

# TERMS

PART 2

WINTER 2022

# Service

Sarah Nickel  
*"A Crying Need for a  
Day Care Centre":  
Indigenous Women's  
Child Care Activism*

Shelley Niro  
*The Essential Sensuality  
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*Tributaries of Care:  
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## TERMS

### PART 2

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### SERVICE

For its second edition, the discursive and artistic program *Terms* focuses on the notion of “service.” This word, which is taken as a given in our lives and shapes nearly all of our social interactions, historically refers to the state of subjection and obedience that binds one to a higher authority—a master, the law, the State, God. In its usual sense, it suggests more broadly a commitment to others or to oneself: made out of desire or obligation, with or without self-interest, at the level of the individual or of society. Today the word prevails, perhaps above all, in

the market economy, where it translates into a transactional object dictated by imperatives of profitability, performance, innovation, general interest, and, occasionally, public utility.

In whose names does a service act? This edition of *Terms* looks at some of the meanings conferred to the concept of “service,” considering the principles on which it can be linked, in particular those of equality, accessibility, benevolence, but also devotion, sacrifice, economy and competition. This second of

two parts reflects on “service” as a form of giving driven by an individual’s sense of duty. Keeping with the program’s three-part structure comprising two essays and an artwork, the contributions in this issue consider the term as it relates to selfless dedication, voluntary and activist work, as well as caregiving. With texts by Sarah Nickel, Associate Professor in the History Department at University of Alberta, and by artist and curator rudi aker, in dialogue with a photographic series by artist Shelley Niro.

Sarah Nickel

*“A Crying Need for a  
Day Care Centre”:*

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1. Formed in 1968 by eight Indigenous women from Kamloops and Vancouver, the BCNW membership was open to status and non-status First Nations women, as well as Métis, urban, and out-of-province individuals. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG10-C-IV-7, Box 1, File 901-24-1-10 (pt. 1), BC Native Women's Society, 1971-76.

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In 1973 Vancouver, Indigenous mothers, many who had moved to the city to attend school, were unable to access affordable and culturally appropriate child care. Lacking the family and community supports they may have had in their home communities, the women turned to the newly formed Makwalla Native Women's Association (MNWA), a voluntary student organization under the umbrella of the British Columbia Native Women's Society (BCNWS), to address their needs. The BCNWS, a women's council designed to unite local Indigenous women's groups already operating in the province, sought to address the unique concerns of Indigenous women and children, including challenging Indian Act sexism, and protecting Indigenous children's rights.<sup>1</sup> The MNWA tackled similar issues, but focused more precisely on the needs of urban Indigenous students.

In addition to seeking improved educational services for Indigenous students, combating stereotypical and incorrect portrayals of Indigenous peoples in curriculum, and finding better housing and professional programs for students, a key component to the MNWA's organizing was to facilitate the conditions for "married Indian students and working mothers"

2. Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Leonard and Kitty Maracle Fonds, Box 4, File 4-21, reference code RBSC-ARC-1351-4-21, Makwalla Native Women's Association, 1974, 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Makwalla Native Women's Association, April 21, 1974, Vancouver Indian Centre.
3. Ibid.

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to thrive.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, this meant having adequate care for their children. In fact, at its 1974 general meeting, MNWA executive member Hattie Ferguson exclaimed: "There is a crying need for a Day Care Centre which would accommodate Indian students and working mothers. The non-Indian takes care of their own and Native mothers must register on the waiting list and some students have finished their course under difficult conditions without ever getting their child or children placed in a Day Care Centre."<sup>3</sup> Indigenous mothers were demanding better for themselves and their children, and they were prepared to do whatever was necessary to reach their goals.

And they were not alone in their struggles. For as long as women have worked outside the home, they have needed care for their children. The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed dramatic transformations in child care, as increasing numbers of working mothers prompted feminists, welfare rights groups, and others to call for universal child care programs as a question of equity. The 1967-68 Royal Commission on the Status of Women identified inadequate day care as just one of many sites of gender inequality for Canadian women,

4. Tom Langford, *Alberta's Day Care Controversy: From 1908 to 2009 and Beyond* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010); Lisa Pasolli and Julia Smith, "The Labor Relations of Love: Workers, Childcare, and the State in 1970s Vancouver, British Columbia," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 14, no. 4 (2017); Lisa Pasolli, *Working Mothers and the Child Care Dilemma: A History of British Columbia's Social Policy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

5. Lisa Pasolli, "This half century of struggle': A Look Back at Child Care Advocacy," *Active History*, May 18, 2021, <https://activehistory.ca/2021/05/childcare2021>.

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which translated into policy recommendations for affordable, available, and safe day care for Canadian families. When changes failed to materialize, many took matters into their own hands to generate day care centres through occupations, protests, and political lobbying.<sup>4</sup> Groups including Action Day Care mobilized public demonstrations across Canada to call for publicly funded, high quality day care. In fact, the establishment of day care centres at Simon Fraser University and the University of Toronto were the direct result of parent organizing, fundraising, and even occupying buildings in the late 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous women were involved in these activities, but also removed from them, in part because some of the unique needs and experiences of Indigenous families didn't align with emerging child care debates amongst white feminists, particularly those that framed child care as strictly a matter of gender equality. Though many Indigenous women recognized sexism as a barrier to child care, they also had to contend with ongoing colonialism and racism that framed their everyday lives.

Many Indigenous families, particularly in remote areas, continued seasonal traditional economic practices

6. RSBC, UBC, Leonard and Kitty Maracle Fonds, Box 4, file 4-34, Interchange '75 - Native Women's Seminar, 1975, Topic Summaries for International Women's Year Native Women's Seminar.

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or culture-based work such as hunting, trapping, and gathering, and needed to integrate formal child care into those activities. In other words, when it was not possible to bring children on lengthy trips to the trapline or other resource gathering sites, families needed to make other arrangements, such as leaving children with family members for extended periods of time. Other families experienced unavailable and culturally inappropriate care for their children due to geographic isolation and lack of child care services in their communities, as well as overt racism, where children were denied a place in centres when spaces were available. Some mothers complained that their children were scolded for speaking their Indigenous language in non-Indigenous day cares, and that operators used standards of discipline that Indigenous families disliked.<sup>6</sup> Other families struggled to pay for expensive day care spaces, and some had complex social and family circumstances that required unconventional child care in the form of temporary kinship adoptions.

And, of course, the backdrop of child care among Indigenous families was also suffused with high rates of Indigenous child apprehensions and the placement of

7. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission notes that the child welfare system represents a transfer of Indigenous children from one institution to another, p. 73. See also: Vandna Sinha and Anna Kozlowski, “The Structure of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada,” *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 4, no. 2 (2013); Allyson D. Stevenson, *Intimate Integration: A History of the Sixties Scoop and the Colonization of Indigenous Kinship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

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Indigenous children in non-Indigenous homes under charges of neglect by social workers and state agents. Quite simply, Indigenous women faced much greater scrutiny in how they cared for their children; always wary that informal or unorthodox child care arrangements could result in social services apprehending their children. This was not paranoia. It has been well established by experts that Indigenous children were apprehended in situations unheard of for non-Indigenous folks in such great numbers that many have referred to the child welfare system in Canada as the ‘new residential school.’<sup>7</sup> This context is crucial for understanding how and why Indigenous women initiated their own day care centres.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, then, Indigenous women came together in provincial women’s political organizations such as the BCNWS, Saskatchewan Native Women’s Movement (SNWM), and the Voice of Alberta Native Women’s Association (VANWS), as well as other community groups to open their own facilities. Organizers were motivated by a sense of responsibility to their families and communities to improve their lives, and women took up this



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important political and service-based work, opening the first Indigenous-run day care in western Canada in 1967 on the Siksika 146 reserve near Cluny, Alberta. Here, children were exposed to their own languages and cultural practices, and were cared for by day care workers from their own community. The Siksika centre was followed rapidly by the creation of facilities across Alberta in reserve communities at Piikani, Kainai, Tsuut'ina, and two additional Siksika communities by the early 1970s, and across Saskatchewan in Regina, Sandy Bay, La Ronge, and Uranium City by the mid-1970s. In each instance, Indigenous women were responding to practical challenges in child care, but through their activism, organizers shifted child care from a private issue within individual families to one grounded in their political rights as Indigenous women to have culturally appropriate care for their children. Caregiving was an act of political resistance to preserve cultural integrity, and one that relied on women's activist labour, service work, and often, unrecognized sacrifice.

In addition to child care activism through formal women's organizations, grassroots efforts were also

8. “Reserve Day Care Centre Soon to be Reality,” *Kainai News*, August 31, 1973, 2.
9. Jacqueline Red Crow, “Day care Centre Receives LIP Grant,” *Kainai News*, January 10, 1974, 1.

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essential, and further highlight women’s personal and political fortitude. At the main Kainai reserve, Blood 148 near Standoff in 1972, the Kainai Community Services Department were prompted to open a day care centre after 28 young mothers initiated a letter-writing campaign demanding a centre for their community. These women were not formally involved in reserve governance, but they took it upon themselves to advocate for necessary services, even if they risked upsetting tribal leadership. Once successful in their bid, the mothers were not content to step back, but instead helped to elect a board of directors to govern the newly-formed Day-Care Project and aided in securing government grants to fund the centre.<sup>8</sup> Less than two years after their original campaign, the Standoff Day Care opened its doors, able to accommodate 26 children, all thanks to Indigenous women’s efforts.<sup>9</sup>

The costly nature of the voluntary political work needed to initiate facilities like this one cannot be underestimated. Women gathered around kitchen tables after their regular days in the paid labour force, or amid their unpaid domestic roles to draft letters to bureaucrats requesting necessary approvals to begin a day care

10. Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Collection DNS1, Department of Northern Saskatchewan, File I.A.174, La Ronge Day Care Centre, Government of the Province of Saskatchewan, Department Memo from Walter E. Smishek, Minister of Finance to G.R. (Ted) Bowerman, Minister, Department of Northern Saskatchewan, January 16, 1976. Internal ministry correspondence included multiple conversations between officials about how Indigenous women did not know how to properly budget for their centres or lacked expertise on report writing to account for their expenditures. Minister of Finance Walter Smishek even recommended withdrawing support for the La Ronge day care in 1976 because he believed the women did not know how to manage it.

11. LAC, RG6-F, Box 20, File 9254-F, Indian Rights for Indian Women – Executive and Board Meeting, Minutes for IRIW Annual Conference, November 3, 1978.

centre. They prepared budgets and applied for funding, found staff members, and located buildings for rent or purchase. They completed this work, often with young children at their feet, for no wages, and, most of the time, meeting significant resistance. Women faced opposition and skepticism from male-dominated government agencies that were responsible for approving grants and habitually highlighted women’s supposed incompetence at navigating bureaucracy and operating their own facilities.<sup>10</sup> They were also confronted by male-dominated Band Councils who did not always approve of women’s child care goals. Still, overcoming those barriers did not ensure success.

Once their centres opened, women faced budgetary and staff shortages, continued bureaucratic hurdles, and for those who found employment as staff members, they quickly learned this meant “very poor wages and no security.”<sup>11</sup> In July 1975, Saskatchewan Family Service Coordinator Linda Hope reported that director Mary Heimbecker “has worked long hard hours and many times, if it hadn’t been for her, the centre would have folded.” She explained that “[Heimbecker] still does a lot of additional work such as cleaning the centre on

12. PAS, Collection DNS1, Department of Northern Saskatchewan, File I.A.174, La Ronge Day Care Centre, La Ronge Day Care Summary, Linda Hope, Family Service Co-Ordinator, July 23, 1975.

13. Anne-Marie DiLella, "Liberating Community Education and Social Change: The Regina Native Women's Group (1971-1986)" (Master of Education, University of Saskatchewan, 1989), 142-143.

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weekends and taking washing home."<sup>12</sup> Centres opened and operated through the determination and elbow grease of Indigenous women.

This was not uncommon as part of women's socio-political labour. Anne-Marie DiLella writes of the Regina Native Women's Association, which operated a day care centre as well as women's shelters and treatment centres across the city: "When the group engaged in unpaid labour to keep the organization operating, it was in essence being exploited. However, according to the state, this form of unpaid labour is legitimate because volunteer work is traditionally sanctioned as women's work by the dominant ideology and is akin to the unpaid female domestic labour performed in the family unit."<sup>13</sup> While some women embraced gendered expectations around service and care work, and even mobilized these strategically to achieve their socio-political goals, Indigenous feminist, activist, and political scientist Joyce Green explains that demands for caregiving and motherhood can, at times, subsume other considerations of political action and identity. There is an expectation that mothers should sacrifice themselves for their families and this private domestic cost naturally

14. Joyce Green, interview with Karissa Patton and author, October 22, 2021.

extends into public service work. “Indigenous women’s deep devotion to their families . . . is true,” Green argues, “but not only.”<sup>14</sup>

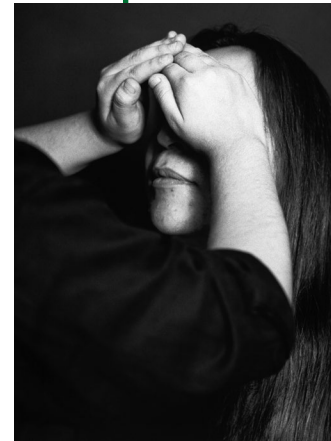
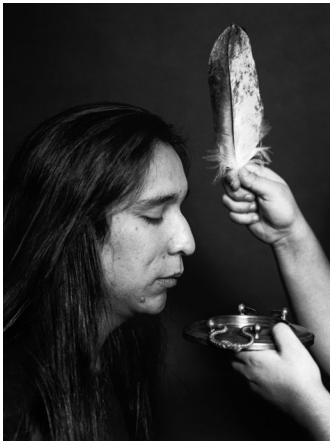
The idea that Indigenous women mobilized to create day cares and other services because of their dedication to their families and communities and deep desire to care for them as mothers and grandmothers, is visible within the archival records, interviews, and scholarship around Indigenous women’s political work. But we must be wary of glorifying motherhood and caregiving as political acts. This erases the social, political, and economic challenges many of the women organizing were confronted with, as well as the exceptional personal cost and sacrifice needed to conduct this important service work.

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Shelley Niro  
*The Essential  
Sensuality  
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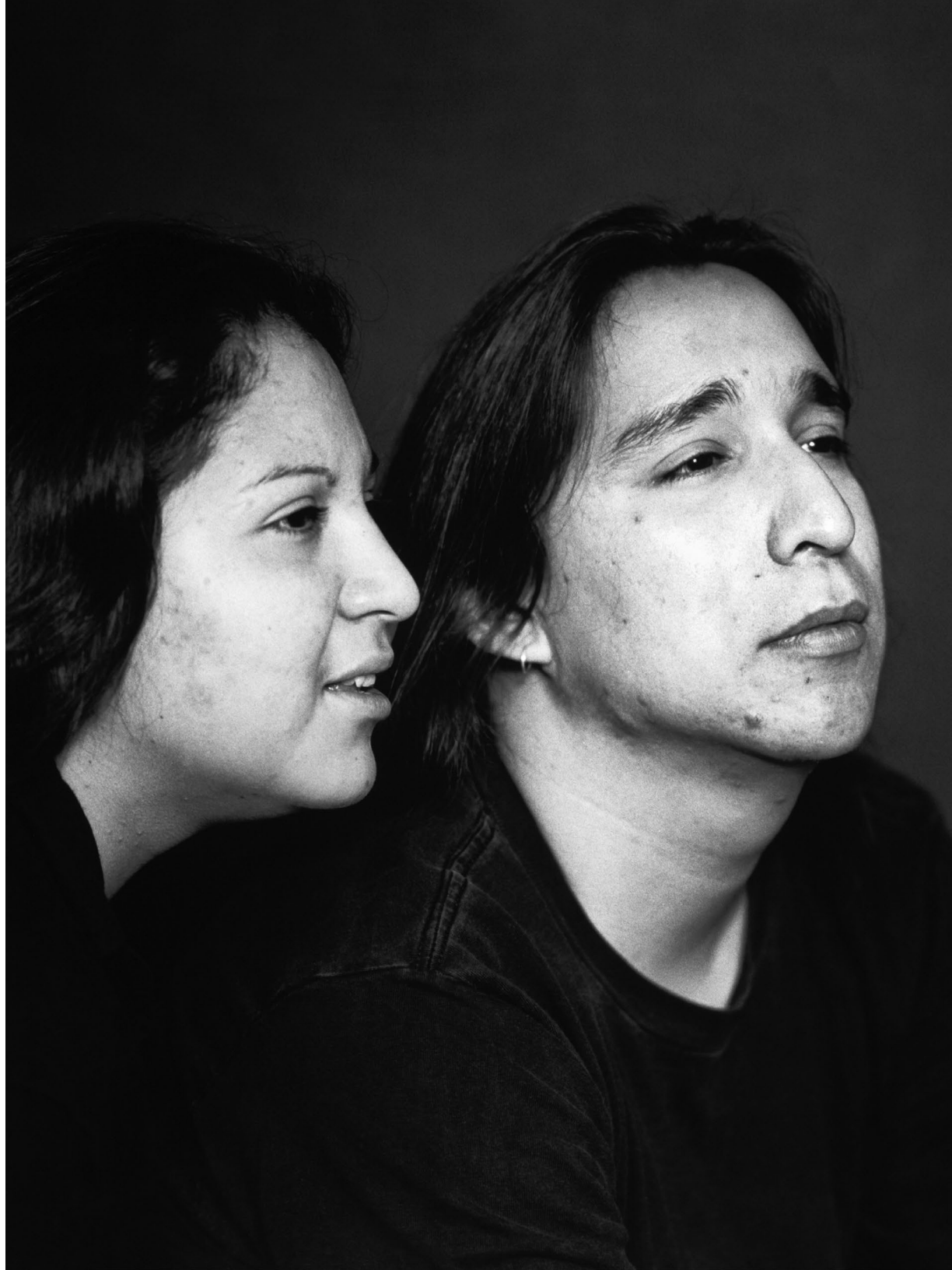


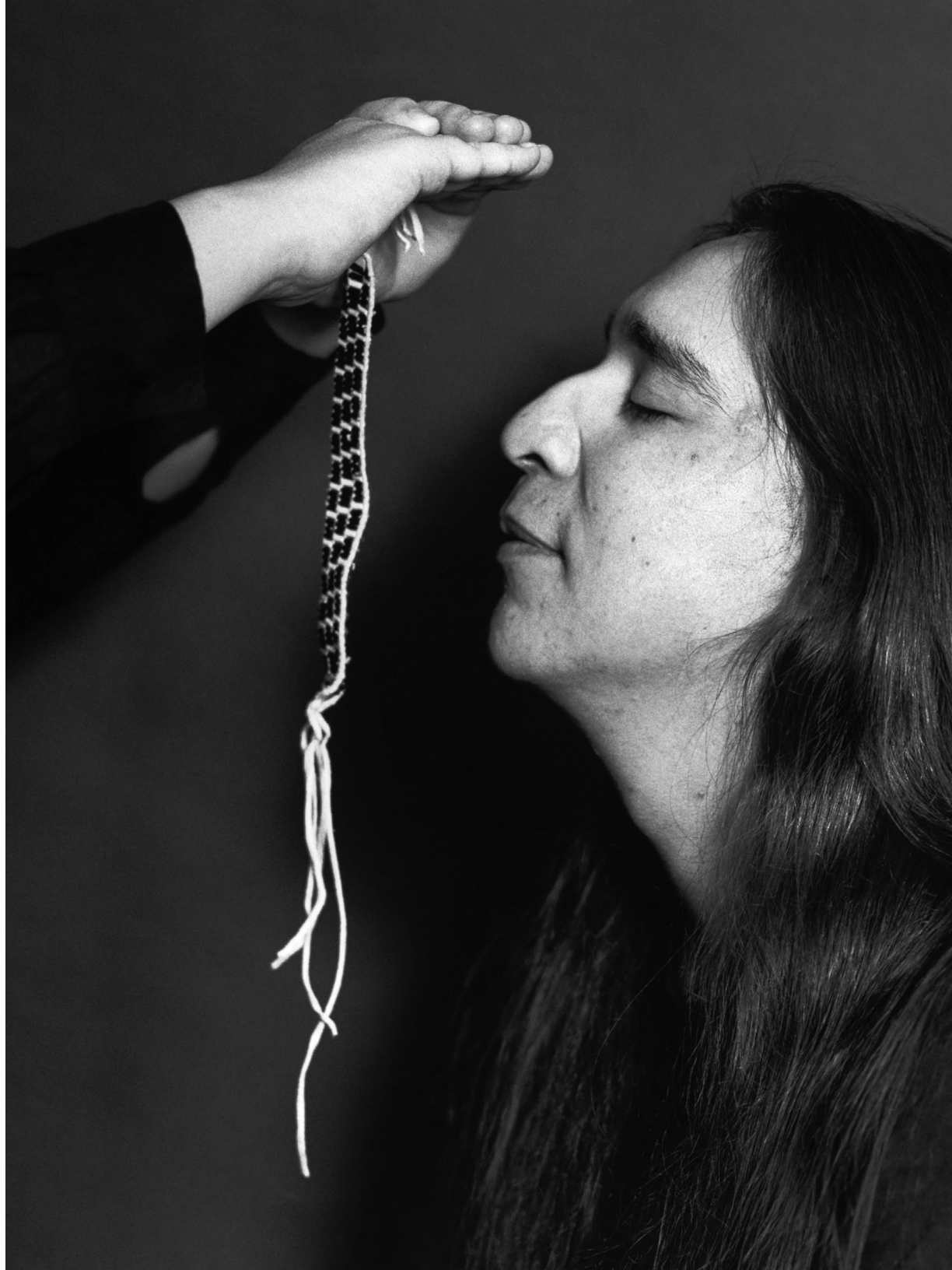
Shelley Niro  
*The Essential Sensuality  
of Ceremony, 2002,*  
series of five black-and-white  
gelatin silver prints, 40 x 30 in.

Courtesy of the artist.













rudi aker

*Tributaries of Care:*

*Shelley Niro's*

The Essential Sensuality  
of Ceremony

The roles of service that we assume in our respective Indigenous communities are not so tightly bound to capitalist notions of labour. Rather, they act as expansive mechanisms of love and care. Where service is complex, damning, and categorical, service is also in braiding hair, serving cups of tea, and sweeping the floor after dinner. In conceiving of service as reciprocal acts of care, we open worlds in which futures feel tangible, possible, and active. When we foreground intimacy in duty and devotion, notions of interpersonal and intercommunal kinships flourish, inching us closer to fullness—a renewal of sovereignty. In her 2002 photographic series *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony*, Shelley Niro offers a visceral vision of grief and illustrates the importance of relationality in ceremonial practice to confront loss and sorrow. The artist mobilizes cultural knowledge to highlight the affinity in caretaking while emphasizing the strength found in the connectivity of caring as an act of service.

In *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony*, Niro enacts the foundational story of the Peacemaker through a series of five black-and-white portrait photographs. Each image features a young man and woman, engaged in a sequence of ceremonies: the woman aids the man in his healing

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journey through smudging, singing, and nourishing while tending to his tears and offering her teachings. These figures reflect details of the Haudenosaunee legend of the Peacemaker—the prophet sent by the Creator to bring peace amongst nations and to teach his people to live well—and his relationship with Hiawatha, he who assisted the Peacemaker in the transmission of his teachings. Where the Peacemaker has been typically depicted as male, Niro employs a substantial shift in reimagining the Peacemaker as a woman, entrusted with the care of her male counterpart, representing Hiawatha.

Building on this legend enveloped in tradition and community, Niro asserts the significance of the Peacemaker’s teachings in Haudenosaunee lifeways.<sup>1</sup> By honing in on ceremonial practice and private gestures of care as a means to process grief, she offers an interpretation of the Peacemaker story that is, in her own words, “all about awakening the senses.”<sup>2</sup> This process of awakening is one of collaboration and kinship, which Niro locates in the gestures and interaction between the two figures throughout the progression of *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony*—the shared affection between the pair is palpable and restorative. The series constructs a narra-

1. Lori Beavis, “to know dibaajimowin a narrative of knowing: art, art education and cultural identity in the life experiences of four contemporary Indigenous women artists” (PhD diss., Concordia University, PhD in Art Education, 2016), 70–82.
2. Madeline Lennon, “Conversation with Shelley Niro,” in *Shelley Niro: Seeing Through Memory* (London, Ontario: Blue Medium Press, 2014), 133.

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tive arc which follows the instructions of the Peacemaker and Niro's interpretations of them. In her version, the Peacemaker, portrayed by the female figure, teaches the man how to "live well" alongside his grief for the immense loss felt across the Indigenous people of North America in the wake of colonial contact.<sup>3</sup> In their incommensurable offerings, each image is more alluring than the next: unfixed votives, rife with tangible sentiment and affection.

The male figure is central in the photographs: he who is circumscribed by grief and beholden to the woman who extends her care. The man sits anchored while the woman ebbs and flows into the frame. We come to know her first through her hands as they disperse the cleansing smudge. His bowed head is raised in the following portrait. The woman, now identifiable by her strong features, leans into the man's ear, likely to sing, and together they look ahead, trusting. She continues to kindle his senses: wiping his tears, feeding him, holding the wampum to his head, imbuing him with the awareness to see, eat, and know well, as the story of the Peacemaker sets forth. These figures are inextricably linked through their intimate acts of giving and receiving: inti-

3. Cora Bender, "A certain amount of magic in that moment': An Interview with Shelley Niro," *European Review of Native American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 37-40.

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macy is knowing another's needs, a willingness to give, and, most importantly, being receptive to these acts. The sensuality to which Niro alludes is observed within these physical acts of practicing ceremony together. One must first be well to give; this extension of wellness is, in essence, the ultimate act of service—pouring from the proverbial pitcher, overflowing with good intention and wellbeing, into the cup of another.

These notions of service are complicated by our own preoccupations with the term. The implications of service are dutiful, demanding, and immoveable. We often resign ourselves over to service: in our jobs, families, relationships. Is the colonial capitalist regime to blame for our narrow understandings of how to serve? Is this the same hegemonic system that implicates our minds and bodies in believing that service begets reward? What is it in our society that deems those in positions of service as inferior? Aren't we all perpetually in service to ourselves and others? Through *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony*, Niro offers a view that we are not often privy to seeing outside of ourselves. In this series, we witness a secret bond—cherishing and nourishing—through which Niro confronts the cynicism and individualism of duty. The relationship

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unfolding before us is sensuous in its privacy. We are invited to behold a man in abject despair and bear witness to his healing. She who cares for him is not indebted but instead offers her care as a way to be in relation. In a world where we long for kinship, this reevaluation of service is necessary in the pursuit of togetherness, for a whole and reciprocal network of care.

I am reminded of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s propositions for an “Honorable Harvest.” Though she writes of these guidelines in the effort to strengthen our relations with our plant kin, it also speaks volumes to how we come to be responsible for one another. The first guideline: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.”<sup>4</sup> Within many Indigenous epistemologies, our teachings often underscore the importance of responsibility in the relationships we maintain with our human and beyond-human kin. This sense of responsibility is deeply tied to both gratitude and reciprocity: “Give thanks for what you have been given. Gift a gift in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you and the world will last forever.”<sup>5</sup> To return to the metaphor of the pitcher, you cannot give from an empty vessel. We must equally fill and then

4. Robin Wall Kimmerer, “The Honorable Harvest,” in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2020), 178.

5. Ibid.

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pour from our respective pitchers to ensure the continuity of our relations and our wellbeing. Niro's personified reconceptualizations of the Peacemaker and Hiawatha demonstrate this intrinsic knowledge of negotiation and concession: Peacemaker knows that the ceremony she provides is crucial for Hiawatha to address his grief. She has a responsibility to impart her teachings to him, knowing that her responsibility will eventually extend far past Hiawatha to those he will then become able to care for. Is the supposed reward of service then found in its iterative nature? Over and above, to a greater extent, is the gift in the interchange? Are we the collective tributaries of the care we give and receive?

Debt of gratitude, indebted to servitude, to those who serve us, or to serve others to ensure our kin can be well. Charged with what Niro names as "whispers of history," *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony* offers a retelling of the Haudenosaunee legend of the Peacemaker and moves beyond to a place unhindered by time to epitomize the deep kinship ties between those who care for one another, in community and ceremony.<sup>6</sup> We are made and remade in the image of those who bestow upon us their teachings, their love, their presence, and their service. Duty is

6. Shelley Niro, "Shelley Niro: Land, Women, River – Artist Talk," interview by Lori Beavis, The Art Gallery of Peterborough, February 17, 2019, video, 29:15, <https://youtu.be/BA2QHSxFNng>.

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not prescriptive; the guiding principle of devotion is led with heart. To give willingly is to give abundantly, and in doing so, we continue the inherited project of formulating a world where our lives are possible, our relations are dynamic, and our care is constitutional, sovereign.

## NOTE

*In the spirit of service and to move away from the pan-Indigenization that occurs in the consumption of Indigenous art and artists, it is critical to clarify my authorial position: I do not intend to speak for communities to which I do not belong but, instead, I hope to offer my inherent wolastoqew perspective on the concurrent streams of thought and shared experiences that connect our communities, especially those located here in so-called Canada. In line with Jolene Rickard's propositions on sovereignty as located in cultural specificity and relationality: "It is prudent to discuss tradition, art, and sovereignty based on a specific cultural location while reserving the right to connect these ideas to a broader discussion of aesthetic practice as a colonial intervention."<sup>7</sup>*

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7. Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (April 2011): 471-472.

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TERMS  
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How does a term circulate through society, and how does its dissemination within contemporary discourse inform us about the way that society thinks about itself? By what means do certain words instill themselves in language and the public sphere to the point of becoming commonplace? *Terms* is an online discursive and artistic program that individually unpacks a series of broad and polysemous terms that are commonly employed to address a range of sociopolitical issues in contemporary society. While some words acquire multiple defini-

tions the more they are used, they also often tend to become generalized and run the risk of having their meaning become diluted, confused, or unclear over time. Nevertheless, their continued presence in our vocabulary requires careful attention and analysis as to their etymological value, their semantic density, and their use across and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

For each selected term, a researcher from outside the visual arts publishes a text that examines it in its many variants, tensions, and ambiguities through the specific lens of their

field of activity. The word is then considered by pairing it with a resonating artwork shared on the Gallery's website. In turn, a writer from the cultural sector uses this same work as the starting point for a second text that draws from the first and from beyond to probe aspects of the term in its various dimensions.

