Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance - Recentering Indigenous Women's Self-Determination, Artistic Sovereignty and Excellence in the 1980s and 1990s.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis builds upon an Indigenous feminist archive by analyzing the exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* within the social and political art climate of the 1980s and 1990s. *Changers* is the first contemporary art exhibition in Canada highlighting work by Indigenous women artists from the perspective of an Indigenous woman curator. It was organized by the Indian Art Centre (now the Indigenous Art Centre) in 1989 and curated by Wolastoqey elder, artist, and writer Shirley Bear of Neqotkuk (Tobique First Nation). The systematic disempowerment of Indigenous women provided the grounds for women's activism, which paved a path for self-determination and amplified women's political voice beginning with the "Indian Women's Movement." *Changers* represents a specific expression of feminism initiated by Bear's activism in the 80s and 90s. Her exhibition text an instrumental tool to Indigenous women's art history, as it addresses colonialist and patriarchal narratives imposed on Indigenous peoples, specifically how these systems impact the women. The exhibition serves as a counter-narrative and strategy to recenter Indigenous women's art, experience, and excellence.

Bear's exhibition advanced discussions around visual sovereignty, survival, refusal, decolonial aesthetics, by drawing on feminist scholars such as Jolene Rickard, Sherry Farrell Racette, and Julie Nagam. The exhibition demonstrates Indigenous relational aesthetics – an Indigenous feminist framework from Jas M. Morgan (previously Lindsay Nixon) – that centers relationships and care through kinship networks.

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An Era of Indigenous Artistic Renaissance

> Artists are the movers and changers of the world. They have always been revolutionaries, creating change in thought and style within their societies. We have no desire to produce work that either looks like or is connected to any European tradition or movement. It is not our way."[1] - Shirley Bear.

> Renaissance is a tough word, with colonial baggage. But what is at the centre of that word is that across every genre — whether it's writing or visual arts or music — our people, and I mean this inclusively, capital-I Indigenous people, are creating important pieces of work that are speaking to very important truths in this country."[2] - Jeremy Dutcher.

Indigenous Renaissance

When Wolastoqey[3] tenor and composer Jeremy Dutcher won the Polaris Prize in 2018, his acceptance speech declared, "Canada, you are in the midst of an Indigenous renaissance. Are you ready to hear the truths that need to be told? Are you ready to see the things that need to be seen?"[4] The term renaissance (rebirth) in Western art history is understood as a specific period after the Middle Ages when European artists were interested in literature, art, and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome.[5] However, the Indigenous renaissance is defined by Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste as a recovery period for all Indigenous communities from a "deep colonizing culture of superiority and racism."[6] Battiste asserts, "Indigenous peoples are now reconciling with that was denied us, our knowledge and languages that lead us to the deep truths about ourselves and our connections with all

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[1] Shirley Bear, *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* (Ottawa: The Runge Press, 1990), 1.
[2] Melody McKiver, "Art Is Our Language: Inside the Indigenous Renaissance with Jeremy Dutcher and Snotty Nose Rez Kids." *Exclaim!*, 2018. https://exclaim.ca/music/article/art_is_our_language_inside_the_indigenous_renaissance_with_jeremy_dutcher_and_snotty_nose_rez_kids.
[3] The descriptor for Wolastoqiyik (people of the beautiful, bountiful river).
[4] CBC Music, "Jeremy Dutcher wins the 2018 Polaris Music Prize!," Facebook, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=669109826928601.
[5] "Renaissance Art," History, 2018, https://www.history.com/topics/renaissance/renaissance-art.
[6] Marie Battiste, "You Can't Be the Doctor If You're The Disease: Eurocentrism and Indigenous Renaissance" *CAUT Distinguished Academic Lecture*, 2013, 2.

things."[7] In this way, a cultural renaissance can be connected to a need for constitutional conciliation between Indigenous knowledge systems and Eurocentric institutions.

Dutcher's Polaris Prize statement connects to a widely held belief that Indigenous cultural renewal has been occurring in phases since the 1960s[8]. I acknowledge that the term "renaissance" is cloaked in Western notions and definitions that often excludes the artistic production of women. Consequently, I must use language that feels familiar to explore specific Wolastoqey/Wabanaki[9] aesthetics beyond their connotations.

Decades before Dutcher's announcement, Wolastoqey visual artist, curator, and elder Shirley Bear referred to a similar Indigenous cultural, spiritual, and philosophical "rebirth" with her critical 1989 curatorial project *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance.* The show marked the first national touring exhibition in Canada to feature work entirely by Indigenous women artists from an Indigenous woman's perspective.

This exhibition is important for several reasons one of which is how exposes the patriarchy of the settler nation state. It pushes back against the reaching effects of the patriarchy, especially for Indigenous women in the arts, as it was primarily Indigenous men who were acknowledged as artists by mainstream society. Women's craft practices (i.e., "women's work" or "low forms" of art in the patriarchal Western World) rendered them outside of contemporary art. It was perceived that men make fine art (paintings, sculpture) and women make craft (textiles, poetry).

Métis scholar Julie Nagam's explores the "complex relations" between socially constructed terms "activism," "feminism," and "Indigenous artists." She considers that the reflections of these terms connect to more extensive conversations about colonization,

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[7] Ibid., 2.
[8] Indigenous art in the 60s and 70s brought Indigenous issues to the forefront of Canadian social consciousness. Social justice for Indigenous peoples in Canada was contingent on the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, and Red Power Movements. Concurrently, some sub movements were born from Indigenous women's kitchen tables that pushed back against the patriarchy of the settler nation-state and these movements.
[9] People of the Dawn

hegemonic Western art practices, and the lack of Indigenous women artists in the mainstream art world.[10] The Western imposition of binary construction of gender (and institutional racism) creates uneven ground for Indigenous women to be represented or discussed in art historical discourse or the mainstream art world for that matter. This is why Bear's exhibition was so groundbreaking for its' time, but it also begs the question, why is it overlooked in contemporary Indigenous art discourse?

The *Changers* exhibition was sponsored by the National Indian Arts and Crafts Corporation in conjunction with the 54th World Congress of International PEN at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.[11] It toured for two years between 1989 and 1991, making it the longest exhibition running of work by Indigenous women artists at that time.

This major research paper analyzes Shirley Bear's exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* within the context of Indigenous women's political voice in the 1980s and 1990s. While *Changers* was a landmark exhibition, it is largely missing from Indigenous art historical discourse. Rather than focus on a colonial exclusion or absence, I argue that Bear's exhibition serves as a strategy to recenter Indigenous women's art, experience, and excellence.[12] This paper will examine how Bear's exhibition galvanized women to assert themselves in places that excluded their political voices in and outside their communities during — and following — the Indian Women's Movement in Canada. Strategically, Bear's exhibition recenters women artists and their communal roles. I will demonstrate how this exhibition advanced discussions around visual sovereignty, survival, refusal, decolonial aesthetics, and care. Her exhibition text addressed settler colonial and patriarchal narratives imposed on Indigenous peoples — specifically women — and their histories. She wrote,

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[10] Julie Nagam, "Transforming and Grappling with Concepts of Activism and Feminism with Indigenous Women," in *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* ,Vol 33.1, (2008): 73.

[11] PEN Canada is the organization that works for the release of imprisoned writers around the world. See: Susan Crean, *About Susan Crean.* Accessed 2022, https://susancrean.ca/about-susan-crean/.

[12] I chose excellence because I was inspired by Jeremy Dutchers music video for *Mehcinut*, which was inspired by Indigenous excellence in the arts.

"Each woman gleans from her intimate past to express her views in the context of her particular tradition. Art, for us, is a very particular point of view, of which there is no reason to seek justification, just as there is no reason to justify why we are here. We simply are.*"*[13]

Wolastoqiyik have inhabited land near the main river, a first-contact zone, since time immemorial. Dutcher's classical Indigenous opera *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*, rooted in his homelands of Wolastoqkuk, is an example of the belief that our sleeping knowledge will eventually return to us. This understanding is similar to the Cherokee phrase *Ni' Go Tlunh a Doh ka*. Cacross and Tagish curator Candice Hopkins explains this phase describes the process where "we are always turning around . . . on purpose."[14] I interpret this as looking back toward the past, in order to see where we are heading. In other words, we must understand our past, so we can understand and know the possibilities for our future. For Shirley Bear, artists had this capability. She is quoted as saying, "Artists are the prophets, sages, the real recorders of history. I am painfully aware that I am not the first or last person to voice this truth. But it needs to be written, said, shouted, sung, danced, and painted, woven, and carved over and over again."[15]

Bear and Dutcher belong to the same artistic lineage of Neqotkuk (Tobique First Nation) and have contributed significantly to localized art histories in Wolastoqkuk.[16] I mention Dutcher's revival and remastering of our recorded songs demonstrate to Indigenous audiences all over the globe that the past has a presence — we do not have to separate the two. Dutcher's comments exemplify Bear's statement that contemporary artists are exercising the notion of "living in two worlds" to their creative advantage by embracing and adapting Western techniques to build upon "traditional" forms of Indigenous art.

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[13] Bear, "Changers," 1.
[14] Candice Hopkins, "We Are Always Turning Around on Purpose: Reflecting on Three Decades of Indigenous Curatorial Practice." *Art Journal* 76, 2017, 39, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00043249.2017.1367191?journalCode=rcaj.
[15] Shirley Bear quoted in Gwen Orechia, "The Importance of the Spiritual Influence," *Kwa'nu'te* (Film Jacket PDF), 1991, 4, http://www3.onf.ca/sg/55180.pdf.
[16] Wolastoqkuk is our traditional territory along the Wolastoq river.

His acceptance speech represents a commemorative moment in contemporary Indigenous art that exemplifies how far we have come.

Self-determination

Bear's intention for the exhibition *Changers* was to celebrate Indigenous women artists' work and encourage women to reclaim autonomy and spirituality. In the exhibition text, Bear writes, "Indigenous women don't aspire to any contemporary art movement. We are a movement of our own."[17] Her words imply that women can be self-reliant in taking back their power. This is a fundamental tenet of Wolastoqiyik worldview.

In Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa (our language), the notion of taking back our power is expressed in the concept wesuwe-*tpelomosu,* which translates to "being responsible for oneself; returning to a former condition in belonging to oneself."[18] Broken down, *wesuwe* refers to returning from the present tense to a former condition. I interpret this as a Wolastoqey Indigenous feminist inclination to reclaim or as a restoration of agency and power that was present within egalitarian societies before contact with Europeans and Western thought. Thus, "wesuwe" reveals the belief that it is possible to return to previous state while creating new values adapted to our current contexts. The second part of this phase *tpelomosu* means she/he/they belong to the self and are responsible for themselves. This concept speaks to an agency that community members hold. However, *tpelomosu* is not the same as selfhood.[19] Relationality and responsibility to others are evident in sentence structure, for example, when we say *keselmol,* meaning "I love you," it actually means, "it is *you* that *I* love."[20]

Self-determination in this sense means the artist makes choices concerning others from a place of responsibility. They carry a proverbial responsibility to their communities. I

[17] Bear, *Changers*, 1.
[18] Ronald Tremblay, personal communication with the author, 2022.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Justin Sappier, personal communication with the author, 2022.

employ these concepts found in the Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa (our language) to highlight Indigenous women artists who exhibited in *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* use the concept *wesuwe-tpelomosu* to resist and refuse ongoing systematic colonialism.

Locating Indigenous Feminisms

> The situation that we are in today is such that our women and children aren't respected as they used to be. It is not the fault of the men. It is because of the layers and layers of influence we have had from another culture. We are in a state of confusion, and we are trying to work our way out of it. People are calling it healing. Well, whatever it is, we are trying to find our balance, and when we find the balance, we will know the women won't be lost. They will be respected and taken care of and so will the children.[21]
> - Catherine Martin (Mi'kmaq)

One of the ways of examining the concept of feminism from a specific Wolastoqey perspective is by examining the word "ehpit," that is grounded in teaching gifted to me from Mi'kmaq elder, Miigam'agan. The word is not directly translated into English; instead, it describes the woman as being focused in 'the inner world.' Miigam'agan explains, "her whole being, her whole position is about the inner world, meaning, this is where we are being taught intuition, values, principals, our beliefs — all the internal part of our being comes from our mother. She created us from her inner world, and we were taught in the beginning from her inner world."[22] Her words denote an internal and robust connection to the feminine spirit. From a Wolastoqey perspective, feminism is about being connected to the feminine spirit and uplifting women in a good way[23]. Our understanding of feminism is expressed in our connection to each other, non-human beings, and our mother (the earth). I define Wolastoqey feminism in this paper, as meaning that women hold respected and revered places in our

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[21] Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*, (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2000), 13.
[22] Miigam'agan, personal communication with the author, 2021.
[23] In her text, "Colonialism and the Struggle for Liberation: The Experience of Maliseet Women", Maliseet/Wolastoqey scholar Andrea Bear-Nicholas says that stories in our oral traditions present an understanding of women's reverence and life-giving powers. She explains that, for the most part, "they exemplify wisdom, sharing, and humanity as flowing from their natural life-giving gifts and original instructions as women." See: Andrea Bear-Nicholas. "Colonialism and the struggle for liberation: The experience of Maliseet women." *UNBLJ* 43 (1994): 230.

communities; they are at the center of our governance structures and family life. To know this is also to understand the paternalistic and colonial structures that have forcibly separated women from filling those roles. Therefore, the way I employ the term "Indigenous feminisms" and its meanings come from my experiences as a wolastoqewisqehs[24] that is specific to my nation and communal knowledge and events. Which I argue is also reflected in Bear's activism and her deployment of feminism.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Indigenous women scholars have sought to define what is meant by Indigenous feminism. Two Indigenous theorists, Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack observe that a single, unified definition of Indigenous feminism is impossible to create as Indigenous women's experiences are varied and influenced by colonizing societies and patriarchy. In this way, Indigenous women do not share a single culture but a common colonial history.[25] The authors assign the systematic disempowerment of women in Canada and the United States to Western-centric patriarchal gender roles, the Indian Act, the General Allotment Act, sexualization, governmental policies and the legal system. All these instances have provided the grounds for women's activism through Indigenous women's organizations like the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Aboriginal Women's Action Network, the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, Women of All Red Nations, and the Indigenous Women's Network (a global platform). All these organization have contributed towards the fight for social and political justice.[26]

One of the critical observations Indigenous feminists make is that Indigenous women's cultural production has played a key and, as I argue in this paper a sometimes neglected role

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[24] Bear-Nicholas receives Wolastoqey language teachings from elder Dr. Peter Paul, who points out the root word for the female principle is also tied to words for "love," "tree," and "moose," which are all sources of life and 'regenerative power.' The interconnectedness between the feminine and all living things is realized through our languages.; Ibid.

[25] Shari Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack. "Indigenous feminism: Theorizing the Issues." in *Indigenous Women in Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture.* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 4.

[26] Ibid., 6.

in developing Indigenous feminisms.[27] The arts, more specifically poetry, provided a space for women to write about their harrowing experiences with Western constructions, of gender race, and class.[28] In the 1980s Indigenous Women writers increasingly sought answers to questions about gender. Writers of this period questioned their influence as Indigenous women in society and began to observe the ways systems of oppression, including colonialism and patriarchy, ruled them inferior. These writers included Shirley Bear, Paula Gunn Allen, Beth Brant, Joy Harjo, and Lee Miracle. There was a growing dialogue around women reclaiming their power, like the revered social status they held in pre-contact governance and family structures. Two Indigenous feminists Huhndorf and Suzack observe that art and Indigenous women's culture production confronts silencing, marginalization, and invisibility of Indigenous women as a result colonization.[29]

While there are diverse interpretations of Indigenous feminism. What is evident is that Indigenous women use their artistic production as a form of activism to resist Western impositions and to amplify their struggles for self-determinization and decolonization in order to make their communities stronger.[30] There is no denying there are tensions and contradictions in how Indigenous feminism is defined by Indigenous women artists.[31] For example, the early rejection of feminism in some Indigenous spaces was partly due to the assumption that feminism trumps Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and self-government issues.[32] Indigenous feminism has been characterized as occupying a contradictory position where Indigenous women are asked to separate their ancestry (or nationhood) from their gender.[33]

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[27] Ibid., 10.
[28] Lana Lopesi and Faith Wilson. "An Ode to Our Teenage Selves," *Pantograph Punch*, 2021, https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/ode-to-our-teenage-selves.
[29] Huhndorf and Suzack, "Theorizing the Issues," 11.
[30]Nagam, 78.
[31] Ibid., 73.
[32] Ibid., 74.
[33] Pamela McCallum, "Painting the Archive: The Art of Jane Ash Poitras". in *Indigenous Women in Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture.* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 254.

Western ideologies of feminism, also known as "white-feminism," do not register with Indigenous women because Western feminism does not include dialogue and action around nation-specific needs, racialized inequalities, Indigenous children, and Indigenous sovereignty, including the revered positions women held in their communities prior to contact. Writers like Lee Miracle, Beth Brant, Betty Bell, and Kate Shanley argue for an Indigenous feminism that encompasses sovereignty, children, Earth, class, sexuality, and all the varied and exciting aspects that make community possible. Brant asserts:

> And I think it's time we realize that feminism is not just about white women, it is about all of us. We are changing the face of feminism. It is no longer a middle-class, white movement for acknowledgement and better pay – it is about uranium in our drinking water, fetal alcohol syndrome, family violence, a life for the generations to come. We are writing about this in passionate and poetic language.[34]

Therefore, ideas foregrounded in the White-Women's feminist movement were rejected by Indigenous women because 'feminism' held a reputation of being connected to whiteness and the Canadian nation-state.[35] Moreover, White women benefit from colonization which has and remains to diminish Indigenous women's power, status, and material circumstances.[36] Indigenous feminists like Shirley Bear, Beth Brant, and Lee Miracle re-defines of the term "feminism" to reflect a culturally specific expression of the term that is rooted in decolonizing Indigenous knowledge and lifestyles.[37]

As a self-proclaimed feminist, Bear's writing re-introduces a specific expression of Wabanaki feminism. She achieves this throughout her lengthy career by creating capacity for community and uplifting other Indigenous women in her writing, artwork, and curation. Indigenous feminism offers a space inclusive of marginalized voices within our communities, though the term "feminism" is still widely contested in Indigenous society today. An

[34] Beth Brant cited in Nagam, 77.
[35] Huhndorf and Suzack, 2-3.
[36] Ibid., 3.
[37] Nagam, 76.

Indigenous feminist framework requires space for artists to thrive and uplift other women, femmes, and gender-variant voices.

To fully appreciate Bear's exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* it must be situated in the discourses of Indigenous feminism, and activism. I maintain that Bear's exhibition would not have come to fruition without her outspoken feminist views and activism demonstrated by her participation in the Tobique Women's Group, and the at Oka during the Kanehsatà:ke Siege.

Making Way for Indigenous Activism

> [We] must distinguish between modernity as an historical stage; modernization as a social process that attempts to construct modernity; and modernism, those cultural projects that take place at several points along the development of capitalism.[38]
> - Nestor Canclini.

> Aboriginal women have their own strategy for social change. Their source of wisdom and knowledge can be found in their own experiences and in their grandmother's teachings, which have been passed on for generations through oral tradition. Decolonization and co-existence can be achieved through the recovery of these sources.[39] - Grace Ouellette

While Bear's exhibition marks a specific moment in time, it reflects the response to the growing discontent and rejection of settler colonialism that began on a national level in the 1950's. Amendments to the 1951 Indian Act made it possible for Indigenous people to gather and organize for the first time since its inception. While Indigenous arts had been deployed in constructing a national identity for Canada, Indigenous artists were beginning to use the arts to speak about the realities of Indigenous lives under colonial subjugation. What had begun in 1950's came to a head in the 1990's. Fed by the civil rights movements in the

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[38] Néstor Canclini quoted in Marcia Crosby, "Making Indian Art 'Modern," *Ruins in Progress: Vancouver Art in the Sixties.* www.vancouverartinthesixties.com/essays/making-indian-art-modern

[39]Grace Ouellette, "Contemporary Feminist Theory," in *The Fourth World: An Indigenous Perspective on Feminism in Aboriginal Women's Activism.* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. 2002), 38. https://concordiauniversity.on.worldcat.org/oclc/48494566

United States and the establishment of “Native Studies” departments in Canadian universities, the fight for Indian control over Indian education increased the visibility and general awareness of Indigenous peoples’ experiences in Canada.

The *Indians of Canada Pavilion* at Expo 67 provided a chance for Indigenous people to speaking honestly about their relationship with Canada on the national and world stage. Historian Jane Griffith observes the pavilion offered a post-textbook education or counter-narrative highlighting Indigenous issues while pushing against colonial narratives of conquering.[40] While this event marks one of the first times Indigenous people had control over the narrative it was decisively one sided[41].

Kanien’kehá꞉ka curator Ryan Rice indicates that the "ground-breaking" strategic efforts by the Indians of Canada pavilion's all-male Indian Advisory Council were essential to address colonial education systems and legitimize Indigenous creative agency and economies on a world stage.[42] Nevertheless, he does not address the erasure of Indigenous women's communal and artistic contributions to our histories that were notably absence from Expo 67. The amnesia of women artists is perhaps because "the Indian" as a political identity is always a man,[43] which echoed the pavilion's central theme, "*A Man in His World."* Métis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette asks, 'Where Were Aboriginal Women Artists at Expo ‘67?'[44] Critiquing Tom Hill's reflections on his participation in the pavilion, which he described as "a great sensation" that brought a "sense of power" to the artists for the first time in

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[40] Jane Griffith, "One Little, Two Little, Three Canadians: The Indians of Canada Pavilion and Public Pedagogy, Expo 1967," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes,* 49, no. 2, (2015): 176.
[41] Artists invited to participate in the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo were all Indigenous men: George Clutesi, Norval Morriseau, Francis Kagige, Alex Janvier, Noel Wuttunee, Gerald Tailfeathers, Ross Woods, and Tom Hill. See: Ibid.
[42] Ryan Rice, “Presence and Absence Redux: Indian Art in the 1990s,” *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2017): 43.
[43] Sherry Farrell Racette, “‘I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance’: Writing Aboriginal Women into Canadian Art History, 1880–1970,” in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970*, (Montréal.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 312. https://concordiauniversity.on.worldcat.org/search/detail/812837107?queryString=rethinking%20professionalism&databaseList=.
[44] Farrell Racette, 311.

contemporary art.[45] Farrell Racette points out women remained trapped in the artistic realm of "souvenir craftspeople", and young Indigenous women were relegated to hostesses inside the pavilion. [46] Farrell Racette argues that the exclusion of can be partially attributed to the widespread sexism and racism Indigenous women artists experience."[47]

While the Indian Pavilion at Expo attempted to educate mainstream society about the realities of Indigenous experiences in Canada. There were other efforts to right past wrongs at this time. Most importantly, during the 1960s was the recentering of our right to educate our children and the founding of organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the United States and the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB)[48] in Canada, both were formed to assert Indigenous self-determination and address contemporary issues affecting Indigenous nations.[49] However, both organizations held reputations for perpetuating toxic masculinity and violence against Indigenous women.[50] To counter discrimination within their communities, women's created "radical" grassroots women's organizations like the Tobique Women's Group.[51] The need for Indigenous women's representation within political settings led to the formation of the Native Women's Association of Canada in 1974.[52] Organizing was not confined to politics but in the art world, artist collectives like the Professional Native Indian Artists Association (Indian Group of 7) and Society of Canadian Artists of Native

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 312. See also: Indian Residential School History & Dialogue Centre & Collections, "Hostesses from across Canada for the Indian Pavilion at EXPO '67," *Pacific Mountain Regional Council Archives,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia, https://collections.irshdc.ubc.ca/index.php/Detail/objects/3748.
[47] Ibid., 311.
[48] AIM was established in 1968 in Minnesota & so was NIB in the same year; through NIB had predecessor groups going back to the forties when political organizing was outlawed. Once the NIB formed, the infamous White Paper came out shortly after in 1969. See: "Assembly of First Nations – Our Story," https://caid.ca/AFNHis2010.pdf.
[49] Shona Taner, "The Evolution of Native Studies in Canada: Descending from the ivory tower," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 19, no. 2 (1999): 293.
[50]Six Nations Public Library. "Indian Rights for Indian Women" *Digital Collections.* https://vitacollections.ca/sixnationsarchive/3210205/data?n=1; Andrea Smith, "Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change." in *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 118.
[51] Sarah A. Nickel, "'I Am Not a Women's Libber Although Sometimes I Sound Like One' Indigenous Feminism and Politicized Motherhood," *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 4, (2017), 300.
[52]"Indigenous Women's Rights", *Rise Up! A digital archive of feminist activism* https://riseupfeministarchive.ca/activism/issues-actions/indigenous-womens-rights/

Ancestry (SCANA) illuminated the importance of self-determined representation within Indigenous art during this period.[53] While women were involved in organizing at all levels, it was at the community level that the Indian women's movement began.[54]

The Indian Women's Movement

The 1980s were a decisive decade for First Nations women's activism. The colonial imposition of "Indian status" as defined by the Indian Act enacted a political identity tied to the settler-colonial nation-state. Indian women were disenfranchised as Indians for "marrying out" (marrying non-status Indian partners). An attempt to address the sexism of the Indian Act occurred in 1985 with the passage of Bill C-31. The relationship between Indigenous women's activism that brought about the amendments to the Indian Act sowed the seeds for Shirley Bear's 1989 exhibition *Changers.*

In her overview of Indigenous women's activism, Grace Ouellette writes that the Indian Women's Movement began when Indigenous women realized the Indian Act discriminates against them based on race, gender and marital status.[55] Ouellette argues that the oppression of Indigenous women prompted a desire to reestablish traditional forms of government over systems of governance introduced by the Indian Act such as band councils."[56]

According to Secwepemc scholar, Sarah Nickel, a core motivation for Indigenous women's political organizing was what she terms as "motherwork."[57] This is characterized by the mobilizing of women on behalf of their children and families. Nickel claims that this motivation is based on ensuring the health and success of women's children, families, and

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[53] Emma Steen, "Why the 90s Were so Sexy: locating sexuality, pleasure and desire in work produced by Indigenous women identified artists during the 1990s and early 2000s in Canada," (Master's Thesis, OCAD University, 2020), 4.
[54] The term "Indian" is no longer acceptable in everyday speech. I am using it here to reflect the time in which it was used.
[55] Ouellette, 29.
[56] Ibid., 51.
[57] A term employed by Secwepemc scholar Sarah Nickel to describe Indigenous motherhood as political motivation to improve the living conditions for their families on reserve. See: Nickel, "'I Am Not a Women's Libber Although Sometimes I Sound Like One,'" 306.

communities. She points out that the Indian Act has robbed Indigenous mothers of moral, material, and political resources to care for their children. As a consequence, Indigenous children were at a disadvantage in society, and therefore women felt a galvanizing responsibility to their children and to advocate for them — as well as other children — because Indigenous mothers lacked security and autonomy in their communities and households[58]. This in effect blended politicized motherhood and feminist politics for the advancement of Indigenous sovereignty.[59]

Politicized motherhood was undoubtedly a driving force behind the Tobique Women's Group (TWG) members. Tobique women have a reputation for being assertive, strong, "radicals"[60] as demonstrated by their band office takeover that lasted four months in 1977.[61] This was a tactic the TWG the used advocate for improve living conditions for women and children living on reserve.[62] Women were pushing back against the clause in the Indian Act that stated if an "Indian" woman married a non-Indian, she lost her Indian status — which prohibited her from the right to live on-reserve which, in effect, denied her children to participate in their community. Ultimately, denying an Indian woman and her children access to housing, education, healthcare, and other cultural activities.

Bear, who was an active member in TWG, moved home to Tobique First Nation and became involved with the group officially in 1980. Métis author Janet Silman's book *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out* (1987) provides first-hand accounts of Tobique Women's Group's engagement with political activism in the 1970s - 1980s. Recounting the forms of injustice encountered by the women and why they formed, group member Eva

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[58] To complete their "motherwork", Nickel argues that Indigenous women used their roles as mothers to increase and reclaim their status and the status of their children. Their inferior social positions on reserve did not stop them from being good providers and utilizing their resources to earn money for education and health services for Indigenous children. See: Nickel, 327.
[59] Nickel, 321.
[60] Bet-te Paul quoted in Janet Silman, "Enough Is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out," (Toronto: Women's Press, 1987), 126.
[61] Ibid., 12.
[62] Lee-Ann Martin, "The Resilient Body," 2018, https://resilienceproject.ca/en/essay.

(Gookum) Saulis shares in an interview “Oh, we always knew what was happening to women was wrong. We just got to the point where we weren’t going to take it anymore.”[63]
Some women in Tobique were abused by their husbands and forced to raise children independently. TWG organizer Caroline Ennis[64], she recalls several accounts of women and children getting evicted from their homes by their husbands.

Several of the Tobique Women's members left Tobique at one point in their lives and eventually returned - only to find they lost their Indian Status and were labeled as "non-status” and, therefore, “outsiders” for marrying non-Indigenous men.[65] Caroline Ennis explains that before she returned to Canada, she was aware that women were losing status, "In the back of my mind I always said to myself, that's really terrible. I was aware of it, but I didn't try to do anything. Actually, it wasn't a non-status issue at all. It was status women that were having problems with housing."[66] Ennis says that Indian status (or lack thereof) did not denote mistreatment of women in the community. Yet non-status women were treated as outsiders within their communities simply for moving away or marrying out. In an interview with Terry Graff, Shirley Bear recounts her first interaction with her father upon moving home to Tobique. He told her she could no longer live in the community because she was a White woman, lost her Indian status because she married a non-Indian.[67] Shirley like many of her contemporaries stripped of their rights for marrying non-Indian men became heavily involved in the protests. Other women in the community such as Cheryl Bear and Juanita

[63] Silman, 93.
[64] The mistreatment of women in the community began much earlier and was systematic; Caroline Ennis says she noticed a generational pattern of abuse and mistreatment as a young girl in Tobique. See: NB Media Co-op, “Tertulia – Caroline Ennis on the 1979 Tobique Women’s March,” April 2021, 58:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvQaBMLRjwU
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 94.
[67] Shirley Bear quoted in Terry Graff, “Nekt Wikuhpon Ehpit: Once There Lived a Woman . . . The Painting, Poetry and Politics of Shirley Bear,” (Fredericton: Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2009), 20.

Perley took independent action by occupying houses not allotted to them.[68] At the same time, it was undoubtedly a gendered issue, status or not.

What was occurring in Tobique was not an isolated incident. In 1979, the group walked to Ottawa from Kahnawá:ke, Quebec, in coalition with a women's group of Kanien'kehá꞉ka women to advocate for improved living conditions and housing on reserve, which included the inequities status and enfranchised women faced living on reserve. It took nearly a week for the women to walk from Oka to Ottawa.[69] Supported by the United Church, Mary Two-Axe Early, the Quebec Native Women's Organizations, and other women's groups the women's groups Wolastoqiyik and Kanien'kehá꞉ka were able to raise the funds needed to conduct the walk.[70] Their cause gained international attention once the media realized Sandra Lovelace Nicholas was among the women in the march. Sandra Lovelace Nicholas had filed a Human Rights lawsuit that brought attention to the discriminatory clauses in the Indian Act that resulted in her losing her Indian Status for marrying a non-status man. Consequently, it was assumed by the media that the entire women's collective was protesting Section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act — the gendered clause that enfranchised Indian women when they married non-Indian.[71]

While Canada tried to stress the necessity of maintaining the status quo of section 12(1)(b) under the Act.[72] The Human Rights Committee found that the Indian Act was in breach of Article 27 of the Covenant, [73] and the Indian Act prevented Lovelace from enjoying her culture and using her language within her community. The success of Lovelace's court

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[68] Silman, 93.
[69] NB Media Co-op, "Tertulia – Caroline Ennis on the 1979 Tobique Women's March," 58:48.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Glenna Perley quoted in Silman, 133.
[72] Yvonne Boyer, "First Nations Women's Contributions to Culture through Canadian Law," *Restoring the Balance: First Nations Women, Community, and Culture,* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 70.
[73] "In those States (any nation which has ratified, accepted, or acceded to the Convention) in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language."; See: General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI), " International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," 1966, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights.

case gained national attention, especially because Jeanette Lavell and Yvonne Bedard who had their cases tried in 1973 in front of Canada's supreme court ruled against them.[74]

Sandra Lovelace's success forced Canada's hand and, in response, Bill C-31 was passed. The amendment to the Indian Act claimed to end sex discrimination. Indigenous women would retain their status whether they marry out or not and regain their band membership. While Bill C-31[75] was thought to end gender discrimination it would soon be revealed that the gender discrimination remained, when and membership codes could now be defined by the reserve's Chief and council.[76]

Lenape feminist scholar, Joanne Barker notes that the Bill C-31 amendments[77] were not passed quickly, in part, due to male-dominated band councils and Indian agents who opposed Indigenous women and their allies. As Mohawk and Oneida women's rights activist Mary Two-Axe Early observes:

> I was happy that women who had lost their status could at last go home. I was wrong, once again we were betrayed by the promise of politicians. The government gave us back our Indian Status with one hand, and with the other hand they gave the legal power to the Band Councils to choose those who could return. They did not choose women who had opposed them.[78]

Barker argues they were accused of being complicit with a long history of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.[79] Similarly, Ouellette observes that some Indigenous women were being threatened with discrimination once more at the hands of Indigenous men for challenging Section 12(1)(b)[80].

In her reflections on the walk to Ottawa, Ennis recalls that women did not have support from

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[74] Silman, 14.
[75] The amendment came with a second-generation cut-off rule, which was later challenged. Women with reinstated Indian status became 6(2) status Indians that could not pass on status to their grandchildren. Thus, Bill C-31 did not fulfill its obligations to Indigenous women. See: Boyer, 72.
[76] Boyer, 72.
[77] Ouellette, 45.
[78] Mistreatment heightened when the Tobique Women's Group took their housing concerns, then sex discrimination in the Indian Act, to Ottawa and eventually the United Nations; Ibid.
[79] Joanne Barker, "Gender, sovereignty, and the discourse of rights in native women's activism." *Meridians* 7, no. 1 (2006): 127.
[80] Ouellette, 44.

the National Indian Brotherhood, an organization that supposedly represented Indigenous peoples. The National Indian Brotherhood actually joined forces with the Department of Indian Affairs lobbied against Indigenous women.[81]

Having Indian Status at this time meant certain cultural privileges, and it was (and sometimes still is) ingrained into the identities of "First Nations" peoples in Canada. I will refer to this phenomenon as "legislative identity," meaning how the Indian Act has impacted the identities of Indigenous Peoples in Canada[82]. The Act's provisions and toxic masculinity enable Indian men to behave disrespectfully because the Indian Act's legislation becomes internalized and systematic; a closer inspection at our communities today reveals the same discriminatory processes at work. Huhndorf and Suzack quote Xwemalhkwu educator and activist Fay Blaney, who observes, "patriarchy is so ingrained in our communities that it is now seen as a 'traditional trait,'". She further argues that a key goal of Indigenous feminism must be "to make visible the 'internal oppression' within our communities."[83]

Indigenous women activists fighting for social justice in the eighties was an expression of the desire for the reinstatement of their revered positions and relationalities prior to contact with Europeans. The Tobique Women's Group members did not set out to change the Indian Act, they were tired of being subordinate to men. Their resistance to patriarchal attitudes within the community exemplifies a reclamation of power and self-determination over their traditional political roles as women in Wabanaki territory.

What Indigenous women were seeking is a restoration of power — which is why they were forced to band together and fight back against domestic abuse in their homes and communities—for rights to their property and the health and wellbeing of their children. The major impact of Bill C-31 was the empowerment of Indigenous women to engage in

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[81] NB Media Co-op, Tertulia, 2021.
[82] Ouellette states, "The colonization of Canada's Aboriginal people is grounded in the Indian Act: It is the colonial instrument for regulating and controlling the lives of Canada's Aboriginal people in every aspect." See: Ouellette, 37.
[83] Fay Blaney quoted in Shari Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack, "Theorizing the Issues," 3.

grassroots political action (outside of Chief and Council systems). Barker explains that Indian women's assertion of their rights in their communities (ex: housing and employment) were reclamations of power as women's separate but equal place in society.[84]

The Kanehsatà:ke Resistance: The Clan Mothers

> When the warriors marched out of the treatment centre in Kanesatake, I cried.[85]
> - Shirley Bear

> [The] 1991 occupation of the Treatment Centre in Kanesatake, in a province now known as Quebec, gave Aboriginal artists an endless amount of inspiration, it was spearheaded by a woman artist who also became the primary spokesperson for the occupation. Many activists were also visual artists, writers, and filmmakers.[86]
> - Shirley Bear

Artists like Shirley Bear belonged to "Warrior Societies" that were established by grassroots activists to combat settler colonialism and resource extraction upon Mother Earth. Indigenous artists engage in activism for the simple fact that their identities are so widely politicized by the settler-colonial nation state. Warriors from across Turtle Island showed their solidarity during the 1990 Kanehsatà:ke Siege (also known as the "Kanehsatà:ke Resistance" and infamously the "Oka Crisis").

The 1990 Kanehsatà:ke Resistance was a 78-day stand-off between the Kanien'kehá꞉ka Warrior Society, the Sûreté du Québec, and the Canadian Army[87]. On March 1, 1990, the Kanehsatà:ke warriors erected a barricade in defense of their land, the Pines - a sacred and protected wooded area. After a four-month standoff the Sûreté du Québec (SQ) attacked the barricade put up by Mohawk warriors. several activists involved in the standoff

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[84] Barker, 148.
[85] Shirley Bear, "Virgin Bones: Belayak Kcikug'nas'ikn'ug," (Toronto: McGilligan Books, 2006), 37.
[86] Shirley Bear, "Culturing Politics and Politicizing Culture" in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, edited by Joyce Green, Black Point (NS): Fernwood Publishing, 2007), 208.
[87] The confrontation at Kanehsatà:ke was nightly news in Canada, creating a wave of activism and displays of solidarity among other Indigenous nations. Kanien'keha: ka warriors were painted as violent and militant in mainstream media - photographic images of Mohawk warriors depicted as terrorists became a nationwide narrative. See: aferrone, "Media Analysis of the Oka Crisis (Kanesatake), Quebec, 1990" *criminalizing dissent*, 2012. https://criminalizingdissent.wordpress.com/2012/12/27/media-analysis-of-the-oka-crisis-kanesatake-quebec-1990-2/

were women and artists among them were Kanien'kehá꞉ka activist Kahn-Tineta Horn and her Clan Mother, Kanietahawi. In an interview given in 1991, the two women provided some insights into the disregard of women's leadership during events at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawá:ke.[88] Both women are from Kahnawá:ke, Quebec, and align themselves with teachings of the longhouse and clan mother traditions in Mohawk worldview and philosophy.[89] They explain, women are title holders to the land in Warrior Society, and men are responsible for protecting women who are watching the land.[90] Horn explains that Warrior Society is "all men" who are born warriors, "You are born a warrior and when it is necessary to defend your land, and your people, and your rights, you have to do it. It is your duty." She further explains, "What the warriors should do is usually discussed among the Clans, and then it's discussed in Council [of all the Clans], and they pass the responsibility over to the War Chief, who then has his men."[91]

While the activities of the men were highlighted in media reports, it was evident from inside the operation that Mohawk clan mothers were the spokespeople who led the land defense. As Horn outlines in the interview, when John Ciaccia (Quebec's Native Affairs Minister) arrived at Kanehsatà:ke after the fatal shooting of a Sûreté du Quebec tactical forces member, he was met by Mohawk men but, then taken to meet with the women and clan mothers. He asked the women, "where are your leaders?" Horn recalls: "All these women were sitting around, and they said, 'you're talking to the leaders, the women.' He was surprised. He was uncomfortable. I believe he didn't take them seriously."[92] While the politician's uncomfortable receptiveness to Mohawk women's assertion of traditional governance is very telling, Horn's recollection of the encounter belies the assertation that

[88] Horn, "Beyond Oka: dimensions of Mohawk sovereignty," 32.
[89] Ibid., 31.
[90] Vinita Srivastava, "Indigenous Land Defenders," *Don't Call Me Resilient*, Episode 6, 2021.
[91] Horn, 38.
[92] Ibid.

Indian Act severed women and clan mothers in matrilineal societies from their leadership and political agency of their nation.

The artist who Bear mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this section, was Ellen Gabriel. The people of the Longhouse chose her to uphold their traditional legal systems. In a recent podcast titled “Land Defenders and Water Protectors” (2021), Gabriel claims most people (mainstream Canadian society, media, politicians) did not recognize the role that Mohawk women played on the front lines. "What people saw were men with guns, they didn't look at the women and the role of the women […] the strong role that the women played without the weapons."[93]

I mention the events that unfolded at Kanehsatà:ke because it would have a lasting impact on Indigenous and settler-state relations. The reassertion of Indigenous women in leadership roles at Kanehsatà:ke served as a reminder to all nations with matriarchal values that women belong in decision-making roles — where they are historically excluded prior to colonization.[94] The Kanehsatà:ke Siege at the same time, as Bear says, gave Indigenous artists "endless amount of inspiration"[95]

It is these forms of activism that Bear’s celebration of women, womanhood, and the feminine spirit is presented the exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance.* This exhibition empowered Indigenous women across Canada to reevaluate their integral roles in our histories. I believe that the themes were also inspired by her feminist viewpoint and participation in the Tobique Women’s Group. Bear’s artistic activism through the exhibition reframes a historical narrative(s) dominated by settler interpretation.[96]

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[93] Auntie Up! “Land Defenders and Water Protectors.” *Makwa Creative*, Episode 2, 2021.
[94] The integral role of women warriors is evident in my personal experience of attending rallies, teach-ins, and political demonstrations organized by Indigenous women in my community (often my grandmother).
[95] Bear, “Culturing Politics and Politicizing Culture,” 208.
[96] Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity: Reclaiming the terrain of decolonial struggle through Indigenous art," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 2.

Indigenous Art Exhibitions in the 80s and 90s.

> Honour the artist. The artist is the voice of the country. For a long time, it seemed to us there was war. Everything was frightening. Many of our people were sleeping; the land, the water, the air and animals were troubled. The artist kept on working. The prophecies are now coming through. Our young are the seventh generation making a difference as they prepare the ground for the next seven generations to come. The artist is inspired and stronger than ever. The children have a place in the world again.[97] - Alanis Obomsawin.

Curator Shirley Madill describes the period between the late 1980s and 1990s as a politically charged climate that galvanized Indigenous activism and solidarity across Turtle Island.[98] She marks Elijah Harper's "no" vote to the 1987 Meech Lake Accord as a significant example of Indigenous self-determination and self-government. Saulteaux artist and curator Robert Houle states that related tensions and controversies over land, resources, and human rights between Indigenous and settler-state relations "shook up the museum world."[99] For example, *The Spirit Sings* exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary was met with opposition by the Lubicon Lake First Nation and their supporters in connection to a land dispute with Shell Oil (a significant funder of the exhibit). Simultaneously, Indigenous peoples were criticizing museums for their exclusion of contemporary Indigenous art.[100]

Curator Richard Hill sees the 80s and 90s as defined by the first large wave of art-school-trained Indigenous artists who exercised their artistic self-determination to pave the way for Indigenous representation in galleries and museums.[101] He acknowledges a celebratory aspect to the current success of Indigenous art and discourse in Canada and questions whether the "Indigenous Renaissance" of the 80s and 90s is cast over by narratives

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[97] France Trépanier and Chris Creighton-Kelley,"Understanding Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today." *Canada Council for the Arts.* (Ottawa: Ontario Research and Evaluation Section, 2011), 81.
[98] Shirley Madill, "Significance and Critical Issues." *Robert Houle: Life and Work.* Art Canada Institute - Institut de l'Art Canadien. Accessed 2022. http://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/robert-houle/significance-and-critical-issues/.
[99] Madill, "Significance and Critical Issues," 2022.
[100] This would lead to an examination of the relationship between Indigenous people and Canadian Cultural institutions. See: Ibid.
[101] Richard Hill, "Was Indigenous Art Better in the 1980s and Early '90s?," *Canadian Art*, 2016, https://canadianart.ca/essays/was-indigenous-art-better-in-the-1980s-and-early-90s/.

of institutional success and identity politics.[102] Hill says that the arts played a huge role in the social context of Indigenous cultural revival but also sends the credit to Indian Friendship Centres and the American Indian Movement Survival Schools of the 70s in the United States.[103] However, Hill fails to address Indigenous women's cultural production, organizing, theorizing, and teaching within each of these movements, spaces, and community events.

In 2016, Hill, writing for Canadian Art magazine, wrote that from the years 1982 to 1995 there were nine Indigenous group exhibitions that defined Indigenous contemporary art in North America.[104] In his article, "9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art" (2016), he notes that while solo exhibitions are essential, it is the group exhibitions that define artistic movements.[105] It is important to note that Bear's curated group exhibition *Changers* is remarkably absent from Hill's lineup; despite the important critical attention it received from its two-year national tour.[106] While women artists are included in Hill's list of nine group exhibitions[107], there is still a gendered imbalance in the featured artists. This observation of the absence of women artists is what makes Bear's exhibition worthy of noting. Using Hill's article, one determines the ratio of men and women artists in each exhibition, as he names each show, the location, and all featured artists. [108]

Beginning with *New Work by a New Generation* exhibited at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1982. Bob Boyer, Robert Houle, and Carol Phillips curated the show. It featured

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Hill does not provide context on why he chose the decade between 1980 and the early 1990s, aside from a note to the reader that reads: "I am using this monthly column to think out loud in public about questions and controversies arising from my current research for a book about contemporary Indigenous art from 1980 to 1995". See: Ibid.
[105] Hill, "9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art," 2016, https://canadianart.ca/essays/9-group-exhibitions-that-defined-contemporary-indigenous-art/.
[106] Owens Art Gallery, File 9921.
[107] Hill notes that his research is limited to exhibitions using "strategies and approaches of international contemporary art" but does not specify what these strategies and approaches are. He places exhibitions like "Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers," at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1984 and "The Arts of the North American Indian" at the Philbrook Art Center (now the Philbrook Museum of Art) outside of that framework. See: Hill, "9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art," 2016.
[108] To illustrate my point, I keep my analysis to large group exhibitions (8 + artists) within Canadian art galleries

fifteen artists, two of whom were women[109]. Hill considers Robert Houle's exhibition essay a vital tool in the transcultural integration of our contemporary art forms in the gallery. The exhibition was an attempt to put art-school trained artists into a contemporary art context — as if they did not belong in that realm already."[110]

In the same year that Changers opened in Toronto, *Beyond History* opened at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1989. It was curated by Tom Hill and Karen Duffek. The exhibition theme focused heavily on revising the methods of history that place or remove value on Indigenous art. Two of the eleven exhibited artists were women. While these are cited as two important exhibitions by Hill in the 1980's things did not change for Indigenous women artists.

In the early nineties, galleries in the US and Canada were celebrating the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of North America. Although Indigenous perceptions of themselves were still reflected in the Canadian nation-state and, similarly today, significant art and cultural institutions are still dominated by colonial systems and western categorizations of art and culture.[111] The lack of understanding of our work forced some Indigenous artists and curators to challenge entrenched colonial ethics and values commonly used to evaluate our practices.[112] This reconfiguration was significant for developing agency among Indigenous artists, curators and scholars.[113]

The exhibition *Indigena* at the Canadian Museum of History (CHM) was installed in direct response to the 1992 Columbus Quincentennial, curated by Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster. Of the nineteen artists exhibited, four were women. *Indigena* was the first large-budget exhibition of Indigenous art at a nationally recognized institution in Canada. However, more importantly, it was the first exhibition in a contemporary art gallery curated

[109] Potentially three as I cannot find information on listed artist Dana A. Williams
[110] Hill, "9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art," 2016
[111] Rice, 3.
[112] Ibid., 47.
[113] Ibid., 43.

entirely by Indigenous curators, with catalogue essays contributed by all-Indigenous writers. The mainstream response to this exhibition, in particular, was profound.

In addition to the disruption of colonial conquest celebrations, *Land, Spirit, Power* opened across the river from *Indigena* in 1992, with overlapping runs. Hill considers these two shows "pendant exhibitions" that were "ambitious surveys" of contemporary Indigenous art.[114] *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibited eighteen artists, six of them were women — making this exhibition of the three major exhibitions on Hill's list the most inclusive of Indigenous women artists. In my opinion, these results reveal the lack of representation of women painfully evident. This has not gone unnoticed by Indigenous feminist scholars and curators such as LeeAnn Martin, Margret Archuletta, Jolene Rickard, and Sherry Farrell Racette. They, along with others, have dedicated much of their careers to tipping the prevalent gendered scale of this period by reinserting women's art and knowledge into art historical discourses.

Farrell Racette inspired by bell hook's text *aesthetic inheritances: history worked by hand* (1990) see this text as a "call to arms" to address the institutional invisibility of women makers. In response to hook's call to arms , ", Farrell Racette argues in her article, I Want to Call Their Names in Resistance: Writing Aboriginal Women into Canadian Art History, 1880–1970" (2012), that the lack of women's representation in the mainstream art world is attributed to systematic oppression and sexism.[115] Farrell Racette, takes up the task of writing a concise and more inclusive art history that considers the work of Indigenous women artists, who are often unnamed and unacknowledged.[116]

Likewise, Margret Archuletta was directly inspired by Michele Wallace's essay, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture"

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[114] Hill, "9 Group Exhibitions That Defined Contemporary Indigenous Art," 2016.
[115] Farrell Racette, "'I Want To Call Their Names in Resistance'", 316.
[116] Farrell Racette names the Indian Act as a primary factor of the for the absence of Indigenous women presence in the art canon. Since the late 1950s-1960s, so many traditional aspects of life, including practicing and producing culture, were banned through the act. See: Farrell Racette, 314.

(2004) — a direct and racialized response to Linda Nochlin's question, "Why Are There No Great Native Women Artists?" (2009). Archuleta states that women of colour are at a greater disadvantage in achieving artistic excellence, therefore their experiences are incomparable to White women. Archuleta observes that while Nochlin and Wallace criticize the "institutionalized academy"[117] for failing to recognize women — first White, then black women artists, Archuleta determines the art world also fails to recognize Indigenous women as visual producers. She notes — like Nochlin's assertion — that great women artists go unacknowledged due to existing systematic structures. These systems that continuously elect White males as decision-makers in power are too narrow and Eurocentric. Archuleta writes:

> Nochlin's question *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* delineates the historic educational disadvantages of European women and its linkage to European male ownership of education and the academy and the proliferation of the myth of the white male position accepted as natural.[118]

Nochlin's essay presents a theory she calls "the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural" which determines the myth of White males as the sole contenders for greatness in arts professions.[119] Archuleta's position is that the White male as natural also applies to Indian male artists. Therefore, the "Indian-male-artist-as-natural" theory suggests that Indigenous male artists and curators continuously benefit from institutionalized systems of patriarchy, which means that like their Western European counterparts, Indian male artists, once allowed into the art world before Indigenous women, also became the champions, liaisons, and gatekeepers of stories.[120]

The Influential Art Period . . . for Whom?

Curator Ryan Rice (Kanien'kehá꞉ka) writes that the 90s are considered the influential period in Indigenous contemporary art by, as artists dominated the art scene more than ever

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[117] Margaret Archuleta, "Why Have There Been No Great Native Women Artists?," Unpublished Manuscript, 2009, 6.
[118] Ibid., 1.
[119] Linda Nochlin, "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ArtNews,* 2015, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/.
[120] Archuleta, 2.

before. [121] Contemporary Indigenous art exhibitions were popping up left and right to counter outdated colonialist narratives that depict native peoples as relics of an ancient past and to look beyond insertions of Indian modernity.

Rice's *Presence and Absence redux: Indian Art in the 90s* (2017) argues that the era between 1990 and 2000 was defined by collective efforts of self-determination and reclamation of Indigenous art practice, space, and future.[122] Indigenous artists' work was receiving critical attention, strengthening our identity and Canada's[123] Rice concludes that the 1990s built a powerful platform for Indigenous artists to stand on; he asserts that it was "clear we had arrived."[124] Indigenous artists, curators and scholars established a presence in the art world and made our own simultaneously.

Jas M. Morgan's counters this assertion in a *Canadian Art* article "Making Space in Indigenous Art for Bull Dykes and Gender Weirdos" (2017). Responding specifically Richard Hill's essay titled, "Was Indigenous art better in the 1980s and early '90s?" (2016). Morgan asks, "Better for whom?" and argues that Hill's view of the art climate in this period is insular and lacking sexual diversity and gender-variant identities[125]. In contrast to Hill, Morgan describes the 1980s and early 90s as a "proverbial dead period" for queer Indigenous voices,[126] In the same vein, Morgan acknowledge the efforts of Indigenous cis-gender women artists like Shelley Niro, Rebecca Belmore, Napachie Pootoogook and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith to provide the next generations of artists with "lineages of love" and to give a voice to those who have been silenced as a result of colonial gender oppression and dispossession.[1]

Indigenous arts professionals in the 90s continued to advocate for our place in art history - or rather, create a new canon of art history that is separate from the mainstream one.

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[121] Rice, 43.
[122] Ibid., 44.
[123]This period set a new tone for a new decade following events at Oka and Kanehsatà:ke that frames Indigenous art within threads of pride, accomplishment, and celebration. See: Rice, 43-45.
[124] Ibid., 53.
[125] Lindsay Nixon, "Making Space in Indigenous Art for Bull Dykes and Gender Weirdos" *Canadian Art*, 2017, https://canadianart.ca/essays/making-space-in-indigenous-art-for-bull-dykes-and-gender-weirdos/.
[126] Ibid.

But as Morgan points out, if we have created a canon that models a western system, this must mean that there are figurative hierarchies and processes of exclusion that deserve revision and demolition. One of the ways to make our art histories more inclusive is by understanding the importance of exhibitions like *Changers.*

Introducing *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance*

Changers was a revolutionary exhibition and the first of its kind in the mainstream Canadian art scene. The show addressed various issues, including colonial impositions onto our histories and identities, constricting categories of Western art, the assertion of women's rightful positions as artists but also shed light on communal and familial relationships, spiritual renewal, and materiality.

The essay Bear wrote for the catalogue highlights the connection between Indigenous contemporary art and "our ancient customs." She notes the juxtaposition of artists using contemporary mediums to depict a relationship to past knowledge systems, which she describes as an ancient bond. While the terminology may be out-of-date, there was at this time a lingering imposition to note the modern/traditional binary within Indigenous art. Bear rejects that notion when she profoundly states, "To approach these artists [in the *Changers* exhibition] in the same manner as we approach EuroCanAmerican art is to deny our own growth and understanding."[127]

A consensus in Indigenous art historical discourse is that art is not a foreign concept to any Indigenous nation; in most cases, it serves as a means of expression and the messages we carry into the future. What bear observes is that even with the introduction to new media, we acknowledge the artistic legacies of our nations as part of our artistic practices. The Western obsession with categorization dictates that our art falls under modern/contemporary

[127] Bear, "Changers," 1; Bear uses the term EuroCanAmerican to describe Western interpretations of art.

or traditional categories continues to be problematic. Scholars Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes suggest that it is time to deconstruct the "temporal continuum" that always places the Indigenous artist as developing towards colonial modernity.[128] Bear critiques the comparisons of Indigenous art to EuroCanAmerican[129] art and suggests that it is an irrelevant and Eurocentric approach that denies Indigenous artists modern aesthetics.[130] She writes, "The EuroCanAmerican interpretations of our art forms have never been significant enough to represent the true value of the original art of the Americas. Anthropologists and art historians have trivialized our artworks as simply functional objects."[131] Bear also argues that archives and historical records have not given women their earned recognition as spiritual leaders in their communities. Expressing her exhaustion over the Western interpretation of Indigenous art, she states that the retelling of Indigenous people's stories by Non-Indian writers lacks truth and depth because they are not fluent in Indigenous languages, stories, or customs that they are recounting.[132]

This phenomenon described by Bear is what researcher Karin E Peterson calls "the modern eye," "a way of seeing that privileges modernist aesthetic standards."[133] Peterson explains this phenomenon in "Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and Cultural Transformation of the Patchwork Quilt,"(2003) the marginalized culture's art becomes "acceptable" in "high cultures" by invoking the modern eye as a way of enhancing the cultural value, in this case, of Indigenous art.[134] Peterson proposes that the equitable way of seeing and evaluating cultural objects and works of art is to understand and appreciate them within their aesthetics and principles.[135]

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[128] Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity," 9. (More on this in Section Four)
[129] Bear uses this term in her Changers curatorial statement.
[130] Karin Elizabeth Peterson. "Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of the Patchwork Quilt." *Sociological Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (2003): 462.
[131] Bear, "Changers," 1.
[132] Ibid., 2.
[133] Peterson, "Discourse and Display," 461.
[134] Ibid., 461.
[135] Ibid., 462.

The exhibition marked an integration of Indigenous women's art into the mainstream art scene as more than functional objects. The artists who exhibited in *Changers* include Rebecca Baird, Rebecca Belmore, Ruth Cuthand, Freda Diesing, Faye HeavyShield, Glenna Matoush, Shelley Niro, Alanis Obomsawin, Jane Ash Poitras, and Joane Cardinal-Schubert. The exhibition opened at what is now the Powerplant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, almost a year following the controversial *The Spirit Sings* exhibition funded by Shell Oil at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary[136] and the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance near Oka, Quebec. The show addresses the effects of colonialism on Indigenous women and challenges colonial impositions of languages, religions, and shame imposed on Indigenous peoples.[137] It simultaneously celebrated the resilience of women and their cultural sovereignty.

Following the opening at the Harbourfront Center, the exhibition was primarily shown in university campus art galleries, including the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville (NB), the Dalhousie Art Gallery (NS), and the Laurentian University Museum and Art Gallery (ON), among others. One can speculate that these types of art institutions were more receptive to an exhibition like Changers, because their mandates allow for critical dialogue, whereas this type of intellectual freedom is absent in major art institutions. As Adrian Foster's has noted Artist-run centres (ARC) are independent art bodies prioritizing "respectful alliance relationships"[138] — or what Morgan calls "Indigenous Relational Aesthetics (IRA)"[139]
In their essay, "Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetic: Making Native Love, Still," (2017) Morgan asserts that the Nation to Nation[140] exhibition *Native Love* (1995) provided a space for voices and themes previously pushed out of the Indigenous contemporary art

[136] Rice, 47.
[137] Bear, "Changers," 4.
[138] Adrian Foster,"Artist-run organizations and the restoration of Indigenous cultural sovereignty in Toronto, 1970 to 2010," *Well-being in the Urban Aboriginal Community, (*Toronto: *Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.,* 2013): 28.
[139] Nixon, "Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics," 196.
[140] Nation to Nation — a curatorial collective of artists Ryan Rice, Skawennati, and Eric Robertson

canon.[141] This exhibition, like Changers was not the typical exhibition that one would see in the conventical art institution.

In an interview with Nation to Nation members, Skawennati recalls the 90s as a time for emerging groups of Indigenous artists to "force their way into critical art spaces."[142] Nation to Nation rejected the institutionalized model of the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) because they saw themselves as community organizers in support of Indigenous artists. As a result, co – founder, Ryan Rice states the members felt art institutions very out of touch with any artistic community and took it upon themselves to create opportunities to exhibit their work, "We decided that we shouldn't and can't wait for opportunity to be knocking at our doors, because in the real world it was just not happening."[143]

In addition, Canadian art institutions carried exceptionally narrow views of Indigenous art—especially following the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance. Mainstream art institutions wanted to see masculinist depictions of militant warriors and barb wire in Indigenous artworks.[144] As a counter-narrative offering, the fundamental truth of *Native Love* was to show Indigenous peoples as loving, sensual, caring beings in charge of their sexual sovereignty. Nation to Nation's methodology of community-based organizing offered beautiful facilitation of collaboration between artists and writers,[145] creating space for radical relationality as it allowed everyone to let down their guard and as Rice puts it, "contemplate our personal experiences."[146]

Changers did something very similar to *Native Love* in that it empowered Indigenous women artists, who are largely pushed out of mainstream art history. Most importantly, each

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[141] Nixon, "Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics," 199.
[142] Nixon, "Nation to Nation," *Canadian Art,* 2017, https://canadianart.ca/features/nation-to-nation/.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Rice, 51.

of these women were written into the Indigenous art history canon through Bear's *Changers* catalogue essay. I argue that Bear's curatorial practice as seen her curation of *Changers* adheres to the "Indigenous Relational Aesthetics" (IRA) methodologies, described by Morgan. Similar to the ways in which Nation to Nation fostered their artistic relations. Bear held pre-existing relationships with sme of the artists.[147]

While I do not know details of Bear's decision-making process upon selection of each artist, it is evident to me that she made sure to include established and emerging voices.[148] Changers represents a pivotal moment because, according to Bear, it is the very first time "in contemporary Canadian art history that Indigenous women's voices are the focus of attention. "[149] In the catalogue essay Bear speaks to the importance of connectedness and ethical relations when she continually refers to women as being part of 'the collective' and 'the group'. Bear writes:

> This unique exhibition honours the collective as well as the individual achievement of these artists and illustrates our unique ability to adapt to foreign materials to deliver a cohesive message . . . when women create from the depths of their spirituality, the work is either trivialized or completely overlooked.[150]

I maintain that it is the exhibition that acts as a container for what was once considered radical dialogue among underrepresented groups in the arts.

Indigenous Visual Sovereignty and Self-Determination

> "If the erosion of sovereignty comes from disempowering women, its renewed strength will come from re-empowering them."[151] - Elsie Redbird

Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty are considered parts of discussions around the processes of indigenization and decolonization. Emma Steen notes, "Indigenous

[147] Bear held preexisting relationships with some of the artists. For example, Bear and Frida Diesing participated in an artist residency at Altos de Chavon School of Design.
[148] Bear, "Changers," 1.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Elsie Redbird quoted in Huhndorf and Suzack, "Theorizing the Issues," 6.

sovereignty can be understood as the fight for self-governance, self-determination and agency against an oppressive colonial structure."[152]. In *For Whom Sovereignty Matters,* Joanne Barker says the word "sovereignty"[153] has become an umbrella term that stands for all inherent rights of Indigenous peoples.[154] It is now used to capture nation-based perspectives concerning laws, governance and culture.[155] The use of "sovereignty" as part of Indigenous social and political discourse was co-opted after World War II to reject a notion that Indigenous peoples were merely "minority groups" within their homelands.[156]and were not integral parts of society; despite the fact that Indigenous soldiers fought for settler nation states of Canada and the United States during WWII.

While sovereignty holds lingering connotations to colonialism and imperialism, Barker does not entirely dismiss the current redefinitions of the term. She asserts that use of the word must be contextualized within historical and cultural relationships of the group deploying the term. An example of this is found in Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard's definition of sovereignty from a Haudenosaunee perspective. In her article "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors" (2011) she argues that sovereignty can be pushed beyond an abstract colonial-legal concept; especially when it is contextualized in her experience as Haudenosaunee and a citizen of the Tuscarora nation. Within traditional governance, sovereignty embodies philosophical, political, and renewal strategies of Haudenosaunee families and communities.[157] She writes, "The concept of sovereignty has become a unifying political strategy among the Haudenosaunee that has been instrumental in our ongoing struggles to maintain our communities, land, and traditions. We simultaneously

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[152] Steen, "Why the 90s Were So Sexy," 5.
[153] Indigenous scholars would argue that co-opting the term "sovereignty" concerning self-determination and self-government is convoluted because its origins are rooted in catholic and colonial-legal histories
[154] Joanne Barker, "For Whom Sovereignty Matters" in *Sovereignty matters: Locations of contestation and possibility in indigenous struggles for self-determination*. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005): 1.
[155] Ibid., 19.
[156] Ibid., 18.
[157] Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (2011): 468, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1162543.

appropriated the European word sovereignty and rejected a U.S. legal interpretation of it while creating a uniquely Haudenosaunee understanding."[158]

In the case of Indigenous contemporary art, Rickard observes that sovereignty is negotiated through visual thought, as artists take up space in the narrow margin of mainstream art.[159] In "Diversifying Sovereignty in the Reception of Indigenous Art" (2017), Rickard contends that (in the many interpretations of sovereignty) "visual sovereignty" is one of the most dominant forms of self-determination for Indigenous people because art upholds our traditions and customs of our nations.[160] Furthermore, Rickard argues that sovereignty becomes a method for Indigenous peoples to shift their social position from victims of the state to a strategic recentering of Indigenous self-determination that is imperishable[161]. She quotes Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith who acknowledges, "Indigenous communities have struggled since colonization to be able to exercise what is a fundamental right, that is, to represent ourselves."[162] Artistic production is a means for Indigenous artists assert our visual sovereignty.

I relate sovereignty to Bear's curatorial statement regarding her emphasis for the self-determined right to take up space in the discipline of art (as we always have) and to not feel creative limitations that suggest Indigenous artists move towards Western aesthetics. She reminds women artists that their art holds value outside of colonial interpretations of our art forms and that the work is worthy of celebration.[163]

It can be said that the artists featured in *Changers* also enact forms visual sovereignty by challenging colonialist narratives and superiority of western education and art. This is a topic that Jane Ash Poitras explores in her *Blackboard Series* (1989). Ash Poitras

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[158] Ibid., 467.
[159] Jolene Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand." *Aperture* 139, no. 139 (1995): 51.
[160] Jolene Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 82.https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2017.1367194.
[161] Rickard, "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," 51.
[162] Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," 471.
[163] Bear, "Changers," 4.

appropriates the school blackboard and uses it to talk about the erasure and repression of Indigenous spirituality in "lessons" given in western classrooms and Indian Residential "Schools" (IRS). Bear notes that Poitras series expresses the aggressive disregard for Indigenous spirituality by the administers of IRS.[164] Furthermore, Bear also points out the sexism within the art world by stating that Poitras' comments are trivialized because she is a woman, whereas a man's similar comments would be praised.

Artists and Public Responses to *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance*

> "This exhibit is brought forward not to emulate other cultures which have to isolate the genders in order to make a central point about inequality, but to focus totally on the positive power of the feminine within the greater world of our society, and to reclaim the balance of power that was exercised by women before colonialism."[165]
> - Shirley Bear

Over six hundred people were in attendance on the opening night of *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* at the Harbourfront Centre in downtown Toronto.[166] In the press release issued from Owen's Art Gallery, it is noted that the touring exhibition received necessary, critical attention.[167] The release says that the curators and organizers are working on a dissertation that will push a redefining narrative on Indigenous women artists' position and role within the "Canadian contemporary cultural community,"[168] and that is provides "a dearth of critical analysis" of Indigenous art by Indigenous academics:

> The tendency of mainstream art critics and historians has been to superimpose existing taxonomies extracted from anthropological treaties, to create constricting categories and restrictive attitudes. Recognition for artistic excellence that both revitalizes yet transcends these imposed categories has not been easily achieved for

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[164] Ibid., 2.
[165] Shirley Bear at the 54th World Congress of International PEN quoted in Susan Crean, "N'tow'wik'hegat (She who Knows How to Make Pictures)" in *Nekt Wikuhpon Ehpit: Once There Lived a Woman: The Painting, Poetry and Politics of Shirley Bear.* (Fredericton: Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2009), 49.
[166] Susan Crean, "Changing Directions: A New Perspective on Native Women's Art," *Canadian Art,* 1989, 20.
[167] Owens Art Gallery, "Major Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Art by Women of Native Ancestry at the Owens Art Gallery," Mount Allison University, 1991 (Owens Art Gallery fonds file 9921).
[168] Ibid.

> Native artists who have chosen individual self-expression over publicly accepted notions.[169]

The mainstream art community's recognition and response to the *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* signaled a new beginning for the visibility of Indigenous women contemporary artists. In a letter addressed to Claudette Fortan at the National Indian Arts and Crafts Cooperative, Crean writes to congratulate Fortan (employee of the National Indian Arts and Crafts Coop) on the *Changers* opening in Toronto:

> It really was a privilege to be associated with these eleven women artists and to bring them all together — to see and hear what they had to say. I believe the show and its presence in Toronto have had a substantial impact on the community, and the turnout on Friday night (not to be too modest about it) really was extraordinary. What particularly impressed me was the number of people who stayed the entire evening, conversations I kept overhearing people actually talking about the work. (Unusual at an art opening in my experience).[170]

Susan Crean also reviewed the exhibition for Canadian Art. Her review titled, "Changing Directions: Perspective on Native Women's Art" (1989), analyzes each artist's work, including one undocumented performance by Rebecca Belmore. She describes the exhibition as "wonderfully diverse" that spans cultures, traditions, generations, geographies, and mediums. Crean's words mirror key themes in Bear's exhibition, "Changers is about changing. Changing consciousness and spiritual direction; undoing aesthetic privilege makes it possible to see the world with the wise, old-young eyes of women whose people have always been here, and know why."[171] While good-spirited and generous, her review is somewhat superficial in that it does not reflect an understanding of the cultural context of the exhibition and as such is predictable in terms of the writing critique of Indigenous art at this time.

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[169] Ibid.
[170] A letter from Susan Crean to Claudette Fortan at the National Indian Arts and Crafts Coop, September 1989. (Owens Art Gallery, File 9921).
[171] Crean, "Changing Directions: A New Perspective on Native Women's Art," 20.

Rebecca Belmore performed *Ihkwewak Kaayamihwat II: Means Women Who Are Speaking* (n.d) at the *exhibition* opening in Toronto. Crean describes the performance in her *Canadian Art* article. Belmore portrays a young Indigenous woman running around the gallery's terrace and wading through pools with a large oil painting of a dark-skinned, dark-haired Indigenous woman strapped to her back. The 1959 pop song "Running Bear" by Johnny Preston plays overhead. The song tells the story of "Running Bear" and "Little White Dove," two Indigenous characters in love but cannot be together because their tribes hate each other.[172] They are also separated by a metaphorical river but risk everything to be together. They unite in the river and ultimately drown. Jiles Perry Richardson wrote the song, featuring "Indian chanting" in repeated "uga, uga" verses that would be considered offensive.[173] Crean interprets the performance as an Indigenous person stumbling "under the weight of European culture."[174]

Afterwards, Belmore makes her way into the gallery space and onto a stage, free of her restricting girdle, and she performs a collection of stories using recordings and slides images of women talking about their lives and recovering culture. Susan Crean writes, "she transforms herself into a subtext, accompanying the stories with the methodical motion and timeless, soothing sounds of laundry being washed and rung out."[175] Belmore includes a poetry excerpt of this work in her artist statement,

> I have with me, the influence of my Kokum (grandmother) and my mother
> I can see their hands at work. Hands swimming through the water, moving earth and feeling sky: warm hands.
> I can see their hands touching hide, cloth and bead creating colour beauty: work hands
> I look at my hands and I am aware of their hands. That is how I wish to work.[176]
> (May 1989)

[172] Wikipedia, "Running Bear," Accessed June 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Running_Bear.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Crean, "Changing Directions," 20.
[176] Bear, "Changers," 6.

The exhibition received critical attention from other reviewers, Natalie Schlesak writing for *ARTSCRAFT* magazine, notes that Changers was the first national exhibition of Indigenous women artists. She writes that *Changers* marked a new beginning for the artists and contemporary art.[177] While she concedes that the artists excel at fusing traditional and contemporary mediums and methods to express their personal and political viewpoints. Her one compliant was the art's readability for a non-Indigenous audience, "If Native artists and curators are to transform the views and, possibly, the bias of Canadians, they must take into consideration how they are going to teach them about the central aspects of Native culture."[178] Her comment reflects two pervasive assumptions about Indigenous artists and art. The first being that is the responsibility of Indigenous peoples to educate the broader Canadian public on Indigenous histories and traumas. And the second being that the intended audience of the exhibition is non-Indigenous, rather than a reflection of the artist's reclamation of culture, spirituality, and tradition.

While Changers offered Canadian viewers a new-to-you perspective on Indigenous women's art, I argue that Indigenous contemporary artists of this era were not "offering new perspectives"[179] to their identity or complex relationship to the state; they were reclaiming lost or hidden parts of themselves; unlearning the pervasive narratives and stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream society.

Interviews with *Changers* artists Ruth Cuthand, Shelley Niro, and Faye HeavyShield

In conducting the research necessary for this project, it became increasingly evident that interviewing some of the participating artists was central to my analysis of this groundbreaking exhibition. For the many reasons I have outlined thus far in my discussion of

[177] Natalie Schlesak, "Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance: Review," (Photocopy) *ARTSCRAFT*, Winter 1990, 21-22, Owens Art Gallery fonds file 9921.
[178] Ibid., 21-22.
[179] Crean, "Changing Directions," 19.

Changers, understanding the real impact of this exhibition on the artistic practice of the participates was paramount. Conducting these interviews also provided an opportunity to contribute to the archive. These accounts help us to contextualize their experiences as emerging and mid-career Indigenous women artists. The interviews with Ruth Cuthand, Faye HeavyShield, and Shelley Niro enhanced our understanding of this moment in Indigenous contemporary art.

As Cree scholar, Winona Wheeler, explains the importance of oral traditions and offers a beautiful teaching in her essay *Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral History* (2005) when she explains that Cree culture is an oral culture and, thereby, a listening culture. The author notes that her people understand and receive knowledge within their relationships with one another, non-human beings, and knowledge that comes from within. I am immersed in this teaching when Wheeler says, "And like my ancestors, I am here on this earth to learn."[180] These interviews as they are offered here give us an opportunity to learn firsthand from these artists about their work in the exhibition and their thoughts on their participation.

Ruth Cuthand

Ruth Cuthand was the first participant I spoke briefly to about her participation in the exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance.* She exhibited three paintings in the show. The eerie, bodiless articles of clothing from her 1983 Dress/Shirts Series include *He Promised me Santa Fe, Remember Your Feminine Wiles, and Sewing Card Gone Awry*.
Sewing Card Gone Awry is a gestural depiction of a blue wash dress on a red backdrop, distressed around the edges of the yellow outline. The canvas is sewn with seams rather than attached to a wooden canvas frame. Cuthand says this 'reinforces' the movement of the

[180] Winona Wheeler, "Reflections on the social relations of indigenous oral histories," in *Walking a tightrope: Aboriginal people and their representations* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 190.

painted garment. The shirt and dress depict imagery that relates to late 1800s Ghost Dance,[181] specifically the shirts worn during the Lakota ceremonies at Wounded Knee.[182]

I asked Cuthand how it felt to be part of such a monumental, first-ever Indigenous feminist group exhibition. She recalls that all the artists in *Changers* were present for the opening in Toronto in 1989. She said:

> It was a really good time. I remember Rebecca Belmore doing the piece about the burden of Indian art on her back - that was fabulous. I met Frieda Diesing from the Northwest Coast. And of course, Joane and Jane. Joane is a force to be reckoned with, she really knew the gallery system. She's like a little ball of fire. It was just so nice to show along with those women. I remember it traveled across Canada; it actually came to Saskatoon[183]. It was an amazing experience, and it was an amazing show for its time. It's like, being older and going through those experiences, you kind of look back on them with a different lens. Like, we were younger, we were sort of idealistic, and we're like, 'Yeah! We're women! We're showing our work!' Like that kind of attitude, When you look back on it, you can see the historical importance of it.[184]

She spoke of the memory fondly and remembered feeling empowered in the success of the exhibition's opening night.

Shelley Niro

Changers was the first time Shelley Niro exhibited work outside her community at Six Nations. She says the opening was 'exciting' and full of people eager to see the artist's work at the Harbourfront Centre. She exhibited her now well-known photographs, *The Rebel* and *Big and Tall Man*, and her painting, *The Waitress.* Niro's photography is described as a mirror of both herself and those around her. She captures the happiness, warmth, and love exuding from her Indigenous subjects. In her artist statement, she notes the emerging confidence and native pride 'breaking through the barrier' of society.[185] *The Rebel* has burned a hole in the hearts of Indigenous peoples and has become somewhat of an iconic image in

[181] Sam Maddra, "The Wounded Knee Ghost Dance Shirt." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 8 (1996): 41, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40743400; The Ghost Shirt is worn by Lakota Ghost Dancers.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Emma Hassencahl-Perley, "Ruth Cuthand: Beadwork, Humour, and Feminism on the Prairies via. Zoom," 5.
[184] Ruth Cuthand, personal communication with the author, 2021.
[185] Bear, "Changers," 12.

Indigenous art historical and feminist dialogue. The woman in the image, the artist's mother, is stretched out 'provocatively' on the back of an American Motors Rebel vehicle.[186] She represents the strength of women in our families portrayed in their joy. The artist strives to portray Indigenous peoples, as whole, complex individuals who make good and bad decisions and think with their heads but sometimes with their hearts. She writes, "When we are alone, awake in the middle of the night, by ourselves, we just want to get back to sleep like the rest of the world."[187]

I asked Niro about the political and cultural climate of Indigenous art in the mainstream art scene in the early 90s. She said, "Well at the time, it seemed like the only people in exhibitions were men. It just seemed like it was male dominated. Not too many females were involved. [Though] I think there *were* many females involved in art, but I just don't remember seeing too many names in that category [fine art]."[188] Niro observes there were persisting opinions about the level of sophistication of Indigenous art and not being "up to par" with mainstream art. She explains that gallerists and audiences did not want to take the time to appreciate the work for the messages it carried. She pondered why Indigenous women's art might have been excluded and ultimately decided that the mainstream gallery is systematically sexist and racist, which continues to be a barrier for marginalized voices within marginalized communities.[189] She elaborates:

> [The mainstream gallery system] was a racist thing and a blatantly racist thing, too. It was using the excuses like 'The work's not sophisticated' or 'They're still using their primitive ways to make art' and it just seemed like they didn't want to take the time to appreciate it or acknowledge it". . . "I think [these systems] are still way behind. Canada's a funny place to live in anyways. When it comes to art it's all about learning to bend the language so that it's politely ignored — anything Indian or Indigenous.[190]

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[186] Resilience Project, "Shelley Niro, the Rebel," 2018, https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/shelley-niro.
[187] Shelley Niro quoted in Bear, "Changers," 12.
[188] Shelley Niro, personal communication with the author, 2022.
[189] Nixon, "Making Space in Indigenous Art for Bull Dykes and Gender Weirdos," 2017.
[190] Niro, personal communication, 2021.

Niro attended the opening in Toronto. She remembers the event as exciting and full of people eager to see the work at Harbourfront Centre. Niro describes the political and cultural climate of the mainstream art scene of the early 90s as a time "dominated by men."[191]

I asked Niro if recognition from mainstream art communities was important to her. She said:

> It doesn't hurt to have that kind of recognition. I don't think we make art to get recognized by the mainstream, but you do it for your people. If the mainstream is paying attention, I think your people will pay attention too. It brings messages to them. If you're on a reserve, you don't know what's going on out there. It's about communication and using mass-media to spread the word.[192]

Niro recognizes the effect of mainstream Canadian art recognition; however, it is not what ultimately drives her to create. She says exposure is important and that the opportunity to exhibit anywhere (ethically) is what remains essential for Indigenous women to show their work; yet institutional barriers have created obstacles to that.[193]

Faye HeavyShield

Faye HeavyShield exhibited wall-mounted mixed media sculptures *Twelve Wives* and *Trap in Yellow Ochre I, II,* and *III.* The artist's cultural memory and technology influence her work as a Kainai (Blood) person.

I asked HeavyShield if she thought *Changers* was overshadowed by other exhibitions in major institutions in the nineties, where most Indian artists were men.
HeavyShield acknowledged my desire to highlight the exclusion of Indigenous women artists; she says, "That's really important. I don't think there's anything that can diminish that. And so, I really don't know that I see it as clearly as you, that it was overshadowed in any way because of its place in our art history."[194] HeavyShield explains that the lack of critical writing about the exhibition did not make it lesser than other comparable exhibitions because,

[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Faye HeavyShield, personal communication with the author, 2022.

for her it was the experience, it was felt, and remembered by a community of Indigenous women artists. She asserts that *Changers* was foundational to each of the artists, because it fed their practice and growing careers.[195]

HeavyShield's observations remind me that, contrary to my thesis statement, the exhibition's lack of recognition in a colonial frame of art historical discourse should not diminish its strength and importance to individual careers and communities. HeavyShield reiterates:

> I don't think it was overshadowed in any way because these other shows were taking place. I think it's good that you are going to write about it and that you're going to bring it to the attention of people who haven't read it before. For me, it really played an important part in each individual's trajectory at that time. And as far as I know, all the women [in the exhibition] were already so strong. And whether people were writing about it, to me, that's secondary to what it meant. Like I am glad that you will write about it and people will read about it. But for myself, I don't feel that I have been able to shed much light on it because it's part of my past and I understand it for what it meant to me but I can't articulate beyond that. I really did see it, as momentum was already in place because of Alanis' art. She was recognized already. So was Jane, so was Joane, so was Rebecca, Shelley...[196]

These comments speak to Bear's centralized theme in *Changers,* that Indigenous women's art is worthy of celebration. As Bear writes in the exhibitions curatorial text there is no reason to justify the presence of Indigenous women artists in mainstream art space; rather, it must be acknowledged how these artists have continued to break ground before, during, and following their participation in this foundational exhibition. However, as Faye HeavyShield reminds us, the recognition of Indigenous art by major arts institutions is not the be-all and end-all.

While it was not possible to interview Bear, as a curator, she championed a group of powerhouse Indigenous women artists who would go on to contribute to the development of an Indigenous art history. Her curatorial essay shaped a framework for future Indigenous curators that focuses on building community. The exhibition demonstrates what can be achieved when Indigenous modes of care and relationship building are central to one's

[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.

curatorial practice. By building space for Indigenous women artists, Bear was curating what we now recognize as a "community of care."[197] Artist and curator Peter Morin commented, "For me, we've started using kinship networks to articulate the importance of these recurring relationships in the artworld… things that Shirley was prioritizing in the 90s with her work in the community.[198]

Refusal

In this thesis, I have argued that Indigenous feminism, self-determination, and sovereignty are inextricably linked. Combining these forces calls for a radical refusal of sexism, racism, and heteropatriarchy. Stó:lō poet Lee Miracle writes, "I and other Native women ought to come by our perceptions of spirituality, culture, womanhood, and sovereignty from a place free of sexist and racist influence

By refusing recognition and validation from settler-colonial institutions, art produced by Indigenous women is tied to sovereign practice.[199] In my examination of the exhibition *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* what became evident is that Bear was demonstrating the concepts of what we have come to know as visual sovereignty, survivance, decolonial aesthetics, and care.[200] This recent shift towards cultural sensitivity and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the museum and gallery spaces means there is "a new receptiveness to a shared understanding of curatorial responsibilities that extends far beyond the walls of the institution."[201] As Bear demonstrated in her curatorial practice connecting with Indigenous communities and maintaining ethical bonds and relationships with artists is an

[197] Stephen Gilchrist, personal communication with the author, 2022.
[198] Peter Morin, personal communication with author, 2022
[199] Terminology used by Audra Simpson in "Indigenous Interruptions: Mohawk Nationhood, Citizenship, and the State," in *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.
[200] May Chew, personal communication with the author, 2022.
[201] Stephen Gilchrist "Indigenising curatorial practice," *The World is Not a Foreign Land*, 55, https://www.academia.edu/36554164/Indigenising_curatorial_practice.

important part of her curatorial process. It also demonstrates what Yamatji curator and writer Stephen Gilchrist describes as the shift from, "cultural preservation to cultural activation."[202]

Decolonization, Indigenization, and the Fugitive anti-colonial aesthetic

> "In this spirit of giving and remembering, Indigenous art reconnects us to the sacred and continued existence of Indigenous Peoples living and dying in struggle; yet, always resurging and creating art to build and rebuild, to learn and re-learn, to recover and remember. Indigenous art unbinds indigeneity from its colonial limits by weaving past and future Indigenous worlds into new currents of present struggle. Indigenous art and decolonial aesthetics mark collective imagings/imaginings of possible paths forward, through, and beyond, where "whatever is built must be willingly dismantled"[203] - Leanne Simpson

In their article, "Fugitive indigeneity: Reclaiming the terrain of decolonial struggle through Indigenous art," Martineau and Ritskes hold a position that Indigenous art occupies a unique space in settler colonialism. The art articulates Indigenous experiences of resistance and resurgence but is also threatened by the persistence of settler colonialism; meaning the ways in which the Western gaze and lack of understanding re-appropriate, assimilate, consume, and repress Indigenous voices.[204] Under this consideration from the authors, so long as harmful narratives are perpetuated, Indigenous cultures remain static and one-dimensional. Indigenous identities and art forms are politicized through the settler-state and reinforced by society. Martineau and Ritskes argue that Indigenous artists reclaim and revitalize our creativity that is activated by political struggle and that is inseparable from aesthetic experience. The authors note, "Indigenous art evokes a fugitive aesthetic that, in its decolonial ruptural forms, refuses the struggle for better or more inclusion and recognition[205] and, instead, chooses refusal and flight as modes of freedom."[206] This is also due to the implicit ties to political struggle, often embodied by the artist. Therefore, political struggle,

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[202] Ibid.
[203] Leanne Simpson quoted in Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity," 10.
[204] Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity," 1.
[205] Ibid., 4.
[206] Ibid.

the colonial struggle, is embodied into our daily lives of Indigenous peoples.[207] Martineau and Ritskes explain, "The Fugitive aesthetic is not an abdication of contention and struggle; it is a reorientation to word freedom in movement, against the limits of colonial knowing incensing."[208] The authors quote writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor, who also refers to this relationship as "Indigenous aesthetic of survivance."[209]

Bear contends that Indigenous women's survival is worthy of celebration.[210] Some visual artists exhibited in *Changers* embrace the opportunity to provide a critical perspective on the quality of life for Indigenous peoples in Canada. While mainstream society perceived these works as political, Martineau and Ritskes contend, "Indigenous art is political because Indigenous peoples make it."[211]

Changers artist Alanis Obomsawin, for example, is well-known for her feminist and activist documentary films include *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) and *No Address* (1988) (featured in the exhibition *Changers*). Bear describes Obomsawin's work as a "tireless" and "relentless pursuit" of justice for Indigenous peoples in Canada. In a 1987 interview with *Cinema Canada,* Obomsawin says, "The purpose of my films is to have voice — that it's O.K. to be an Indian, to be a Native in this country."[212] Her work is always authentic and true to these words. Obomsawin asserts her self-determination and visual sovereignty by telling stories that matter, often from an Indigenous woman's perspective.

In the *Changers* exhibition catalogue Bear asserts repeatedly that Indigenous women's work deserves to be held in respect and interpreted by people who understand and care for the work deeply. As Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes observe, Indigenous art articulates Indigenous experiences of resistance and resurgence. This is seen in Bear's

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[207] Ibid., 2.
[208] Ibid., 4.
[209] Gerald Vizenor quoted in Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity," 3.
[210] Bear, "Changers," 4.
[211] Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity," 9.
[212] Alanis Obomsawin quoted in Bear, "Changers," 4.

analysis of Glenna Matoush's *Grand Mother Basket.* While Bear's essay describes Matoush's as an interweaving of art, womanhood, and love. The practice of weaving reaffirms the continuance of ideas, technology and skills that are handed down from one generation of women to another. The continued presence of this artform in Indigenous communities is a testament to the resistance and refusal to assimilate. This is also an example of the ways in which Bear's catalogue text "solidifies a resolve"[213] to write art criticism from the heart and celebrate Indigenous women artists.

Reflections on the importance of "*Changers*: A Spiritual Renaissance" Recognition and Sovereignty that are intertwined with identity and art

> "Colonialism has brought foreign religions, laws, economy, and shame to the Indigenous people. Indigenous people have lived through and survived harsh realities and practices of this. That survival is worthy of celebration. This exhibit is a first in the celebration of women. Their dedication, pride, and tenacity is visible in the unseen but visible sprit and strength of this exhibition."[214] - Shirley Bear

I have argued that the *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* exhibition serves as a strategy to recenter Indigenous women's art, experience, and excellence. Bear describes the exhibition as a 'feast' in the celebration of women[215] — more specifically, their accomplishments in the community, connection to place and spirit and having the self-determination to speak our truths. For Bear, spiritual renaissance she speaks of involved recreating and reaffirming women's rightful place within their societies. *Changers* represents a specific expression of feminism that was initiated by Bear's activism and spiritual connection.[216] She writes: "All of the women in the exhibition have used their work to

[213] Bear, "Changers, 2.
[214] Bear, "Changers," 4
[215] Ibid.
[216] Miigam'agan. personal communication with the author, 2021.

express the earth from which their roots are nourished. From the youngest to the eldest, our main connection is to the earth — our first mother."[217]

In Bear's view, reconnecting to spirit and honoring women's artistic achievements (or any successes) helps to create a gender balance of status and power, "thereby ensuring a more orderly community."[218] Ultimately *Changers* recentered Indigenous women's art and excellence by challenging patriarchy and sexism within the art world and speaking to the injustices women artists have to face in order to achieve equity of treatment.

The exhibition was a direct response to the racism, sexism, and oppression that Indigenous women endured at the time. It is important to note that even while challenging the treatment of representation of Indigenous women in that era, the exhibition overlooked the shared experiences that 2Spirit and gender-diverse peoples have also endured since contact with European colonialists. ."[219] While revolutionary for centering women's voices in mainstream art, *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* does not exemplify a gender-diverse range of voices, and is a reflection of the time, and as such remains us how far we have come, but also how much further we have to go to address equity and justice.

In order to achieve this, Indigenous feminisms must open a wider door for others in our communities who have also been marginalized by colonial and Christian influences. How can we imagine a future beyond settler-colonialism without picturing Indigenous women, femmes, 2Spirit, and gender variant peoples in positions of power?

Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance is also just one example of cultural critique and response to social and political change. I have examined Bear's exhibition within the context of the Indian Women's Movement because events like the Tobique Women's March (1979) and Kanehsatà:ke Resistance (1990) laid a foundation for exhibitions like *Changers* and *Native Love* to exist. Bear's involvement in each movement gives *Changers* an enriched first-

[217] Bear, "Changers," 1.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Lee Miracle, "Preface" *I Am Woman,* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1988), vii.

hand knowledge and perspective on injustices experienced by Indigenous women. As Martineau and Ritskes point out, politics and art are never separate from each other.[220]

Bear's exhibition is also a visual record that has contributed immensely to Wabanaki feminisms. For myself, sovereignty and feminism are inextricable forces. These terms do not encompass our place-based knowledge systems or sovereigntist agendas. However, the execution of sovereignty over our bodies and lands it can also mean s a recentering of women's capabilities as leaders.

As such, *Changers: A Spiritual Renaissance* represents an influential moment for Indigenous women because it marks the cultural and political shift that changed the reception of Indigenous people's art in Canada. Bear's art and curation opened the door for other artists and curators to follow. I maintain that the Indigenous exhibition space can be transformed into a location for political discussion and intervention, as well as a space to transmit stories, spiritual beliefs, ceremony, protocol, dialogue, critique - anything we want it to be. The art exhibition enables Indigenous curators to respond to critical moments and issues of our times while contributing to the growing field of Indigenous art histories.

Reflecting on this exhibition forty years later, the legacy that Bear has left for us presents an exciting opportunity to build from her work and to redefine Indigenous feminism, sovereignty, and activism as it pertains to our territory and languages. Bear’s foundational work presents an opportunity to redefine and widen the expanse of Wabanaki feminisms, to create the space for all kinds of experiences, peoples, practices, and theories to flourish in the future.

Woliwon Shirley, for this gift.

[220] Martineau and Ritskes, “Fugitive indigeneity,” 1.

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