In the book *On Photography*, author Susan Sontag observed how the vernacular of the genre of photography was imbued with violence. Through citing examples of the terminology used to describe photographic acts such as *shooting* or *capturing* an image, Sontag revealed how acts of photographic documentation are often mired in aggression.¹ If the starting point of a photographic image begins in a framework of brutality, what then becomes of its subject? If the act of photography germinates in violence, it will almost certainly be expected to visit violence upon the subject of a photographic image.

If we are to closely examine the phrase “capturing an image,” we can identify within it the desire to entrap and arrest. If we are to parse meaning from the term, it can be determined that what is caught within the photographic frame becomes frozen, unable to move outside of or beyond the particular paradigm that has enclosed it—that the power to shape or frame a way of knowing in regard to a subject lies solely with the photographer. In a sense then, the subject who has been “shot” exists as a taxidermied specimen. Acknowledging this dynamic, the extent to which photography was employed as an instrument of visual colonization of a number of racialized groups is unsurprising. Photographers such as Edward S. Curtis were responsible for creating a lexicon of Native Americans throughout the United States that contributed to the perception of Indigenous people in North America as “noble savages” who were a doomed and vanishing race.² Curtis’ images (along with the work of other photographers who worked in a similar vein) were not interrogated at the time of their production, they were understood to be accurately depicting the lives of Native Americans. Instead of reading these types of images as the imaginings of those who had little interaction and understanding of those whom they were documenting, these images came to define First Nations peoples and tether them to associations of poverty and failure, associations that would remain unchallenged in the mainstream for many years.

The titles of Shelley Niro’s works implore us to “unbury her heart” or to “surrender nothing always.” Niro employs photography in her practice in a manner that subverts and transgresses; under her guidance the act of photography becomes a method of de-colonization and resistance. Throughout her practice, Niro has engaged with the trauma that riddles the trajectory of indigeneity in North America. Her works reference the horrors of the residential school system, forced relocation and attempted erasure of identity that occurred under the guise of colonization. Yet, though these factors are acknowledged, her works do not become subsumed by this particular history. Rather, they seem to serve as starting points for explorations or testaments to the endurance of innumerable First Nations traditions and culture and the resilience of Indigenous peoples. In her large-scale photographs, the artist monumentalizes what is commonly
deemed as inconsequential and in doing so underscores the importance of ritual, touch, memory, and community in sustaining the self.

Niro is a multidisciplinary artist; and though she works across genres such as painting, printmaking, installation and film, photography is often her main medium of choice. The ways in which she deploys the medium in her practice eludes and displaces the violence of earlier applications of photography to First Nations peoples.

Many of Niro’s photographs are made using a large format camera and the resulting images are often printed as murals. These works document that which is often overlooked or has been deemed unimportant. For example, her series *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony* depicts two young Mohawk people, a woman and a man, enacting the different stages of the Peacemaker legend. The black and white images in the series depict the two individuals in a series of acts: in one photograph the young woman “speaks” into the ear of the young man, in another photograph she feeds him and in yet another she performs “smudging” on him. The images within the series are arresting because of the essence of care that emanates from them. The subtle gestures performed within them convey intimacy and healing, but more importantly, they attest to the continuation of First Nations culture. In *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony* the legend of the Peacemaker ceases to exist solely as myth and manifests itself in present day reality. The other noteworthy aspect of this work is the depiction of the Peacemaker as female. In having a woman occupy this role Niro both elevates the position of women in Mohawk communities as well as drawing attention to the contributions of women to First Nations culture.

An earlier draft of Niro’s statement for *M: Stories of Women* reveals the artist’s original conception for the series:

MONSTER will be a series of self-portraits. In this series of twelve I will use my image to express emotion, critique and anger at the ongoing reality and depiction of Native People in Canada. I am referencing the day-to-day struggle Native People have to confront and contend with... Using myself as the subject within the work I will portray, abstractly, innermost feelings as my personal space is impeded by actual happenings exploited by the media and delivered to my own reality on a daily basis. The Missing 500, Alcohol and Drug Abuse reported regularly on Native reserves, the Abuse of Children, Systemic Racism in Canada, Genocide Through Indian Status, Suicide Rates in Native Communities, Legislated Permission to Squat on Native Land, Apology of the Residential System, and most recently the Body Bags delivered to isolated Native Reserves in preparation for the H1N1 flu epidemic. These are some of the subjects I wish to confront, internalize and display.
In this statement Niro identifies the overt and covert forms of violence that First Nations peoples are subjected to, and alludes to the ways in which this violence is carried out through representation. Though the media enacts this violence through the discourse that it produces on a linguistic level, it is often reinforced by the visual imagery that is used to accompany the narratives that are constructed of First Nations life that are situated within frameworks of abjection. Presenting herself as a monstrosity, and a grotesque entity, Niro would embody the ways in which she witnesses how First Nations peoples (as a group) are depicted in the media. Perhaps realizing that presenting herself in this manner wouldn’t necessarily challenge the overarching perception of “Native as abject,” Niro’s vision for the series shifted away from her original concept for the body of work. Observing the misogynist underpinnings of the assault against Indigenous peoples in North America, Niro has created a series of works that pay homage to the roles that women occupy in First Nations society while acknowledging both history and the realities of contemporary life.

_M: Stories of Women_ evolved to become a series of large-scale photographs that incorporate elements of myth and portraiture to contest the prevailing narratives that define First Nations peoples existence as rooted in degradation. The letter _M_ in the title references the myriad characterizations of First Nations women. As Niro points out in her statement on the work, it could be taken to reference an earlier title and incarnation of the work (_MONSTER_) or it could reference other traits or roles such as maternal or mother. The ambiguity of the title affords Niro the ability to explore several issues within and outside the context of gender. The images in the series have all been digitally manipulated. Niro incorporates fantastical elements with found imagery, landscape photography and portraiture; the overlapping imagery allows for complex presentations of each of the subjects.

_M: Stories of Women_ begins with a series of images that display a reenactment of the legend of Skywoman, the first human inhabitant of Turtle Island (the earth). The legend dictates that Skywoman originally lived in the sky and fell to the earth while reaching for a drink of water from the Forbidden Tree of Life and plummeted towards Turtle Island. Though the legend portrays her fall to earth as happenstance, in these images she is depicted wearing an aviator’s cap and flying goggles which convey that she has a certain degree of control over her particular circumstances. In the work _Finding Her Helpers_, we see Skywoman mid-fall/flight in a skyscape of red clouds, accompanied by a dog and encircled by eagles, a stretched cape unfurled behind her. In all of the images of Skywoman she is connected to the elements. In _Beginnings_, Skywoman stands before water with the outline of a celestial tree appearing to her left with strands of DNA above and below (Niro has included this element as a nod to ancestral ties but primarily for the resemblance to wampum). In another image, _Ancestor_, Skywoman is shown in profile with a translucent solar flare in the background, four moons anchor the border that is otherwise punctuated with celestial bodies. Though within ecofeminism some have identified the problematic association
between women and the natural world,\textsuperscript{6} in this instance the affiliation underlines her role as an "earth mother" figure but also stresses the importance of remaining grounded (within nature). In each image Skywoman's appearance is extremely contemporary, her face is made up with cosmetics and she sports a sparkly top and heels. While her fashionable appearance alludes to Niro’s trademark humour, it is also notable for its linking of First Nations culture with the present, not as something that has been relegated to the past, but as alive and continually evolving.

Each image in \textit{M: Stories of Women} is composed in a similar manner: the images of the subjects are framed within the outline of a deerskin hide that could also be read as a land formation. Beneath each frame is a motif that provides an additional element for interpreting the works and that simultaneously relates to the subject’s particular history; each photograph features a (blood) red background. The images in \textit{M: Stories of Women} feature representations of the artist along with her relatives and friends and highlight women at various stages in their lives. Miniature motifs appear at the bottom of each photograph, either alluding to different facets of myth and history or serving to underscore inherent themes in the works. In \textit{Finding Her Helpers}, a manipulated image of Niagara Falls accompanies the portrait of the artist’s daughter Naoga Blackey, a massage therapist and mother, illustrating the Fall’s ties to Skywoman as well as its importance in Iroquoian history. In \textit{Blanket}, the motif takes the form of a band, which is actually a horizontal strip from a Hudson’s Bay blanket, that appears beneath a partial portrait of artist Jackie Traverse. Behind the subject is a faint image of water that is overlaid with stacked bands of white, yellow, red and black, the colours signifying the four directions. In this piece, the inclusion of water references the poor water quality that exists on several Canadian reservations. Coupled with the Hudson’s Bay blanket (which recalls the “gifting” of smallpox-infected Hudson’s Bay Company blankets to First Nations peoples during the 1700s in an attempt to decimate and weaken Indigenous populations),\textsuperscript{7} it appears as though the subject is mired between a past and a present that are both particularly desolate. The work \textit{Never Ending Horizon} features a portrait of artist Lori Blondeau with the repeated image of four buffalo at the bottom representing each of the subject’s four children. Between the buffalo and Blondeau’s image is a found image of an older woman standing with a horse in front of a teepee. Niro posits Blondeau as a contemporary version of this woman. Teepees appear in the background of the photographs; they, and the buffalo, allude to the vestiges of First Nations life on the Prairies.

\textit{Routes} depicts Jacquie Carpenter, a Cree woman from the Attawapiskat Reserve near James Bay. Appearing under Carpenter is the image of a canoe, and as in the work \textit{Blanket}, an image of water fills the space behind her. The image that forms the background/border is an aerial shot of the highways near Toronto Pearson International Airport. The image of the water (and the canoe) references the controversial James Bay Project.\textsuperscript{8} Though Carpenter was born in another part of the province, she was raised in Toronto and holds an extensive
knowledge of the city’s streets. Her knowledge of the city’s landscape harkens back to the early Indigenous ancestors of the area surrounding James Bay whose knowledge of portage and trade routes enabled early European settlers to exploit the natural resources in the area. The continued exploitation of natural resources is further explored in the works *Legacy* and *Bagging It*. In *Legacy* an inverted landscape with a lone tree appears above the head of Skywoman while beneath her lies an expanse of barren terrain save for the multiple windmills that populate its surface, a supine skeleton, and a beaded version of the celestial tree that appears in *Beginnings*. *Bagging It* features a self-portrait of the artist. Niro, poised as Skywoman, stands with her arms akimbo, staring defiantly at the viewer. The landscape behind her features tiny longhouses that are dwarfed by the presence of hydro towers that loom in the background. Body bags that appear to float in a sea of blood surround Niro, referencing the government forwarding dozens of body bags to reserves, in place of the H1N1 vaccination. Similar to the “stereotypical depiction of men as warriors” that Niro has incorporated into her work (a detail of an image of a bronze cast of Indigenous men wearing loincloths and brandishing weapons from the Joseph Brant Monument in downtown Brantford) Niro has posited herself as a warrior incarnation of Skywoman. Accompanied by animal helpers in the form of birds and a dog, she stands in resistance against environmental and psychological warfare (as a reference to evolution, the birds have evolved into airplanes). *Land of Opportunity* is an unabashedly hopeful work. Smiling brightly, the artist’s niece Paula stands before a backdrop of the Grand River, framed by a swathe of roses and butterflies. A tiny image of a dancer, symbolically representing Paula, as the future and possibly things to come, her arms outstretched and poised to dance, exhibits the expressive and uninhibited nature of youth.

Niro began her series with the legend of Skywoman as she felt that the heroine’s predicament was not so different from her contemporary counterparts. Niro states, “Skywoman found herself in a difficult position yet managed to land on her feet and keep moving.” It is interesting to observe that each subject’s image looms over the motif, suggesting that though they cannot necessarily escape past histories, they are not necessarily bound or defined by these events. The collaged nature of each piece in *M: Stories of Women* imbues each with a sense of dynamism; the outlines seem to function as tears in the centre of each work that disrupt the overarching narratives of the photographs. These fissures operate as portals that allow for us to perceive of these in ways that do not romanticize or deny but rather acknowledge the complexities of post-colonial existence. Though the images in *M: Stories of Women* are ever mindful of history, they manage to shift beyond its confines.

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3 The Peacemaker, along with Hiawatha, brokered a peace treaty between the then warring tribes of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca. In the 16th century they came together as the *Haudenosaunee* or the Five Nations. When the Tuscarora joined with the aforementioned tribes in the 1700s they became known as the Six Nations. The Iroquois Confederacy, or Iroquois League as the Five and Six Nations are also known, were primarily based in what is currently known as upstate New York and their confederacy stressed equality between men and women. The Iroquois are now primarily based in New York, Ontario and Quebec.

4 Artist statement from September 24, 2009.

5 The M could also refer to Matriarchy. Traditionally, First Nations’ economies were controlled by the women. The women owned the land and everything that come out of it. In essence, the women were the overseers, however this changed when colonialism became the enforced power. Artist statement from July 12, 2011.


