

The Writing Names Project: UnSilencing the Number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

by Sorouja Moll

I'm sick of for getting.
—Caffyn Kelley, “Creating Memory, Contesting History”



Montreal, Parc Lafontaine, 2008.
Photo by of Sorouja Moll

Introduction¹

HIn the early morning on 6 December 2015, I began to write the names of 1,000 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. **E**This wasn't the first time I undertook this work. In the early morning with chalk in hand **L**I knelt on the cold cement as letter by letter emerged. **E**I mouthed the names slowly as they appeared on the ground. **N**

Two details were different this time: the number of names was higher, and I wasn't alone. In 2007 I began my research about the crisis in Canada. I examined its association with nineteenth-century

government policy; specifically, I followed the work of Nicholas Flood Davin and his thirteen recommendations to John A. Macdonald for residential schools in Canada (see Moll). While I was undertaking this preliminary research, the number 520 appeared *over and over again*, a statistic representing Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. The use of statistics is not an uncommon strategy for a researcher. Still, one afternoon, surrounded by books, theories, and questions, I stopped.

I just stopped.

“Who are these women and girls?” I asked myself. “Why don't I know their names?” “Why don't *we* know their names?” The questions made me reflect on how my use of numbers paralleled the use of numbers to identify children as they were forced into residential schools, where their names were replaced and their cultures, histories, languages, and stories erased. I was, in this sense, participating in the colonizing practice of truncating lived experiences in order to facilitate an agenda, my agenda. Then a more intimate question loomed: how could I begin the process of decolonizing my self, *my gaze*, and *my privilege* in the midst of my study and my life?

The statistic is a fixed social marker, functioning within a very present colonial structure as a site of amnesia that neatly evacuates experiences that have been silenced. In the case of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, the statistic becomes a site of a memorial. A site of femicide. A site of grief. A site of forgetting. However, individuals within this constructed amnesia are not silent. *We are just not listening*. The act of counter-memorial, alternatively, emerges as a tactic that unveils the structures of oppression in order for the work of decolonization to take place. It creates a site at which embodied performative acts can acknowledge and honour those who have been forgotten.

The statistic

By 2015 the official Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) statistic had grown to 1,017, although activists argue that the number is closer to 4,000 (Tasker). Is it shocking that such “confusion” exists about the official tracking of the individuals (Tasker). Furthermore, the RCMP’s 2015 report states that their statistics originate from 1951 forward (missing-person cases) and onward from the 1980s (missing-persons and homicide cases), occluding the historical reality that the brutality was present well before Confederation (Riel; Carter; Anderson; LaRocque). The RCMP is historically implicated in the violence against Indigenous women and girls,² yet it maintains control over data collection, analysis, and dissemination; its conflict of interest and lack of accountability remain unacknowledged. How can we respond to fixed, structural patterns of oppression in a nation that continues to produce policies, narratives, and statistics that conceal the memory of responsibility in acts of convenient forgetting?

Maureen Moynagh explains that “national narratives are ... acts of cultural memory, if we are to understand cultural memory to be about identity, values, and recollection of the past that serve the needs of the present” (97). Paul Ricoeur describes this form of “profound forgetting” as “the effacement of traces” (415). Cultural memory thus utilizes the act of “forgetting” to sustain desired narratives through repetition. Counter-memorials and their agents must therefore break the continuity of national narratives in order to contest “hegemonic narratives of nation” and the “splitting open of the historical sutures that close out stories of racial terror and sexual injustice, relegating them to a space beyond the body of nation” (Moynagh 97).

The national press reproduces narratives that reinforce *what we know* and, more specifically, *what we do not know*, organizing cultural memory through discriminatory structures that communicate who is and is not worthy of attention. Sarah Carter locates the root of this explicit disparity in the mass media’s representation of Aboriginal women and girls, dating the Canadian state’s systemic racism to the late nineteenth century (159). Colonization pulverized Indigenous women’s power and manifested in policies like the Indian Act, which alienated Native women from their land, their sense of community, and the wellsprings of cultural memories and exposed them to inordinate risks in the subjugated space of “unbelonging.”

Still, *forgetting* is a capricious beast.

Forgetting also marks a spot. *Why can’t I remember? What was there (and is still there) but I can’t see it through my colonial gaze?* Ricoeur proposes that forgetting is an attack “on the reliability of memory” (413), marking a lacuna, a gap, or a *discontinuity*. Kim Anderson maintains that “the crisis experienced by women who were disenfranchised through the *Indian Act* was instrumental in sparking a critical consciousness about identity and inspiring resistance” (126). Individual and grassroots collectives resist at specific locations of “forgetting” to illuminate the refusals to acknowledge, recognize, and take responsibility for violence against Aboriginal women and girls.

When I presented *Writing Names* in Montreal in 2008, spectators were most responsive when I was in the act of writing. Action, it seems, induces individuals to take notice, and inaction perpetuates social apathy. When I stopped writing, pedestrians walked over the names without looking down. At Parc

Lafontaine I wrote names around Michel Goulet’s sculpture *Les Leçons singulières (Voler 2)*. Six stainless steel chairs are arranged in an arc. The installation, which Goulet describes as “a metaphor for the relationships among people” (Art Public), invites visitors to engage with each other as they enjoy their natural surroundings. The performative intervention of writing the names of missing and murdered women at this site interrupted its aura of privileged leisure, disrupted its bucolic setting on unacknowledged Mohawk territory, and inscribed the site with new meaning. Upon learning about my project, Monique Mojica, a Guna and Rappahannock actor and playwright, expressed, “You are creating altars and prayers from what was left behind and memorializing out of absence.” Mojica’s words resonate with Sarah Stillman’s feminist media activism aimed at resuscitating lives through storytelling: each name is a story, and when the names of the missing are articulated, they become “acts of private mourning into the public arena” (495).

Counter-memorial as collective activism

In 2015 I was asked to present the *Writing Names Project* during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence at the University of Waterloo. My method, as in Montreal, was to write the names alone. **B**As in Montreal, a large majority of the public had no idea about Indigenous histories in Canada, the contemporary issues, or the crisis. However, something had changed from 2008: a spectator crossed the line from witness to practitioner. **E** Then a student asked me if he could also write a name; he wanted to do something. **T**Faculty members began to join in. **T**Individuals and groups took pages from the binder of names, knelt down, and began to write. **Y**

Kelly Laurila is a Sáami Indigenous and settler Irish doctoral student at Wilfrid Laurier University. She also facilitates the drumming and singing circle Mino Ode Kwewak N’gamowak (Good Hearted Women Singers). As I looked up from writing, I saw that she had arrived with members of the circle. Laurila reflected about her experience:

I could not help but well up with tears as I looked around me and the ground beneath my feet covered with names of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and youth. I just stood there; silent, with the crying taking me by surprise. Sorouja came over to me and offered a hug. She just let me cry. There is something that shifted between us as this moment of pain and grief was shared. We never said anything, but I felt it. I felt for the women and youth who lost their lives and who are still missing. It moved me when I saw this Settler professor’s efforts to raise awareness and educate students who stopped to ask what she was doing... I smudged this space and I sang for the women and youth with my drum.

As an Indigenous woman and the program coordinator at the Waterloo Aboriginal Education Centre, Luane Lentz also took a special interest in the project. Lentz explained that she was searching for someone she knew, a friend she grew up with in Kenora, Ontario. Lentz found the name:

It was in 2000, sometime in the fall when she went missing, last seen at a house party at an apartment complex. I really don’t remember too much of a “search” for her, of course

her family was searching for her, but it seemed not much attention was given in the media. There was talk that she had run away, she had family in Manitoba. In the spring of 2001, she was found merely a few meters from that same apartment complex, she was murdered the night she disappeared, last seen at the apartment of the convicted murderer. She was 16 years old. I was honoured to write her name in chalk on the stone of the University of Waterloo Arts Quad as a tribute to Jocelyn “Chippy” McDonald.

Writing names

Although hundreds of monuments remembering violence against women are scattered across Canada, only a small percentage mark violence against Aboriginal women and girls (Cultural Memory Group 14). The method of counter-memorialization, however, is not without its limitations when attempting to challenge the systemic roots of violence. Caffyn Kelley raises a central question within a critical analysis of hegemonic infrastructures: “How might women do something other than insert themselves into a memorial culture that exists as a form of self-congratulation by white people?” (8). It is crucial that the practice of counter-memorial activism is also the work of critical self-awareness.

OIn my project, I used the most basic communicative tool: the act of naming (Stillman 494). I used chalk as my medium with a “graffiti-like” approach. Mark Halsey and Alison Young explain that writing graffiti in urban spaces makes visible the loss that has been blatantly erased (277). **S**The montage of names, through a form



Montreal, rue Saint Catherine, 2008.
Photo by Tatiana Koroleva

of graffiti writing, produced an affect in the passersby “akin to the ways in which the body can connect with itself and with the world” (Halsey and Young 277). There was a refusal to *let the girls go silently* (Stillman 500). **B**Individuals began to ask: who was she? **O**

RStillman’s attempt to locate the name and story of an unidentified woman whose death appeared as a random news item was a performative act of counter-memorial to destabilize the social norm and meaning of who is valued and who is not. She explains that “each of these journeys [is] from grief to grievance from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury” (500). It is at these locations that counter-memorials value individuals as citizens and as worthy of remembrance, as we continue to demand that human rights be equitably distributed and social justice restored. **N**As a counter-memorial project that confronts the silencing of Native women, Beth Brant’s reflection about her process of collecting stories and poetry for *A Gathering of Spirit* is insightful: “It does not end here. It begins” (12). **E**

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Yasmin Jiwani for her encouragement and Tatiana Koroleva for her assistance with documenting the 2008 project.
- 2 After 1885 “government agents sometimes withheld rations to reserve communities unless Aboriginal women were made available to them. The NWMP [North West Mounted Police] often turned a blind eye to such practices, engaging in their own coercive relations with Aboriginal women” (Razack 130–31).

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Photo by Sorouja Moll

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About the Author

Sorouja Moll has a PhD in humanities (Concordia) specializing in the fields of communication, English, and art history. She also holds a BA and MA in English from the University of Guelph. Sorouja's research interests include critical discourse analysis of sovereignty, nation, and memory in private, popular, and alternative media.