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Renegotiating Identities, Cultures and Histories: Oppositional Looking in Shelley Niro's "This Land is Mime Land"

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Renegotiating Identities, Cultures and Histories:
Oppositional Looking in Shelley Niro's *This Land is Mime Land*

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
The Oka Crisis, Columbus Quincentennial and the Media: Defining Niro as an Oppositional Spectator.....	10
Challenging Conventions and Reclaiming Control: Masquerading in the “Historical” Photographs.....	17
Contesting Invisibility: Reflections on the “Personal” Photographs.....	26
Visions of Plurality and Indeterminacy: Picturing Identities in the “Contemporary” Photographs and Structure.....	40
Conclusion.....	45
Works Cited.....	48

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Shelley Niro, *This Land is Mime Land* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
2. Shelley Niro, *500 Year Itch* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
3. Shelley Niro, *Survivor* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
4. Shelley Niro, *Always a Gentleman* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
5. Shelley Niro, *Camouflaged* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
6. Shelley Niro, *Love Me Tender* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
7. Shelley Niro, *Judge Me Not* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
8. Shelley Niro, *North America Welcome* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.

9. Shelley Niro, *Santa is a Dene* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
10. Shelley Niro, *Final Frontier* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
11. Shelley Niro, *Mohawk Warrior* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
12. Shelley Niro, *The Warning of Snow* from the series *This Land is Mime Land*, 1992. Gelatin silver print heightened with paint, gelatin silver print (toned), and gelatin silver print, on hand-drilled overmat, 56 x 94 cm. Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, Ontario.
13. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled (As Marilyn Monroe)*, 1982. Color-couplet print, 39.37 cm x 23.34 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California.
14. Shelley Niro, *Mohawks in Beehives*, 1991. Series of fourteen hand tinted black and white photographs. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.
15. Edward Curtis, *Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter*, c. 1907-1930. Photogravure. Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, DC.

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ABSTRACT

My master's thesis explores the photographic series *This Land is Mime Land*, which Shelley Niro made in 1992. Despite this work's complex form and structure, there are currently no sustained studies of this series alone, or books solely dedicated to Niro's art. Instead, *Mime Land* is often discussed in compilations that address a number of Native artists, Western feminist practices, or multiple works in Niro's oeuvre. My thesis fills this gap, as I closely investigate how *Mime Land* asks the viewer to look at visual culture, histories and Niro herself. Bell hooks's definition of the "oppositional gaze" – meaning a way of looking that challenges the conventions of visual culture by implementing the media's tools (film and photography) to construct new images of self – provides the framework for my analysis. Specifically, I contend that the subject, form and structure of *Mime Land* critically intervene in mainstream visual culture by asking the viewer to look at Native American women's identities, cultures and histories in new ways; ways that disavow the conventions of dominant visual representations and return the power over one's image to Niro, her family and community. My study demonstrates this thesis through a close consideration of the context contemporary to the work's production; a detailed examination of the photographs in the series; and an analysis of the work's overall structure.

INTRODUCTION

Meet Shelley Niro. Born in 1954, Niro is a Canadian, member of the Mohawk Nation and artist who lives and works in Brantford, Ontario. The artist received a diploma in Performing Arts from Cambrian College in 1972; an Honors Fine Arts Degree in painting and sculpture from the Ontario College of Art in 1990; and a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Western Ontario in 1997.¹ Niro works with several mediums including film, photography, painting, sculpture, collage and beadwork. Her art has been exhibited extensively throughout Canada, the United States and Europe.

Though such biographical facts are interesting, Niro's 1992 photographic series *This Land is Mime Land* introduces Shelley Niro's identity, cultures and histories to us through a much different lens. In *Mime Land*, Niro presents herself to the viewer through thirty-six portraits of either a family member or herself. She mounts these photographs onto twelve separate panels (22 X 37 inches), which she hand-drills with a pattern evoking beadwork. Each panel is composed of three photographs that, from left to right, Niro calls the "Historical," the "Personal" and the "Contemporary" (figures 1-12).²

In the "Historical" photographs, Niro masquerades in a variety of costumes that are mostly reminiscent of Western popular icons, including Marilyn Monroe (*500 Year*

¹ National Gallery of Canada, "Collections: Shelley Niro," accessed February 4, 2012, <http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artist.php?iartistid=24542>.

² Shelley Niro, in conversation with Theresa Harlan, "As in Her Vision: Native American Women Photographers," in *New American Feminist Photographies*, ed. Diane Neumaier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 121.

Itch), Elvis Presley (*Love Me Tender*), Santa Claus (*Santa is a Dené*) and Snow White (*The Warning of Snow*) (figures 2, 6, 9, 12). Niro hand-paints over these photographs with bright, neon colors in monochromatic passages of paint.

In contrast to these colorful images, the “Personal” photographs are all sepia toned snapshots of Niro’s mother, father, daughter, and sisters.³ While some of these photographs are out of focus with grey mid-tones, others are sharp and highly contrasted. They do not follow any temporal or chronological order, but represent a combination of moments, both recent and long past.

The “Contemporary” photographs are again self-portraits of Niro, yet they are quite different from her spectacular masquerades in the “Historical” photographs. In these black and white prints, Niro is barefoot and wearing a plain, loose fitting button-up shirt, jeans, and glasses. These photographs are devoid of any indication of time or place, as Niro’s figure is starkly contrasted against an all black background. In some images, Niro addresses the other photographs in the series, mirroring the stance of the figures depicted there. In other cases, she directly confronts the viewer with her gaze, or else turns her back.

Despite this work’s complex form and structure, there are currently no sustained studies of this series alone, or books solely dedicated to Niro’s art. Instead, *Mime Land* is often discussed in compilations that address a number of Native artists, Western feminist practices, or multiple works in Niro’s oeuvre.⁴ In these studies, scholars commonly argue

³ Shelley Niro, interview by Lawrence Abbott, “Interviews with Loretta Todd, Shelley Niro and Patricia Deadman,” *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 18, no. 2 (1998): 350-353. Even if the viewer did not know that these are photographs of Niro’s family, their visual style clearly invites her to consider them as the vernacular snapshots that one would find in a private family album. I discuss these photographs in-depth later in this thesis.

⁴ Deborah Cox, “Contemporary Photography and Native Identity: Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Richard Ray Whitman, and Shelley Niro” (master’s thesis, University of Memphis, 2003); Rachel Deutsch, “Rebelling

that *Mime Land* addresses stereotypes of Native Americans in Western visual culture (e.g. advertising, television, films and fine arts).⁵ Yet in general, these projects scratch just the surface of this topic without conducting an in-depth analysis that explores *what* misrepresentations Niro addresses and *how* she engages with them. My investigation of *Mime Land* fills this gap, as I closely examine the subject, form and structure of the series in dialogue with the social context contemporary to the work's production.

Other discussions of *Mime Land* (and Niro's works in general) associate Niro's strategies with the photographer Cindy Sherman's.⁶ This is a rather logical comparison,

Against Discourses of Denial and Destruction: Mainstream Representations of Aboriginal Women and Violence; Resistance Through the Art of Rebecca Belmore and Shelley Niro" (master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2008); Theresa Harlan, "As in Her Vision"; Lucy R. Lippard, "Independent Identities," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 134-148; Heather Norris Nicholson, "Making Things Happen Through Parody and Visual Irony: Reflecting on the Work of Shelley Niro," in *Screening Culture: Constructing Image and Identity*, ed. Heather Norris Nicholson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003) 157-168; Alan J. Ryan, "I Enjoy Being a Mohawk Girl: The Cool and Comic Character of Shelley Niro's Photography," *American Indian Art Magazine* 20, no. 1 (1994): 44-53; Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Paula Tharp, *Shooting Constructed Realities: The Self-Defining Art of Native American Women Photographers Shelley Niro and Carm Little Turtle and Selected Poets* (master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1997).

⁵ I use the term "visual culture" throughout this paper to define the broad scope of visual media I consider. In Marita Sturken's and Lisa Cartwright's words: "the term 'visual culture' encompasses many media forms ranging from fine art to popular film and television to advertising to visual data in fields such as sciences, law, and medicine." Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2. I specifically use this term because *Mime Land* challenges a wide array of visual media (not just the fine arts). However, my use of this term does not signify an abandonment of art history and a move to visual culture (or visual studies) as a different academic field or way of studying images (on which see Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* [London: MIT Press, 2005]). While my approach shares commonalities with visual studies, as I am interested in spectatorship and a broad range of visual media, I do not share the limited view of art history that some practitioners of visual culture have. Instead, I find that close attention to diverse visual practices is essential to the most advanced art history at this time. For a more in-depth discussion of the debate over visual culture studies vs. art history, see: Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003); W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 336-356; Marquand Smith, "Visual Culture Studies: Questions of History, Theory, and Practice," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 470-490; "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25-70.

⁶ Brandon Taylor, *Contemporary Art: Art Since 1970* (New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, 2005), 190; Phoebe Farris, *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to 20th Century Artists in the Americas* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 55; Phoebe Farris, "Racializing Gender: Women Photographers from the Seventies to the Millennium," *Camerawork* 26, no. 2 (1999): 45; Joanna Osburn Bigfeather, "Curator's Statement," in *Native Views: Influences of Modern Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Artrain

as both artists work in photography, masquerade, and refer to popular culture. Yet, problematically, this connection is often hastily made to imply that Niro's projects are similar to Sherman's, which consequently foregoes a close analysis of Niro's methods.

Specifically, art historians commonly define the works of Cindy Sherman as deconstructing gender. In Sherman's well known series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) for example, the artist masquerades as feminine personas from Hollywood films in staged "stills." Rosalind Krauss famously analyzes Sherman's tactics in this series by evoking Barthes's definition of the "myth" to argue that Sherman's "stills" function as "de-mythifiers."⁷ "Myths," according to Barthes, are a second order semiological system (language is the first). They are produced when the sign of the first order system (i.e.: the word "woman") is emptied of its original meaning and filled with a new history.⁸ Krauss argues that Sherman's photographs ask us to consider how such "myths" are constituted, and by extension recognize gender as an ideological construct. Specifically, Krauss argues that Sherman's "stills" have no original filmic source in order to reveal that gender similarly has no essential origin.⁹ Rather, in Krauss's words, Sherman's works show that "woman is nothing but masquerade, nothing but image."¹⁰

USA, 2004), exhibition catalog, 7; Lee-Ann Martin, "Shelley Niro: Flying Woman (Bay of Quinte Mohawk)," in *After the Storm: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2001*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 2001), exhibition catalog, 62.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 110.

⁸ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 93-149.

⁹ Krauss, *Bachelors*, 114.

¹⁰ Ibid. This interpretation of Sherman's works is similarly argued by a number of scholars. For instance, Norman Bryson in "House of Wax" argues that Sherman's works refute the notion of an original or fixed identity: "Sherman convinces the viewer that her various images are indeed different presences, but that 'behind' those there stands no central core of identity. The sense of identity – of each image as bodying forth a different presence – becomes manifestly a product of a manipulation of the complex social codes of appearance, a pure surface." Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in *Cindy Sherman: 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), exhibition catalog, 218. Also Andy Grundberg argues that in her *Untitled Film Stills* Sherman "unmasks the conventions of not only film noir but also of woman-as-depicted-object." Andy

Many scholars similarly interpret other feminist art projects in the 1980s and 1990s as deconstructing identity categories and revealing the power relations underlying visual discourses.¹¹ Yet because these interpretations primarily focus on what these works deconstruct, they rarely consider the ways some feminist works from this period construct “new, ‘positive’ images of revised femininity,”¹² which propose social change. As a result, while I find deconstructive interpretations and artistic approaches useful, I also find them limited.¹³ Thus, while my analysis does argue that *Mime Land* deconstructs discursively produced categories, I also move beyond this theoretical slant to examine how Niro uses photography as a tool to promote social action by producing new images of Native women in the visual realm.

Specifically, I argue that *Mime Land* encourages the viewer to look oppositionally. The notion of the “oppositional gaze,” which is crucial to frame my

Grundberg, *The Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography, 1974-1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990), 7; also see Laura Mulvey, “A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman,” *New Left Review* 1/188 (July-August, 1991): 137-150.

¹¹ This tendency is discussed in Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 4th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 380-395; Laura Cottingham, “The Feminist Continuum: Art After 1970,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 276-287; Craig Owen, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” (1983) in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 487-502; Mira Schor, “Backlash and Appropriation,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, 248-263. Also see Laura Mulvey on the male gaze of Western Cinema: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (1975), in *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 44-53.

¹² Owen, “The Discourse of Others,” 496. Owen further says that constructing such new images of femininity “would simply supply and thereby prolong the life of the existing representational apparatus.” Ibid. As I argue throughout my thesis, I disagree with this position and think that the construction of new models of femininity is a crucial project for feminist art practices like Niro’s.

¹³ This line of thought was inspired by the course “Advanced Feminist Theory” that I took with Dr. Sara Crawley at University of South Florida in Spring 2010. In this course we discussed the limitations of queer theory (whose primary goal is generally deconstruction) and feminist theory (whose goal is to eliminate gender inequality), and explored ways to unite these two seemingly incompatible projects. For examples of projects that unify queer and feminist approaches, see: Sara Crawley, Lara Foley and Constance Shehan, *Gendering Bodies* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); and Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Crawley, Foley and Shehan argue that gendered bodies are discursively produced, but also consider how to resist cultural messages (i.e. discourses) that form expectations of normative gender categories. In *Queering the Color Line*, Somerville uses a queer methodology, but takes into account specific social-historical circumstances, and explores the way gender, race and sexuality intersect.

interpretation of Niro's work, has been articulated in two articles by bell hooks: "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators"¹⁴ and "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life."¹⁵ In these articles, hooks defines the "oppositional" gaze as a mode of looking that socially and culturally marginalized spectators develop in Western visual culture. She specifically focuses on black women, whom mainstream media often characterizes as debased caricatures (e.g.: the mammy and welfare queen) or just simply excludes. In response to such images (or lack of representation), bell hooks argues that critical marginalized spectators look oppositionally to question and challenge the conventions of visual culture, and implement the media's tools (film and photography) to construct new images of self.¹⁶

As an example of "oppositional looking," hooks describes the movie *A Passion of Remembrance* (1986) by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien. Hooks first defines Blackwood and Julien as critical observers of visual culture, who "retheorize subjectivity in the realm of the visual"¹⁷ by constructing a film that affirms black female protagonists as active spectators. Hooks then describes a scene in the film to articulate the revised visions of black femininity it promotes:

Dressing to go to a party, Louise and Maggie [the black female protagonists in the film] claim the 'gaze.' Dancing to the tune 'Let's Get Loose,' they display their bodies not for a voyeuristic colonizing gaze but for that look of recognition that affirms subjectivity – that constitutes them as spectators. Mutually empowered they eagerly leave the privatized domain to confront the public. Disrupting conventional racist and sexist stereotypical representations of black female bodies, these scenes *invite the audience to look differently*. They act to critically intervene and

¹⁴ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 197-213.

¹⁵ bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994).

¹⁶ hooks, "Oppositional Gaze."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

*transform conventional filmic practices, changing notions of spectatorship.*¹⁸[italics mine]

As hooks conveys in this paragraph, artists who are oppositional viewers of mainstream visual culture, such as Blackwood and Julien, make films that encourage viewers to denaturalize how we are led to look at minority women in Western media by constructing new models.

In this paper, I argue that *Mime Land* similarly invites its viewers to enact an oppositional gaze. I contend that the subject, form and structure of *Mime Land* critically intervene in mainstream visual culture by asking the viewer to look at Native American women's identities, cultures and histories in new ways; ways that disavow the conventions of dominant visual representations and return the power over one's image to Niro, her family and community. My study demonstrates this thesis through a close consideration of the context contemporary to the work's production; a detailed examination of the "Historical," "Personal" and "Contemporary" photographs; and an analysis of the work's overall structure.

In the first section, I contextualize *Mime Land* in order to articulate Niro's own attitude toward visual culture and suggest that when she made *Mime Land*, she herself was an oppositional spectator of the mass media. This is important as Niro presents herself in *Mime Land* as not only the maker of the work, but also, as I will discuss, as a subject and spectator. I also show that Niro clearly voiced her desire to construct images that would encourage this oppositional mode of looking.

In the following section, I propose a close comparison between Niro's "Historical" photographs and one of Sherman's works, as Niro's art (as I previously

¹⁸ Ibid., 212.

discussed) is so commonly described as “Cindy Shermanesque.” I argue that while these two artists use similar strategies, Niro’s work departs from Sherman’s because *Mime Land* does not reproduce the conventions of visual culture. Rather in the “Historical” photographs, Niro uses photography as a tool to redefine herself on her own terms.¹⁹

The third section focuses on the central “Personal” snapshots, which have generally received very little to no scholarly attention. I examine the relation between these family photographs and the ongoing colonization, misrepresentations, and absence of Native women, cultures and histories in contemporary society. Specifically, in this section I argue that these “Personal” photographs, which Niro collects from her own family archive,²⁰ contest this absence of Native women.

The final section focuses on the “Contemporary” photographs and the structure of the series as a whole. I begin by analyzing the assumption that the “Contemporary” photographs are the product of the “Historical” and “Personal” prints (or Niro’s true self), which is the most common interpretation of this group of photographs.²¹ I argue that these approaches are problematic because once identities become fixed they can be reified as popular caricatures and stereotypes. By contrast, I contend that the “Contemporary” photographs and the work’s structure leave the viewer with indeterminacy and plurality, which counters notions of an authentic or true identity.

¹⁹ There are interpretations of Niro’s various works by authors including Teresa Harlan, Nancy Marie Mithlo, and Alan Ryan, which read her art as constructing new images of Native women, and it is in dialogue with their voices that I write this paper. In particular, my analysis offers a more in-depth and sustained analysis of *Mime Land* and the context contemporary to its production. Particularly important for my thinking have been: Theresa Harlan, “As in her Vision”; Nancy Marie Mithlo, “Reappropriating Redskins *Pellerossasogna* (Red Skin Dreams): Shelley Niro at the 50th La Biennale di Venezia,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 20, no. 2 (2005): 22-35; and Alan J. Ryan, “Postmodern Parody: A Political Strategy in Contemporary Canadian Native Art,” *Art Journal* 51, no. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 59 – 65.

²⁰ Niro quoted in Abbott, “Interview,” 350

²¹ Lippard, “Independent Identities,” 146; National Gallery of Canada, “Collections: *This Land is Mime Land*,” accessed February 4, 2012, <http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=94996>; Zena Pearlstone, “Shelley Niro,” *American Indian Art Magazine* (35th Anniversary Issue) 36, no. 1 (2010): 61; Ryan, “I Enjoy Being a Mohawk Girl,” 51.

Niro's ambiguous figure intervenes in the representation of Native women as static caricatures, and instead asks viewers to recognize Niro's identity as plural and continuously evolving.²²

²² Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Second Wave*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 300-315.

THE OKA CRISIS, COLUMBUS QUINCENTENNIAL AND THE MEDIA: DEFINING NIRO AS AN OPPOSITIONAL SPECTATOR

Niro made *Mime Land* during a politically tumultuous time in Canada. She produced the work immediately following the Oka Crisis in 1990 (a land conflict between the Mohawk community at Kanehsatake and the Oka, Québec and Canadian governments) and in the same year as the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992 (the 500 year anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas). Importantly, the media accounts of both events generated a great deal of controversy. This section analyzes this historic context and Niro's critical, oppositional posture toward this media coverage.²³

The Oka Crisis was a land conflict that roused tensions between the Mohawk community and Canadian government in the early 1990s. Though the Crisis was not long (about six months) it quickly escalated to national levels, received ample media attention, and illuminated the ongoing colonization of Native communities in Canada. The Crisis began when Mayor Jean Ouellette of Oka announced his plans to expand an already existing nine-hole golf course to an eighteen-hole course with a luxury housing development. The golf course would have extended onto a Mohawk burial ground and spiritual plot of land traditionally used by the Mohawks called "The Pines." Regardless, the Mayor decided to proceed with the golf course without the consent of the Mohawk

²³ I would like to thank Riccardo Marchi for encouraging me from the very initial stages of my thesis to examine *Mime Land* in relation to the social, political and historical context. His insights and guidance were truly invaluable to the development of my project.

community, even stating ““you know you can’t talk to the Indians.””²⁴ In response, on March 10, 1990 the Mohawks assembled a barricade on the dirt road leading into the Pines to challenge the expansion. When the protesters refused to retreat, the SQ (Sûreté du Québec, or the Québec police force) moved in on July 11, 1990. Their advance led to an outbreak of gunfire in which Corporal Marcel Lemay was shot and killed. After the shootings, the nearby Mohawk community at Kahnawake barricaded the roads leading to their reserve in solidarity with the protestors at Oka. These barricades blocked the only easy access into Montreal over the Mercier Bridge, which led to increased tensions and many often racist demonstrations by non-Native commuters. At one point, protesters even burnt a Native American effigy.²⁵

In general, the news coverage of the Oka Crisis was extremely biased. For one, the footage documenting the events was inevitably one-sided because federal funding for Native-produced newspapers was fully cut in March, 1990.²⁶ Mainstream journalists generally lacked enough background information on the land disputes to accurately communicate the issues central to the debate.²⁷ This insufficient coverage of the Crisis

²⁴ Elizabeth Andrea Keller, “Anglos with Feathers: A Content Analysis of French and English Media Coverage in Québec on the Oka Crisis of 1990” (master’s thesis, Concordia University, 1994), 30-31.

²⁵ *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, documentary VHS, directed by Alanis Obamsawin (Montreal, Québec: National Film Board of Canada, 1993). After months of negotiations some agreements were reached, and the Mercier Bridge was reopened on September 6, 1990. The protesters finally left the Pines on September 26, 1990. Though they departed peacefully without guns, many of the protesters were violently arrested by the army. The land issues remained unresolved, but the golf course was not built. See Lorna Roth, “Media and the Commodification of Crisis,” in *Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order*, ed. Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais (London: Sage, 1992), 144-161.

²⁶ Roth, “Media,” 149.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 154. It is important to note that there is a very long history of conflict over this land between the Mohawks and non-Natives. For more information on this, as well as the general information on the Oka Crisis, see Roth, “Media”; Keller, “Anglos with Feathers”; and Obamsawin, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, documentary VHS.

illuminated the scarcity of Native journalists and lack of knowledge about Indigenous histories in the Canadian mass media.²⁸

The Army also secured primary control over how the media represented the events and tried to silence the voices of Mohawks and their sympathizers. Officials even characterized the journalists with the Mohawks in the Pines as suffering from “Stockholm Syndrome” – when hostages begin to identify with their captors – in order to discredit their stories.²⁹ In the last month of the Crisis, the Army also cut off all cell phone lines in the Pines, which made it impossible for the journalists who remained there to communicate their reports.³⁰

The Native community in Canada in no way reacted passively to such attempts to censor their voice. Rather, film and photography played a central role in enabling the Mohawks and their supporters to circulate their stories. Immediately following the Crisis for instance, many documentaries and books with vivid photographs were produced that highlighted the accounts of the Mohawk activists and the long history of disputes over the land.³¹

As a Mohawk woman living in Brantford, Ontario, Niro was considerably engaged with the Oka Crisis, which is evidenced by her direct allusions to this phenomenon in *Mime Land*. As example, in the “Personal” photograph of *Judge Me Not*

²⁸ Elizabeth Saccá reflects at length on how the media handled the Crisis, and the way they ignored or rendered invisible Native histories and voice. Elizabeth J. Saccá, “Art, Native Voice, and Political Crisis: Reflections on Art Education and the Survival of Culture at Kanehsatake,” *Visual Arts Research* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 37.

²⁹ Roth, “Media,” 148.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ As a few examples, the following are all documentaries made about the Crisis: *Okanada*, documentary VHS, directed by Albert Nerenberg (Montreal, Québec: Les Productions Maximage, 1991); *Acts of Defiance*, documentary VHS, directed by Alec MacLeod (Québec: National Film Board of Canada, 1992); *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, documentary VHS; *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*, documentary VHS, directed by Alanis Obamsawin (Montreal, Québec: National Film Board of Canada, 2000); *Keepers of Fire*, documentary VHS, directed by Christine Welsh (Montreal, Québec: National Film Board of Canada, 2007);

(figure 7), the central figure holds a sign that refers to Oka. The sign clearly reads “Our land, our government, our future, our heritage,” with a picture of three Native Americans over a map. The posters the protesters carry in the background also refer to the Crisis, as they say “Kaneshatake Mohawk Nation” and “Peaceful Resolution.” Furthermore, the title of the panel *Mohawk Warrior* (figure 11) cites a guerrilla group involved in the Crisis, called the Mohawk Warriors, whose hyper-masculine image the mass media lumped all the Mohawk activists under.³² Even the title of the work – *This Land is Mime Land* – alludes to not only the well known Woody Guthrie song, but also the title of a book published in 1991 on the Crisis: *This Land is Our Land: The Mohawk Revolt at Oka*.³³

The way that Niro discusses the Oka Crisis furthermore suggests a critical assessment of the role the media played. In a 1996 interview with Heather Norris Nicholson, Niro states:

Let’s look at Oka, momentarily. What would have happened if the CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] were not there with the cameras, the journalists, and up-to-minute commentary, giving us twenty-four hour coverage?... Looking at technology and seeing how it works is an important job for any community. We cannot take its use for granted and we cannot let images out without giving any consideration. Being a part

³² Gail Valaskakis describes the media’s Warriors in the following passage: “The summer of crisis in Québec is remembered in startling media images of rock-throwing townspeople and scuffling Indians, staring soldiers and crying children. But in all the media coverage, one image emerged as salient in the Mohawk crisis: the image of the ‘Warrior’ – bandana-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting Indians who dominated the news accompanied by headlines of ‘Rough Justice: After Oka Will the Violence Spread?’ (Maclean’s, 6 Aug. 1990); ‘Mohawk Militancy’ (Ottawa Citizen, 15 Sept. 1990); ‘The Mohawk Warriors: Heroes or Thugs?’ (Toronto Star, 24 Nov. 1990); ‘The Making of a Warrior?’ (Saturday Night, April 1991); and Aislin’s political cartoon of the ‘Mafia Warrior.’ (Montreal Gazette, 30 April 1990).” Gail Valaskakis, “Rights and Warriors: First Nations, Media and Identity,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 25, no. 1 (January 1994): 61.

³³ Craig MacLaine and Michael S. Baxendale, *This Land is Our Land: The Mohawk Revolt at Oka* (Montréal: Optimum Publishing International, 1990).

of that mishandling makes us sensitive in how we want to bring instruments of technology and how we are going to incorporate their use.³⁴

In this statement, Niro clearly articulates her position toward visual culture. She recognizes that the media can circulate misrepresentations, but she also champions “instruments of technology” (i.e.: film and photography) as important tools to change such distorted images.

The Columbus Quincentennial is also an event that sparked heated debates in the year Niro made *Mime Land*. The Quincentennial in 1992 marked the five-hundred year anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. Niro was certainly engaged with the conflicts the Quincentennial raised, as she directly alludes to this event in *Mime Land* as well. For instance, the title of the panel *500 Year Itch* (figure 2) defines, as Teresa Harlan argues, the “500 years of contact as an intolerable itch to Native peoples.”³⁵ The Quincentennial is also the subject of the film Niro produced immediately after *Mime Land* titled *It Starts with a Whisper* (1992).

Like the Oka Crisis, the Quincentennial generated a good deal of media coverage in the early 1990s. Popular films, documentaries, exhibitions and news stories varied from celebratory accounts of Columbus to condemnatory criticisms of the colonization and genocide of Native Americans that ensued upon his arrival.³⁶ Consequently, like the

³⁴ Shelley Niro, private communication with Heather Norris Nicholson, 23 August 1996, in Norris Nicholson, “Making Things Happen,” 162. Norris Nicholson also makes the point that the role of television and media were central to Niro’s later works in the 1990s (*Honey Moccasins* [1991] and an Exhibition she co-devised with Nancy Paterson, *How The Rest Was Won* [1997]). As Norris Nicholson states: “Both projects, in different ways, examine the media’s capacity to frame, construct, and manipulate people’s understanding of events and explore how modern technology can both empower and disable in its role as mass and mis-communicator.” (Ibid.) In this section I build on such insights, as she does not discuss these themes in relation to *Mime Land*.

³⁵ Harlan, “As In Her Vision,” 122.

³⁶ For instance, Schuman, Schwartz and D’Arcy’s study of sixty-two articles found that fourteen provided positive accounts of Columbus, nine were negative, nine were mixed, and the rest were not relevant. Their

Oka Crisis, the media's accounts of the Quincentennial defined visual culture as a place where colonial myths (like Columbus's "discovery") are both perpetuated and challenged.

What Niro says about why she works with photography additionally confirms her sensitivity to the role of the media as a potential ideological weapon, but also as a tool.

As she states in 1995:

The reason I use technology in my work is that a lot of the people I hang out with are Indian photographers and they're also very interested in media and how media portrays Indian people... about ten or fifteen years ago we'd all get together and talk about how we could change this image-making of Indian people. And it comes down to ourselves making that change. So we're using that technology as a way of addressing how technology was used in the imaging of Indian people. And when you get into these certain circles, there's even a patriarchy in minority groups, so I want to address the use of the female image in that sort of portrayal as well, so that's why I use a lot of female figures in my work.³⁷

In this statement, Niro uses language that defines her as a critical, oppositional spectator of Western media who wishes to use photography to challenge and change the image of Native women in visual culture. In the sections that follow, I analyze how Niro

analysis of the exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum on Columbus for the Quincentennial also suggests a more balanced portrayal of the figure. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the New York Times published a total of fifty stories on the Quincentennial. In the same study eighteen were negative accounts of Columbus (or at least mentioned revisionist ideas) and the other thirty-two were entirely positive. During 1992, a series of seven one hour public TV documentaries – *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* – were aired that presented a more balanced representation of Columbus as both positive and negative. Two Hollywood action movies that were released though in 1992 – *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* and *1492: Conquest of Paradise* – mostly represented Columbus in a positive light. To date, many lingering, controversial cultural signifiers commemorating him remain in our culture including Elementary School books, paintings, statues, the recognition of "Columbus Day," and the thousands of schools, natural sites and other locations named after him. Howard Schuman, Barry Schwartz, Hannah D'Arcy, "Elite Revisionists and Popular Beliefs: Christopher Columbus, Hero or Villain?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (Spring, 2005): 19-23.

³⁷ Shelley Niro, quoted in Jan Allen, *Femscript: Transcript of the Proceedings of the Symposium on Feminist Art Practice, 29 January 1995, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario* (Kingston, Ont.: Organization of Kingston Women Artists, 1996), 27-28.

accomplishes this in *Mime Land*, as the work invites viewers to look at Native American women, cultures and histories in new, constructive ways.

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS AND RECLAIMING CONTROL: MASQUERADING IN THE “HISTORICAL” PHOTOGRAPHS

This section focuses on the first photographs on every panel, which Niro calls the “Historical” photographs. In these prints, the artist presents herself masquerading as personas from mainstream visual culture. Past studies often quickly define these tactics as similar to Cindy Sherman’s methods because Niro’s masquerades (like Sherman’s) refer to popular culture.³⁸ While this quick association renders Niro’s strategies immediately familiar, as Sherman is a very well-known artist who has countless exhibitions and books dedicated to her, such comparisons generally lack an in-depth consideration of the crucial differences between the artists’ methods. By contrast, in this section I conduct a close comparison between Niro’s “Historical” photographs and one of Sherman’s early works. I argue that while Niro’s and Sherman’s strategies are similar, Niro’s work departs from the latter’s as she constructs what I call “new texts.” I then move to a close consideration of the “Historical” photographs in dialogue with Niro’s words and Native feminist politics to argue that these “new texts” disavow the ideologies and conventions of mainstream popular culture.³⁹

³⁸ Taylor, *Contemporary Art*, 190; Farris, *Women Artists of Color*, 55; Farris, “Racializing Gender,” 45; Bigfeather, “Curator’s Statement,” 7; Martin, “Shelley Niro: Flying Woman,” 62.

³⁹ I would like to thank Elisabeth Fraser for recommending that I conduct a close comparison between Sherman’s and Niro’s works. Her expertise in feminist art history and postcolonial studies has helped to advance my thinking on this project in a number of ways.

In both Niro's masquerade as Marilyn Monroe in *500 Year Itch* (figure 2) and Cindy Sherman's take on the same icon in her work *Untitled (As Marilyn Monroe)* (1982) (figure 13), the artists photograph themselves "wearing" femininity, yet they do so in different ways. In *Untitled* for instance, Sherman performs femininity with careful precision. In this frame, Sherman's slacks and buttoned shirt, (which recall Monroe's more casual outfits), fit the artist's slender frame to a T. Sherman's own hair is bleached blonde, and her makeup is carefully applied to accentuate her blue eyes, white skin, rouged cheeks and red lips. The space she crouches in reads as "real," with floorboards and hints of a chair in the upper right corner. As Laura Mulvey argues, Sherman's strategy here is to meticulously reconstruct femininity in order to denaturalize gender as a performance. As Mulvey states: "Sherman-the-model dresses up in character, while Sherman-the artist reveals her character's masquerade."⁴⁰ Yet while this photograph is meant to deconstruct femininity, Sherman's masquerade is so precise that viewers not aware that Sherman is an artist could arguably mistake this print for an actual film still.⁴¹

Conversely, viewers of Niro's campy masquerade in *500 Year Itch* would not confuse this photograph with a genuine still. In this print, Niro exaggerates the artifice of Monroe's performance by parodying the icon's famous moment above a subway grate in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). The artist adorns herself in a "Marilynesque" dress, gaudy costume jewelry and what is obviously a wig. She exposes a number of "behind the scenes" props, as she sashays playfully against a contrived black curtain, grips the shutter release cable in her hand and straddles an electric fan that causes her skirt to billow out.

⁴⁰ Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 141.

⁴¹ Mira Schor argues this point in "Backlash and Appropriation," 255.

In sum, Niro adapts Monroe's starlet status to her own body on her own terms, as she presents herself thriving in an artificial world she herself constructs.

Niro's fabricated performance (much more than Sherman's) furthermore denaturalizes Monroe's whiteness. Markedly, Monroe's persona has long been associated with whiteness: from her light skin, dyed platinum blonde hair, to her white costumes, apartments and dressing rooms.⁴² Niro's masquerade subverts Monroe's whiteness by highlighting and then contradicting it. The Mohawk artist wears a glaringly white "Marilynesque" dress, white (not blonde) wig, and then pairs this exaggerated whiteness with a reference to the five hundred years of European colonization of Native Americans in the panel's title (*500 Year Itch*). Consequently, Niro reveals and parodies Monroe's whiteness as a criterion for iconic beauty in Western visual culture, which is so often rendered invisible.⁴³

Another striking difference between these two works is the viewer's relation to the photographed subject. Sherman's performance in *Untitled* for instance exudes vulnerability and distress.⁴⁴ As Ken Johnson notes in a review discussing Sherman's 1980s color photographs (such as *Untitled [As Marilyn Monroe]*): "There is... an atmosphere of depressed anxiety, the feeling that something still remains to happen."⁴⁵

In this photograph, Sherman gazes out to the right suggesting an outside, daunting

⁴² Lois Banner, "The Creature from the Black Lagoon: Marilyn Monroe and Whiteness," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 6.

⁴³ A later exhibition in 2009 in Victoria, BC – "The World Upside Down" – presented this photograph precisely in this light. As the curator states, *500 Year Itch* presents "'a perceived inversion to illuminate the extent to which 'whiteness; functions as an invisible standard, a default ethnicity that is all the more entrenched for remaining unspoken.'" Robert Amos, "Topsy-Turvey Show Delights; World Upside Down is One of Several Superb Exhibits at AGGV," *Times Colonist*, 21 June 2009, C3.

⁴⁴ In "Phantasmagoria," Mulvey further suggests that in *Untitled (As Marilyn Monroe)*, Sherman is showing the hardship behind the glamour of performing Monroe, as the icon famously suffered from depression and possibly committed suicide. As Mulvey argues: "Marilyn's masquerade fails to mask her interior anxiety, and unhappiness seems to seep through the cracks." Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 149.

⁴⁵ Ken Johnson, "Cindy Sherman and the Anti-Self: An Interpretation of Her Imagery," *Arts Magazine*, no. 62 (November 1987), 49.

presence or perhaps inner turmoil. She crouches in a confined, cramped space and clutches her leg to her body. The artist crops the photograph so that her form spills out into the viewer's space, which further suggests instability. As the viewer towers over Sherman's cowering figure, it is clear that the artist is not the one in control: instead, the viewer enacts a dominant, voyeuristic position over Sherman's body. As Mulvey argues, this hovering perspective is part of Sherman's strategy to "'capture' the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms."⁴⁶ In other words, Sherman reproduces a voyeuristic way of looking at white women, common to classical cinema, to make viewers increasingly aware of the relations of power caught up in how they look.⁴⁷

In stark contrast, Niro clearly presents herself in complete control over her body and image. This is not particular to *500 Year Itch*, as her masquerades in all the "Historical" photographs deny voyeurism completely. Her costumes do not reveal but generally cover most of her body. She also paints over all the photographs to declare her active hand in the process of making. In some prints she even paints over her own flesh, which could be understood to deny the viewer direct access to her body and suggests Niro's complete control over herself. She also forcefully defines herself as an active spectator with agency over her own representation in all these shots by holding the shutter release in her hand, staring directly out at the viewer, and choosing to wear her glasses.⁴⁸ Niro additionally crops the prints to her figure, which further signifies her

⁴⁶ Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," 142.

⁴⁷ For a full discussion on the "male gaze" see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 44-53. Note that there has been a lot published challenging Mulvey's argument, as she universalizes the concept of "woman" without taking into consideration race, class or sexuality. Bell hooks's article "The Oppositional Gaze," (which is the theoretical backbone of this paper), is one text that directly challenges Mulvey's argument by considering black female spectatorship.

⁴⁸ As Mary Ann Doane argues, wearing glasses is a motif in mainstream cinema that signifies active looking. As example, it is the classic moment in many films when the mousey, intelligent woman gets a makeover and removes her glasses. Thus, she is transformed from spectator to spectacle. As Doane

control over her own person and the space she inhabits. In short, Niro refuses to be a consumable spectacle: she disallows voyeuristic objectification by presenting herself as a confident figure with authority over her own representation.

For Niro, masquerading itself is also an important strategy to establish control. In a 1992 interview, in which Niro discussed her work *Mohawks in Beehives* (figure 14), she defined her choice to dress up in these terms. Significantly, *Mohawks* is very similar to *Mime Land*, and she completed both in the same overarching context. Like *Mime Land*, *Mohawks* is a series of multiple hand painted photographs (fourteen) where Niro herself (and in *Mohawks* her sisters) masquerade in rich costumes that recall 1950s Hollywood fashions.⁴⁹ The artist also links the Oka Crisis to both works: while Niro (as previously argued) refers to the Oka Crisis in *Mime Land*, she moreover names the Crisis as the underlying motivation for *Mohawks*. Specifically, she states that she created *Mohawks* because Oka left her feeling “powerless,” and that to “take control,” she decided to get together with her sisters and be “outrageous” and “goofy” by masquerading.⁵⁰ Thus, when Niro produced *Mime Land*, she clearly associated masquerading with control; specifically, control over her own representation.

describes: “The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses... she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire.” Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 82-83. Contemporary films such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *She’s All That* (1999), and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996) continue to perpetuate this motif.

⁴⁹ A more thorough description of *Mohawks* is provided in: Alan J. Ryan, “I Enjoy Being a Mohawk Girl,” 45.

⁵⁰ Niro states this in an interview where she discusses *Mohawks*. In her words: “Oka was draining, and I felt powerless, because I saw there was very little that I could do. To avoid a spiritual depression, rather than doing an ambitious but ineffective ‘down with Mulroney’ piece [the Prime Minister of Canada at the time], I decided to show what I was feeling. So I asked my sisters to spend a crazy day with me, be goofy, to just take control and make what we wanted.” Shelley Niro, quoted in Deirdre Hanna, “Shelley Niro's Photos Slyly Satirize Stereotypes,” on website of Mercer Union: Centre for Contemporary Art, Archives, “East Gallery: Shelley Niro *Mohawks in Beehives* and Other Works,” <http://www.mercerunion.org/archive95/323.html>.

Therefore, as this comparison has shown, while Niro and Sherman use similar strategies, their works are quite different. In *Untitled (As Marilyn Monroe)*, Sherman's masquerade is meticulous. She reproduces Monroe's performance of femininity and the dominant white, heterosexual, male gaze of classical cinema to ask the viewer to deconstruct how visual culture produces gender. In contrast, in *500 Year Itch* Niro embraces artifice, subverts Monroe's whiteness, and pictures herself as an active spectator in complete control over her body and representation. In this photograph Niro clearly does not try to pass as Monroe, but instead constructs what I call "new texts."

These new texts (or images of self) that Niro produces furthermore defy mainstream media conventions that dictate the roles that she, as a Native American woman, is expected to occupy. For one, the artist's choice to never masquerade as a stereotype of Native women in Western visual culture⁵¹ (e.g.: excessively spiritual earth mothers, passive squaws, and Indian Princesses)⁵² exemplifies an act of resistance against mainstream popular culture, which tries to ideologically fix Native women as such images. Rather, in these photographs, Niro decides who she wants to be and redefines that persona on her own terms.

Costumed as a ballerina in *Survivor* (figure 3) for instance, Niro confronts the viewer as a full figured Mohawk woman with her hands firmly planted on her hips and a severe gaze. She fashions the cacophonous array of an eye patch, jazzercise leotard, leggings, and a hot pink tutu fasted with a thick belt around her waist. Niro complements this garb with golden slippers and a mane of neon blue hair. Her campy performance and assertive gestures refuse to conform to the mainstream image of a waiflike, "graceful

⁵¹ The exception of this is *Mohawk Warrior*, but importantly this is a stereotype of Native men not women.

⁵² These stereotypes are discussed in Lippard, "Independent Identities," 135.

ballerina”; alternately the artist’s outrageous performance refashions this persona in ways that emphasize her own strength, control and presence. She refuses to be a victim of the codes of popular culture or the media’s gaze, as she defies their conventions by actively re-defining what a ballerina looks like and who can be one.

As a further example, in *Santa is a Dené* (figure 9) Niro evokes the quintessential European patriarch: jolly old Saint Nick. In this photograph, Niro appropriates and reworks the icon Santa Claus by juxtaposing an image of herself (a biological woman) in a Santa suit with a title that redefines Santa as a Dené (an aboriginal group of First Nations in the Northern regions of Canada). With this gesture, Niro appropriates this persona – a commercial, white, patriarchal figure – and in dialogue with her own body redefines Santa Claus as a woman and Native American. Santa is now a matriarchal figure who, as a Dené, privileges Niro’s cultures and histories.

Niro’s gender bending in *Santa is a Dené*, *Always a Gentleman* and *Mohawk Warrior* (figures 9, 4, 11) additionally transgresses the limitations of established Western gender categories. In *Mohawk Warrior*, Niro cites the hyper-masculine guerilla group who the mass media used to represent the Mohawk community during the Oka Crisis.⁵³ In this photograph the artist wears an oversized jacket that hides her form, large boots, sunglasses, and a hard hat. While this gendered costume initially reads as male, she disrupts this conclusion and feminizes the Mohawk Warrior by displaying herself applying makeup. The makeup also alludes to the artifice of gender categories as a costume we perpetually perform.⁵⁴ Niro therefore opposes the conventions of established

⁵³ Valaskakis, “Rights and Warriors,” 61.

⁵⁴ As Judith Butler argues, there is no original, fixed “identity.” Rather one’s subjectivity is forever in the process of being performed and reiterated. This performativity of identity *produces* sexuality and gender, not the other way around. As a political intervention, Butler argues that one must subvert the codes of

Western gender categories by refusing to perform either femininity or masculinity correctly, as she instead constructs an image of self in-between these two terms.

Viewers aware of the histories of certain Indigenous tribes or contemporary Native rights campaigns would also recognize Niro's gender blurring as disrupting Western identity categories by referring to what some Native cultures call "two spirited" individuals. As scholars have discussed, prior to colonization many American Indian cultures organized sex, gender and sexuality very differently than European societies. For instance, some Native communities embraced cross-gendered identities.⁵⁵ These individuals were called "two spirited" and considered holy in several tribes. Gender roles were based less on one's sexual orientation and biological sex, and more on occupational interests. In other words, a biological male might become a "two spirit" because he/she was more interested in the work done by women than men.

This tradition was well known in the context in which Niro produced and sometimes exhibited *Mime Land*. As example, the artist Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie in the exhibition catalog for *Native Nations* (which included *Mime Land*) argues that "gay" is a Western word, and that "contemporary Native gay and lesbians prefer the self-described title of two-spirited society."⁵⁶ Furthermore, since the 1970s various groups such as the Gay American Indians (GAI) were founded, which acknowledge and reclaim two spirited

gendered behavior by performing gender wrong, yet recognizably wrong, and by extension denaturalizing gender and compulsive heterosexuality. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 300-315.

⁵⁵ For information on what follows see: Franchot Ballinger, "Coyote, He/She Was Going There: Sex and Gender in Native American Trickster Stories," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 15-43; Evelyn Blackwood, "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females," *Signs* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 27-42; Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man-Woman* (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Tsinhnahjinnie further states: "Similar to missionaries knocking on the doors of Native homes, presenting the proper road to heaven, so approaches the gay and lesbian community spouting polemic political agendas defining a proper existence, a missionary approach that does not include Indigenous philosophy, much less historical or cultural perspective." Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, "When is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?" in *Native Nations: Journeys in American Photography*, ed. Jane Alison (Great Britain: Barbican Art Gallery, 1998), exhibition catalog, 50.

traditions. GAI's goal is to "challenge and reconstruct the gender roles and sexual identities of Anglo-American society and to look to other cultures, including those of native North America, for new models."⁵⁷

In essence, in the "Historical" photographs Niro constructs new texts that ask the viewer to look at the artist in an oppositional way. In these prints, Niro does not "pass" as the icon she performs; rather she redefines these personas so that she is Monroe, she is a ballerina, she is Santa, Santa is a Dené, and she is both a woman and Mohawk Warrior. The artist defies the rules that say she cannot be these figures just because of her race, gender, physique, culture or disposition. She furthermore manipulates and reclaims these icons in dialogue with her own body, histories, and cultures to construct new texts that promote ideologies central to Indigenous feminist politics. In these photographs, it is Niro herself as a Mohawk Canadian woman and artist who calls the shots: she is in complete control, and embraces her cultures and histories.

⁵⁷ Roscoe, *Zuni*, 204. I am not suggesting Niro is engaged with these Indigenous feminist concerns just because she is a Native American woman; rather I am arguing this because she is also a self-proclaimed feminist (though she prefers the term "humanist"). Lippard, "Independent Identities," 146. The artist also grapples with sexuality politics in Native communities in other works, including her film *Honey Moccasin* (1998). In this film, the main protagonist Honey reveals Zachary John as a cross dresser who steals pow-wow costumes. Though Zachary is initially condemned in his community because of his desire to dress as a woman, the final scene of the film envisions a society that would happily accept Zachary as he is shown sitting in Honey's bar, surrounded by friends and wearing jewelry and lipstick. Heather Norris Nicholson describes Zachary's journey in *Honey Moccasin* as one of isolation and acceptance, arguing at the end of the film "Zachary no longer has to be a clothing thief or closet drag queen in the privacy of his basement," and that his "journey through the film involves alienation, despair, ostracism, and re-acceptance." Norris Nicholson, "Making Things Happen," 163.

⁵⁷ Shelley Niro, quoted in Abbott, "Interview," 353-54. Similarly, in the same interview Niro questions social expectations that dictate her identity because she is a Native woman: "Some people think that to be Indian you have to do certain things, but I'm just saying that you're Indian no matter what you do, but you have to decide what you want to do and you have to ask questions, like, am I doing something because it's expected of me, or am I doing it because I really believe this and it's really a part of me?" Ibid., 355.

CONTESTING INVISIBILITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE “PERSONAL” PHOTOGRAPHS

The second, central photograph of each panel, which Niro calls the “Personal” photographs, are all sepia toned shots of a single figure from Niro’s family archive.⁵⁸ These snapshots conjure a variety of informal moments, such as a young woman posing awkwardly in a backyard, a girl skateboarding on a concrete street, and a small baby gazing curiously at us from her stroller. Though these snapshots initially seem quite vernacular and ordinary, I argue in this section that they actually make a very strong, powerful statement. Specifically, these family photos counter the literal and symbolic absence of Native women from mainstream popular culture, fine arts, feminist practices, and Native politics.

As bell hooks argues, in the majority of mainstream media “the woman to be looked at and desired is ‘white.’”⁵⁹ Only a handful of Native women even appear in popular films, and they are rarely cast in leading roles.⁶⁰ Rather, American Indian female roles are commonly given to white women (Raquel Welch in *Legend of Walks far Woman* [1982], Katherine Ross in *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* [1969], Tina Marquand

⁵⁸ Niro quoted in Abbott, “Interview,” 350.

⁵⁹ hooks, “Oppositional Gaze,” 201.

⁶⁰ For two interesting discussions on Native American actors, actresses and their roles in mainstream cinema see: Caroline Brown, “The Representation of the Indigenous Other in ‘Daughters of the Dust’ and ‘The Piano,’” *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 1 (Spring, 2003): 1-19; Nicolas G. Rosenthal, “Representing Indians: Native American Actors on Hollywood’s Frontier,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Autumn, 2005): 328-352.

in *Texas Across the River* [1967], and Audrey Hepburn in *The Unforgiven* [1960]) or are animated (*Pocahontas* [1995] and *Peter Pan* [1953]).

In the “Personal” photographs, Niro literally contradicts this absence by incorporating family snapshots, as photographs are indexical signs. The philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce defined three different kinds of signs in his writings: iconic, symbolic and indexical. Iconic signs have a physical resemblance to the referent (e.g.: a picture), symbolic signs allude to the referent through convention (e.g.: language), and indexical signs have a physical or causal relation to the referent (e.g.: smoke or a footprint).⁶¹ In “Notes on the Index,” Krauss argues that photographs are indexical and iconic signs because “every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.”⁶² As Roland Barthes discusses, because photographs are indexical signs the referent (or literal object a photograph depicts) is both present and absent in the photograph. In other words, the referent is implied in the photograph that is materially present, but the referent is also absent because it is not physically there. As a result, photographs function as material traces or witnesses of an otherwise irrecoverable past. Even though all photographs are manipulated, the truth they offer is “this-has-been.”⁶³ By incorporating snapshots of mostly Native women, Niro relies on photography’s indexical quality to publicly promote this proof of presence. In short, the artist’s very choice to use family photographs in a

⁶¹ Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 156-173.

⁶² Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October* 3 (Spring, 1977): 75.

⁶³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

public artwork actively rejects the literal absence of Indigenous women in Western visual culture.

Niro also formally manipulates these photographs to establish similarities between them. Notably, all of the photographs are centrally placed on the panels, and most of the subjects are Native women.⁶⁴ Each panel is furthermore composed of three photographs, which is a structure that recalls the visual language of European religious triptychs. Traditional triptychs often positioned the religious icon in the center, flanked by two descriptive panels.⁶⁵ The central location allotted to the subjects of the “Personal” photographs therefore elevates them to a position of great esteem.

The individuals in these photographs are also all aware of the camera and address the viewer directly with their gaze. For the most part these figures do not smile (except in *The Warning of Snow* [figure 12]), but instead critically assess the viewer. When looking down at the young girl in *Santa is a Dené* (figure 9) for example, viewers get the sense that the child analyzes them. The girl folds her arms awkwardly before her in a gesture that shields her body. Two dolls sit in front of her, which also blocks our access to her figure. Like the child, these dolls confront the spectator with their dark eyes. These aspects guard the girl’s figure so that her person cannot be voyeuristically consumed. Her gaze and pose furthermore define her as a critical, active subject and spectator who consciously investigates the viewer.

When Native women do physically appear in dominant visual culture, they are usually positioned there by and for a gaze that is not their own. For instance, the

⁶⁴ The exceptions to this are the photographs of Niro’s male relatives in *Always a Gentleman* and *Mohawk Warrior*. The other ten “Personal” photographs are all of Native women.

⁶⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “triptych, n.,” accessed May 24, 2012, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/view/Entry/206357?redirectedFrom=triptych>.

photographs of Edward Curtis famously construct a mythical image of “Indianness.”⁶⁶ Curtis took approximately 40,000 photographs of Native Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁶⁷ As James Faris argues, in these photographs Curtis sought to capture American Indians as a “vanishing race.”⁶⁸ The “vanishing Indian” motif is not unique to Curtis’s works, but emerged during the early twentieth century because European Colonizers had forcefully relocated most Native tribes onto reservations by this time. This led to an increased social nostalgia in the Americas for the vanquished, “authentic” Indian, who many white, Western artists strove to recover.⁶⁹ These romantic, mythical images directly render invisible lived experiences of Indigenous people in the twentieth century. As William McRae argues: “[f]ew if any of the photographs that we have of Native Americans show the mental anguish or frustration that they went through in living on the reservation. It was forced encampment and many died either from sickness caused by living in the white man’s house or from open rebellion.”⁷⁰

Curtis’s sepia toned, pictorialist photographs of American Indians are a clear example of such nostalgic and contrived images of Native Americans. For one, Curtis famously carried with him wigs and “Indian” costumes in which he dressed his models. Sometimes he even used non-Native models, which suggests that the lives of real American Indians were not very important for his photographs.⁷¹ In short, Curtis

⁶⁶ William E. McRae, “Images of Native Americans in Still Photography,” *History of Photography* 13, no. 4 (October-December 1989): 321-342; James C. Faris, “The Navajo Photography of Edward S. Curtis,” *History of Photography* 17, no. 4 (Winter, 1993): 377-387.

⁶⁷ McRae, “Images of Native Americans,” 335.

⁶⁸ Faris, “Edward S. Curtis,” 377.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ McRae, “Images of Native Americans,” 335.

⁷¹ Faris, “Edward S. Curtis,” 377.

consciously constructed his photographs to connote his own version of the “authentic Indian” that only existed in his works.⁷²

The sepia toning and soft contrasts of Niro’s “Personal” photographs allude to the visual language of nineteenth century pictorialism and – by extension – Curtis. Yet in these photographs, Niro replaces Curtis’s picturesque Indians with her own family snapshots. While Niro herself tells us these images are from her family archive,⁷³ this information is not required to recognize these prints as such.⁷⁴ For one, these photographs read as a snapshot because the people in them are largely un-posed.⁷⁵ As example, in *Final Frontier* (figure 10), a young girl appears before us holding a skateboard, shielding her eyes from the sun, and staring out at the viewer with a questioning look. A dog runs through the composition in front of her figure, which implies the spontaneity of this moment. This photograph is furthermore overexposed, which suggests that this is an informal, vernacular photograph taken by an amateur photographer.

⁷² Many contemporary artists criticize Curtis’s picturesque photographs by exposing his version of “Indianness” as a construction. For instance Warren Neidich’s *Contra Curtis* series recalls Curtis’s oeuvre, as the work includes sepia-toned prints and refers to Curtis in the title. Neidich then pairs this reference with photographs of fake Cowboys massacring fake American Indians in Hollywood Western films. These photographs are meant to “suggest the bloody historical preliminaries that were genteelly elided in Curtis’s nostalgic account of a ‘vanishing race.’” Christopher Phillips, “Necessary Fictions: Warren Neidich’s Early-American Cover-Ups,” in *American History Reinvented: Photographs by Warren Neidich* (New York: Aperture, 1989), 69. Yet ultimately, by drawing on old Westerns, these prints just replace the mythical stereotype Curtis produced with another one from mainstream popular culture. Thus, as in Curtis’s photographs, Neidich continues to render Indigenous persons and their histories invisible.

⁷³ Niro quoted in Abbott, “Interview,” 350.

⁷⁴ I would like to thank Allison Moore for recommending that I conduct a closer investigation of the “Personal” photographs in dialogue with the literature she suggested on family photographs. Her suggestions, insights and expertise in contemporary art and the history of photography advanced my project significantly.

⁷⁵ For the following discussions on the snapshot and family photograph, see: Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Patricia Holland, “‘Sweet it is to Scan...’ Personal Photographs and Popular Photography,” in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2000), 119-163.

Curtis's photographs are glaringly different from such casual snapshots, as his works are all clearly posed. *Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter* (1914) (figure 15) for instance has a balanced composition that implies the artist's active hand in its construction.⁷⁶ The horizontal lines and shadows in the backdrop behind the woman lead the viewer's eye to her illuminated figure that is centralized in the upper half of the composition. Below the woman are two statues to her right and left, which mirror her posture and gesture. Curtis uses a soft focus lens and sepia toning (as he does in all his photographs) to romanticize this figure as a noble savage of an exotic, distant past,⁷⁷ which is much different from the contemporary girl with a skateboard in *Final Frontier*. The softness and careful contrasts of Curtis's prints also suggest his artistic mastery, as the technique was considered "the mark of the shaping hand of the artist-photographer, and it became the most distinctive stylistic trait of pictorialist photography."⁷⁸ In effect, the photographic gaze implied in Curtis's photographs is one that masters the image before it: it is that of an artist or tourist constructing a vision of the "Other" for public consumption.

Conversely, the photographic gaze implied in the "Personal" photographs is more of what Marianne Hirsch calls a "familial gaze."⁷⁹ The photographed subjects appear in various spaces – both public and private – including interior homes, backyards and city streets. That Niro includes snapshots in private spaces implies a familial relationship between the photographer and subject, as they both have access to these domestic interiors. Furthermore, most of these snapshots are taken in close proximity to their subjects, which implies an intimacy between photographer and those photographed. As

⁷⁶ This photograph is further discussed in McRae, "Images of Native Americans," 336.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Joel Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation: American Criticism of Photography in the Modernist Period* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 20.

⁷⁹ See Hirsch's discussion on the familial gaze and looking relations in Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 10-11.

previously stated all these figures acknowledge the photographer's presence by staring directly at the camera, which suggests recognition. We are not looking at a spectacularized "Other" constructed by a white male artist searching for an imagined authenticity (like Curtis). Rather the photographs lead the viewer to assume the photographer is maybe Niro, her mother or a sister. Niro therefore gives the power to represent one's self back into the hands of her family, community and self.

Native women are not only largely absent from the visual realm, but also from mainstream Western feminist practices and Indigenous politics. Regarding the former, Theresa Harlan forcefully argues that "Euro-American feminist discourse is so lacking in references to Native women that I have to wonder whether the omissions are due to lack of information or to lack of inclination to find these artists and writers."⁸⁰ Similarly, nationalistic Native projects often ignore Indigenous feminist concerns, and instead mainly focus on issues regarding Native men of legal Indian status.⁸¹ This was not always the case, as many Indigenous societies prior to colonization were matriarchal; yet as many Native feminists argue, the imposition of Western patriarchal social organization onto Native American societies is one of the effects of ongoing European colonization.⁸²

⁸⁰ Harlan, "As In Her Vision," 119.

⁸¹ Shari M. Huhndorf, *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 112-113.

⁸² Julia V. Emberley, *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 87-91; Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 196. Two of the most famous instances of this forced conformity in policy are the Enfranchisement Act of 1869 and Indian Act of 1876. Under these acts, Native women could not inherit land rights when their husbands died or hold political positions in their bands. Additionally, one's Indian Status was only legally recognized if passed down through the male line. This law callously stripped Native women of their Status if they married non-Status or non-Native men. Problematically, only Native Americans with a legally recognized Indian Status get access to crucial government programs and services available to Indigenous people in Canada. As Julia Emberley argues such policies "ensured that Native women, like non-Native women, were subject to Euro-Canadian patriarchal controls over marriage, sexuality, and reproduction." (Emberley, *Thresholds*, 88). The discrimination against women underlying the Indian Act did not change until the Bill

This enforced assimilation continues to negatively impact contemporary American Indian women,⁸³ and Native women who do voice feminist concerns are often accused of jumping on the white women's feminist bandwagon by some in their communities.⁸⁴ Consequently, Indigenous feminist's voices are silenced and not often considered part of dominant Native politics.

The "Personal" photographs counter this absence by highlighting Native women's public and political presence. The panel *Judge Me Not* (figure 7) for example depicts a woman solidly planted before the viewer, who carries a sign on an urban street. As I described earlier in this paper, the posters in the background and sign in her hand identify this scene as a social protest for the Oka Crisis. This reference reminds the viewer of the ongoing land struggles and discriminatory acts that the Mohawk community in Canada continues to endure. Yet we do not find an image of a victim here. Alternately, Niro presents us with a strong woman with a stable stance who actively engages in a social protest. This setting and the woman's posture define her as a public agent of political activism and change.

Niro furthermore counters the public disregard of Indigenous feminist concerns by clearly stressing their projects. Specifically, *Mime Land* in a number of ways embraces the continuity of American Indian cultural practices in contemporary society, which, as Paula Gunn Allen argues, is central to many Native feminist practices.⁸⁵ This

C-31 passed in June 1985. Since it was passed, many contradictions and problems with this bill have been noted. Emberley, *Thresholds*, 87-91.

⁸³ As Paula Gunn Allen argues: "During the five hundred years of Anglo-European colonization, the tribes have seen a progressive shift from gynecentric, egalitarian, ritual-based social systems to secularized structures closely imitative of the European patriarchal system. During this time women (including lesbians) and gay men... have suffered a severe loss of status, power and leadership." Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 196.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 210-214.

continuity does not imply nostalgia for a recoverable past, but rather a constant renegotiation of cultural forms and identities in the present. This distinction is important because visual culture (like Curtis's photographs), patrons, and scholarly literature all commonly position Native Americans and their cultures within a fixed, static past. As Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips argue, white patrons "romanticized the Indian as still connected to Nature and to local community, ties that many non-Natives believed to have been broken by urbanization and industrialization. Buyers of Native-made objects, whether 'crafts' or 'fine art', sentimentalized and romanticized their acquisitions as previous traces of lost authenticity."⁸⁶ Similarly, Audra Simpson argues "conventional, scholarly representation of the Iroquois relegates us to the domain of the past, to a place that freezes us within a frame of unmoving tradition."⁸⁷ By contrast, cultural continuity "suggest[s] movement, the passing of time, the dialectic of history, and, most importantly perhaps, the process of tradition."⁸⁸ Promoting this continuity is an important project for many Native artists, feminists and activists to resituate traditional practices and motifs within their lived present.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 212.

⁸⁷ Audra Simpson, "The Empire Laughs Back: Tradition, Power, and Play in the Work of Shelley Niro and Ryan Rice," in *Iroquois Art: Visual Expressions of Contemporary Native American Artists* (Altenstadt, Germany: Christian Feest, 1998), exhibition catalog, 52. Simpson discusses cultural continuity in dialogue with a number of Niro and Ryan Rice's works in "The Empire Laughs Back." This quote immediately follows her discussion of *Mohawks in Beehives*. The full quote is: "conventional, scholarly representation of the Iroquois relegates us to the domain of the past, to a place that freezes us within a frame of unmoving tradition. The pieces I have just discussed break up that frame by taking traditional subjects and motifs and resituating them in the present. In doing so, the pieces suggest movement, the passing of time, the dialectic of history, and, most importantly perhaps, the process of tradition." (Simpson, "Empire," 52). I am building on her insights here through my close analysis of *Mime Land*.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Cultural continuity is a central tenet discussed by Native feminist theorists such as Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 210-214. Yet even so, themes of cultural continuity are not unique to Indigenous feminist practices. For example, Stuart Hall has also discussed this concept, arguing that: "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant

Niro clearly promotes this concept of cultural continuity in *Mime Land*. For one, the designs on the matboards that unite the three photographs refashion beadworking (which is commonly considered a “traditional” Native practice⁹⁰) in new, innovative ways. The artist drills the patterns into the matboards instead of fastening beads onto the panels, which industrializes what is commonly considered a “craft” practice by using mechanical tools.⁹¹ Furthermore, Niro invents the designs. The artist describes this process in a 1998 interview, as she states:

With *This Land is Mime Land* I decided to invent my design as I went into it because I think you have to look at the traditional, but at the same time you always have to stay inventive. In *Mime Land*, because I’m dealing with both contemporary and historical presences, I also wanted to deal with a cultural signifier. In my other work, I’ve used a beadwork design and I wanted to continue using that same sort of design, but I wanted to incorporate a more original, more contemporary on in the mat.⁹²

In sum, Niro reworks beadworking by implementing new methods and materials in order to resituate this practice in the contemporary arts.

Niro also celebrates the continuity of her cultures and histories in the “Personal” photographs. In these snapshots the past and present, traditional and contemporary intermingle in dialogue with one another. As one example, *North America Welcome* (figure 8) is a picture of Niro’s mother wearing a baseball cap embroidered with a “six

transformation.” Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

⁹⁰ Though this practice is often associated with past Native traditions, this art form continues to thrive in the contemporary arts. As Richard William Hill discusses in the introduction to the exhibition catalog for the 2004 Artrain USA exhibition, there is no fixed, authentic, original “Native American beadwork.” Rather, this cultural practice has always been a hybrid form that continues into today. For a full discussion on this, see Hill, “Introduction,” in *Native Views*, 9-10.

⁹¹ Hill argues that industrial vs. craft practices are often treated as opposites that connote, respectively, the modern and the primitive. As he argues: “Civilization has always required a primitive ‘other’ to define itself against. Native craft to Western art, hand production to industrial production – these add up to the gap between the modern and the primitive.” *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹² Niro quoted in Abbott, “Interview,” 354.

nations” logo and a t-shirt with the words “Three Fires Homecoming Pow-Wow Traditional Gathering.” This garb implies the continuation of pow-wow ceremonies in contemporary culture through t-shirts and baseball caps, which demonstrates how mass-produced commodities can be appropriated to negotiate new costumes that perpetuate cultural practices within ongoing, changing contexts.

North America Welcome also alludes to the central role many Native women play in past and present Indigenous cultures. In this photograph, Niro’s mother is presented as a strong, confident figure: she looks at the viewer with a bold, self-assured gaze and her body dominates the majority of the composition. She is centrally focused and completely self-contained, as her arms wrap around her torso and clasp at her center. Teresa Harlan even suggests that this photograph refers to the Iroquois creation story by alluding to “The First Mother.”⁹³ This reference celebrates the central role of Native women and reworks gynarchic traditions and spiritual stories in the contemporary setting.⁹⁴

The “Personal” snapshots also meld historical and contemporary subjects together as they refer to a variety of moments, both recent and long ago. In some of these photographs, Niro clearly chooses to affirm Native women’s contemporary presence.

The writing on the posters in *Judge Me Not* for instance (as I previously described) (figure 7) directly refers to the recent Oka Crisis in 1990. Several subjects also wear

⁹³ Teresa Harlan, “Indigenous Photographies: A Space for Indigenous Realities,” in Alison, *Native Nations*, 236.

⁹⁴ The artist grapples with Native women’s roles and matriarchal traditions in other works as well. For instance, in a photograph from the *Mohawks in Beehives* series titled *The Iroquois is a Very Highly Developed Matriarchal Society* (1991), Niro questions whether Iroquois society is, as she so often heard growing up, such a highly developed matriarchal society. In commenting on *The Iroquois*, Niro states: “I grew up knowing this line by memory. It was confusing to be living in a historically important part of the country, nodding our heads to this description of our community but at the same time accepting violence against women as normal living conditions.” (Norris Nicholson, “Making Things Happen,” 160) In another interview, Niro says: ““Since I come from a reserve where domestic violence is high, I wanted to ask... Why doesn’t anyone put a stop to it and really make our society a matriarchal society?” Shelley Niro, *Watchful Eyes: Native American Women Artists* (Phoenix: The Heard Museum, 1994), exhibition catalog, 29.

current fashions such as shorts, jeans, and T-shirts. These settings and costumes clearly define Native women as contemporary subjects rather than romanticized historic figures. Even Niro's choice to use snapshots is relevant, as this medium connotes a modern, industrial method to record the modern family and their histories.⁹⁵

Niro juxtaposes these allusions to the contemporary context with references to the past. Some of the figures wear outmoded fashions, and, as previously argued, the soft focus and sepia toning of the "Personal" photographs recall Curtis's picturesque prints that sought to "capture things as they used to be."⁹⁶ Yet Niro's images of the past are nothing like the sentimental yesteryear Curtis envisioned. For instance, even though *Survivor* (figure 3) is sepia-toned, slightly out of focus, and the subject wears outdated garb, viewers do not find a romantic "noble savage" before them. Instead the woman in this photograph speaks of hardship, poverty and work. She is barefoot and thin, wearing a simple weathered dress, sun hat and apron collected at her middle. Yet like the figure in *Judge Me Not*, this woman is not a victim. Rather, she stares at the viewer with a solid gaze, and the title of the panel defines her as a "Survivor." Therefore, by including inferences to both the past and present in these photographs, Niro establishes continuity between them. The photographs simultaneously recall modern industrial snapshots, nostalgic pictorialist techniques, contemporary subjects, and historical figures. This reminds the viewer of how history always vanishes in the present moment; that when we

⁹⁵ As Holland notes, the snapshot is a very modern, industrialized and democratic form of photography. First invented by George Eastman in 1888, Kodak (and other forms of disposable photography) made photography accessible to all regardless of one's class, race or gender. Throughout the twentieth century, disposable photographs were marketed as a tool to document the lives of growing modern families. Holland, "'Sweet it is to Scan,'" 140-151.

⁹⁶ McRae, "Images of Native Americans," 336.

consider the past we are not returning to another time but restaging events in the present “in order to think about what’s happening here and now, to think about the present.”⁹⁷

In sum, by incorporating these family snapshots into a public work of art and highlighting the continuity of her cultures and histories, Niro resists the invisibility of Native women and feminist projects in contemporary society. The fact that Niro uses family photographs is a crucial tactic because, as bell hooks argues, personal snapshots function as important tools in the decolonization of vision by circulating images that do not conform to mainstream constructions of the “Other.”⁹⁸ Hooks further argues that access to such informal photographic practices plays a pivotal role for marginalized spectators to develop a sense of self and record their personal histories.⁹⁹ Niro herself similarly describes these family photographs as tools to change the image (or lack of image) of Native women in Western visual culture. As she reflects in her interview with Abbott:

Using these basic images was a self-actualization process where, if you start relating to the people you’re looking at, and the more images you see of somebody that looks like you, the more you can accept yourself, whereas if you see images of people that you have no connection with and can’t relate to, then you’re doubting your own presence. You say ‘I don’t look like that.’ I thought by using these images of women, it actually creates a welcoming feeling, and it makes other Indian woman say, ‘I can relate to these images.’ A lot of women have said that to me, that they can see their own aunts or their sisters in these images that are up on a gallery wall.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October*, no. 120 (Spring, 2007): 147.

⁹⁸ hooks, “In Our Glory,” 53.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47. Discussing African American communities specifically, hooks argues that “the camera became in black life a political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation as well as a means by which alternative images could be produced.” *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Niro quoted in Abbott, “Interview,” 361.

As Niro's words suggest, the artist puts herself, her family, and her community in charge of their own representation by incorporating these family snapshots. These photographs encourage the viewer to look oppositionally by presenting us with a new vision of Native women: one that opposes their invisibility by celebrating their presence.

VISIONS OF PLURALITY AND INDETERMINACY: PICTURING IDENTITIES IN THE “CONTEMPORARY” PHOTOGRAPHS AND STRUCTURE

This final section considers the third prints on each panel, which Niro calls the “Contemporary” photographs, and the work’s structure. The “Contemporary” photographs are all plain, black and white self-portraits of Niro. Scholars commonly define these final prints as Niro’s “normal self,” or the “product” of the first two photographs.¹⁰¹ In this section I question this interpretation, and instead argue that if these photographs do represent the artist’s true self, they define her identity as multiple and indeterminate.

I specifically find it important to counter these past interpretations, as assuming that these photographs represent Niro’s “true” or “authentic” identity treads dangerously close to what stereotypes do: fix people as consumable, knowable image or types. For example, as I discussed previously, a predominant stereotype of the Mohawk community in the particular context that Niro made *Mime Land* was the Mohawk Warrior (who the artist refers to in the panel *Mohawk Warrior* [figure 11]).¹⁰² Like all stereotypes of

¹⁰¹ Lippard, “Independent Identities,” 146; National Gallery of Canada, “Collections: *This Land is Mime Land*”; Zena Pearlstone, “Shelley Niro,” 61; Ryan, “I Enjoy Being a Mohawk Girl,” 51. Ryan argues that Niro herself says that the “Contemporary” photographs are the product of the past two frames, though it is not cited. If she does argue this, I would interpret her words more like a playful wink that speaks to the inability to pin down or discover one’s true, essential identity, as the work embraces multiplicity and ambiguity. Furthermore, Niro herself has said (as I will discuss in this section) that identity is not something that can be discovered.

¹⁰² Though the Warriors came to stand for the Mohawk activists in the media, they in no way represented all those involved in the Crisis or the Mohawk Community in general. As Valaskakis argues: “The Indians

Native Americans (e.g.: Indian princesses, noble savages, passive squaws), the Warriors were quickly turned into reified, mass-produced commodities. Immediately following the Oka Crisis for instance, the Warriors became a popular Halloween costume.¹⁰³ In 1991, an Oka resident even released over seventy-five different Oka and Warrior related products including video and board games starring the Warriors, Warrior dolls, and lunch boxes.¹⁰⁴ In these cases, popular culture consolidated both the Oka Crisis and Mohawk population at large under a controllable, knowable image. This phenomenon exemplifies what many postcolonial scholars argue stereotypes do: establish control and mastery over the “Other” by fixing them as an object or fetish immediately knowable in its entirety.¹⁰⁵ Thus, claiming that the “Contemporary” photographs represent Niro’s authentic self suggests that the artist has a single, underlying identity that once discovered can similarly be fixed and reified.

In contrast, I argue that the “Contemporary” prints recall a visual aesthetic that connotes “authenticity” only to subvert this notion. When initially confronted with these final photographs, the viewer does at first read them as an objective image of Niro, as the

from the Treatment Centre, like the Mohawks who stood on both sides of the barricades at Akwesasne through the spring; those who blockaded the Mercier bridge and the Kahnawake reserve in the summer; the traditional women who sat in vigil in the Kanesatake pine forest through the winter, like those who run the office of the Mohawk Nation or practice the traditional Longhouse religion, are all yoked together as the media’s Mohawk warriors.” Valaskakis, “Rights and Warriors,” 61.

¹⁰³ “Warriormania! Lasagna look the hottest ticket for Halloween!” (*The Gazette*, 24/10/90: A3).” Roth, “Media,” 154. Relevance of “Lasagna” is that this was the pseudonym of Ronald Cross who was a Mohawk Warrior whom received a lot of media coverage during the Crisis.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

¹⁰⁵ Homi Bhaba, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (Spring, 1984): 125 – 133; Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 176; Craig Owen, “Global Issues,” in *Beyond Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 324; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1978).

artist draws on the visual language of early twentieth century straight photography.¹⁰⁶

Artists like Edward Weston, Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand are commonly grouped under this definition, though their photographic styles and philosophies vary.¹⁰⁷ Most of these artists were defined as such because they used a sharp focused lens to create stark contrasts with dark blacks and white whites, subtle tonal variations, and precise details.¹⁰⁸ Straight photographers used this aesthetic to give off the illusion that what their camera captured was scientific, objective and true to reality.¹⁰⁹

The sharp contrasts and precision of Niro's black and white "Contemporary" photographs clearly recall this visual language. Yet while the artist draws on this aesthetic, she actively subverts its connotations of authenticity by pairing these formal conventions with an indeterminate image of herself. Throughout these photographs, Niro's figure is devoid of any overt signifiers of race, gender, culture or context. Her hair is short, and she adorns herself in a plain, loose fitting shirt and jeans with no shoes, make-up, jewelry (except for a ring) or any other forms of ornamentation. Because her form emerges from a stark black background, these prints lack any context or hints of time and place. In two photographs she wears a watch, which evokes the concept of time, yet the time dictated on her watch is unclear. Therefore, her appearance is simple and constant as she poses in a variety of gestures that engage with the spectator or with the photographs to her right. In some cases she turns her back with her arms aggressively on her hips, while in others she relaxes languidly in a chair with a content smile on her

¹⁰⁶ I would like to thank Louis Marcus for suggesting this connection between Niro's aesthetic and modernist photography. His expertise in photography helped to improve this portion of my project considerably.

¹⁰⁷ Eisinger, *Trace and Transformation*, 52-78.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52.

face. Still in others, she squints as if blinded or flinching in pain. In effect, these prints leave the viewer with an indeterminate, ambiguous image of Niro. Her figure looms in a liminal world in-between all those categories society uses to make others familiar: her class, race, ethnicity and gender are all unclear; the stark black background does not offer any hints of a certain time or place; and her demeanor lacks consistency.

The structure of the work further suggests the plurality of identities. Intertwined on each panel, the subjects in the “Historical,” “Personal” and “Contemporary” photographs all engage with one another in their gesture and form. As an example, in *Always a Gentleman* (figure 4) the figures in all three photographs stand with their feet solidly on the ground and arms crossed. The cigar in Niro’s hand in the “Historical” photograph mirrors the feather fan the figure holds in the adjacent “Personal” snapshot. The interrelation between the photographs on each panel disavows any reading of a single image as absolute. Niro instead presents herself as always simultaneously part of the “Historical,” the “Personal” and the “Contemporary” as she physically unites all three on the matboard.

It is also the plurality of Niro’s materials and photographic practices that refute the notion of a fixed, stable identity, as this diversity cites the multiplicity of discourses through which subjects negotiate a sense of self. The “Historical” photographs recall popular culture and commercial photography; the “Personal” snapshots refer to the archive, photo album and pictorialism; the “Contemporary” photographs suggest self-portraiture, science, and straight photography; and the beadwork on the matboards alludes to beading practices and beaded wampum belts, which many Native cultures have

used to record important agreements and treaties.¹¹⁰ These multiple citations encourage the viewer to reflect on how all these visual discourses play a role in how Niro continuously produces her subjectivity (and also how we construct our own).

Furthermore, in interviews Niro herself denies the notion of a fixed identity. For instance, in 1998 the artist states:

If you're searching for your identity, that sounds kind of hopeless, doesn't it? It just seems to have a connotation that you're lost or you're trying to find your way back to someplace. I think it relates to stereotyping, so instead of accepting what people say you should be, I'm questioning why can't I be like I am, why can't I like parts of other things in contemporary society?¹¹¹

Here, Niro rejects the idea of discovering one's identity, as this implies an essential inner core that can be fixed and stereotyped. This description epitomizes the way she presents herself to us in *Mime Land*, as not searching for her identity but as constantly renegotiating her subjectivity in dialogue with a number of discourses, visual and otherwise. Thus, Niro encourages us as viewers to look at her in a new, oppositional way; a way that negates neat, tidy identity categories that define subjects as ever complete or knowable.

So let us re-meet Shelley Niro: as illustrated by this work, Niro always simultaneously embodies the "Historical," "Personal" and "Contemporary." Among others, she is a ballerina, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Snow White, Santa Claus and a Mohawk Warrior. She is a mother, daughter, sister, Mohawk, feminist and Canadian; concurrently defiant, content, critical and resigned. She is artist and subject, spectator and spectacle. In essence, Niro's identity is complex, dynamic and multiple.

¹¹⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "wampum," accessed May 27, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/EBchecked/topic/635213/wampum>.

¹¹¹ Niro quoted in Abbott, "Interview," 355.

CONCLUSION

While oppositional spectators do look to deconstruct, they also look to contest and reinvent how and what we see. As I have argued, Niro clearly recognizes the power of visual culture as a discourse that produces us as subjects; yet in *Mime Land*, Niro also acts as an oppositional spectator as she takes this recognition a step further by using this knowledge to change how we look at histories, others and ourselves. As Stuart Hall similarly argues:

We have been trying to theorize identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.¹¹²

In short, once film and photography are identified as tools that constitute us as subjects, they can be manipulated as devices to change how we define ourselves; mechanisms to take control over what is rendered visible and invisible.

In *Mime Land*, Niro uses photography as such a tool to renegotiate her representation of self in visual culture. This departs from deconstructive interpretations of feminist works in the 1980s and 1990s, as photography here becomes a social device that constructs new visions of Native women. In other words, *Mime Land* not only enables the viewer to see how power works, but the subject, form and structure of the

¹¹² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 229.

work furthermore encourages viewers to enact an oppositional gaze: a way of looking at Native American women's identities, cultures and histories that resists the conventions of mainstream visual culture by considering new models.

This oppositional mode of looking characterizes my very first engagement with *Mime Land* before I knew anything about Niro, her art, or Native American feminisms and histories; and as a white, female, heterosexual, feminist, middle class American spectator, this experience is what challenged me to take on this project. Initially looking at the "Historical" photographs made me recognize my privilege; that because of my race and nationality, I own the rights to the dominant codes of feminine beauty in Western visual culture; that when I turn on the TV, the majority of celebrities, cultural icons, and TV personalities are all largely white like myself. Niro's references to the Oka Crisis, Columbus Quincentennial, Native feminist politics and also her personal family archive made me recognize my own ignorance of the contemporary histories of Native American cultures, and the unforgivable reality that this lack of knowledge is considered normal and acceptable. These references also challenged me to realize that I have access to the dominant accounts of history taught in Western schools and institutions, and to acknowledge appalling and uncomfortable truths of my own cultural histories that include the past and continued genocide, objectification, and violence done to Native Americans; actions that the white Western world would much rather forget, and allow to slip invisibly into a past that we do not dare see or speak of.

But Niro's work has also convinced me of the importance of art and visual culture to counter this invisibility and inequality. *Mime Land* encourages me to recognize that the ways we look at ourselves, others, identities, cultures and histories is never fixed but

constantly changes; and that *Mime Land* itself is an agent of such change. This series shatters myths and ideological constraints that fix Native Americans within subordinate positions by encouraging viewers to look oppositionally: to look to interrogate and contest, revise and reinvent, and dare to change their lived present.

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