as filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha observes, “Truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be “dramatized” if it is to convince the audience of the evidence, whose “confidence” in it allows truth to take shape.”

Once the officers obtained footage of unsettling scenes (the action component), each subject’s character development was primed to evolve, and the director instructed the officers how to capture humanizing interaction on camera.

Yet the officers had particular ideas as to what made a compelling story. Of the nineteen addicts they filmed, only six were scripted into the final edit. Those that were chosen recognized that they were, in the words of Cst. Arsenault, “the authors of their own misfortune”. They wanted subjects without political agendas, who talked simply about their life on the street and the negative effects of drugs on their lives. The individuals they avoided were those who had overt political views or blamed structural agents, such as child apprehension, for their addiction. The intention to produce an “apolitical” film was to ensure that the documentary would appeal to a large audience, which could then use it for multiple political strategies. To assert that the act of
representation or the construction of knowledge is apolitical is problematic, as it veils the influence of personal biases in producing a visual text. The constitution of documentary cannot separate aesthetics from politics.

One of the most striking aspects of all the film subjects is their whiteness. The absence of aboriginal people in particular is curious as the Downtown Eastside has the largest off-reserve aboriginal population in Vancouver and this community tends to have higher proportion of drug induced deaths than other populations\textsuperscript{39}. There are multiple ways to read and contextualize this invisibility. An obvious point would be that demographically there are more ‘white’ individuals, those with European background, living in the Downtown Eastside than what Census Canada considers ‘visible minorities’\textsuperscript{40}. Also, given the racial tension between aboriginal residents and police officers in the Downtown Eastside, aboriginal people may have felt uncomfortable participating in a fairly invasive film process with white officers. In a workshop to analyze audience reception to the film, aboriginal women from the Downtown Eastside, in particular, responded differently to the overwhelming whiteness of the film\textsuperscript{41}. Some women felt that their presence in the community and experiences were not addressed by the film, because it only focussed on ‘white’ people and their drug addiction. Recognizing this, one aboriginal woman felt strongly that the Police should videotape all races since many aboriginal people- particularly youth, women and elders- are on the street doing and dealing drugs. In contrast, another woman felt that aboriginal people were not underrepresented. Recognizing two of her aboriginal friends who were briefly shown in the film, she felt the film provided ‘enough’ representation to make her feel included.

In addition to the representation of race, most women critiqued the positive portrayal of the relationship between the addicts and the police. In a focus group on the police, I had asked Patricia, a First Nations woman from northern British Columbia, about her thoughts on the film. She and two others, responded:

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P: It was one sided the way I looked at it after it was all over. Sure there are plenty a lot of people living on the Downtown Eastside but it seemed like they were just doing it for their own benefit and nobody else's... I think they need to do a little bit more accurate film that what they did... cause it's multicultural.

C: They just had white people, that's it.

L: And they're going to have a different perspective because they don't know the native life. So how is it going to be true if it's only one sided? And they're not always right, they're mostly wrong.

C: I would say the whole film was candy coated.

L: White icing.

Blurring a critique of whiteness and the “one-sided” construction of the film, these aboriginal women recognize how the personal biases of police officers influence a narrow representation of subjectivity and space. Lana's description of *Through a Blue Lens* as “white icing” echoes Nichols's analysis of Reality TV which, he contends, aspires to “non-friction... [by reducing] potential subversion and excess to a comestible glaze.” Specifically they felt that the film did not reflect their experiences with officers on the Downtown Eastside, as suggested by Lana who commented that officers, in their actions and opinions, are mostly “wrong.” Gestures of affection exhibited by officers towards the film subjects (hospital visits and Christmas presents) are foreign in a community where police gestures tend to be that of harassment and discrimination- particularly towards racialized minorities. These sensitive and generous acts (or performances) do not reflect the familiar machismo subculture of the police with which many women are familiar. This illustrates a clear rupture exists between what they consider to be the carefully constructed image of the friendly officer and their experiences. As Olivia observed, “they’ll put out their best if they know they’re on camera”. By questioning the officers’ performances, women recognize that the value of aggressiveness continues to shape the practices of many police officers. They also rightly acknowledge that these performances can be strategically used to repair a threatened public image (particularly in context of the Downtown Eastside). However, gestures of affection and concern also signify the complexity of the police
force. Many police departments are undertaking partial shifts from traditional law enforcement models that advocate “a strong separation between the police and the potential corrupting influence of community politics” to one that forges cooperative relationships between police and neighbourhoods, as influenced by the recent reform movement, community policing\textsuperscript{47}.

Forming another layer of interpretation, members of the aboriginal community praised Mannix and the Odd Squad for not highlighting aboriginal people in a documentary about drug addiction\textsuperscript{48}. Sensitive to the circulation of negative stereotypes about urban aboriginal people, members of the aboriginal community were relieved that whiteness was associated with drug addiction. This is unique as literary critic Mary Brady argues that drug wars are typically associated with racialized rather than white bodies\textsuperscript{49}. Peggy Phelan has argued that visibility for minority groups may not be an empowering political strategy. If the film had been comprised of aboriginal addicts and paternalistic, white police officers, hierarchical colonial power relations would only be affirmed. Thus, \textit{Through a Blue Lens} can be partially read as a text that unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions regarding drug addiction, subverting common inner city stereotypes about racial minorities.

While the documentary disrupts racial stereotypes, it also provides a more complex understanding of the lives of women living on the Downtown Eastside. In contrast to the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and the \textit{Heroine’s} exhibit (Chapter 2)- which reaffirm essentialized representations (criminalization, eroticization) of aboriginal women- \textit{Through a Blue Lens} manages to present a much more complex representation of subjectivity. The documentary attempts to humanize both the drug addicts and the police officers by exploring their common goal of enhancing drug awareness and abuse prevention. This is developed through scenes of teasing and laughter, police interest in the subject’s childhood and family background, and paternalistic concern for the addict’s well being. Through these scenes addicts are shown to be
‘normal’ human beings—with caring families, trips to Europe, Santa photographs, and dreams to which middle-class, white viewers can easily relate.

The intent of humanizing the addicts by the director and the officers is primarily achieved by filming the interaction of Nicky, a witty, playful character, with the officers. Stereotypes of the irresponsible, lost addict are subverted by revealing her resourcefulness, self-sufficiency, humour, and thoughtful reflections on life. In one funny and sensitive scene Nicky reverses the paternalistic role of the officers by offering a gift, with irony.

Nicky: Can you believe that? I mean you'd be amazed at what I find in the garbage. You'd be absolutely amazed. [Hands officers t-shirt] Perfect for you.

Cst. Hinton: “I call the shots”[referring to the phrase on the t-shirt]. Ha, ha, ha. That's good.

Nicky: Would you ever wear it though?


It is clear from this dialogue that the officers are also humanized. Police officers are shown to move beyond the hyper-masculine performance, by relaxing the tough enforcement approach and embracing a community-based policing strategy. Humanizing the addicts, however, is often affirmed by the narratives and performances of the police officers who relate to the addict’s lives through idealized heterosexual, middle class, family norms. Consider the following two monologues:

Cst. Hollingsworth: When I first started working down here, they were just all addicts, hypes and trash; garbage essentially. Just a waste of society’s monies and taxpayers' dollars. And in a lot of sense, I don't blame people for thinking that about these people either. But when you get to know a little bit about these people and their stories, you can't help but have compassion for them. These people have mothers and fathers that love them just like we love our children.

Cst. Steinkampf: I don't think anything has affected me more than looking at those family pictures. I realized then that each -- each one of the people down here has a past and they'll have futures. They, they may come from broken families, but a lot of people come from good, strong, upbringing families. They've just made the wrong choice. They've got into drugs. They've got into the alcohol abuse. And with, with Carlee that day I watched and I saw that she when she was young, did the same things I did. Went on camping trips; went with family outings.

Points of connection for the officers are derived from the norms and values typical of middle-class families. Through the officers’ commentaries and confessions they seek to reassure themselves and the audience that ‘its ok, they’re just like us’. Akin to a strategy of Reality TV,
any disgust or revulsion that the audience may harbour towards drug addicts is suspended through the “ideological reduction” by the police officers. This narrative serves to undermine the agency of the addict’s testimonies, thus overshadowing their ability to humanize themselves. And on another level these performative statements identify the privileged representative of a threatened population: like Reality TV they are a warning that drugs threaten the integrity of the white nuclear family.

While the documentary offers a more complex reading of subjectivity, it reinforces essentialized representations of place. Consider the opening comment by CBC Magazine’s Gloria Macarenko:

Illegal drug use is increasingly regarded by experts as a national crisis. It is right here in Vancouver that the drug and HIV problem is at its most alarming. It’s centred in the Downtown Eastside. Two years ago, police officers armed themselves with video cameras and began documenting life in the neighbourhood. Their goal was to record the misery and take it to the world outside. The result is an extraordinary documentary, “Through A Blue Lens.”

While drug addicts are humanized through the exploration of their histories, desires, and motivations to move beyond drug addiction, the Downtown Eastside community remains type-casted as a fixed site of drug using- a ‘black hole’ that will continually attract “pathetic wasted lives”. We are reminded that the Downtown Eastside, known as Canada’s worst drug community, has become a threat to national and international security. The United States’ War on Drugs ideology has slowly migrated across the border and has become one of Canada’s top national policy issues. I would argue that the Through a Blue Lens’s attention to bodily harm emphasizes the link between criminality, medical discourse, and place. Like the sensational images provided on Reality TV which threaten the white, nuclear family, the ‘action’ shots of psychosis, magnified shots of open wounds and scars, and exposed pathological body seek to establish the boundaries and distance between residents of the Downtown Eastside and the documentary’s audience. As Cst. Toby Hinton strolls the back alley he comments, “A lot of people come down here to fix if they don't live in the area. There's needle wrappers all around.
There's bleach bottles. There's condoms. There's signs of pathetic wasted lives.” Attention to garbage and decay in the urban landscape is paralleled by the fetishization of the pathological body. Mobilizing the ‘truth-effects’ of objective documentary, Cst. Len Hollingsworth summarizes, ”it's our goal to provide young people with real-life images and information about the effects of hard-core drugs, allowing them to make their own choices about drug use” (my emphasis). Although justified by the rhetoric of education, Through a Blue Lens dwells graphically on bodily harm in similar ways to Reality TV. Multiple scenes in the film reveal officers showing scars on a young women’s face (via an ‘after’ drugs photograph), or asking addicts to show their wounds or scars from injection drug use. This approach is similar to the anti-smoking campaigns of the 1980s, where school children were often shown a blackened lung, with the hope they would be sobered by the visual evidence of biological harm. In the most graphically disturbing scene, an officer zooms in on a gaping wound in Carlee’s arm, which is the result of ‘seeing’ bugs crawl out of her flesh once high on coke. The desired effect, an officer confides to me, is that “kids will remember Carlee’s arm”52. Two disturbing scenes of Randy and Darlene experiencing psychosis in open public spaces are also filmed. Although the audience witnesses the hopes, fears, and insight of each addict, which I argued offered a more complex reading of subjectivity, Through a Blue Lens was unable to disrupt the stereotypes of the Downtown Eastside. In the attempt to send a strong educational message, the body was fetishized in ways that also fetishize inner city space. These images provide the audience with the opportunity to relish a sustained moral gaze.

As film theorist Bill Nichols notes, interpretations are as stable as the persuasive power supporting them. The Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens are situated within “discourses of sobriety” and disciplinary power. Within these discourses, power lies in the acknowledgement that it has a privileged way of knowing and seeing, through a direct and transparent access to reality. In Through a Blue Lens this is partially achieved through the
interactive film process that appears immediate and natural, which serves to validate evidence. It is also achieved through technological prowess, through the ability of photographic film to capture the exact details of the historical or natural world; constructing a direct relationship between an object and its image, known as indexicality. Yet the notion of indexicality is problematic, as relations of power are contested by multiple institutions and actors. The photographer or filmmaker, editor, subjects, funding agencies, and news programs alter each production with their own cultural, economic, psychological, and historical biases and experiences. Constructing another layer of representation, diverse audiences offer multiple interpretations of the same optical frame. There is no fixed or stable reading of an indexical image— despite promises of the contrary. This is evident in the conflicting interpretations of raw footage that portrayed a severe beating of Rodney King by four Los Angeles Police officers. While the prosecution depended on the comforting yet problematic assumption that ‘what-you-see-is-precisely-what-happened’, the defence constructed a convincing case, founded on the premise that ‘real’ footage does not communicate straightforward truths. However as Nichols has argued, certain truths are privileged over others, particularly when discourses of authority (such as the ethical credibility of the police officers) and logic are mobilized.

As qualified and recognized arms of the nation-state, police officers, like those represented in the Rodney King case, serve as moral and circumstantial guards of ‘truth’. I would argue that while the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens acquire power through the discourse of sobriety, they acquire credibility due to the institution of disciplinary power they are embedded within. It is the institutional authority of the Vancouver Police Department that constructs and confirms elements of immediacy, truth, transparency, and objectivity that we encounter in the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens. Theorists such as Tagg have been highly critical of the representational strategies of police, due to the consequences of hegemonic control via surveillance and documentation. While my
analysis incorporates his many of his criticisms, I want to emphasize that this narrative does not entirely overlap with my reading of these two visual texts. As indicated above Through a Blue Lens offers a more complex reading of subjectivity and is developed in the context of collaboration with its subjects. However Tagg’s theorizing of power, representation, and the body enables viewers to read this documentary critically, thereby opening a political space for alternative readings and questions. As Phelan argues, because representations are never totalizing and ultimately convey more than they intend, excess meaning is generated. Through analyzing images of women and the Downtown Eastside we are able to locate ruptures and gaps in the representational frame that render resistant readings possible. As made clear through the popular education workshops, aboriginal women ironically interpreted Through a Blue Lens in ways that echo the initial parody on Reality TV, which intended to connote a tension between officers and residents of the Downtown Eastside. Rather than reaffirming stereotypes of police officers, aboriginal women’s readings raise important political questions regarding the interrelation between representations of subjectivity and space and their material, everyday lives. This will be demonstrated by turning attention to the embodied effects of these representations in aboriginal women’s everyday lives. Moving beyond the visual text I extend the discussion in order to understand how aboriginal women negotiate the narrow representations of their identities and the spaces they move within/between.

Negotiating Representations: Experiences with Racism on the Downtown Eastside

Critical discussions of representation, prompted by the intellectual revisions of postmodernism and poststructuralism, have been predominantly confined to textual or discursive analysis. While interpretations have dismantled the unnecessarily thick discursive/material boundary there is little work that explores how everyday lives are directly influenced by the discourses that constitute images. In this section of the chapter I am interested in how women
are negotiating the narrow representations of their bodies as prostitutes, drug-addicts, alcoholics, and the Downtown Eastside community as a deviant space as signified by the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens. To explore this I will move through aboriginal women’s experiences with Police harassment and racism. These narratives first illustrate my argument that aboriginal women negotiate and experience these representations in an embodied, material way, and second that these negotiations are plural and shifting. This suggests the very complex ways women are marked or unmarked by race, class, and gender in inner city spaces.

I briefly reflect upon the work of feminist theorist Peggy Phelan who challenges the assumption that increased visibility (representation of mimetic likeness) equals increased political power (referred to as the “ideology of the visible”). While she acknowledges that visibility can be empowering for minority groups she cites surveillance, voyeurism, fetishism and imperial possession as disempowering consequences of visibility. In relation to the war on drugs, Mary Brady also works through the visibility/invisibility trope, outlining the differences between “state-sponsored ocular/spatial practices” and activist strategies. While she concentrates on literature and narrative visibility, she is careful to recognize that visibility for minority groups/activists may not destabilize existing power relations, but rather reinforce them. For example, both Phelan and Brady recognize that visibility for minority groups may only stimulate the commodification of exotic ‘others’. What I want to take from both of these theorists is a nuanced analysis of the relationship between power, representation, and the body- in order to challenge the idea that visibility offers a radical site for social transformation. As the interviews suggest, narrow representations of subjectivity and space produced by the disciplinary arm of the state work their way into everyday social practices that can disempower aboriginal women. Recognizing this, Phelan, using psychoanalysis, suggests that there is value in being invisible or unmarked for minorities. This is evident as some aboriginal women I interviewed talked about the ways in which they made themselves “disappear” in order to avoid police harassment. While
I engage with Phelan and Brady’s argument regarding visual textual representation, I want to extend it by moving beyond the text and attending to the multiple ways in which aboriginal women experience the visibility or invisibility of their bodies and voices.

Experiences of visibility/invisibility, influenced by one’s subject position of race, gender, class (among others), determines which groups and issues are represented and others ignored. This became clear in the focus group on the police and the media. Many women felt that because white people are dominantly portrayed in the media, the serious issues within aboriginal families and communities are subsequently marginalized. Lana a 52-year-old woman from southern Alberta discusses an incident at her daughter’s school:

A native man came with a gun and he was going to shoot his wife… and then these cops were called. But the cops were joking about it. My daughter was, and these people were, close enough to hear these cops joking about the incident. But if it was a white person it would be on the front page. Nothing was said about this incident. Not at all, not with native things. But with every little thing on white, it focuses right on the front page. But they don’t see the things that they do to the natives, you know in the background.

This comment illustrates the frustration with neo-colonial power relations, where white people’s issues are addressed, yet aboriginal issues forgotten. However, the concern about representation and the media is not solely situated within a white-native discourse. In other interviews women expressed frustration that immigrant minority groups garnered more attention. Some women felt this was indicative of where the state’s care is directed. Specifically, a few women felt that immigrant concerns took precedence over aboriginal issues. Lana articulates this in relation to the missing women.

[Aboriginal women are represented in the media]… I like to use analogies now, like [in] the same way they celebrated 2000 having fireworks way out there- [I] couldn’t really get into [the fireworks]. [The concern for the missing women] was just like a little firework of all these women that were killed-nothing [was done]. And what I saw in the front of everything was a $100,000 [reward]- that’s all, [money] not concern. But I see other concerns here. You know that little girl Mindy Tran? And these other white kids that like in the school shootings. Any person that gets killed here. That guy that was a race car driver, golfer, you know all these famous people splashed across the paper was only a little bit of that much on the news of these women that were killed in Vancouver, not much.
The visibility of (what is perceived as) whites and immigrant minorities serves to erase important aboriginal community concerns, such as the missing women. These feelings are tied to Peggy Phelan’s “ideology of the visible”: if one’s image is not represented, one is not addressed. Lana also drew connections between this privileging and the racism immigrants learn to direct towards aboriginal people from white society.

Nothing has improved, not for native people. But for other cultures, yeah, the Asians, and whatever that come in. They’re taught to be racist against native people too. I can’t even rent from a Chinese person because I’m native.... In my home town they had Chinese restaurants that everyone, they have big signs, “No Indians Allowed”. I mean they’re immigrants! You know it’s a privilege to be in this country, and they act like the mainstream society. The reason why they’re accepted here is because they’re just like mainstream society. They’re all corrupt. We see that but we can’t do nothing because they’ve got all the power.

While Lana is clearly stereotyping immigrants in a simplistic and negative way, her comments illustrate the intensity of emotion instigated by particular media representations that shape her perception of injustice towards aboriginal peoples.

I have argued that the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens are situated, although differently, within relations of disciplinary power. Aboriginal women’s bodies are essentialized as drug addicts and prostitutes, and the Downtown Eastside community homogenized as a deviant space. ‘Immoral’ identities and spaces are inscribed onto one another, creating thick borders between classed urban communities. Yet women’s bodies have been disciplined in racialized context, specifically in relation to the missing women’s tragedy. This experience of racism was raised by Deborah, a mixed-blood native woman who has lived on/off the Downtown Eastside for 23 years when I asked her what it was like to be an aboriginal woman in the city.

D: I find it really hurtful sometimes because you know you look at the majority of women down here they’re mostly native and most of us are on drugs and alcohol and how am I going to say this? [Sigh] It’s like people, non-natives are saying that’s exactly what... you were put here for is to be there and be drunk and stoned and work the streets and whatever. That’s the way I look at it sometimes.
J: Where do you get those ideas from?
D: A lot of it is from the news. Take these native women that have disappeared. And the police won’t do the police are, um. Ok, on the 31 women’s missing list there were two ladies found and
both of them they said it was death by natural causes. Now, in my opinion how could they say that if these ladies have been gone for so long? How long have they been gone before they found them? And did they really do an autopsy and did that autopsy say death by natural causes?

J: These are important questions.

D: So that's what really makes me feel like I am getting pointed at because I am native and they figure that just because I'm native or even if he is native they belong down here, they belong doing drugs, they belong drinking alcohol. They belong homeless.

For Deborah the lack of rigorous Police investigation is related to her experience of racism; in particular, to her experiences of being stereotyped as a prostitute. This is also related to her experiences of having her inner city community stereotyped as an aboriginal space of criminality. “They belong down here”, meaning the Downtown Eastside, implies that the inner city is marked primarily by bodies of deviance. These stereotypes of identity and place are signified in both the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and the film Through a Blue Lens. Her comments illuminate that this act of marking is embedded within a neo-colonial discourse that serves to naturalise the material and symbolic ‘place’ of urban First Nations. Recognizing the over-representation of First Nations women in the Downtown Eastside, Deborah’s experience of discrimination from both society and the police serves to reinforce the imperial hierarchy of ‘whites’ and aboriginal peoples through a narrative of self-destruction and poverty. Here I think the tension between visibility/invisibility is clear: her experience with discrimination is an issue of being visibly marked due to her gender and race, yet this marking also renders aboriginal women invisible- evident in the perceived lack of authoritative concern and action for Downtown Eastside missing women. I would argue this narrative provides an excellent illustration as to how representations travel into the daily negotiations of racism, and discrimination of/against aboriginal women.

The trope of visibility/invisibility is emphasized by the narrative of Lana when she described her experiences of being marked as a prostitute by police officers.

The only reason I came and I stood by my daughter I didn’t want her to get bothered she was all dressed up, she was going to go out with her boyfriend. But I didn’t want her standing like that so maybe people will come by and say well your prostituting let’s go. And then when I’m standing there this cop goes to me like this, “come here”. So I go up there, and I’m in a good mood. He
says “you standing out here again?” And I said, “What the hell are you talking about?” “Can you give me your names, both of you give me your names. Cause if you’re going to act smart you’re going to come with us”. I say “no I rather not come with you, but I’d rather report you to your supervisor”. And yet they still intimidated me because they didn’t think I would. My daughter went over there and says, “what’s the problem here”...and then pretty soon, because they had made a mistake they tried to cover up to her.

Here is a strong example of how being visible as an aboriginal woman in an inner city space, solicits the stereotype of a sexual deviant by the Police who seeks to discipline both her body and the space her body occupies (the street). I would argue this experience is an embodied negotiation of essentialized representations of aboriginal women signified by the disciplinary power of the Missing Women’s Reward Poster. Her visibility in a space of criminality constructs a gendered, and racialized power imbalance between aboriginal women and the Police. Yet despite this heightened visibility, Lana also describes her experience of being invisible when she describes the painful and helpless emotions she experienced when police refused to investigate her daughter’s death.

When my daughter died in ’77, she was a hit and run victim. And there was witnesses that said the man switched seats with his wife and his wife was sober. So when the cops came, they don’t investigate nothing those cops. They really, really enjoy themselves. I’ve seen them downtown when they pick up native women... They get promoted with the amount of arrests they make...And nobody tells them ethics about treating people. They are really horrible people. I don’t even go to a cop for help now. ‘Cause I haven’t met a good cop yet in my whole life and I’m 52 years old.

While Lana is representing police officers in a narrow way, this excerpt emphasizes her frustration regarding the lack of police concern and action over an unjust death, which relates to her feelings of invisibility. Lana layers her experiences of invisibility with the hyper-visibility of aboriginal women in the inner city, illuminating the many forms of discrimination she experiences from police officers. In these first two cases the experiences of visibility due to gender, race, and class, and their subsequent experiences of invisibility, prove to be disempowering (the basis of Phelan’s argument).

Yet I want to introduce a woman who complicates this narrative, revealing the very complex ways women’s bodies are marked in inner city spaces. Patricia is a thirty-year old
woman from northern B.C. who has lived in the city for 11 years (on and off). Speaking of her experiences of racism and the Police.

It depends on the circumstance of where you’re at and what’s going on and who’s all there. It seems like they have this notion that native people are all one way and no other way. And they figure it’s a normal thing. Well let’s make a judgement of whether or not you smell like, if you’ve got alcohol on you or making the assumption that alcohol or drugs that we’re sort of like the minority and we should be treated a certain way. That we’re not important as to other people on the planet... It’s really heavy duty, just the way they talk down to people and where I think maybe it’s a life or death situation and they’re taking it lightly and they don’t seem to care as much... They just got this attitude of I don’t care I’m just doing my job and that’s all I’m here to do. And let’s get it over with kind of thing...

In this moment Patricia is emphasizing the visibility of aboriginal women, which is mediated by the essentialized stereotypes of drug addiction that are inscribed onto their bodies. She echoes many other women when she feels these stereotypes serve to justify inaction by the Police in serious life threatening situations, rendering aboriginal women invisible. However at another moment in our interview Patricia talks about a different interaction with the Police, one that provides a more complex narrative in the ways aboriginal women are marked and unmarked. Patricia had spent three weeks without shelter on the Downtown Eastside. During that time she had become involved with drugs and alcohol, but was able to leave that lifestyle within a very short period of time. She contextualized her ability to get off the street in her interview:

J: What do you think helped you get off the street?

P: Listening to the older ones, cause they didn’t like, some of them didn’t like the fact that they were still on the street. And they said you don’t belong here, this isn’t your lifestyle. Like a lot of them reinforced that as well as listening to other people that I come in contact with on the streets and that. And I know there’s a couple of cops out there that actually said that too, is like what are you doing down here, you don’t belong down here.

This offers another complex layer in the trope of visibility as it suggests a different relationship with the Police that seems to be unmediated by racism. While the first woman I interviewed talked strongly of how she felt that racism inscribed her in the criminalized boundaries of the inner city due to the stereotypes of urban aboriginal people, Patricia was somehow marked ‘out of place’. Her narrative suggests that women are marked in fluid and shifting ways, evident in the disjuncture in her experiences with police. There are other markers of visibility- class or
health- that are re-inscribing Patricia’s relationship to inner city space by the disciplinary power
of the Police that attempts to place her outside of its territory.

Other women claim to have experienced very little racism or discrimination from the
police and others. Olivia is a 53-year-old First Nations woman from northern British Columbia.
When I ask her what it is like to be an aboriginal woman in the city, she responded by explaining
that she feels that aboriginal women are no different than other women- implying, as she has at
later moments, that skin colour doesn’t influence women’s everyday life experiences. She
articulates, “there is nothing racist. Actually there hasn’t been any at all. And a lot of friends that
I make are white guys [laughs]”. Although Olivia asserts that she has not experienced racism in
the city, she recognizes that other aboriginal women have experienced racism from white men
and social service organizations, such as the Ministry of Children and Families (particularly
through child apprehension). While there is a tendency to negate experiences of racism, there are
moments where Olivia speaks of experiences of discrimination- therefore alluding to the
complex ways aboriginal women are physically marked or unmarked. This emerged in our
conversation regarding the police on the Downtown Eastside. Upon listening to Lana’s
experience of being stereotyped as a prostitute, she comments,

Nothing like that has happened to me, but then again I’ve been dumb enough to get too drunk and
picked up and thrown in the can. But other than that it’s, they’ve been OK with me. But they do
ask some crazy questions sometimes, you know was I selling myself, was I working on the street,
do I work the street? No way, I don’t do that stuff.

The direct questioning by police officers of whether she prostitutes emphasizes the narrow
assumptions regarding place and identity which surface through direct experiences of
discrimination. The way in which she describes the questioning suggests that it was out of
context for the encounter, particularly given that she does not work the streets. This unreasonable
measure by the police seems to be explained by the fact Olivia is a single, aboriginal woman
living in the Downtown Eastside, thus rendering her highly visible to an institutional arm of the
state that seeks to essentialize her identity and subsequently discipline her body and actions. Yet
Olivia emphasizes that it is only certain police officers that propagate racism. She speaks of a positive experience with a police officer in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver.

There actually are a few good cops. [For example] I had... this shirt [indicating her Nation]... I was walking down the street and this cop comes up to me and [a police officer’s] looking at me as I was walking down. And I thought he was going to stop me for something. And then all of a sudden he says, where did you get that beautiful sweater? And I said I’m a Nisga’a. He said that is so pretty. And I didn’t know what to say but thank you. That was all. That was the only time I got stopped in Burnaby.

Rather than essentializing Olivia’s identity through the act of stereotyping this police officer constructs an opportunity (although superficially) for Olivia to affirm and celebrate her cultural identity. However, this occurred in a differently coded space than the Downtown Eastside.

Although this was a positive experience, Olivia’s initial fear of being stopped by the officer suggests that she sensed her visibility as an aboriginal woman may subject her body to the power of a disciplinary institution.

Expressing the complex and sometimes confusing emotions surrounding racism, Olivia speaks of her experiences of being invisible to the state; hypothesizing that this is attributed to her race. Reflecting on the police’s handling of the missing women files, one of whom is a relative, Olivia comments:

I saw her about two weeks before she actually went missing and I saw who she was with. But what can I do? I didn’t know where to find them or what, and I don’t know how the cops would handle it if I told him exactly what he looked like. And just up until recently I forgot what his name was. But you know how seriously will they take it? Cause you know it’s the second time. I’ve made reports to the police that’s never went anywhere. Maybe it’s because I’m native. They figure I’m just a drunk on the street or something.

Olivia relates the experience of being dismissed or silenced to the stereotyping against urban aboriginal people that is perceived to take place within the police academy.

Her visibility as a native woman renders her invisible to the arm of the state that theoretically exists to address her concerns and ensure her safety. While others in the focus group felt they could not trust the police (this includes aboriginal officers) due to stereotyping and the lack of concern for aboriginal women, Olivia felt safer with an increase in Downtown Eastside police
officers. To Olivia, the extensive violence women experience in the community is more threatening than the discriminatory practices of police officers.

Irene, a Metis from northern Alberta, has had diverse experiences with racism in Vancouver, but none with police officers. Yet she talks about the strong classification of space in the Downtown Eastside, emphasizing her assumptions regarding the visibility of racialized crime and the invisibility of ‘white’ crime. Relating an explanation from a social service worker on who instigates the majority of crimes in the Downtown Eastside, she admits her surprise when she hears,

It's the young boys from North Van that come over here, make trouble, they beat up these elderly people, take their money, and their fathers have to phone the lawyers next morning to get them out. And they're practically paid off. So they were the ones that were doing the most crime out there. They cause it and they just take off. And the natives get blamed. The people living in the community get blamed for that. And there’s just a whole misconception that this whole area is bad because of the people that live here... And I was shocked to hear this that these perfect white people, I mean sorry but not that they grew up with it, like being white you’re perfect. And being non-white you’re not perfect... so I was pretty shocked, I thought wow I was believing that stereotype as well.

Irene’s narrative illustrates the internalization of colonial power structures, which construct a racial hierarchy, elevating ‘whites’ to superior moral positions. Through overlapping discourses, this hegemonic structure is mapped onto the Downtown Eastside, providing a simplistic understanding of social relations. Although Irene also simplifies complex social processes by solely blaming outside ‘white’, middle-upper class males, her reaction of surprise indicates the extent to which racialized bodies are strongly associated with ‘deviant’ inner city spaces. This was also discussed by other women in relation to being commonly interrogated by police officers on the Downtown Eastside.

In our focus group on the police all four women had experienced being randomly stopped on the street and searched. This seems to work differently depending on the places aboriginal women travel within, with the experience occurring more frequently in the Downtown Eastside and Mount Pleasant (an adjacent working class community). Lana began the conversation by talking about random police searches:
L: ... They'll search you anytime. Ask you what’s your ID, where’s your ID. I’ve had to produce by ID but I haven’t done nothing about it simply because I’ve been walking down and I’m native and they ask me for my ID. They ask for everybody’s ID. And they will strip search those kids and if they have any money they take it...

C: They’ll ask you to dump your pockets out and see what you’re carrying They’ll call your name and where you’re living and see if you have warrants.

Carey continues the conversation, yet observes that the police do not ask everyone for their ID.

Although she was walking outside of the stigmatized Downtown Eastside community, Carey feels that the visibility of her race accounts for why she was interrogated.

C: I used to live at Mount Pleasant and I was walking to the store one night and they just pulled me over and said what are you doing? I said I’m going to the store. And they said well let me see some ID.

J: How did that make you feel?

C: I was mad. Like why are you doing that to me? These other girls are walking around.

L: White girls.

C: Yeah. But I wasn’t dressed appropriately as these white girls were.

Carey cites race and class as markers of visibility that justify the disciplinary actions exerted on her body and the space her body occupies. Whiteness and “appropriate dress,” which was described as suits worn by middle or upper class women, were the markers that enabled other women to occupy space in this “nice neighbourhood”. Disciplinary measures taken on the Downtown Eastside are often exercised in the middle of the day, rendering the ‘fugitive’ bodies of aboriginal women hyper-visible. Olivia, Lana, and Carey ironically describe the embarrassing experience of being stopped and searched in the day.

O: They made me empty my purse right on the back of their car and...

L: In front of all these people you know!

O: It’s stupid.

L: They just treat you like a criminal.

O: It belittles you.

C: It’s belittling. In the middle of the day, people are driving by and they are looking at you.
O: People walking by, my friends are walking by, wondering you know...

J: Yeah that's true because in the day you're more visible.

L: It makes me wonder if they're so insecure they need all this attention just to boost up their power.

All three women have felt the hyper-visibility of their bodies on the street, upon being stopped and searched during the day. One of the consequences of this penetrating surveillance, as described by Lana, is the loss of privacy. The spontaneous yet frequent process of interrogation, customary search (and confiscation) of their clothing and possessions constructs an informal space, where the body and street form the primary sites onto which disciplinary power is exerted.

However it is difficult to know whether aboriginal women are harassed more often than white women or whether these experiences are racially motivated. Although race certainly plays a role, there was a sense among three aboriginal women that individuals are randomly selected. On the issue of being questioned about prostituting, Patricia noted, “they seem to do that to most of the women that are walking around by themselves. It doesn’t matter how you dress either. More or less focus in on who it is they come across.”

Where outward appearances seemed to play a role in Carey’s experience in Mount Pleasant, Patricia suggests it may be the space of the inner city that condones or justifies particular stereotypes. On the issue of being stopped for ID, Lana felt that there appears to be no particular criterion. Nadine, a First Nations woman from northern BC, who has worked the streets and used heavy drugs on and off since she was 16, related that while she had only been stopped once, she was never asked for ID. However, in that situation her fellow white friends were asked for ID, while she was left alone. These narratives seem to suggest that race is not necessarily an overdetermining factor.

Despite these differences there are certain commonalities that each woman expressed, including the use of overly aggressive force when dealing with First Nations women. Six of the eight women I interviewed about the police had witnessed unnecessary violence towards residents of the Downtown Eastside and spoke particularly about the harsh way in which many
aboriginal women and men are treated. Lana commented on how the spectacle of disciplinary techniques enhances the power of the officers. Testimonies that described the use of aggressive force described tactics of fear and intimidation. In order to avoid disciplinary encounters, three women spoke of the conscious strategies they use to detract attention from police officers.

L: I mind my own business and I fade into the background. I know how to disappear even though I’m tall.

O: It’s kind of one thing we have to do after a while.

L: Yeah it’s part of my survival, you know I disappear.

J: How do you do that, what strategies do you use to do that?

L: Up here [points to head] I’m invisible.

O: I see them coming into a bar and just ignore them completely.

L: I just say I’m invisible.

Nadine, upon relating two experiences of rape and sexual harassment by police in Vancouver and in a northern B.C. jail respectively, also described her strategies for physically avoiding police on the Downtown Eastside. “I just totally ignore them. I just don’t even look them in the eye or nothing. I just ignore them. Everything I tend to avoid having any contact with them”61. Some women find ways to become unnoticed, unremarkable in order to avoid being marked as ‘Other’.

The narrative of Through a Blue Lens does not overlap with the experiences of aboriginal women. It is clear from the women’s testimonies that many encounters with police officers involve elements of aggressive machismo and racism, elements that are not associated with the community policing model. In many circumstances aboriginal women have had to negotiate essentialized representations of drug addiction and prostitution in their everyday lives. I have argued that through relations of disciplinary power the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and Through a Blue Lens naturalize criminal subjectivities and inner city spaces. This is reinforced through technologies of realism and by the authority the Vancouver Police Department. The
essentialized representations found in these visual texts bleed into women's everyday lives in ways that render their bodies either invisible or visible. Consequently aboriginal women, marked differently by their race, gender, and class, often contend with police inaction or harassment. To avoid negative experiences women strategically become invisible to avoid being noticed by officers. However this considers only part of the story. Using Phelan's concept of excess, I argued that multiple readings of these visual texts are possible in ways that create a political space of resistance. To further this discussion, I will expand on this in the final chapter. Through a Blue Lens offers a more complex understanding of subjectivity on the Downtown Eastside. This documentary film provides a different picture of drug addiction- associating it with whiteness- and policing in the community, which is later affirmed by some aboriginal women, whose experiences with police complicate the narrative of racism. In a few cases, women maintained that they encountered little racism or discrimination on the Downtown Eastside. This very complexity raises some central political questions regarding the relationship between women and the police in a community fraught with competing representations of identity and space. It also raises more puzzling questions regarding the different experiences of racism by aboriginal women. Why do some women claim to have never experienced racism? Is it an unconscious strategy for survival? Is it denial? Are women experiencing racism but not recognizing (or admitting) it as such? While I cannot address these questions here, I contend that working with visual texts produced by the Vancouver Police Department provides some insight into how aboriginal women interpret and resist these representations, ultimately revealing how powerfully cultural productions influence material, everyday lives. I now turn to the final chapter where I discuss the political consequences of these visual representations, and suggest some ways visibility politics can be transformational.
There was concern over the publishing of Lisa Grapevine’s juvenile criminal record by The Province newspaper. By the court of law, criminal convictions of a youth offender are not to be released to the public. The aboriginal community questioned the police officer as to how the newspaper could have had access to these records: he was unable to account for this.

The documentary film, Through a Blue Lens, does not solely represent women addicts (two men are portrayed). I am using this film as it offers a rare example of a visual text of an inner city space produced (alongside director Veronica Mannix and the National Film Board) by police officers. I am interested in how it constructs addicts as complex, humanized subjects, but the Downtown Eastside community as a space of deviance. As well, I am particularly interested in why there is an absence of aboriginal women (or men), and how local community residents have interpreted their invisibility.

The majority of the 31 women have gone missing in the last five years. One third of these women are First Nations. To date four cases have been solved.


J. Kasson quoted in Gunning, 52.

Janet Acoose argues that negative representations of aboriginal women as “easy squaws” can have serious material consequences- to the extent that they may justify violence against women. Reflecting upon the 1994 murder of four Saskatchewan aboriginal women, she charges that the media representation seemed to offer an explanation of the tragedy. Focussing on their promiscous behaviour' the media made the connection between their deaths and the fact' that these women had often visited downtown bars. For a more in depth discussion on Canadian literature, representation, and aboriginal women see J. Acoose, Iskwewak: Kah'kiyawni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princess or Easy Squaws, (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1995).

Referring back to the documentary Through a Blue Lens, one can observe the disciplinary intentions of the Police in reference to drug use. However, while the Police (Odd Squad) are concerned with the health and well being of drug users, their disciplinary discourse extends beyond the immediate bodies of the Downtown Eastside to the suburbs.

This art of visual surveillance has been used in other urban areas such as Hull and Sudbury, Ontario and Tacoma, Washington. Given these examples, the Vancouver Police Department’s Forensic Video Squad feels that the closed circuit TV cameras will disrupt criminal activity, half of which is thought to be committed by individuals living outside of the Downtown Eastside. They also feel it would enable more prompt responses to criminal wrongdoing in the community. The estimated cost of this project is $400,000. There are mixed reactions to this proposal evident at a Carnegie Centre community meeting organized by the Downtown Eastside Residents Association. While some feel it will reduce crime in the Downtown Eastside and make the streets safer, particularly at night, others, including activists, contend that it will infringe on resident’s civil liberties. Many people, including MP Libby Davies, would rather see the money put towards increasing the number of patrol officers or drug treatment services. D. Ward, “Police Want Video Cameras in Downtown Eastside.” Vancouver Sun 31 May 1999: A4; B. Yaffe, “Don’t Smile the Government May Be Taking Your Picture.” Vancouver Sun 4 Jun. 1999: A17; “Downtown Eastside Monitoring Report (1999),” Street Vibes 1 Oct. 1999, Volume 1(2): 1.

I am grateful to Bev Pitman for this fact. The missing women issue was not taken seriously by the Vancouver Police Department until a middle-class woman from Shaughnessy went missing on the Downtown Eastside. For more details please see D. Wood, “Missing,” Elm Street 4:2 (1999): 96-110. Now The Vancouver Police Department has a special team in the Missing Person’s Unit who are quite involved in some of the family’s lives.

The West Side of Vancouver is typically a middle-upper class set of neighbourhoods.


Prostitution was widespread during the gold rush in the mid 1800s. Taming this "wild and savage" sexuality was the object of a tripartite alliance (missionaries, government officials, and aboriginal men). Of an interesting geographical note, one of the main ways of 'taming' this sexuality was to bring aboriginal women back to reserves-putting them in their place. The fear of wild sexuality is a synecdoche for aboriginal women's agency, expressed as resistance to the confinement of colonial reserves. This helps to situate contemporary non-native perceptions of urban aboriginal women. For further discussion on how gender, power, and race intersected in ways that condemned aboriginal women's agency refer to J. Barman, "Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850-1900," *BC Studies* 115/116 (1997/8): 237-266. Of course this is a particular Euro-Canadian construction of aboriginal women. Aboriginal women's agency is also affirmed and celebrated at contact, and there is important work illustrating how women's roles (political and economic) were highly valued by aboriginal and European societies. Please see J. S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); S. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1999); C. S. Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators," *Ethnohistory* 39:2 (1992) 97-107; L. Littlefield, "Women Traders in the Maritime Fur Trade," *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis,* ed. B. A. Cox (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987) 173-18?


Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries* 44.


Tagg 94.

*Down Here* focuses on the Downtown Eastside activist Bud Osborne and the complex questions surrounding low-income housing, and the increasing pressure of gentrification.

Interview with Al Arsenault and Toby Hinton, Vancouver Police Department, May 17th, 2000.

There is a rich literature on the evolution of documentary film. Bill Nichols work provides some important insights into understanding how documentary film has responded to changing social and political conditions and questions. From the 1930s documentary style has metamorphosed from expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, to more recently the performative. Although different filmmakers and theorists define documentary in radically different ways, *Through a Blue Lens*, if we had to pick a category, reflects the interactive style. For example, the interactive style is characterized by these aspects: the filmmaker's voice is heard (or seen in the case of TBL), interviews form the basis of acquiring knowledge (akin to the confessional), dynamics between the filmmaker and subjects of the film are central as are images of testimony. Recent experimental or postmodern documentaries significantly depart from this approach, actively questioning the referent and the subjectivity of the filmmaker by interrogating how knowledge about the social or natural world is constructed and represented. Trinh Minh-ha's films are a good example of this. For further work on the nature of documentary film please see B. Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991); T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics,* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); P. I Crawford and D. Turton, *Film as Ethnography* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1992); D. Vaughan, *For Documentary: Twelve Essays,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); C. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999);

In "Representing Reality" Bill Nichols explores the multiple ways documentaries are defined and categorized. Nichols identifies three ways to define documentaries: from the position of the filmmaker, text and viewer. Central to the "text-centered" definition of documentary, sound and images are conceptualized as evidence rather than "elements of a plot". I would argue that *Through a Blue Lens* seeks to establish the authenticity and 'truth' of its argument (re: drug addiction) primarily through the 'spontaneous' narratives of the addicts and the dialogue between the addicts and officers. For an overview of his analysis see B. Nichols, "The Domains of Documentary," *Representing Reality,* 3-31.

*Through a Blue Lens* aired twice on CBC's Magazine on December 8th, 1999. The National Film Board has made more money on *Through a Blue Lens* than any other documentary or film in its history (Veronica Mannix, personal communication). HBO and Cinemax also showed the documentary. ABC did a short 12 minute piece on the Odd
Squad, aired on 20/20 entitled “Reclaiming the Dead”. It was also aired in Australia. Moving beyond Reality TV, it is travelling through various film circuits, such as the Banff Film festival. It was voted the “Most Inspirational” film by youth in the festival “Real to Reel”.

34 Of the 52 minute documentary, Veronica Mannix only used 22 minutes of the Odd Squad’s footage. The remainder was hers.

35 By no means am I arguing that Through a Blue Lens is an example of Reality TV. While there are many distinguishing differences between documentary and Reality TV boundaries are easily blurred. Through my reading Through a Blue Lens seems to employ similar characteristics of which I am critical.

36 Al Arsenault and Toby Hinton, Personal Interview.

37 Minh-ha 35.

38 Apparently, the film is being used by very different groups: lawyers, emergency room doctors, addiction counsellors, correctional facilities, teachers, single parents, and recovered addicts- for multiple agendas (Interview with Toby Hinton and Al Arsenault).


40 Community Services, City of Vancouver, The Downtown Eastside, Chinatown, Gastown, Strathcona Area: Data from the 1996 Canada Census, (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, May 1999). Of course this too is problematic. Based on the Employment Equity Act, 1986 the visible minority designation of Census Canada depends on one’s skin colour (non-white, non-Caucasian) as a basis for categorization of identity.

41 I was able to utilize popular education (in conjunction with another organization) as a flexible feminist methodology in order to gain insight as to how local women received and interpreted photographs and the documentary film. The workshop on Through a Blue Lens was one in a series of four (during May 2000) on the media and the police.

42 Focus group on Police and Aboriginal Women on the Downtown Eastside with four participants (three of whom I had previously interviewed), May 6, 2000

43 Nichols, Blurred Boundaries 45.

44 Lana has had very difficult experiences with the police throughout her life. In many cases, she has felt the social justice system has failed her, which she attributes to prejudice and racism. There have been many instances when Lana’s experiences or interpretations of abusive situations have been either ignored or dismissed. Based on these experiences she feels that the police are often “wrong” in their actions and their perceptions.


46 Indeed, the Chief of Police of the Vancouver Police Department was thankful that the Police Department was finally receiving some positive press because of the documentary initiative at the world premiere of Through a Blue Lens.

47 Note that many police officers are very resistant to community policing, which focuses more on projects than police work. See S.L Miller, “Walking the Talk: Contrasting Neighbourhood Officers and Patrol Officers,” Gender and Community Policing: Walking the Talk, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999) 165-192.

48 Veronica Mannix, Personal Interview.


50 Blomley and Sommers note that the language of community is increasingly saturating “political rationality.” This is evident, they argue, in community health initiatives, ‘neighbourhood’ urban planning, community economic development and community policing. See N. Blomley and J. Sommers, “Mapping Urban Space: Governmentality and Cartographic Struggles in Inner City Vancouver,” Governable Places: Readings of Governmentality and Crime Control ed. R. Smandych (Ashgate: Dartmouth, 1999) 261-286. The officers of the Odd Squad view their drug awareness work as a preventative crime measure, which they understand to be a component of community policing. For more research on community policing see S. L Miller, “Summary: The Findings and Their Policy Implications,”
Miller relates that critics of community policing feel that state power has increased under the guise of 'community empowerment'. Miller compares the surveillance aspect of community policing to the technique of social control practiced in Jeremy Bentham's panoptical prison of the late eighteenth century. Bentham's model was designed so that prison guards could monitor the prisoners without being seen. Creating the feeling that they are continually being watched, prisoners begin to police themselves. Miller extends this social logic to Neighbourhood Police Officers, arguing that they may be initiating a similar process. It is interesting to consider this analysis alongside the Vancouver Police Department's proposal to install video cameras in the Downtown Eastside.

51 Williams 99.
52 Al Arsenault and Toby Hinton, Personal Interview.
53 Nichols, Blurred Boundaries 5.
54 The prosecution argued that Rodney King, rather than the police officers, was in charge of the situation. Instead they convinced the jury that the officers were simply responding to his actions and behaviours in order to protect themselves, conjuring up pre-conceived stereotypes about urban, black males. For an excellent analysis of the raw footage and the two trials of four LAPD officers, see B. Nichols "The Trials and Tribulations of Rodney King," in Blurred Boundaries, 17-42.
56 The Downtown Eastside has long been a site of conflict with police. This is particularly because of its rich history of trade unions. For example in 1935 1,000 longshoremen went on strike which precipitated violent clashes with both city and provincial police. See D. Ley, “The Downtown Eastside: One Hundred Years of Struggle,” Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State, S. Hasson and D. Ley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 174.
57 Olivia, Personal Interview, March 8th, 2000.
58 Lana felt that increasing aboriginal representation in the Vancouver Police Department would not solve the problems the aboriginal community currently faces with the institution. This was argued from the perspective that aboriginal officers are assimilated 'white' officers in an organization run by white men. As far as I know, there are only two aboriginal officers who work in the Downtown Eastside community.
59 However, Irene relates that her husband, who is has to be particularly careful around police officers.
60 Focus Group May 6, 2000.
61 Nadine, Personal Interview May 9, 2000.
CHAPTER 5. Conclusion: Ways of Seeing and Social Transformation

“Facing the Eastside,” a photography exhibit at the Roundhouse Community Centre, portrays Downtown Eastside residents without a material or geographical context. The universal grey background of these photographs serves a particular purpose. In the words of photographer Christopher Grabowski, each image challenges “the stereotypes of peoples living in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, particularly as depicted through the conventions of media and photojournalism”. Grabowski wants to destabilize the negative images of crime, prostitution, and drug addiction that cling to the Downtown Eastside’s public alias, skid row; as these images influence the perceptions and decisions of ‘outsiders’: policy makers, City officials, developers, planners, and business associations in adjacent communities. Grabowski’s aesthetic technique is effective as the viewer cannot determine whether the subjects are social workers or drug addicts. A large part of the confusion arises from the fact that these characters are liberated from a geographical context, whether the street, bar, or community relations office. “Facing the Eastside” requires its audiences to see differently, and therefore know differently, those that live and work in the Downtown Eastside. It demands viewers to question and reconsider their assumptions about inner city urban space, accumulated from the media, public discourses, and perhaps limited personal experience.

Visual representations have embodied, material effects that structure and organize dynamic social relations. Many photography or film projects hope to present stories in ways that will instigate meaningful social change. If we consider the various images analyzed throughout this thesis, it is clear that each has a different set of political effects. Lincoln Clarkes’s exhibit, Heroines: Portraits of Women on the Downtown Eastside, has
helped place harm reduction back on the national agenda. Moved by his series of photographs, local MP Libby Davies took a slide show to Ottawa to raise awareness and support for additional treatment centres in the Downtown Eastside. The Missing Women's Reward Poster has also made an important difference. After airing on America's Most Wanted, no additional women from the Downtown Eastside have been reported missing. Through a Blue Lens has proven to have a deep impact on young viewers as it won the 1999 Real to Reel festival award (voted by youth) for the most inspiring documentary. These visual images not only call attention to the escalating health and social problems associated with drug addiction and poverty; but they have inspired others to take action against conditions that continue to marginalize women. Yet these images warrant closer analysis. Alongside other feminist theorists, Peggy Phelan has argued representational visibility does not necessarily ensure social transformation. “Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda.” While these three texts have raised awareness of difficult and tragic social circumstances, I have argued that they also reinforce essentialized representations of aboriginal women and the Downtown Eastside through relations of disciplinary power.

I argued that Heroines served to reinforce victimized subjectivities by portraying women as prostitutes and drug users. Predominantly photographed in the back alleys of the Downtown Eastside, the inner city is represented as a deviant and tightly bounded space. Negating a complex reading of subjectivity and space, Heroines eroticized women through the ideological lens of a fashion photographer who wanted to make women beautiful. Exerting agency, many women responded to this encouraging gaze by
embodying an idealized femininity. I argued that this reciprocal gaze inscribed a binary of desire/disgust that reaffirmed relations of disciplinary power; women's subjectivity is narrowly constructed as a drug user and prostitute.

The Missing Women's Reward Poster and the documentary film *Through a Blue Lens* are also situated within relations of disciplinary power. The mug shot photographs in the Missing Women's Reward Poster work in similar ways to the *Heroines* exhibit, as they ironically portray aboriginal women as criminalized subjects. As I have argued this establishes the need to discipline the bodies and spaces signifying deviance. This has influenced media coverage on the '31 missing women,' which continually describes women as drug addicts and prostitutes. The ways in which the police and media circulate this discourse reaffirms and produces negative stereotypes of women and the Downtown Eastside, effectively erasing the dynamic, political nature of their community. This was evident at the community meeting of aboriginal people who met with a neighbourhood police officer to express their concerns about a recent death in the Downtown Eastside (Chapter 4). Against this visual text, the film *Through a Blue Lens* offers a more complex and humanized portrayal of women and police officers; and I would argue, successfully subverts the racialized drug stereotypes of inner city communities by associating substance abuse with whiteness. Yet like the two previous texts, *Through a Blue Lens* constructs the Downtown Eastside as a fixed urban space, where drug-addiction and criminal activity are naturalized. This is achieved through the fetishization of bodily dysfunction, which affirms linear connections between drug addiction, deviance, and inner city space.
These representations have material effects that influence aboriginal women's everyday lives. How do aboriginal women negotiate the material consequences of these images, which gain power through discourses of realism and authority? Through in-depth interviews and popular education workshops women suggest that their experiences with disciplinary institutions, such as the Vancouver Police Department, are structured by gendered, racialized, and class power imbalances. In many cases aboriginal women have been stopped, interrogated, or threatened by police officers who hold the assumption that they are working the streets or carrying drugs; stereotypes that circulate through the three above texts. However, Peggy Phelan's concept of 'excess,' implies that a representation cannot be totalizing, thereby enabling the possibility to "intervene in its meaning." This enables multiple readings of representational frames. For example, aboriginal women reacted strongly to Through a Blue Lens, critical of its positive portrayal of the relationship between police officers and Downtown Eastside residents. Many aboriginal women discussed how their gender, race, and class generate negative stereotypes. Consequently these stereotypes seem to either justify inaction by the police or harassment, which renders women invisible and/or visible. However other women described a different relationship with police officers, claiming to have had experienced little racism or harassment. While this perspective offers a more complex picture of the police force, it also raises some important questions. Analyzing Reality TV cop shows, film theorist Bill Nichols has argued that they attempt to convince public viewers that the disciplinary system works. That is, through surveillance, containment, and the disciplinary action of police officers the public's safety is upheld. With these aggressive, police strategies aside, sociologist Susan Miller has suggested community policing (as
shown in *Through a Blue Lens*) may be another form of surveillance, accumulating power through the guise of an alternative model. While I would agree *Through a Blue Lens* attempts to convince the middle class that the “the system works,” aboriginal women’s experience and critical reading remind us that racism and harassment continue, indicating the system doesn’t work for everyone. This is particularly important when considering the larger political context of strained relationships between urban aboriginal people and police officers. For example, two recent incidents in Manitoba and Saskatchewan raise alarming questions about the treatment of urban aboriginal people by municipal police and related social service organizations. Therefore questioning the ways in which visual discourses constitute everyday social relations is of utmost political importance. *Heroines*, the Missing Women’s Reward Poster, and *Through a Blue Lens* inscribe subjectivity and space in ways that discipline aboriginal women’s bodies.

Destabilizing stereotypes through visual media may not be the primary intent of an artist. Grabowski’s exhibit is unique in its success at rupturing outsiders’ assumptions about subjectivity and space in the Downtown Eastside. Yet in what ways does the politics of self-representation contribute to this goal? The *She Counts* exhibition provided a nuanced reading of women and the Downtown Eastside, destabilizing stereotypes of women as criminals and prostitutes and of inner city space as a tightly bounded site of deviance. Specifically designed to challenge outsiders’ perceptions of the community, the community public arts project had two objectives. The first is to communicate that women count no matter who they are, what they do, or where they live, and the second is that the Downtown Eastside is a strong, supportive community. Importantly this exhibit signifies the complexity of community through the themes of family, First Nations
culture, and mobility. Like the conflicting narratives of community in Chapter 2, it neither romanticizes nor victimizes the Downtown Eastside and its residents. Although it emphasizes the Downtown Eastside is a supportive community it visually critiques this idea by revealing the poor environmental and social conditions in many photographs, such as poor housing conditions, drug addiction, and poverty.

This idea of complexity is important in the current political context where idealized community rhetoric is beginning to substantially influence government discourse. For example it is found in community health initiatives, community policing, community empowerment, and community development\(^\text{10}\). In many of these cases ‘community’ is used promiscuously without careful attention to its usefulness. More specifically, one must be critical of how governmental institutions are defining community involvement. For example, the new Vancouver Agreement that aims to improve life in the Downtown Eastside has promoted grassroots initiatives to involve residents\(^\text{11}\). Unfortunately it has not always committed to an inclusive decision making process. Instead political leaders, business community members, and representatives of organizations are typically consulted on community issues, leaving women’s and First Nations voices (among others) behind. Self-representational strategies are useful not simply because they represent additive politics. Disrupting conventional “economies of seeing” that reaffirm stereotypes about inner cities, self-representation offers a different way of seeing and knowing, that may enable a more meaningful collaborative approach to projects that directly impact local environmental and social conditions.

Photography and documentary film are technologies of vision that are saturated in power due to their privileged connection with the ‘real’. Power is embedded in the
acknowledgement that indexical images can offer an objective way of seeing, which thereby enables one to acquire knowledge as ‘truth.’ Critical theorists of representation have argued that one cannot read such images as reflections of a pre-discursive real. Rather visual images are embedded in a variety of discourses that construct knowledge in particular ways. While I have decentered the authority of each text reading them against one another, it is important to reflect on one’s own power of representation in the process of translation. Emphasizing each text’s partial accounts, I too acknowledge my partial reading of each text. Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran has advocated Donna Haraway’s situated or partial knowledges, but also speaks of “situational knowledges—knowledges produced both in and for a specific context”\textsuperscript{12}. This is useful when thinking through the performances of sexual identity by the subjects of the \textit{Heroines} exhibit, political agendas of artists Clarkes and Beiks, institutional production of the Missing Women’s Reward Poster and \textit{Through a Blue Lens}, and self-representational strategies of community photographers. All of these actors are actively producing knowledge of women on the Downtown Eastside through unequal relationships of power. My construction of partial knowledge creates another layer of representation. As a woman researching gender issues in the inner city, I am particularly sensitive to violence, material and symbolic. I am also critical of the material effects of certain representations of women that justify violence against women. Because of my positionality, I can be seduced by what Judith Stacey calls the “delusion of alliance” with the women that I work with\textsuperscript{13}. This ‘alliance’ needs to be deconstructed by an analysis of my own axis of power—class, race, sexuality, and education. My reading of multiple subjectivities and fluid inner city boundaries is most certainly partial, a reading that shifts as I confront my
own biases. Locating myself as an academic researching First Nations women’s issues on
the Downtown Eastside, I have also aligned myself, however partially, with movements
of self-determination. Self-determination and self-representation are two overlapping
strategies of empowerment that I advocate and support. Despite this support, I am caught
(again) in between my politics and my limited ability to represent these women’s lives-
just as Clarkes, Beiks, the Police, and women on the Downtown Eastside offer partial
representations. However, Haraway and Visweswaran provide a way of contextualizing
this dilemma, by advocating situated knowledges. If we are careful to expose multiple
processes of representation that are equally constituted, shifting, and contested it is
possible to situate knowledge in accountable ways.
2 Clarke, Personal Communication.
4 Al Aresnault and T. Hinton, Personal Interview, May 17, 2000. The Real to Reel Film and Video Festival is supported by the Clevland County Arts Council in Shelby, North Carolina.
6 Phelan 27.
8 I would argue that this includes other kinds of governmental officers. The tension instigated by a fishery management dispute between Department of Fishery and Oceans officers and Burnt Church band members is one such current example.
9 Two aboriginal women phoned 911 five times within 8 hours to report a serious case of domestic violence. The police never appeared until it was too late. Another case involved an aboriginal man who was driven outside of Saskatoon in the extreme winter and without proper clothing. The RCMP is investigating six other related deaths. These two incidents have destabilized many aboriginal people's faith in Canada's justice system.
11 The Vancouver Agreement is a tripartite relationship between municipal, provincial, and federal governments who are committed to improving the conditions on the Downtown Eastside, in addition to other parts of Vancouver.
13 J. Stacey quoted in Visweswaren 40.


**Films and Radio Programs**
