Cherchez les Femmes: Graffiti, Street Art & Self-Identity in Montreal

Sofia Misenheimer

Department of Art History and Communication Studies

McGill University, Montreal

July 2018

A thesis submitted to McGill University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the practices of women and non-binary femme street artists and graffiti writers in Montreal, a city known for its grassroots artistic communities and dynamic movements for gender equity. My research explores how these creatives reclaim city space, represent and affirm their identities in the process, and create potential for more inclusive engagement with unsanctioned urban art. I interviewed a cross section of artists, writers, and event organizers about their creative processes and community building initiatives, incorporating analysis of specific artworks and events to better understand their impact in the context of Montreal's urban art scene. Grounded in feminist identity politics, visual culture, and cultural studies, I interrogate the interlocking systems of power that impact their lives and their work, as well as the tactics they use to individually and collectively fight mechanisms of oppression. I argue that the ways they develop and deploy their artistic practices, safety strategies, and anti-colonial approaches not only offer dynamic reflections of city life, but foster conditions that are more welcoming, and secure, for fellow and future artists.

Key words: self-identity, graffiti, street art, gender, Montreal

Résumé

Cette thèse examine les pratiques des graffitistes et des artistes de rue femmes et non-binaires à présentation féminine à Montréal, une ville connue pour ses communautés artistiques populaires et ses mouvements dynamiques pour l'égalité des genres. Ma recherche considère comment ces créatives récupèrent l'espace de la ville, représentent et affirment leurs identités dans le processus, et créent un potentiel d'engagement plus inclusif avec l'art urbain non autorisé. J'ai interviewé un échantillon d'artistes, d'écrivains et d'organisateurs d'évènements au sujet de leurs processus créatifs et de leurs initiatives de développement communautaire, incorporant l'analyse d'œuvres et d'évènements spécifiques pour mieux comprendre leur impact dans la scène urbaine montréalaise. Fondé sur la politique de l'identité féministe, la culture visuelle et les études culturelles, j'interroge les systèmes de pouvoir établis qui influencent leur vie et leur travail, ainsi que les tactiques qu'ils utilisent pour combattre individuellement et collectivement les mécanismes d'oppression. Je soutiens que la façon dont ils développent et déploient leurs pratiques artistiques, leurs stratégies de sécurité et leurs approches anticoloniales offrent non seulement des réflexions dynamiques sur la vie urbaine, mais favorisent des conditions plus accueillantes et sécuritaires pour les artistes du présent et futur.

Mots-clés: identité, graffiti, art de rue, genre, Montréal

Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks to the artists, writers, and community organizers featured on the following pages—*Cam*, *girlplague*, *Lilyluciole*, *Made in Shaïna*, Melissa Proietti, *Miss Teri*, *Swarm*, and *Zola*—you all inspire me beyond words! Thank you for taking the time to share your knowledge with me.

To Dr. Carrie Rentschler, I extend my utmost appreciation for your guidance and support. I feel immensely fortunate to have worked with such a kind, patient, and generous supervisor. To Dr. Alanna Thain, I'm profoundly grateful for your provision of incredible opportunities to engage my interests and develop my theoretical approach. To Dr. Cynthia Hammond, sincere thanks for introducing me to the foundational concepts of my methodology around reciprocal community engagement during your transformative "Right to the City" course. To Dr. Jenny Burman, many thanks for your insightful comments on the initial draft of this paper.

Warmest thanks to my wonderful friends and colleagues, especially Audrey Anctil, Dr. Shanly Dixon, Ayanna Dozier, Sandra Evoughlian, Joana Joachim, Cassie Jones, Vincent Mousseau, Christina Marie Phelps, Jhessica Reia, Feroza Saïd, and Marissa Singer, whose editorial, intellectual, and emotional support has sustained me throughout this process.

Much love to David Rawalia for the pep talks, bear hugs, and gourmet lattés when I needed them most. Thank you to Ursa and Athena for offering endless cuddles and for knocking the laptop out of my hands with regularity to ensure I took breaks (and threw the ball).

Thank you to my family for the encouragement to dive into this life-changing experience. And lastly, a nod to my literary idol, Dorothy Parker, whose wit I have turned to time and again to overcome what I thought were impossible life hurdles, for summing up this experience in a mere seven words: "I hate writing, I love having written."

Introduction

In cities around the world today, women and femme graffiti writers and street artists are reclaiming public spaces, affirming their identities, and creating conditions that are more welcoming, and secure, for fellow and future nonhegemonic artists. Armed with spray paint or wheatpaste, these creatives effect change on city walls and within their spheres of influence. In Montreal, a city known for its grassroots artistic communities and dynamic movements for gender equity, women and femmes similarly engage in urban art with purpose.

Within the "overwhelmingly male realm" of artistic urban subculture, those perceived as feminine are often marginalized, sexualized, and treated as novelties (Cooper). 'All girl DJ nights' entice attendees by marketing sex appeal over skill, while graffiti crews may exclude women not deemed 'one of the boys.' Media coverage reinforces discriminatory attitudes by emphasizing the gender of writers and artists instead of the content and quality of their work. Despite such longstanding inequities, feminist street art—from murals depicting inspirational icons, to stencils denouncing rape culture—is flourishing in Montreal. Women writers are not only carving a space for themselves, they are also ensuring that the next generation of girls interested in graffiti subculture will face fewer challenges getting involved. Women and femme artists are forming collectives to support each other's artistic practices and organizing events to showcase their talent. They are protesting inequality within their subcultures and on city streets, renegotiating their relationships with urban space, and asserting their right to exist. The visual language of Montreal's artistic urban subcultures is shifting; unsanctioned works are offering an archive of resistance against normalised mechanisms of oppression. City walls, and the communities giving them meaning, are better reflecting their diverse concerns, values, and interests of local women and femmes.

It's a Man's Wall: Masculinity and the Roots of Graffiti Subculture

Artistic urban subcultures in Montreal stem from the 1970s hip hop movement in New York City that encouraged young inner city Black and Latino men to empower their communities through graffiti, breakdance, and the provocative new lexicons of the live master of ceremonies (or MC) and the disc jockey (or DJ). Each facet of the movement, but especially graffiti, proliferated in urban centres across the United States and later spread worldwide, providing creative channels for disenfranchised youth to express opinion and voice non-violent frustration with the status quo. For many writers, graffiti and hip hop arrived in one neat package (Edlin 55). Popular hip hop documentaries, like *Style Wars* (1983) and *Wild Style* (1983), and books, like *Subway Art* (1984), spread graffiti subculture across the globe. Writing as a subculture developed later in Montreal than other North American cities, marking a shift from the socio-political graffiti a tool for public sharing dissatisfaction with language laws since the 1960s, although graffiti referring to First Nations peoples, gender and gay rights, religion, anarchy, and revolution also proliferated (Waclawek "Pop Culture and Politics: Graffiti and Street Art in Montréal" 248). By the 1990s, hip hop-inspired graffiti subculture spanned anglophone, francophone, and Indigenous communities in Montreal (Labonté 67). While this distinct form of expression provided a positive alternative to violent crime, it also largely ignored women, except as sex objects and in their roles as girlfriends or female sidekicks. Despite their involvement from the outset, few women are recognized from early iterations of the city's graffiti scene (Tourigny 194).

Graffiti scholar Nancy Macdonald attributes this phenomenon to the patriarchal nature of the highly visible, yet culturally covert, world of graffiti. She challenges negative preconceptions surrounding graffiti and analyses how and why youth participate in the

subculture it inspires. She points to male identity, in particular, as a driving force in the modern scene and argues that the majority of writers define their masculinity through subculture participation, using aerosol paint "to construct the 'self,' and for the most part, the 'male' self" (Macdonald 6). Macdonald posits that male youth who struggle to assert themselves during adolescence often seek a way to do so through immersion in the subculture. These writers, in many cases marginalized by low economic status or racial inequality, treat public space as canvas, applying personalized inscriptions on alley walls and train cars, among other venues, in pursuit of recognition.

In order to participate, a writer must adopt an original name, or 'tag', and plaster it in as many intricate styles and visible locations as possible. This practice actively shapes how a writer is perceived by others within the subculture, especially based on his technique, the 'battles' he wins with peers (by covering other writers' work with his own), and the risks taken to have his name seen by as wide an audience as possible. According to one writer, who cites the subcultural premise that name visibility equals status: "There's no financial gain, getting the respect of total strangers is enough…" (Macdonald 65). Thus, writers aim to get their names in the most unlikely places, from the sides of high-rises and overpasses to the tops of subway tunnels and bridges—forms of artistic self-expression that often prove territorial (Crofts 4; Witten). By ensuring one's name is viewed frequently, a writer not only manifests his own existence and affirms identity, but he does so in a way of his own choosing. With commitment to these practices, a writer can quickly achieve the main goals of subculture participants: renown and respect.

Graffiti placement demonstrates subculture ideology in action. The positioning of two graffiti tags scribbled side-by-side in close alignment represents mutual respect shared by both

writers (Macdonald 204). However, when one tag is written above the other, despite empty wall space around both, the placement signifies dominance by the second writer over the first (206). As one subculture handbook explains:

> Graffiti may seem like a lawless pastime to some, but that doesn't mean that it has forgotten respect or the time that may have gone into someone's work… there are unspoken rules as to what is fair game, and what is most likely going to end up in a problematic situation… A paint tag can go over a pen tag, a throwy[1] can go over a paint tag, a piece[2] can go over a throwy, and a piece can only be gone over if it has been tagged/crossed out. (Crofts 58)

Based on the frequency of wall-based interactions, these unwritten subculture rules form the basis of a language, an unspoken form of communication between writers. In fact, the abstraction of graffiti lettering further intimates a "secret language" shared by those in-community, one that excludes those outside the subculture and imbues the practice with meaning and purpose, and its participants with a sense of power (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 16).

For many, the illegality of graffiti production and increased danger of subculture participation increases its appeal for male youth. By completing high-risk tasks, like breaking into train yards to mark subway cars or spray-painting locations with more likelihood of run-ins with the police, young writers stand to gain more recognition from their peers, while asserting their status and masculinity. The logic of these acts boils down to a basic equation: the more dangerous a scenario, the manlier it becomes. Macdonald asserts that subculture participants use

---

[1] Also known as a "throw-up," this term refers to a simple name outline spray-painted using two colours.

[2] Short for a "masterpiece" that uses more than two colours and a range of design elements.

the illegality of graffiti production to forge autonomous masculine identities, outside of societal norms and, in doing so, free themselves of the social inequalities of the 'real world'. Graffiti subculture offers "a free space which young people can use to explore who they are and forge a sense of their own independence" (179). While this may hold true for male writers, exclusion of women "is an integral part of their bravura conception of the act of doing graffiti—they often define the dangerousness of writing…in terms of women's inability to participate" (Lachmann 235). In this sense, the production of graffiti by male and female writers becomes a way to "perform" gender, through inclusion and exclusion.

Gender Matters: Street Art and a "Woman's Touch"

Male writers often characterize the masculinity of graffiti production by affirming that women lack the required skill and stamina, or by arguing that while women may be physically able to complete the activity, they lack the interest and commitment (Macdonald 98). In contrast, women writers acknowledge the gender-based elements that contribute to a woman's survival in the subculture. Montreal-based writer, *Cyens*, explains:

> When you're a woman, a lot of times it ain't just the police you gotta be afraid of.
> Wandering around downtown in the middle of nowhere, sometimes you come
> across some shady people. (Tourigny 146)

Women alone in the urban environment at night are made to feel more vulnerable than their male counterparts, because the discourse of institutions, the media, family, and friends, aims to persuade women that public space is where they are most likely to experience acts of violence (Condon, Lieber and Maillochon). As a result, some women writers prefer tagging together or in the company of male friends, although the latter safety strategy can perpetuate the myth that

women only engage in graffiti because "some guy they like is a writer…" (Macdonald 136). By reducing the credibility of women writers to romantic interest in male peers, and regularly highlighting gender differences, male writers can aim to discredit their female counterparts. In using graffiti to evoke a masculine image, many male writers view women writers as a threat. Consequently, women writers who partake in the subculture are often automatically attributed a "tainted set of traditional feminine qualities," like fragility and disloyalty (130).

Celebrated 1980s graffiti photographer Martha Cooper acknowledged her admiration for women writers who have endured in the practice despite such obstacles.

> In addition to talent, it takes guts, perseverance, and an ability to ignore snide comments and malicious criticism for a girl to get her name up alongside the legendary guys. Graffiti girls have had to work doubly hard to prove they've got the right stuff. (Cooper)

Whereas male graffiti writers "work to prove they are 'men'… female writers must work to prove they are not 'women'" (Macdonald 130). Long-term New York City writer, *Claw*, completed feats more challenging than her male peers, "so people would say, 'How the fuck did she do that?' I want to do the riskiest, the most outrageous stuff because I'm a woman" (Ganz 12). Fellow icon *Lady Pink* switched to masculine posturing and baggy clothing during the early stages of her subculture involvement as a means of gaining what little acknowledgement she could from fellow male writers. "I had to be an aggressive little thing and dress like a boy," she recalls (Macdonald 130). *Lady Pink*'s affectations often reflected in her work, but her occasional floral designs "fell short of male peers stylistic standards and sacrificed the respect that was given to those of equivalent ability" (131). Only women artists who demonstrate commitment to masculine graffiti styles and act like 'one of the boys' tend to be 'rewarded'

with fewer references to their gender by male subculture participants. Montreal-based writer

Klor123 supports this narrative:

> I never wanted to feminize my walls, I fell in love with graffiti writing as it was
>
> in NYC in the 90's, and I wanted to play the same game! Same rules…no need
>
> to use pink or paint butterflies, just work on a style. And when people think that
>
> *Klor* is a boy, for me that's the best compliment I can hear. (Syrup 139)

Renowned street artist *Swoon,* a writer who switched media early on, recalls how being

mistaken for a boy helped promote her image: "I had been at it for a couple of years, making

work on the street, when suddenly people started to want that *Swoon* guy to come to their town

and do shows. I giggled and kept it to myself" (Ganz 9). But *Swoon* soon realized that fellow

exhibiters at graffiti galleries were strictly male and the only other women she encountered at

shows were girlfriends or sidekicks. The macho attitude inherent in graffiti subculture, coupled

with the marginal place women have long occupied, has contributed to the smaller number of

women and femme-presenting writers.

In Montreal, determining an accurate count of current women and femme writers would

require guessing anonymous artists' gender based on pseudonym choice. Due to subculture

pressures, these writers have long disguised their gender with neutral or masculine-sounding

names. By surveying participants in Under Pressure, the longest-running local graffiti festival,

however, concretizes the overwhelming imbalance in male-to-female participants. Only nine of

over 100 participating artists in 2017 were women and of that minority, only two writers, *Wüna*

and *Klor123*, were women (N. Robinson). While these numbers are influenced by multiple

factors, including artist availability and interest, women's continued exclusion from graffiti

production by male writers has pushed many interested in the letter-based practice toward street art (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 29).

Street art[3] emerged during the 1990s when stickers, stencils and posters were used for the first time in conjunction with spray-painted graffiti characters. Street art abandoned the tag as the centrepiece and moved into a different space altogether (Witten). The expansion of subcultural tools and media, to include paintbrushes, rollers, and wheatpaste glue[4], along with markers and spray paint, broadened the rules of writing to become more inclusive of techniques and styles (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 213). Moreover, the processes involved in the street art movement, such as putting up posters and stencilling take less time than in-place spray painting and therefore carry fewer risks than producing graffiti (Ganz 11). These changes impacted women writers most, because they created a safer, more inclusive environment within which to work. In the same way that writers participate in graffiti subculture as a means of artistic self-expression, street art production retains the creative and identity-forming aspects, while omitting potentially sexist 'rite of passage' and patriarchal practices[5].

Miss Van, a founding fixture of the 90s Toulouse street art scene, got her start depicting "vivid sexual creatures in the world of macho graffiti" (Greiner 5). Her work—adding voluptuous "poupées", or dolls, to a realm that had, until then, belonged solely to graffiti—

---

[3] Not to be confused with corporate muralism or city-sponsored public art, both of which are legal practices and do not conform to graffiti or street art. For example, Montreal's *MURAL* festival, a city-funded and corporatized public art event, is often mislabeled as a street art festival.

[4] Wheatpasting is a common form of street art that involves adhering printed posters or cutouts on city walls with homemade glue, often a mixture of water and flour that is heated until thick.

[5] While some scholars have argued that street art does not constitute a separate subculture, as a result, the significant surge in collective artistic creation and community organization over the last decade, especially by women, refutes this argument. There is a clear structure and delineation for participation within both graffiti and street art subcultures, although the two will forever share an inextricable link.

wasn't just unusual, it was ground breaking. The femininity and roundness of her figures went against the "graffiti norm" of angled, letter-focused pieces (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 98). As a young woman competing for space with street art's mostly male "aerosol predecessors," who considered street artists to be 'soft,' she received backlash from the graffiti community (Edlin 31):

> Girls have a very difficult experience as graffiti writers… It was especially
> intense for me because I was, with Kat[6], one of the first girls painting these kind
> of graphics in the streets. My close friends were tolerant, but I was criticized by
> lots of writers because of how different my technique was. (Hernandez 37)

Miss Van's iconic beauties quickly gained popularity, however, and inspired many women to join the burgeoning global street art movement.

As graffiti subculture continues to fragment and new offshoots develop, avenues open up to those who may have been "alienated or excluded from its 'illegal core'" (Ganz 13). But as 70s graffiti photographer Henry Chalfant remarked, street art, the "heir to graffiti," remains rooted in the "creativity of the dislocated and alienated" (Lewisohn 8). Women and non-binary artists are, thus, ripe candidates for the street art movement. The diversification of unsanctioned art on walls around the world provides an outlet for otherwise repressed criticism of unjust societal practices. Issues like sexism and rape culture are reaching a receptive audience through increased participation of nonhegemonic street artists.

Throughout the Middle East, for instance, in countries where interpersonal discussions regarding social justice must be broached with extreme caution, young women assert personal narratives through street art, which in turn stimulate public discussion about social change and

---

[6] *Mademoiselle Kat* is another early female street artist from France, known for drawing stylized depictions of women.

gender relations. During the Arab Spring revolutions, for instance, women street artists demanded respect in the wake of increasing sexual violence and abuse. An anonymous work in Egypt depicted a woman cradling a wounded male protester above the words: "During battles, I was behind you, protecting you," calling on men to support and respect their female peers and allies (Morayef). Another, produced by Laila Ajjawi, features a woman with colourful shapes emanating from her head, with the caption: "Look at my mind." The feminist symbolism Ajjawi paints in the street is ground breaking in Jordan, where women culturally hold a subordinate position to men (Gupta). While Ajjawi and other women artists across the Middle East have received brief international exposure due to the attention surrounding political events in the region, the media has generally overlooked the global rise in women's graffiti and street art. Similarly, little scholarship has documented the gendered experience of subculture participants or explored how self-identity informs their work.

The State of Women in Graffiti and Street Art Studies

My research has led to seven main books that incorporate the experiences of local and international women street artists and graffiti writers, including *La Jenkins: Graffiti Stories in Southwest Montreal* by Vincent Tourigny, *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents* by Nicholas Ganz*, Women Street Artists of Latin America: Art Without Fear* by Rachel Cassandra and Lauren Gucik, *Graffiti and Street Art* by Anna Waclawek, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* by Nancy Macdonald, *All City Queens* by Syrup, and *Women Street Artists: The Complete Guide* by Xavier Tapies. Within this selection of texts, however, half do not evenly represent male and female subjects. Tourigny blames the underrepresentation of women during the early days of Montreal's graffiti scene for the solitary

woman in *La Jenkins*. Macdonald acknowledges that theorists "have yet to explore gender dynamics that emerge when women infiltrate subcultures that are predominantly male," but her primary interest in masculinity means that only three of thirty *Graffiti Subculture* interviewees are women (Macdonald 6). Waclawek adeptly synthesizes both male and female voices in her historiography, *Graffiti and Street Art*, but chooses not to engage with the gendered experiences of her interviewees. Despite inconsistent representation and absent analysis, however, it is notable that women are mentioned in these works at all, as the overwhelming majority of graffiti and street art literature concentrates solely on male contributors.

As Tapies writes in *Women Street Artists*, "most books on street art have a minority of women artists… [because] the toughest thing in the West remains proper recognition" (Tapies 7). In referencing the West, the author implicates the systemic sexist and racist ideologies inherent in societies sharing European, colonialist roots that have historically favoured work by white men and long positioned women, especially women of colour, as outsiders. The Anglo-American tradition that upholds the archetypal status of the white male artist, "the hidden 'he' as the subject of all scholarly predicates" permeates research as well as street art and graffiti subculture, maintaining a pervasive hierarchical system that disempowers women (Nochlin). Within this system, women artists can never achieve parity with male counterparts.

In an effort to balance representation, books like *Women Street Artists* and *Graffiti Women* showcase strictly female artists. Such visibility provides a step toward equality, combatting the subtler internalized forms of misogyny that value masculinity and disparage femininity (Queen of the Neighborhood Collective 13). But these texts often fail to adequately acknowledge the sexist, racist, and heteronormative standards that dictate mainstream visibility and success in the art world, which enacts adverse effect. Ganz notes that graffiti literature has

focused almost exclusively on men, and aims to rectify this "oversight" by including as many

female artists as possible in *Graffiti Women* (Ganz 10). Though well intentioned, this is too

simplistic a response to the complex structures that reduce women's contributions to a product

of their gender. Similarly, Tapies deserves praise for his refreshing inclusion of Montreal-based

women spray artists—often overshadowed by those in other major Canadian cities—but his use

of gender as the sole lens through which the artists and writers in his book are evaluated

tokenizes those he wishes to elevate (Caldwell). These texts inadvertently reinforce a sexist

notion, common within graffiti and street art circles, that women writers and artists aren't

talented enough for standalone attention and, instead, receive gender-based deferential treatment

(Women in Music & Art). Montreal is not immune to this pervasive attitude, where many male

writers consider women a "menace" to the integrity of the subculture (Nancy).

Rectifying unequal representation of women writers and street artists must start from a

place of nuance and contextualization to avoid what cultural studies scholar Jennifer Daryl

Slack calls "falling into the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism" (Slack 122). Slack

advocates greater use of "articulation," or mapping the complex range of circumstances that

support relations of dominance and subordination within modern cultural praxis. Through

articulation, she writes, identities can be pieced together and practices can be traced back to

their source.

The question: "Why aren't 'women artists' just called artists?" provides a succinct

starting point to approach the issue, as it underscores how women and femme-presenting artists

are most often evaluated solely on the basis of assumed femininity, and how, as a result, they

lose control in shaping their own narratives. The term "artist" has long carried a patriarchal

assumption, unless expressly coupled with a "woman" qualifier. But even the term "woman

artist" remains defined "in relation to dominant male paradigms of art and femininity" (Chadwick 10). Studies foregrounding women graffiti and street art subculture participants perpetuate this reality, by reproducing societal discrimination, exclusion, and exoticization.

Women Street Artists of Latin America, for instance, exceeds gendered tokenization to engage the "inspirational marginalized woman" trope as a basis of study. Conducted by American researchers interested in women street artists "outside the United States," the book evokes an out-dated ethnographic model that "others" foreign study subjects in relation to an implied "norm". The authors introduce the book by confessing: "When our journey began, we didn't know if or how we would meet female street artists, but by the end of our third day we had conducted our first interview" (Cassandra and Gucik 12). This early admission reveals that artists were picked at random based on gender alone, a tokenizing and objectifying practice.

Cassandra and Gucik fail to incorporate discussion of the disparate cultural landscapes of the seven countries where interviewed women artists produce their work, or even the larger inequities within street art culture. Instead, they label interviewees "Latin American," an umbrella categorization that forces their featured creatives, of diverse background and style, into a unified identity narrative predicated on Western perceptions. The result reads like a series of colonial encounters that at once exoticize and dehumanize the artists, while establishing hierarchy between the researchers and their interviewees (Radway). Postcolonial feminist scholar Sherene Razack calls this "the cultural differences model," occurring when scholars are "not pressed to examine their behaviour" during cross-cultural engagement (9). The desire of Cassandra and Gucik to make contact with bodies deemed "other," with no apparent will to dominate, denies their accountability and exacerbates the gendered dimension of their colonial encounters with interviewees (Razack *Looking White People in the Eye* 5). Their lack of

understanding about the social organization of the cultures where their research is conducted

sustains the existing power arrangements and social hierarchies that they purport to want to

overcome by looking south of the border.

Though Cassandra and Gucik engage with artists in their native language of Spanish,

and include both an original transcript and English translation to make the text more accessible,

their engagement with interviewees is not reciprocal. Western concepts of identity and gender

roles dictate the researchers' approach, and what they wrongly present as an "in their own

words" strategy of empowerment, in fact, fails to provide artists with any control over their own

narrative. When analysed using critical method questions, proposed by Indigenous scholar

Linda Tuhiwai Smith to trouble Western dominance within scholarship, such as "Who owns the

research? Whose interest does it serve? Who has designed the questions and defined the scope?"

the answer is never the interviewees (Smith 10). From this perspective, the book is revealed as a

vanity project of sole benefit to the researchers. While it does provide an archive of direct

quotes from women street artists in Latin America, the repetition of superficial questions, like

"talk about women in street art" and "talk about the role of your gender," without provision of

an artist's cultural background or reference to examples from an artist's repertoire, diminish any

value and suggest the authors are not only unfamiliar with the work of the women they

interview, and street art culture in general, but lack accountability to their interviewees.

In contrast, *All City Queens*, compiled by and for women writers and artists, calls for

gendered and cultural analysis of the experience of female-produced graffiti and street art. One

chapter, in particular, titled "(In)Significances: Clues for Female Rewriting of Mexican Graffiti

Practice" by Luisa Fernanda Hernández Herse, masterfully situates the practice of women

participants within graffiti subculture. Herse limits her research to Mexico City and applies the

study of all-women graffiti crews to answer broader questions about how gender expresses itself in graffiti subculture. She begins by proposing a feminist analysis of graffiti, which she defines "not as a 'male-dominated scene' but as an andro-centric and heteronormative cultural practice" (Syrup 108). By establishing her study within a feminist framework through contextualization of the gendered power structure within graffiti subculture, she reveals the wider sexist social factors that influence art production. For example, she describes how her interviewees' illegal painting excursions at night, result in their perception as promiscuous by male peers and the decline of their subculture status. In noting that the artists break from "the heteronormative mandate that indicates women's sexuality has to be administered by men," Herse reveals not just gender-based inequities and social expectations within graffiti subculture, but those that influence Mexican society as a whole (Syrup 113). The author goes on to situate the experiences of interviewed women writers by interweaving their voices throughout her analysis and allowing them to control their representation. Herse's approach highlights the need for reconceptualization of researchers' approaches to women's participation in graffiti and street art.

As graffiti and street art studies further develops into a discipline, incorporation of three main elements would greatly improve the clarity and accuracy of research. Firstly, scholars must establish their standpoint, conveying both prior knowledge of the field and relationship to subject matter, to recognize the impact of their identity on gathering material. Secondly, reliance on lived experience, or first-hand accounts, must drive research to grant interviewees control over how they are portrayed and hold researchers accountable for their claims. And finally, researchers must situate women artists they study within the foundational, systemic prejudices that continue to precipitate the domination of white men in the realm of art production, and, in doing so, challenge biased cultural practices. The circumstances of urban

art-making, reinforced by male artists who act as subculture gatekeepers, represent wider social inequalities (Nochlin). It remains imperative that graffiti and street art scholars acknowledge these longstanding power structures and counter them by encompassing a more inclusive and critical research approach.

Research Methodology of the Following Study

Taking these points into consideration, my research poses an active counter-hegemonic intervention in current graffiti and street art studies. I aim to unravel the discourses that naturalize ideas about femininity and enrich the study of artists and writers by focusing on women and non-binary femmes as socially engaged cultural producers. By focusing exclusively on femme-presenting subculture participants, I explore the cultural conditions of their artistic production and the ways in which they reconcile self-identity and aesthetic expression. I document not only the contributions of this long overlooked group of vital Montreal creatives, but I also situate them within the realms of feminist identity politics, visual culture, and cultural studies. I interrogate the interlocking systems of power that impact their lives and they ways they fight these mechanisms of oppression. I adhere to a set of methods and established practices of reciprocal ethnography to ensure nuanced representation of interviewed participants.

In centring the most marginalized voices within local graffiti and street art, especially Black, Indigenous, urban artists of colour, I survey diverse experiences to challenge the stereotypes that often surround participation in urban art in the city. The public visibility of street art and graffiti provides an effective platform to discuss gendered and racialized inequities within not just subculture communities, but society as a whole. I begin with the assumption that self-identity is a predominant force behind art production in much the same way that art

creation informs identity construction. British philosopher R.G. Collingwood argues that

through the process of making art, "artists come to better know themselves" (Collingwood 79).

He conceives of art as a mode of self-expression that reveals deep truths about an artist for

viewers to interpret and even identify with. While art cannot provide a full reflection of all the

intricacies that constitute self-identity—what feminist art historian Linda Nochlin calls "a

translation of personal life into visual terms"—it can reveal some of the influential factors that

define individuality (Nochlin). Interrogating these elements, as they pertain to the writers and

artists featured in this paper, opens the door to understanding their artistic practice, as well as

the conditions of urban art production, circulation, and reception in Montreal.

By documenting key women and femmes in local street art and graffiti movements, I

look at how "shared, culturally sedimented and implicit knowledge… shapes and mediates

[their] practice in highly localized ways" (Johnson et al. 105). I investigate how these writers

and artists use their chosen medium to navigate notions of identity, relate to fellow subculture

members, and assert place in Montreal life and culture. I further explore how their presence

within male-dominated realms of graffiti and street art undermines the power structures of

artistic urban subcultures. My thesis thus aims to characterize the complex relationships

between identity and locality, and more clearly develop accounts of graffiti and street art created

by nonhegemonic participants as a practice of lived culture. To this end, I used a wide range of

sources to complete my research. Interviews with writers and artists provide direct, intimate

insight into the beliefs, ideas and protocols of Montreal subculture. Magazines, like *Graphotism*

and *Hi Fructose*, and related books, like *Street Art* by Cedar Lewisohn and *Graffiti 365* by

Andrew Witten, contextualize current practices and styles. I combine the words of writers,

artists, and community organizers with my analysis and that of feminist scholars to achieve a balanced synthesis of academic and artistic voices

The ways in which interviewed participants come to define themselves in the process of making art are shaped by their gendered experiences of the city and "policing" by fellow subculture participants, who often share the belief that subcultural cohesion relies on socially enforced conformity to an established set of norms. These norms emphasize the illegality of "true" graffiti and street art, and the stereotypical masculinity of "real" writers and artists. As such, many subculture participants, mostly men, but some women, reproduce systemic forms of misogyny in the ways they limit or exclude the participation of women and femmes. "Femme" is a descriptor for a queer individual anywhere on the gender spectrum who presents as feminine, often subverting gendered expectations by engaging an individualized expression of femininity. Gender aesthetic and identity, thus, forms a crucial part of subculture participation, as it dictates modes of being, interactions with other members, and relationship with urban environment. For women and femme writers and artists of colour, limitations stemming from gender identity are further defined by skin tone.

Non-binary artist Hari Ziyad posits that Blackness denies access to mainstream gender identities because it was never intended to exist comfortably in Western society. They explain that gendered identity for individuals of colour, especially those who are queer, trans, or non-binary, is largely expressed through efforts to "prove" a form of manhood or womanhood not constructed to encompass them (Ziyad). To be Black, Ziyad contends, is to be excluded from hegemonic gender and sexuality norms. Deviance from these norms extends beyond individuals who are "queer" to those who do not conform to traditional standards of appearance. The risks that come with such nonconformity include stigmatization and discrimination by social

18

institutions, victimization by hate crimes, and marginalization (Richie 116). These responses are intended to reinforce heterosexual patriarchy and disparage non-normative identity characteristics. Women's studies scholar Roxana Ng also emphasizes that experience of gender and race oppression is felt in totality, not as separated variables (Vorst 12). She writes that too often the significance of gender is treated as a separate field of investigation, when to account for the lived experience of women of colour, ethnicity, race, and gender (among other aspects of identity) must be articulated as interrelated facets of identity. Ng cautions, however, that gender and race are not fixed but rather socially constructed entities and must be considered in cultural context (Vorst 21). Though the focus of my thesis is specific to women and femme street artists, I consider gender and race inherently bound, and treat them as such.

I acknowledge the limitation of Western conceptions of gender and use terminology, like male and female, to reference gendered identities that tend either masculine or feminine, not in a biological sense. I, therefore, use the preferred pronoun indicated by each interviewee. Gender and personhood do not fit a binary opposition, yet because Western-mediated gender constructs uphold the superiority of white, cisgender male, heteronormative able-bodiedness, permutations outside this "norm" are subjugated. Ideals of womanhood, based in relation to the elevation of the straight white male, dictate normalized standards around women's behaviour, sexual activity, and reproductive decisions. Queer and trans women of colour prove furthest from this socially enforced norm, and are thus subject to heightened pressures for conformity, often enacted in the form of violence.

Social theorist Michel Foucault argues that these power relations form human subjectivity. Through normalizing disciplinary action, individuals become aware of the elements of their identities deemed "abnormal". Foucault contends that, in this way, punitive

practice and the self-regulation it encourages is what "makes individuals," (Foucault *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 170). People modify their behaviour under the belief that they under surveillance even if they cannot directly see who (or what) is watching them. Though Foucault frames his theory in terms of imprisonment, and precludes any relation to gender-based identity, his concepts apply to the regulation of identity construction and subculture participation. Any variation outside masculine hegemony within graffiti subculture, for instance, is expected to fit a socially acceptable role, as a girlfriend, a sex object, or sidekick, and women may feel pressured to fill these roles, as a result. This is not to say women are passive, powerless victims of male power. Hegemonic power relations may shape the lived reality of women and femmes, but they retain agency and often employ it to resist. Through this paper, I explore the ways in which women writers and artists challenge such forms of exclusion, normalization, and hypersexualisation.

In focusing my study on women and femmes, I do not an attempt to universalize their experiences. I do not ascribe shared feminine characteristics to work by these writers and artists, nor do I seek to essentialise "womanhood," as that would reinforce the sexist heteronormative standards that uphold masculinity and further marginalize women and femmes, especially those of colour. Instead, I limit the scope of my research to allow for engagement with a selection of participants who self-define as women and non-binary femmes, and who represent a range of experiences within urban arts-based subculture. Gendering is a process governed, but not fully determined, by social norms, and informed by visible characteristics, like hair length or body shape. While there is no singular gender identity to account for shifting subjectivities within unequal relations of power, dominant phallocentric culture devalues "feminine" gender expression, refusing women and femmes conceptual autonomy or social value. It undermines

feminine traits along with those who express them and though I find commonality with interviewed participants, shared experience is not the focus of this paper. Instead, I include writers and artists from a range of backgrounds and who engage different styles, to focus on their individualized engagement with street art and graffiti in relation to self-identity and self-expression.

Assessment of art from a gendered perspective has the potential to limit nuanced appreciation of work and take control away from artists in shaping their own narratives, but I try to compensate for this by consulting participants about their portrayal. I approach knowledge as embodied, "a locus of perception and a point of orientation" that best reflects the multiplicity of identities (Johnson et al. 49). I consider the varying, sometimes overlapping, discriminations faced by women and femme writers and artists, whose complex experiences and identity factors are too often reduced to, or subordinated by, the single layer of just gender or just race (Hill Collins and Bilge 3).

I engage Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to reconcile junctures of identity and oppression across gendered and racialized boundaries. Intersectionality is a concrete analytic frame that acknowledges the intricate identities of "marginalized social actors—women of colour and queers of colour" that guides a large portion of this paper (Bilge 412). To avoid "whitening" intersectionality, an issue raised by sociologist Sirma Bilge, I centre those who the practice applies to most. The significance of race is clear in initial articulations of intersectionality and related critical feminist research, so I consider gender and race in tandem to avoid re-marginalizing the women of colour with whom I engage in this paper. My second chapter, titled "Anti-colonial Street Art and Graffiti," for instance, foregrounds the work of predominantly queer artists of colour who use their artistic practices to navigate personal

intersections of Indigeneity, race, and gender. As Bilge notes, subordinate groups are most capable of "understanding and interpreting their own oppression and… articulating their own tools of resistance" (Bilge 418). Consequently, I rely on Black and Indigenous women of colour (BIWOC) scholars as the basis for my theoretical framework on these issues, including Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Sherene Razack.

Identity narratives, made up of unique overlaps in gender, race, class, and sexuality, determine individual positioning within society. Those whose identities most closely mirror wealthy, white, masculinity are rewarded, while those who diverge from this "norm" are subject to increasing layers of oppression, marginalization, and violence. I analyse the ways in which artists express and navigate their overlapping identities to understand how they impact experience of urban subculture. The "othering" of the woman or femme artist, as outside male-dominated societal and cultural spheres, exacerbates other discriminations. It is thus imperative to not only focus on individuality and self-identity as key determining factors in artistic output, but to recognize the larger systemic issues, or "whole erroneous intellectual substructure," that most graffiti and street art studies overlook, shift research practice to contextualize societal inequalities, and centre the most marginalized individuals to avoid token equality (Nochlin).

When initially approaching this subject, I considered women's production of street art and graffiti an inherently feminist practice, even if an artist's work didn't explicitly advocate as such. In finding that some of the artists and writers I wanted to interview actively do not consider themselves feminists, however, I decided not to force this narrative. Instead, I switched to the question of self-identity, so my interviewees could control their representation. In many ways, this approach encouraged me to develop a more critical gender-specific intervention in graffiti and street art studies. The strict focus on women and femmes in this thesis

22

contextualizes the embodied practice of contemporary graffiti and street art production by diverse actors within the urban environment. While I use a feminist ontology to investigate variations within identity construction, to develop intersectional representations/interpretations of gendered identity, and establish an embodied female identity, I acknowledge gender as a self-defined and diverse set of experiences that encompass what it means to be a woman, a femme, or even feminine.

Through investigation of the self-identity of eight artists in Montreal, I unpack and challenge the factors that contribute to the "othered" status quo of women and femme participants in local artistic urban subcultures. Interviewed participants comprise three interrelated and overlapping groups: graffiti writers, street artists and community organizers. I interweave my examination of individual artists and writers, including the style, approach and intended impact of work, with group identity and community engagement. The artists and writers I interviewed include *girlplague* with her wheatpasted collages; *Lilyluciole* with her mixed media wheatpastes of marginalized women of colour; *Made in Shaïna* with her spray painted representations of Black subjects; *Miss Teri* with her graffiti lettering and art historical fusions; *Swarm* with her wheatpasted space voids; and *Zola* with their wheatpasted depictions of masked femme protesters. I conducted in-depth interviews with each individual, which focused mostly on questions about their practice in making graffiti and street art and their negotiation of self-identity as Montreal-based urban artists.

I also interviewed Melissa Proietti, founder of Queen's Creation, an event that spotlights local women writers and artists, and *Cam*, an Indigenous street artist and founder of Unceded Voices: Anti-colonial Street Artist Convergence, an event that uplifts Indigenous, Black, and women of colour artists and opposes colonialism, racism and patriarchy. Both Proietti and *Cam*

23

offer key perspectives on the work of defining and shaping public discourse on women and femme urban artists in Montreal. I also draw on published interviews with other local artists to broaden my analysis of unsanctioned urban art in the city, including those with *Maliciouz*, *Starchild Stela*, and *MissMe*.

Artists interviewed for my thesis were selected to document the impact of their impactful, yet largely unrecognized work in the local urban arts scene. The devaluation of their work by local male-dominated graffiti and street art subcultures stems from the structural inequalities that disadvantage women and femmes, and further discredit those who challenge the status quo. In their own way, each writer, artist, and community organizer featured in this paper is a change maker, whether through aesthetic expression, community engagement, general outspokenness, or presence as a subculture participant. Their conceptions of self and urban art take many forms and must be understood in their specific contexts. Readers are advised to understand the stories and the facts that surround them as prototypes of a particular dynamic related to the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and art, rather than as a generalized statement about all women and femme graffiti writers and street artists.

I have endeavoured to centre marginalized voices in the women's urban art scene using an intersectional analytic framework as the basis for navigating, exposing, and resisting injustices caused by institutionalized power and privilege in the city and around artistic urban subculture. While this kind of work is mired in paradox due to the inescapable link between academia and the power structures that perpetuate privileged and subordinated groups[7], I aim to break from normalized power structures by giving equal weight to the knowledge of

---

[7] The role of educational institutions is not only to teach students knowledge, but to inculcate students with values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that integrate them into larger society. The university, an elitist, hierarchical institution steeped in colonial practice and ideology, thus largely socializes students to replicate Western sociocultural oppressions.

interviewed participants from disparate cultural backgrounds and subcultural experience levels (Bilge 409). I have also taken language preference into consideration, to include both anglophone and francophone participants. Montreal is a majority French language city also home to many other communities speaking English, Arabic, Indigenous languages, Spanish, and Creole, among others. Sensitive to these divisions, I have translated quotes into English, but footnoted them in the language they were spoken to include the exact wording of interviewed participants.

Through my research, I seek the answers to three main questions that each correlate with a chapter. In Chapter 1, "Write to the City," I ask how interactions with space, particularly urban space, impact the creative process and identity negotiation of women and non-binary artists whose work is defined by its very presence on city walls. I establish the cultural landscape of Montreal graffiti and street art, and explore how the urban environment influences the work of femme-presenting contributors. In Chapter 2, "Anti-colonial Street Art and Graffiti," I ask how Black, Indigenous, artists of colour, use graffiti and street art to express their identities and counter oppressive realities as gendered and racialized subjects. In Chapter 3, "Gender Politics of Urban Subcultures," I ask how the gendered experience of contemporary graffiti and street art communities in Montreal impacts the output of women and femme participants.

As a female researcher conducting a feminist study, collaboration with participants has been key from conception to completion of this paper. In keeping with Elaine Lawless' outline for reciprocal ethnography, all interviewees are considered collaborators (Lawless 197). Participants were compensated for their time and for sharing their knowledge during interviews; I also provided each with a draft of the thesis and invited them to submit responses. By

involving interviewed participants in the editing process, I have endeavoured to provide them the ability to control their representation, and ensure my research is as fair, honest, and open as possible. Submitted participant responses have been included following the conclusion of this paper to encourage dialogue around covered issues and ensure that my voice is not privileged over those whose work is critical to this study. My research is grounded in current lived experience, so I have maintained friendly rapport with collaborators and hold myself accountable to representing their work and words accurately (Bilge 406). I have striven to portray participants with individualized voices within their own specific contexts.

On My Position as a Researcher

My relationship with graffiti and street art is as a long-term casual participant, with continued involvement in local community events surrounding both graffiti and street art subcultures. I was introduced to many of this paper's interviewed participants through work at Fresh Paint, an urban art gallery linked with Under Pressure International Graffiti Convention. I have volunteered at the multi-day festival for five consecutive years, assisting with set-up, street monitoring, and stage management. I have also filmed and produced original video content for Fresh Paint documenting their urban art events, including Under Pressure, Beaux Dégâts art competition, and Off the Record conference. I am conducting research as a woman studying fellow women and predominantly femme subculture participants from a place of knowledge and involvement in the local urban art community. As such, this paper shifts away from academic study of urban art that is as male-dominated as the urban art world. My work contributes to a larger debate about the development and role of street art and graffiti produced by women and

non-binary writers and artists as a global phenomenon, with Montreal as a key node in this transnational occurrence.

I have developed friendships with interviewed participants in accordance with Janice Radway's "Ethnography Among Elites," in which she criticizes ethnographers' tendency to maintain an 'us and them' mentality. Radway writes that through such distancing, "we create otherness, inflect difference in a particular way, and then frequently teach that knowledge of difference as fact" (Radway 4). I believe traditional objectivity is an unrealistic goal and instead outline my standpoint as a white mixed-race individual with some class privilege to provide context for my work. I aim to be accountable toward featured street artists, graffiti writers, and community organizers as a diverse group with varying cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Haraway 590). I have included interviewed participants who represent varying views of feminism—some don't consider themselves feminists at all—so I am vigilant against improper labelling and presuming to speak on their behalf.

I employed pointers from Alexandra Juhasz' *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video,* in which she interviews over twenty women and includes their conversations, on how to avoid blending researcher and participant voice "to make it impossible to discern which dominates a work" (82). Researchers often hold control over process and product, so they tend not to have as much stake in their output as participants whose livelihoods may depend on reputation or representation. I hope to maintain friendships and continue working with the individuals featured in this paper in future, so I raised the stakes for myself. All interviewed participants are practicing writers, artists, and community organizers who produce unauthorized urban art, so I have made every effort to shield their identities using pseudonyms and not share details that could reveal their personal identities (i.e. school/university names, ages, etc.). Those

featured in this thesis[8] are at the centre of my research and I have done this project with the

hope of benefiting them first and foremost through compensation, written material for future

grants, and visibility from articles generated from this work.

Over the past several decades, graffiti and street art have gained increasing visibility in

urban centres across the globe, marking them as particularly compelling subjects of discussion.

From hand-scrawled tags and spray-painted pieces, to wheatpasted and stickered works, graffiti

writers and street artists continue to inject bold colour, design and meaning into public spaces.

Many city dwellers ignore the writing on the wall, or dismiss it as unsightly vandalism—

perhaps the profusion of modern graffiti and its lingering association with deviant behaviour

make it easier for many urbanites to overlook. But whatever the reason, few consider the effect

of these distinct forms of graphic expression on everyday life. Through my research, I hope to

provide a more nuanced perspective of a unique form of expression that is often reduced to a

symptom of urban decay. Graffiti is still largely considered a "dirty word, denoting an

activity…seen by the majority as containing little artistic merit or social consequence"

(Lewisohn 9). I want readers to look beyond negative stereotypes associated with writing or

drawing on walls and "deliberate with a deeper understanding of it as lived experience" (4).

Whether intended to elicit an emotional response or to educate viewers, street art and

graffiti produced by nonhegemonic participants reflects a storied past. Women have been

---

[8] In light of a social media post by one Montreal street artist I had hoped to interview, in which
they disparaged prior encounters with academics, I chose to rely on published interviews instead
of requesting a face-to-face meeting. I thought this would be most respectful of their wishes.
Activist DiDi Delgado emphasizes, the importance of listening to those "who are willing to
share their experiences". This premise guides my research, as I recognize my privileged place in
a society based on a "social pecking order" that starts with straight white able-bodied cisgender
men, and proceeds down the line (Delgado).

integral since the inception of both movements, yet they remain n in the minority and largely ignored in academic study. Despite this underrepresentation, local women and femme artists and writers in Montreal are bringing a different set of perspectives to Montreal's urban arts scene by challenging masculine norms, empowering alternate voices, and provoking participants to think critically about gender equality.

Keeping with early feminist practice, I hope to document the work of marginalized participants in male-dominated artistic realms, where "the feminine is undervalued, ignored or despised" (Queen of the Neighborhood Collective 14). As a form of self-expression, art making can break the bounds of hegemonic norms. Graffiti and street art, more specifically, remain among the few forms of mass communication in which individual voices have the chance to be heard, where "the cultural domain and the interpersonal domain focus on the significance of identity" (Hill Collins and Bilge 118). This is why a central aspect of this paper is self-defined and individualized identity within the gendered dynamic of Montreal's graffiti and street art scenes. Women and femmes are central to the identity politics of graffiti and street art culture because they break from what has been established as the norm.

In Montreal, street culture validates masculinity and has long demanded that women just deal with it; but change is in the air. Women and femme innovators—from graffiti writers, to street artists, to community organizers—are visibly injecting a bold feminist flair into the urban scene. Long-hidden narratives are emerging in public space, potentially spurring a more inclusive urban youth culture that will both enliven the city and spur dialogue around anti-colonial discourse and gender equality. Graffiti and street art share political roots as a means of rallying support and communicating dissent, thus it is imperative to recognize and document this transformation.

Chapter 1: Write to the City

From boroughs in transition, to contested city streets, graffiti and street art define the Montreal urban landscape. Spray-painted lettering and wheatpasted designs draw attention along busy sidewalks. Tagged lampposts, stickered mailboxes, and other creatively claimed public surfaces, make artistic encounters an integral part of the urban experience. These mediations construct the city as much as the built environment. They permeate day-to-day interactions, redefine local sociocultural narratives, and impact viewers' perceptions of themselves and their surroundings. When Montreal writers and artists take to city walls, they contribute to what urban studies scholar James Donald terms "an economy of symbolic constructs that have material consequences" (Donald 27). Using figurative imagery, they manifest tangible assertions of existence, initiate dialogues with other artists and the public, and communicate their values, personalities, and societal perceptions to viewers. They suffuse public space with personal identity markers that each stake a claim for their right to exist within the city.

Artistic interventions by women writers and artists in Montreal, in particular, contest the patriarchal nature of unsanctioned urban space that limits their mobility and access within the city. A recent paste-up by street artist DAYS depicts a woman placing a card with the words "moi aussi" on a brick wall (*see Figure 1*). The image of a woman engaging in an act of street art signals solidarity with the outpouring of #metoo stories on social media that affirm the ubiquity of rape culture, as well as the gendered experience of artistic urban subcultures. During the day, women writers and artists labour under the threat of street harassment, sexual assault, and violence, only to become more vulnerable under cover of night. Women's bodies have long been sexualized in connection to nighttime in city. Euphemisms for sex work, such as "women

of the night" and "street walkers," reveal how women's nocturnal presence within urban

settings retains historical association with the sexual gratification of men (Arnold). These

pervasive misogynistic notions, along with systemic racism, and the illegality of graffiti and

street art form a trifecta of limitations that aim to control the urban mobility of women writers

and artists, especially those of colour. The "right to the city," a theory coined by urban

sociologist Henri Lefebvre, analyses the varied accessibility of city space. Though he fails to

engage concepts of reduced mobility and access on the basis of gender difference and racial

othering, Lefebvre champions reshaping the dynamics of urban space to create more just

relations of power. He argues that city residents should gain control over "urban life, to renewed

centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full

and complete usage of moments and places" (Lefebvre *Writings on Cities* 179). Women writers

and street artists embody these goals, and continue to advocate for equality on the walls of the

city. Their concerns about safety and access to public space impact not only how they share
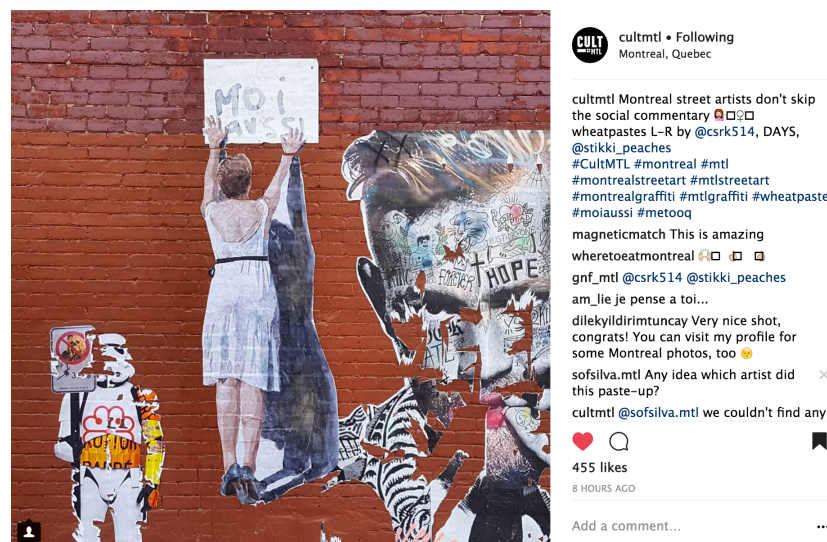
their work, but its content.

Figure 1: "Montreal street artists don't skip the social commentary," CultMTL on Instagram

(November 28, 2017)

The artists featured in this chapter—*girlplague*, *Lilyluciole*, and *Made in Shaïna*—engage urban art to leave their mark on the city, a powerful self-affirming gesture they manifest to express their gendered identities and experience of mixed heritage or disability. They use the public nature of their individual artistic practices to create visibility around women's issues and fight an oppressive system that often ignores or seeks to erase them, and those like them. Through their art, they share personal hopes, fears, and achievements, along with those of other women, to articulate more inclusive city spaces and safer streets for all. They create and circulate images that foster moments of connection and elicit feelings of belonging from viewers, often other women, who see themselves or their experiences reflected in the street.

Struggle around gender and race are a mainstay of city space, in which images and visual culture that inform our sense of self and reality are a crucial in the reproduction and contestation of existing social practices (David 188). The re-appropriation of sites by "the other" and contestations of cultural narratives and popular memory are rooted in spatial practices. The public placement of messages or self-representations that advocate on behalf of "invisible" or lesser-seen bodies, for example, bring attention to social inequality in an accessible way. Art historian Anna Waclawek asserts the ability of urban art to raise such socio-political issues and push boundaries, to "reflect the experience of the city on the fabric of the city itself" (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art*). She cites the work of street artist *Swoon*, whose portraits of marginalized individuals, intricate paper cut outs glued onto city walls, form a material connection with their point of placement. Montreal street artist *Lilyluciole* disseminates similarly impactful paper-based representations of African and Asian women in her unique style that focus on identity, self-image, femininity, and the body.

This chapter, "Write to the City, " explores women's existence in a realm where men take up the most space and often make them feel unsafe and unwelcome—each interviewed participant affirmed the danger of being in public as a woman, especially while engaging in a culturally stigmatized activity. It examines the circumstances that dictate their relationships with the city and impede their urban mobility and access. How does the city, and those who govern it, manipulate visual culture to construct, maintain, and justify the status quo? How do women artists subvert such efforts? How does urban art imagery produced by women deconstruct public understanding of transgressions in their own cultural milieu? And how are these movements mediated through artistic intervention?

Featured artists begin to answer these questions, sharing their experiences and the safety strategies they use to navigate the city—from only working on "legal walls," to sharing their art under the cover of night to disguise their actions. This chapter explores how interaction with urban space impacts the creative process and identity negotiation of women whose art is defined by its very presence on city walls. Through analysis of these artists and their public contributions, it unpacks some of the cultural practices surrounding urban art in Montreal, and the ways in which women participants inject indentificatory significance to the areas where they exhibit their work. It further investigates how their actions form the first steps in creating safer spaces for women's participation in both urban subculture and daily life.

Feminist Reoccupation of Space

Over the last decade, Montreal has gained reputation as a favoured destination of international graffiti writers and street artists eager to sample the city's local colour. Graffiti culture site *Bombing Science* ranks the city 13th in the world for urban art, citing the duration of

community-based events, like Under Pressure International Graffiti Convention, and the

popularity of city-designated walls, like the Rouen Tunnel, that provide space for writers and

artists to hone their skills without criminal infraction (Davison). Montreal's nascent rise to "art

capital of Canada[9]," and the implied financial gain associated with such a title, has softened city

officials to graffiti and street art aesthetics, or at least invigorated them to exploit its appeal

(Paré). Since the mid-2000s, the city has repurposed urban art styles to accelerate the process of

gentrification and "mainline a sense of 'authenticity' into sites" (Schacter). It has actively

funded local festivals and projects that offer a sanitized graffiti and street art look under the

guise of "community building and urban renewal," while continuing to punish property owners

who fail to remove illegal graffiti with severe fines (Woods; Olson). Ten years ago, business

owners had to consider the devaluation that wall art brought to their property, but now

perceptions have changed (Caragay-Cook). So much so, that last year the city's executive

committee announced its plan to invest half a million dollars into mural projects that "give life

to walls" and make "citizens feel safer" (Michaud). This funding, along with some from

Montreal and Quebec's Culture Department, has supported MU, a non-profit organization that

emerged in 2007 to coordinate city-approved public art interventions, MURAL, a corporate-

driven art festival that began in 2012, and Under Pressure, which in its twenty-third iteration

was driven to seek municipal assistance to stay afloat after two decades of refusing sponsorship

(Breummer). Still, crackdowns against unsanctioned urban art persist via police surveillance

and city-sponsored ad campaigns. One earlier this year announced "your graffiti, what a mess,"

and called for taggers to "think before leaving your rubbish," aiming to illicit sympathy for a

white male entrepreneur whose business façade is implausibly overlaid with aerosol tags (see

---

[9] In 2015, Montreal's murals earned it distinction as the first Canadian city to be added to
Google's street art gallery (Tapies 158).

Figure 2). That tagging goes part and parcel with the graffiti aesthetic of writers and artists otherwise embraced, and even lauded, by municipal projects—that pieces for which writers are admired by the general public, would not exist without the practice of tagging—remains unquestioned (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 21). It is within this contradictory, politicized environment that women writers and artists must navigate and engage with the city.

Figure 2: "Every day, hundreds of thousands of people commit acts that seem harmless, but dirty Montreal. It's our city, let's keep it clean," Ville de Montréal on Facebook (July 18, 2017)

Though Montreal's ostensibly progressive trend toward acceptance of rebel art forms has encouraged the rise of a new generation of artists, "after a long period of relative seclusion and quiet growth," city co-option of graffiti and street art also reinforces the systemic and subcultural oppressions that undermine and ultimately discourage women's involvement (Milroy). City efforts to curb the subversive power of illegal art in public space, coupled with continued failure to adequately address women's safety in the street, maintains the status quo of women's limited urban access and mobility. Moreover, city-supported endeavours consistently

showcase the same rotation of male writers and artists, namely those from *A'shop*, over local

up-and-coming and even well-established women artists, thereby, upholding the hierarchical

"boys club" mentality that often discourages women from participating in the subculture in the

first place (Caragay-Cook).

   While MU co-founder Elizabeth-Ann Doyle asserts that city-backed graffiti and street

art-inspired "murals bring a sense of ownership and security" to Montreal neighborhoods, only

nine of the sixty artists on her organization's roster are women, and all are white. Even making

allowance for objective social factors that might cause some groups to be under- or over-

represented in the ranks of the artistic community as a whole, such a dramatic imbalance has

pernicious implications. Even if, as Doyle asserts, public art has the power to create

"meaningful encounters and sustain our relationship with the city every day," such a skewed

gender representation excludes more than half the city's population from public art contracts

and erects a bureaucratic wall in front of women artists, those of colour in particular, that they

can neither paint nor surmount (MU). City-sponsored works that seek to domesticate graffiti

and street art by severing them from their radical roots, "perform a charade of rebellion" to sell

a fabricated notion of place (Schacter). MU's supposed mission in favour of the

"democratization of art," similar to that articulated on MURAL festival's website, "to

democratize urban art," is inherently compromised by lack of diversity and sterilization of

meaningful content by city and corporate sponsorship (MU; MURAL). In reality, such

programs and festivals—by elevating and promoting the artistic output of white male street

artists at the expense of their female and minority counterparts—reveal themselves to be about

as "democratic" as ancient Athens. Citizenship in the world's prototype of direct democracy

was confined to males at least 18 years of age, a privileged minority (never more than a third of

the city's residents) whose power over the broader population of women, immigrants, and enslaved peoples was absolute and unquestioned. Thus it should not be a source of civic pride if Montreal's prevailing cultural norms are found to be in this sense excessively Periclean. Resulting works do not represent the experiences, nor contribute to the sense of belonging, of all, or even a majority, of Montrealers. A recent example that received little critique was produced by several members of *A'shop*, who appropriated Indigenous imagery in a commissioned mural commemorating Montreal's 375th anniversary, the celebration of which was widely decried by Indigenous communities for erasing thousands of years of their existence prior to the colonization of Canada (CSL Group). This display, offensive to many, could have been avoided with increased racial and gendered diversity of mural planning committees and hired artists.

After all, there are no shortage of Black, Indigenous women of colour writers and artists whose deserve wider visibility beyond the occasional token offer, but as one local male writer noted in a 2015 interview with *The Link*: "it's hard for them to in the inner circles without getting hated on. Graffiti is every *man* for themselves" (Caragay-Cook). I posit, therefore, that women writers and street artists who persist in adding their mark to city walls, despite exclusion from city-sponsored opportunities, invalidation from fellow subculture participants, and risks to personal safety, engage in a feminist reoccupation of urban space. They take these risks to leave lasting reminders of their existence and the multi-faceted nature of their identities.

Municipal projects uphold the phallocentric conception of urban space—the ways in which it functions to erase women's bodies, and to produce a mainstream view of space as the domain of men—by providing opportunities that most often benefit local men and enable them to express their visions on city walls. Even when male writers and artists work illegally, their

bodies are less vulnerable to street harassment and sexual assault, although perhaps more likely to be profiled by police. Whatever benefit women writers and artists receive from being "unlikely candidates" for engaging in illegal urban art, however, is superseded by the great risk they take by venturing into the street, especially after dark, because urban space is not intended for their bodies. In many cases, fellow male subculture participants even contribute to this sense of unease. Since coming out as a survivor of rape several years ago, Montreal artist *Starchild Stela* has been approached by fellow artists sharing their own stories of sexual violence by male graffiti writers and street artists in the local scene: "When I began to see my experience in the scene as a sexist experience…I cannot see anything that I do, street art-wise, as not political, because it is. Because I am not supposed to still be there" (Chan). In addition to the threat of sexual trauma, street artist *Lilyluciole* notes the, at times, violent tension between competing subculture participants: "I felt a lot of violence between artists in the street, like fights, but that did not discourage me because my message is more important. I was not afraid to make street art in Canada per se, but I had to take care of myself. My position in Montreal was not easy, I'm French and had my permanent residence and I was afraid to lose it from a run in with the law…" (Lilyluciole). When women impart their artistic visions in public spaces, the impact and meaning of their work is amplified in light of their relationship with the spatiality and governance of the city, and the rape culture inherent within artistic urban subcultures: both unsafe and exclusive spaces.

This is not to imply that local women writers and street artists are passive purveyors of identity markers on the city. Many knowingly aim to counter the heterosexist and racist norms that impact their safety and movement within urban space, both individually and collectively. They mobilize the illegality of their artistic practices to usurp the power of established authority

and appropriate space not meant for that purpose. In 2014, for example, a group of Montreal

women and non-binary femme street artists formed a temporary collective, characterized by

illegal street art, to protest the launch of MURAL festival and the resulting rise in

corporatization of urban imagery and gentrification of urban space. Members *Lilyluciole*, *Zola*,

Stela Starchild, *Wall of femmes*, *Harpy,* and *Cam*, later joined by *52HZ* and *Zuzu Knew,* titled

their collective OFFmuralES[10] to assert their presence in the streets of Montreal and to offer an

alternative vision of street art "closest to the social realities in which most of us live" (Mairet).

They placed paper and fabric-based paste-ups on the margins of the festival, reminding passers-

by that while MURAL employed the rhetoric of community, it was actually about making

money for sponsors—one of the largest works produced during MURAL, at the corner of St.

Laurent and Milton, is owned by multimillion dollar corporation Rogers Communications

(Chan). As local street artist *Zola* succinctly iterates:

> They call themselves a street art festival, but… everything is ruled by money and
>
> it's all legal. None of the organizers are from the community, and it shows. They
>
> come from the marketing industry, and they bring their VIP shit and sponsored
>
> walls and recreate the hierarchy of monetary value related to popularity. The
>
> different artists are not all equally paid... They are bringing the capitalist system
>
> further into the street art world, which perpetuates inequalities between artists…
>
> Public art is not street art. Street art is not public art. Legal murals are not street
>
> art, etc. There is nothing more hypocritical than naming a mural street art… don't

---

[10] The name of the festival, MURAL, was lowercased to emphasize the opposite (OFF) and feminist nature (-ES) of the women's project. The ending replicates the trans and non-binary friendly "ungendering" of words in French language.

capitalize on a subversive culture and try to look edgy. (Zola "Radical Thoughts

on Street Art 2")

The commodification of graffiti and street art by cultural authorities working in parallel with

corporate and land-owning interests in the selection and approval of public art limits its

subversive power and potential. The last decade or so has seen the commercial art world, in the

form of pseudo street art festivals and urban art galleries, offer rebel art forms a path to

mainstream "legitimacy". But illegality, a rejection of hegemonic capitalist practices, remains at

the core of graffiti and street art subcultures. Offering financial rewards of dominant culture

cannot subvert the ideological cohesion of artistic urban subcultures. Sociologist Richard

Lachmann notes that "only by undermining the organizational bases for sustaining belief in the

subculture's alternative view of reality could graffiti writers or anyone else be attracted to a

conception of reality they had previously rejected" (Lachmann 248). For many women

participants, these bases would require a complete sociopolitical and systemic overhaul. Women

and femme writers and street artists take great legal and personal risk to advocate changing the

status quo, which imbues their work with power. The presence of their unauthorized work on

city walls fosters a sense of belonging and place making within a strictly masculine space. This

shift doesn't require the placement of recognizably "feminine" imagery on city walls; rather it is

through public presence and the intent of self-representing in these spaces that women and non-

binary writers and artists impart meaning to a space, even before they've marked a wall.

Self-Identity and Viewership

In addition to spatial considerations, graffiti writers and street artists rely on the visual to

express their identities, experiences, and values. The public visibility, and resulting

accessibility[11], of their creative transgressions is vital in conveying meaning to a wide

viewership. Unlike within historically exclusive spaces, like the museum or art gallery, works of

graffiti and street art are created and curated by writers and artists themselves for anyone to see.

While barriers remain in terms of who can most safely engage in either practice, as detailed in

the previous section, graffiti and street art offer the possibility of a more egalitarian arts-sharing

practice that validates knowledges outside of dominant institutions. They offer a break from the

mass-produced advertisements that plaster public spaces, instead adding uncontrolled, non-

commercial visual signifiers to the urban environment that constitute a 'language of images'

with the power to engage viewers' imaginations and transform consciousness, encourage

personal reflection, and contribute to the identity formation of viewers, writers, and artists alike.

Art historian John Berger attributes the communicative power of images to the

reciprocal nature of vision, which forms the "inherent connection between what is seen and

what is known" (Berger 9). He argues that sight precedes other forms of internalization and

understanding, like hearing or reading, thereby informing viewers' perceptions of self, society,

and the ways both intersect (Berger 104). Viewers interpret what they see based on the complex

series of subjective experiences, practices, and discourses that influence their perceptions

(Sturken and Cartwright 101-5; Mirzoeff 72). With regard to graffiti, for instance, viewers are

influenced by colour preference, stylistic cues that denote a writer's skill level, and personal

knowledge (or lack thereof) of street culture. In the case of street art, often character-based and

more accessible to the average viewer, subject matter, style, and gender markers or other visual

signifiers of an artist's identity prove influential factors in how a work is perceived. Each

viewer consciously and unconsciously negotiates the meaning of seen images by interpreting

---

[11] Not to exclude those with impaired sight, but to acknowledge that the world is largely
organized around visual cues that take seeing for granted.

elements, like colour, style, setting, and content, in relation to themselves and the sociocultural context with which they are most familiar.

While viewers achieve a sense of self through the act of looking, writers and street artists further assert one through the creation of viewed works. The existence affirmation that undergirds artistic urban subcultures—graffiti through lettered monikers and street art through figurative representations—requires an audience. Works of graffiti and street art derive meaning through the *gaze* of a viewer. To borrow from visual culture, "gaze" denotes the act of looking and the process of understanding, as well as the power relations between who is seeing and who, or what, is being seen. This dynamic, "encoded with values and concepts of power, superiority, and worth," reinforces the binary oppositions that define "the norm" and "the other" in Western society (Sturken and Cartwright 111). Viewer perceptions are, thus, influenced as much by the content of a work, as the sociocultural implications of its production and placement. Public art created by women or femmes, for instance, is subconsciously marked as feminine, whether it presents as such or not, because masculinity is the social and cultural standard with which everything else is compared. Further removed from this "norm," graffiti and street art produced by women or femmes of colour is viewed through the lens of prevailing racial disparities coupled with the devaluation of perceived femininity within the arts[12]. Graffiti and street art works must therefore be understood *in situ*, based on content and cultural factors influencing their creation and interpretation. The visibility and viewership of urban artworks created by individuals marginalized by gender and/or race is key in communicating and affirming the identity of creators, as well as shaping viewer acceptance or rejection of representations.

---

[12] A Spring 2017 study by The City University of New York revealed a gender ratio of 70/30 in favour of men within the local fine arts community and that within the minority of women artists, less than 20% were WOC (Lackner).

Montreal street artist *Made in Shaïna* harnesses the visibility of her medium to assert her identity as an artist and a woman of colour. Her distinct characters, each a mix of caricature and realism, represent extensions of the artist herself:

> I paint characters that resemble me, like alter egos. This is my way in the graff
> universe. Writers mark their identities with their names and my way of doing it is
> through these characters. 'Queen of the Thunder,' for example, is a more intense
> version of me, of 'angry Shaïna,' who has many things to say and who stands up
> for herself (see *Figure 3*). Or another character I do has green eyes and braids—I
> often change hairstyles. Through these characters, I paint my identity as a
> racialized woman[13] (Made in Shaïna).

Though she started as a writer at the age of 15, tagging a shortened version of her name illegally in the street, *Made in Shaïna* was deterred by the overt machismo of graffiti subculture: "I never thought I could live in that universe as a woman, I thought it was more of a world that belonged to men, so it wasn't for me[14]" (Made in Shaïna). Developing figurative self-representations to assert her identity instead, she found a means of personal expression that also allowed her to provide visibility for members of her community and combat the underrepresentation of Black women in public space:

---

[13] « Je peins les personnages avec des caractéristiques qui me rassembler, des alter egos, dans la rue. C'est ma manière dans l'univers de graff. Les graffeurs vont marqués leurs identités avec leurs noms et m'a façon de l'a faire est à travers ces personnages la. Par exemple, la personnage « Queen of the Thunder » ca c'est l'alter ego un peu plus intense de moi, de « angry Shaina », donc qui a beaucoup de choses à dire et qui « stands up for herself », donc ceci est une partie de moi. Ou une autre personnage qui je fais est un personnage avec des yeux verts et de tresses, Souvent je change ma coupe de cheveux. Dans ses personnages la, je peins mon identité surtout en tant qu'une femme racisée aussi. Je mets ça en évidence dans mes œuvres. »
[14] « J'ai jamais cru m'être vivre dans cet univers la en tant que femme, j'ai pensé que c'était plus un univers qui appartenait pour les hommes, donc ce n'était ca plus pour moi. »

My motivation is to demonstrate that I exist through my style. If what I represent

in my art can help others in my community, if I can put out a message that is

motivating for the Black community, I will do it. We lack representation[15]"

(Made in Shaïna).

By painting versions of herself on city walls, *Made in Shaïna* normalizes the presence of

"othered" bodies in public space. She counters dominant traditions of representing the female

body as a "site of display" and instead offers characters that break from the traditional power

dynamic of the gaze by staring back at viewers, holding defiant poses, and speaking rebellious

words (Sturken and Cartwright 131). Viewers can connect with these depictions, whether or not

they share similar identity markers, although, they prove particularly powerful to fellow women

of colour. Black women are not often self-represented and even when there is a "hint of

presence," anti-racism scholar Esmeralda Thornhill notes: "We remain an underdeveloped

negative, unacknowledged as a negative—but a negative which is being passed off in its

distorted state as a truthful and fully developed picture" (Vorst 27).

In Montreal, street art depicting women of colour is predominantly produced by white

artists who, while technically skilled, consistently employ stereotypical pseudocultural

references. A recent example is *MissMe*'s wheatpaste of Marie-Josèphe Angélique, an 18th-

century enslaved woman unjustly executed after an escape attempt and alleged arson in the

Montreal Old Port. The work is an exoticized and fetishized depiction of the historical figure in

ambiguous African garb, a headwrap and draped cloth covered in tribal patterns, juxtaposed

with animal print and a jungle cat, implying the "wild" and "uncivilized" stereotype long

---

[15] « Ma motivation est de démontre que j'existe a travers mon style. Si ce que je représente dans mon art peux aider les autres dans mon communauté que je m'identifie à. Si je peux mettre mon message qui est motivant pour la communauté noir je vais le faire. Il y a un manque de représentation par rapport nous donc si je peux le faire, je le faire. »

associated with Black women. In explanation, *MissMe* writes, "I put tigers on the image because she seemed to be a very fierce woman" (MissMe). While wild animals have been used by artists' of colour to intimate symbolic meaning taken from their cultural and spiritual beliefs, the significance is lost when employed by outsiders and instead becomes a form of cultural appropriation, enacted when members of the dominant culture borrow elements of deep meaning to a marginalized culture and reduce it to a form of "exotic" fashion. Despite the positive intentions behind highlighting the shameful, often overlooked legacy of slavery in Montreal, *Missme*'s wheatpasted image not only upholds a tired, racist trope, but it furthers the widespread misconception that images of Black subjects on public walls equals diversity. Such outcomes could be prevented if visibly white artists collaborated with artists of colour, or declined commissioned contracts intended to "improve" diverse representation on city walls, in favour of ensuring artists of colour have opportunities to represent their own cultures and communities. The profusion of similar depictions across Montreal of commissioned works of Black subjects by white artists reveals limited representation on Montreal walls[16].

In contrast, *Made in Shaïna* depicts Black identities that are rooted in her own lived reality. Her street art not only fosters a sense of belonging, but demonstrates that other women of colour can engage in creative work within the public sphere. She attributes the absence of diverse subjects on city walls and within artistic urban subcultures to unsafe working conditions:

> [Black women] view it as a less important to look for more trouble or go out on the street, to do street art as people who are already profiled by the police. I also

---

[16] See also, 2018 Place Ville Marie mural by white French artist, Aurore Danielou, depicting a disembodied Black woman, wearing a head wrap and jewelry, framed by exotic flora and cheetah heads (https://www.instagram.com/p/BebUcBPnrvP).

experience barriers like that. Maybe with me and a few other artists working to

make it more visible, more women of colour will participate[17] (Made in Shaïna).

Her work, "Queen of the Thunder" provides an apt example of her individual street art style and

the themes most common in her practice. Depicting a woman of colour with a serious

expression, bantu knots, a third eye to represent self-awareness, and a raised left arm in the

universal symbol of resistance and strength in the face of discrimination, the goddess-like

creation conveys frustration and resilience in the face of oppression. *Made in Shaïna* affirms:

> There is a message in each element, an affirmation that there are positive ways to
>
> channel anger. For me, I do it through art. There's spirituality in my art. Just
>
> doing it is an act of resistance against pressures and stereotypes toward me. It
>
> provides a moment of self-acceptance. Art can send a message, or just a feeling.
>
> It's my dream to do something that can create change[18] (Made in Shaïna).

Unlike more traditional artistic encounters, the immediacy of art in the street—most often an

unplanned interaction between a viewer and a work that grabs their attention—adds a unique

layer of disruption that takes viewers out of their daily routine to elicit a reaction. Works of

street art "function as vehicles for identity formation vis-à-vis their sites of

dissemination…Owing to their temporal nature, and because artists work under pseudonyms,

the ambiguity of authorship invites the spectator to consider the work in the present moment"

(Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 103). Street artist *Swoon* supports this notion, suggesting that

---

[17] « Elles pensent qu'il est moins important de faire ce genre de choses, à chercher encore plus des troubs ou d'aller dans la rue, pour faire le street art comme personnes qui sont déjà profilés par les polices. J'ai certaines barrières par rapport à ca. Peut-être qu'avec moi et quelques autres artistes travaillant pour le rendre plus visible, plus de femmes de couleur participeront. »

[18] « Il y a une certaine spiritualité dans mon art. Juste le fait de le faire, c'est un acte de résistance contre la pression, les stéréotypes contres moi. Ce moment d'acceptance de soi-même. L'art peut attendre les gens, puis leur transmettre un message, ou juste un sentiment. C'est mon rêve de faire quel que chose qui peux changer.»

"people are more open when they stumble upon something unsuspecting," especially a creative public work that engages their imagination (Stouffer 92).

Figure 3: Made in Shaïna with "Queen of the Thunder", 2017. Photo: Sofia Misenheimer

The surprise element of graffiti and street art, encouraging viewer participation over mere perception empowers these forms of unauthorized urban art to advocate social change (Jenks 4). Jean Duvignaud unpacks this concept in *The Sociology of Art*, stating "the unexpected, the unusual, and the unforeseen become valued…in so far as they enable the artist to attack the rigidly enclosed structures of habit and common perception" (Duvignaud 138). Breaking away from curated and more exclusive modes of art sharing, the intersection of artistic expression and viewer experience of the urban environment, realized by graffiti and street art, form a space of communication that can result in powerful moments of artist-viewer exchange and self-reflection (Demers, Lambert and McMurray 7; Wacklawek 96). The wall becomes a place for "visual conversation" and new forms of "visual thinking" (Mirzoeff 258-61).

By inserting artistic encounters into quotidian experience of the urban environment, graffiti writers and street artists "open up a dialogue and bring about a participation which society cannot create for itself" (Duvignaud 31). Interdisciplinary scholar Sandra Weber further affirms the visual power of art:

> Art makes us look; it engages us. The reason we need and create art has to do with its ability to discover what we didn't know we knew, or to see what we never noticed before, even when it was right in front of our noses. Artistic uses of images can make the ordinary seem extraordinary—breaking through common resistance, forcing us to consider new ways of seeing or doing things (Weber 44).

Building on Foucault's concepts in *Discipline and Punish*, modern society normalises certain bodies and modes of knowledge over others in order to "maintain relations of dominance and subordination" and, thus, has a vested interest in the maintenance and regulation of its citizens (Sturken and Cartwright 108). Graffiti and street art operate outside of this regulatory system, although they counter the status quo in different ways. Whereas graffiti is often construed as delinquent to outsiders or considered too intricate for viewers to decipher, street art welcomes viewer interpretation. While graffiti provides a means of self-affirmation within a "network of initiates," street art conveys an artist's identity along with political stance or social commentary to the average passerby (Waclawek 123).

The accessibility of street art can often render it an impactful activist tool. For street artist *Lilyluciole,* activism and art prove inseparable. As a woman of colour, she engages issues of identity and self-image that encourage public visibility and humanization of marginalized women. At the heart of *Lilyluciole*'s creative practice lies an emotive, nuanced, and, above all,

personal exploration of the self in its pluralized forms: "We have a lot of identities inside us, and collage is the best way for me to talk about this complexity. I'm métis[19], a mix of a French and African…a woman with many faces, sometimes white, sometimes Black, sometimes French with a Northern accent, sometimes Parisian, or Canadian; people see me many ways" (Lilyluciole). *Lilyluciole*'s street art compels viewers to acknowledge the dignity and strength of 'hidden' women in the city—"my battle to represent ethnic minorities in a scene dominated by white men" (Tapies 98). Each portrait features a model whose appearance breaks from stereotyped conceptions of Canadian or French national identity. Often perceived as immigrants or outsiders, these women straddle a realm of invisibility and hypervisibility, of neglect and constant surveillance, that *Lilyluciole* aims to call attention to through poignant photography interlaced with thread, cut-outs, and stencilling. She articulates that women want to walk the streets without physical or verbal harassment, without being subject to an aggressive, intrusive or demeaning gaze, "the right to act, to be an agent, the right to walk the city street unmolested and unchallenged" (Donald 112). By pasting larger-than-life representations of marginalized subjects in the street, *Lilyluciole* combats unsafe gendered and racialized experiences of the city by normalizing the presence of women of colour. Her artistry asserts the existence, confidence, and beauty of "othered" women and engages the visibility of street art in their defence. Her works at once integrate themselves into the visual landscape of the city and disrupt it, encouraging viewers to see depicted subjects as natural members of the urban environment, while also consciously acknowledging their existence.

---

[19] Métis (capitalized) denotes a member of the mixed descent Indigenous community. Use of the term uncapitalized is the word in French for "mixed," which does not have an implied Indigenous connection.

Each piece is a labour of love, an act of care, and an exercise in patience. Taking months to find the right model, weeks to construct assemblages of her likeness, days to paste the larger-than-life creations in public, and, at times, mere hours for city workers to buff them into oblivion—*Lilyluciole* remains undeterred in her goal to make visible marginalized lives (Misenheimer "Women of Many Parts"). Unlike many street artists who "use techniques to keep their works up as long as possible," she produces ephemeral works to "affirm the fragility of paper, of life, the impermanence of everything" (Lilyluciole).

Lilyluciole began her work in 2011, while recovering from a serious illness and related surgery that inflicted lasting physical pain and emotional trauma. Faced with her own mortality, she sought to assert her own existence, placing creations in the street to reach an immediate audience: "It was urgent for me to express myself. I felt responsible for the gift that I had, as an artist, and I needed to use it" (Lilyluciole). Her early designs became cathartic forms of self-expression that explored the artist's mixed heritage. Anonymous figures, at once joyful, revelling in their femininity, and sombre, bearing the weight of a colonial past, externalized her hybridity. More importantly, however, these subjects defied dehumanization, emanating organic shapes and floral motifs—impermeable auras of self-awareness and freedom. Butterflies and hummingbirds fluttered around the portraits, evoking physical sensations of love, reverence for nature, and motion. This movement infuses *Lilyluciole*'s street art with a vibrant, standout quality that renders it eye-catching even on the liveliest street corner. Each portrait fuses to the wall where it's plastered, adapting to the new texture, claiming its right to exist, and inscribing 'the other' onto the very make-up of the city.

As a female street artist, *Lilyluciole*'s representation of diverse subjects proves especially impactful. Her introspective works contrast with more common urban depictions that

emphasize mainstream, male-defined feminine 'perfection,' to portray identities more complex than the sum of their physical attributes. While *Lilyluciole*'s earliest works used models to represent her personal struggles; over time, her process has become more in dialogue with her models. An emphasis on self-definition has led the artist to collaborate with women of many backgrounds, including, her most recent sitter, Tysha. This latest portrait captures the model posing confidently and displaying her vitiligo, a pigment-related skin condition, with pride: "Tysha is powerful. I love the way she stays true to herself and wanted to highlight that quality. You don't need to be perfect to inspire others" (Misenheimer "Women of Many Parts"). But Tysha's portrait also emanates a deep vulnerability. *Lilyluciole* glued paper tears directly onto the model's body that snake from her cheek, down her shoulder, and toward the rope wrapped around her waist. These symbolic accents recall the histories of slavery and African ancestry shared by the artist and model, and visualize the intergenerational wounds imprinted on both women that impact their day-to-day lives. Though obscured by added layers, they're never erased from view.

At the core of this, and every, piece by *Lilyluciole* is a stark black and white photograph that centres viewer focus on self-identity: "When shooting, I talk to each woman about the question of identity. My upcoming model, Nangale—she's African and Muslim—told me people look at her differently. She is constantly aware of the regard of others on her." (Lilyluciole). Based on a model's responses, the artist determines personalized layers and colours to exemplify resilience in the face of adversity. For *Lilyluciole*, her embroidery, and stencilling blend together to better show depth of character and elicit viewer emotion. She believes her works form a resistance against gendered discrimination and the oppression of those navigating hybrid identities. They tell a story about the interplay of strength and fragility,

conveyed through her models, her supplies, and her overall portraits, and affirm that "even

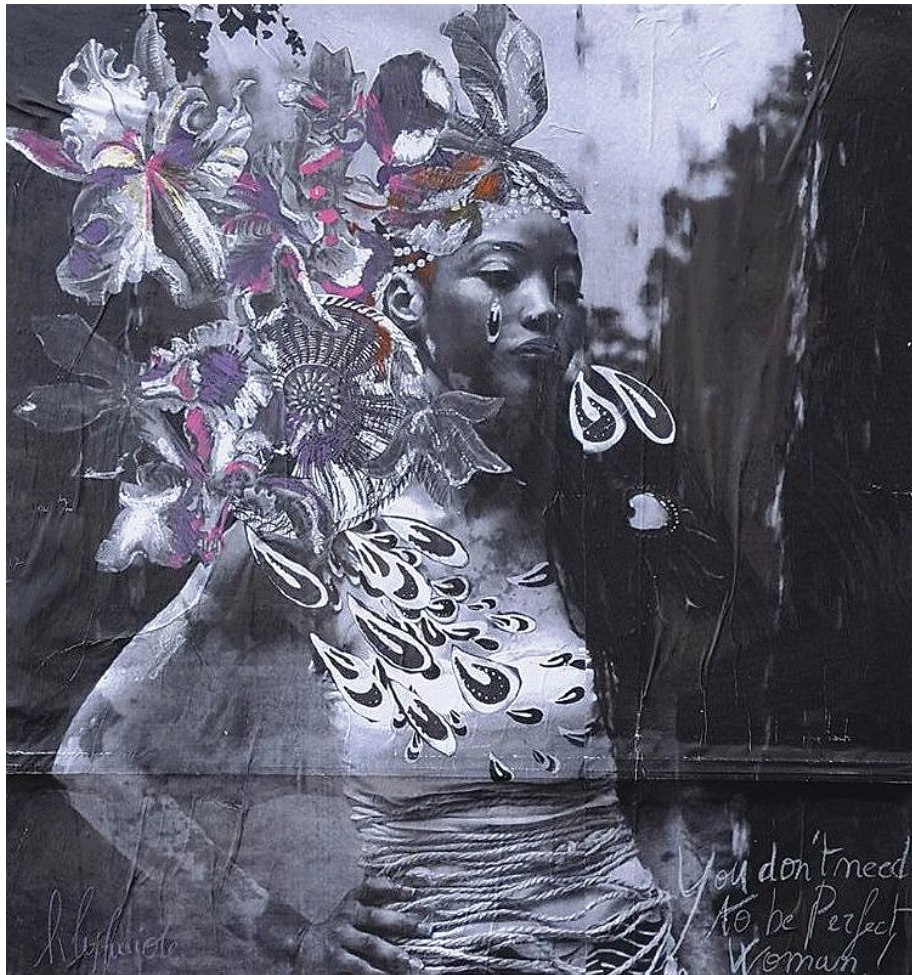when the works are gone, the women are still there" (Lilyluciole).

Figure 4: Lilyluciole, Tysha, mixed media, 2017. Photo: Isabelle Virot.

Placemaking

The spatiality and public visibility of creative output by *Made in Shaïna*, *Lilyluciole*, and

other women writers and street artists in Montreal not only asserts their right to exist and

reclaims public space for themselves and viewers of their work, it enacts a form of placemaking

within the city. Unsanctioned artistic works made and experienced in public change the

appearance of urban spaces in a way that increases viewer awareness of city surroundings.

Material use of the street by writers and street artists produces creatively engaged relationships with city spaces that foster a sense of lived connection between artists, viewers, and the built environment (Urban Systems, Mirzoeff 258). When placed in the street, "either as an artistic material or an artistic context (or both)," without the input of a sanctioning body, graffiti and street art become sites of human engagement that bypass social power structures, challenge dominant discourses, and transform the commonplace (Riggle). As Montreal street artist *girlplague* notes, "Cities bombard people with advertising and tall buildings, but street art creates a more human connection to catch your eye and make you think" (girlplague "Interview").

According to Henri Lefebvre, this transformation of spatial practices, the banal routes and networks of quotidian city life, from 'ordinary' to 'remarkable' indicates a form of physical placemaking. He theorizes the physicality of spatial practice in relation to more social representations of space, drawings, and diagrams by expert designers (engineers and architects), and mentally-based representational spaces, existing as an abstract imaginary realm (Lefebvre *The Production of Space*). Graffiti and street art produced by woman in Montreal interact with Lefebvre's three modes of spatial production to render the invisible, visible. This multi-tiered active production of space occurs primarily through the physical alteration of spatial practice, turning otherwise overlooked points along daily routes into destinations worthy of acknowledgement. And secondarily, it moves the design of art in public space "toward changeability, evolution, and an appreciation for humanity… one in which designers actually welcome the opportunity to open up places for new interpretations, creating more room for public art" (Kent and Nikitin).

Graffiti and street art produced by the most marginalized urban artists—not just women, but queer women, women of colour, and/or differently-abled women—constitutes what Lefebvre called "a differential space" that dissolves the social relations of abstract space and generates new relations that accentuate difference and "shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body… and the [dominant] corpus of knowledge" (Lefebvre *The Production of Space* 52). By placemaking through unexpected and unsanctioned production of space, at odds with the dominant order, women writers and street artists shift the order in an extraordinary way (Johnson et al. 109). Space signified by women-produced urban art, through its subversive existence, stimulates active engagement with viewers rather than passive observation. Whether this process is conscious or not, it has the power to normalize women's presence and imagery in public space. It breaks away from traditional concepts of spatiality, that "fetishize space in a way reminiscent of the old fetishism of commodities, where the trap lay in exchange, and the error was to consider 'things' in isolation, as 'things in themselves'" (Lefebvre *The Production of Space* 90). In contrast, while the work of white male heteronormative writers and artists can be skilled, subversive, and enact a form of placemaking, it simply signifies a less extraordinary form because men take up the most space on city streets and within artistic urban subcultures. They are assumed to belong within these spaces.

The extraordinary placemaking ability of work by Montreal women writers and street artists occurs on various scales. Unlike disruptive life-sized wheatpastes by *Lilyluciole*, *girlplague's* street art practice involves scattering subtle, ephemeral artistic works across Montreal—each one intended to create a brief moment of interruption within the daily routine of viewers (see *Figure 5*). These "femmeglitches" as *girlplague* calls them, are equal parts whimsy and concept. Less concerned with conveying narrative than embracing street art as an

emotional outlet, *girlplague* layers found images with self-made textures to not only imbue her

creations with meaning, but to channel her mental illness.

Diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) in 2014, a condition

characterized by distorted self-image and emotional variability, *girlplague* finds solace in the

artistic outlet she had been practicing for nearly a decade: "Art in general is always something

I've done to unleash difficult emotions and soothe myself. Now I really focus on projecting

struggles with mental illness into my art as a way to survive" (girlplague). Cutting images by

hand and scanning them into her computer for hours has become a daily form of therapy; so, too,

has the act of assemblage. Many of her creations express personal struggles with BPD and aim

to counteract the often-debilitating identity crises she suffers. Her street art evokes loneliness,

heartbreak, rejection, and anxiety.

Girlplague's creations frequently involve hijacking collaged characters with glitched

disruptions to explore questions of identity and encourage self-reflection. Glitch entails a

process of trial and error, ensuring no certain outcome, which appeals to the artist. In fact, her

femmeglitch practice takes her street art into an even more abstract realm. Through harnessing

corrupt data to find aesthetic value, and sometimes manipulating those digital errors to create

texture, *girlplague* is able to reflect "what's in [her] head" (Misenheimer "Girlplague,

Interrupting"). Creating femmeglitch has, thus, become an act of self-love that embraces

personal and technological imperfection to produce beauty. In this way, *girlplague* uses

femmeglitch to assert herself as a female artist, as well as share "a digital expression of

femininity" (girlplague "Interview"). Though she doesn't consider her street art overtly feminist,

it is a core part of her self-identity.

In 2016, she created a femmeglitch zine to claim space as a woman in a male-dominated art community. When shared with fellow members of Glitch Artists Collective, an online forum dedicated to the art form, however, the resulting backlash was extreme. *Girlplague* was continually spammed with pornography and denigrated as an artist:

One of the moderators congratulated me on having one of the longest threads in the history of the group… A lot of men were angry because they said glitch isn't gendered. It made me want to paste [those works] up in the street. I like leaving my mark, because it's so hard for me to go out a lot of the time. The world easily brushes off those who are mentally ill, [but] pasting powerful imagery into the streets forces my energy, voice, and presence into public. It insists I exist, unapologetically (girlplague "Interview").

Through producing street art, *girlplague* finds self-affirmation and reward. However, there are limits to her desire to be seen. More recently, personal safety and privacy have become critical concerns. Just over a year ago, the street artist was attacked by a stranger at a bar who wouldn't accept "no" as an answer to his physical advances. She left the encounter with two black eyes and stitches across the bridge of her nose. When her story went viral on social media, an onslaught of online harassment sustained the trauma. She produced art about the experience: a collage that features her injured face surrounded by violent online comments insisting she deserved worse abuse. The cuts and bruises resemble glitches on an otherwise anonymous face.

Viewers less familiar with her work often think that *girlplague* is a feminist movement. And she may as well be. Her pseudonym is an extension of her identity, once a girl, and now, an "unstoppable force" as a woman:

I found [the name] empowering and something really bold to attach to myself to and heal from. I'm always pushing the envelope and being more and more open about my struggles has proven to be the best coping method… Whether you love [my art] or hate it, it's there and valid and if you try to rip it down, I'll just put it up again. There, and somewhere else, and everywhere. I'm not going away. I'm just getting started (girlplague "Interview").

Figure 5: (From left to right) "glitchcastle" (2016), "end rape culture" (2017), "fuck your ableist BS" (2016). Photos: girlplague.

Self-identity, re-appropriation of city space, and placemaking are key facets of women's production of unauthorized urban art. Women writers and street artists in Montreal use their media to engage viewers in the experience of art, as well as foster social change. If, indeed, "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it," as claimed by Marxist poet Bertolt Brecht, who incidentally penned "In Praise of Illegal Work," then unsanctioned urban art both reflects social realities most clearly and holds the most power to change them. Graffiti and street art comprise a complex field where power relations are exercised and exchanged between artists, artworks, and viewers, engaged in multi-layered practices of looking and being seen. These processes prove especially complex for women of colour writers and

artists, whose experiences of city life and local urban subcultures, safety, and mobility are

impeded by the effects of settler colonialism. They complicate the notion of space reclamation

through urban art, when a work is created on stolen native land. The following chapter explores

strategies employed by these artists to counteract modern-day colonialism through individual

artistic practices and collective engagements.

Chapter 2: Anti-colonial Street Art and Graffiti

"White supremacy is killing me," reads the sticker a young Xicana woman[20] holds over one of her eyes in the latest multi-storey artwork by Jessica Sabogal to grace Montreal streets. The subject's expression is knowing and confident, framed by a pink semi-circle and mint green design that direct attention back to the starkness and immediacy of her message. Produced in August 2017, during the third iteration of Unceded Voices: Anti-colonial Street Artist Convergence—an independent biennial event organized by and for Indigenous-identified and Black women, Two-spirit, queer, and gender diverse artists of colour—the piece lasted a few days before "anti-white" was haphazardly scrawled at street-level across the bottom, and explosions of red paint pockmarked upper portions. Balloon fragments and paint splatters covered the street in front of the piece, suggesting the crude method used to reach the highest parts of the work. With Sabogal out of town, already working on her next creation, members of Unceded Voices artists banded together to collectively restore the piece that following afternoon. They removed the vandalism, but a week later the piece was attacked again, this time with more than twice the number of red paint-filled balloons. Unceded Voices artists, along with a group of nearby residents determined to restore the piece, worked together to paint over the stains. Local media outlets covered the story, citing St-Henri borough mayor, Craig Sauvé, who deemed the destruction "clearly, clearly racist" (CBC News "Indigenous Mural Calling out White Supremacy Vandalized Days after Completion"). A further attack, more hostile than either of the two previous, shrouded most of Sabogal's muse in red, but failed to obscure her written message. In response, neighbourhood resident Lindsay Fleming created a fundraising page on GoFundMe to cover the costs of repainting the damaged portions of the mural and

---

[20] Alexandra "Lexx" Valdez, a friend and mentor of the artist.

coating the entire wall with a protective varnish to prevent future damage. In 30 hours, her grassroots campaign raised over $1,500 for supplies to fully repair the piece (Sproull "A Community Mobilizes against Racist Art-Vandalism"). An astute commenter on the fundraising page remarked, "the work was targeted because it directly attacks the heart of white-supremacy and colonialism" (Anne).

The destructive and restorative exchange around Sabogal's street art attests to the potential of unsanctioned urban art to foster dialogue about the power relations that configure Montreal's public sphere. While "tagging over" large scale works of graffiti and street art are to be expected within the competitive framework of urban art subcultures, where participants vie for recognition, the anonymous defacement represents a marked departure from usual practice. Instead, this incident offers a symbolic snapshot of the ongoing, attempts to silence local women of colour, artists and non-artists alike, who call attention to the modern-day effects of colonialism on their lives, bodies, families, cultures, and histories. The immediate response of fellow artists to fight back against these attempts demonstrates the resilience and power of collective action enacted by women of colour to support each other and persevere in the face of opposition. Today the remaining larger-than-life portrait of an Indigenous woman holding steadfast in her truth connects the visual and the political. It signifies reclamation of city space that exists on stolen Native land, space not intended for the identity affirmation, let alone the physical presence, of artists from the very communities targeted for systemic abuse and erasure. Jessica Sabogal's international renown as a street artist contributed to the attention her work received. Tourism Montreal even later added her mural to their Public Art website (with permission from Unceded Voices) although there is no mention of the attacks and discreet reference to the event, which operates independent of the city. Just a few blocks away, fellow

Unceded Voices artist *Dolly Deals* (formerly *Red Bandit*), who is Kwagu'ł and non-binary,

painted a haunting street art memorial to the Indigenous children who died in residential schools

across Canada from 1848 until the last one closed in 1996, and in honour of their father who

was a survivor of the residential school system (see *Figure 6*). Physical and sexual abuse and

starvation were rampant at these institutions, where Indigenous children were forcibly removed

and detained away from their families and cultures, and violently assimilated to white settler

culture, language, and religion. There is no mention of this work on the city's Public Art

website.

Figure 6: Dolly Deals, "Some of us never came home from that school," 2017.

Photo: Sofia Misenheimer.

61

To determine the significance of artistic street "interventions" by Black, Indigenous,

women of colour (BIWOC) necessitates consideration of the lingering effects of colonization on

their daily lived experience of the city and the efforts of these urban artists to resist and

persevere despite state-sanctioned racism in the form of hyper-surveillance, profiling,

criminalization, and punishment. These ongoing colonial impacts, most deeply felt by BIWOC,

stem from notions of cultural, racial, and gendered superiority that white male European (and

female) settlers encoded and enforced on the land in and around Montreal taken with force and

deceit from Native populations 400 years ago. Over the centuries, colonizers perpetrated acts of

mass genocide and oppression to fracture and disenfranchise Indigenous families, communities,

and cultural frameworks, enslave African, Black Canadian, Indigenous, and Chinese individuals

(before then erasing these legacies from narratives about the "birth" of Canada), and uphold the

racist and patriarchal social forms that persist today, solidifying white, male privilege within the

social and political culture of contemporary Canadian cities and governments. As anti-racism

educator Esmeralda Thornhill writes, "As women, we live in a sexist world order. However, we

Black women and other Women of Colour in addition live in a racist world order…" (Vorst 27).

The multi-tiered effects of the gendered colonial process perpetuate the "heightened

vulnerability to physical and emotional male violence" of Indigenous and Black women, which

culminate in the highest rates of murder and incarceration for these demographics in Canada[21]

(Green 5). Identity, thus, remains a core signifier linking the experiences of women of colour

---

[21] According to the most recent Statistics Canada report, one-quarter of all female homicide victims in Canada in 2015 were Indigenous, six times higher than that for non-Indigenous women (Mannarino and Kurlandsky). And while Black-Canadians make up three per cent of the general population, they account for 10 per cent of the federal prison population (CBC News "One-Quarter of All Female Homicide Victims in Canada in 2015 Were Indigenous").

within overlapping spheres of colonial oppression, intergenerational trauma, and societal alienation.

Despite commonalities, however, the "culturalization of racism" operates differently for Indigenous populations than it does for other marginalized groups (Razack *Looking White People in the Eye* 61). In "Decolonization is not a metaphor," for instance, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang demonstrate the difference between "expansive" racialization, enacted by the Canadian settler state to maintain the slave/criminal status of Black populations, and "subtractive" racialization based on law policies and blood registries that keep control of tribal status in the hands of the settler state and portray contemporary Indigenous generations as diluted, or "less authentic," and, thus, less entitled to the land claims of their ancestors (12). These disparities demonstrate that race is not a fixed entity, but rather comprised of varying experiences and histories of colonization that when overlapping, can give rise to kinships, shared identities, and collective belonging around shared struggles and shared experiences of oppression around differences. Women's studies scholar Roxana Ng advocates for conceptualizing identity "as social relations which have to do with how people relate to each other through productive activities" (Vorst 16). Gender and race encompass a "bricolage of identifications" fundamental to the division of labour and processes of domination and struggle in Canadian society. Ng cites, for instance, the emergence of Indigenous people as a group, and Métis as a sub-group, based on colonization "which destroyed, re-organized, fragmented, and homogenized the myriad tribal groups across the continent" (Vorst 19). To avoid colonial, oversimplified representations of identity, that reify one aspect of identity over the reality of multi-faceted experiences, this chapter refers to artists and community organizers using the terms that they themselves use to self-identify, both personally and collectively, in order to

acknowledge their perceived boundaries of inclusion/exclusion from certain groups and better understand their approaches to combatting colonialism in its modern-day forms through alternative solidarities and practices.

This chapter explores work by Montreal urban artists who aim to dismantle colonial narratives and the erasure of indigenous communities and communities of colour in the city— from *Swarm's* serialized renditions of a utopic spaces full of possibility, to the self-referential pieces painted on legal walls by *Made in Shaïna*, to community-based engagements by street artist *Cam* and Unceded Voices collective. Black, Indigenous, women of colour in Montreal who use artistic means to publicly challenge dominant social and cultural power relations, engage anti-colonial practices within their spheres of influence and the city at-large (Unceded Voices). They bypass Western institutions (i.e. education systems, galleries, arts journals, granting bodies) that formalize recognition of professional artists and often discriminate again them, and, in doing so, "reject the restrictions of the institutional art world that can confine dialogue and expression to colonially designated spaces" (Desmarais and Larivée). Uncensored urban art not only exposes a wide public viewership to anti-colonial discourse; it also enacts a three-part process of humanization, (re)territorialization, and collective belonging of those living with marginalized identities.

Humanization

Racism remains a driving force behind the limited safety and mobility of women of colour in the street and, consequently, their trepidation to engage in illegal practices like graffiti and street art that require extended public presence. The dehumanizing process of racialized discrimination operates, at its basest level, by reducing people and whole groups to abstraction,

usually a set of negative stereotyped qualities, based on their appearance, and then responding

through violence and erasure. Art historian Charmaine Nelson notes in an interview, the role of

visual culture in perpetuating colonial effects specific to the Black Canadian experience, but

which also extend to other communities of colour:

> It usually transpires at the level of vision… [white Canadians] see us and all they
>
> see is brown skin and hair that is too curly and they have an idea that attaches to
>
> our bodies that has nothing to do with who we are, what we want for ourselves,
>
> and what we are actually doing in that moment… It is a very dangerous thing for
>
> the ways in which it literally puts Indigenous and Black and Brown people at risk
>
> because when your body is othered you're seen as a threat, you're seen as
>
> foreign to the space and through that discursive strategy you can also be seen as
>
> criminal in your so-called otherness… (Joachim)

BIWOC writers and street artists face these unsafe conditions to intervene in an

oppressive and dangerous environment that seeks to erase their right to exist within the

city. As such, they employ safety strategies to protect themselves while resisting racism

and patriarchy. In fact, most artists interviewed for this chapter prefer to engage in street

art practices using paste-ups, stickers, and stencils, rather than graffiti, because they can

prepare works in advance in the safety of their studios or homes. They can then place

them quickly in public and incur less risk than on-the-spot painting.

Montreal-based street artist *Swarm* explains that after countless instances of harassment,

she has largely switched media to mitigate the risks she faces:

> Even though I'm not usually spray painting, it's still scary. When I am, it's even
>
> worse… I'm not a man, so I get harassed constantly just for existing. That's

literally what it is for me to be outside, to be yelled at for existing… I identify as

non-binary, but I look like a woman, so it's not safe. It draws more attention to

you as a person. Also with the police, the fact that it's illegal and police are really

intense—they're definitely more intense in Montreal than they were in Toronto,

with me anyway—I get paranoid because I've had so many bad experiences. It's

not really worth the risk in the long run. (Swarm)

For *Swarm*, external identifiers of race and gender lead to regular threats of physical violence

and ongoing trauma around her mixed heritage[22], which oscillates between privilege and

marginalization based on other's perceptions of her identity: "It feels like I'm a blank space to

be projected onto, and when external pressures to identify happen, when external identity

assumptions or labels happen, it's in these moments that I become just like my art" (Swarm).

Presenting as femme and racially ambiguous, she finds that people expect her to readily make

assumptions depending on how they perceive her gendered and racialized identity.

Swarm tackles the in-betweenness of her identity through depictions of the day and night

sky connected by interdimensional portals or voids, spawning otherworldly plants and "star

beings" that she wheatpastes, stickers, and occasionally spray paints across the city. A prolific

artist of nearly five years, *Swarm*'s work can be found in every borough and in the most

unexpected of locations, sometimes appearing higher than seems humanly accessible. Through

serialized depiction of liminal spaces, non-places between dystopic present and fictional future

that she describes as representing her own sense of subjectivity, *Swarm* creates an alternative

plane of existence —a floating utopia rendered possible through artistic representation. Here,

---

[22] *Swarm* prefers not to disclose the specific parts of her identity as she is still navigating what it means to have mixed heritage, but still experience instances of white privilege.

there is no gendered dichotomy and no racialized subjecthood. Her star beings are genderless, teetering between figuration and abstraction:

> I call them my people, my sky people or star beings, which is mostly about my
>
> identity, because I am non-binary and mixed race, and I feel like I'm constantly
>
> occupying liminal space. I'm not here or there really. I try my best to make them
>
> as genderless looking as possible, although genderless looks different to each and
>
> every person. Still, it does get across to some, which is validating. (Swarm)

These incorporeal forms exist outside dominant Western binary categorization and engage viewers to imagine what that possibility might be like. The only seeming duality that remains in *Swarm*'s work is between night and day, represented by stars and clouds, although on deeper reflection these represent a shared sky at different times. She finds belonging to multiple identity circles is complex and disconcerting, especially when navigating city space, which shapes a creative tension in her work.

For *Swarm*, public visual media offer a means for traversing the boundaries imposed by the colonial state. Her representations of liminality become resistant third spaces, in which a challenge to dominant cultures is produced—what critical theorist Homi Bhabha refers to as "the antagonistic *in-between,*" a marginal space outside of Western binary-based understanding of spatiality that allows for "production of resistance," as quoted in "The Practice of Cultural Studies" (Bhabha 157; Johnson et al. 111). In her training from Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), *Swarm* looked beyond Western modes of instruction to find her artistic voice: "I felt pressured to tell a story other than my own experience because I felt like mine wasn't valid and I've learned now that that's not the case" (Swarm). Over time she developed her vision of a different world, one that exists outside the realm of hegemonic binaries, offering a powerful

tool to reimagine subjectivity and render visible her bicultural and hybrid experience of the city as a gendered "other" within and outside communities of colour. Her street art, thus, offers a humanizing reflection of what it means to belong in the city as a gendered "other" within and outside communities of colour:

> It is about seeing a reflection when I go outside. I'm a really dissociative person, so seeing a reflection somewhere really helps. I think that's probably true for a lot of people who do it. I'm not saying that everybody's dissociative, but people like to see themselves in their surroundings, it's pretty normal. (Swarm)

By asserting her own conception of self-identity, outside dominant gender and racial constructs, *Swarm* expresses the interconnectedness of her hybrid identities and her surroundings. She places works so they interact with the built environment, thereby linking the real world with an idealized alternate reality, a symbolic world inspired by futuristic and science fiction imagery: one of her portals on an overturned concrete pile-on becomes a gateway to a realm of infinite possibilities; a wheatpasted bloom of jellyfish that encase the words "Swarm the state," pit the natural against the constructed; a stickered pair of star beings, one starlit and one cloud-filled, peek out from the back of a street sign embodying distinct identities connected by planetary rings to form a singular entity (*see Figure 7*).

Swarm*'s public oeuvre conveys complex emotion around socially constructed and often conflicting identities in an accessible way. What emerges through her work is a mediated testimony that offers viewers a glimpse of her lived reality. Swarm's exploration of issues pertaining to identity is metaphorical, merging her consciousness and lived experience of shifting, hybridized identities, and socially constructed boundaries around race and gender. By visually responding to challenges brought about by gender and race inequities, and manifesting

a third anti-colonial space within which to exist, *Swarm* asserts her humanity through her desire for place:

> I'm floating constantly and one day I would like to be able to land somewhere... I don't know if that will ever happen, so I'm probably floating forever, but I try to evoke boundlessness and positive emotions to make viewers feel like they're not powerless, because they're not. (Swarm)

Instead of exoticizing or abhorring her mixed identity—common enculturated responses determined by the "desirability" of hybrid features based on their proximity to cisgendered herteronormative whiteness—*Swarm* humanizes her lived experience through visual manifestations of a space where she can belong, while encouraging others in similar situations to engage these issues and come away feeling empowered.
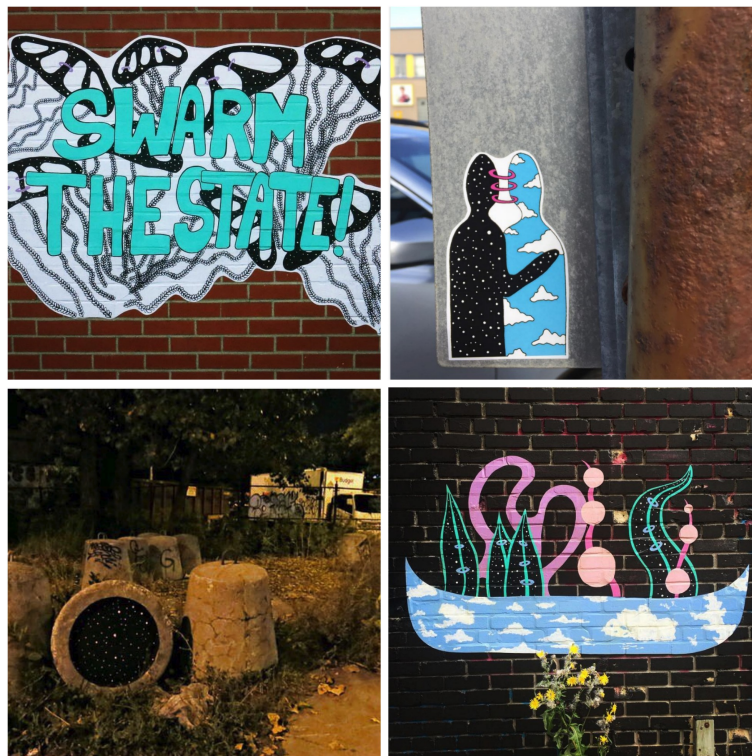

Figure 7: (Top left, clockwise) "Swarm the state!" (2016), "Let love set you free" (2018), "Dreaming while awake" (2016), Portal (2017). Photos: Swarm.

Montreal-based street artist *Made in Shaïna*, introduced in Chapter 1, enacts a different, but similarly humanizing practice of self-expression through street art. Much like *Swarm*, *Made in Shaïna* has moved away from graffiti toward her own mode of safe artistic practice in the street, by choosing to only spray paint on legal walls, city-designated spaces where writers and artists are permitted to practise their craft without threat of law infraction (Le Sino).

With only three designated legal walls on the Island of Montreal, content changes daily, if not hourly, reflecting the popularity of these spaces among inexperienced and established writers and artists alike who look to practice their art without legal repercussions. *Made in Shaïna* elaborates:

> I lost interest in illegal walls because they're less accessible. There were times that scared me, and moments when I thought my safety was in danger... Legal walls don't have the negative or criminal connotations, so people consider what they see there to be art. If I can do something I love in a safe way, not risky to my career, I find it better. People are much more comfortable coming to visit if a wall is legal. There are many passersby who come every day to take photographs. It brings together a lot of people, many of whom are curious about who I am. I'm really happy that my art has an impact, so it's always a matter of representation. If I represent Black struggles and people like it, it's rewarding[23]. (Made in Shaïna)

---

[23] « Au début je faisait des murs légaux et illégaux, mais j'ai perdu d'intérêt pour les murs illégaux parce qu'ils sont moins accessibles. Il y a des moments qui m'ont fait peur, et des moments ou j'avais pensé que ma sécurité était en danger. Ses sont les risques que je n'étais pas prête a faire … Les murs légaux n'ont pas la connotation négative ou criminelle, donc les gens considèrent ce qu'ils voient comme de l'art. Si je peux faire quelque chose que j'aime, dans une manière sécuritaire, pas risquée ma carrière pour ca, je le trouve mieux. Je pense que les gens sont beaucoup plus à l'aise d'aller visiter de voir si le mur est légal. Il y a beaucoup

Made in Shaïna finds the ecosystem created by legal walls the most secure option available to continue engaging in her creative passion without endangering herself further as a Black woman in the city. Her safety strategy offers validating and supportive interactions with passersby who stop to speak with her, and in some cases, even ask if she will consider painting their homes (Made in Shaïna). These reactions—vastly different from those a writer or artist painting an illegal wall might expect—demonstrate the city's power to legitimate artists and the work they produce within city-controlled space. Residents are socialized to view art condoned by the system as no longer deviant. However, they also demonstrate the transgressive potential of legal walls to reach a receptive audience with underrepresented narratives.

Though traditionalist subculture participants consider work "condoned by the system" no longer valuable as "deviant art," *Made in Shaïna* produces disruption and even redefines the nature of legal walls through her presence and negotiation of the space. In fact, she exploits the relative safety of legal walls to challenge the very colonial narratives that oppress her and undermine dominant narratives by producing large self-referential portraits imbued with subversive undertones (Maunder):

> In my art there are many affirmations of Black women, racialized women, and
>
> mixed women, like me. The question of identity is more important when you're
>
> doing illegal things. But when you're doing legal things… who's going to stop
>
> you?[24] (Made in Shaïna)

---

d'animateurs qui viennent chaque jour pour prend des photographes. Ca réunie beaucoup de gens, il y a une communauté d'artistes qui met ensemble. . Je suis vraiment contente que mon art a un impact, donc c'est toujours une question de représentation. Si je représente les bâtis noirs et les gens l'aiment c'est gratifiant. »

[24] « Dans mon art il y a beaucoup d'affirmations en tant que femmes noires, femmes racisées, femmes métisses comme je suis. La question de l'identité est plus importante lorsque vous faites des choses illégales. Mais quand vous faites des choses légales ... qui va vous arrêter ? »

With fewer concerns about police interference, *Made in Shaïna* continues to hone her skill and visibly inscribe public self-representations of Black women on the city. One recent work proclaims, "Representation matters!" depicting a Black woman in a t-shirt that reads "We Exist" (see *Figure 8*). Subtler elements like the character's nose ring and striking eye colour, allude to the artist herself. *Made in Shaïna* uses self-referential elements to address the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the political, capturing physical, mental, and emotional attributes of her characters, all while maintaining a non-objectifying approach to female figures. Her empathetic gaze and depictions of non-sexualized Black women in the legal wall context makes viewers confront the hypersexualisation projected on Black women's bodies as a result of colonialism and consider alternative perspectives (Benard).

 Made in Shaïna uses her identity as a Black woman practicing art in a male-dominated urban space, multiply unintended for her presence, to break from normative subject and style, further distinguishing each of her works from the graffiti pieces that surround it. Her artworks function to take up space where few other women do, which occasionally rankles more traditionalist subculture participants. The nature of legal walls is frequent turnover, but *Made in Shaïna* sometimes finds her works tagged over in a deliberate sign of disrespect, rather than fully painted over with a new work (Crofts 61). These episodes don't deter her though, as she notes, "Street art comes from graffiti, so I understand their frustration and don't take it personally, but I would like to talk to them[25]" (Made in Shaïna). She hopes over time to encourage other Black women's involvement in street art through the normalization her presence—a possibility supported by her own experience, as *Made in Shaïna* started producing graffiti with the encouragement of a more established Black woman artist:

---

[25] « Le street art vient du graffiti, donc je comprends leur frustration et ne le prends pas personnellement, mais je voudrais leur parler … »

I used to be more of a vandal, but the first graffiti I did was in Rouen [legal

wall]… An artist who is still painting today, a friend, introduced me to the space,

so we painted together. She was the one who first introduced me… Working

with other women is gratifying. It's motivating to see other women, or find other

women to paint with[26]. (Made in Shaïna)

Her intermittent collaborations with *Maliciouz*, a prolific fellow artist who uses graffiti

aesthetics to empower Black women through large-scale street art attests to the creative

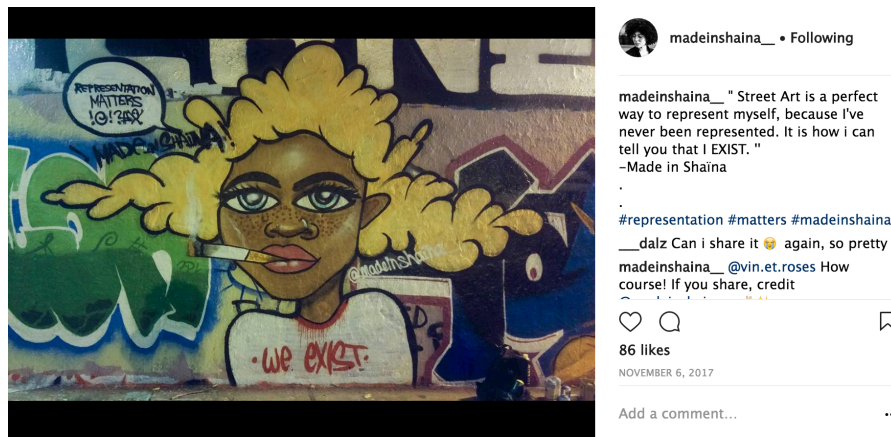potential of strength in numbers and the importance of taking up space (Evoughlian and

Joachim).

Figure 8: "Street Art is a perfect way to represent myself, because I've never been represented.

It is how I can tell you that I EXIST." Made in Shaïna on Instagram (November 6, 2017)

Both *Made in Shaïna* and *Swarm* use their street art to humanize themselves and those

living with intersecting identities and oppressions within the city. Through their individual

modes of self-representation, they challenge dominant racist and sexist constructs, weave anti-

---

[26] « J'étais plus comme vandale, mais le premier graffiti que j'ai fait, c'était à Rouen. C'était la que j'ai fait la premier step à ce culture la. Un artiste qui est encore aujourd'hui, un ami, m'introduit a ca, donc on peint ensemble. C'était elle qui a m'introduit… Travailler avec d'autres femmes est gratifiant. C'est motivant de voir d'autres femmes ou de trouver d'autres femmes avec qui peindre. »

colonial discourse into their work, and normalize their presence within urban subculture and the city at-large. For *Made in Shaïna*, this involves not only depicting Black folks in public, but doing so on legal walls that allow her to hone her craft safely. Her practice bypasses stereotyped viewer perceptions that might otherwise discredit her on the basis of race, gender, and choice of medium. For *Swarm*, producing representations of mixed identity on her own terms and seeing her lived reality reflected in the street provides a sense of belonging and empowerment. Black, Indigenous, mixed, queer, women, and gender-nonconforming artists of colour who engage in graffiti and street art in Montreal have the power to transform "liminal socio-spatial sites into sites of action, communication, and beauty" (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 115). In the act of making and sharing humanizing works, these artists confront colonial narratives and create spaces of possibility, where feelings around identity and marginalization can be openly explored and discussed.

(Re)territorialization and the Role of Collectivity

Indigenous identity is inherently place-based, as the relationship between Native peoples and land proves "a central component of cultural memory" at odds with settler colonialism, which remade land into property and relegated human relationships to land around that of owner to property (Green 28; Tuck and Yang 5-7). Colonial conceptions of land ownership and dichotomies of space, such as city versus country and public versus private, have radically and forcibly shifted Indigenous worldviews and gender roles to conform to the spatial image of the West (Smith 53).

In Canada, tensions around Indigeneity and territory directly impact the lived realities of Indigenous women. Racialized and gendered dispossession of Native peoples from their land

has, among other harms, devalued Indigenous women's bodies because "they represent land, reproduction, Indigenous kinship… and are thus contaminating to a white, settler, social order" (A. Simpson 156). Colonial systems have not only long essentialised Indigenous womanhood across First Nations and Métis communities, but rendered their identities and bodies disposable. In "Gendered Disposability," postcolonial feminist scholar Sherene Razack argues that the "attempted annihilation of Indigenous women," evidenced through the magnitude of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada, reveals how colonial power is inscribed on their bodies, "an extreme destruction that the law condones" (Razack "Gendering Disposability" 290-92). Inevitably, these patriarchal oppressions have seeped beyond contemporary Western society to reproduce gendered configurations of power and labour within Indigenous communities, minimizing women's once heightened social and political status (Smith 47; Green 29). Indigenous women are now largely relegated to the domestic realm within their own communities and charged with transmission of cultural knowledge, a position of simultaneous empowerment and exclusion (Green 31).

Across diverse communities and regions, therefore, Indigenous womanhood is inherently invested in land reclamation, as well as collective contestation of endemic sexism and racism through resurgence—"a form of mobilization and action that is grounded in the revitalization of traditional ways" (Green 25). In the urban setting of Montreal, graffiti and street art offer immediate and public gestures of autonomy and cultural resiliency, resistance to institutional and state barriers that tap into existing Indigenous artistic practices, and physical and symbolic forms of (re)territorialization. The significance of space reclamation by women and gender non-conforming urban artists, explored in Chapter 1, becomes amplified when enacted by Indigenous women taking back city space that is, in fact, unceded Native territory.

Their unsanctioned urban art becomes a re-inscription of Indigenous visibility on a colonized landscape (Desmarais and Larivée).

A 2016 street art intervention by *Cam* (Innu/Métis) reclaimed space for Native women in Cabot Square, a downtown park and gathering place for Montreal's homeless Inuit and Indigenous populations. She constructed a 12 square foot makeshift "wall" along a main pathway and wheatpasted one side with grayscale portraits[27] of three Indigenous women and a girl[28]—all well-known faces in the Square. *Cam* laid out supplies and invited passersby of all ages to help her add colour. For several days, city residents, park visitors, homeless individuals, and families with children all contributed to the piece, transforming it into a whimsical blend of swirling colours and designs (see *Figure 9*). While painting, participants engaged in dialogue with *Cam* about the purpose of the project, many expressing pleasure in their "first time making street art" (Cam). Park habitués stopped by with regularity to identify the women by name, assert their friendship, or confirm that the women had given permission for use of their photos. Of the hundred plus individuals *Cam* interacted with, the only direct criticism she received came from a visibly white man who claimed one of the women owed him money. *Cam* attributes his agitation to the success of the project: "Some people are afraid of street art. It takes up a big space that people think should be theirs" (Cam).

For *Cam*, the imposing size, physical presence, and disruptive placement of her installation not only augmented the positive portrayal and increased visibility of Indigenous women in the park, but achieved a reclamation of space:

---

[27] The portraits of Mae, Maggie, and Bonnie were taken by Cindy, an urban photographer, member of the Native Women's Shelter, and friend of the women who acquired their permission to use the photos in the project. She was compensated for use of her photos by the Cabot Square Project.

[28] The teen approached *Cam* and specifically asked to be included to the work. *Cam* took her photo on the spot and added her image to the mural the next day.

The project was to honour these women, to reclaim their space. This is their

space. They belong in the park, they have the right to be there. This wasn't my

project, it was their project. (Cam)

The park represents a contested space as well as a popular site of congregation and

community building for regulars at the nearby Native Women's Shelter. As such, it also attracts

police, pimps, drug dealers, and other people in the street looking to abuse and exploit. By

advocating on behalf of the women who frequent Cabot Square, *Cam*'s tribute directed positive

attention to some of the most precarious women in the city whose bodies and plights are too-

often erased from dominant perceptions of the city.[29] Instead, she offered an alternative visual

narrative and co-produced the installation grounded in traditional views of land and belonging.

Her work enacted what gender studies scholar Ty P. Kāwika Tengan (Kanaka Maoli) terms,

"embodied discursive practice," a physical experience, action, or movement that produces "new

subjectivities of culture and gender" (McKegney). Through the act of public painting, co-

creation, and artistic exchange around identity and belonging, marginalized participants were in

control of imagery and thus empowered.

Cam's own embodied experience around identity and land, as a queer, mixed Indigenous

woman—"doubly invisible in the city"—is what first drew her to street art (Cam). The public

visibility of the medium offered a way for her to assert her existence, although the

heteropatriarchal "bro culture" surrounding graffiti and street art subculture made it seem

largely inaccessible. During the 2012 Quebec student protests, she joined Maille à Part[30], an all-

---

[29] According to Nakuset, co-chair of the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy
Network, "People don't know there are 26,000 urban Aboriginal Montrealers. We are here, and
we are multi-talented; and yet, people don't recognize us" (McIntyre).
[30] A play on words that roughly translates to "a stich apart".

women feminist yarn bombing[31] collective that employed textile arts, media traditionally

affiliated with domesticity and womanhood, to deposit knitted and sewn messages of solidarity

with students across the city. From that experience, *Cam* developed her fabric-based street art

practice, repurposing floral sheets overlaid with turtle drawings to represent Turtle Island[32]

accompanied by statements like, "We are not invisible" to produce wheatpaste-able pieces

(Cam). *Cam*'s articulation of self-identity through street art centres her heritage, proximity to

community, and spatial relationship with the city and other marginalized subjects:

> I'm really invisible in lot of ways and I grew up far from my community. So, for
>
> me, doing art is a way to represent this reality in the street because there are a lot
>
> of people here like me. Through my art, I can say, 'You belong, I'm here too,'
>
> and start a discussion. A lot of my work is related to myself, as a way to involve
>
> other people. (Cam)

To further leverage the transformative potential of unsanctioned urban art—to not only

take back space, but bring people together—she founded the Unceded Voices[33] street art

collective in 2014 to cultivate kinship ties between queer, Two-spirit, Indigenous women, and

gender non-conforming creatives of colour. *Cam* believed that a supportive community space

where fellow marginalized artists could safely experiment with street art and anti-colonial

resistance could also offer the opportunity for collective healing from the "ripple effects of

intergenerational colonial trauma and violence" (Unceded Voices).

---

[31] A mode of street art that employs colourful displays of knitted or crocheted yarn or fabric rather than spray paint or wheatpaste.

[32] The name of North America according to some Indigenous groups.

[33] Formerly named "Decolonizing Street Art".

Figure 9: Cam et al., mixed media, 2016. Photo: Sofia Misenheimer

With early collective members, she overhauled the "graffiti crew model" that mandates less experienced writers "apprentice" with veterans to learn subculture rules, instead opting for coalition building over hierarchy and co-creation (or at least supported creation) over independent making—a means of empowering all members through traditional Indigenous modes of knowledge sharing and community (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 27). In rejecting the Western-based structure of crews to favour Indigenous "social formations that can be described as kinship," the collective adopted Indigenous modes of territoriality to which kinship roles "give shape" (Rifkin 8). To affirm Indigenous kinship, "an understanding of common social interdependence… that link[s] the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an

ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships," is to affirm Indigenous

relations to the land, reifying the group's commitment to (re)territorialization and collectivity

(Justice 150).

Since its inception, the collective has embraced members spanning over 20 First Nations,

Métis, and marginalized communities across multiple regions of North America[34]. Despite

wide-ranging histories and perspectives, the group has manifested an inclusive form of what

postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism," whereby a group foregrounds

common aspects of their many identities toward a singular political goal, depending on situation

(Spivak). Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge apply intersectionality to expand the concept,

stating that groups made up of many cultural memories can unify in a struggle for social justice

because "conceptualizing identity coalitionally highlights the coalitional work already at play

within the group" (Hill Collins and Bilge 133-34). Unlike some current anti-colonial

movements that discount the claims of women and other gendered persons due to the "deepened

patriarchalization of Indigenous societies," Unceded Voices reconceptualises membership to

integrate tradition and the contemporary reality of Indigenous living (Fregoso 598). In

developing a cohesive voice and egalitarian structure within the collective, Unceded Voices has

developed more effective bonds and channels of communication with the broader community,

evidenced in the outpouring of local support following the defacement of Jessica Sabogal's

mural during the most recent Unceded Voices Anti-colonial Street Artist Convergence.

---

[34] Members have included: Chris Bose (Nlaka'pamux/Secwepemc), Cedar Eve Peters (Anishinaabe/Ojibway from Manitoulin Island/Saugeen First Nation), Jessica Sabogal (Colombian), *Red Bandit/Dolly Deals* (Kwagu'ł), *Swarm*, Dayna Danger (2Spirit/Queer, Métis/Saulteaux/Polish), Jessica Canard (Ojibwe/Sagkeeng First Nation), Lianne Charlie (Tagé Cho Hudän), Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde (Kahnawake/Iroquois/Mohawk), Melanie Cervantes (Xicana), Chief Lady Bird (Chippewa/Potawatomi Rama/Moose Deer Point/Toronto Anishinaabe), Aura (Haudenosaunee/Oneida), Elizabeth Blancas (Xicana), and Shanna Strauss (Tanzanian-American).

The Convergence—"called a convergence, because the collective aspect is crucial"—showcases the work of Unceded Voices members on city walls and offers public workshops and discussions around the realities of marginalized existence within colonial cities (Harris). The event treats public space as a way to visualize and question the larger community about colonialism, violence towards Indigenous women and women of colour, LGBTQ+ issues, and other subjects of import to participating artists (Unceded Voices). Artists support each other at each step of creation, asking each other questions, and engaging in discussions that allow them to co-reflect on their work. Their artistic practice proves as invested in relational aesthetics as it does in the rewards of collaborative activity: mainly, anti-colonial output, safer street art practice, and collective healing (Harris; Bishop 179). Under this framework, partnerships and collective artworks have been forged between *Swarm* and *Dolly Deals*; Lindsay Delaronde and Lianne Charlie; and Dayna Danger and Jessica Canard, among others. By creating works together publicly and producing radical art to cultivate collective reflection, "a solidarity, rarely seen in street art, has emerged" (Unceded Voices).

For as long as there has been colonial violence in Canada, there has also been anti-colonial resistance—movements for social justice and liberation within which artistic forms of expression feature prominently. While urban art provides a platform for anti-colonial discourse—no stand-in for decolonization which "must involve repatriation of land…and not just symbolically"—unauthorized urban art still holds potential for public expression of unresolved land claims and assertion of Indigenous women's autonomy and existence (Tuck and Yang 7). A 2015 poem by Indigenous writer and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson titled "i am graffiti," alludes to this potential:

"…we were erased.

except, i am graffiti.

except, mistakes were made.

we are the singing remnants

left over after

the bomb went off in slow motion

over a century instead of a fractionated second…" (L. B. Simpson "I Am Graffiti")

Simpson's poetic response to the closing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a government initiative to document the history and impacts of residential schools on survivors, relates the dominant view of graffiti as criminal and unwanted to her own identity and experience as an Indigenous woman made to feel invisible and devalued.

If further invokes modes of state-sanctioned violence as efforts to pressure wash her very being off the colonial structure that is modern-day Canada:

"I felt angry, not reconciled… I felt like this was a process to neutralize Indigenous anger without talking about returning land, sharing power, and decolonizing Canada. Canada tried to assimilate Indigenous peoples, mistakes were made, it didn't work. I am still here. I am graffiti." (L. B. Simpson "Micro-Interview")

Simpson's reference to graffiti also evokes the humanizing power of unauthorized urban art produced by BIWOC to assert existence and reclaim urban spaces that remain unceded Indigenous territory. Anti-colonial graffiti and street art asserts Indigenous existence in a way that is tied with the land and cannot be erased or "confined to stereotypical associations with natural environments" (Desmarais and Larivée).

Through concerted individual and collective action, overt occupation of public space as "othered" bodies and identities in an oppressive environment that aims to erase them, women and gender non-conforming street artists in Montreal engage an artistic and cumulative form of political transformation grounded in the gradual, often undetectable accretion of changes in individual consciousness. Their unsanctioned urban art provides an important vehicle for engaging identity politics to critique social problems faced by marginalized communities through humanization, (re)terriorializaion, and collectivity. *Swarm*'s form of visual communication, for example, even with few explicitly political statements still incites viewer interest and solidarity, depending on how they self-identify.

In this way, the notion of urban art is inherently bound in social construction. As expressions appear and disappear from city walls, entirely new meanings emerge from continuous and unpredictable collaborations between different artists and their surroundings. Works by *Made in Shaina* on the legal walls of Montreal, for instance, take meaning from their anti-colonial content, as well as their juxtaposition with graffiti pieces produced by predominantly white male writers. *Cam*'s Cabot Square installation experimented with new modes of collective action to overcome mistrust encouraged by the state and reclaim space for marginalized identities. But calling attention to the rhetorical or declarative status of one's body in public space involves a considerable degree of risk. Through collective action, rooted in Indigenous kinship and traditional modes of knowledge production, Unceded Voices allays safety concerns, promotes anti-colonial discourse around identity, and counters the erasure of marginalized communities. It offers a form of (re)territorialization, a symbolic and physical claim to land that is inherently tied to Indigenous struggles for social justice and liberation. Works produced by members hold viewers—settlers and visitors alike—accountable for their

presence on unceded Native land. They create a dialogue with non-Indigenous people that, as *Cam* notes, "asks them to listen to what we're doing. I think that's a way to start to decolonize space… having people look at the wall and ask what the walls say. There is a lot of work to do" (Cam).

Jessica Sabogal, whose mural asserting "white supremacy is killing me" was defaced multiple times during the latest Unceded Voices Street Artist's Convergence, believes urban artists have the power to "serve as a reflection of justice":

> As artists, it is our duty to uplift the sacredness of women, people of colour, the disabled, queer and trans folks, immigrants and the undocumented, and our Indigenous brothers and sisters, whom history has forced to believe are less than human. We believe in the right to our own liberation, unbounded by man-made borders, white supremacy, misogyny and xenophobia. (Sabogal)

The women and gender non-conforming urban artists featured in this chapter remain steadfast in their efforts to reclaim public spaces, and affirm their identities. Their artistic urban expressions are a form of survival. They are graffiti.

Many operate at the periphery of the standard urban subculture paradigm, however, where the patriarchal systems that govern the city equally govern male-dominated fields of graffiti and street art. The nonhegemonic writers and artists, mainly women and non-binary femmes, who try from within these subcultures to create conditions that are more welcoming and secure for all, engage different tactics to pursue equality and visibility from their peers. I explore the gender dynamics and identity politics of Montreal graffiti and street art subculture more centrally in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Gender Politics of Urban Art

From early writers like *Barbara 62* (NYC) and *Lady Pink* (NYC), to formative street artists like *Miss Van* (France), women have long left their mark on city walls and within graffiti and street art subcultures. Despite sustained presence and influence, however, women and femme writers and artists remain outliers within both male-dominated fields, often required to work twice as hard to prove they are as dedicated and skilled as male peers with little promise of equivalent respect or recognition. As street artist *Swarm* notes, the macho attitude inherent in graffiti subculture and the resulting devaluation of women and femme writers discourages their involvement:

> I mean there's a reason why I don't spray paint: graffiti culture is not super
>
> inclusive of women or anyone who isn't a man. The women who do it, they've
>
> been through a lot, even if it doesn't look that way, you know, they've gotten their
>
> fair share of crap and they still do. (Swarm)

In turn, while street art subculture proves more inclusive in terms of style and media than graffiti, and ostensibly safer in practice due to reduced need for public presence, women and femme artists still constitute a minority.

At the heart of this gendered imbalance lies the perception of unsanctioned urban art as a manly pursuit—a way to assert masculine identity—perpetuated by societal and subcultural attitudes that attribute risk-taking with traditional masculine bravery and public space as the domain of men. Whereas women are often socialized to fear the urban environment, especially at night—made to believe "that public places are where men are most likely to commit violent acts against them"—men are taught that public space is theirs for the taking (Condon, Lieber and Maillochon). Unauthorized urban art offers male writers a means to fulfill normalized,

gendered expectations of spatial control and dominance in the form of artistic letter-based

public markers planted across the city, like spray painted flags, not only marking their territory,

but claiming their masculinity and subcultural membership. In order for the patriarchal

framework of artistic urban subculture to construct its norms of hegemonic masculinity,

however, it must also subordinate that which is perceived to be feminine. Much like the wider

art world, where women-made works are automatically attributed gendered characteristics and

defined in terms of feminine aesthetics, regardless of content, subcultural attitudes ascribe

similar sexist notions to the works and the bodies of women and femme-presenting writers and

artists (M. Robinson). Ironically, these practices replicate the very systems of state authority

that male writers and artists aim to subvert in their own pursuit of subcultural esteem, only to

then uphold them in suppressing other participants (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 43-44).

The resultant hierarchical and gender-based structure of graffiti and street art subcultures

often proves daunting, exclusive, or outright inaccessible for women, and especially queer,

trans, non-binary femmes, who may lack a friend or connection who can help to provide access.

It largely gatekeeps those who fall outside heteronormative masculinity unless they fit a role

that replicates dominant societal (re)productive divisions of labour, like girlfriend, sexual

object, or female sidekick. While some women writers and artists may find their start this way,

many later resist and challenge such forms of exclusion and sexualisation from within

subculture practice, as they discover that the talent and dedication that is supposed to grant them

respect and community belonging rarely reaches par with male colleagues. Unlike artists who

don't fit subcultural "norms" and choose to create spaces for themselves outside socially

enforced graffiti and street art paradigms (see Unceded Voices in Chapter 2); the writers and

artists in this chapter work from within established subcultural frameworks to assert their identities and resist sexist treatment and erasure.

The participants featured in this chapter, including graffiti writer *Miss Teri*, who blends traditional graffiti aesthetic with art historical elements, street artist *Zola*, who wheatpastes representations of femme protesters, and Queen's Creation organizer Melissa Proietti, all challenge the repressive binary gender ideologies that dominate the graffiti and street art subcultural status quo. As participants operating within these subcultural structures, I posit that their presence and actions are doubly transgressive: they both subvert the devalued "feminine aesthetic" automatically forced on their creations and they often break from socially prescribed submissive roles to gain individual recognition and assert their own definitions of gender and selfhood.

According to Foucault, transgression "affirms limited being," and illuminates the boundaries of the self and the cultural, which, in turn, reveal inequalities and provide an "affirmation of division… [an] existence of difference" (Foucault "A Preface to Transgression" 35-36). While Foucault ascribes neither positive nor negative attributes to the act of transgression, I assert that the work of each participant featured in this chapter renders positive subcultural change possible by calling needed attention to women and femme-identified artists' experiential differences on the basis of gender. They use their art practice to highlight both the social and subcultural limitations they face in the scene, constructing their own knowledge and power to resist these gendered configurations of power. Though Foucault omits implicit discussion of gender in his analysis of power and the body, as noted by Angela King in her article "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body," his androcentric approach underscores the very reality that men are treated as "the essential human

subject," while those who fall outside conventional conceptions of masculinity are rendered secondary (King 33). I believe that by transgressing the normative roles and "feminine aesthetics" ascribed to them on the basis of gender, women and femme writers and artists enact a strategy of (sub)cultural resistance that creates more equitable participatory environments for themselves, and fellow and future street artists.

While the prior two chapters explore how women and gender diverse writers and artists overcome spatial inequities and challenge gendered and racial oppressions on city streets to continue practicing their crafts, this chapter looks more closely at how these artists navigate and overcome inequities and oppressions perpetuated by their male peers. How does the presence of women and femme writers and artists transform the meaning of works from within existing subcultural frameworks? How do they undermine the stereotypes and perceptions that surround their participation in this male-dominated field?

Sidekick, Girlfriend, Sex Object

Graffiti subculture is built around a code of conduct that guides visual competition between writers vying to "get up," or make one's name omnipresent in the city. In the process they earn peer acknowledgement for their visibility, technical skill, and innovative style (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 26). In premise, not taking into account varying gendered or racial urban mobilities, this framework constructs a level playing field wherein all writers follow the same set of rules in pursuit of respect and recognition from an elite community of fellow participants. Ideally, it offers writers an equal platform for creative self-expression, experimentation, and existence affirmation, an escape from the oppressive confines of hegemonic society, and a path to belonging attainable through hard work and perseverance.

Though it presents as merit-based, however, graffiti subculture proves innately hierarchical in reality.

Male writers attain clout as much from their skill level as their perceived proximity to hegemonic masculinity. The peer-based systems of recognizing artistic value in the field of street art creates patriarchal hierarchies that transform the community into a societal microcosm replete with hegemonic expectations and oppressions. This practice renders graffiti and street art as forms of spatial dominance in assertion of male artists' manhood—and their peer recognition as "tough" men. The resultant gendered dynamic within graffiti subculture thus becomes predicated on policing the bodies and sexuality of women participants, a tactic male writers use to assert their own masculinities and control access to women's and femme individuals' recognition as artists in the field (Gélinas; Nancy). Within this structure, women and non-binary writers perceived as "feminine" are often confined to three main roles—sidekick, girlfriend, or sex object—the latter of which is virtually impossible to escape. This is a reality with which veteran writer *Miss Teri* is long familiar and that she now combats through her interactions with peers and through her artistic expressions in the street.

After nearly 10 years as a writer in Montreal, *Miss Teri* has "paid her subcultural dues" through the placement of her skilled pieces across the city, often on intrepid night missions. She is known for her engaged community presence, yet she remains subject to sexism and exclusion by fellow (generally male) writers. She expected that this treatment would diminish when she earned enough respect from other writers and artists, proving her dedication and her technique, as rules of the subculture imply. Now, almost a decade later, the veteran writer is still objectified by male peers beyond the point of discomfort:

I'm not even worried about what they think of my style. I have enough confidence

that I've reached a level where I've made progress and am still on an upward

trajectory. But when they make me feel uncomfortable in my own skin, like with

constant sexual comments towards me at a vernissage, that bothers me more than

anything because it makes me not want to go next time. What really affects you is

when your body is targeted. (Miss Teri)

The actions of these writers, including long-term acquaintances and even friends of *Miss Teri,*

amount to crude assertions of power in a subcultural dynamic that socializes such behaviour. In

"Ways of Seeing," art historian John Berger notes that based on dominant constructions of

gender, men's identity is dependent on his embodiment of power, or, at least the pretence of

power that he exercises on others; whereas women's is "confined…to the keeping of men"

(Berger 46). Within graffiti subculture, the bodies of women writers come to function as objects

of men's power—as potential conquests, first, and artists, second. Art critic Lucy Lippard

argues that a similar dynamic is also enacted at the institutional levels of the art world through

"disregarding women or stripping them of self-confidence…treating women artists as sex

objects…[and] identifying women artists with their men…" (Lippard 31). *Miss Teri*'s lived

experience of graffiti subculture attests to the prevalence of these oppressive practices through

the normative use of sidekick, girlfriend, or sex object tropes forced on women and femme

writers to limit their involvement and reinforce male writers' positions of power.

Initially enticed by the creative freedom and competitiveness of graffiti culture, *Miss*

Teri started painting at the age of 15 with a male friend who took her to "TA,"[35] an abandoned

factory and former Montreal graffiti mecca (demolished in 2014) that provided ample space for

---

[35] Named after "Team Autobot," a graffiti crew most active in the 90s, whose members still
hold close community ties.

practice and discovery of work by other writers. What she lacked in experience, *Miss Teri* made up for in athleticism, daring, and drive. Eager to hone her skills, she started painting often: "It was really exciting just to have a little activity that not a lot of people did, but all my friends were excited about and my family supported. It was made really accessible to me, at least in those beginning stages when it was just very innocent" (Miss Teri). Later she would accompany her then-boyfriend and his friends to paint, enjoying the group dynamic and even relishing her status as one of few other girl writers:

> I remember thinking, 'I get to prove myself, that I'm as good as the boys.' But
>
> then years later I realized how misogynistic that is, for a young girl to think it's
>
> awesome there aren't more women. How fucked up is that? (Miss Teri)

This sentiment reveals an established process of enculturation wherein male and female writers are pressured to fit hegemonic gendered roles that become internalized and difficult to escape. As *Swarm* explained, "I'm still trying to let go of internalized macho bullshit, because it's really easy to internalize in that subculture" (Swarm).

The initial role for all new writers, or "toys," is that of sidekick, a subordinate who requires mentoring from more experienced writers in order to learn the ropes. While both male and female initiates to graffiti subculture can fill the sidekick role, young men are more likely to be treated as little brothers who eventually progress out of the role to become fully fledged writers, whereas women often remain novelties, hyper visible by way of their perceived gender, but unthreatening to the patriarchal social order because, by hegemonic standards, they embody "fragility". This view has been embedded in graffiti culture since the beginning, as iconic 90s writer *Lady Pink* noted in a recent interview, "It took a while before a lot of boys… would let me come along, they viewed girls as a liability…who might crack under the pressure if cops

91

caught them," so she sometimes "dressed as a boy" to disguise her identity (Bombing Science). The bodies of girl and women writers carry not only inescapable gendered, but sexualized connotations in the eyes of most peers. As Foucault describes, "the feminine body was analyzed—qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality" (Foucault *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* 104). *Miss Teri* notes that early on, male writers regularly directed sexual innuendos at her, which she took in stride: "I was hungry, still working my way up, and kind of feeling like 'I'm an outsider, so I'll accept whatever way they treat me.' I didn't let it phase me" (Miss Teri).

　　Miss Teri found the one time she dated a fellow writer afforded a status that made her wary: "I had to stick my ground, I'm an individual and wouldn't let myself be turned into just someone's girlfriend" (Miss Teri). When not being actively reduced to her relationship with the male writer—to the subordinate role of girlfriend—*Miss Teri* continued to endure sexual objectification from other writers. In "The Myth of the Graffiti Whore: Women's Bodies in a Masculinist Subculture," Éliane Gélinas writes that simply being a woman interested in graffiti is enough to invite the label 'graffiti whore,' which marks her body as a "heterosexual, promiscuous and vapid sexual object" (Gélinas 37). Gélinas argues that common use of this term by male writers denotes their prevailing view of women in terms of hegemonic standards of gender and sexuality, a way of contrasting their masculine subjectivity and establishing dominance over women.

　　These displays of dominance extend beyond derogatory labels and verbal harassment. They can also manifest in the form of physical violence and rape. Veteran Montreal writer, street artist, and survivor *Starchild Stela* has openly critiqued the ways in which sexual violence is normalized and joked about within the subcultural milieu, which they say protects known

abusers and rapists (Starchild Stela). After their personal trauma, and later coming out as a

survivor, art became a coping mechanism for *Stela* who has since spray-painted innumerable

public messages like "Destroy rape culture," "Fuck you and your macho bullshit," and "I

believe you" in support for survivors (Chan). As a queer non-binary femme who got their start

in graffiti culture, *Stela* has since chosen to opt out of the subculture, stating: "Graffiti doesn't

need any feminist heroes, neither does any male-dominated scene for that matter… the scenes

are boring anyways; why change them when you can build your own?" ("Interview with

Starchild Stela").

This is a question *Miss Teri,* and her close friend and fellow writer *Aliss,* consider as

they challenge the sexual harassment of local street art subcultures and subvert the submissive

roles to which they have long been relegated through direct engagements with their male peers:

"Recently we've been getting into verbal debates when we hear a remark. We're not going to be

quiet anymore or accept that kind of behaviour" (Miss Teri). She credits recent art classes for

heightening her awareness of gendered inequalities in the art world, and exchanges with *Aliss*

on their similar experiences within Montreal graffiti culture for confirming the bias she always

felt was real. Despite professed support from some peers, she finds few male writers openly

acknowledge the patriarchal system inherent in Montreal graffiti subculture that uplifts men and

limits women and femmes. Instead many resort to referencing sexist stereotypes, like the under

motivated woman writer not tough enough to endure the risk inherent in illegal graffiti practice,

or the woman writer not dedicated enough to improve her skills, to explain away unequal

gendered representation:

> They try to say that women and men are just different and girls just don't want to
>
> do graffiti, but it's not true at all. If you have a group of guys who are always

acting macho and helping each other, making sure they're included every time,

but no one else, it's obviously going to stop a lot of women. Maybe if they made it

somewhat accessible to anyone else but white straight men, maybe women would

have more opportunities to work on their skill. If you keep giving space to the

same guys, they'll be more experienced and more skilled because you're literally

the ones making them that way... (Miss Teri)

Most male writers uphold the sexist subcultural paradigm without admitting gendered

disparities, giving themselves a pass to continue performing socially sanctioned harm without

consequence.

Established male writers are socialized to accept the patriarchal norms of graffiti

subculture because the social script benefits them to the disadvantage of everyone else—"they

don't understand how much sexism influences their thoughts, their speech, and the decisions

they make" (Miss Teri). Whether passively or deliberately, however, most writers remain

complicit in gatekeeping women writer's access to walls, jams, and other social subculture

activities, offering access only to a privileged few.

They'll invite their girlfriends or other women to come hang out and watch, but

they won't invite the women who can paint beside them. In my earlier years I was

hungry and I was pushing and I didn't care what I had to face, but after 10 years

and feeling like I'm established, I should be part of all these groups and events but

I'm still not. (Miss Teri)

As a creative and competitive, but, above all, community practice, graffiti is meant to be done in

the company of friends, so limiting access to communal social events becomes a way of also

limiting the participation of women writers and policing their bodies. For *Miss Teri*, this

exclusory practice has become more pronounced the more she calls out sexual harassment, evidently impacting her "in" with male writers, especially those at the top of the hierarchy. But she says she no longer cares about "hits to [her] reputation," because recognition from sexual predators and harassers, and those complacent with their behaviour, is meaningless:

> We all fear being rejected or being disliked. As women we're not really shown
> how to be brave, or aggressive, or how to fight in defense. I've always been a shy,
> soft-spoken person but I think having the courage to stand up at certain moments
> in life is important. I'm at a point where I don't want to please anyone. I have
> worked so hard to be a part of that community, but now I'm realizing that, fuck, I
> just want to change a lot of things. I don't want to be a part of it as is. (Miss Teri)

By calling out sexual harassment directed at her body and initiating dialogue with friends and colleagues around sexism, *Miss Teri* rejects the submissive roles long ascribed to her, but says male writers need to start calling out sexism and holding each other accountable, if cultural change is going to take effect on a wider scale.

Aware of the gendered disparities in graffiti subculture, based on her involvement with Under Pressure International Graffiti Convention for over a decade, community organizer Melissa Proietti similarly contends that sustainable change must come from within the community and with the support of male writers: "There's a lot of conscientious work that needs to go into undoing such a historically ingrained male-dominated culture. A lot of strong women need to participate in that and be willing to take some heat. And it also takes men to do the same thing" (Proietti). Never a writer, despite sustained interest in the culture, Proietti has personal experience overcoming the gendered role of sidekick within the graffiti milieu. Working her way up from a teenaged Under Pressure volunteer to become the full-fledged coordinator in

95

recent years—now both operations manager of the event and president of the non-profit

organization that oversees both the festival and affiliated Fresh Paint urban art gallery—she has

encountered continuous gender-based barriers, not least of all when taking over from Under

Pressure founder and veteran writer, Sterling Downey. She says the transition would have been

impossible without his support:

> People were always trying to go over my head and talk to him; if he didn't keep
>
> saying 'don't ask me, you need to ask Melissa', then I never would have been able
>
> to take over because people don't want to give you that power, that leverage,
>
> especially as a woman, especially in this culture. Without the support of a male
>
> counterpart, I never would have been successful in my role with Under Pressure.
>
> (Proietti)

As a woman and non-writer with community influence, Proietti holds a unique position and

vantage point within local graffiti subculture, which she mobilizes to create space for dialogue

around questions of accessibility and visibility. In 2013, during her early tenure as head of

Under Pressure, she organized a panel discussion around women's experience of artistic urban

subcultures wherein speakers from Montreal's graffiti, B-girl, MC, and DJ scenes collectively

called for a local event highlighting the successes of women and offering opportunities for intra-

community support and dialogue around how to combat sexist subcultural practices. In

response, Proietti founded Queens Creation the following year.

Taking its name from graffiti slang for a prolific and skilled female writer—and meant

to evoke the image of "someone who commands respect, someone who is in charge"—the first

Queens Creation was a one-day event featuring an exhibition of 20 women writers and artists, a

live collaborative painting project, a B-girl and DJ showcase, and a follow-up conference on

women's experiences in urban culture (Waclawek *Graffiti and Street Art* 26; Proietti). Subsequent editions added free workshops, including a graffiti lettering activity in 2016. Each year the event has evolved in an effort to foster a more accessible and supportive environment for local women and girls to network, learn from each other, and engage in friendly competition: "The objective of Queens Creation is directly linked to the experience of exclusion, to respond to the needs of women in the community" (Proietti).

Despite her best efforts, however, Proietti has found it difficult to host a women-only event without playing into sexist stereotypes that claim women's fragility or need for "special treatment" in the eyes of male peers. In the same way that all-women graffiti crews can offer spaces for women writers to gain visibility and provide mutual support, men often don't support them or credit their output because masculinity is founded on the myth that men alone are "rights-bearing persons," whereas women are subordinate and passive beings (Zimmer). For women to participate in an event that offers an alternative to the all-male jam is to subvert the established male-dominated hierarchy, thus the wider graffiti community has largely neglected Queens Creation. She notes that some women have chosen not to participate, either to avoid perceived tokenization and any resultant loss of respect from male peers or to uphold proscribed gender roles, like girlfriend or sidekick, because they benefit from proximity to those at the top of the patriarchal power structure—pressured or socialized into the position of voluntarily doing what the male establishment wants them to do (Lippard 124).

Those who try to sidestep this system or call it out, like *Miss Teri*, are alienated for failing to obey the dictates of gendered norms, because it upsets the power structure and makes male writers feel "disempowered and scared... They don't know how to deal with it" (Miss Teri). Male writers have even expressed feelings of being excluded to Proietti about Queens Creation:

I hear, 'You're giving women opportunities who aren't as good as men in their

practice,' and 'You're creating an imbalance in the culture.' People are more than

welcome to have their opinions and I'm happy to discuss it, but even in 2017,

these are critiques we're receiving about doing a women's festival, so it means

that we need to keep doing it because if you're still trying to fight me on it, then

we haven't achieved our goal yet. (Proietti)

Her comments echo reflections by Mira Silvers, curator and founder of the Sugar 4 Brains

artists collective (2013), on her 2016 "Woman x Women" exhibition featuring work entirely by

Montreal women writers and artists. During an interview after the show, Silvers intimated that

despite positive reception by the general Montreal art community, some male artists had

asserted that her show would never achieve gender parity:

One guy told me that I should have made a show that was more gender neutral

and based only on the quality of the art… But when a traditional exhibition takes

place, no one comments on the lack of female artists even though most are less

than 20% women…As soon as there is an all-female line-up of artists…suddenly

the exhibition is exclusionary" (Women in Music & Art)

This response reflects the insidious nature of gendered enculturation; that in highlighting the

work and achievements of a subordinated group, the dominant group feels threatened. For male

writers to relate to women as equals, as "genuine peers" would require coming to terms with the

fact that masculinity trains men to have great difficulty recognizing women—or, indeed, anyone

perceived as feminine—as persons, as agents, as worthy of respect, and then making an effort to

see and treat them that way (Zimmer).

The (So-Called) Feminine Aesthetic

While women's bodies and physical presence function as symbols of men's power in graffiti and street art subculture, so to do their likenesses. Sexualized depictions of women regularly feature in the work of male writers and artists as a show of dominance, masculinity, and assertion of the male gaze (Gélinas). Such imagery can feature in the creative output of women too, as a reflection of subcultural expectation—"so deeply embedded in Western culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women"—as an homage to tradition, and even as a means of subverting sexist norms (Berger 63). Montreal street artist *MissMe*, for instance, wheatpastes images of her own naked body covered by confrontational elements as a means of parodying the sexualized role women are expected to hold—"the vandal is not about the female gender classily portrayed… it's a reaction to the oppression of patriarchal society" (Sproull "Censored by Social Media, Missme Took Her Artful Vandal to the Streets"). In contrast, *Miss Teri* alludes to the hypersexualisation of women writers with textual references, like "sluts," that accompany her pieces (see *Figure 10*). Both *MissMe* and *Miss Teri*, who coincidentally share gendered monikers despite vastly different artistic practices and approaches to combatting sexist social norms, acknowledge their lived experience within differing subcultures and demonstrate how the focus of their work affects how it is perceived and interpreted (Lippard 124).

The ongoing sexualisation and gendered devaluation of women in artistic urban subculture upholds long established assumptions that writers and artists are men and that graffiti and street art aesthetics are inherently masculine. Writers and artists who do not self-identify as men have been largely written out of understanding either subculture, in an emblematic move toward discrediting "the feminine". Femininity is a social process by which subject matter,

colour scheme, and style are judged in the context of perceived gender in opposition to masculinity. Whereas the female body is culturally coded, so too is output by femme-perceived creatives as representative of a "feminine" aesthetic—as if there is a singular mode of femininity that is linked to a biological experience of gender (Berger 64).

Figure 10: "A slut or a saint". Miss Teri on Instagram (February 4, 2018)

Art produced by women has historically carried a "feminine" signifier simply by way of distinguishing its worth, or rather lack thereof, conditioned by opposition or "having meaning in the context of being opposed to existing styles" normalized as the work of men (Lippard 84). But women's and femme's chosen aesthetics aren't any more alike or definable than men's. The cultural insistence on a male/female binary that devalues the "feminine" in relation to the "masculine" leads to more intense policing of women's bodies and apparatuses of control within artistic urban subcultures that inflect sexist tropes about what constitute masculinity and femininity, reinforce an artificial chasm between men and women that seems natural, and construct inherent limits for femme writers and artists (King 33). Conflation of women and femme's gendered identities with the aesthetic objectification of femininity has traditionally

100

misattributed their artistic output as either adopting a masculine point of view or passively subscribing to the object of masculine representation.

Women and femme writers thus face a unique dilemma in how they present their work—whether to pursue a style that "outs" them as nonhegemonic subculture participants through use of socially gendered signifiers, like bows or hearts, or to actively engage "aggressively masculine" stylistic choices to demonstrate they are just as capable as male peers (Nancy). While "feminine" visual elements can symbolize acts of resistance within a male-dominated realm, they also instantly devalue work and become a means for gendered contradistinction by male actors. They are part of a "symbolic sign system" enabled through hegemonic standards of visual culture that establishes masculinity and femininity as coded oppositions and, in turn, constructs the basis for masculine and feminine subjects (Craig 23).

Since graffiti, and to an extent street art, offers a form of self-expression and identity construction built around the premise of masculinity as the active domination of urban space, women and femmes who engage in either practice are seen to diminish this potential through their embodied "feminine" presence and imagery. Women and femme writers and artists challenge the so-called "feminine aesthetic" ascribed to their work through their varied practices and conceptions of self-identity, which break from traditional patterns of representation and sidesteps attempted limitations by patriarchal subculture standards.

Artistic expression cannot be ascribed a gendered aesthetic at all, as exemplified in the graffiti and street art of *Starchild Stela,* who employs a femme-positive aesthetic they term "radical softness" as a demonstration of power in the face of trauma and hardship ("Interview with Starchild Stela"). Characterized by a pastel colour palette and "cuteness" that is often conflated with hegemonic representations of femininity, *Stela*'s work aims to subvert normative

association of emotion and vulnerability as feminine traits and signs of weakness, instead

describing graffiti and street art as an outlet for healing and release of anger. When asked how

they reconcile an aesthetic deemed "feminine" as a non-binary femme, *Stela* states that not

being a "female person" underscores the absurdity of cultural structures that uphold and

perpetuate such gendered stereotypes:

> What makes something feminine? Pink, lace, lipstick? I perceive everything I do,
>
> what I wear, what I express as gender "neutral"... I think we are used to
>
> associating non-binarity with androgyny, and androgyny with a "masculine"
>
> aesthetic… People who wear pastel colours are often made out to be feminine by
>
> default. I don't understand anything about gender or femininity, and in the end I
>
> find it irrelevant. In fact, it's annoying that I'm always associated with
>
> "femininity," because I do not think about it at all…[36] (Misenheimer "Rêver De
>
> Communauté: Une Échange Avec Starchild Stela")

By normative standards, gendered aesthetic is "supposed" to fit one's gender identity, so the

femininity wrongly ascribed to *Stela*'s artwork not only erases their non-binary identity, but

forces a narrative to fit socialized conceptions of gender binary. This is emblematic of the

oppressive social conditions and prejudice long imposed on femme and women writers and

---

[36] « L'affaire c'est que je ne suis pas vraiment une personne féminine. Qu'est ce qui fait que quelque chose est féminin? Du rose, de la dentelle, du rouge à lèvres? Je perçois vraiment tout ce que je fais, ce que je porte, ce que j'exprime comme « neutre » dans le genre, alors c'est un peu difficile pour moi de répondre. Je crois qu'on a l'habitude d'associer non-binarité avec l'androgynie, et l'androgynie avec une esthétique «masculine ». Je m'y perds un peu. … Les personnes qui portent des couleurs pastels vont souvent se faire genrer de façon féminine par défaut. Moi, je ne comprends rien au genre ni à la féminité, et en fait en bout de ligne je trouve cela très peu pertinent. En fait, c'est agaçant qu'on m'associe toujours avec un courant "féminin," parce que je ne pense pas à ça du tout... »

artists that misrepresents their works within the framework of "feminine" aesthetics and places

pressure on those who do not fit essentialist definitions of gender.

Street artist *Zola* employs a vastly different style and practice from *Stela*, yet their

wheatpastes of women and femme protesters, underrepresented in the street and within activist

circles, are similarly misinterpreted. In one recent piece, a masked individual helps another tie

their face covering. For *Zola*, this was meant to show femmes assisting each other, but some

viewers placed a heteronormative narrative on the piece:

> I thought it was clearly two queer people and then someone said, "Oh, it's so
>
> sweet she's tying up her man's mask. She's taking care of her man before he's
>
> going to the struggle." It was such a male-oriented narrative that he put on to the
>
> piece and that really upset me, but I couldn't do anything about it and I didn't
>
> want to argue with him. (Zola "Interview")

While they generally don't mind the genders associated with their characters—"because that's

the point of a masked person, gender is not important"—*Zola* actively aims to break from

stereotyped perceptions of street art and anarchist subcultures, which both rely on public urban

space to express dissent, as the domain of men. *Zola* thus produces collaborative depictions of

masked demonstrators to combat the stereotype of "skinny white men" as the normalized "street

fighter figure" and to render the presence of radical urban politics more visible in Montreal (It's

Going Down).

As a queer street artist and anarchist, *Zola*'s work bridges the gap between visual culture,

identity politics, and intersecting urban subcultures. Their cross-cultural practice serves a

variety of social and identificatory functions, mobilizing their communicative, activist capacity

to undermine the hegemonic gendered context of both street art and anarchist subcultures,

although this has proven no easy feat, as *Zola* notes: on the one hand anarchists can be

"suspicious or hateful towards experimentation and art," which makes navigating between

scenes socially costly at times, while on the other, hip hop-based graffiti culture remains largely

disconnected from activist movements (It's Going Down). Breaking from prescriptive norms of

collective identity within both urban subcultures, *Zola* has thus carved a unique niche for

themself from which they resist patriarchal norms.

Figure 11: "Make racists afraid again". Zola on Instagram (January 29, 2018)

Wheatpasting hand-illustrated portraits of anonymous women and femme rioters in the

street, *Zola* combats perceptions of those advocating social change in the public sphere and in

cities across Canada as a homogenous group comprised of white men. Their characters

encompass diverse identities, most often sporting nondescript hoodies or jackets and makeshift

face coverings that indicate their shared identification as protesters and anarchists. A recent

paste-up, for example, depicts masked subjects holding a sign that reads, "Make racists afraid

again" foregrounding two femmes clasping hands in a sign of solidarity (see *Figure 11*). For

Zola, unauthourized urban art represents direct action and disruption in the ways that it claims public space, and enables self-recognition on city walls:

> One of the main roles of art in social movements is creating an identity people can refer themselves to. There is nothing like a strong sense of belonging to loyalize someone to a cause. It is also a gateway into activism and a real way to play out accessibility… graffiti and street art reflect the people's ethos... (It's Going Down)

Their artistic practice stems from the Occupy movement against social inequality and subsequent Quebec student strike when they first mobilized feminist and femme mediums, like textile and yarn bombing, to actively contest masculine-perceived graffiti and street art media. Their solo project, under the name *Zola,* soon followed as a way of memorializing protesters:

> I was hoping for the movement to continue forever, so I put these images on the streets so people didn't forget, but it has been a while now. People have short memories… Part of me continues to work on the same theme because I'm also doing it for the movement and not just the general public. Organizers and activists are really happy to see each piece; it makes them feel good and part of something. Giving them positive imagery to create a sense of community is one of the things my art now explores. (Zola "Interview")

Zola has long applied their artistic practice in support of Indigenous solidarity and migrant justice, among other activist movements, in collaboration with various local organizations including Unceded Voices, OFFMuralES, and Maille à Part (see Chapter 2 for more on these collectives). As a self-identified white settler of French-Canadian descent working primarily on anti-oppressive campaigns, *Zola* places emphasis on accountability in their artistic practice. They do not sign their work, for instance, in an effort to prevent conflation of their message

105

with their personal identity as an artist—"I prefer to let my art do the talking" (Zola "Interview"). Even without a signature, unlike name-based graffiti practice, *Zola*'s style is consistently recognizable and their politics shines through depictions of otherwise invisibilized masked protesters.

Masculinity largely defines the treatment and restricts the participation of women and femmes within graffiti and street art. The cultural meanings of gender varies enormously based on socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity, which, in turn, dictate mechanisms of power and interplay within subcultural microcosms of society (Craig 2). Much like the wider art world, where women-made works are automatically defined in terms of feminine aesthetics, regardless of content, subcultural attitudes ascribe similar sexist notions to the works and bodies of women writers and artists (M. Robinson). This chapter has sought to illuminate these discrepancies and highlight the efforts of women and non-binary femmes in Montreal to combat sexist treatment and tokenization. Their methods for achieving this end are variable, depending on self-identity and subcultural affiliation, which in turn impacts their artistic practice. Despite differing manifestations of resistance as nonhegemonic subculture participants who refuse to fit proscriptive gendered roles or aesthetics, they are all impacting the next generation of subculture participants by making space and creating visible identifiers in the street with the potential to make interested participants feel "seen," and realize that they too can belong.

Graffiti and street art will always be limited to those willing and most able to engage in illegal practices, But it also holds the potential to become more accessible based on the direct action of *Miss Teri* who calls out the sexist behaviour of male peers; Melissa Proietti who

creates space for artists and writers alike to connect, co-create, and feel empowered in a male-dominated field; and *Zola*, who mobilizes their position within overlapping subcultures to advocate for more diverse representation and participation. These varying efforts indicate a growing awareness and wider move by nonhegemonic subculture participants to make artistic urban subcultures more accessible for current and future participants. Change must come from those within artistic urban subcultures:

> If you're organizing an event and you're not thinking about inclusivity, then you're doing it wrong. It feels like it's going to be the same scenario every year unless we talk about it. The people at the top need to be so critical right now of who they're giving opportunities to. If they see a female artist, they need to include her right away, because even if you took all the women in the scene, you would still have a majority of men. So what the fuck is the problem? (Miss Teri).

Just like mastering can control and graffiti techniques, sexism is a learned behaviour, and what can be learned can also be unlearned.

Conclusion

The women and femme writers, artists, and community organizers featured in this paper all engage graffiti and street art in different ways and toward different ends. While there is no cohesive identity that binds them, their individual breaks from traditional gender roles and their commitments to new imaginaries, representations, and subjectivities collectively create space for new conceptions of what it means to exist and belong in the city. Their myriad approaches to unsanctioned urban art, influenced by the ways they self-identify, their lived experiences, and their connections with other members of the local graffiti and street art community, constitute a wider movement toward cross-cultural inclusivity and gender equity in Montreal, one that is non-structured and organic.

The public and uncontrolled nature of unauthorized urban art renders alternative narratives to both personal and societal struggle accessible to a wide public, spurring the potential for self-reflection and greater understanding of diverse perspectives, for instance, that "art is essential for changing society… for helping us rethink ourselves" (Tapies 51). The work of featured writers, artists, and community organizers in Montreal moves beyond acts of non-conformity and rebellion to signify political assertions of existence for marginalized residents, outlets for anti-colonial discourse, and calls to change patriarchal power structures in the city and within artistic urban subcultures. These subcultures have long validated masculinity at the expense of feminine and gender nonconforming bodies, but women and femme writers, artists, and community organizers are visibly injecting a bold feminist flair, potentially spurring a more inclusive urban culture that will both enliven the city and spark dialogue around the gendered exclusivity of hegemonic subcultural coding that has largely denied their participation. By breaking from societal and subcultural expectations, writers, artists, and community organizers,

like *Miss Teri*, *Zola*, and Melissa Proietti are making clear that they don't want special treatment; they simply don't want sexist treatment. Whether reflecting their personal realities in the street or creating safer environments for marginalized artists to take back space, artists like *Swarm* and *Made in Shaïna*, and community organizers like *Cam*, are demonstrating that urban art can be an accessible platform. As internationally renowned street artist *Swoon* says "So many times in my life, I've given myself permission by seeing another person take action. If you can, then so can I. With every piece of street art we pass the message: You can. And you can. And you can" (Watson).

Systemic and subcultural change requires courage and determination, qualities embodied by the women and femmes who confront sexism within their own communities and brave the streets to share their messages. As such, they engage safety strategies—from medium and location choice, to collective practice—that reflect not only tactics for self-preservation and resistance but provide insight on urban conditions and the ways non-hegemonic writers and artists navigate public space. Their public movements and uncensored visual forms of storytelling become reclamations of space, offer cathartic release in the face of trauma and ongoing oppression, and manifest belonging for writers, artists, and viewers alike. The public visibility of images, like those by *Lilyluciole*, and public presence of nonhegemonic creatives, like *girlplague*, is important in reflecting societal norms that harm and those with the possibility to heal. Their media and creative output is invaluable in activating processes of cultural transformation, tools for cultural resistance against the normalization of violence in everyday life. Their work targets hegemonic culture and understanding—all the social processes by which communities make sense of who they are, and how they should interact with others.

This thesis initially stemmed from an interest in the ways self-identity impacts the content and approach of Montreal-based women and femme writers and artists to unsanctioned urban art. My desire was to document the work of nonhegemonic subculture participants and situate them as legitimate cultural producers. This, in turn, revealed the prevalence of forced identity narratives and the insidious impacts of hegemonic gendered narratives on marginalized subjects in the city: many not able to walk in the street without harassment by passersby or the police, or practice art within their own subcultural communities without harassment—even those communities populated by friends who share similar artistic passion. The question of self-identity thus remains at the heart of this thesis, to provide interviewees control of their own representations and demonstrate gender as a self-defined and diverse set of experiences that encompass what it means to be a woman, femme, or even feminine.

The focus on women and femmes as socially engaged cultural producers helps unravel the discourses that naturalize ideas about intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in the lived experience of these Montrealers. Whether claiming city walls to redefine local sociocultural narratives, revamp subcultural practices, or simply beautify urban space, these writers and artists are asserting themselves and challenging the hegemonic oppressions that seek to limit their mobility and suppress their voices. Their creative engagements with the built environment leave artistic evidence of their presence in the city and assert their right to feel safe and welcome in public space. The complex and multidimensional roles unsanctioned urban art can have in triggering communication processes that draw people back into their local public spaces, help marginalized communities reappropriate their spaces, and nurture a sense of belonging and togetherness.

For dynamic reflections of peoples' experiences of city life in Montreal and visual culture and the concerns, values, and interests of local residents, simply look to city walls, not those marred by corporate mural festivals or gentrified by city-commissioned projects, but rather the ones hosting independently-produced, unsanctioned images made with heart and placed with purpose. In short: *cherchez les femmes*.

Participant Response

All artists and writers interviewed for this thesis were sent the initial draft and invited to continue the conversation. Street artist *Swarm* shared the following:

"I don't spray paint."

"I am not a graffiti artist because I very rarely write letters."

"I don't deserve the label of graffiti."

"Graffiti is superior to street art, and I am inferior to graffiti writers."

These are all blatant lies that have been shoved down my throat since I started getting into street art and graffiti in 2011. After our original interview, I was almost upset with myself for perpetuating these lies in the absolute statement I made that I don't spray paint. I feel that I have been selling myself short all these years simply because I don't do letters and am not respected by graff dudes. The truth is, I spray paint less than I paste, and my skills in pasting are superior to my skills as a spray painter. But that doesn't mean I don't spray paint. Over the past year I have become okay enough at it to feel like I want to do it more often. However, I do feel pressure to spray paint more to prove my legitimacy as a street artist, despite being up consistently over the past 7 years in multiple locations across the country.

I literally used to tell peers "I don't paint, I paste" so that men artists wouldn't insult me or belittle me on the spot... they did anyway, and I paint almost all of my pastes! Patriarchy has made me act pretty silly out of "deer in the headlights" type of fear, I say that phrase because I often give off the impression that I am less skilled than I actually am, and less experienced than I actually am, all because I have been trained to feel inferior to my peers who are men in this subculture, and to essentially almost fear my peers who are men. To this day if I go painting

with a dude I don't know I am literally afraid of what could happen to me. It may seem like an over exaggeration but it is not.

I feel as though spray painting is a medium I deny myself as a result of the macho attitude surrounding graffiti. Hell, most times I have more respect for random graff dudes I don't even know than I do for my own damn self. A specific recent event really taught me that and I have to keep reminding myself periodically that I should never respect an anonymous, random writer dude over myself. Obviously I don't target their work, that's not the type of respect I am talking about. Just basic mental respect.

I often come across graff dude macho bullshit on Instagram, as well as in the street. It makes me extremely angry, especially Instagram accounts like Memefitti, and also shitty posts by artists I admire only fuel the fire that prevents me from giving myself what I deserve: to spray paint and feel good about it, regardless of where, to feel like I am part of the community and the culture (although, is that really something that matters anymore?), to feel respected.

I am angry at myself for losing what I could have had over these past 7 years to the internalization of all this nonsense. That is not to undermine what I have accomplished through courage and persistence. However, for me it's not quite enough.

I am tired after all that I have done, but the story is not over and I level up more and more each year, which, honestly, is more than most random graff dudes can say for themselves. Don't get me wrong, I am a huge graffiti fan, but a good majority of these boys get more praise and respect than they actually deserve because they don't have to work as hard to earn the basic level of respect that is just handed to them solely based on the fact that they are men.

I have met a handful of respectful graffiti dudes who appreciate what I do, as I appreciate them and their work as well... But I often wonder what they say behind my back in

113

the presence of other men who do graff. The tension of gender differences also makes me naturally distrustful towards graff dudes because I am always questioning their motives if they want to associate with me at all.

I have also witnessed many women/enby artists talk shit about their women/enby peers in the space of men who do graffiti to gain clout and cover their own asses. It makes me sick!

List of Figures

References

"Interview with Starchild Stela". *Persephone's Daughters (2), 2016*. Web.

Anne, Lindsay. "Repair Jessica Sabogal's Mural." (2017). Web.

Benard, Akeia A. F. "Colonizing Black Female Bodies within Patriarchal Capitalism:Feminist
    and Human Rights Perspectives." *Sexualization, Media, & Society* 2.4 (2016). Print.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Bilge, Sirma. "Intersectionality Undone." *Du Bois Review.* 10.2 (2013): 405-24. Web.

Bombing Science. "Interview: Lady Pink." (2017). Web.

Breummer, René. "Giant Mural Commemorating Leonard Cohen Coming to Crescent St."
    Montreal Gazette (April 11, 2017). Web.

Caldwell, Caroline. "Why Aren't 'Women Street Artists' Just 'Street Artists'?" *Hyperallergic*
    (2015). Web.

Cam. "Interview." Ed. Misenheimer, Sofia. Print.

Caragay-Cook, Jonathan. "It's Not a Fluke: Local Artist Helps Legitimize Graffiti in Montreal."
    The Link (October 5, 2015). Web.

Cassandra, Rachel, and Lauren Gucik. *Women Street Artists of Latin America: Art without Fear*.
    San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2015. Print.

CBC News. "Indigenous Mural Calling out White Supremacy Vandalized Days after
    Completion." (2017). Web.

---. "One-Quarter of All Female Homicide Victims in Canada in 2015 Were Indigenous."
    (2017). Web.

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. World of Art. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and

>   Hudson, 1996. Print.

Chan, Hera. "Feminist Art Collective Puts the Writing on the Wall." *The McGill Daily* 10 Feb.

>   2014. Print.

---. "Feminist Art Collective Puts the Writing on the Wall." *The McGill Daily* (February 10,

>   2014). Web.

Collingwood, R.G. *Principles of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938. Print.

Condon, Stéphanie, Marylène Lieber, and Florence Maillochon. "Feeling Unsafe in Public

>   Places: Understanding Women's Fears." *Revue française de sociologie* 48.5 (2007): 101-

>   28. Print.

Cooper, Martha. *Bombshell: The Life and Crimes of Claw Money*. Brooklyn: powerHouse

>   Books, 2006. Print.

Craig, Steve, ed. *Men, Masculinity, and the Media*. London: Sage Publications, Inc., 1992. Print.

Crofts, Danny. *Get up Stay Up: The Concise Graffiti Writer's Handbook*. Germany: Publikat,

>   2015. Print.

CSL Group. "Csl St-Laurent Opens Seaway with Unveiling of Spectacular Mural

>   Commemorating Canada 150 and Montreal 375." (March 20, 2017). Web.

David, Clarke, ed. *The Cinematic City*. Routledge, 1997. Print.

Davison, Peter J. "Top 99 Cities for Graffiti Art." *Bombing Science* (October 2, 2017). Web.

Delgado, DiDi. "Befriending Becky: On the Imperative of Intersectional Solidarity." *Medium*

>   February 10, 2017 2017. Print.

Demers, Jeanne, Josée Lambert, and Line McMurray. *Montréal Graffiti Bis*. Montreal: VLB

>   Éditeur, 1988. Print.

Desmarais, Laurence, and Camille Larivée. "Taking Back the Streets." *Canadian Art* October

    30, 2017. Print.

Donald, James. *Imagining the Modern City*. University of Minnesota Press, 199. Print.

Duvignaud, Jean. *The Sociology of Art*. London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1972. Print.

Edlin, Jay "J.SON". *Graffiti 365*. New York: Abrams, 2011. Print.

Evoughlian, Sandra, and Joana Joachim. "Futures Imagined While No One Was Looking."

    Art/iculation magazine 2017. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Second Vintage Books, 1995.

    Print.

---. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Hurley, Robert. New York:

    Vintage Books, 1990. Print.

---. "A Preface to Transgression." *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Bouchard, Donald

    F. New York: Cornell University Press, 1977. Print.

Fregoso, Rosa Linda. "For a Pluriversal Declaration of Human Rights." *American Quarterly*

    66.3 (2014): 583-608. Print.

Ganz, Nicholas. *Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents*. New York: Abrams, 2006.

    Print.

Gélinas, Éliane. "The Myth of the Graffiti Whore: Women's Bodies in a Masculinist

    Subculture." *Yiara Magazine.* 1 (2013). Web.

girlplague. Ed. Misenheimer, Sofia. Print.

---. "Interview." Ed. Sofia Misenheimer. Print.

Green, Joyce, ed. *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. 2nd ed. Nova Scotia: Fernwood

    Publishing, 2017. Print.

Greiner, Zang. "Miss Van: Van Fatale." *Very Nearly Almost* 2013. Print.

Gupta, Prachi. "This Woman Is Using Graffiti to Change the Way Her Country Thinks About

      Girls." (2015). Web.

Haraway, Donna J. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege

      of Partial Perspective." *The Social Science Reader*. 1999. 172-87. Print.

Harris, Mark Ambrose. "'Listen to the Walls': These Indigenous Street Artists Are Converging

      to Decolonialize Montreal." *CBC News* August 14, 2017. Print.

Hernandez, Jesse. "Miss Van: From Toulouse with Love." *Juztapoz* 2005. Print.

Hill Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016.

      Print.

It's Going Down. "Wheatpasting the Revolution: An Interview with Zola." (2018). Web.

Jenks, Chris, ed. *Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Joachim, Joana. "Making Visible Black Bodies: An Interview with Dr. Charmaine Nelson."

      Art/iculation magazine 2017. Print.

Johnson, Richard, et al. *The Practice of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2004.

      Print.

Justice, D.H. ""Go Away Water!" Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative." *Learn,*

      Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures. Eds. Reder, D. and L. M.

      Morra: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016. 349–71. Print.

Kent, Fred, and Cynthia Nikitin. "Collaborative, Creative Placemaking: Good Public Art

      Depends on Good Public Spaces." *Project for Public Spaces* (2012). Web.

King, Angela. "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplinig of the Female Body."

      Journal of International Women's Studies 5.2 (2004): 29-39. Print.

Labonté, Paul. *All City: The Book About Taking Space*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2003. Print.

Lachmann, Richard. "Graffiti as Career and Ideology." *American Journal of Sociology* 94.2 (1988): 229-50. Print.

Lackner, Chris. "Montreal Is a Canvas for Its Own Art Scene." *The Star*. Web.

Lawless, Elaine. ""Reciprocal" Ethnography: No One Said It Was Easy." *Journal of Folklore Research* 37.2/3 (2000): 197-205. Print.

Le Sino. "Murs Légaux." Web.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991. Print.

---. *Writings on Cities*. Blackwell Publishers, 1996. Print.

Lewisohn, Cedar. *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*. New York: Abrams, 2008. Print.

Lilyluciole. "Interview." Ed. Sofia Misenheimer. Print.

Lippard, Lucy R. *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*. New York: Dutton, 1976. Print.

Macdonald, Nancy. *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Print.

Made in Shaïna. "Interview." Ed. Sofia Misenheimer. Print.

Mairet, Aline. "Off-Murales, a Feminist Vision of Street Art in Montreal, Canada." *Vandalog* (August 22, 2013). Web.

Mannarino, Amy, and Mara Kurlandsky. "What the Data Tell Us About the Challenges Facing Female Artists of Color." *Hyperallergic* (2018). Web.

Maunder, Patricia. "Street Art or Public Nuisance?" *Concordia University Magazine* 2013. Print.

McIntyre, Catherine. "Canada Has a Black Incarceration Problem." (2016). Web.

McKegney, Sam. ""Pain, Pleasure, Shame. Shame.": Masculine Embodiment, Kinship, and

      Indigenous Reterritorialization." *Canadian Literature*.216 (2013): 12-33. Print.

Michaud, Shaun. "Public Art: Montreal Invests Half a Million Dollars in Mural Program."

      Montreal Gazette (September 2, 2016). Web.

Milroy, Sarah. "Is Montreal the Real Art Capital of Canada?" *The Globe and Mail* (2008). Web.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *How to See the World*. Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2016. Print.

Misenheimer, Sofia. "Girlplague, Interrupting." *Kolaj magazine* 2017. Print.

---. "Rêver De Communauté: Une Échange Avec Starchild Stela." *Art/iculation magazine*

      (2018). Web.

---. "Women of Many Parts." *Kolaj magazine* 2018. Print.

Miss Teri. "Interview." Ed. Misenheimer, Sofia. Print.

MissMe. *#Smrtpop : Missme X Marie-Josèphe Angélique*. 2017.Web

      <https://popmontreal.com/en/mag/detail/smrtpop-missme-x-marie-josephe-angelique/>.

Morayef, Soraya. "Women in Graffiti: A Tribute to the Women of Egypt." 7 Jan. 2013. Web.

MU. "About Us." http://www.mumtl.org/en/about-us/vision/ (2017). Web.

MURAL. "About Us." http://2017.muralfestival.com/en/about/ (2017). Web.

Nancy, Dominique. "Les Dessous Du Graffiti Féminin." *UdeM Nouvelles* (2014). Web.

Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ArtNews* (1971). Web.

Olson, Isaac. "N.D.G. Property Owner Battling Graffiti Tickets in Court." *Montreal Gazette*

      (March 24, 2017). Web.

Paré, Isabelle. "L'art Rebelle Apprivoisé: Montréal Est Aujourd'hui Une Des Villes Préférées

      Des Artistes De La Bombe Aérosol." *Le Devoir* (2017). Web.

Proietti, Melissa. "Interview." Ed. Sofia Misenheimer. Print.

Queen of the Neighborhood Collective. *Revolutionary Women*. Oakland: PM Press, 2010. Print.

Radway, Janice. "Ethnography among Elites." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 13.2 (July 1989): 3-11. Print.

Razack, Sherene. "Gendering Disposability." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 28.2 (2016): 285-307. Print.

---. *Looking White People in the Eye*. University of Toronto Press, 1998. Print.

Richie, Beth. *Arrested Justice*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. Print.

Rifkin, Mark. *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*. Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Riggle, Nick. "Review of Street Art New York, by Rojo and Harrington." *Hyperallergic* (2010). Web.

Robinson, Macushla. "Labours of Love: Women's Labour as the Culture Sector's Invisible Dark Matter." *Runway.* 32 (2016). Web.

Robinson, Nickie. "Under Pressure Festival. Like a Big Jam -- Just for Fun." (2017). Web.

Sabogal, Jessica. "As Artists, It Is Our Duty to Uplift the Sacredness of Women, People of Colour, the Disabled, Queer and Trans Folks..." *(August 31, 2017) Unceded Voices, Facebook*. Print.

Schacter, Rafael. "From Dissident to Decorative: Why Street Art Sold out and Gentrified Our Cities." *The Conversation* (November 9, 2015). Web.

Simpson, Audra. *Mowhawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "I Am Graffiti." *Poetry in Voice* (2015). Web.

---. "Micro-Interview." *Poetry in Voice* (2015). Web.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl. "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies." *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Ed. Chen, David Morley and Kuan-Hsing. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 112-27. Print.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books, 2012. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." *The Spivak Reader*. Eds. Landry, D. and G. Maclean. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Sproull, Lisa. "Censored by Social Media, Missme Took Her Artful Vandal to the Streets." *CultMTL* 2016. Print.

---. "A Community Mobilizes against Racist Art-Vandalism." *Cult MTL* 2017. Print.

Starchild Stela. "I've Been Thinking So Much of the Place Abuser/Rapists Hold within Scenes I'm More or Less Part of (Including and Mostly Graffiti/Street Art). Honestly I Just Can't Grasp How Casual Sexual Violence Is Normalized and How I See Men in That Milieu Joking About It and Even Worse Supporting and Portecting Abusive People. I Really Hope Guys Will Call out Their Bros. And No It's Not Only Teen Boys Who Are Abusive in That Scene, I've Seen Abusers of All Ages, and I'm Especially Mistrustful of Men in Their 30s/40s Hanging out with Young Girls. I Hope Rapists Face Actual Consequences Fro the Harm They Cause. I'm Here for People Who've Been Abused and Want to Speak up, I Believe You." (April 7, 2016), Facebook. Print.

Stouffer, Hannah. "Swoon." *Juxtapoz* 2012. Print.

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. 2nd ed: Oxford University Press. Print.

Swarm. "Interview." Ed. Misenheimer, Sofia. Print.

Syrup. *All City Queens*. London: CFC Books, 2015. Print.

Tapies, Xavier. *Women Street Artists: The Complete Guide*. Marina del Ray, CA: Inqling, 2017.
Print.

Tourigny, Vincent. *La Jenkins: Récits Graffitis Sud-Ouest Montréal*. 2 ed: Possibles Éditions,
2016. Print.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization:
Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. Print.

Unceded Voices. "Decolonizing Street Art." *Art/iculation magazine* 2017. Print.

Urban Systems. "Citizens Stepping up to Reshape Public Spaces. Where Do Urban Planners
Fit?" (2014). Web.

Vorst, Jesse, ed. *Race, Class, Gender: Bonds and Barriers*. Second (revised) ed. Toronto:
Garamond Press, 1991. Print.

Waclawek, Anna. *Graffiti and Street Art*. World of Art. London: Thames & Hudson, 2010. Print.

---. "Pop Culture and Politics: Graffiti and Street Art in Montréal." *Routledge Handbook of
Graffiti and Street Art*. Ed. Ross, Jeffrey Ian: Routledge, 2015. Print.

Watson, Tennessee. "The Walls Speak Even If the Media Is Silent." *Signal: 04* (2015). Print.

Weber, Sandra. "Visual Images in Research." *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research:
Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*. Eds. Knowles, J. G. and A. L. Cole:
Sage, 2008. 41-54. Print.

Witten, Andrew "Zephyr". "Foreword." *Graffiti 365*. Ed. Klopfer, Eric. New York: Abrams,
2011. Print.

Women in Music & Art. "Unyielding Power to Demand Change Will Be the Ultimate Goal to

      Create a New Order and Balance in the Arts: An Interview with Mira Silvers." (2016).

      Web.

Woods, Alan. "Québec En Scène: Montreal's Murals Help Chase Away Urban Blight in Social

      Housing." *The Toronto Star* (June 13, 2014). Web.

Zimmer, Tyler. "Good News, Fellow Men: Our Terrible Behavior Isn't Biological." *Slate*

      (December 2, 2017). Web.

Ziyad, Hari. "My Gender Is Black." *Afropunk* July 12, 2017. Print.

Zola. "Interview." Ed. Misenheimer, Sofia. Print.

---. "Radical Thoughts on Street Art 2." *Zine*. Montreal (2016). Print.