

# Is Canada Postcolonial? Re-Asking through “The Forgotten” Project

## ABSTRACT

A dozen years after I first asked the question “is Canada postcolonial?,” I have returned to consider it again. Of more concern now than the original question itself, however, is the productive set of questions it raises. These questions form the heart of this paper and are, I argue, at the core of contemporary postcolonial discourse in Canada: (1) What is the triangulated relationship between art, politics and place?; (2) What responsibility does an artist have to her subject matter?; (3) What are the ethics of representation?; (4) Who speaks for whom?; (5) Who profits?; and (6) How then to remember? To engage these serious questions, I turn to the controversy surrounding the cancellation of an art exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver. In early 2011, Pamela Masik was set to launch “The Forgotten” project, an exhibition of the portraits of sixty-nine women who were missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Citing “serious concerns” raised by the victims’ families and community groups, the museum cancelled the show (Museum of Anthropology 2011). This was a controversy over the public role of art and the role of art in public spaces. It was also a pivotal case for considering cultural memory and victims’ rights in the process of memorializing. This paper examines the exhibition and its cancellation and, by extension, art and public memory in a postcolonial framework.

## RÉSUMÉ

Une douzaine d’années après avoir demandé pour la première fois « Le Canada est-il postcolonial?, » je reviens sur la question encore une fois. De plus important maintenant que la question originale elle-même, toutefois, est la série de questions fructueuse qu’elle soulève à son tour. Ces questions constituent la base de cet article et sont, selon moi, à la base du discours postcolonial contemporain au Canada : 1) Quel est le rapport triangulaire entre l’art, la politique et la place?; 2) Quelle responsabilité l’artiste a-t-elle envers son sujet?; 3) Quelles sont les éthiques de la représentation?; 4) Qui parle pour qui?; 5) Qui en profite?; et 6) Comment, alors, se souvenir? Pour engager ces questions importantes, je prends l’exemple de la controverse engendrée par l’annulation d’une exposition d’art au Musée d’anthropologie à Vancouver. Au début de 2011, Pamela Masik se prépare à lancer le

projet « The Forgotten, » une exposition consistant des portraits de soixante-neuf femmes disparues du quartier Downtown Eastside à Vancouver. Donnant la raison de « l'inquiétude grave » soulevée par les familles des victimes et des groupes communautaires, le musée a annulé l'exposition. Cela fut une controverse sur le rôle de l'art dans les espaces publiques. Il fut également un cas essentiel pour la considération de la mémoire culturelle et les droits de victimes dans le processus de commémoration. Cet article examine l'exposition et son annulation et, par extension, l'art et la mémoire publique dans un cadre postcolonial.

**KEYWORDS:** Postcolonialism; public art; cultural memory; violence against women; Vancouver Downtown Eastside; controversy



In the fall of 2000, I organized a conference around the question “is Canada postcolonial?” I wondered where Canada sat in the international fields of postcolonial theory and literature, as both a settler and an invader colony and as a contemporary multicultural nation with questionable governance practices of the First Nations population.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to think about Canada in the larger global framework and to consider how the study of Canadian culture had shifted from the comparative scaffold of Commonwealth studies, through decolonization struggles and radical nationalism, to the possibly post-national present. At the conference and in the subsequent book *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature* (Moss 2003), the prevailing answer to the titular question seemed to be an equivocal “it depends.” Diana Brydon put this position best: “It depends on the definitions,” she said. “It depends on who is asking the question, from what position, in space, time and privilege” (2003: 49). Some critics responded to the original question by noting that a nation-state cannot “be” postcolonial and others asked if colonialism had ever really ended for Aboriginal Canadians (asking how it could be considered “post” when the impact of colonialism, in the form of the Indian Act, is still very much felt by First Nations communities that live with what could be seen as a national double standard in terms of housing, health care and education). Still others used the question as a springboard to examine textual representations of racism, hybridity, marginality, forced assimilation, appropriation, collection, and historical revision in literary works from the 19th and 20th centuries, and to consider how these issues were troubled in Canadian writing.

Now, a dozen years later, the question “is Canada postcolonial?” no longer seems as vital as it once did. So when I was asked to speak on the question and the current links between Canadian culture, postcolonialism and gender at a Canadian Studies conference in Germany, I paused over what I could add to the discussion. It was at this time that a headline in the University of British Columbia campus newspaper caught my attention: “‘Who speaks for whom?’ Museum of Anthropology cancels

paintings of missing and murdered women” (Wakefield, the *Ubysey*, January 19, 2011). The article pertained to the cancellation of a local art installation by Pamela Masik based on the women who had gone missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES). When Gloria Larocque, a critic of the show, asked “Who speaks for whom?” she was asking a core postcolonial question. Indeed, the exhibition raised serious questions that have been at the centre of postcolonial discourse for several decades, about the relationships between art and place, memory and representation, and history, violence and speech. That the postcolonial lexicon can now be employed in the everyday address of a student newspaper, I realized, reveals one of the most significant contributions of postcolonialism to the current Canadian context. Through an examination of the controversy surrounding “The Forgotten” project, I posit that a valuable and ongoing legacy of postcolonialism in Canada is its critical vocabulary and the series of key questions it raises, which have permeated discussions of difficult topics such as rights, identity, history, citizenship, opposition, voice and representation over the past decade. In this framework, we can contemplate the forms of responsibility an artist has to her subject matter and, by extension, consider the ethics of representation of violence. Further, in conjunction with asking who speaks for whom, we can add an examination of who profits. These are questions that I think postcolonialism (often in fruitful conjunction with feminism, Indigenous studies, memory studies and critical race theory) has brought to the table in Canada and beyond.

I want to pick up the conversation from *Is Canada Postcolonial?* with a consideration of the relationships between culture, power and place, and ask, as Brydon does in her contribution to the collection (drawing on Stephen Turner), “How then to remember?” (2003: 53). In light of important theoretical work on memorializing, cultural memory, remembrance, postmemory and public memory in the recent past, the conjunction of postcolonial theory and memory studies is particularly pertinent here. I add my thoughts and questions to the work done by the contributors to *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (2006), edited by Annette Burfoot and Susan Lord, and by the Cultural Memory Group in their book *Remembering Women Murdered by Men: Memorials Across Canada* (2006). I am particularly indebted to Sharon Rosenberg’s writing on public memory. I follow her when she writes that “the conceptualization of memory I am putting into play here is informed by an interdisciplinary theorization of public memory as those selective and contested social formations that circumscribe a set of terms and bounded symbolizations through which past events are remembered and living attachments to the past are formed” (Rosenberg 2006: 27). “The Forgotten” project controversy forms a poignant instance of just such contested social formations, as it highlights the complexity of competing concerns in the formulation of public memories. For Rosenberg, “a public remembrance practice can be understood as something that attempts to bring the living in a particular relation not only to the dead but also to each other” (27–28). The shared nature of such public acts of

remembrance is intended to create a sense of community, but the Masik case leads us to ask what happens when the living do not necessarily want to be yoked together. If we agree with Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith that “acts of [cultural] memory are acts of performance, representation, and interpretation,” we might also query who is entitled to perform, represent and interpret acts of violence in the past (2002: 5). Hirsch and Smith argue that cultural memory emerges “out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires” (5). A case such as “The Forgotten” project controversy puts pressure on just such complex dynamics. What if such pairings are unflaggingly at odds? What happens when an individual artist tries to turn a real woman’s story into an object lesson for the “greater good” of cultural memory? How then does the creative process best interact with a pedagogical imperative? By considering what happens when “real” events and people’s lives and deaths are turned into art, I question how to memorialize with a purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Before I can address such questions in light of the Masik case, a fuller history of the cases on which the exhibition is based is required. In 1999, the attorney general of British Columbia and the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) issued a poster that offered a \$100,000 reward for information that might lead to the arrest of the person or persons responsible for the kidnapping or murder of thirty-one women who had gone missing from the DTES since 1978. The poster displayed the women’s names and photos, and the dates they were last seen. In 2004 (and again in 2007), the RCMP and the VPD issued an updated missing-women poster to accompany their joint task force investigation into the serial disappearances of women. By this point, the number of women missing amounted to sixty-nine. In 2007, Robert Pickton was convicted of the murder of six women; the DNA of many more of the missing women has been found at Pickton’s farm in Port Coquitlam, BC.<sup>3</sup> Reportedly, Pickton also bragged to an undercover police officer that he had murdered forty-nine women in total and planned to kill one more to make it an even fifty (*CBC News*, January 23, 2007). Five women whose images appeared on the earlier poster have been found alive. The remaining women are still unaccounted for. Looking into the slow police processing of the cases, the ostensible police mishandling of evidence, and the fact that Pickton continued to murder women while he was apparently under police investigation and surveillance, the government of British Columbia created the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, which began preliminary hearings in January 2011. Critics, families of the missing women and even some officers working for the joint task force itself have accused some of the investigators, the Coquitlam Police Department, the Vancouver Police Department and the RCMP of sexism, racism, class discrimination and a fundamental lack of respect for the women of the DTES. Further, concerns have been raised about the commission itself, concern-

ing who has been allowed to testify as well as who could afford to have her stories represented.

From her 14,000-foot studio on Second Avenue at the edge of the DTES, Pamela Masik spent five years creating “The Forgotten” project, a series of large portraits based on the thumbnail images of the women whose photos appeared on the police poster. The sixty-nine portraits painted by Masik each measure eight-by-ten feet, and each holds the name of the woman depicted. Some of the paintings are straightforward reproductions of a woman’s face rendered in a large scale. Others represent a woman with knife slashes, broken bones, blood, newspaper clippings, cellophane and garbage bags embedded on and in the portrait. One final portrait—number seventy, a self-portrait—was to have been included in the show. Whether the seventieth painting was meant to show that anyone could be a victim (artist included) or to link the artist more closely to the women is unclear.<sup>4</sup>

One year after the exhibition had been announced at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (MOA) and a month before it was to open, MOA cancelled the show, due to public pressure, “serious concerns” that the museum could not gather enough perspectives in time to have a multi-voiced dialogue running alongside the exhibition, and fear of causing further pain to the families (Museum of Anthropology 2011). As Larocque points out, DTES community members wanted the opportunity to create a “side exhibit to accompany ‘The Forgotten’ and to address racialized violence against women in depth,” but this was not possible given time constraints (Wakefield 2011). The “serious concerns” stemmed from the perceived problems of appropriating suffering for artistic gain, and the question of who had the right to memorialize the missing women in a public space. The concerns began after Masik took a CNN reporter on a tour of the DTES during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games.<sup>5</sup> Presumably hundreds of thousands of CNN viewers saw Masik in the role of tour guide—perhaps even spokesperson—for the neighbourhood. Community members worried that as a result of the large and potentially misplaced media exposure, Masik would profit from such a position. Further concern was voiced when Masik was on a panel at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in August 2010, talking about the DTES and her exhibition. According to reports of the event, women from the DTES community attended the panel and challenged Masik about her right to paint the portraits. Masik walked out of the conference after apparently saying it was her “God-given right” to paint what she wanted. She later commented on her blog that the “conference was hijacked” by people from the DTES.<sup>6</sup> “Who speaks for whom?” echoes here.

The cancelled exhibition foregrounds an ongoing ethical debate about the responsibility society has to allow an artist to work in a state free of censorship, on one hand, and the responsibility an artist has to her “real” subjects to represent them with dignity, on the other. In an online “Comments” section on the CBC Web site

responding to the notice of the show's cancellation, "E\_Beroni" posted the following comment:

The portraits do not "honor" the missing women. If I were one of the missing women—I am a female and I live in the DTES—I would hate to be so "honored." I would want to be remembered with love. Portraying me as beaten, drugged, damaged and then calling me forgotten isn't love. Turning these women into a collective symbol to "raise awareness" of social issues should not trump their individual right to dignity, even in death. (Beroni, CBC, January 14, 2011)

In Beroni's comments, I am reminded of Charles Taylor in "The Politics of Recognition" when he speaks of the distinction between honour and dignity: honour is bestowed on someone as an exception but dignity is a state of value (1992). The fear, as Taylor articulates this position, is a state of misrecognition or non-recognition—a withholding of dignity. Taylor puts the argument like this:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*-recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 1992: 25)

Masik's opponents seem to fear the dangers of misrecognition (of the missing women and, also, of the people still living in the DTES) and caution about the harm that such misrecognition might bring to their memories and to those still in the community. By extension, there also seems to be a fear that the artist might be misrecognized as part of the community and benefit from such an association.

On one hand, there is the artist who vehemently argues her right to paint a social ill as she sees it and to speak for those who can't. Again and again, in public statements and in interviews, Masik has claimed that her "role as an artist was to bear witness to these women" (quoted in CBC Radio 2011). She begins her artist's statement on her own web page with "'The Forgotten' Project. / A title chosen to describe society's apathy / Toward a group of women marginalized / By class, race, gender, and sexuality" (Masik 2011). And she asks, "What if I could create a body of work so powerfully moving / That views could be challenged / That the realization of society's role, / Our play in this tragedy, / Could inspire social change?" (Masik 2011). Masik's premise is that art can have a powerful social function as it raises awareness and—by creating witnesses who are moved to act—instigates change. In particular, she appeals to affect, or trying to "powerfully mov[e]" her viewer toward instigating change. Whether such action is to be prompted by sadness, fear, anger, frustration, shame, sympathy, empathy or hatred is unstated.<sup>7</sup>

Emotion-motivated action or affect-prompted response is sought based on humanistic affiliation. The premise is that action is more likely to occur when pain is given a human face (or seventy large faces). Masik's statement rests on a belief that art can transform through emotional appeal.

Masik is not alone in her argument about the potential power of art. The figure of the artist as social commentator has a long history (and, indeed, figures prominently in postcolonial discourse). Writing about Lincoln Clarke's photographic series of women from the DTES, *Heroines*, Paul Ugor makes a similar case. He claims that "visual representations such as Clarke's transmute from innocuous entertainment pieces to lethal political weapons wielded for a social debate or argument" (Ugor 2007). He continues, "in this social agenda of visual representation, images shed their creative essence to assume a utilitarian value, invoking and re-inscribing certain discarded and forgotten social problems onto the public map. In fact, photographs in this new discursive framework begin to function as testimonials of cultural experiences of struggle, pain, sorrow, and deprivation" (Ugor 2007). For Ugor, Clarke's photographs carry powerful testimony about the humanity of the women in them, and thus become "lethal political weapons." The difference between the images of Clarke and Masik, however, is that the *Heroines* consented to be photographed, and were paid a small amount of money or were given some food in exchange for their images (even if the amount of payment can be called into question—Ugor suggests that it was five dollars—consent was sought). The utilitarian nature of representation here is premised on the complicity of the subjects in the photographs. Such complicity is impossible in Masik's case, even though the artist is asking the same kind of representational—and political—role of her subjects. Masik's stated motivation is pedagogical. She renders the women as metonymic victims to mobilize social action and to teach her audience about the larger social issues of violence against women.

Where Masik used the cumulative effect of the stories of the individual women to make a public statement about the magnitude of violence against women collectively, some people objected to having "real" victims rendered as social symbols. A chorus asked: "Forgotten by whom?" (not their families, not their friends), and drew attention to the real lives of Sarah De Vries, Mona Wilson, Janet Henry and the many other women who disappeared. As Mary Bryson asserted in a speech for a memorial of the victims of the 1989 Montreal shootings at École Polytechnique, "The names matter. They remind us of irreducible difference and singularity" (Bryson, November 28, 2008). It is just such singularity that some argue has been lost in an art exhibition like "The Forgotten" project, with its multiple canvases of the same grand size and shape and its repetition of violence enacted on the women's faces. In this case, some members of DTES groups such as the Memorial Women's March Committee did not want their missing and murdered family and friends to be consolidated in order to make a larger social point.

Those who supported her work argued that Masik took it on herself to “bear witness to lives that ended,” as one commentator put it, “because of their very anonymity. Undo 69 oblivions” (Harris, *Vancouver Magazine*, January 1, 2010). The underlying—and somewhat grotesque—assumption in this statement is that the women were without a community that might mourn their losses un-obliviously, and they needed Masik’s representational grief. In the “Comments” section of Masik’s Web page (which I fully realize is a mediated source of information), there were many comments about her “bravery,” her “heroism,” her “selflessness,” and her dedication to “give voice” to the “voiceless” and marginalized.<sup>8</sup> Further, the women’s families neither condemned nor condoned Masik’s work as a unified group, instead responding individually to the exhibition and the depictions of the missing women. While some people were angry at Masik’s representation of their loved ones, as I will discuss below, for other family members, the portraits are a fitting memorial. Several family members of women she painted posted acknowledgement messages to Masik on her Web site. For instance, on Tuesday, May 5, 2009, Marilyn Kraft, Cindy Feliks’s stepmother, posted:

Thank you so much for doing the pictures of our “women.” My daughter would have been so proud of the pictures you painted showing the truth of her friends in death as well as herself. No one knows what these women suffered at the hands of Mr. Pickton but it will come out sooner than later. Also, thank you for the tears you shed for them and my daughter as many people have just shoved the fact aside that they were loved by lots of their friends and families and not just known as “prostitutes and druggies” as lots of media have portrayed them. Again my thanks and to let you know that the families are with you.<sup>9</sup> (Masik 2009)

Kraft groups the women in loss as “our women.”

Others who supported the exhibition did so because of its educational potential. Ernie Crey—the brother of Dawn Crey, whose remains were found on the Pickton farm—was a vocal critic of the cancellation. A policy advisor to the Sto:lo Tribal Council, Crey called the cancellation of the exhibition a “lost opportunity” to speak about the issues surrounding the women’s disappearances and deaths.<sup>10</sup> He argued that it was important for the general public to know how his sister “lived and died” because, he said, “we need a whole new mindset and a series of policies related to health, education, social services, housing and zoning practices pursued by the city of Vancouver” (quoted in Wakefield 2011). For Crey, the exhibition was an opportunity for potential meaningful public dialogue about communal urban problems.

Those who supported the cancellation of the exhibition argued that it was not Masik’s place to bring such community problems to the attention of the larger public. Such criticism concentrated on the fact that Masik is not *of* the DTES

community, even though her studio is physically located *in* that neighbourhood. Paramount here was the distinction between being *in* and *of* a geographic space, where *of* represents belonging and *in* represents location. Marlene George, a community services programmer at the Carnegie [Community] Centre in the DTES, voiced her concerns in a newspaper interview: “[Masik’s] realm of experience is so different from [that of] women from the Downtown Eastside—those two worlds could never, never meet. She has no clue, presenting herself as being from the community, speaking on behalf of women from the community” (quoted in Parkatti, *Vancouver Observer*, February 8, 2011: 1). Similarly, Larocque, a member of the annual Memorial March Committee on the Downtown Eastside, is quoted in agreement: “My concern is: who speaks for who? [Masik] is not the spokesperson on this issue” (quoted in Wakefield 2011). As mentioned above, it was Larocque’s phrasing of the question about voice that drew me to this case. Corinthia Kelly, another member of the Memorial March Committee, expands upon Larocque’s position, arguing in an interview with *The Province*: “It is very offensive to many of these families...that the image of their beloved daughters, mothers, sisters and aunties has been stolen and used by this ambitious artist to further her own career” (quoted in Baron, *The Province*, January 12, 2011). Stolen images. Stolen lives. Stolen stories.

Questions of voice, theft and appropriation have long been central to postcolonial discussions in Canada and beyond. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s foundational essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” resonated in Canadian contexts, particularly with minority writers and artists. Many asked whether it was acceptable for a non-Indigenous person to write from an Indigenous perspective, or a racial majority member from the perspective of someone from a racial minority. This was intricately linked with the “appropriation of voice” debate. Kelly’s comment here echoes Lenore Keeshig-Tobias when she urged non-Native writers to “stop stealing Native stories” so that Native writers could “tell their own stories” for themselves (Keeshig-Tobias, *Globe and Mail*, January 26, 1990). This is, in many ways, once again the central debate around “The Forgotten” project. But who has the right to speak for the missing women? Who can tell their stories? Is it a matter of proximity (of blood, of experience, of situation, of space) or contingency?<sup>11</sup> In reference to memorials of the victims of the 1989 shootings at L’École Polytechnique, Rosenberg writes about how feminists in Quebec had a difficult time, or refused outright, to use the Montreal massacre as an emblematic case of violence against women. She argues that their “emotional proximity” could have been “a hindrance to claiming a memorial narrative of emblemization” (Rosenberg 2006: 41). Indeed, it is precisely the notion of memorial emblemization that Masik’s most vocal critics, and some of those most proximate to the victims, are wary of. The three women I have quoted as critical of the exhibition—George, Larocque and Kelly—position Masik outside the DTES community and implore her to stop stealing their stories. They charge her with exploitation. Masik positions herself in

Vancouver “society” and as someone responsible for telling the stories to the wider world. Indeed, what public do artists represent? In asking who can speak for whom, I also wonder who gets to decide and who profits in making such decisions.

There were those community members from the DTES who concentrated on the need to protect each victim’s right to dignity in representation. They criticized the artist for appropriating the women’s pain for her own artistic profit. For some families and community members, the aestheticization of victimhood, or the turning of violence into art, was simply unacceptable. Drawing on the missing and murdered women as muses for artwork, regardless of motivation or artistic merit, was intolerable. In this case, then, it was not a matter of whether a more respectful remembrance might have been more powerful, but whether such a memorial should be created in the first place.

On the flip side, Masik was also criticized for refusing to “aestheticize” the women’s deaths, or to depict the women as anything other than victims, through her insistence on representing the “ugliness” of the violence they experienced in her detailed depictions of their battered visages.<sup>12</sup> The charge of exploitation is levelled in particular at Masik for the aspects of the portraits that can be deemed sensationalist. Masik took creative licence when she inflicted violence on the canvas to echo what had been done to the women’s bodies. In an interview with CBC Radio’s *As It Happens*, she explains her process in producing an early painting in the series: “Her cheekbone is coming out of the canvas in a sculptural kind of way. Underneath the canvas is a bandage and under the bandage is a garbage bag. With the little hint of a garbage bag, I am questioning the idea of disposability” (quoted in CBC Radio 2011). This is the literalization of metaphor taken to an extreme. It is precisely ideas like “disposability” that haunt the community. Vocal in self-defence, Masik argues, “I did have to speak about the truth of things. The truth is that some went through a horrific end of life. Some of them were murdered” (quoted in CBC Radio 2011). But the question remains whether it is her truth to speak. The larger issue here is whether a representation of violence exposes the “truth” of that violence, or risks on some level re-enacting the violence.<sup>13</sup> Can such violent, if reflective, representations of mothers, sisters and friends be fully justified? Can a mutilated portrait be a dignified memorial? This is also, in some ways, a debate about genre and artistic merit. Would *better* art have been more appropriate? Might another form of representation than painting on an eight-by-ten canvas be less exploitative?

Another element of the charge that the paintings were exploiting the memory of the women was the allegation that Masik seemed to be using the portraits as a way to strengthen her own reputation in the art world. An e-mail message reportedly written to MOA by Corinthia Kelly claims that “‘The Forgotten’ does nothing to stop the violence against women in this community. It exoticizes them and turns them into commodities to promote the ‘Masik brand,’” (quoted in Baron 2011).

This indictment of Masik presents her as a self-serving opportunist. Once again, a critic of the exhibition draws on postcolonial ideas of exoticism and the commodification of memory to articulate her criticism. In this case, the commodity nature of art comes into direct conflict with the stated politics of resistance. Pertinent here is Graham Huggan's criticism of postcoloniality in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, where the market value of an object defines its value and that market value is in turn driven by a desire for exotic representations of difference. I take seriously Huggan's differentiation between the *postcolonialism* of cultural works that function to redress the injustices of imperialism and its aftermath and the *postcoloniality* that operates as a "value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange" and trades in "culturally othered goods" produced in the "alterity industry" (Huggan 2001: 6; vii). Huggan argues that artists often play into a public desire for the exoticized other as "postcolonialism is bound up with postcoloniality" (6). Kelly herself links the artistic production of exoticized portraits of the women with their commodification, and questions Masik's profit motivation. Where Masik is working under the assumption of art as vital social commentary (somewhat akin to the notion of art as resistance along the lines of postcolonialism), her critics' arguments might situate the work as a product of postcoloniality. The use-value of the work (raising awareness about violence) is itself questioned in this framework. Masik received international media attention for the show and subsequently for the cancellation of the exhibition (from multiple national newspaper reports to CBC interviews to the CNN tour during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games). It does make one wonder how much cultural capital Masik accrued as she established a wide-reaching reputation amid, and even through, the controversy. Because publically exhibited art is a commodity (even if there is much debate over who controls its movement and what form profit takes), I think it vital to consider the larger issue here, which is the way in which poverty, oppression and contested histories have sometimes been commodified, and who benefits from such projections.

Who profits is not an easy question to answer. Some might argue that Masik is a working artist, that art should be recognized and valued, and that she has a right to be compensated for five years of work. Further, for several years she has run an art program at the Union Gospel Mission in the DTES. Does this make her part of the community? Worried about the idea of profiting financially from violence done to others, it was suggested that if Masik gave the fee for her exhibition to causes that supported abused women, her exhibition might have been more acceptable. In this view, the show itself was not offensive, but the money that might be made from it is. There is clearly a continuum of responses to the concept of profit and socially motivated art.

One criticism that has been surprisingly quiet—not absent, but quiet—concerns the original choice of venue for the show. A brief consideration of the history of

colonial and neocolonial relations in Canada, or a postcolonial perspective, would point out that MOA is home to collections of centuries of Indigenous artefacts.<sup>14</sup> What might have happened if the portraits of the missing women were surrounded by such artefacts? It is important to note that approximately half of the women in the portraits were Indigenous, and to consider the cultural implications of exhibiting their artistically brutalized countenances in the same museum as totem poles, dugout canoes, Bill Reid's beautiful sculpture *The Raven and the First Men*, and "36,000 ethnographic objects and 535,000 archaeological objects many of which originate from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia" (Museum of Anthropology 2011). Focusing on Northwest Coast Native culture, the MOA aims to educate the public about the long history of Indigenous people and cultures in the Pacific Northwest. As with many cultural institutions, MOA has come under scrutiny in the past for the way it acquired its artefacts, for the very provenance of the objects in its collections, and for the documentary presentation of cultural and spiritual objects. It has responded by working with local Indigenous groups, hiring experts from the community as consultants, and introducing protocols for dealing with First Nations concerns. MOA recently underwent a \$55.5 million renovation. "The Forgotten" project exhibition was meant to inaugurate a new gallery space and to launch the museum's renewed educational mandate and public role as a place for "discussion about difficult issues that have a continuing and powerful resonance in Vancouver" (MOA 2010). When the exhibition was originally announced in early 2010, Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson decried that "This is a part of our city that we cannot close our eyes to, that we will not cover up" (quoted in Baron 2011). The exhibition itself was to be "a catalyst" for discussion about gender discrimination and racialized violence toward women, the director of the museum, Anthony Shelton, announced (quoted in Baron 2011). Once again, as with Masik's artist statement, the impetus for displaying the show in this venue was pedagogical and, to use Rosenberg's term, "emblematic."<sup>15</sup> The organizers of the exhibition do not seem to have fully considered the ramifications of the conjunction of space, history, artistic representations of racialized violence, educational imperative and personal stories.

Surely the venue for this show provided an extension of the anthropological gaze of the museum and highlighted the Aboriginality of many of the victims as objects of distanced study. Further, in all probability, Masik assumed an adult audience for her paintings. However, thousands of schoolchildren visit the museum every year to study First Nations cultures.<sup>16</sup> What kind of explanation would have been sufficient contextual framing for eight-year-old children? Would they have been equipped to understand the movement from the room with the canoes and totem poles to the room with the portraits? Perhaps violence against women could have been a significant part of the educational process of the museum's mandate, and perhaps it could have been appropriately presented for a range of audiences. This was presumably why the Memorial Women's March Committee wanted to create

a “side exhibit,” and, presumably, why the museum opted to cancel the show without sufficient time to create such a companion exhibition. Without such contextualization and without substantial framing in historical and cultural terms, I too wonder if “The Forgotten” project would have been appropriate for that space. I wonder how the story have been different if the show had been set for an art gallery—even one on UBC campus, like the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery—where the portraits would have been more self-reflexively represented as art. Would the viewer in that instance be less of a spectator and more of a witness? Or the other way around? Would a side exhibition have been necessary in that case as well? What if the exhibition had been displayed at the Carnegie Centre, a cultural centre in the DTES? Perhaps a result of the cancellation of “The Forgotten” project is that more consideration will have to be given to such questions by organizers at MOA and other institutional spaces in the future.

In addition to considering issues of space, it is useful to recognize how other artists have created memorials for victims of violence. Masik is not alone in publically telling the stories of victims of gender-based violence, the DTES, or the missing women of Vancouver. In her book *Missing Sarah*, about the life and death of her sister (whose DNA was found on the Pickton farm), Maggie De Vries uses Sarah’s own letters and drawings to tell Sarah’s story as Maggie tells her own story of loss, grief and love. Nancy Lee’s short story “Dead Girls,” in the story collection *Dead Girls*, is a haunting and painful—but fictionalized—exploration of violence in the DTES. It might be said that the story raises the emotional stakes of the issues without violating an individual woman’s right to the dignity of her own stories. Marie Clements’s provocative play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is another fictionalized engagement with the mysteries of women missing from Vancouver’s poor neighbourhoods, as the story follows one woman in search of her mother. Marilyn Dumont’s elegy for Helen Betty Osbourne in the poem of that name and Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* both name and memorialize Indigenous victims of violence (although Highway’s names are changed, he draws on real events).<sup>17</sup> Beyond fiction, the Toronto artist Dorette has done repeated sketches of the missing women in pencil and in oils, and the Anishnabe artist Rebecca Belmore performed *Vigil* at the corner of Cordova and Gore streets in Vancouver, on June 23, 2002, to publicly commemorate the missing women. A recording of this performance is part of Belmore’s video installation *The Named and the Unnamed*. As mentioned above, the fashion photographer Lincoln Clarke photographed hundreds of women in the DTES over a period of several years to create *Heroines*. Gillian Jerome and Brad Cran compiled a series of photographs and stories by the residents of the DTES in *Hope in Shadows*. In 2010, the photographer Gabor Gasztonyi published *A Room in the City*, a collection of photographs of residents of short-term hotels in the DTES. As with “The Forgotten” project, it too has garnered a contradictory set of responses, some calling it appropriation (as Gasztonyi is not a resident of the DTES) and others calling the images fitting

representations of an underrepresented community. The myriad questions I have asked throughout this paper about artistic representations of “real” spaces and people pertain, distinctly, to these works as well.

I am torn over my own response to “The Forgotten” project and its cancellation. To say that I am ambivalent does not mean that I do not care. I care deeply and thus take a concerted position of hesitation in this complex discussion of representations of violence.<sup>18</sup> On one hand, I believe in an artist’s right to create art and to engage with her community. I see artists as fundamental to social critique, view culture as holding the capacity for public education, and fear censorship in response to cultural productions that might be deemed offensive. On the other hand, I believe in an artist’s responsibility to the subject matter of her art and in a victim’s right to dignified remembrance. Further, I worry about who profits from appropriation and exploitation. I suspect that my ambivalence is a part of the legacy of postcolonialism in Canada as well. Brydon’s original answer to “is Canada postcolonial?,” “it depends,” has translated over time to signify an ongoing refusal to see issues in solely oppositional terms. Again, I turn to Rosenberg who writes on the pedagogy of memory, “public remembrance practices can be understood, therefore, as practices of teaching and learning, attempts to prompt and engage people in the development of a historical consciousness that might affect their perceptions of, feelings about, identifications with, and meanings they attribute to the massacre” (28). Part of what we might retain from postcolonialism, too, is a pedagogy of questioning, prompting and learning.

In my readings about memorializations of victims of violence in Canada, I have been struck by a pattern: most critics begin and end with a series of five or six questions. That the questions are unanswerable seems to be part of the point. I find Amber Dean’s comments on critique in her review of *Killing Women and Remembering Women Murdered by Men* particularly useful here. She writes of her own dissatisfaction with critique “as a response to the terrible suffering and violent loss of human life that books like these take up” (Dean 2008: 233). She concludes by saying that

the only thing I seem sure about at this point is that too much certainty seems itself to do a kind of injustice to the stunning complexity that surrounds such representational practices. As such, I intend to make a case here for a practice of critique that importantly retains its critical capacity but is nevertheless something a bit different from how critique is conventionally thought and practised. (Dean 2008: 233)

Following Dean, then, I want to retain my critique of the controversy surrounding the Masik exhibition, but I do not want to take a definitive stand for or against the cancellation. Instead, I want to move laterally and employ the controversy as a springboard for posing further important questions that reach beyond this single

exhibition: What is the role of art in promoting public awareness of injustices? What happens when the rights of the community to learn about violence butt against the rights of individual victims? How is pain represented responsibly and accountably? How complicit is an artist in histories of exploitation through the very act of presentation and reproduction? Is communal grief appropriative? What does respectful memorializing look like? What is the role of cultural productions in shaping both cultural memory and political vision?<sup>19</sup> Such questions have swirled around in the public discussions about this exhibition and in postcolonial discussions in Canada over the past decades. I do not think that they *make* Canada postcolonial, but I do suspect that postcolonial criticism has provoked some of these questions and advanced some of the vocabulary to help productively ask them.

## Notes

1. In spite of the vast quantity of ink spilled over the contentious definition of the term “postcolonial,” I hold to the early notion that postcolonialism temporally begins with the moment of colonial contact (as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* argue [Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 2]) and does not refer to a fictive time “after colonialism.” Conceptually, I follow the succinct definition that postcolonialism is the “continuing process of resistance and reconstruction” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995: 2). Such postcolonialism carries an overt commitment to the politics of place and the history of that space, as well as a framework for studying the production, reception, circulation, and consumption of culture in social, political, and historical contexts. It also emphasizes the role of the writer/artist and de-emphasizes the role of the theorist in instituting change. The historical focus on reconstruction (or social and cultural reimagining) of such an approach is also key. Postcolonialism looks backward (in critical resistance) and forward in what Diana Brydon has called a productive perspective through which “to imagine a more socially equitable future” (Brydon 2003: 50).
2. I am mindful that in doing so, I run the risk of further objectifying the women at the centre of the exhibition, and I am aware of the problems of approaching their stories in a way that may be deemed to be case studies. Jo-Ann Episkenew spoke eloquently about the problems of turning individual people’s stories into academic case studies in “Women Worth Remembering” at the “Forgotten? Women: Gendered Violence Race and Representations” Symposium, Green College, University of British Columbia, November 2010. It is with respect for the missing and murdered women and their families that I engage in this study.
3. In 2006, the trial judge, Justice James Williams, split the twenty-six charges against Pickton into two groups, arguing he did not want to put too much of an unfair burden on the jurors that would come out of an extended trial. Pickton was convicted on the first group of six counts of second-degree murder and was sentenced to twenty-five years without parole. Upon appeal, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the conviction. The remaining counts have been stayed.
4. I am reminded of the opening of Wendy Hesford’s article “Defining Moments.” She begins with a discussion of Yong Soon Min’s “Defining Moments #4” where a photographic image of the Kwanju Uprising and Massacre—when an estimated two thousand Korean citizens were killed while protesting military rule and calling for democratic

elections (Hesford 2001: ix)—is superimposed upon the upper body of the artist. Hesford writes that “superimposing this historical referent on to the photographic flesh of the artist positions the material body as a site marked by the trauma of cultural memory and national conflicts. Yong Soon Min figures her body as an archive of memory, even as she interrogates the dilemma of realist representations by placing the ‘real’ of history in dialogue with the ‘real’ of the body” (ix). In the case of “Defining Moments #4,” the artist chose to articulate herself as traumatized by the massacre. I wonder if Pamela Masik was also trying to mark herself in a similar way by creating herself as #70? Perhaps the implication was meant to be that the ‘real’ history of violence and oppression extends to her as a woman in the community and she too can hold an archive of memory.

5. In an article from February 2010 critical of the “Olympic industrial complex,” Jules Boykoff writes, “while the mainstream media swarm the Downtown Eastside to collect poverty porn for the middle class public consumption, the Vancouver Police Department has been working furiously to sanitize the neighbourhood so it doesn’t undermine the smooth surfaced spectacle Olympic organizers so desperately wish to produce” (Boykoff, *Counterpunch*, February 10, 2010). In this framework, it might be argued that Masik’s CNN tour of the DTES during the Olympics, and perhaps her exhibition by extension, were a similar kind of “poverty porn” for the consumption of the middle class. I leave such an argument for another paper.

6. That posting has since been taken down. I should note that I was not at the Simon Fraser University panel, and I have compiled my information about the events from newspaper reports and conversations with people in attendance.

7. Discussing the concept of “affective contagion,” Sara Ahmed productively cites Anna Gibbs’s argument that “bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear—in short, communicable affect can enflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion” (Gibbs 2001: 1; quoted in Ahmed 2010: 36). Ahmed further emphasizes the significance of contingency of affect, or, “the effect of how an object is given” (Ahmed 2010: 36). I suggest that Masik is relying on the possibility of affective contagion here without acknowledging the concerns of contingency.

8. These comments, there in February 2011, have since disappeared from Masik’s Web page.

9. Similarly, on Wednesday, June 24, 2009, “Lenora, Brenda’s sister” posted a comment on Masik’s Web site: “yes, your paintings, truly have given our women life again. i feel as though Brenda is with me now, in more of a precious light than i could have ever imagined. thank you so much again. you’re paintings have restored my heart and mind and will continue to for the rest of my life” (Masik 2009). Like Kraft, Lenora groups her sister with “our women” in her comment.

10. The Masik exhibition, and its controversy, has generated discussion about violence against women in BC, at least in the academic context. A two-part symposium organized at UBC—“Forgotten? Women: Gendered Violence Race and Representations” and “Colonialism, Marginalization, and Gendered Violence”—was held in the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011.

11. In conversation, Deena Rymhs suggested the notion of proximity as particularly relevant here. I am also reminded of Daniel Heath Justice’s notion of kinship.

12. I am indebted to *Topia*’s anonymous reader for making this point in her/ his report on this article. Indeed, I thank that reader for several important interventions.

13. Again, thanks to the anonymous reader for expanding on this point.

14. See Barbara S. Bruce, “Figures of Collection and (Post)Colonial Processes in Major John Richardson’s *Wacousta* and Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water*” for an excellent discussion of the problems of collections in *Is Canada Postcolonial?*

15. The horrifically large number of Aboriginal women who are victims of violence leads some commentators to see the disappearance of women from the DTES as part of a much larger story about racialized violence and discrimination against urban and non-urban Native women. Speaking in another context, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, the President of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), argues that “violence against Aboriginal women and girls is a national tragedy that demands immediate and concerted action.” She points out that “Aboriginal women in Canada experience rates of violence 3.5 times higher than non-Aboriginal women, and young Aboriginal women are five times more likely to die of violence. NWAC has documented the disappearances and murders of over six hundred Aboriginal women and girls in Canada over about twenty years” and concludes that the “response of law enforcement and other government officials has been slow, often dismissive of reports made by family members of missing women, uncoordinated and generally inadequate” (Feminist Alliance for International Action, December 13, 2011). Indeed, in response to requests by NWAC and the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), among others, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women will conduct an inquiry “into the murders and disappearances of Aboriginal women and girls across Canada” and other “violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” (Feminist Alliance for International Action, December 13, 2011).

16. I accompanied my son’s third-grade class to the museum last year when they studied cedar stripping and basket weaving.

17. See Jennifer Henderson’s “‘Something not unlike enjoyment’: Gothicism, Catholicism, and Sexuality in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*” for details on the links between the original cases and their fictional counterparts in the novel.

18. See my “Hesitating Readers: When The Turn of the Screw Meets Disgrace in the Classroom,” for a discussion of readerly hesitation and “open-ended narrative ambiguity as a kind of literary indeterminacy that sustains discussion of unresolved/irresolvable political and moral issues.”

19. I am paraphrasing Sharon Rosenberg’s points about pedagogy as “tied broadly to cultural practices and to any public, cultural endeavour to shape political visions of the past, present, and / or future” (27).

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