## #silence isviolence

# Heidi Cho Deirdre Logue Allyson Mitchell Morgan Sea



### Tannis Nielsen Zoe Whittall

Instructional Centre Vitrines
University of Toronto Scarborough
February 3-June 4, 2017

# Doris McCarthy Gallery Off-Site Project







Introduction
Ann MacDonald
Director/Curator, Doris McCarthy Gallery

The Doris McCarthy Gallery commissioned the Feminist Art Gallery (Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell, with Heidi Cho and Morgan Sea) to create a work that would contribute to the ongoing discussion of sexual violence in our Canadian context, including on university and college campuses, as well as the University of Toronto Sexual Violence Policy that was implemented in January 2017.<sup>1</sup>

#silenceisviolence was installed in the busy atrium of the University of Toronto Scarborough's Instructional Centre, where it generated many direct conversations on campus and across on-line platforms. The Doris McCarthy Gallery is grateful to the artists and to their associates for creating and sharing their outspoken and outraged representations of viable and collective responses to the realities of rape culture.

In response, Zoe Whittall, has contributed a personal essay that speaks to years of frustration, yet concludes with the hope that can be found in the young women who reject status quo and relentlessly oppose oppression.

Tannis Nielsen's account makes direct links between sexual violence and colonialism and capitalism, and resource extraction and rape. Her words are permeated with a refusal to be complicit, and are powered by the existence of community.

FAG, Nielsen, and Whittall's ardent production can transform educational environments, and incite change that must, and will overturn institutionally and societally-held beliefs.

1 In March 2016, the Ontario government passed Bill 132, the Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act, which required workplaces, campuses, and communities to address sexual violence and harassment. Publicly assisted post-secondary institutions were instructed to have their own stand-alone sexual violence policy that will undergo a review every three years.

### **FAG** states:

In anticipation of this policy, and with the knowledge that this policy and the process of its creation and implementation will be flawed, and its outcomes fraught, still we have hope that because of centuries of activism insisting on justice for survivors and the annihilation of rape culture, the most marginalized people will move from margin to centre.

This installation includes two large murals that depict the movements and individual activists that have put pressure on institutions of education, law, government, and the media to address the conditions of toxic masculinity, white supremacy, colonialism, and other structural inequalities that breed and even encourage sexual violence. The activists represented here flank the centre mural, which depicts the university itself and the complicated relationships that individuals and communities have as insiders, outsiders, perpetrators, survivors, and policy-makers: a collective body that comes together for the project of learning and problem-solving and has great potential to decolonize curriculum, centre survivors, and support those who are most marginalized. Unfortunately, this isn't always or even usually the case, and it is up to "us" to stay vigilant to hold together, make space for voices to make change, and insist on socially just accountability in structured and everyday ways.

The title #silenceisviolence honours the student-driven movement (Silence is Violence) to end sexual violence on university campuses that is happening right here and now. Silence = violence is also a more generalized social justice call to action that is multi-pronged and useful as it flags the connections between white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, the suppression of information, complacency, and fear that allow for the abuse of power to continue as seemingly unchangeable as it limits our lives and harms people every day.

This project precedes the establishment of the Sexual Violence Centre that will open at the University of Toronto Scarborough in spring 2017.













### #SilenceisViolence Zoe Whittall

I met my first girlfriend at a Take Back the Night march in 1994, when I was a college student. I dropped out of school because I wanted to major in dismantling the patriarchy and writing poetry. I've held almost every sign in this mural—though not lately, maybe not for a decade.

In fall 2016 I published a novel about rape culture called *The Best Kind of People*. At home after a lengthy tour, I tell my partner I'm tired of talking about the rape book. That's what we call my new novel in private. It's tiring when young men approach me before the reading, asking, *He's innocent, right? The girls were lying?* 

It catches me off guard at first, and then I get used to it, the way your book never belongs to you after publication. You can't control the way it's read. It's no longer yours. I wrote a plot line about men's rights activists that I think is clearly satirical. Serious young feminist men email me to tell me the MRAs came off too sympathetic.

In every city, I'm asked how it came to be that I wrote such a *timely* book. Like rape is a new subject. My first published poem twenty-two years ago was about rape. About sitting up all night in Old Montreal with a weathered female detective, while my girlfriend at the time described her assailant; it was all I could think about.

At the ceremony for our country's most important literary prize, the two female jurists come up to tell me how important my book was to them, their daughters. The male jurists do not. When the women walk away, I know I will not win the prize, and I'm right.

A woman accuses an MFA department head of rape. He claims they had a relationship. She says they didn't, that there was an assault. There wasn't enough evidence. Almost a hundred of the nation's writers write a letter to support *him*.

People talk about student protest these days as though students are going bananas silencing everyone, when it is clear they're just trying to speak freely and finally address the issues that have been brewing for decades. They don't accept that sexual assault is an inevitable aspect of their education, or the ways universities falter in the face of rape accusations, with patterns of institutional malaise and systemic victim-blaming, trying to silence those who speak out.

Writers are often asked about their ideal reader. Who are you writing for? When I get mail from young women reading the book in university classrooms, using it to talk about rape culture, I picture them cracking the spine, writing reviews, and I feel less tired, less burnt-out—that's who I'm writing for. Their work causes those in power to be afraid, to rethink long-held beliefs, to create change.





















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"WE CAN'T COMPETE
WE WON'T COMPETE
WE CAN'T KEEP UP
WE WON'T KEEP DOWN"
Tannis Nielsen

As an Indigenous woman of Metis (Saulteaux/Anishnawbe and Danish) ancestry, i've never called myself a feminist *per se* (which I'll expand upon later) but I can definitely relate to this most righteous slogan coming from the representatives of the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG). Because throughout my own actions of resistance, i've also not sought equality with the patriarchy, nor ever *really* "asked" for "them" to recognize me. i try and enact this "way of being" as my own declaration of sovereignty, and it ain't easy. As i know i'm a chronically, colonially conditioned, distressed pessimist. Though i still *cautiously* (sometimes) open my spirit toward the possibility of sensing any element of emancipatory ambitions in this massively unbalanced, unjust, capitalist society. And Art is the primary apparatus in which i find such aspirations of justice.

There is a powerful, political, matriarchal mural (currently installed at the Doris McCarthy Gallery), and it is in this profound, cognizant, voluminous work, that i have found some inspiration—some hope. The mural titled *silence* is *violence* is an illustrative triptych, painted in grisaille. The painting holds a highly dynamic,

polycentric composition, depicting many figures, individuals, subjects, actions, and movements of various social justice groups who are active in the city of Toronto. Included are Idle No More, Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, No More Silence, Black Lives Matter, and Take Back the Night. The people(s) animated in political action (painted on both left and right panels/on the periphery) are viewed as moving toward/surrounding the "centre" panel, which metaphorically depicts the grotesque, monstrous, grasping hands of institutionalized racism, imperialism, and colonialism; these hands blindly seek to absorb/consume/control "the others"—who boldly form together to resist and confront the cannibalist nature of "the centre."

The Doris McCarthy Gallery commissioned the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) to create [this] work that would [be utilized toward] the ongoing discussion of sexual violence in [a] Canadian context, including on university and college campuses, as well as the University of Toronto Sexual Violence Policy that was implemented in January 2017.

Sexual violence is a direct manifestation of the ongoing coloniality in canadian society.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's advocates often speak of the intertwined relationship between colonialism/capitalism, resource extraction, and rape. As "Indigenous women [we know that we] are a direct manifestation of Earth in human form." Our respect for the Earth/Mother is the epistemological foundation of our matriarchal society. This respect/reverence is also offered to our women,

who are viewed as sacred (as life-givers). It is this matriarchal "way of being" that later influenced settler ideas of feminist theory, and this is why i don't call myself a feminist, as much as i am a part of the original matriarchy. With this relationship between women and Earth, we know too that when the land is exploited, so too are the women who live within the desecrated ecosystems. Examples of this effect are mostly evident in the canadian reserve system. Example: i once had a student who printed a map of all the toxic waste-dump sites in canada. She then overlaid this transparent image on top of a map of the reserve system. It was no coincidence that these toxic sites laid directly parallel to the geographic locations of the reserves. Think of Attawapiskat, Kashechewan, the tar sands...and the fact that over 114 Indigenous reserves in canada do not have access to clean water. What is the effect of such toxicity on human (and other sentient) bodies and psyche? The sexual violence, substance abuse and suicide rates (both on reserve and in urban centres) are a direct result of environmental racism and a continuing coloniality.

i had an interesting conversation about this subject with my mother, when she was living in Fort McMurray/the tar sands. The first thing my mother usually does when she moves into a new location is to "peruse the yellow pages." She says that doing this allows her "to get a better understanding of the lay of the land"/the cultural geography. While in Fort Mac, she was surprised to discover how many pages of escort services there were. We spoke further and she

made the comment 'i think it's because so many men are working away from home," and i responded, "They are there for capitalist gain. While they rape/exploit the land, they also rape/exploit the women, all out of an incessant greed that they've been colonially conditioned throughout their lives to feed." My mother agreed, and we both sat in a long solemn silence afterward.

The centre panel of this mural exposes a similar type of patriarchal voracity. It also depicts how peoples have been "oppressed through theory," as a series of eurocentric texts are illustrated in the centre panel. The painted hands (surrounded by text) remind me of the heinous mentality behind the multiple Doctrine(s) of Discovery, which was used as theoretical justification for "european" entities to seize lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples under the guise of discovery."3 When european explorers arrived in america, they proclaimed their discovery by denying the fact that the lands were already occupied. Known as the myth of "terra nullius" (a Latin term meaning "land belonging to no one" or "no man's land"), this theory was used as rationale for the illegal, immoral acquisition of Indigenous lands, rights, and resources. Yet the colonists didn't only deny that the lands of the Americas were empty, they also denied Indigenous people's humanity. We too were considered "empty." As in devoid of worth, knowledge, morals, culture, government, or civility. The colonizers denied us humanity, as a means to also easily deny us empathy.

While canada promotes itself internationally as a model of equality (in celebration of its 150 birthday), this indifference/denial continues as the citizenry forgets (or was never made aware) that this *new* nation was built from the erasure of Indigenous rights and liberties. The canadian economy continues to grow exponentially through the maintenance of this inequality; so too does the general populace's apathy toward the harsh reality of oppressed societies. This erasure of liberty, and preservation of inequality, is enforced/ sustained through a system of colonial thought that is embedded within the architecture of all canadian practice in media, governmental policy, constitutional law, and institutionalized curricula. canadian apathy toward Indigenous and "othered" peoples is the result of colonization. This indifference was designed.

Denial is the number one strategy of coloniality,<sup>4</sup> and for this reason i wasn't surprised at all, unfortunately, to have read about the University of Toronto's apathy in response to the survivors of sexual assault on campus. In an article written by Lesley Flores,<sup>5</sup> provided "the details of institutional responses to sexual violence" on campus. In this text, Flores writes about the Survivors Speak Back poster campaign that was initiated by the Silence is Violence group, and launched on campus March 16, 2017.

The posters were composed of individual quotations by survivors that referenced the negative responses they had received after telling various members at U of T about their assault. One poster

read, "When I told my professor I was raped, they said that university is hard for all and I am no exception"; another poster recounted how "one survivor was told by their college that they could be punished for retaliation if they spoke about their rape." Prior to this campaign, Silence is Violence also conducted a survey on campus. The results indicated "that survivors at U of T are routinely silenced and discouraged from reporting or speaking out about the violence they experience."

The campaign posters were immediately taken down by the university, and again the peoples/survivors were silenced and denied. U of T's negative response denied the survivors any chance of healing, justice, or reconciliation. i suspect the academy is in denial of the violence on campus because it wants to maintain a record of superiority compared to other academies, and this denial then becomes a strategy of academic capitalism. In fact, the very structure/architecture of the academy itself reflects the oppressive eurocentric ideology that maintains and privileges a white male capitalist/colonial patriarchy and has very little to offer any student seeking justice, cognitive autonomy, or sovereignty.

The structures of capitalism/colonialism both initiate and maintain violence.

When i was a student at U of T, *they* often tried to silence me, especially when i spoke of canada's genocidal policy and thus my need for continually enacting sovereignty. In fact, indigeneity wasn't

included in any course content or pedagogy during my entire undergraduate degree. Imagine what this type of "cognitive imperialism" does to Indigenous students' psyches as they study upon their own traditional territory. In my studies i was constantly revolting against a system of denial. i did everything i could to teach myself about colonial/capitalist strategy so i could later enact a life of decolonizing methodologies.

So, how do we turn colonial/patriarchal apathy into compassion? When the strategy of imperialism and colonization is an attempt to deny, silence, and eradicate "the other's" context/cognition, then the resistance to this erasure is to regain, reaffirm, and express our consciousness, as a means of testimony toward our very existence. Through providing the populace with an accurate education and by sharing our stories/uploading our consciousness in our text, audio, and art, we may recognize each other and begin to unify—in solidarity: to honour the diversity amongst our ancestries, subjectivities, and memories—as we work toward building an encyclopedia of diverse, emancipatory strategies.

i recognized myself in this mural (as a survivor of violence), and this is why i am left inspired, as i was also reminded that i am not alone in "speaking truth to power" and in refusing to be silenced or denied in a system designed to maintain colonial/capitalist thought at the expense of othered and Indigenous bodies/territories. A system in which i/WE can't compete, won't compete, can't keep up, and yet most definitely won't keep down.

- 1 FAG Feminist Art Gallery: #silenceisviolence at the Doris McCarthy Gallery UTSC. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 June 2017.
- 2 Winona LaDuke, Anishnawbe scholar and activist.
- 3 Revolvy, LLC. "Discovery Doctrine' on Revolvy.com." Revolvy. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 June 2017.
- 4 Poka Laenui, Processes of Decolonization," in Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision, ed. Marie Ann Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).
- 5 Lesley Flores, "Poster Campaign Calls Attention to Impacts of Sexual Violence at U of T," Varsity. N.p., 20 March 2017.
- 6 ibid
- 7 Marie Ann Battiste, Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision.









Heidi Cho is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto. She self-publishes comics and zines about being a queer Korean navigating family and mental health. Her work has appeared in *C Magazine*, *Shameless*, and *Peak Magazine*. She has interned with FAG Feminist Art Gallery, as well as Red Dress Productions. She is currently working on a graphic novel about intergenerational trauma and healing.

Mandi Gray attempts to intersect empirical research, activism, art, and humour to critically examine and discuss issues of sexual violence in her work. Gray's writing about her own sexual assault and subsequent legal battles has appeared in NOW Magazine and the Toronto Star. She is currently producing a feature-length documentary film titled Slut or Nut: The Diary of a Rape Trial. In her spare time, Mandi works on her PhD in the Department of Sociology at York University.

Deirdre Logue holds a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design and an MFA from Kent State University. Recent solo exhibitions of her award-winning work have taken place at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art (Winnipeg), the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto; artist-in-residency), Open Space (Victoria), Oakville Galleries, the Images Festival (Toronto), the Berlin International Film Festival, Beyond/In Western New York (Buffalo), YYZ (Toronto), and articule (Montreal).

Logue has contributed over twenty-five years to working with artist-run organizations dedicated to media arts exhibition and distribution. She was a founding member of Media City, the executive director of the Images Festival, executive director of the CFMDC, and is currently the development director at Vtape. Logue has been dedicated to working at the Independent Imaging Retreat (the Film Farm) in Mount Forest, Ontario, since 1997 and directs the FAG Feminist Art Gallery with her partner/collaborator Allyson Mitchell.

Allyson Mitchell is a maximalist artist working in sculpture, performance, installation, and film. Her practice melds feminism and pop culture to investigate contemporary ideas about sexuality, politics, and the body. These articulations have resulted in a coven of lesbian feminist Sasquatch monsters, a room-sized vagina dentata, an army of genius Holly Hobbies, and a woodland utopia library of political knowledge.

Mitchell's works have exhibited in galleries and festivals across Canada, the U.S., and Europe, including Tate Modern (London), the Textile Museum of Canada (Toronto), the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto), Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts (San Francisco), Andy Warhol Museum (Pittsburgh), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), the British Film Institute, Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto).

Her most recent collaboration with artist Deirdre Logue includes *KillJoy's Kastle:* A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House in Toronto, London, and Los Angeles. The two just completed an artist-in-residency program at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where they completed new video and sculptural work for the travelling exhibition *I'm Not Myself at All*. Mitchell is an associate professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University and runs the FAG Feminist Art Gallery with her partner Deirdre Logue.

Tannis Nielsen is a Métis Woman (of Meis, Anishnawbe and Danish descent,) with twenty years of professional experience in the arts, cultural and community sectors, and nine years teaching practice at the post-secondary level. Tannis holds a Masters in Visual Studies Degree (M.V.S.) from the University of Toronto, an Art and Art History-Specialist Degree from U of T, as well as a Diploma in Art and Art History from Sheridan College, in Oakville, Ontario.

Tannis's research interests include: anti-colonial/anti-capitalist theory, Indigenous decolonization methodologies, Indigenous pedagogies/oral histories, Indigenous arts activism(s), Indigenous governance/natural law(s), and the relative investigations between Indigenous science and quantum physics.

In 2006, Tannis's dissertation asserted the need for localized Indigenous contexts to be inserted *accurately* within the structures of the academy by visually illustrating the negative consequence of colonial trauma on Indigenous culture/land/language, familial relationships, and memory. Her text titled "Not Forgotten," emphasized this positioning

by repudiating the need of utilizing the constraints of an English/imperialist punctuation and capitalization in text. The focus of this text has led to a number of select invitational presentations which include lectures titled; "Deconstructing the Doctrine(s) of Discovery" for the Law Union of Ontario, "Global Cities - Indigenous Histories" at York University, "Sourcing Indigenous Ways of Knowing," at McMaster University and "Academic Capitalism, Apartheid and Insurgency" at the Toronto Free Gallery.

Tannis has served on the Aboriginal Engagement Committee at UBC-O, as a member of the Equity and Diversity Committee at OCAD-U, the Toronto District School Board, and is the past President of The Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts (A.N.D.P.V.A.), a national Native arts organization in service since 1972. She was also a member of the Toronto Native Community History Project and has assisted in organizing the last three annual "Indigenous Sovereignty Week" events in the city of Toronto. In 2012, Tannis became active on the Idle No More-Toronto organizing committee and continues to contribute towards this vital international Indigenous grassroots movement from her current location in Toronto Ontario where she currently teaches at OCAD-U.

Morgan Sea is a cartoonist from the Canadian Prairies. Her practice often blends fantasy and queer theory to create trans feminist comics, zines, and new media endeavours. Past projects include producing forty episodes of *Tranzister Radio*, a monthly radio show celebrating trans activism and cultural production. Sea studied video and performance art at Concordia University and ACAD. She lives in Toronto with her girlfriend and their three cats, while studying comics in a master's program at OCAD University.

Zoe Whittall is the author of 7 books, including her recent Giller-shortlisted novel *The Best Kind of People*, a national bestseller, soon to be made into a feature film by Sarah Polley.





## **FAG Feminist Art Gallery**

**Artist Collaborators** 

Heidi Cho Deirdre Logue Allyson Mitchell Morgan Sea

Research & Concept Collaboration Mandi Gray

**Further Consultation** 

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