Working from the Violent Centre: Survival Sex Work and Urban Aboriginality in Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*

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From the early 1970s until 2002, at least fifty-nine women—more than half of whom were Aboriginal,[1] and many of whom were street-level sex workers—disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Their disappearances from within this small neighbourhood in what has been labelled Canada's poorest postal code were treated with little interest by Vancouver police and municipal officials for two and a half decades. In February 2002, a recently-formed joint RCMP–city police task force charged a Port Coquitlam farmer with the murder of seven of the missing women. At the time of writing, Robert Pickton has been convicted of murdering six of the missing women: Marnie Frey, Georgina Papin, Brenda Wolfe, Sereena Abotsway, Mona Wilson, and Andrea Joesbury. Pickton's lawyers are appealing this conviction; if they fail, federal prosecutors will not try Pickton for the pending twenty additional counts of first-degree murder—a decision not without significant public controversy. To date, however, many of the disappeared women are yet to be accounted for.

1 I use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous to refer to all persons descended from the First Peoples in what is now known as Canada. In Canada, Aboriginal is a constitutionally recognized category that includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.

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As the Vancouver investigation has unfolded (and as upwards of twenty more women are now missing from the same Vancouver streets),[2] a number of other serial kidnap and murder cases involving poor, racialized, and/or street-level sex workers have made headlines, particularly in Western Canada. In Edmonton, an RCMP and Edmonton police task force was formed in 2003 to investigate eighty-three cases, dating back to 1982, of murdered and disappeared women. A serial killer murdered four First Nations women and was suspected of killing at least three others in Saskatoon in the early 1990s. In addition, there have been a series of disappearances and violent murders in Winnipeg that police have only begun to investigate.

Cases like these fuel the efforts of groups who struggle to combat the social, political, and economic forces that contribute to increasing extreme violence against sex workers in Canada. Although many of these groups regularly underscore the high number of First Nations women involved in the survival sex trade,[3] as well as the overrepresentation of Indigenous women among kidnap, assault, and murder victims in Canada, sex worker activism in Canada remains primarily a white enterprise.

Even the briefest consideration of North America's colonial history provides many reasons why Indigenous women are overrepresented in inner-city populations of women who trade sex for dollar amounts which barely provide sustenance or to fund debilitating addictions. Such analyses also highlight a number of reasons for divisions between sex worker activists who work from a labour activist and/or communal human rights position and activists who foreground the role of state-sanctioned racism and colonial violence in populating the survival sex industry. The latter of these social movements—including the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), the Aboriginal Women's Action Network (AWAN), the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF, which funds, among other significant initiatives, a shelter for First Nations women in downtown Montreal), and the NWAC-affiliated research group Sisters in Spirit—emphasizes the combined effects of class bias, misogyny, *and* culturally ingrained racism in the assault, rape, and murder of many survival sex workers. These organizations and the anti-violence, anti-poverty, and anti-racism initia-

2 See, for example, Lori Cuthbert's "'Nothing's Changed' in Vancouver's Drug-plagued Downtown Eastside" in the *Vancouver Sun*'s Tuesday, 26 February 2008 edition.

3 Generally, survival sex workers are persons who use sex work to survive on the streets, who work to support a debilitating addiction, or who have been forced or trafficked into the sex industry by others (Nagle 2).

tives with which they are involved thus insist that Indigenous sex workers suffer and die *because* they are Aboriginal women whose already precarious cultural status too often becomes difficult to navigate and survive in contemporary urban contexts. Significantly, however, representatives from groups like these often assert that prostitution *causes* rape, poverty, and violence for Aboriginal women. For example, in 2007, AWAN released a statement opposing the legalization of brothels in Vancouver (proposed in anticipation of the 2010 Olympics). In this statement, AWAN argues that "[p]rostitution is inherently violent, [and is] merely an extension of the violence that most prostituted women experience as children.[4] We should aim not merely to reduce this harm, as if it is a necessary evil and/or inescapable, but strive to eliminate it altogether. Those promoting prostitution rarely address class, race, or ethnicity as factors that make women even more vulnerable" (online, 1 March 2009). In the recent past, NWAC's position on sex work has been equally unequivocal: in 2003, spokesperson Terri Brown attended a Vancouver public forum—a forum organized by Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Centre—advocating the end of prostitution. Interviewed about the conference and her views on its subject matter, Brown stated, "Prostitution is slavery, it's rape, it's violence; it's not about choice of occupation" (Borowko). Such claims are echoed in the position of non-Indigenous feminist anti-rape organizations such as the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres (CASAC)[5] and Vancouver Rape Relief.[6]

Emerging "urban reserves," in combination with Canada's long history of gendered, racialized cultural violence, and an even longer tradition of whore stigma in Europe and her former colonies, result in the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in one of urban Canada's simultaneously most visible and most marginalized populations: street and/or survival sex workers. The question of personal agency in the context of the sex trade, particularly in the circumstances through which a woman enters the business, has thus become one of the key points of difference between sex worker activist and Aboriginal anti-poverty, anti-violence, and urban outreach groups, although there is no evidence of public debate between

4 Francis Shaver's research, which she presented before the 2005–06 federal Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws (the SSLR), examines the personal histories of female sex workers and women working in other service industries such as hairdressing and nursing. Her research suggests that survivors of childhood sexual abuse are not over-represented in the sex trade (SSLR, meeting 005).

5 See Lee Lakeman's "Linking Violence and Poverty in the CASAC Report."

6 See "Abolition of Prostitution" on the "Issues" page of Vancouver Rape Relief's website.

them. In fact, NWAC's current position on prostitution, as expressed through Sisters in Spirit (SIS), is significantly less hard line. At the time of writing, I have found no clear anti-prostitution position in SIS documents, presentations, or website materials.[7] SIS appears instead to read prostitution as a symptom of deeply ingrained social injustices. In addition to raising awareness of the growing numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women across Canada, the SIS mission statement thus focuses on anti-poverty, anti-racism, and anti-violence research and work.

Nonetheless, although the Women's Information Safe House (WISH Drop-in Centre, of Vancouver), Prostitutes Empowerment Education and Resource Society of Vancouver (PEERS), and CASAC spokespeople suggest that the majority of the women who use the resources at inner-city shelters are Aboriginal,[8] at the time of writing I could find little evidence of direct co-operation between Aboriginal outreach and anti-poverty, anti-violence, or anti-racism groups and sex worker activism and outreach organizations.[9] In addition, despite both social movements' concern with the growing numbers of disappeared and murdered sex workers across Canada, and although many of the groups discussed below have extensive user-friendly websites, at the time of writing none of the sites for the sex-

7 Words such as sex work and prostitution are rarely used on the SIS webpages or in the research documents, pamphlets, newsletters, and "Toolkits" linked to these pages. Although some of the missing and murdered Indigenous women whose disappearances and violent deaths SIS investigates were involved in the sex industry, many were not. However, the conflation of Aboriginal womanhood and prostitution is a significant negative effect of colonization in Canada. Such conflation occurs regularly in mainstream media reports on these cases (See, for example, Jiwani and Young's "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourses"). SIS researchers appear to be well aware of this fact and work to resist this conflation in their research and education initiatives.

8 See also Cecilia Benoit, Dena Carroll, and Munaza Chaudhry's "In Search of a Healing Place: Aboriginal Women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside" or Michelle Oleman's *First Nations Drum* report "Conference Tackles Missing Women Crisis."

9 There are two noteworthy exceptions to this point: the first is WISH's nationally unique Aboriginal health and safety project for women working in the sex trade, a project that is delivered in partnership with Vancouver Native Health as well as Vancouver Coastal Health (discussed by WISH Executive Director Kate Gibson before the 29 March 2005 public meeting of the SSLR, the joint federal Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness [15, 30]). In addition, at the time of writing, the homepage for Stella of Montreal includes information about a "Native Medical Clinic" administered by the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal for which Stella includes a link.

10 SPOC is a Toronto-based sex worker activist organization.

worker activist groups noted above includes a link to a single Aboriginal group site, and vice versa.

Former Sex Professionals of Canada (SPOC)[10] spokesperson Wendy Babcock argues that "a blow job is better than no job,"[11] and that, furthermore, sex work is less demeaning than many other forms of employment. SPOC's Mission and Goals, like those of the Prostitution, Alternatives, Counselling, and Education (or PACE) Society of Vancouver, as well as those of PEERS Victoria and PEERS Vancouver, outline approaches to the subject of prostitution as work that are significantly more nuanced than Babcock's. On their websites, each of these organizations focuses on the legitimacy of prostitution as human labour, asserting that as providers of sexual services for which they receive remuneration, sex workers are contributing members of Canadian municipalities and of the Canadian nation. As such, these groups note, sex workers—particularly those working in the lowest paid and most visible areas of the sex industry (the street level and/or survival sex trade, for example)—deserve laws that protect rather than criminalize and fine them or that violate their civil and human rights.[12]

Questions like these are rarely addressed directly by sex-worker activist groups.

In terms of the survival sex trade and many of its poorest and racialized members, such positions may not be as persuasive or empowering. When, for example, systemic racism, poverty, and any number of other sociocultural factors effectively force a woman to her knees and require that she accept as little as five dollars for services rendered, her agency must be understood as severely limited. If cultural racism and colonization—both their historical legacies and their everyday expression—have contributed to an Aboriginal woman's impoverishment and/or fuelled her need for cash or drugs, can her participation in the survival sex trade be considered—and respected—as the same manner of "necessary choice" as that of a poor white woman who does the same? Questions like these are rarely addressed directly by sex-worker activist groups like PACE, PEERS, SPOC, and Stella (of Montreal). Significantly, however, points like those of PACE and SPOC that reject moral condemnations of sex work in favour of a more utilitarian perspective rarely receive due and/or direct consideration

11 Babcock made this statement at SPOC's "Bawdy House Burlesque Show," a SPOC fundraising event held at Toronto's Gladstone Hotel on 16 August 2006.

12 See "Mission" and "Goals" at www.spoc.ca; "Our Mission" and "Our Vision" at www.pace-society.ca; "PEERS—Our Purpose" and "PEERS—Core Values" at www.peers.bc.ca/whoweare.html; and "Mission Statement: What Peers Does" at www.quammer.dreamhosters.com.

by Aboriginal groups like SIS, AHF, and AWAN, or by feminist anti-violence organizations like Vancouver Rape Relief, CASAC, and others.

This paper explores such questions in one of the few venues through which others have begun to address them: contemporary Indigenous literature. This paper interrogates the unique activist consciousness evident in the portrayal of urban survival sex work in *Halfbreed*, Métis author Maria Campbell's 1973 autobiographical novel. In *Halfbreed,* Campbell portrays survival sex work as the best available choice for her younger self and for other disenfranchised and culturally marginalized Aboriginal women.

Halfbreed unflinchingly examines issues of personal agency within Canada's inner-city survival sex trade. Campbell's text thus engages stereotypes of degraded and sexualized Aboriginality in contemporary urban culture, highlighting systemic racism and ongoing colonial violence as well as the cumulative effects of these formidable cultural forces for isolated and marginalized Indigenous women working as survival sex workers. In addition, Campbell examines key incarnations of the Aboriginal-as-urban-outsider stereotype, particularly as this negative image affects Indigenous women in recognizably Canadian settings. This paper considers the female protagonist, Maria, whose cultural isolation, social exclusion, and subsequent impoverishment leads her into survival sex work. I analyze this text and this character in part because of the ways in which the author challenges a number of (relatively) dominant positionings of Aboriginal women and the sex industry and in part because of the ways the narrative demands that readers acknowledge similarities between real Canadian cities and the cityscapes Campbell describes. *Halfbreed* thus interrogates sociocultural circumstances alarmingly similar to those that have facilitated the current serial kidnappings and murders of poor, racialized—in particular, Aboriginal—women in actual contemporary Canadian cities.

In many ways, Campbell's narrative denies the abjection of the suffering (and Aboriginal) prostitute body that other literary and "real world" texts too often facilitate. Indeed, readers' concern for Campbell's consistently marginalized and often suffering protagonist contrasts ironically with the current lack of dominant cultural concern about the plight of so many disappeared and murdered Indigenous women across the country. Thus Campbell's narrative, like the activism undertaken by Aboriginal anti-violence groups, challenges hegemonic discourses that individualize the plight of the racialized urban poor. Campbell's text reaches beyond the mandates of many of these groups, however, in its thematic treatment of survival sex work as a symptom, not a cause, of systemic racism, cultural violence, and misogyny. In thus indicting systemic forces for the degrada-

tion of Maria's experiences in the survival sex trade, Campbell's narrative calls for the end not of prostitution itself but of the state-sponsored and culturally endorsed racial/sexual violence that populates the survival sex industry with Aboriginal women.

It is important to note that autobiographies like Campbell's can create a sense of intimate textual identification for readers, a level of identification that a newspaper article or television spot cannot inspire. Such psychological and/or emotional proximity to this text can and has been distressing for Indigenous and other readers. For example, Jo-Ann Thom notes many Aboriginal readers' anger with *Halfbreed* because they believe that Campbell's confessions "substantiate the very stereotypes that plague aboriginal women in this country" (299).

Reading Campbell's autobiographical Bildungsroman only as a thinly veiled representation of real lives and actual events, it has been argued, risks marginalizing a minority author and can significantly limit the influence of her work. Discussing the effects of being defined and defining oneself as Aboriginal, Sonja Kurtzer notes that Indigenous communities can in fact restrain Indigenous authors by requiring that Aboriginality be "authentically" represented in their writing (quoted in Heiss, 207). Focussing on Campbell's narrative authenticity and veracity, or lack thereof, can and has resulted in her text's rejection or condemnation by some readers. However, writing for and with the Native Critics Collective in 2008, Craig Womack marks a shift in present and future critical reception of the work of Native cultural producers like Campbell. "For most American Indian artists," Womack writes, "it is impossible to simply walk away from the social ills that threaten our communities to engage in an art that prioritizes aesthetics at the cost of ignoring the things that are killing us" (8). "A major dilemma for the Indian artist," Womack continues, "is commenting in one's art on social policy […] while keeping the work artful. Such a conundrum shapes the kind of theory that will be generated by those interested in an ethical criticism. It is our belief that an increased commitment to social realism can actually generate new artistic experimentation rather than shut it down" (8). My analysis of the social realism inherent in Campbell's novel's cultural critique is produced with the aim of contributing to such an ethical criticism. I acknowledge, however, the need for further critical examination of the ways in which the artfulness of the narrative interacts with the social criticism so apparent in this text.

Halfbreed is a coming-of-age story that traces Campbell's life from her impoverished beginnings in rural northern Saskatchewan to her time as a survival sex worker in Vancouver and then her later struggles as a single

mother and her involvement as political activist in the Indigenous rights movement in Calgary. Despite the breadth and richness of *Halfbreed*'s narrative and the significance of its cultural and political commentary, the text remains underanalyzed in the academy. The small but useful body of literary criticism that has grown up around the book focuses, for the most part, on genre, discussing it in the context of women's and/or postcolonial autobiography.[13] While a few critics appreciatively discuss the "humour, pathos, defiance, and courage [of Campbell's story]," such analyses repeatedly return to the ways that the text, in Kate Vangen's words, "has re-created [Campbell's] own history and heritage" (193). And although Armando E. Jannetta points to the ways characters in the text humorously subvert racial stereotypes by "wearing the mask of the stereotypical image [so that] the Native no longer resembles the stereotypical image of the 'Native'" ("Anecdotal Humour" 6), his reading, like most others, focuses on the first fifteen chapters, or the first half of Maria's life. Thus the bulk of existing criticism is concerned primarily with Maria's tumultuous and poor but loving family life in rural Saskatchewan and the historical record she provides of her family and her people, the Métis or the "Road Allowance people."

Such analyses also highlight Campbell's assertion that she writes to teach and to heal (Lutz 42) but gesture only vaguely toward the darker years of Maria's life in Vancouver as part of the author's learning process—events and experiences from which she recovers and through which she may identify with others, Métis or not, who suffer. For example, Helen Buss argues that in addition to functioning as "a means to help other [A]boriginal people," "[t]he autobiography becomes a powerful confessional instrument which Campbell uses to put her own degradation behind her" (165). But Buss offers no further examination of how exactly Campbell works through either her "degradation" or her confession. Examining Campbell's treatment of Christianity, Ken Derry briefly summarizes Maria's years in Vancouver as characterized by "shame [that] fuels the events of her life as she becomes an addict and a prostitute, living a life of squalor and repeated suicide attempts" (208). Derry further observes that Maria's time as a prostitute haunts and inhibits her from moving on (208), yet he provides no further analysis of the exact nature of this "squalor" or haunting in Maria's life, choosing to focus instead on the events that lead up to her time as a prostitute.

13 See, for example, Helen M. Buss's "The Different Voice of Canadian Feminist Autobiographers" or Armando E. Jannetta's "Métis Autobiography."

For a number of reasons, it is troubling that such analyses offer no extended commentary on the formative years recorded in chapters sixteen through eighteen. First and foremost is the order in which Campbell wrote these sections of her story. Campbell reportedly wrote the first half of the book at the request of her editors who, after discussion that included the editors, the author, and another non-Indigenous reader, reduced her original two-thousand-page manuscript to two hundred pages. They requested that she write about her earlier years in order to balance out the darkness and anger of the story Campbell initially produced.[14] Thus to focus on the first half of Campbell's story is to largely ignore the narrative the author initially intended to be the sole focus of her book.

Critical discussion of the first fifteen chapters establishes the significance of Campbell's story in the context of First Nations and Métis writing as cultural resistance and in the evolving Canadian literary canon. I was surprised, however, by the routinely brief critical treatment of Maria's time as a prostitute. What is the cause of this apparent reluctance to examine fully the portions of Maria's urban existence that she chooses to share? Do we risk stigmatizing and thus marginalizing Campbell herself if we consider more extensively this portion of her autobiography? In analyzing Maria's life as a survival sex worker in Vancouver, do we simultaneously reopen an unpalatable and lengthy debate around the rights and wrongs of prostitution?

Throughout the remainder of this paper, I demonstrate the necessity of reading the sex work portions of Maria's life story, or chapters sixteen to eighteen. In doing so, I argue that the cultural critique offered by Campbell's text hinges on the ways that Maria's experiences as a survival sex worker and criminal in Vancouver help her to value her experiences in her family and her rural Saskatchewan community. I also argue that her Vancouver life provides her with a clear understanding of and vision for the activist work she undertakes after she leaves the coastal city. Maria's story subsequently argues that systemic racism breeds violence and hopelessness, that social and political systems are too often prejudiced and corrupt, that crime pays, and that, for certain female populations in Canada, dreams do not come true. In addition to her survival under such circumstances, however, what makes Maria's story especially remarkable is her encouragement that we continue to dream as she does and to search for solutions to these cultural problems in spite of these dark truths.

The cultural critique offered by Campbell's text hinges on the ways that Maria's experiences as a survival sex worker and criminal in Vancouver help her to value her experiences in her family and her rural Saskatchewan community.

14 See Campbell's interview with Hartmut Lutz or Barbara Godard's "Voicing Difference: The Literary Production of Native Women."

The opening paragraphs of Campbell's autobiography establish the text's settings, both landscape and the buildings contained therein, as key elements, even supporting characters in the story that follows. The next fifteen chapters detail the racial history and everyday struggles that result in Maria's decision to leave her rural home. The poverty of this period in her life as well as the happy memories she retains from her childhood remain integral features of her character throughout the story. This early indication of the relationship between the course of Maria's life and the setting in which she lives contributes to the foreboding tone at the beginning of chapter sixteen. Maria has left her father to marry Darrel, a marriage she has undertaken quickly at fifteen years of age with the belief that such an arrangement will enable her to keep her six little brothers and sisters (whom she refers to as "the kids") with her. But Darrel cares little for Maria's familial concerns, and his telephone call to the Welfare office has resulted in the kids being taken away. Despite the physical and verbal abuse Maria receives from Darrel, and against the advice of her friends, Maria has agreed to travel with him and their new baby, Lisa, to Vancouver, the first city Maria has ever seen.

Having dreamt throughout her childhood of a prosperity she believes is inherent in urban settings, Maria hails Vancouver with excitement akin to a nineteenth-century travel writer viewing a new land for the first time:

> Vancouver! It was raining when we arrived. The city was beyond my wildest imagination! It seemed to go on without end. As we drove along in the cab, I pressed my face against the window and drank in everything around me…. The people all looked rich and well-fed. The store windows were full of beautiful displays, lots of food, clothes and all the things a person could possibly need to be happy.
>
> I sat back and thought, "Maybe it's possible to bring the kids here, where everything will be clean and good for them." (114)

Although Maria suspects that Darrel intends to leave her soon, she nonetheless manufactures hope, however briefly, as her romantic visions of city life are momentarily confirmed. As the taxi proceeds toward their apartment through the increasingly dilapidated cityscape, however, this hope falls away again. She recalls,

> My childhood dreams of toothbrushes and pretty dresses, oranges and apples, and a happy family sitting around the kitchen table talking about their tomorrow came to an abrupt

> end as I looked out of the window again and saw that we were now in an older part of the city. The buildings kept getting dirtier and dirtier. I had lived in poverty and seen decay but nothing like what surrounded me now.
>
> The cab pulled up in front of a grimy old apartment block and as Darrel paid the driver I looked about. The street was filthy and I shivered and felt sick as I saw the people who were there. They looked poorer than anyone I'd seen at home; there were drunks, and men who walked aimlessly and seemed not to see anything or anyone; women who appeared as though they had endured so much ugliness that nothing could upset them; and pale, skinny, raggedy kids with big, unfeeling eyes who looked so unloved and neglected. Small as they were, they were frightening. (114)

Maria's suggestion that witnessing "ugliness" can mark a human being's own appearance is particularly poignant given both the ugliness she has endured in her life to this point and her distress at the "grimy" appearance of her new neighbourhood with its correspondingly sickening and "frightening" inhabitants. This brief description of Vancouver thus communicates a clear sense that the evolution of Maria's character throughout her time in Vancouver may not be particularly positive. And with the end of her dreams of a united family comes a sense of futurelessness in this cityscape.

Thus begins one of the darkest periods of Maria's already fraught existence. Her claims that her family's impoverished life in Saskatchewan differs significantly from the poverty she sees on Vancouver's dirty streets initially reinforce cross-cultural stereotypes of urban pollution and degeneracy and healthier or cleaner rural life. In the next three chapters of the book, however, Campbell explores the effects of a number of collapsing binary systems in Maria's world: stereotyped or traditional common sense beliefs about the oppositional relationships between urban and rural, wealth and poverty, criminal and legitimate business. In this way, Maria's life on the urban margins parallels her marginalized existence in the countryside. Later, although she struggles to leave the city in search of the elusive "happiness and beauty [she] had known as a child," she cannot find this home again, anywhere (8). For when she finally returns home, she finds even more alcoholism, spousal and child abuse, and poverty than she remembers.

Initially, the difficulty of Maria's life in Vancouver rivals the constant struggle of her life in the countryside, but without the community and family life that made such poverty and desperation bearable. Maria's new

neighbours in her dilapidated Vancouver apartment building can barely bring themselves to communicate. She describes the awkward time she spends waiting to use the shared bathroom on their floor: "The most rejected looking people would be waiting their turns with me. Some tried to be friendly but mostly they were so lost in a world of their own that I doubt if they even saw me. I wondered, as I waited, whether any of them had parents who loved them, or if they had ever laughed, or loved, or hated" (115). Thus, in Vancouver, Maria moves through what seems to her to be a graveyard of broken dreams from which she repeatedly tries to escape.

Sex work and life in the city are by no means culturally, economically, or emotionally emancipatory for Maria. What description this much-edited section of Campbell's text provides of Maria's experiences in the sex trade makes Maria's agency very clear in these circumstances, framing her sex work as self-exploitation in which she chooses to participate. Subsequently, even as Maria's prostitution traumatizes her and facilitates the development of her drug addiction, she appears for the most part to be making the best of a very bad situation. Although the chance to support herself and her child through sex work is one that Maria feels she cannot pass up, after she services her first trick at Lil's house, she recalls, "I lost something that afternoon. Something inside of me died. Life had played such a joke. I had married to escape from what I'd thought was an ugly world, only to find a worse one" (116). The choices Maria makes from this point onward become the only decisions she can imagine taking, as her life circumstances worsen.

Maria's city life thus simultaneously destroys her dreams for the future and gives her a future anyway. And the relationships she develops with key figures who live, as she does during her time in Vancouver, outside of mainstream society and the law, are some of the most sympathetic and supportive ones she experiences away from her family. Through Lil and Ray, Maria manages to save herself and her daughter from the hopelessness and lack of future with which she is initially threatened in Vancouver. The conversation Maria has with Lil is the first one she enjoys in Vancouver. She recalls, "I liked Lil immediately and we talked about all sorts of things—books, clothes and Lisa" (133). Maria also confides in Lil, describing their meeting as the beginning of a friendship, not a business relationship: "I told her how miserable and disappointed I felt about our life in the city. Before we left she gave me her phone number and we agreed to get together some day soon" (133). The business aspect of this new relationship emerges almost immediately, however, as Maria first explains

exactly how broke and alone she is before she resorts to calling Lil for the first time: "After about a week, I knew [Darrel] wasn't ever coming back and I was in a panic. I was back to no money, no groceries, the rent was due and I had no one to turn to. Then I remembered Lil" (133).

The description that follows dispels any expectation that Maria remembers Lil as a friend to whom she may go for advice. Maria explains, "I could say at this point that I was innocent and had no idea what I was getting into. I have even tried to make myself believe this but that would be lying. I did know. I guess I knew from the moment I picked up the phone and called her" (133). Thus Maria's first friend in the city becomes her first boss, or Madame, as Lil finds a convent where Lisa can stay temporarily, gives Maria a makeover and a new wardrobe, and installs her in a room in the house, or brothel, from which she runs her business.

Maria claims responsibility for each of the choices she makes during this period in her life. Her story thus directly challenges archetypal "fallen woman" narrative arcs and completely undercuts the dichotomous relationship critics such as Kim Anderson, Sarah Carter, and Terry Goldie identify between the "Indian maiden" and the "unattractive squaw."[15] Maria occupies each of these roles briefly but ultimately resists any such clear characterization. Although sex work, however well paid, traumatizes Maria, the arrangements she makes with Lil initially protect both Maria and her daughter in ways that her marriage does not. The nuns who care for Lisa are "gentle and kind and [Maria knows] she'd be safe with them" (134). Lil takes care of Maria as best she can, given the nature of the work and Maria's unhappiness in prostitution. Despite the isolation Maria recalls between the other women in the house, she also notes, "Lil arranged it so my clientele consisted of older, mature men who thought nothing of spending a small fortune. She was an unusual woman. She was kind in her own way, and I got along well with her" (134). Thus Maria remembers Lil as a business woman who offers her a way out—however repugnant Maria finds it—of a desperate situation. And while Maria continues to

15 Anderson discusses the emergence and subsequent disintegration of virginal Indian princess imagery that connects the unexplored wilderness with North American Aboriginal womanhood in colonial narratives. However, "once Indigenous peoples began to resist colonization […] in the Americas the squaw emerged" (102). Carter discusses the subsequent promotion of dirty squaw imagery in mainstream pre-Confederation Canadian culture, examining how this powerful archetype facilitated the violent oppression of Aboriginal populations, and particularly Aboriginal women, during this period and beyond (160–93). Goldie observes a similar pattern of gendered racial violence in colonial representations of race and womanhood in literature.

describe the people she meets in Vancouver as "Lil's girls" (136) or people she has met at Lil's house, Lil herself remains a sympathetic character in Maria's life story.

This sympathetic portrayal of Lil and Maria's relationship significantly separates the circumstances of Maria's survival sex work from the depth of the sorrow she tries very hard not to feel during this period. As the young woman in the next room at Lil's cries herself to sleep each night, Maria cannot go to her: "[I]t was impossible," she recalls, "I knew, during all that time in Vancouver, that if I shed even one tear, I would fall apart and be finished. I felt that I'd never be able to pull myself together again so I would try to shut out the sounds of her weeping" (135). Maria's description of the relative freedom she experiences after trying some of the pills to which she is introduced at Lil's reveals the source of her sorrow, or what Derry and others term Maria's "degradation," to be not her prostitution in particular but the hopelessness she feels because of her inability to help her family or to achieve the dreams she chases into the city: "[The pills] helped me to sleep, they kept me happy, and most of all, I could forget about yesterday and tomorrow" (136). Too long the desperate provider and failing young mother haunted by past losses and responsible for the respective futures of her father's and then her own children, Maria takes pills and then heroin to free herself from the cycles of hope and despair that have brought her to this point in her life. Without a yesterday from which to recover and no tomorrow for which to plan, moments of happiness and sleep uninhibited by day-to-day worries become, however briefly, possibilities in Maria's life. As a heroin addict, Maria begins another descent into desperate poverty and spiritual neediness. Ironically, she manages—for a short time at least—to support both herself and her daughter during this period even as she tries to escape such responsibilities.

Given the uniform facelessness of the very poor and very powerful to this point in the urban chapters of Maria's life, those characters whose names are included are all the more remarkable. Ray, the influential businessman who encourages Maria to get straightened out and introduces her to the elderly woman who helps her get through heroin withdrawal, is also a well-connected criminal. Maria remembers his kindness to her as well as his sometimes violent dealings with others, noting that this man who occasionally orders the breaking of someone's arms and legs also takes her to parties where she meets "many government people as well as the businessmen [she'd] met before" (140). But Maria remembers no threats in her relationship with Ray. In fact, the only demand he makes of her is that she stop taking heroin if she wishes to continue seeing him, and this

demand is accompanied by concerted—and successful—efforts to help her to clean up, get her child back, and even move away from Vancouver.

Campbell portrays Ray as carefully as she portrays Lil, highlighting his criminal activities but also emphasizing his kindness in comparison to the selfishness of the influential Vancouver man, referred to only as Mr —, for whom Maria briefly becomes a mistress. Such contrasting depictions of characters like Lil or Ray and Mr — or his friends erode divisions between criminal and legitimate citizens in Maria's Vancouver. In fact, Lil, Ray, and Maria herself, the more overtly criminal characters, come to seem more legitimately human or humane alongside Mr —, whose concern for Maria's well-being, like that of the welfare officials, teachers, and RCMP officers who target Maria's family in her youth, is revealed as cold, even inhumane, and more detrimental than the circumstances into which he intervenes. Unlike Darrel and the welfare people, Ray recognizes and helps Maria to meet her needs and the needs of her child.

And once again readers glimpse the depth of Maria's cultural isolation as well as her desolation at the loss of her siblings.

During one of her initial unsuccessful attempts to leave her Vancouver life, Maria finds herself alone in Mexico. As she hitchhikes back, a group of Indigenous people in Arizona invite her to stay with them. Demonstrating the extent to which Maria identifies with the culture, traditional social structures, and cultural outsider status of Indigenous people, when Maria leaves the Arizona Natives, she compares them to her own people. The grandmother, who, Maria says, "could easily have been [her] Cheechum" (143), gives her a few dollars for food, and Maria considers for the first time since leaving home how difficult it is for her to stay away from her people, to live on her own and be responsible for no one but herself. Staying away to this point, she says, has been a survival strategy. And once again readers glimpse the depth of Maria's cultural isolation as well as her desolation at the loss of her siblings. She explains how being responsible for others, having to care for others and share responsibility for their fates as well as her own, and the seemingly inevitable losses that accompany such community living, would affect her now: "I knew that as long as I stayed away I would somehow always survive, because I didn't have to feel guilty about taking from white people. With my own people I would have to share. I couldn't survive if I worried about someone else" (143). Thus she continues to deny her desire, or need, for family, for a specifically rural community of Aboriginal people, and for home.

Afterward, upon reaching Vancouver again, a city where she knows at least one way to make a living, Maria begins to blame the Aboriginal men she sees there, men whose circumstances rival her own in terms of desperation, substance abuse, and poverty, for the tragedies of her life

and for the lack of education and the poverty that have pushed her to this point. Conceivably recalling her father's desolation and the subsequent erosion of their family life after the Métis political movement in which he had once been involved had failed, Maria says, "The drunken Indian men I saw would fill me with a blinding hatred; I blamed them for what had happened to me [...] and for all the girls who were on the city streets. If they had only fought back, instead of giving up, these things would never have happened.[...] I hated our men, and yet I loved them" (143–44). But even while she begins what she calls a "really down and out" existence in Vancouver (144), returning to heroin addiction and survival sex work, and living from one fix to the next with Trapper, another addict who beats her, it is the presence of these other Aboriginal people around her that consistently reminds her of her Cheechum.

This time Maria makes her own arrangements for kicking heroin, feeling that her Cheechum is with her throughout the hellish withdrawal period. And when she is clean again, she calls Ray, who picks her up and nurses her back to health, despite his own impending arrest. He also picks Lisa up from the convent, pays the balance owing on her room and board, then makes arrangements for Maria to work as a cook on an Alberta ranch.

Maria experiences severe losses wherever she goes, and the evolution of her thoughts and feelings—or lack thereof—about her future simultaneously reflects these tragedies and signals the dissolution of traditional cultural images of city and country life in Campbell's text. Poignantly commenting on the price she has paid for the decisions she has made in her life to this point in pursuit of what she retrospectively considers "symbols of white ideals and success," Maria says, "I feel an overwhelming compassion and understanding for another human being caught in a situation where the way out is so obvious to others but not to him. Dreams are so important in one's life, yet when followed blindly they can lead to the disintegration of one's soul" (116).

As Maria's feelings of failure when the kids are taken away from her indicate, her expectations for herself are impossibly high. This recognizable pattern, in concert with Maria's earnest selflessness throughout her youth and early adolescence and the cumulative influences on her life of systemic racism and cultural abuse, lead readers to interpret Maria's successes and failures differently than she does. Initially marginalized in her home community because of her race, and isolated and persecuted because of her poverty, Maria's efforts to better her situation in the city leave her feeling even more marginalized and isolated from whatever com-

munity she had as a child. Her desolation becomes a tragic inevitability given the course of her life thus far, and her disillusionment is a direct result of her liminal cultural and social status. Thus dreams, in Maria's story, fade and disappear. However, although she encounters more terrible losses after leaving Vancouver, Maria's very survival in Vancouver, the city of her lost dreams, inspires hope and speaks to the strength of the lessons she learns from her Cheechum in her childhood. She survives because, thanks to her Cheechum's refusal to allow Maria to hate her own people, she has happy memories and a desire for the community she has known from which to draw hope during her time as an illegal drug addict and survival sex worker in the city.

In Maria's narration, sex work and other criminal activities become not marginalized, exceptional, or vilified elements of Canadian urban culture but, rather, inevitable, even natural developments stemming from the misogynistic, racist, and colonial dominant hegemonic order. Maria's criminal consorts are, she implies, government leaders and captains of industry, the very people who, in real Canadian contexts, currently support and enforce the laws that both separate and draw together (in increasingly unequal relationships) the culturally and politically powerful and the racialized, criminalized poor. In suggesting that she operates, during her time in Vancouver, from the very centre of contemporary culture, Campbell's narrative insists that sex work and addiction constitute viable responses to her difficult life circumstances. In this context, the violence Maria and others like her suffer becomes not random inexplicable acts for which exceptional, culturally marginalized persons are responsible but, rather, inevitable expressions of the violent, racist, misogynistic cultural centre.

Campbell's text offers brief but painful records of intoxicated men, Métis and white, beating and raping women outside the bars in her home town, of blank-eyed children and hopeless men and women, Aboriginal and white, in Vancouver; and of her own body, cut and bruised from numerous beatings from Trapper and "anyone else who felt like beating [her]" (144). Next to, for example, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's documentary-like, detailed descriptions of similarly haunting moments of violence and despair in her novel, *In Search of April Raintree*, however, Campbell's treatment of such images is akin to a montage. The narrative of Maria's life thus focuses on the steps she takes, personally and later politically, to save herself and her people from violence, degradation, and hopelessness. For example, a clear and detailed recollection of Maria's agency in leaving Trapper, her addiction, and her street life behind immediately follows her

two-sentence recollection of her running sores and layers of bruises from the beatings he administers.

Halfbreed thus works to foreground survival sex work as a symptom rather than the cause of Maria's cultural marginalization, impoverishment, and subsequent social isolation. While her work at Lil's and on the streets of Vancouver clearly hurts Maria physically and spiritually, her story foregrounds not an anti-prostitution agenda but, rather, a pro-urban Aboriginal community mission. About the Indian men she once despised on the streets of Vancouver, Maria comes to believe that blaming them for their plight ignores the complicated series of socio-political forces that produce their obvious hopelessness. As Maria records in chapter twenty-three, "I realize now that the system that fucked me up fucked up our men even worse. The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that women were a source of evil. This belief, combined with the ancient Indian recognition of the power of women, is still holding back the progress of our people today" (144). In these closing chapters, Maria thus describes the uphill battle she fights to establish support networks for urban Aboriginal women, especially those who live and work on inner-city streets. Struggling to make her concerns heard in a variety of social and political settings, she finds that Indigenous women must fight harder than Indigenous men to find the supportive communities they need. As Maria explains, the racist patriarchal colonial forces that "fucked up" Aboriginal men have even more negative consequences for Aboriginal women:

Struggling to make her concerns heard in a variety of social and political settings, she finds that Indigenous women must fight harder than Indigenous men to find the supportive communities they need.

> At one meeting I talked to the AA group about a halfway house for women. I expounded at great length that there were soup kitchens, flop houses and hostels for men throughout Canada. Furthermore, society didn't deal with men on the street as harshly as it did with women. One of the male members said that my problem was that I hated men and that probably what I needed was a good lay. I got so mad and frustrated I walked out. (151)

Ultimately, then, for Maria the force to be reckoned with by people like her is a culture-wide racism that marginalizes, physically and spiritually brutalizes, and ultimately limits the personal and communal agency of Indigenous people.

In conclusion, I return to the disparate views of sex work—survival or otherwise—taken by sex worker and Aboriginal activists. Is sex work synonymous with slavery, rape, and violence, especially for Aboriginal women, as NWAC's Terri Brown once argued? Canada's violent colonial history and continuing racism too often place Métis, Inuit, First Nations,

and other descendents of First Peoples in the bottom levels of urban social and geographical hierarchies. In these cultural contexts, are legal protections and human rights for sex workers enough? If colonization—both its political legacy and its everyday racism and sexual violence—contributes to a woman's impoverishment, fuels her need for drugs or alcohol, and significantly increases her chances of becoming a victim of extreme misogynistic, racist, and sexual violence, can her participation in the survival sex trade be considered the same necessary choice—and expression of personal agency, however limited—as that of a poor white woman who chooses the same?

In Campbell's narrative, an Aboriginal survival sex worker and regularly sexually exploited woman becomes not a pivotal signifier of the degradation that is prostitution but, rather, a street fighter whose daily struggles to survive illustrate the pervasive effects of colonial racism and cultural misogyny. How might this relatively unique approach to Indigenous street-level sex work translate into real world activist contexts? How might we make room for women's agency, even in the survival sex trade, *and* take into account the ways our colonial history and its ongoing legacy of racist misogyny limit the personal and professional choices of Indigenous women in the survival sex trade? Might Indigenous sex workers suffer more if their means of survival is denigrated by Aboriginal and other social justice and urban outreach groups? How do Aboriginal street-involved and survival sex workers benefit from assertions that their work, in and of itself, constitutes a particularly repugnant form of violence against women?

Might a marriage of anti-poverty, anti-racism, anti-violence, and anti-stigma activism be more effective in terms of acknowledging the personhood, the presence, the agency, and the culturally marginalizing forces that define Aboriginal as well as other sex workers, survival or otherwise? Sex workers, especially Indigenous women in the industry, continue to disappear; inner-city sex workers, especially Indigenous women in the industry, continue to be assaulted, mutilated, murdered, or otherwise disappeared in greater and greater numbers. How many more deaths do we facilitate by incorporating the forces largely responsible for the murders of so many racialized and marginalized persons into social mobilization that struggles to resist these same forces?

Campbell's text illustrates the necessity of reading, explaining, undercutting, and struggling against stereotypes of the abject or anachronistic Aboriginal body in the city. By engaging with this text in its entirety, acknowledging the difficult and pervasive stereotypes it tackles, we begin

to recognize the significant effort of the narrator in this and other such stories to humanize and to illustrate the personhood and admirable personal agency of those women contemporary culture too often dismisses as abject, even deserving victims. It is especially important to consider the suffering sex worker body in literature like Campbell's, a text that does not shrink from examining both the truths and the fallacies connected with the harshest and most culturally pervasive stereotypes of Aboriginal womanhood. *Halfbreed* does not suggest that images of assaulted, raped, suffering, addicted, and degraded Aboriginal people—especially women—are new. Rather, it insists that readers and social justice activists look again at these abject stereotypes and that we work to understand as well as resist the cultural forces that create such suffering and hopelessness.

In addition, Campbell writes the city as a space of potential resistance, of emerging community, and of life. But death is everywhere, and acknowledging and building up urban communities are important means of preventing more violent death, despair, and degradation. Particularly at a time when political mobilization is happening in Aboriginal and other communities to resist the systemic cultural forces that have produced cases like those of the so-called Missing and Murdered Women of Vancouver, as well as the more than five hundred underinvestigated disappearances of Aboriginal women across the country recorded by Amnesty International and confirmed by Sisters in Spirit,[16] it is important to foreground connections between cultural structures, social justice movements, and the plight of those who live under state control but not state protection.

16 In their 2004 report, *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*, Amnesty International condemns the Canadian government for its inaction on these cases. In her presentation for NWAC at August 2008 Missing Women Conference in Regina, Judy Hughes, a spokesperson for Sisters in Spirit, a research initiative developed in response to *Stolen Sisters*, confirmed this statistic. Sisters in Spirit's research is ongoing, however, and Hughes indicated that there were a number of additional missing women cases to be investigated by researchers in the coming months.

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