

Changing 'Forms' in Theory and Practice:
A case study of Contemporary Social Movement and Vancouver's Missing
Women

by

Katrina Chapelas
B.A., University of British Columbia, 2005

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly implied within currents of so-called 'post-structural' or 'post-modern' theory is a particular conception of how to pursue social and political change based on seeking out and encouraging more flexible and heterogeneous epistemological categories and modes of action. This paper develops and explores this conception of change through bringing together theoretical threads, particularly the work of Alberto Melucci on Contemporary Social Movements, with empirical, specifically the political actions taken in response to the disappearances of women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

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Dedication:

In many ways, what follows is about representations, about social hierarchies, and undertaking political action and change. It is about the ways we assign meanings and value to people; and, it is about the forms of our dominant structures and codes.

It is also about a group of women who went missing in Vancouver, some of whom have been confirmed murdered. It is about the political actions undertaken by friends, family and other advocates of the women who invested their time and emotions into forcing government and the general public to acknowledge these disappearances.

However, the women and the efforts of their advocates sometimes take on a rather abstract quality in my work. When talking about the 'event' of the disappearances as framed in this or that type of way—or as an example of such and such a theory—it is easy to lose the women themselves all over again. It is also easy to critique action, but not necessarily to take it.

I want to preface my thesis, then, by recognizing the efforts and struggles of the missing women's advocates in all their forms, and by honoring Vancouver's missing women.

In Memoriam and with Respect

Lillian Jean O'Dare ~ Sherry Rail ~ Rebecca Guno ~ Marlene Abigosis

Laura Mah ~ SHERYL DONAHUE ~ Elaine Allenbach ~ *Taressa Williams*

Ingrid Soet ~ Elaine Dumba ~ Nancy Clark ~ Kathleen Wattley

Elsie Sebastian ~ TERESA TRIFF ~ Leigh Miner ~ Gloria Fedyshyn

Sherry Baker ~ Angela Arseneault ~ Dorothy Spence ~ Diana Melnick ~ Catherine Knight

Catherine Gonzalez ~ *Frances Young* ~ Olivia William ~ Tanya Holyk

SHARON WARD ~ Jacqueline Murdock ~ Richard 'Kellie' Little

Stephanie Lane ~ *Marie Laliberte* ~ Sherry Irving ~ *Janet Henry*

Ruby Hardy ~ Helen Hallmark ~ Marnie Frey ~ *Cynthia Feliks* ~ Cara Ellis

Andrea Borhaven ~ CINDY BECK ~ Julie Young ~ TAMIA PETERSEN

Kerry Koski ~ *Angela Jardine* ~ Inga Hall ~ *Michelle Gurney* ~ *Sheila Egan*

Sarah de Vries ~ Marcella Creison ~ *Brenda Wolfe* ~ Georgina Papin

Jacqueline McDonell ~ Jennifer Fuminger ~ Wendy Crawford

DEBRA JONES ~ *Tiffany Drew* ~ DAWN CREY ~ Sharon Abraham

Mona Wilson ~ Dianne Rock ~ Patricia Johnson ~ *Andrea Joesbury*

Heather Chinnock ~ Heather Bottomley ~ Yvonne Boen ~ Sereena Abotsway

Jane Doe

Introduction:

There is a trend in contemporary social and political theory, often associated with 'post-structuralism', towards portraying change as a matter of pushing the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems and codes so as to modify what it is possible to conceive and enact. Pursuing change, in this sense, does not concern envisioning alternative futures; nor does it concern the development of a set of goals and a strategic plan of action to achieve them. Rather, it is about our rationalities and modes of representation; it is about seeking out and encouraging physical and conceptual sites which might allow us to modify our realm of possibility. This conception of change is often developed, both implicitly and explicitly, in theory and abstraction, yet it is rarely applied to our specific and empirical undertakings in the world. In this thesis, therefore, I endeavour to do exactly that: to examine what I am calling (for lack of a better term) the 'post-structural' conception of change together with a specific attempt to pursue change—the political actions taken in response to the disappearance of close to seventy women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. This undertaking is framed by two guiding questions. It explores what a 'post-structural' conception of change suggests about undertaking action, particularly collective action, and whether the 'event' of Vancouver's missing women might provide a space to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise.

This thesis, then, is about the intertwining of empirical and theoretical threads and it consists of four interrelated chapters or, perhaps more accurately, four interrelated layers. Each of these layers explores common themes of action, meaning, social construction and systemic limitations, but each in a different way. Chapter One introduces the disappearances of the women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) through two ways the 'event' of the disappearances has been represented: the 'missing' women's frame and the 'murdered' women's frame. In this section, I draw out some of the normative understandings about women's identity animating narratives on the disappearances, and also a series of issues concerning the interrelationship of definition, action and change evoked through this 'event'. In Chapter Two, I construct something of a 'narrative collage' of currents within the so-called post-structural or post-modern 'turn' concerning the implications of social construction and the boundaries and limits of our systems, structures, and codes. The conception of change implied in this mode of theorizing, I suggest, has significant implications for thinking through the issues of definition and action raised by the DTES disappearances.

The second half of this thesis forms something of a case study of the 'post-structural' conception of change, focussing specifically on social movement. In Chapter Three I outline the work of Alberto Melucci on contemporary social movements as a particular example of the mode of theorizing introduced in Chapter Two. His theory is particularly pertinent to the issues I explore, as he is directly concerned with the convergence of social construction, social movement action and identity. For Melucci, it is these contemporary social movements which should be understood as a privileged site for undertaking change—as a site where there is the space to act and conceive otherwise.

In Chapter Four, I return to Vancouver's 'missing women' and the political actions undertaken in response to their disappearances. I analyze how these actions do and do not reflect Melucci's conception of the role and form of social movements and what they suggest about the utility of the 'post-structural' conception of change when it is taken up together with a specific 'event'.

My project is deliberately circular—that is, its parts refer back to one another. I juxtapose the work of Alberto Melucci, as an example of a certain kind of theorizing, with the political actions undertaken in response to Vancouver's 'missing women' in order to explore both what Melucci's way of conceiving contemporary social movements suggests about the political actions and what the political actions, in turn, suggest about the abstract conception of change developed by Melucci and 'post-structuralism.' I do not want simply to apply abstract and theoretical conceptions to 'actual' events, but rather to bring them into conversation: to bring about 'play' between the two. In this way, and to echo Melucci, the circular form of my project "implies a methodological attitude": an emphasis on reflexivity rather than linearity, on contingency rather than definitiveness (Melucci 1998b 487).

* * *

Before turning to Chapter One, however, I want to briefly outline the method I employ to explore the 'event' of the missing women and to clarify my use of two re-occurring terms in this paper: 'identity' and the 'system'.

My analysis of the 'event' is based on a heterogeneous range of popular and scholarly sources. In terms of the former, I have undertaken a comprehensive review of the news stories on the disappearances archived on the website *missingpeople.com*. The stories represent a wide range of media sources and span the years 1997 to 2008. Regarding the latter, I draw primarily on Beverly Pitman's, and Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young's analyses of media stories on the missing women and the work on memorialization undertaken by the Cultural Memory Group. I also supplement these sources with a range of other media stories, academic articles, reports and books touching on the missing women.

My analysis does not delve into the historical or sociological constitution of the issues and concerns I explore. This is not because my project is meant as a negation of, or alternative to, these avenues of exploration, but rather because I hope to provide an analysis which supplements them. In discussing the 'event' of the missing women, I make reference to a set of widely accepted normative assumptions regarding identity, value, power and space—assumptions produced and maintained through particular material and cultural conditions. These normative assumptions cannot be separated from this embedded location: specifically, in terms of this paper, the position of Indigenous women in Canada cannot be understood without reference to Canada's colonial history, prostitution without evoking a context of inequality based on gender, and indeed the 'event' of the missing women without the acknowledgment of the reality of material inequality and the role of our social structures in producing this inequality. What I hope explore in this thesis, however, is less the construction and constitution of this set of

assumptions and more their relationship to political action and the strategies we use to pursue change.

Regarding my use of terms, I take 'identity' to signify the interconnected array of meanings, values and powers attached to people. I do not understand it as something static, that one is born into, but rather as a fluid system of individual and collective meanings. This, however, is not to say that our identities are something that we can always change or control. As for the 'system', I use the concept in two interrelated ways. First and foremost, it signals our hegemonic rationalities and modes of perception; it signals our dominant orders and codes. Yet, when speaking of the 'event' of Vancouver's 'missing women', I use the term to refer to a collection of institutional and regulatory bodies, particularly the Vancouver Police Department, the City of Vancouver, and the provincial and federal governments. These bodies, in many ways however, represent and express our dominant rationalities and orders and accordingly, I also refer to them as the 'system.'

* * *

Framing the 'Event': Vancouver's 'Missing' and 'Murdered' Women

*Woman's body found beaten beyond recognition.
You sip your coffee
Taking a drag on your smoke
Turning the page*

Sarah de Vries

Over the course of almost two decades, close to seventy women have gone missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Nearing the end of the second decade, the women began to be understood as a group, and the 'event' of their disappearances became a part of general civic consciousness. The women, and the circumstances surrounding their collective disappearances, have been represented in many ways within the public domain, and these representations tell a story, or rather a number of stories, about definition and action. The disappearances raise issues of identity—of the meanings and significance attached to people—and its implication in systemic boundaries and limits: they raise concerns regarding what kinds of identities are compatible with systemic organizations and with systemic action. Moreover, many interpretations of the 'event' of the disappearances imply that the construction of identity is an important terrain of political action.

To introduce the 'event' of the disappearances and to illustrate its entanglement with processes of identity and action, I will trace out two ways the disappearances have

been framed.¹ As the women first began to enter public consciousness, they were understood through a frame representing them as ‘missing’: a frame shaped by the transformation of the disappearances into general public knowledge—into an ‘event’. In many ways, this frame was produced through the efforts of friends and families of the women, along with community workers and activists from the Downtown Eastside, to convince the police and the public to acknowledge the disappearances and recognize the women as a group. Seen through this frame, the disappearances are characterized by ambiguity, inaction and open questions. In 2002, following a breakthrough in the investigation of the disappearances, the women began to be understood as ‘murdered’. This second way of framing the ‘event’ is rather different—it is characterized by a certain kind of clarity, action and closure.

* * *

The ‘missing’ women’s frame emerged in the late 1990’s in conjunction with publicity regarding the disappearances—the label ‘missing’ began to be used by advocates of the women and in the media in stories profiling the women.² Doug Ward, a reporter for the Vancouver Sun suggests “‘missing women’ became a familiar phrase as reporters attempted to give the alarming statistics some humanity” (Ward).³ Similarly, Wayne Leng, a friend of Sarah deVries who was actively involved in advocating for the

¹ Frame “denotes ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective” (Snow 464).

² Some of the first stories on the ‘missing’ women, using the phrase missing women, were written by Lindsay Kines of the Vancouver Sun. He began writing about the ‘missing women’ in 1997 (de Vries 191).

³ Citations with no page numbers are from internet sources without pages numbers.

women, says “we use the phrase “missing women” in Vancouver, we don’t say prostitutes . . . we say missing women. Because that is what they were, first and foremost they were human beings” (Missing Pieces).

Yet the ‘missing’ women’s frame is about more than the assertion of the women’s humanity. In many ways, it is inseparable from ambiguity. Beyond the semantic uncertainty implied by the term ‘missing’, even the exact number of women, and when they began to disappear, is somewhat unclear (Laurence). The number of women represented in the designation ‘missing women’ has fluctuated over the years, both as new cases were discovered and as the criteria of those included within the group were redefined (Koepke).⁴ Moreover, this frame is not simply about a number of unresolved missing persons cases. It is partially a construct of the significant gap between the period

⁴ According to the most recent official police poster, there are 68 ‘missing women’. The earliest case included is that of Lillian Jean O’Dare who was last seen in 1978. Prior to 2001, the police refused to publicly and officially consider a link between the unresolved cases of women who disappeared from the DTES asserting that the women had simply moved on without telling anyone—something they suggested was quite common for women who lead such ‘high-risk’ lifestyles (de Vries 220, Phillips 1999a). They further suggested that there were no more than a handful of unresolved missing persons cases in Vancouver. Family, friends, and community workers from the DTES argued to the contrary that many of the women routinely checked in and that their silences were usual. In 1999, in response to growing public pressure, Vancouver Police Department put out the first missing women’s poster, the first ‘official’ list of ‘missing women’. The release of the poster was the first time the police publicly alluded to a link between the women, though it was not until 2001 that VPD publicly suggested that the cases could be connected. (deVries 220) In the following years, the number of cases included increased on numerous occasions. In 2001, for example, journalists Lindsey Kines, Kim Bolan, and Lori Colbert compiled a list of 45 missing women’s cases from the DTES as opposed to the 27 on the official police list. The ‘official’ list was expanded shortly thereafter (Jiwani and Young 903).

The official ‘missing women’ are: Lillian Jean O’Dare, Sherry Rail, Rebecca Guno, Marlene Abigosis, Laura Mah, Sheryl Donahue, Elaine Allenbach, Taressa Williams, Ingrid Soet, Elaine Dumba, Nancy Clark, Kathleen Wattley, Elsie Sebastian, Teresa Triff, Leigh Miner, Gloria Fedyshyn, Sherry Baker, Angela Arsenault, Dorothy Spence, Diane Melnick, Catherine Knight, Catherine Gonzalez, Frances Young, Olivia William, Tanya Holyk, Sharon Ward, Jacqueline Murdock, Richard ‘Kellie’ Little, Stephanie Lane, Marie Laliberte, Sherry Irving, Janet Henry, Ruby Hardy, Helen Hallmark, Marnie Frey, Cynthia Feliks, Cara Ellis, Andrea Bohaven Cindy Beck, Julie Young, Tania Peterson, Kerry Koski, Angela Jardine, Inga Hall, Michelle Gurney, Sheila Egan, Sarah DeVries, Marcella Creison, Brenda Wolf, Georgina Papin, Jacqueline McDonell, Jennifer Fuminger, Wendy Crawford, Debra Jones, Tiffany Drew, Dawn Crey Sharon Abraham, Mona Wilson, Diane Rock, Patricia Johnson, Andrea Joesbury, Heather Chinook, Heather Bottemley, Yvonne Boen and Sereena Abotsway,

when women began to disappear and the period when their disappearances became a part of public consciousness.

Though the women started to go missing in the late 1970's (according to the 'official' police list), the cases drew little consideration or attention from the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) and the general public outside of the Downtown Eastside for nearly twenty years. In the late 1990's, family and friends of the women began to act together with DTES community activists and a few members of the media to demand attention and action from the government, the police and the public (Pitman 174-75).⁵ It was during this period of action that public and systemic awareness of the disappearances began to spread—that the women began to be recognized as a group and portrayed as *the* 'missing' women.

As nearly twenty years of societal and systemic inattention and inaction implies, the 'missing' women's frame evokes a series of troubling narratives and social tensions. In many ways, these narratives are inseparable from what are perhaps the most widely known and first publicized pieces of information regarding the women—their location in the Downtown Eastside and their 'deviant' characteristics.⁶ The 'missing' frame is animated by a set of pervasive (and readily acknowledged) normative assumptions regarding the women's identities and the space they inhabited.

The 'missing' women lived, worked, and were last seen in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The DTES is one of Vancouver's oldest, best known—by reputation—and most impoverished neighbourhoods, and it has a particular presence in

⁵ This period of action also corresponds to a period where increasing numbers of women were going missing.

⁶ The official VPD poster gives a brief list of each woman's physical characteristics and then offers these descriptors: "known drug addict and sex trade worker in the downtown eastside area."

the city's mythology (and within 'urban-shock journalism'). For many, the DTES is solely a zone of drugs, crime, prostitution, dirt and decay. Journalist Trevor Green describes it as a space where "the bars and shops are uniformly squalid, [and] the sun shines a little less brightly . . . the sidewalks are stained with blood, urine, vomit, broken teeth, hair, condoms, and cigarette butts" (Green 11, 1). The Downtown Eastside, then, is a place to avoid. Or perhaps to engage in voyeurism: a drive through the DTES to ogle the antics of crackheads and hookers offers a vicarious yet self-affirming thrill, provided the car doors are locked and the windows shut tight. If one is feeling more adventurous, however, the DTES is a space to dabble in danger and deviance: a dark, seedy netherworld where life is cheap, and the laws and moral codes of respectable society do not apply. It is the 'other' neighbourhood—Vancouver's 'sin city'.⁷ Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young sum it up this way:

not only are areas such as the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver created as degenerate zones . . . designed to demarcate degenerative bodies—those that society deems as being unwanted, unmissed, and ultimately disposable. More importantly these zones permit others to be defined as respectable (900).

The DTES, then, is a spectacle, morality tale, and an affirmation for those 'outside' of it.

The Downtown Eastside is also a zone of extreme poverty: the neighbourhood's median income is less than 30% of the city's, and more than two-thirds of the population

⁷ In contrast to 'sim' city – a sustainable urban area (Lees and Demeritt 1998). The DTES is also often contrasted to the 'natural' beauty of Vancouver, to the scenic beauty of the mountains, oceans, and trees. *America's Most Wanted's* introduction to its 1999 story on the missing women is a good example of this kind of discourse:

But finding a killer who preys on this type of target means getting inside a world that is dark and unforgiving. Vancouver's Eastside is the skid row of this seemingly picture perfect city. Women of the evening roam the streets searching for their next high—many believe their lives depend on common street drugs leading them on mind-numbing trips. They pay for their dope-induced journey with their bodies and sometimes with their lives. ("Prostitute Killer(s) America's Most Wanted")

fall within a particularly low income bracket (Community Report 14, Burk 319).⁸ As other parts the city—especially the downtown core—underwent gentrification, many who could no longer afford to live in such areas gravitated to the DTES, since a large proportion of the city’s remaining low-cost housing is located in the neighbourhood (Community Report 16). The inhabitants of Vancouver’s ‘other’, ‘deviant’ neighbourhood are primarily the poor. A significantly disproportionate number of DTES residents are also seniors, mentally ill or Indigenous (Community Report 10-14, Culcave 596). Yet despite, and in response to, the marginalization of the neighbourhood, a great many vibrant social networks have developed, along with a strong tradition of creative community mobilization and activism, specifically regarding issues of poverty, addiction, housing, development and gentrification (Burk 319).

Like the Downtown Eastside, much about the ‘missing’ women is also uncomfortable and somewhat ambiguous. The women led what the Vancouver Police Department termed ‘high-risk’ lifestyles: that is, they lived in the Downtown Eastside, did hard drugs and engaged in sex-work—primarily street level prostitution—to support their habits.⁹ Many of the women were also of indigenous descent.¹⁰ As Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young determined in their analysis of media coverage of the disappearances “the dominant filter in [the] early stories involves Aboriginality and deviant sexuality, along with police inadequacy and inefficiency.” (904). In this way, the ‘missing’ women’s frame evokes not simply a number of disappearances that were

⁸ The primary source of 40% of the population’s income is government transfers (Community Report)

⁹ I use the term ‘sex-work’ here loosely, not as an assertion that prostitution is a form of employment rather than a form of violence.

¹⁰ Again the exact number has fluctuated, partially, I suspect, as the result of the changing numbers of women included as ‘missing’, and also as a result of differing ways of determining what qualifies as Indigenous descent. The Cultural Memory Group suggests the numbers may be as high as 60% (207) other reports have suggested 40% (Amnesty International).

unresolved, but also the women's shared 'deviant' qualities, the controversial space they inhabited and the assertion that the disappearances received so little attention for so long *because* of these characteristics. After the disappearances began to be acknowledged, most commentators attributed the lack of public outcry, media attention and police investigation to a set of normative assumptions regarding the work the women engaged in, the lifestyles they led and their location in the Downtown Eastside. As Lisa Birnie put it in her *Globe and Mail* editorial:

So where are they? Does anyone—except their families and a few east-end social workers—care? What are the rest of us supposed to do, think or feel about these missing prostitutes? They stand on street corners in the rain with hardly anything on, they get into any van or car whose door opens as it cruises by. They do their business in some darkened corner or some grotty room where anything can happen. Many of them are drug users. It's scarcely surprising that when one of these women disappears many of us feel, along with a sense of decency and pity, a sense of smug affirmation about the stupidity of the risks they've taken. A reasonable reaction, enough to dampen outrage (Birnie).

Or as Bob Stall wrote in his article in *The Province*:

The reason we don't care very much is that these women were all residents of the downtown eastside and mostly prostitutes and drug addicts. We – in the persons of our elected officials and those they appoint to direct our police –would care a lot more if 20 women were snatched from homes in Kerrisdale . . . then we would be more likely to regard the victims as real people. Then we'd think of them as ourselves, our mothers, daughters and sisters (Stall).

'Drug-addicted hookers' and indigenous women in the DTES, it seems, do not evoke the same types of reactions and attention as other types of women in other parts of the city—something, as Birnie and Stall suggest, which does not surprise us, but with which we are perhaps not quite comfortable.

The 'missing' women trouble our dominant social discourses. This way of framing the disappearances alludes to an incongruity between our societal ideals and generally accepted social values—between the stated basis of our social order and normative assumptions upon which it functions. Claims that all citizens are worthy of

equal concern, respect, and protection before the law regardless of race, sex, income or lifestyle ring rather hollow in the face of close to twenty years of inattention and inaction regarding the disappearances of large numbers of women who lived in poverty, used drugs, engaged in street-level prostitution, and of whom a highly disproportionate number were of indigenous descent. And yet, that all citizens are not treated equally does not surprise us; that women from the Downtown Eastside are not treated equally and are more likely to experience violence does not surprise us. Indeed, narratives associated with the 'missing' women's frame take a hierarchy of identities and a general public consciousness of this hierarchy for granted (though not as something we like to talk about when we are trying to be 'politically correct'). What the 'missing' women's frame makes visible, however, is the discrepancy between our social ideals and the type of assumptions that suggest these women are 'less valuable' than most other members of society. It suggests our inconsistency and complicity in maintaining both.

Moreover, the 'missing' women also intimate a disparity between our different societal ideals. In something of a contrast to narratives emphasizing the equal value of human life, stories on the disappearances also invoke narratives emphasizing individual agency and choice—which essentially assert that each of us has the ability to make his/her own decisions and to determine his/her own lifestyle. These stories suggest that the 'missing' women *chose* their dangerous lifestyles, and that society as a whole, therefore, should not be held responsible for the bad choices of a few individuals. As Joyce Green notes “the white public knows there is no need to be concerned about [the] issues [raised by the women], for it believes (it is taught) that these women brought themselves into danger by “choosing their lifestyles” (10). Thus, a part of why the

'missing' women make us uncomfortable is that this manner of framing the 'event' brings out tensions between discourses asserting equal concern and respect for all human life and those asserting individual agency and responsibility. Again, it hints at our inconsistency in maintaining both while suggesting that this inconsistency may be rather advantageous for some of us.

The 'missing' women also prompt questions regarding our moral orders and the ways we understand people and undertake action. For Jiwani and Young, the 'missing' women emphasize that how we understand people is based on

a moral and racialized economy of representations works to privilege dominant social norms (whiteness, middle class values etc).¹¹ Within this economy, racialized status, such as Aboriginality, interlocks with prostitution to position these women in the lower echelon of the moral order (902).

In this way, we know and marginalize women living in the DTES and working in the sex-trade through their 'deviant' characteristics: they are visible—that is recognizable to the general public and compatible with system action—only as representatives of a 'delinquent' identity. They, as a 'deviant' body, require monitoring and policing, not care and police protection. The 'missing' women's frame, then, necessitates (at the very least) an acknowledgement of the types of normative assumptions underpinning how we as a society recognize and assign value to different kinds of women. It raises questions about how the missing women are defined, about 'good' and 'bad' types of women, and the relationship of these values and definitions with action.

The women framed as 'missing', suggest that something—in society, in our systems—is going wrong:

That so many prostitutes have gone missing suggests the system is broken. And what's more, it's flawed from top to bottom: from laws governing prostitution, to

¹¹ Brackets mine

social services available for prostitutes, to our attitude toward people who work or live on the street. ("Now it's time to deal with the prostitution problem" A10)

Yet as Maggie de Vries, the sister of Sarah de Vries, notes "People feel a sort of helpless guilt, and I feel it too, because what can we do?" (Koepke). The 'missing' women raise a series of uncomfortable questions that often seem to have no clear and immediate answers. What do the 'missing women' mean? How do we understand their 'deviant' characteristics? Do their disappearances represent a problem? What kind of problem? Is something or someone responsible? Responsible for what, exactly? And what, if anything, should be done regarding the disappearances? Through attempts to answer these questions, and to understand the disappearances and the kind of problem they represent, the 'missing women' have been linked to, and evoked as examples of, a heterogeneous and often intersecting constellation of issues including race, colonialism, sex, violence, prostitution, space, poverty, addiction, and individual, societal and systemic responsibility. Particularly the 'event' of the 'missing women' has been taken up in arguments regarding the disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination faced by indigenous women,¹² the ways prostitution is understood and addressed in Canada,¹³ and issues of addiction in the Downtown Eastside, particularly the need to provide more detoxification facilities and rehabilitation programs and to reserve more beds in these programs for women.¹⁴

¹² Approximately 500 Indigenous women have gone missing and been murdered in Canada in the last 20 years (Cultural Memory Group 14).

¹³ Many of these arguments focus on the somewhat precarious legal status of prostitution in Canada. The act of prostitution itself is not illegal in Canada but many of the activities associated with it are. It is illegal to 'communicate' for the purposes of solicitation, it is illegal to live 'off the avails of prostitution', and it is illegal to own or operate a 'common bawdy house'. Primarily, the enforcement of these laws is complaint-driven. (Lowman 2, Larsen 169).

¹⁴ Lori Colbert of the *Vanouwer Sun* reports that in 2007 there were an estimated 7000 addicts in the DTES. The Vancouver Coastal Health Authority funds 81 detoxification beds (41 are allocated for men, 22 for Youth, and 18 for women.) Culbert also records that it is four times harder for women to get into recovery

For all the issues and questions it raises, or because of the questions and issues it raises, the 'missing' women's frame is also associated with inadequate action—with a lack of systemic engagement and activity regarding the disappearances, even as awareness of the women began to spread. The women understood as 'missing' appear to have remained fairly incompatible with the system: that is they seem to represent problems to which state structures would not—perhaps in some ways could not—devote a significant amount of resources or become overly involved. A series of examples occurring in the late 1990's as the disappearances were gaining publicity emphasize this incompatibility.

In 1999, a DTES organization called Grandma's House initiated a program distributing cell phones to sex-trade workers engaged in street level prostitution. The phones, it was hoped, would provide the women with a way to get help in the eventuality of a 'bad date' and act as a deterrent to anyone seeking to harm the women. The phones were programmed only to call 911, in order ensure that they would not be pawned, used for personal calls or for conducting business (Hammell).

Initially, the Ministry of Women's Equality, a department of the provincial government, offered to provide a \$3000 grant to fund the program. The offer, however, triggered an eruption of criticism. Media coverage of the story cited a 'widespread' reaction against the project and the proposed government funding. Gordon Campbell, then the leader of the provincial opposition, captures the essence of the criticism in a quote in the Vancouver Province: "the project shows the [governing party] has their priorities all wrong: 'There's a lot of places I can think of to spend the money rather than

or treatments centres after they have detoxed, resulting in a far higher rate of relapse in women than in men (Culbert 2008).

on cell phones for prostitutes” (Tanner and Grindlay). Critics suggested the project was an unacceptable use for public funds, even if the phones might protect the women against assault and murder. After all, the women had ‘*chosen*’ to put themselves in dangerous situations, and moreover there was no ‘conclusive’ evidence the program would be effective. Terry Harrison of the Ministry of Women’s Equality acknowledged the underlying difficulty: “We’re dealing with a group in society who are not socially accepted and so anything that will help these individuals will obviously raise a few eyebrows” (“BC Government Defends Phones for Prostitutes”). As a result of the criticism, the offer of a government grant to fund the program was withdrawn, though the plan would eventually go ahead with the support of private donors (“British Columbia Will Not Buy Cell Phones For Prostitutes”).¹⁵ This episode enforced the understanding that prostitutes in the DTES exist outside the arena of socially accepted systemic action and are accordingly perceived as ‘unworthy’ recipients of public resources and ‘official’ support.

In many ways, this understanding was echoed in the Vancouver Police Department’s approach to the disappearances, particularly in terms of the devotion of resources. Prior to 1998, the VPD had only one full time officer assigned to investigate unresolved missing persons cases (Kines and Bolan). The VPD cited both a shortage of personnel and leads in the cases as an explanation of the limited manpower devoted to the disappearances. Police spokesmen suggested it was unclear if the disappearances were even a criminal matter and implied that the women were more likely to have simply

¹⁵ Sue Hammell only withdrew her Ministry’s offer of support for the program after finding a private donor to fund the program. In this way, the issue of concern was not whether or not the program went ahead, but whether it was an acceptable and worthy recipient of public resources. Similarly, the Vancouver businessman who would eventually fund the program asked that his name not be released to the public. (Phillips 1999b)

moved on without telling friends or family or died of a drug overdose as women leading such lifestyles are wont to do. One reporter summarized the police position this way:

investigators emphasized that the women are prostitutes, drug addicts or alcoholics who lead transient lives. One of the missing women was tracked to Arizona, where she was in a mental hospital after going on a crack binge, getting arrested and giving police a phoney name (Phillips 1999a).

Yet, beyond it being rather unlikely that all the missing women could have died of an overdose without their bodies being found, there are a number of problems with these assertions. Friends and family of several of the women assured police that they had been in regular communication with their friend or relative, and that it was out of character for them 'simply to wander off'. As Maggie de Vries, the sister of the Sarah de Vries wrote: "My sister would not have walked away. Sarah's silence was scary for us. The silence of each woman was horrifying for her family. Taken together, the silence was deafening" (227). Moreover, community workers from the DTES asserted that given their addictions—given the need to use multiple times per day—it would be very difficult for the women to relocate, as it would mean moving away from their sources of money and drugs. This point was acknowledged (in contrast to the 'official' police position) by Detective Lori Shenher, one of the officers most involved in the case at the time:

To have them disappear, I find that extremely strange. You or I have the freedom to get up and go somewhere, but [these women are] not only imprisoned by their poverty and their social situation; they're imprisoned by their addictions, they're imprisoned by illness. That makes it highly unlikely they would just get up and go. (de Vries 217)

In this way, though hidden within what is likely both a conscious and unconscious guise of functionalism, the way women were understood played a role in preventing the VPD from allocating resources and personnel to investigate the disappearances.

Similarly, in 1999, the Vancouver Police Board, chaired by Mayor Philip Owen, offered a reward of \$100 000 for information on a series of garage robberies on the West

Side, closely followed by a second \$100 000 reward for information regarding a series of 'home invasions' in East Vancouver (Pitman 176). Friends and family of the missing women, with support from the Attorney General's office, responded by demanding that an equivalent reward be offered for information regarding the disappearances (de Vries 213-229, Skelton 1999).¹⁶ At first, Owen and the VPD (officially) opposed the reward in the missing women's cases, claiming that there was no evidence of 'foul-play.' Furthermore, they suggested, it was unlikely to help locate the women while it could possibly endanger lives and reward the wrong people (Hogben 1999b, de Vries 224). As Mayor Owen put it, the City was not in the business of "running a locating service" (de Vries 217) and as police spokesperson Anne Drennan commented, "right now, it's difficult to imagine how the reward system would lend itself to this kind of life" (Hogren 1999a).

When their request was turned down, advocates of the women portrayed the City and the Vancouver Police Board's refusal as suggesting that they valued the property of well-to-do citizens over the lives of poor women from the DTES. This assertion was met with sympathy in both the general public and the media; the City would eventually bow to pressure and offer a \$100 000 reward for information regarding the disappearances. In many ways, this was a victory for the advocates of the missing women. They had forced the City and the VPD to devote attention and resources to the disappearances and their actions had generated public attention and sympathy—they had helped portray the women as valuable rather than as 'delinquent'. They also furthered efforts to force the police to consider the cases as a group though the police did not officially acknowledge

¹⁶ Maggie de Vries organized a letter writing campaign—along with ten others families of the women—to the mayor, police board and attorney general advocating for a reward (Phillips 1999a).

the possibility of a connection between the disappearances until 2001 (de Vries 220). Nonetheless, the struggle for the reward emphasizes the difficulty in getting the system, in this case the city and police board, to devote resources to the women. The allocation of a \$100 000 reward in the case of the 'missing' women, and the symbolic acknowledgement of their worthiness as recipients of systemic attention and resources implied by the reward, required a fight.

Though the 'missing' frame is characterized by systemic inaction, however, it is also partially a product of the efforts of friends, family and other advocates of the women to force the police and the public to recognize the women as a group and the disappearances as a problem. In this way, the 'missing' frame is not incompatible with all types of action, for it is intrinsically linked to political action and more particularly to political action focussed on the 'missing' women's identity. What united participants in the diverse and primarily ad hoc actions taken in response to the disappearances, was the understanding that in order to generate public concern and systemic action, they needed to counteract a set of normative assumptions constructing the women as 'unworthy.' They needed to counteract society's view of sex-workers: in the words of Pouline Vankoll, one of two 'citizen reporters' and former sex-trade workers enlisted by Orato.com to cover the Pickton Trial, the view that the women were "stupid, good for nothing, wasted skin" (3). Moreover they needed to reframe them as 'valuable.' The actions were undertaken, therefore, in the hopes of generating direct critical attention regarding the disappearances through targeting the construction of the women's social meaning and significance. As Maggie de Vries, said regarding a memorial to the women she organized in 1999, "I can at least do something to show that [Sarah] mattered"

(Kines). In this way, the women's identity—the women's value—became the primary terrain of action of their advocates. And non-systemic action directed at symbolic targets became the primary mode of action associated with the 'missing' frame.

* * *

Intricately enmeshed in the development of the 'missing' frame and in the construction of the disappearances as an 'event', however, is the idea that the women had been murdered. In many ways, the lack of systemic and public recognition of the disappearances was 'shocking'—it was 'unacceptable'—because it was suspected that the women had fallen victim to foul play. Furthermore, the eventual confirmation that some of the women had been murdered produced a certain kind of political and social capital for advocates of the missing women and for feminist, Indigenous, antipoverty and Downtown Eastside activists. The deaths, in some ways, highlighted the seriousness of the issues and concerns they had been raising. Yet, it was partially because 'foul play' was neither officially confirmed nor denied prior to 2002, that the 'missing' frame took on its questioning, ambiguous quality. In her analysis of the media coverage of the disappearances in the late 1990's, Pitman argues that as there were so few leads in the police investigation, it "fuelled speculation about the women's fate" (174). Some stories focussed on sensationalist tales of the possibility of serial killers and sex crimes, others on police failure, conditions in the DTES and the backgrounds of the missing women. Similarly, the actions undertaken in response to the disappearances had a wide range of focuses and targets—they lobbied the City, targeted Canada's prostitution laws, the

violence faced by Indigenous women and the conditions faced by women in the DTES to invoke but some examples. In this way, because the 'truth' about what had happened to the women was unknown, a space was created (if only briefly) to question and contest the terms and stakes of the 'event' of the disappearances.

In early 2002, the newly formed Joint Missing Women's Task Force, a combined unit formed by members of both the Vancouver City Police and the RCMP, began to investigate a Coquitlam farm in connection to the disappearances. The task force uncovered physical evidence and traces of DNA from a number of the women. One of the farm's owners, William Robert Pickton, would eventually be charged with murdering twenty-six of the missing women.

As the investigation of the farm developed, a new way of framing the women began to take hold. The women were no longer 'missing' but 'murdered'; and in taking on this signification they became much more readily definable. The 'murdered' frame provides a set of easy answers to the 'problem' of understanding the women and their disappearances: the women are murder victims; they represent a problem of criminal justice; their murderer is to blame because he has killed them; and the crime must be investigated and its perpetrator brought to justice. Framing the women as 'murdered', then, offers a certain kind of clarity and closure to the 'event' of the disappearances. Once the case has been investigated and the murderer brought to justice, it suggests, the 'problem' will have been addressed and resolved.

The answers and closure attached to framing the women as 'murdered', of course, are not entirely satisfactory. For one, charges have been laid in the cases of only twenty-six of sixty-seven official 'missing women'. The 'murdered' frame implies that these

twenty-six cases represent the entire group.¹⁷ As Suzanne Joy of Vancouver's Rape Relief and Women's Shelter notes:

The pressure on the public to believe that Robert William Pickton killed most if not all of the missing women is enormous and family members are being used to add to that notion. Even if 'their woman' is not one . . . that Pickton is charged with killing, there is pressure [from the media] to respond as though they have settled on him as the killer (48).

Moreover, the 'answers' offered through the 'murdered' frame do not address the concerns raised by representing the women as 'missing'. Rather the signification 'murdered' puts them under erasure; it offers a way of understanding the disappearances where these issues need not be confronted—where social values, identities and systems need not be questioned. As Femke Van Delft—a Vancouver artist whose most recent work focussed on the women—writes: "What began as a city's collective unease eventually emerged as a serial murder story that permitted Vancouver to heave a collective sigh of relief" (Van Delft).

With the investigation of the Pickton farm, media attention regarding the disappearances increased significantly. Accompanying this increase was also something of a shift away from stories focussing more specifically on the women (though there was a numeric increase in these as well, particularly in the early days of the investigation). Instead, many stories focussed upon the particulars of the investigation—on the numbers of people and types of 'experts' involved, on the special forensic equipment employed, and on the legal developments of the trial once it had begun. Furthermore, the media also focussed on Pickton himself and the spectacular nature of his crimes. Jiwani and Young describe the majority of the media coverage in 2002 as centred on:

¹⁷ Similarly, while Robert Pickton was charged with the murder of 26 women, his trial was divided into two. He was to have one trial for 6 of the cases and another for the remaining 20. Pickton was found guilty of second-degree murder on all 6 counts at his first trial. If he loses his appeal of these convictions, he will not be tried in the remaining cases. The first trial will, unofficially, represent all 26 women.

personal details about Pickton, family and friends . . . [and] the police's activities . . . concentrating on the work of a joint task force involving the Vancouver's Police Department and the RCMP's Division "E." This coverage included reports of the weekly or, in some cases, biweekly police news conferences, the enumeration of police personnel and forensic investigators on Pickton's farm, and the collection of mounting evidence accompanied by aerial shots of the farm. (905-906)

With this shift in focus, the coverage of the 'event' became much more factual—it was no longer about questions, but about uncovering the 'evidence.' The media now had access to 'hard facts'; they could begin to tell the 'real' story.

Yet, conceiving the women as 'murdered' allowed for a certain kind of action. As the women began to be framed as 'murdered', they took on an identity that the system was equipped to address and it launched into motion—vast quantities of time, resources and personnel were devoted to the case. Together, the Provincial and Federal governments would eventually spend an estimated 120 million dollars on the investigation of the Pickton Farm and the ensuing criminal trial (Sin). The search of the Pickton property is the biggest investigation of its kind in Canadian history: over 500 police officers were employed by the Joint Missing Women's Task Force during the investigation and 102 anthropology students were hired to help uncover DNA evidence (ibid). As Rich Coleman, the Solicitor General at the time, put it: the investigation mobilized "a small army of police investigators, scientists and specialists, applying the latest in technology and forensic investigation tools." (Smith). Similarly, the following trial mobilized a great many more legal professionals and experts. (A new courtroom was also built for the occasion). Conceiving the women as 'murdered', then, allowed systemic action.

The action produced from understanding the women as 'murdered,' in many ways, exemplified systemic coordination and an extensive mobilization of people and resources. Reframed as 'murdered', the women had become compatible with the

system.¹⁸ They had not only shed their 'deviant' characteristics and taken-on an identity the system 'allowed', but they had also taken-on an identity that triggered the mobilization of a pre-existing organizational structure designed to facilitate the devotion of resources and personnel. Again, if the 'missing' frame is characterized by questions, ambiguity and an incompatibility with systemic action, the 'murdered' frame is characterized by definition, closure, and an enabling of systemic action.

* * *

The 'missing' and 'murdered' frames are by no means the only ways the 'event' of the disappearances has been represented.¹⁹ Nor has the development of the 'murdered' frame resulted in the disappearance of the 'missing' frame—though, in many ways, it has overshadowed it. Though I have outlined the 'event' in term of either this or that frame, the use of the two overlaps, and both have been evoked concurrently.

The 'missing' frame developed in the late 1990's, when the number of women going missing from the DTES increased significantly, and as friends and family of the women began to come together and demand public and systemic attention regarding the disappearances. Yet though the break in the police investigation of the disappearances came in early 2002, resulting in the confirmation of the deaths of many of the women and the onset of the 'murdered' women's frame, the 'missing' women's frame continued—

¹⁸ Another example of how the identity 'murder victim' is compatible with the system, whereas 'prostitute' or 'drug-addict' is not, is the DNA bank being compiled by Project KARE in Edmonton. A large number of women from the city who led 'high-risk lifestyles' have been murdered. The police have been given the funding to compile a DNA bank of at-risk women so that their remains may be more easily identified. (Fong 2008)

¹⁹ Particularly, the 'event' has also been portrayed as spectacle—a way of framing it which has links to both 'missing' and 'murdered' frames.

indeed continues—to animate many narratives and actions responding to and representing the ‘event’. These actions were often part memorial, yet they were also linked to the questions and ways of thinking about the ‘event’ that I have associated with the ‘missing’ women’s frame. They addressed the ways the women were represented and the systemic obstacles they faced. Accordingly, the ‘missing’ women’s frame may be understood as compatible with the reality that some of the women had been murdered.

The ‘missing’ and ‘murdered’ frames are not simply the products of the reality of a large number of unresolved missing persons cases or the eventual conclusion that some of these women had been murdered. Rather, both frames evoke particular modes of thinking about and representing the ‘event’ of the disappearances—modes which animate each frame’s relationship with action.

The ‘missing’ women’s frame is characterized by ambiguity and disjunction. It evokes a questioning of definitions, of identities and of systems and it is associated with political actions produced, in many ways, by a lack of systemic action. It opens a space for the contestation of the meaning and the stakes of the ‘event’ of the disappearances. Alternatively, the ‘murdered’ women’s frame offers a way to define and resolve the ‘problem’ of the disappearances and to mobilize systemic action. It may be said that this frame glosses over or erases too much—it simply avoids rather than addresses the issues and concerns raised by the ‘missing’ women’s frame—yet it enables for the definition of the ‘problem’, it enables systemic action and it allows for a way to move on. The ‘murdered’ frame provides a way to avoid becoming bogged down in the uneasiness, frustration, and inaction of the ‘missing’ women’s frame. As a result, if the utility of the two frames were to be judged on the basis of which better enables action, the ‘murdered’

frame is by far the more 'useful' way to represent the disappearances. Moreover, as Maggie de Vries said of the Pickton investigation, "it moves me to see that hundreds of people across Canada are working day in and day out to find the remains of my sister and the more than sixty other women who until recently hardly seemed to be worth the effort of mounting a search at all" (242). In this way the 'closure' offered by the murdered frame was not just in regards to the public 'event' of the disappearances, but also in regards to the family and friends of the women who would finally see systemic action taken in response to the disappearances of their loved ones and would, in some cases, finally come to know what had happened to them.

Each of these frames also offers a rather different interpretation of the relationship of the 'event' of the disappearances and social change. That is to say, the 'missing' frame suggests the disappearances represent a problem, or set of problems, which our systems and structures are not able to recognize or resolve. It suggests that change—and likely significant change—to our systems and codes may be necessary to 'resolve' the 'problem' of the missing women. The 'murdered' frame, though it enables action, does not imply that anything is going 'wrong' with our systems. Rather it represents the disappearances as one of the many problems our social structures exist to resolve, namely a problem of criminal justice. The system represents a means to 'resolve' the problem, rather than a 'problem' itself.

Taken together, what the 'missing' and 'murdered' frames make visible are the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems and structures. They suggest that certain people are incompatible with the system except when recognized through their 'deviant' characteristics. Moreover, they suggest that our processes of definition and our modes of

action are very much tied up in these boundaries and limits. Once the 'problem' of the disappearances had been clearly defined through the 'murdered' frame, it became compatible with the system and with systemic action—with the coordinated mobilization of personnel and the devotion of resources. Defined in ambiguous, heterogeneous, and questioning terms, the 'problem' had taken a form incompatible with our dominant systems and structures—a form however, which is central to the 'post-structural' conception of change.

**AN ALTERED MODE OF
UNDERTAKING CHANGE IS AFOOT . . .**

?

‘Post-structuralism’

?

‘Post-modernism’

?

‘Critical Ontology’

?

IN THEORY . . .

I would like to begin this chapter by suggesting that there is a trend in contemporary (western) social and political theory—not perhaps a ‘new’ trend and certainly not one that has gone unrecognized. It is a mode of theorizing concerned with disrupting and unsettling norms, knowledges, structures and relations of power; with rendering visible and challenging the boundaries of our systems and codes in the hopes of generating space for new possibilities. It is concerned with critiquing processes of naming and definition, and in doing so, deliberately disrupting its own nomination. Seemingly paradoxically, it seeks to take its meaning from its mobility, multiplicity, and incongruity rather than from its definition. In this way, this ‘mode’ is less a ‘type’ of theory than a set of interconnected theoretical moves; a shifting web of ideas that seeks to avoid being pinned down as a consolidated theoretical doctrine. Nonetheless, posited in this web of theory, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, is a particular approach to how we undertake social change. It is this conception of change I want to draw out and eventually apply to the ‘event’ of Vancouver’s missing women and the political actions undertaken in response to their disappearances. What follows is an attempt to reconstruct a sense of this web in order to illuminate the conception of social change it implies. I have chosen to develop this section as a ‘narrative collage’—as a collection of conceptual snapshots—which, I think, certainly tells a story and forms the

basis of an argument, but, in keeping with its subject matter, a looser, less consolidated argument than more traditional narrative forms.

* * *

The classical paradigm of . . . modern society is that intellectual progress along a diversity of fronts will in the end yield a unified picture of the world, and furthermore one that evidences the universality of common principles. This model now stands refuted.

Ulrich Beck

There is no fundamental recourse, no escape within a pure form.

Michel Foucault

The 'web' of theory I am attempting to reconstruct, sometimes labelled 'post-structuralism' and 'post-modernism', is linked to the critique of a collection of intertwining narratives often associated with modernity and the Enlightenment. One pervasive focus of this critique is the assertion that reason has a universal quality or acts as its own justification. It critiques the idea that if we reason correctly, we can uncover a set of guiding principles upon which we all agree, and, perhaps more ambitiously, that we can uncover truth, authenticity, and justice. A second focus is the notion of development or progress: the supposition that we are moving towards a better way of existing in the world, or perhaps that we are becoming more 'knowledgeable'. Implied in this conception is the understanding that we may not be able to know the world more accurately or to make impeccable value judgements right now, but that in time we can

learn to know, and judge, better (though different people, of course, may develop these abilities at different rates). A third critical focus concerns the epistemological assumptions underlying empiricism, particularly the conception that we may not be able to understand the grand overarching order of the world, but that we can 'know' and 'define' little pieces of it—we can make inferences about parts of it. These assumptions also animate the somewhat less ambitious notion that even if we may never ultimately 'know' even little pieces of the world—if “by definition, inference is an imperfect process” (King, Keohane, and Verba 8)—greater precision within our categories and methods of analysis, will allow us to 'know' it better.

What the 'web' of theory I am gesturing towards tends to repudiate, and what each of these three narratives implies, is that there is something concrete and real to know and that over time, or if we just use the right methods, we can access a non-interpretive and non-contextual knowledge. It rejects the universality of any 'is'. Moreover, this repudiation is closely associated with a critique of the ways each of these narratives has been mobilized to convey legitimacy upon certain hierarchies, knowledges, and structures through asserting a closer connection to 'true', 'scientific', 'unbiased' knowledge. The so-called 'post-structuralist' or 'post-modern' turn, in many ways, is animated by sensations of entrapment within our dominant social and epistemological narratives and sensations of frustration with power relations that mask themselves behind claims of definitiveness, neutrality and factuality. Its repudiation of these narratives, then, is based both on their failure, by their own standards, as abstract theoretical conceptions and on their mobilization as tools of exploitation.

* * *

The reality in which we live has in its entirety become a cultural construct, and our representations of it serve as filters for our relationship with the world

Alberto Melucci

Why couldn't the world that concerns us—be a fiction?

Friedrich Nietzsche

Central to the critique and repudiation of epistemological assumptions associated with the 'Enlightenment Paradigm' are the ideas of social construction, contingency, and contextualism. Implied in social or cultural construction is the rejection of the ultimate definitiveness of any of our ways of knowing—of any of our knowledges. Social construction asserts the contingency of 'is' or of 'essence'. It posits that we are continually producing our 'realities', and our 'selves' through our social choices, systems and codes.²⁰ Yet if our realities are a 'fiction' of our own production, as Nietzsche hints, they are a fiction we cannot escape. Social construction does not imply that we—as a social body—may act as a conscious agent to construct our reality according to a predetermined design, or even that this may become a possibility. Instead it suggests we are always embedded within our languages, knowledges and structures, and that this contextual location determines the limits and boundaries of what we may imagine and enact. In this way, we are both determining and determined, affect and effect: our very realm of possibility—what we can think, communicate and undertake—is a construct of

²⁰ I am using 'our' here to signify a social body, more particularly a western social body, as the mode of theory I am reconstructing has primarily developed in a western context, from a western perspective.

our systems and interpretations. The interrelated conceptions of social construction, contingency and contextuality, then, trouble the ideas of conscious agency and conscious control and they trouble our sense of the legitimacy and continuity of our realities and selves. Social construction unsettles our meanings, values, and codes and asserts that our social ideals, orders, and 'realities' are fundamentally questionable. The rejection of universals and of a 'pure' knowledge, then, renders the construction of our meanings, knowledges and logics an important terrain of action and reduces the divide between critique and analysis on the one hand and action on the other. The assertion of social construction, contextualism, and contingency signals a shift from asking *what* 'is'—from seeking to uncover truth—towards asking *how* seeming unities or truths came about.

Moreover, it complicates our relationships with our languages, systems and codes in another way, for while such structures impose limits on the possibilities available to us, it is through these restrictions that we are able to conceptualize, communicate and act (particularly socially). As Melucci puts it: "one has to be located somewhere in order to think of the future, to be rooted in an already established definition of order to have projects; otherwise one is left in [a] world of fantasies and images" (1996 85). And as Habermas suggests, "the tools of thought . . . are nevertheless the only available means for uncovering their own insufficiency" (14). In this way, the codes and orders we produce—and the knowledges, meanings, and power relations that animate them—serve both to oppress and enable us. Much of the web of theory I am outlining, however, suggests that our dominant systems and codes are rather more oppressive than need be.

But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage

Max Weber

It arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways . . .

Michel Foucault

The Decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is unintentional in it, while everything about it that is intentional, everything about it that can be seen, known, "conscious," still belongs to its surface and skin . . .

Friedrich Nietzsche

A part of the problem with our dominant logics and structures is their seemingly inherent tendency towards hyper-definition and hyper-organization—a tendency to perpetuate the increasing consolidation and precision of meanings, orders and identities—allowing for the regulation, coordination, and mobilization of ever more people (Foucault, Boggs). Though we rely on some kind of order to reduce uncertainty and facilitate communication and action (particularly social action), the construction of order is also tied to the assertion of control (Melucci 1994 185). Ordering and definition regulate meanings and spaces; they ‘fix’ both things and people in their ‘proper’ places (a concept that becomes rather problematic if contingency is accepted) and the more we consolidate meanings—the more precise our categories—the more constrained we become in what we can think, do, and mean within our systems and logics. Accordingly,

the intensification of systemization and classification is linked to an increasing sense that uncertainty is being reduced too much: that our 'realities' and indeed our selves are becoming over defined. As Foucault puts it, "we are trapped within our own history"; we are increasingly 'stuck' within our definitions (1997 329).

If we accept that our knowledges, logics, and structures flounder according to their own internal criteria, the ways in which they 'fix' meanings and people are never entirely authentic (Boggs, Cook). Something is always left out. Accordingly, as we increasingly refine the precision of our categories through processes of hyper-definition and hyper-organization, it follows that more and more is 'left out', sometimes resulting in the feeling that our traditional ways of knowing the world are progressively moving further and further out of alignment with our experiences within it. As our processes of definition and organization multiply and intensify, our realities are becoming more complex and ambiguous, rather than more understandable. We sense that the proclaimed purposes of our systems and codes may not be what they actually do or perhaps all that they do; we sense that we are being structured in ways we do not recognize. And moreover, through this discrepancy, power (normative, disciplinary) is able to act upon us 'unseen', for though we may feel 'entrapped', we do not recognize the forms of power acting upon us and we misdirect our attempts to thwart it (Foucault 1978).

* * *

*I do not believe in decisive ruptures, in an unequivocal
"epistemological break," as it is called today. Breaks are always, and
fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably
be undone.*

Jacques Derrida

This web of narratives and conceptions produces, sometimes implicitly sometimes explicitly, a certain kind of vision of social change which focuses more upon *how* we conceive, communicate and act together—upon the limits and boundaries of our logics, systems, codes—rather than upon *what* we conceive, communicate and undertake. If our structures and languages form channels that determine the shape and trajectory of our social actions and expressions, the codes and rationalities of contemporary western societies (with their tendency to hyper-definition and hyper-organization) produce an ever-narrowing network with a rather rapid and particular current. In this way, what we can think and do within these channels is increasingly determined for us and somehow always seems to move in the same direction. Undertaking change, subsequently, entails less of a focus on *what* we do within our systems, and more of a focus on how we might generate space to do different things: on pushing the boundaries and limits of our channels, and on moving within them in altered ways. Pursuing change in this sense is about making visible and challenging our realm of possibility; it is about asking what locations, analytical and physical, might allow us to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise.

It is of course a fairly abstract conception of change, and perhaps one with a tendency to sound overly grandiose. Yet it is a way of thinking and theorizing that rejects revolution—broad sweeping changes and social transformations—for it rejects the idea that we can step out of our current realities and into new ones. “There is,” in the words of Foucault, “no single locus of great Refusal” (1978 96). We ourselves are constructed

through these realities, and we cannot step outside them. Change, subsequently, is more about encouraging subtle shifts in our systems and codes without planning definitively what, if anything, these shifts will allow than it is about envisioning alternative futures, for ‘real’ changes are ‘unknowable’, or perhaps ‘unrecognizable’, within our current realm of possibility.²¹ To quote Jacques Derrida, undertaking change in this sense involves an attempt “little by little to modify the terrain . . . and thereby produce new configurations” (24).

* * *

It is not so much a matter of what we are undertaking, more or less courageously, than it is the idea we have of our knowledge and its limits.

Michel Foucault

I absolutely refuse a discourse that would assign me a single code, a single language game, a single context, a single situation; and claim this right not simply out of caprice or because it is to my taste, but for ethical and political reasons

Jacques Derrida

The medium is the message

Marshall McLuhan

The pursuit of ‘real’ change, in this way, is detached from what is typically understood as strategic action—the web of theory I am gesturing towards unsettles the

²¹ This, I think, is something of the same idea Derrida is getting at when he suggests that a ‘discourse of emancipation’ requires some messianicity (Derrida 82).

conceptualization of goals and well-defined, organized actions as an effective way to ‘challenge the boundaries and limits of the system.’ Again, the construction of goals takes place within our languages, systems and codes, and they, in turn, play a significant role in determining what goals we construct. Moreover, pursuing strategic action may be understood as enforcing our dominant logics and structures, for they both rely on emphasizing certain processes and *forms* of meaning. Our dominant traditions of definition and organization require and privilege the clear demarcation of ‘types’ of things, people, and space, and assert the *unity, sovereignty, homogeneity, consistency, stasis* of these categories (prominent examples of these types of categories include the unitary, essential self and the sovereign nation). They attempt to ‘fix’ in place what they *are*—to arrest the movement of signification and significance—so that they become more controllable.

Pushing the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems, and accordingly pursuing change, in this web, seems to imply a privileging of the ‘other’ of our dominant systems and forms of meaning they emphasize. It seems to imply a focus on *movement* rather than *stasis*, on *becoming* rather than *being*, on *flux* rather than *fixity*. Yet somewhat paradoxically, it does **not** imply disorder instead of order, nor unmeaning instead of meaning. Rather, it seeks alternative forms of meaning and alternative forms of order—looser kinds of meaning and order—in *disjunction, heterogeneity, fluidity, multiplicity*. It seeks out forms that will bring out meanings and organizational patterns that our dominant logics and codes do not allow. Undertaking change, in this way, and addressing the types of power and control present in our dominant systems and structures, is about seeking out and promoting—about ‘privileging’—sites (physical and conceptual) that

allow these 'other' types of processes and forms. And it is about bringing these types of forms into conflict with those privileged through our dominant systems and structures.

* * *

The new model of social change . . . might well draw its inspiration from the appearance of new social movements with their plural and dispersed spheres of discourse and action.

Carl Boggs

Theorists associated with this 'post-structuralist' turn put forward many different sites and processes that they suggest allow meanings in 'other' forms, including, to cite but a few, the urban, the practices of everyday life, and the genealogical method of history. Another site, and the site of particular concern in this thesis, is the social movement. Movements have been gaining prominence among social and political theorists as a privileged site for the pursuit of innovative social changes (Diani 1), and for some theorists, including Alberto Melucci, this is because they serve as a medium through which meanings and orders may flourish within discontinuity and multiplicity.

Alberto Melucci suggests contemporary social movements (CSM)²² should be considered as a privileged site for thinking about and pursuing 'real' social change, for

²² Melucci termed the movements 'new social movements' in his early work. In his later work, he began to call them 'contemporary social movements' in order to emphasize that his use of the term was not to suggest that there is something empirically 'new' about the properties of the movements, but rather to assert that they represent a certain type of challenge. What is 'new' about these movements is that the challenge they mount is addressed to dominant systems and code, to our ways of perceiving and naming our world, and the recognition that this challenge is mounted primarily through movements' form. (Melucci 1998b 493)

Some of the quotes used from Melucci's earlier work, then, use the phrase 'new social movements'.

through these movements, the boundaries of our social structures, systems and codes may be rendered visible and challenged. Movements have great creative and transformative potential. They function as a medium through which the 'system' and that which it does not allow may encounter and interact with one another—as a medium though which meanings found in multiplicity, fluidity, and disjunction come into contact with those found in homogeneity, unity, and stasis (Melucci 1985 810). Moreover, CSM's are a "composite action system" in which 'looser' forms of meaning, and particularly 'looser' forms of identity, come together with collective action (Melucci 1986 28). Movements provide a medium for representing and asserting those identities and behaviours which the system cannot integrate as it currently functions. They are Melucci's response to the question 'what locations, conceptual and physical, might allow us to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise' (1985 799).

* * *

The post-structuralist Left continues to talk about "praxis," but the very pretentiousness of this vocabulary suggests that its ideas are not a politics so much as an academic "field"—and in fact it is only in the academic setting in which the vocabulary has any operational meaning and any audience.

Gerald Graff

For many critics of the web of theory I am constructing—of the so-called 'post-modernist' or 'post-structuralist' turn—this kind of theorizing is overly abstract, rather futile and potentially dangerous, particularly when it is conceived as 'political'. Through

its equivocation and ambiguity, it fails to offer a positive and concrete base for collective action and political change. It unsettles and renders questionable our traditional tools for organizing and undertaking collective action and does not succeed in offering anything in their place. The difficulty, critics suggests, is that these types of theories fail to actually produce 'looser' forms of meaning, particularly, 'looser' forms that may be effectively communicated among large numbers of people and used as a basis for organizing coordinated actions. They unravel our ideals, critique our rationalities, and collapse our categories, but in doing so they simply become lost 'in a world of fantasies and images' or, in endless academic pedantry which has very little chance spreading outside the ivory tower and even less of generating positive social change. Critics suggest 'post-structural' or 'post-modern' theory **does** imply disorder instead of order and unmeaning instead of meaning—simply, that it is ineffectual in its attempts to employ paradox and subtlety. These theories, then, do not offer a way to achieve 'real' change, but rather where they gain adherents they produce inaction and apathy. They stall rather than encourage purposive action towards emancipatory goals by collapsing the distinctions on which we rely in order to act and particularly to act together.

The point of my argument, however, is not to revisit the debates of the eighties between 'modernists' and 'post-modernists' or 'structuralists' and 'post-structuralists'. Rather, I want to pose the working assumption that what I have been constructing as the 'post-structural' conception of change has something to offer in regards to thinking about and undertaking social and political action, but that the potential of this conception is lost if it is taken up only in abstraction—that is to say that this kind of theorizing is of very little use unless it can be applied to and taken up through actual 'events' happening in the

world. For this reason, therefore, what I want to explore is the relationship between a 'post-structural' conception of change and the 'event' of Vancouver's missing women, and more particularly, the relationship between this conception of change and the social actions undertaken as a result of the disappearances.

* * *

The first two chapters of this thesis introduce two incidents—the 'event' of Vancouver's missing women, and the development a particular mode of theorizing change centred on promoting 'other' *forms*. And they suggest a certain overlap between the two. The debate regarding the utility of 'post-structuralist theory', and the conception of social change I suggest this theory evokes, has significant implications for the way that the 'event' of the disappearances is understood and represented. Considered through the web of theory I have been developing, the 'missing' women's frame with its systemic incompatibility, ambiguity, disjunction, and discomfort may potentially act as a medium through which systemic limits and boundaries may be rendered visible and challenged. Given the *forms* of meaning it allows, it may act as a medium through which to pursue change, as it is conceived in 'post-structural' theory; and seen through the web of theory I have been outlining, the ambiguity, disjunctions, and uncertainty of the 'missing' frame may not represent its problematic aspects so much as its potential. Moreover, in many ways, the 'murdered' women's frame and its erasure of many of the issues raised through the 'missing' women's frame exemplifies how our systems and structures may be seen as 'leaving out too much'; even when it is the process of definition—and erasure—

represented in this frame which enabled systemic action, which enabled the devotion of large amounts of resources and personnel to the 'event' of the disappearances. A 'post-structural' conception of change, then, troubles the type of action and closure that is offered through the 'murdered' frame. Yet, in turn, the frustration and inaction associated with the 'missing' frame challenges the utility of this conception of change outside of abstraction.

The final two chapters of this thesis, then, continue to develop the relationship between the 'post-structural' conception of change and the 'event' of Vancouver's missing women but through the more specific lens of social movement action. In Chapter Three, I outline Alberto Melucci's conception of contemporary social movements as a specific example of the 'post-structural' conception of change, and in Chapter Four I relate Melucci's conception of contemporary movements to the political actions taken in response to the disappearances in Vancouver.

Melucci and Contemporary Social Movements:

The work of Alberto Melucci might seem a rather strange example of ‘post-structural’ or ‘post-modern’ theory. Even though Melucci does critique the rationalities of our traditional state structures and modes of political representation, he also insists on their necessity. Indeed, one particular focus of his theory is the development of ‘public space’—of space where the rationalities of our state structures may encounter, and interact with, those animating the practices of everyday life (Melucci 1994 189).²³ Through this emphasis on ‘public space’, Melucci’s work takes on a likeness to the theory of Jurgen Habermas, a decided critic of the so-called post-structural turn. Yet in other ways, particularly in his emphasis on the centrality of language and signification, social construction, and *form* (in the sense that I have been using it in the previous chapter), Melucci’s work illustrates many of the currents animating ‘post-structural’ thought. It also invokes the ‘post-structural’ conception of change and has an explicit focus on the convergence of social construction and action. In this way, though Melucci

²³ For Melucci, public space allows for the questions raised by movements to be represented:

The main function of public spaces is that of rendering visible and collective the questions raised by movements. They enable the movements to avoid being institutionalized as such and, conversely, ensure that society as a whole is able to assume responsibility for (i.e. institutionally process) the issues, demands and conflicts concerning the goals and meaning of social action raised by the movements (1994 189).

may be a rather 'moderate' post-modernist, his theory is particularly pertinent in terms of the questions and relationships I am exploring.

In this section I outline how Melucci's work on contemporary social movements takes up some of the currents of 'post-structural' thought—an emphasis on social construction, systemic boundaries, the questioning of apparent unities, and the assertion of our need for 'looser' epistemological categories—and how it demonstrates a 'post-structural' conception of social change. My focus is particularly on Melucci's interrelated conception of the roles and forms of contemporary social movements and his assertion that these movements are privileged sites for pursuing change. Before I turn to the roles and forms of CSMs, however, and in order to provide them with something of a theoretical backdrop within Meluccian theory, I outline Melucci's conception of the shortcomings of previous traditions of social movement analysis and his conception of 'complex' society.

* * *

For Alberto Melucci, the problem facing the social sciences, and indeed to a significant extent the problem facing contemporary society, is one of analysis—the tools and instruments we have been using to interpret the world are simply becoming less and less useful given the complexity of our social realities. Analysis, according to Melucci, is reflexive. It is a means of interpreting our experiences and environment, but in turn, it is also a significant factor in determining them. He argues that the ways our traditional forms of analysis represent society are becoming incongruous with our actual experiences

within it, rendering the limits they create increasingly confining. Regarding the analysis of movements, Melucci writes:

The question of new social movements actually turns into the question of what analytic instruments are required to understand something that escapes us . . . that touches on a certain number of aspects, levels and analytically well-defined elements that cannot receive an explanation in the framework of traditional analysis (1998b 493)

Our traditional modes of analysis, then, are allowing too much to slip away.

Melucci's conception of analysis is significantly shaped by his concerns with the analytical shortcomings of the Marxist/structuralist and Crowd Psychologist traditions of movement analysis on the one hand, and those of the Resource Mobilization tradition on the other—particularly given the ways we experience contemporary society. These traditions are overly 'reductionist': they fail to capture the potential of contemporary movements, the type of challenge they represent and the contingent and 'complex' realities of contemporary social experiences.²⁴

In structuralist theories, social movements are reduced to "an actor without an action"—action is explained through the social conditions which actors seem to have in common—while in Crowd Psychologist theories they are "an action without an actor"—an instinctual social projection (Melucci 1986 18). For the former, social movements are an expression of tensions within the social structure, and accordingly, the forms they take and the roles they play are determined by structural dynamics. For the latter, they are expressions of social pathology—an irrational social emotionalism (Melucci 1996 26, 1985 44,46 1986 19). Both these modes of analysis 'reduce' or obscure the creativity expressed through movements and the variety of roles they play within social systems.

²⁴ Like so much of the 'post-structural' web of theory I have been gesturing towards, Melucci's theory is primarily 'western'—the experiences of 'contemporary society' and of 'complex society' are western experiences.

They posit a single determinate causal explanation of *why* movements occur with no regard for variations in form, goals, or longevity. They reject the possibility of multiple causal factors and neglect the analysis of *how* movements form and mobilize. Accordingly, through these modes of analysis—through their teleology—the diversity expressed by movements is often contorted to ‘fit’ into the explanatory logic of their theoretical framework, or simply lost due to its irrelevance to the overarching causal dynamic. They take movements as ‘given’, as ‘unified datum,’ when movement analysis should explore how this apparent unity came to be. In this way, these analyses are problematic, not because movements are unaffected by structural elements or social emotionalism—indeed both these elements factor significantly in Melucci’s own analysis—but because they attempt to fit too much, too definitively, into a single theoretical framework.

Inversely, Melucci is critical of the primarily American tradition of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), as he suggests it focuses too much on the *how* of movement organization and mobilization while ignoring the *why*. Once again, something is being ‘lost’ through this focus, something perhaps critical to the creative and transformative potential of movements. For Melucci, the *how* and the *why* of movements cannot be separated. Accordingly, movement analysis requires a new set of conceptual tools that might allow us to interpret movements in a looser, less certain way; a way that has the space for exploring both the *why* and *how* of movements and their potential interaction.

Another weakness of structuralist and Crowd Psychologist analyses is that they assert the disconnection of action and actor: they negate even a mediated role for the exercise of choice and responsibility in the formation and mobilization of movements.

For structuralists, systemic forces are responsible for the growth of a movement and the roles it plays: if systemic tensions necessitate a movement, people will mobilize. In this way, it is not a matter of choice or responsibility for the members of the movement or for society more generally; they are little more than pawns of structural forces. Similarly, for Crowd Psychologists, movements are the product of instinctual emotional responses rather than the choices of rational, autonomous agents who may be held accountable for their actions. In this context, movements are more the result of 'nature' than of choice. Within these theoretical frameworks, consequently, concerns regarding agency, choice, and responsibility retain very little relevance. Yet, similarly to his conception of the role of the *why* and the *how* in movement analysis, Melucci also rejects theoretical frameworks associated with rational choice theory. Resource Mobilization Theory, he asserts, is problematic as it represents movements as a given "empirical actor" (Melucci 1985 707). It fails to allow for any restraints to movement agency. For Melucci, then, both sides of this duality are overly definitive: "either actors are dispossessed of the meanings of their action, or they produce meanings and goals without any constraints" (1985 791).

To address these weaknesses, Melucci attempts to develop a theoretical framework that allows for the constraining influence of structural and normative forces and for unsettling the subject as autonomous individual and rational agent, while still maintaining the connection between actor and action—while still maintaining that what we choose to do is not entirely determined by our context, and that what we choose matters.²⁵ Meluccian analysis, then, is "an uneasy and uncertain adventure, since it lacks

²⁵ Melucci's theory allows for a great deal more agency and actual choice than do many other theories associated with 'post-structuralism'—Foucault for example.

the sense of security produced by undivided belonging” (Melucci 1986 13). It seeks to provide a theoretical framework that explores the construction of apparent unities, of apparent identities, and which allows for meaning in heterogeneous, disjunctive and mobile forms—for meaning that can exist across categories. Moreover, this analytical move is crucial given our contemporary social experiences in ‘complex society’.

‘Complex society’, as it is used in Meluccian theory, is an analytical category: that is, it is a motif for thinking about—for understanding—contemporary, western societies. One prominent characteristic of this category is the centrality of social or cultural construction. In complex society, our abilities to ‘construct’ have never been so extensive, or so difficult to ignore.²⁶ Complex societies deny the existence of, or perhaps cannot be contained within, a single guiding rationality: too much escapes these rationalities and we are becoming conscious of the discrepancies. We are becoming aware of the contingency of our knowledges. As a result, our experiences within complex society are often ambiguous and ambivalent. Though our capacity, as a social body, to impact, organize and mobilize both our natural and social environments is increasingly comprehensive—our actions and choices impact greater numbers of people across more extensive spaces—we are more and more uncertain of how, and to what ends, we should use this ability, and of whether we as a society or as individuals have any control over how we implement it.

While complex societies offer a broadening range of opportunities with increasingly global dimensions, they require that we restrict our field of possibility in order to take action within it. They require that we choose the boundaries and limits of

²⁶ “The nuclear situation is the extreme, paradoxical example of social capability of intervening on society itself. It is the ultimate expression of an ‘artificial,’ self-reflexive social life. Contemporary societies produce themselves to a degree that includes the possibility of final destruction.” (Melucci 1985 805)

our systems and codes, while denying the possibility of a single 'right' choice (Inner Time 181). The boundaries and limits of our social experiences, then, are products of the aggregate of our choices, though often unintended and unpredictable ones. And, somewhat paradoxically, they also define what is possible for us to choose.

Moreover, in complex societies the boundaries and limits of both our social experiences and our realm of possibility have become recognizable as cultural constructions. Accordingly, "as the range of possibilities becomes too wide compared to the actual opportunities for action and experience, the question of boundaries [and choices] becomes the fundamental problem of individual and collective life," and the spaces and methods enabling us to make visible and challenge these boundaries become vitally important (Melucci 1996 117).

Within complex societies we are constantly engaged in a process of 'choosing'—consciously, unconsciously, subconsciously—the boundaries and limits of social life. We are constantly engaged in the process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing meanings and what it is possible to signify. Thus, in contradiction to the Marxist tradition of historical materialism, Melucci asserts, culture is "the core resource for the production and consumption" of complex systems (1996 8). It is the way that meanings (and not material commodities) are produced, consumed and disseminated across space and time which determines the boundaries and limits of complex societies and the power relations within them: "the forms of power now emerging in contemporary societies are grounded in an ability to 'inform'" (Melucci 1992 75). In complex societies, then, "power must affect everyday life, the deep motivation of individual action must be manipulated, and the process by which people give meaning to things and their action must be under

control” (Melucci 1985 796). In these systems, exploitation does not connote so much a deprivation of control over the means of production, as the “deprivation of control over the construction of meaning” (Melucci 1996 182). The ways knowledge and information are produced, organized, ordered and accessed within complex societies, therefore, should be conceptualized and analyzed as an important terrain of action and contestation, for they are already critical terrain for the mobilization and consolidation of relations of power.

Perhaps the irony of complex society is that despite, or partly because of, the increasing recognition of our contingent condition, we are ensnared within a seemingly self-perpetuating process of consolidating names and orders—of battling uncertainty by attempting to define the world in its entirety so that we might ‘know’, and ‘know’ with certitude, what to choose. The possibilities and experiences that are not allowed in complex societies are those that cannot be ‘fixed’: these systems have “eliminated from experience all that is not susceptible to verification and measurement” (Melucci 1986 62). In this way, then, the limits of complex societies may be linked to those of our dominant systems and codes as they are conceived by ‘post-structuralism,’ for it is experiences and possibilities that cannot be defined and consolidated into a ‘unified datum’ that do not fit within the logic and codes of complex societies. This is also a part of what Melucci is driving at when he says that our old analytical tools are not enough. He suggests we need more flexible and less consolidated categories and modes of analysis, so that we might reduce uncertainty—so that we might *choose* the boundaries and limits of our social experiences—according to a less confining, less essentialist, logic.

The very notion of 'complex society' itself, for Melucci, is an effort to make use of 'more flexible and less consolidated categories'. His definition of these systems is intentionally loose, overlapping, mobile, and at times contradictory. It signals not a *type* of society, but a *shift* within society, which cannot yet be defined, and whose future is uncertain. Moreover, Melucci uses the term 'complex society' interchangeably with other somewhat analogous terms (post-industrial, post-capitalist, post-materialist) to enact the 'type' of category to which he is referring (Melucci 1986 184). The mobility of names connotes flexibility within the analytical category—a sense that it remains unconsolidated; not that it 'is', but that it is 'becoming'.

* * *

Contemporary social movements are only one of several types of collective action, for Melucci, but they are a kind of action which plays a vitally important role in complex societies—they make visible the limits and inconsistencies of our systems and structures, and in this way, they encapsulate a challenge not simply on behalf of the members of the movement, or those the movement acts in the name of, but on behalf of society as a whole (Melucci 1985 810-11). CSMs represent a challenge to our dominant logics and codes, and play a mediating role between the different parts and logics of complex systems—they act as a medium or vehicle of representation for meanings and identities the system does not allow.

Melucci argues that contemporary social movements facilitate movement and interaction *between* the cultural and political dimensions of social experiences. He

stresses that CSMs cannot be understood only within the terms of what he terms the political:

Contemporary social conflicts are not just political, since they affect the system's cultural production. Collective action is not carried out simply for exchanging goods in the political market or for improving the participation in the system. It challenges the logic governing production and appropriation of social resources (Melucci 1985 798).

Moreover, movements are “at one and the same time prior to and beyond politics; they are *pre-political* because they are rooted in everyday life experience; and *meta-political* because political forces can never represent them completely” (Melucci 1996 72) Given his separation of contemporary movements from ‘politics’, Melucci has often been labelled a ‘cultural reductionist’ (Bartholomew and Meyer 1992, Masson 1997, Carol 1997, Vahabzadeh 2001). Yet, to get at the role Melucci’s theory suggests for movements it is important to explore further both his conception of the cultural and the political.

As I have suggested above, Melucci’s work on contemporary social movements is partially a reaction to what he considers to be the shortcomings of structuralism, Crowd Psychology, and Resource Mobilization Theory and his use of ‘the political’ should be understood with this in mind. One of the prominent difficulties of RMT, according to Melucci, is its ‘political reductionism’. Within this tradition, the success or failure of a movement is determined on the basis of its ability to consolidate its organization and to influence systemic institutions and modes of representation. The successful movement, then, is the movement that has become compatible with institutional structures and modes of decision-making—that has entered into the political process and become influential.

Alternatively, what Melucci wants to stress about contemporary movements is that what is most interesting about them cannot be contained within these terms. Contemporary movements are incompatible with the political system, understood as a set

of representative and administrative institutions and decision-making processes. They represent a symbolic challenge to the codes, norms, and logics upon which the political system and political relationships, as they are understood in RMT, are based; accordingly, the success of this challenge cannot be gauged by the ability of the movements to integrate into that system. Melucci's use of the 'political', then, stems partially from his critique of previous traditions of movement analysis and what 'political' has connoted within these traditions. Portraying movements as 'political' meant understanding them in terms of their ability to consolidate their membership and organization structure, and their ability to conform to institutional logics, but for Melucci CSMs escape this rationality and form of analysis. Moreover, it is *because* of this very 'escape' that these movements are so important in complex systems—it is *because* of this 'escape' that they should be conceived as an important site for pursuing social change. As Steven Buechler notes:

If the new movements were more political in the conventional sense of that term, they would be playing by sets of rules that benefit existing power-holders and they would in all likelihood be much easier to co-opt through the normal channels of political representation and negotiation (452).

It is this 'otherness' that Melucci wants to emphasize when he says the primary challenge movements mount is not political.

This is not to say that movements are unconcerned with social and political power. If politics is understood as that which concerns relations of power, Melucci's contemporary social movements may be said to engage in politics. If politics is understood as "the creator and destroyer of boundaries," these movements are most certainly political (Magnusson 113). Once again, however, according to Melucci the political represents a set of institutions and particular logic of decision-making and

negotiation: a set of systems designed to facilitate the reduction of uncertainty. CSMs mount a critical challenge, because they operate outside of, and in alternative ways to, the dominant instrumental rationalities of our institutional systems—they mount a challenge to our technological and scientific processes of domination and decision-making from within the cultural sphere (Melucci and Avritzer 522).

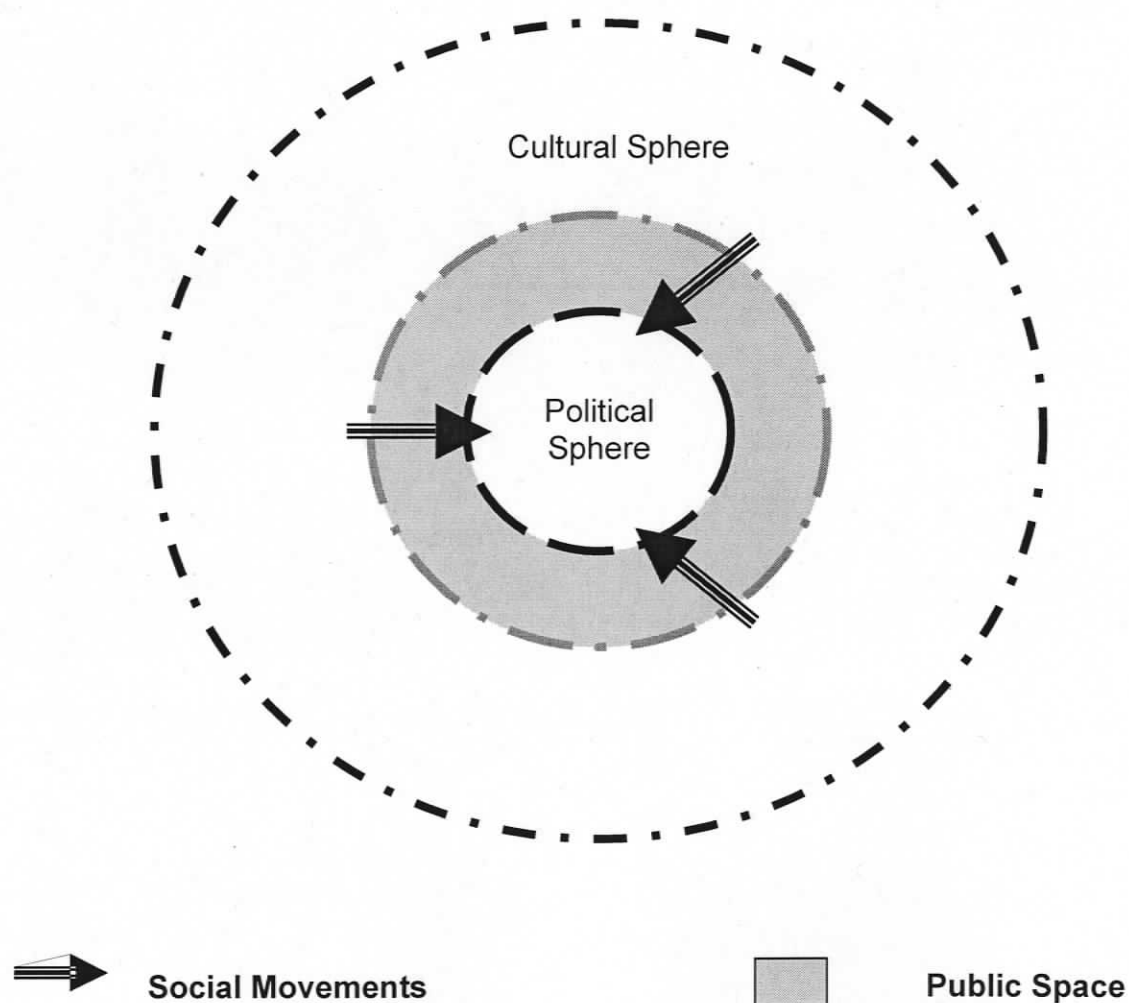
For Melucci, the cultural sphere is the arena of the symbolic—the realm of naming and the word. It is the practices of everyday life and the field of construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of meanings and identities: it is “a system of interweaving opposites, of ambivalences, of multiple meanings which actors seek to bend to their goals so as to lend meaning to their action” (Melucci 1996 95). In many ways, then, the cultural sphere is a space of symbolic building blocks; hence, it, like movements, is both ‘pre-political’ and ‘meta-political’. Contemporary social movements are “born precisely at the junction point between these many constructions of meaning and the logic of domination”—between the cultural and political spheres (Melucci 1998b 505). They enable complex societies to ask questions about meaning, to choose and enact meanings and identities the system does not allow. CSMs, then, are a medium or vehicle for meanings, identities and logics that are incompatible with systemic processes and logic, and through their incompatibility they force “power into the open and [expose] the interests behind the apparent neutrality of its rationality” (Melucci 1994 185).

The terrain of action of contemporary social movements is meaning and identity. Movements represent a challenge in terms of the ways meanings and people are constructed, controlled and mobilized. They represent a medium through which people may construct or act out, identities that are incompatible with the system—a medium

through which people may name and represent themselves in opposition to the ways they are defined and represented by/within the system. Without “the challenges posed by these movements, complex societies would be incapable of asking questions about meaning; they would entrap themselves in the apparently neutral logic of institutional procedures” (Melucci 1986 11).

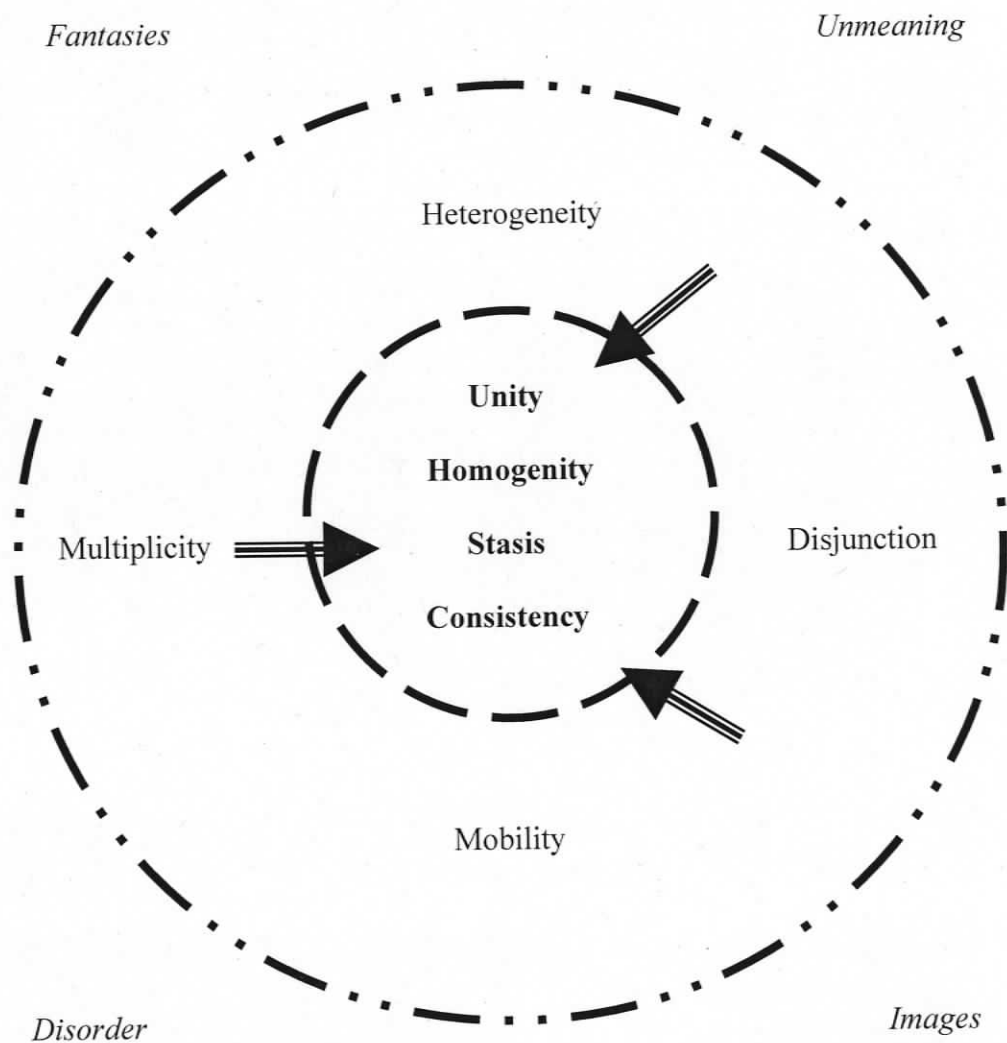
Contemporary social movements, in this way, may be understood as a medium enabling a challenge, via our public spaces, to the logic of the political system from within the cultural sphere:

Figure 1:



And, they can be understood as a medium enabling looser and less consolidated *forms* meaning which challenge our dominant rationalities, systems, and codes, and, the *forms* of definition and organization they privilege. Contemporary social movements may be understood as a medium enabling the pursuit of social change as it is conceived by the 'post-structuralist' turn:

Figure 2:



In this way, contemporary social movements as a particular *form* of organization and action have the potential to modify our realm of possibility. As Rosa Proietto says of Melucci, “his perspective on new social movements suggests that their difference from older labour, socialist or anti-colonial movements is primarily that their *form* is self-consciously understood as a communicative gesture” (374).²⁷ It is in this way that movements mount a challenge on ‘behalf of all of society’: “the very ‘form’ of the action before its specific content is the expression of a conflictual, and sometimes antagonistic orientation” against our dominant systems and codes (Melucci 1996 115). Through their *form*, CSMs make visible our dominant rationalities and, potentially, create space for new possibilities, not just for the specific identity they represent, but also for society as a whole. According to Melucci, the women’s, peace, and ecology movements are each examples of contemporary social movements.

* * *

Contemporary social movements are: “a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on conflict (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs” (Melucci 1985 795). Movements are not ‘unified subjects’ as implied by RMT, but rather, as is suggested by the role Melucci ascribes to them in complex societies, a looser, less consolidated medium; they are “composite action system[s] in which widely differing means, ends and forms of solidarity and organization converge” (1986 28).

In making the claim that contemporary social movements are based on solidarity, Melucci rejects the conception, associated with RMT, that social movements are formed

²⁷ Italics are mine.

around the pursuit of specific shared goals and interests in favour of the understanding that they are formed around collective identities—identity not understood as something permanent, however, but as something that is both producible and contestable. In this way, the existence of a movement does not depend on the active pursuit of specific goals, but rather on the identification with and construction of certain solidarities. Accordingly, CSMs do not need to be active or organized at all times and their mobilizations are often sporadic. When they are understood as based on solidarity, movements may be conceived as retaining a meaning and continuity that is not orientated around their organizational structure and aims. It is solidarity that enables the looser forms of organization of these movements and the diverse mobilizations they undertake. It is solidarity that allows movements meaning in ‘other’ forms, and which prevents them from slipping into the realm of ‘fantasies and images’—which prevents their fragmentation and disintegration.

The notion of solidarity is also linked to Melucci’s understanding that movements address the production of meaning and are not simply instrumental for a certain set of goals. CSMs are concerned with the ways identity and significance are attached to people and with what our dominant logics and codes allow people to mean. They form a medium through which solidarities and identities that are incompatible with the system may express themselves, and through their expression challenge the boundaries and limits of the system. In this way, Melucci suggests there is always some overlap between movements and ‘deviance,’ as both represent what the system does not allow: ‘deviance’, ‘abnormality’, ‘madness’ suggest “a refusal/loss of ‘meaning,’ but [they] also reveal a possible distance from dominant ‘reason’” (1986 130-131). They reveal, potentially, some space in which to act and conceive differently.

Intricately linked to this symbolic challenge of the limits of our systems—to the framing of meaning—is the form of contemporary social movements and their mobilizations. CSMs have a decentralized, fluid and mobile membership; unstructured, diffuse leadership; and, given that they are formed around shared identity rather than the rational pursuit of specific instrumental goals, the aims they mobilize around take on a heterogeneous and fluid quality. Their “goals are temporary and to a certain extent replaceable” (Melucci 1986 56). Indeed, it is in the fluid, heterogeneous, and diffuse quality of CSMs that their most significant potential as a site of resistance and transformation resides. In the words of Melucci:

The new organizational form of contemporary movements is not just ‘instrumental’ for their goals. It is a goal in itself. Since the action is focused on cultural codes, the *form* of the movement is a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant patterns. Short-term and reversible commitment, multiple leadership that can be challenged, temporary and ad hoc organizational structures are the bases for the internal collective identity, but also for a symbolic confrontation with the system. People are offered the possibility of another experience of time, space, interpersonal relations, which opposes operational rationality of apparatuses. A different way of naming the world suddenly reverses the dominant codes.

The medium, the movement itself as a new medium, is the message. (1985 801)

CSMs primarily contest dominant discourse and paradigms not through the aims they pursue, but through their very *form*, their medium. They offer a way of pursuing collective action that rejects the centrality of unified, rational, aim-oriented action, and through this rejection questions the organizational framework of our social systems. Through their diverse and decentred qualities, CSMs make space for the development and interaction of a wider variety of meanings and identities. They “permit a multiplicity of meanings to play in their discourse and action, recognizing that this represents the actual plurality of constituencies and participant identities which constitutes portions of the creative tension of movement” and through these qualities, they form a system or

network where diverse actors—including both individuals and organizations—may come together and interact (Proietto 381). In this way, movements enable change through their ‘other’ forms—through allowing meaning in *heterogeneity, fluidity and multiplicity*.

Contemporary social movements exist in both latent and visible forms. In their latent form, they are a collection of submerged networks of everyday practices and meanings enacting a collective identity or solidarity. They take on a visible form only during short-term mobilizations in pursuit of specific goals. It is this fluctuation between their latent and visible forms that allows CSMs their sense of continuity without a consolidated purpose and organizational structure. Conditions favouring mobilization of movements, Melucci suggests, arise with the development of “problems raised but as yet unresolved, and against which it is possible to assess power relationships and estimate the weakness or incapacity of the adversary.” (1996 385). Problems ‘as yet unresolved’ open space for the contestation of meanings and relations of power and, consequently, for movements to take on their visible form.

Melucci’s conception of CSMs, in this way, invokes many of the currents of the ‘post-structural’ turn, yet it also incorporates the recognition of some of its weakness.

The *form* of movements:

accounts for both the strength and weakness of collective actors. Their strength derives from the mobilization of primary solidarities, which no complex organization could hold together on a stable basis; from their provision of flexibility, adaptability, and immediacy, which more structured organizations cannot incorporate . . . Their weakness lies in their permanent risk of fragmentation . . . in their susceptibility to expressive escapism; in their uneasy handling of problems political in the strict sense, such as the complexity of decision-making and mediation [and] the problems of efficiency and effectiveness (Melucci 1996 116).

Movements are always in danger of falling ‘into the realm of fantasies and images’ or of failing to support meanings around which collective action may be organized. Moreover, because of their lack of a consolidated purpose and agenda, it becomes hard to talk about

the success or failure of movements. These movements are not based around a vision of the future against which their achievements may be measured. Because of the type of challenge they mount, the success or failure of movements is not something that is 'verifiable.' Nonetheless, despite this precariousness and ambiguity, or rather *because of* this precariousness and ambiguity, the type of challenge mounted by contemporary social movements is crucial within 'complex societies.'

Before moving on to the application of Melucci's conception of CSMs to the political actions undertaken in response to the disappearances in Vancouver, I would like to return briefly to Melucci's assertion that movements mount a challenge on 'behalf of society as a whole'. Through this assertion Melucci is *not* saying that movements represent a 'universal' challenge, or even a 'universal' challenge within a particular kind of society. The challenge they pose—and its significance—is inseparable from a specific embedded and temporal location within 'complex' societies. Furthermore, Melucci suggests that he wants to move away from the belief held by Alan Touraine that a single central conflict animates every kind of society. It is somewhat unclear, however, if Melucci succeeds in establishing this distance. As Peyman Vahabzadeh argues:

Despite an acknowledged "critical distance" from Touraine in this respect (Melucci, 1989: 80, n. 2), Melucci still seems to accept Touraine's argument that some movements by essence play a pivotal role that can be notably consequential for the existing social system (615).

I want to suggest that this tension in Melucci's work arises though his evocation of what I have been calling the 'post-structural' conception of social change.

Unlike Marxism, Melucci does not pose a particular type of central conflict between particular actors (e.g. class conflict between the bourgeois and proletariat). In his theory, movements may act as a vehicle of representation for many different types of groups. Nor does he suggest that there is a central conflict typified by a certain set of

goals. Again, and in seeming contrast to the idea of a single central conflict animating society, movements evoke and allow *heterogeneous, mobile, and multiple* forms of action and meaning. Yet, paradoxically, it is these very qualities that are *essential* to contemporary social movements and to other sites privileged through the 'post-structural' conception of change. Melucci's theory, and the 'post-structural' conception of change, may not suggest that there is a certain *type* of central conflict animating contemporary (western) societies; rather they suggest the central conflict is *formal*. There is a conflict between the *forms* perpetuated by our dominant discourses, structure and codes—*homogeneity, stasis, unity*—and their 'other'—*heterogeneity, mobility, and multiplicity*. And it is this conflict Melucci refers to when he asserts movements mount a challenge on 'behalf of society as a whole.'

In this way, one critique of the 'post-structuralist' turn is that while in abstraction it is concerned with the 'exploitation' our dominant rationalities allow, it has very little to offer specific marginalized groups. It does not require a critique on the basis of race, or gender, or class—at least not specifically. This type of theory may construct tools for challenging our hierarchies, but it matters very little to what type of hierarchy they are applied. To return to Melucci, in terms of the challenge movements mount 'on behalf of society as whole', it hardly matters at all whether a particular movement is centred on a solidarity based on gender, ecology or hairstyle, provided the movement allows certain *forms*. Amy Bartholomew and Margit Mayer argue "just as the codes and forms of regulation, which CSMs challenge, are represented by Melucci in monolithic and neutral terms, the movements are presented as unambiguous challenger" (149-150). This, however, should not necessarily mean that this kind of theory has nothing to offer in

terms of thinking about issues of race, class, and gender.

Developing Meluccian analysis together with the political actions taken in response to the disappearances in Vancouver brings together the abstract conceptions of pursuing change through *form* and of challenging our hegemonic rationalities and codes on ‘behalf of society as a whole’ with a specific and concrete ‘event’—an ‘event’ which is far from ‘unambiguous’ and which, to paraphrase Erin Graham, a DTES community worker, is about sexism, racism, and poverty (Mertl). The actions, taken as a case study of Melucci’s analysis, add nuance to his theoretical conception of contemporary social movements and offer a means to explore the ‘post-structural’ conception of change outside of abstraction. Meluccian analysis, in turn, I suggest, offers an alternative way of understanding the potential of the actions taken in response to the disappearances—it offers an alternative way of representing what the actions mean and of representing what is at stake.

* * *

Theory and Practice: The 'Missing' Women Actions

But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is greivable?

Judith Butler

One of the most obvious convergences between Melucci's conception of contemporary social movements and the political actions taken in response to the disappearances in Vancouver centers on women's identity. The Vancouver actions sought to achieve many goals, they targeted many audiences and utilized an extremely wide range of media; yet on a very basic level, all these actions were about women—simply, it is women who have gone missing and it is the public perception of women's significance and value which the actions address and contest. As for Melucci, one of his most prominent examples of a contemporary social movement is of course the women's movement. Yet, more ambiguously, the Vancouver actions also concern the convergence of multiple issues—particularly prostitution and race—which have divided women.²⁸ Thus in many ways, the actions focus on women's identities, some trouble our conceptions of these identities; but they have not served as a unifying, rallying point for women. The actions, accordingly, may be linked to the 'women's movement,' but the connection is by no means unambiguous.

²⁸ In this way, the question has been raised in connection to the missing women, 'where are the feminists?' (Joy, Feminist Media Project).

Indeed, 'there is a connection but it is by no means unambiguous' rather seems to capture the relationship between Melucci's conception of contemporary social movement action and the political actions prompted by Vancouver's missing women. In many ways, the actions have a great deal in common with Melucci's conception of contemporary social movement action. Yet, as is the case with the applicability of any theory, the fit between the two is imperfect; the actions taken in response to the disappearances also deviate from a CSM paradigm in a number of telling ways. This chapter, therefore, is about both these convergences and divergences, and particularly their implications regarding the practical application of a 'post-structural' conception of change. The underlying question I seek to explore, and the question framing my application of Meluccian analysis to the actions taken in Vancouver, is to what extent, if any, the 'event' of the disappearances generates a conceptual or physical space which might 'allow us to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise.'

My application of Melucci's conception of contemporary social movements to the Vancouver actions centers primarily on two aspects of his theory—the *form* of movement action and organization, and the symbolic challenge movements pose to the boundaries and limits of our systems and codes. In terms of the former, it addresses whether the actions take on the *heterogeneous, fluid and multiple* forms Melucci associates with movements. Through summarizing the actions (see Appendix A) in terms of participation, leadership, organization, goals and medium, I conclude that they do exhibit these 'other' forms, if not in quite the same ways Melucci attributes to contemporary social movements. In terms of the latter, my analysis explores the interrelated questions of whether the actions engage in symbolic contestation, and if so, whether this

contestation pushes the boundaries of what our systems and codes allow. Some of the actions taken in response to Vancouver's missing women, I suggest, mount a symbolic challenge to our dominant systems and codes, other do not. Moreover, the actions' potential for this kind of challenge is mediated by a concern with motivating and mobilizing action.

* * *

In many way, the actions taken in response to the disappearances fit very well with Melucci's conception of the composition, organization and mobilization of contemporary social movements, and with his description of movements as "composite action system[s] in which widely differing means, ends and forms of solidarity and organization converge" (1986 28). Particularly, they evoked many of the *forms* Melucci attributes to CSMs.

The actions were directed at a wide range of targets and audiences including the general public (local, national, international) the media, the VPD, the municipal, provincial and federal governments. They also pursued a heterogeneous and shifting collection of goals. Prominent among these were actions undertaken in order to generate awareness of the disappearances and the recognition of them as a 'problem'. These actions were of many different kinds. Family and friends made missing posters for the women and plastered them around the Downtown Eastside (de Vries 202). In early 1999, Jamie Lee Hamiton, a prostitutes' rights activist, dumped sixty-seven pairs of stiletto-heeled shoes on the steps of Vancouver City Hall (Wood). Each pair symbolized one of

the sixty-seven women (according to Hamilton's tally) who had disappeared from the DTES since 1975. This action was also a part of the campaign to persuade the Mayor and the Police Board to offer a \$100 000 reward in the cases of the missing women. Wayne Leng (a friend of Sarah de Vries) worked with several family members of the missing women to convince the 'real crime' television series *America's Most Wanted* to do a story on the missing women. The segment first ran in 1999. Leng also created and maintained the website *MissingPeople.net*. This site is devoted to the missing women, and was created partially to tell their stories and also as a way to facilitate contact between the different parties affected by the disappearances.

Another series of actions were undertaken in an attempt to maintain a public focus on the women themselves and the questions their disappearances raised once the investigation of the Pickton Farm had begun—to maintain the 'missing' frame after the onset of the 'murdered' frame. In this vein, Femke Van Delft, a Vancouver contemporary artist, created *Missing: A Guerilla Mapping Project*. Part of this project involved a photographic series portraying a pair of cast cement legs, modeled after plastic department store legs used to display nylon stocking (Van Delft). Van Delft placed the legs in prominent Vancouver locations, particularly those currently and historically associated with the sex trade. Her impetus, she says, was to critique sensationalist media coverage of the Pickton Trial and the story of the missing women's reduction to a serial killer trope (Van Delft). Moreover, the project was designed to expose society's complicity in maintaining a sexual economy which, she suggests, resulted in the 'event' of the disappearances (Van Delft). In this manner, Van Delft attempted to reestablish a critical awareness of the 'problem' of the missing women. Somewhat similarly, a group

of self-described ‘concerned academics and journalists’, came together to undertake a “feminist intervention in media depictions of missing and murdered women” (Feminist Media Project). They developed a website to serve as a resource for discussion and feminist analysis of the missing women’s cases. The group hoped to encourage critique of—and resistance to—sensationalist media coverage of the Pickton trial reinforcing “stereotypes about women victims of violence and their perpetrators,” as well as to encourage media stories focusing on the missing women themselves and particularly the material and systemic conditions they faced (Feminist Media Project).

Many of the actions were also concerned with memorializing the missing women. Projects of this kind were often undertaken both to honour and remember the missing, and to politicize the disappearances. One campaign involved the organization of a memorial for the women in CRAB Park.²⁹ The memorial consists of a boulder and a bench. The boulder reads:

THE HEART HAS

IN HONOR OF THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE
MURDERED IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE.
MANY WERE WOMEN AND MANY WERE NATIVE
ABORIGINAL WOMEN. MANY OF THESE CASES
REMAIN UNSOLVED. ALL MY RELATIONS.

ITS OWN MEMORY

Dedicated July 29, 1997.
(Cultural Memory Group 47)

²⁹ CRAB is an acronym for ‘create a real accessible beach’, the slogan of a campaign by DTES activists to establish some publicly accessible waterfront in the community.

A plaque (dedicated in 1999) is embedded in the bench and lists the names of several of the missing women.³⁰ . Both boulder and bench are one of many; they blend into the scenery of the park. One of the memorial's intended purposes was to act in lieu of a grave—to offer friends and family a place to mourn and remember their loved ones. In some ways, the memorial is for those who are already aware of its presence. Yet as the Cultural Memory Group notes, it “also serves as a potent site of solidarity and mobilization, at both the personal and political level” (49). It has become a site where advocates for the missing women rally together and an important stop in another more visible action responding to the disappearances—the annual Valentine's Day Women's Memorial March.

Organizers of the Women's Memorial March, which has been held since 1991, state that it is undertaken in order to:

commemorate the women in the Downtown Eastside who die each year due to violence; not just physical violence, but the violence of poverty, homelessness, addictions, and lack of medical care . . . A community of friends and family members led by women . . . move[s] together through the Downtown Eastside, stopping at sites where women have died, to leave a rose in remembrance and do a smudge ceremony for Healing (12th Annual Women's Memorial March)

The memorial march has also involved stopping traffic at the central DTES intersection of Main and Hastings. Through this disruption—this brief (re)appropriation of territory—the marchers assert their presence and through this assertion require the recognition of an often-invisible community. Dara Culhane describes the kind of action and contestation embodied in the march:

In this struggle, visibility and recognition are inseparable from the goals of material survival: these women are engaged in a struggle to stay alive and to change the material and symbolic conditions of existence for women who come after them (595).

³⁰ Maggie de Vries, who was prominently involved in organizing the bench, says those involved chose to include only the names of the missing women whose family had agreed to their inclusion. This also restricted those included on the basis of who she had contact with (de Vries 208).

The Women's Memorial March was initiated by the First Nations community, and, in many ways, it is their jurisdiction.

Other memorial projects involved a series of fundraising campaigns collecting donations towards rehabilitation and treatment centres for women with addictions. They sought to commemorate the 'missing' by working to aid women living in similar circumstances. Still others included a temporary memorial to the women at the Pickton Farm, "Vanished Voices"—a website created by Deborah Jardine (the mother of Angela Jardine) with a page devoted to remembering each of the missing women—and many ad hoc memorial ceremonies.

Just as the particular purposes and goals of the actions varied greatly, they were also undertaken using a diverse range of media including: letters, posters, websites, poems, paintings, sketches, performance art, music, theatre, books, quilts, reports, videos, articles, reports, protests, marches, rides, swims, fundraising campaigns, formal and informal memorials, vigils and lawsuits. In part, this heterogeneous collection of media reflects the mixture of institutional and non-institutional—or to put it in Meluccian terms, political and cultural—material and symbolic targets at which the actions were directed.

These actions or mobilizations were primarily ad hoc and undertaken by a diverse and fluctuating range of participants including: friends and family of the missing women, indigenous groups, women's groups, DTES community organizations, sex-worker's advocacy groups, a variety of artists, academics, prison inmates, high school drama students, members of the media and the general public along with a sprinkling of police officers, and government officials from the municipal, provincial and federal levels. Participation in the actions, to put it in Meluccian terms, was primarily 'short-term and

reversible.' Commitment levels varied considerably among the individuals and groups involved. Some took part only in a particular action; some for only a certain period; others in a number of actions over more extended periods; while still others moved in and out of active participation at a variety of different times. For many participants, especially those who knew the women personally, their drive to act politically and publicly was mediated by the need to grieve—to come to terms with their own private losses. Their grief, then, was sometimes a motivation to act and sometimes a motivation to withdraw.

Similarly, the actions were not coordinated by a single, central organization or leadership structure. At times they were undertaken in isolation from each other, at times in conversation with each other, and at times with a certain degree of integration with other efforts; yet the coordination that existed between actions and actors was rarely formalized. Rather, different individuals and groups moved in and out of leadership roles, and different actors and networks came together at various times and in various ways. Many organizations took part in the actions, but as participants and not as structuring forces. The actions themselves did not result from, or in, their own organizational structure or a consolidated movement organization.

For many of the organizations that became involved in the actions, however, the 'missing women' were emblematic of their own particular causes—in particular the women were represented as an example of problems regarding prostitution. For PACE (Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education) and for PEERS (Prostitution Empowerment Education Resource Society), advocacy and support groups for women working in the sex trade, the women exemplified the need for more support services, particularly for those involved in survival sex. For these groups, the 'missing women'

also underlined the need to decriminalize prostitution. On the other hand, for the Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's shelter, "a volunteer feminist collective," the 'missing women' exemplified the inherent violence and sexism of prostitution; they exemplified the need to make prostitution illegal in Canada and to legislate harsher penalties for 'johns' (Vancouver Rape Relief, Joy). This rift over prostitution, a traditional divide among feminists, has also been echoed among many of the other participants in the actions.³¹

The missing women also became emblematic of the discrimination and violence, particularly sexualized violence, faced by First Nations women in Canada. For example, the missing women were a potent tool in the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) efforts to lobby the federal government to provide funding for the "Sisters in Spirit" Campaign—an initiative to put a face to every name on a list of over 500 missing or murdered aboriginal women from across Canada, and to address issues of racialized and sexualized violence (Sisters in Spirit).

In terms of participation, leadership, structure, goals and medium, then, the mobilizations may be interpreted as allowing 'other' forms—as expressing and evoking *heterogeneity*, *mobility* and *multiplicity*. Yet for Melucci and his conception of contemporary social movements, taking on these forms is not enough. A part of what distinguishes CSM action from merely fragmentary and poorly organized collective action is the movement actors' understanding and utilization of the movements' form 'self-consciously as a communicative gesture'. The actions taken in response to Vancouver's missing women, I suggest, primarily do not fulfill this criteria. Vancouver's

³¹ Maggie deVries, for example, calls for the decriminalization of prostitution in her book *Missing Sarah* (de Vries). Rick and Lynn Frey (the parents of Marnie Frey) alternatively, have publicly objected to anyone using their daughter's legacy to attempt to legalize prostitution (Frey).

missing women were members of a particularly disadvantaged segment of society. Their addictions, poverty, engagement in prostitution, and for some, their Indigeneity converged to result in their extreme marginalization; and subsequently, they had very little social and political capital. This position was also reflected in the social and material resources available to their advocates. As Elain Allan, who worked at a women's drop-in centre in the DTES, said: "women in the sex-trade are a hard sell" (Matas 2006b).

Participants in the actions were often divided over how to interpret the women's 'deviant' characteristics, and the actions, it may be said, took on 'other' forms because there was hardly any other choice. The 'missing' women evoked many controversial and divisive issues, resulting in a wide range of actions with a heterogeneous and shifting set of goals. To quote the Culture Memory Group regarding efforts to memorialize the women:

The stakes in these efforts and disagreements are raw and immediate: how to honour the women's lives while marking the violence of their deaths; how to specify individual victims while including all abused women—across lines of race, ethnicity, class, economic situation—in remembrance . . . how to make a memorial publicly acceptable . . . *and* politically effective (Cultural Memory Group 30-31).³²

There was simply no ready consensus and few resources around which to organize and structure more coordinated and strategic action.

Moreover, participants' commitment to the actions was 'short-term and reversible' partially due to frustration and exhaustion caused by the difficulty of producing tangible results. Indeed, as far as material goals, and particular major fund raising projects, were concerned, the actions were largely unsuccessful. During the investigation of the Pickton property, there was a surge in public support for projects and fundraising efforts commemorating the women, but this was short-lived. The Missing

³² The italics are mine.

Women's Legacy Society, for instance, undertook a campaign to fund a recovery centre in Maple Ridge for women from the Downtown Eastside dealing with addiction-related issues. The plan was eventually abandoned due to a lack of funds. The campaign's organizer Valerie Hughs, (the sister of Keri Koski) summed it up this way: "We were so touched by the response at first . . . We based our plans on the continuation of the response. We learned that the media and the public have a very short attention span" (Matas 2006a). A second group, the Buried Heart Society, also planned to open a recovery facility in the DTES primarily funded by the proceeds from a celebrity compilation CD. Its estimated proceeds from the CD totaled around \$25 000, far short of the sum required to run the facility (Matas 2006a). Similarly in 2005, Marlene Trick and Carol Martin, who work with women from the DTES, announced a plan to construct the Lasting Memorial, a memorial to the women costing \$100 000 and scheduled to be unveiled in the summer of 2007 (Burrows).³³ To date, the project has yet to be completed.

Thus, actors explored alternative avenues of action (particularly symbolic action) partially because more traditional channels—more political channels in Meluccian terms—were closed to them. The actions primarily engaged *heterogeneity, fluidity, and multiplicity* not as a conscious choice, but through the dictation of circumstance.

This does not mean, however, that Melucci's conception of contemporary social movements is of no use in analyzing the actions in Vancouver. What Meluccian analysis offers with regard to the actions is a different perspective on their potential—it suggests that there may be something more to these actions than inadequate organization, frustration and fragmentation. Actors and actions may indeed be 'forced' through circumstance to engage with 'other' forms, but it is through this engagement that they

³³ Money raised from the Valentine's Day Memorial Marches was earmarked for this memorial (Burrows).

may find new space to mount challenges to our dominant systems, structures and codes. The actions, like 'deviance', "reveal a possible distance from dominant 'reason'" (Melucci 1986 130-131). Meluccian analysis alerts us to the possible potential for social change in the Vancouver actions. It is consequently with this in mind that I turn to the symbolic contestation of the actions.

* * *

The 'missing' women, particularly during the period between when the 'event' of the disappearances first began to enter public consciousness and when charges were laid against William Pickton, represent, in Meluccian terms, a 'problem raised but as yet unresolved.' They are a 'problem' which the system did not immediately recognize or respond to, and as a result, a certain kind of space was created through the 'missing' frame for contesting what the disappearances could mean—for questioning what kind of 'problem' the disappearances represent and of what is at stake in this 'event'. In many ways, the missing women formed a bridge between Vancouver and its 'other' neighbourhood—between its 'respectable' citizens and their 'other'. At least at times, the actions rendered the DTES and its residents visible in something other than 'deviant' terms. As a result, Melora Koepke suggests, the disappearances resulted in "a crisis of meaning in a city where, for years, the very absence of [the women] had to be insisted on" (Koepke). The inattention and inaction of the system resulted, then, in the types of conditions that Melucci suggests favor the mobilization of contemporary social movements—that create the space for a symbolic challenge. The price of this space

however, should not be forgotten: sixty-seven (officially) missing women, twenty-six of whom, it has been confirmed were murdered.

In many ways, symbolic struggles feature prominently in the actions undertaken in response to the disappearances. Indeed, the public representation and perception of the women's identities may be understood as the dominant field of contestation of the actions. Though many of the actions undertaken in response to the disappearances had specific strategic and material goals outside of influencing the way the women were represented—some were undertaken in order to pressure the VPD into assigning more officers to investigate the disappearances, some to raise money for rehabilitation facilities for women in the DTES, some to raise money for memorials to the women etc.—these goals were mediated through the representation of the women's identities. Actors involved generally understood that before resources would be devoted to their causes, the women had to be rendered both visible and valuable. In this way, what united many of the actions was their implicit or explicit challenge of how the women were represented—as prostitutes, as addicts, as poor, as Indigenous—as 'unworthy'.

The actions not only addressed meaning and the symbolic, then, but they also exhibited two of the primary characteristics Melucci attributes to contemporary social movements: solidarity and contestation. They were based on solidarity around the assertion of the women's value, and the contestation of a set of normative assumptions identifying the women as 'deviant' and thus undeserving.

The solidarity animating the DTES actions, however, is perhaps not entirely of the same kind Melucci associates with CSMs, for it is based on the contestation of a particular set of normative judgments regarding value, as opposed to a specific

conception of a collective identity. Though a certain consensus developed around the conception of the women as 'worthy', solidarity among the different participants was far weaker regarding how the women's 'deviant' characteristics should be interpreted and what part they should or should not play in representing the women's 'identity'. In this way, the solidarity uniting the actions was rather less consolidated than that based around a positive conception of collective identity.

Yet given the actions exhibit contestation and solidarity, what of the third characteristic Melucci attributes to movements? Do the actions undertaken in response to Vancouver's missing women represent meanings or identities that the 'system' does not allow? Do they represent meanings and identities that pose a symbolic challenge to the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems and codes? I suggest that the heterogeneity and mobility animating the organization and structure of the actions also applies regarding this attribute: some of the actions mount an outright challenge to the limits of our systems, some mount a partial challenge, while some actually reinforce these limits. Moreover, in many cases, aspects of the actions which might have resulted in a symbolic challenge of our dominant systems and codes were mediated by the attempt to achieve certain strategic goals, or simply by the need to motivate action. As Adrienne Burk remarks, "it is as though the local activists were willing to endure the framing of their issues by even sensationalist global media if it might aid in finding these women" (328). To use Sidney Tarrow's phrase, the actions were often caught in the 'paradox of the symbolic politics of social movements.' They fluctuated between

developing dynamic symbols that will create new identities and bring about change, and proffering symbols that are familiar to people who are rooted in their own cultures The major symbolic dilemma of social movements is to mediate between inherited symbols that are familiar, but lead to passivity, and new ones that are electrifying, but may be too unfamiliar to lead to action. (Tarrow 106-107)

This fluctuation, I suggest—along with the actions’ relationship to systemic boundaries and limits—is intricately linked to the strategies actors used in order to represent the missing women as ‘worthy’. Many of the political actions taken in response to the disappearances and asserting the missing women’s worth were animated by three often-overlapping strategies: they asserted the women as valuable *regardless* of their ‘deviant’ characteristics, *despite* their ‘deviant’ characteristics and *including* their ‘deviant’ characteristics.

The first of these strategies invokes the women’s status as ‘human beings’ and is based on the assertion that all human life is intrinsically worthy of both protection and concern, regardless of identity and regardless of ‘lifestyle’. An editorial in *The Vancouver Sun* typifies the essence of this narrative:

Virtually all our social and political institutions are guilty of marginalizing ‘junkies’ and ‘whores.’ And all our institutions—the police most particularly, where these disappeared women are concerned—must never forget that every human life really matters. (“The lesson is every human life really matters”).

Or from another angle, as Amnesty International’s report on violence and discrimination against Indigenous women in Canada, puts it:

When a woman is targeted for violence because of her gender or because of her indigenous identity, her fundamental rights have been abused. And when she is not offered an adequate level of protection by state authorities because of her gender or because of her Indigenous identity, those rights have been violated . . . The concept of human rights is based on the recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of every human being (Amnesty International).

In various ways, the assertion of equal concern and respect for all human beings animated most of the actions taken in response to the disappearances, including those invoking the assertions that the women are valuable *despite*, and *including*, their ‘deviant’ characteristics. However, as I suggested in Chapter One, what the ‘event’ of the missing women makes clear is that this ideal is rarely exhibited within our social systems and

discourses. Rather, a series of normative assumptions generate a hierarchy of values—a hierarchy of people and identities influenced by sex, race, wealth and ‘lifestyle’ (among other things). Unequal treatment is the norm, not the exception. Asserting the ideal of equal humanity, it would seem, is not enough to problematize the ‘event’ of the missing women.

Accordingly, narratives and actions evoking the second of the strategies sought to represent the women as valuable by focussing on other, less ‘deviant’ aspects of their identity. In particular, this involved presenting the women using relational terms—as sisters, mothers and daughters—as women like ‘you and me’. It involved attempting to represent the women not simply as ‘human’, but as ‘good’ women. Actions and narratives evoking this strategy focused on highlighting the women’s ‘innocent’, ‘sympathetic’ qualities, and through this focus, they placed their ‘bad’, ‘deviant’ qualities under erasure. As Jack Cummer, the grandfather of Andrea Joesbury, noted, the women were often represented as “murdered children” (Matas 2003). They were represented in ways which negated large portions of their lives, particularly their adult lives and their experiences in the Downtown Eastside. Jiwani and Young argue:

The description of the missing women as mothers, daughters, and sisters serves a twofold function. On the one hand, it makes these women more like “us.” It rescues them from a place of degeneracy to a zone of normality. On the other hand, it conforms to the dominant hegemonic, in that the only women who can be rescued or are worth saving are mothers, daughters, and sisters—women like us. (904)

Thus, by representing the women as ‘women like us’, these actions do not seek to render women valuable by challenging the normative assumptions through which ‘value’ is socially assigned; rather they seek to bring the women back within the bounds of ‘respectability’. Moreover, they define ‘respectable’ women as mothers and daughters, and ‘respectable’ space for women as the familial home (Pitman 181). In so doing, this

strategy for re-inscribing the missing women as valuable reinforces our normative assumptions regarding 'deviance' and 'respectability'.

This way of representing the women, however, animated many of the actions taken in response to the disappearances; it was also the primary news filter for media stories critiquing the lack of public concern and systemic action regarding the disappearances. It figured prominently in the early actions and news stories which first transformed the disappearances into an 'event' (Jiwani and Young 904-905). Indeed, this strategy seems to have been central to that transformation.

One action that embodies many aspects of this strategy was the efforts of Project Eden—an American group devoted to making "facial reconstructions for Law Enforcement Agencies that do not have access to, or funding for a qualified Forensic Artist"—to create alternative images of the missing women as a tribute and memorial to the women (Project Eden). A familiar criticism of the media coverage of the disappearances, and particularly of the VPD missing poster, focused on the pictures they used (England 296). The missing women were represented in mug-shot-style images, often looking disheveled and strung-out. Consequently, their pictorial representation seemed to support the reduction of the women to their 'deviant' qualities, to their status as 'known drug-users and sex-trade workers'. In response, the artists from Project Eden created a series of sketches of the women: a series of alternative representations "revealing the women behind their grim mug shots" (Colbert 2005). As Project Eden founder, Todd Mathews put it, the mug shots were not "a true reflection of the women's inner spirits: they didn't reveal that these women were mothers, sisters and aunts, with families, friends and unfulfilled dreams" (Colbert 2005). Accordingly, the sketches were

an attempt to capture some of this ‘inner spirit’—“to make the women look as what they might have been” (Missing Pieces).

Todd Mathews describes his vision for the sketches this way: “I gave the direction to give the sketches of the ladies a Mona Lisa Smile, [to] make them look pleasant,” and, to style their hair nicely in a “reflection of happier times” (Missing Pieces, Culbert 2005). Another artist working on the sketches says he imagined how the women could have appeared when they were “happy, healthy and safe” (Culbert 2005). He continues:

I saw through the damage that had been done physically to them. It's obvious their diets were bad, and drugs had taken their toll on some of them. I pretty much take that out -- it's like an age-regression. . . . I wanted to try to make them look as lifelike as possible, in a more innocent time (Culbert 2005).

The mugs shots, Mathews reflects, were not the women’s “real face”, an echo of the assertion that ‘known drug addict and sex-trade worker’ is not the women’s ‘real’ identity.

Yet in contesting this image of the women and this portrayal of their identity, the sketches suggest that how the women ‘really’ are—how valuable women really are—is ‘smiling’, ‘happy’, ‘pleasant’, and ‘innocent’, and what the women ‘really’ are—what valuable women really are—are ‘mothers’, ‘sisters’, and ‘daughters’. And indeed, it is likely that these characteristics do reflect parts of many of the women’s experiences and lives. As do their ‘deviant’ characteristics. Yet characterizations of Project Eden’s artists also have something else in common: they are uncontroversial and unquestionably respectable—they are very much allowed. Given these qualities, the sketches do not represent the women in ways that challenge how we assign meanings and values to people. To use Tarrow’s terms, they represent the women using ‘symbols that are familiar but lead to passivity.’

An action that exemplifies the third strategy, which represents the women as valuable *including* their 'deviant' characteristics, is the Montreal Mural: a three-storey high painting dedicated to Vancouver's missing women, located on the wall of the Native Friendship Centre in downtown Montreal. It was unveiled on September 18, 2003. The mural, created by the Living Monument Mural Collective—an ad hoc group organized through activist networks and personal connections including individuals from the Native Friendship Centre and from STELLA (a Montreal based advocacy group “by and for sex trade workers”)—displays a scene of violence and healing in vibrant color:

The top third shows boats floating through a starry sky: Ojibway spirit-boats (as the accompanying text explains) carrying souls through the stars, each of which represents one of Vancouver's 'missing women.' Embedded in each star is a piece of glass from the shore of the Restigouche River that runs along the land of the Listuguj First Nation in Quebec. Below are the silhouettes of the Vancouver and Montreal skylines. The bottom third depicts five figures of various races and genders -- a composite of everyone who contributed to the mural-- holding a red banner. On the banner in English, French, Inuit, and Mohawk is written "We Honour the More Than 60 Sex Workers Most of Them Indigenous Who Were Killed or Disappeared in Vancouver." (Cultural Memory Group 171)

Under these images is an explanation of their meaning and the mural's dedication (again in English, French, Inuit and Mohawk). The English text reads:

WE PAY HOMMAGE TO THESE WOMEN, VICTIMS OF
THE COMFORT AND INDIFFERENCE OF A SOCIETY
THAT WOULD SOMETIMES RATHER SEE THEM AS
SOMETHING TO BE ELIMINATED.

THIS MURAL IS ALSO DEDICATED TO THEIR FRIENDS,
THEIR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, TO THEIR LOVERS
AND LOVED ONES.

YOU WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN.
(Cultural Memory Group, 171)

The approach of this memorial project, is rather different than that of Project Eden: the Montreal Mural sets an explicitly challenging tone by offering its own response to the question of who is responsible for Vancouver's missing and murdered women.

The mural's dedication implicates society as a whole—through its 'comfort and indifference'—in the disappearances and in the construction of the missing women as 'disposable.' Yet it also does something else. It represents the missing women using both their 'deviant' characteristics and their relationships to family, friends and loved ones. The mural honours the women as sex workers and Indigenous, yet suggests these characteristics do not represent the women's entire identity. It thereby challenges not only the reduction of the women to their 'deviant' characteristics but also the normative assumptions regarding value which position these characteristics as 'deviant.' In Meluccian terms, therefore, the mural represents a challenge on behalf of an identity the system does not allow—it represents the missing women as sex trade workers and as Indigenous, *and* as valuable. Rather than trying to make the women 'respectable,' 'good', and 'white', it challenges the normative assumptions entangled in these terms. It allows the women an identity that extends across categories.

In this way, the actions that represented the women as valuable *including* their 'deviant' characteristics challenge the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems and codes. They challenge the alignment of 'prostitute', 'deviant', and 'Indigenous' and also the alignment 'mother' 'respectable' and 'white,' while allowing the missing women an identity which is heterogeneous and mobile.

* * *

If the political actions taken in response to Vancouver's missing women exhibit looser *forms* of meaning and organization, but primarily do not engage 'self-consciously' with these forms—if they are based on solidarity, but a solidarity formed around value

rather than a positive conception of a collective identity—if only some of them push the boundaries and limits of our dominant systems and codes—has the ‘event’ of the disappearances generated a conceptual or physical space which might ‘allow us to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise’? I suggest that through the questioning of meanings, identities and discourses inherent in the ‘missing’ women’s frame, and the *heterogeneous, mobile, and multiple* forms of the political actions taken in response to the disappearances, the ‘event’ has generated such a space; but, that this space is small, temporary and rather precarious.

In her analysis of the early media stories on the disappearances, Beverly Pitman suggests that in early 1999 the representational work undertaken by “the women’s supporters, Downtown Eastside activists, and newspaper communists” resulted in an emotional and moral response from a broad spectrum of Vancouverites—in the emergence of an “uncommon kind of community” (Pitman 176). It created a space where it may be possible to act differently. However, the broadcast of the *America’s Most Wanted* segment overshadowed this representational work by recasting the story in sensationalist and hegemonic terms—in what Pitman labels a ‘Jack-the-Ripper’ template. She concludes the ‘uncommon community’ was dissolved. Likewise, my own analysis of the ‘event’ of the disappearances in terms of its representation through the ‘missing’ and ‘murdered’ frames suggests that the latter primarily displaced the former resulting in erasure of the questions and issues raised by the ‘missing’ frame. The space created for different actions, meanings and identities, it seems, is always in danger of collapse through the reassertion of our dominant modes of representation.

Moreover, this space is partially produced through a certain distance from dominant rationalities and codes—a distance which also corresponds to a separation from large-scale, coordinated systemic action, and consequently from our primary networks for coordinating the distribution of resources. Again, Vancouver's missing women represent an extremely marginalized population living in an extremely marginalized space. The need for material resources in this space, and for this population, is particularly pressing; the cost of pursuing a space to 'act otherwise' real and immediate. Those involved in the political actions responding to the disappearances sometimes made the pragmatic decision to pursue the strategy of representation most likely to produce resources.

Yet part of the nuance brought to the 'post-structural' conception of change by the 'event' of the missing women is the suggestion that systemic modes of representation or action and the space to act and conceive otherwise are not mutually exclusive: they cannot be reduced to an 'either-or' relationship. In many ways, it was the representation of the missing women in early news stories as valuable *despite* their 'deviant' characteristics which resulted in the recognition of the disappearances as a problem outside of the DTES—which resulted in the disappearances becoming a 'problem raised but as yet unresolved.' The attention generated by such representation contributed to the creation of a space through which systemic boundaries and limits were rendered visible and contestable. And, though this space was often eclipsed by the reassertion of representations of the women fitting within our dominant structures and codes—the representation of the disappearances as spectacle, the onset of the 'murdered' frame, the pragmatic decision to attempt to represent the women in the way most likely to result in positive publicity and an increased allocation of resources—it still allowed for a

challenge of our dominant normative assumptions regarding women with ‘high-risk’ lifestyles. The ‘event’ of the disappearances afforded women with addictions and engaging in prostitution a different kind of visibility—a less ‘deviant’ visibility—to those ‘outside’ of the DTES. At least at times.

The ‘event’ of the disappearances, and very likely this ‘different kind of visibility’, may also be linked to an increased institutional and systemic focus on the DTES. Issues of addiction, prostitution and poverty began to figure more prominently in civic politics, and some attempts were made to explore these issues including the voices and perspectives of DTES community groups, aboriginal groups, and sex workers organizations along with those of the local business community, neighbourhood associations, and police (Living in Community).³⁴ The ‘event’ also resulted in some modest increases in the resources allocated to the DTES, and particularly to women in the DTES. In one instance in 2003, VanCity Credit Union awarded WISH (Women’s Information and Safe House) \$ 1 000 000 to fund a 24 hour drop-in centre for sex workers in the Downtown Eastside (Matas 2006b).³⁵ In this way, the space created through the ‘event’ to ‘act otherwise’ does not imply isolation from our systems, but rather an interaction with them—an interaction which serves as a constant threat to such spaces and also as an expression of their political potential.

³⁵ However, even with this award, WISH would have to consider 18 different locations for the drop-in centre before finding a partner that would lease to them (Matas 2006b).

Conclusion:

This thesis is about the intertwining of empirical and theoretical threads. The former, the ‘event’ of the disappearances, suggests a number of ways that our definitions, particularly our forms of definition, relate to the kinds of action we undertake. It emphasizes a relationship between clear definition—reducing uncertainty and restricting questions—and mobilizing strategic, coordinated action. The ‘event’ of the disappearances also gives some indication of the types of meanings and identities our systems do not allow. These identities are not the so-called ‘deviant’ identities; indeed the identity “known drug-user and sex-trade worker” is very much allowed. What is not, is for a “known drug-user and sex-trade worker” to take on other dimensions—to be recognized as having an identity that traverses our dominant categories regarding different ‘types’ of women and that challenges the ways values are attached to these categories.

The former, the theoretical thread, explores the ‘post-structural’ conception of change—the pursuit of change through challenging the boundaries and limits of our structures and codes in the hopes of modifying our realm of possibility. Implied in this thread is the assertion that an epistemological choice—indeed a normative choice—to seek out and encourage looser categories and a little more uncertainty is central to undertaking change.

What developing a 'post-structural' conception of change together with the 'event' of the missing women indicates, I suggest, is not that this conception of change cannot be or should not be applied outside of abstraction, but rather that encouraging spaces which may allow us 'to act—and indeed to conceive—otherwise' requires concessions. It requires giving up a level of efficiency and coordination in undertaking action, and it requires that we live with a greater amount of uncertainty, and likely frustration.

Yet, in turn, what a 'post-structural' lens brings to the 'event' of the disappearances is a theoretical framework with the space for the intersectionality of race, class and gender. It provides a framework for a politics where issues, identities and actions are allowed—indeed encouraged—to reach across categories. In particular, a 'post-structural' lens requires a reevaluation of our representations and interpretations of sex-work and addiction, and of the perspective that they represent a 'problem' to be resolved. From this stance, sex-work and addiction are what is wrong with the missing women, they are why the police failed to investigate the disappearances adequately, and they are what must be 'fixed'—through providing more treatment facilities and support systems for women suffering from addiction and engaged in the sex-trade, through acknowledging the inherent violence of prostitution, through asserting that the women's 'real' identities do not include these 'deviant' characteristics—in order to solve the 'problem' of the disappearances. Through a 'post-structural' lens, addiction and sex-work are not something to be erased, for they "reveal a possible distance from dominant 'reason'" (Melucci 1986 130-131). They do not easily fit into our dominant social narratives, and accordingly provide a way to make visible the boundaries and limits of

our systems and codes. This is not to say that in order to modify our realm of possibility, we should all develop addictions or enter the sex-trade. A 'post-structural' lens simply positions addiction and sex-work as something to be engaged and explored rather than negated; as something which may enable us to better understand both those identities which are not allowed, along with the meanings and powers associated with them, and those which our systems and structures foster and encourage.

Appendix A: The Political Actions

Project Eden

Who: The project was undertaken by an American group devoted to making “facial reconstructions for Law Enforcement agencies that do not have access to, or funding for a qualified Forensic Artist.” Todd Mathews and Wayne Leng spearheaded the project.

When: 2004?

What: A series of sketches of the missing women’s faces

Goal: To represent the women as what they ‘might have been’ and to contrast the mug shot style images of the women in the press and on the VPD missing poster.

“The Forgotten”

Who: Vancouver based artist Pamela Masik

When: On-going

What: 69 (when completed) large-scale 8x10 portraits of the missing women’s faces. “Each enormous portrait is densely layered with powerful brushwork, collaged with personal information and materials, slashed with deep cuts, sewn with stitches, and emblazoned with text written by Masik”(Johnson).

Goal: The portraits are designed to force the viewer to see the faces and hear the voices of an often invisible population—to force the viewer to recognize the marginalization and violence of their lives.

“The Profession of Hurt”

Who: Zoe Pawlak, a British Columbian artist

When: Exhibited in 2007

What: One part of the exhibition is an interpretive and semi-abstract series of painting of the Pickton farm landscape that “contrast light and dark areas and juxtapose expensive spaces with impressions of confusion and claustrophobia” (Perspectives on Pickton Art Show). The other part is a series of portraits of the 26 women Pickton was charged with killing.

Goal: To contest the horror of media stories on the trial and to emphasize the individuality and humanity of the missing women.

“A Room Full of Missing Women”

Who: Betty Kovacic, a Prince George Visual Artist

When: Began in 2002

What: A series of portraits of Vancouver’s missing women and of the women who have gone missing along

Northern BC's Highway 16. The portraits are each to be accompanied by a piece of music and a selection of poetry and prose.

Goal: "To present the woman in the portrait as a real person with a history, a pool of feelings, an active dream life instead of a dispassionate mug shot" (Prince George Artist Paints). To reestablish the women as a presence, in contrast to media coverage of the Pickton Trial and to represent them as individuals.

"Missing: A Guerilla Mapping Project"

Who: Femke Van Delft, a Vancouver multimedia Artist
When: Began 2003

What: The installation has several parts. The artist made a pair of cast concrete legs modeled after the legs department stores use to display nylons. She took a series photographs of the legs in what she considers different 'sites of complicity' in Vancouver's sexual economy. Another part of the project involved leaving the legs to go 'missing' and placing newspaper adds for their return.

Goal: "The news of a serial killer . . . allowed local citizens the mistaken consolation of absolving themselves from responsibility for such incidents of violence and for the conditions that perpetuate their occurrence. Van Delft wants to challenge this as too-easy relief; her aim is to "critically map out our collective responsibility" for and in these crimes" (Granzow and Dean 111).

"i have a name"

Who: Drama Class from Dover Bay High School in Nanaimo

When: 2004

What: A play based on the stories of the missing women and preformed by female drama students from Dover Bay High School

Goal: To explore the "theme of sexual exploitation" (Chamberlain). The proceeds from the performances were donated to PEERS

"67 Shawls"

Who: Kati Campbell, a Vancouver Artist

When: Exhibited 2004

What: 67 Shawls embroidered with text inscribing the meaning of the missing women's names to be delivered to each of the missing women's mothers after the exhibition.

Goal: to create a physical marker of remembrance and to

acknowledge the grief of the women relatives in a way that does not add media spectacle: "They're meant to be something one can wrap oneself in . . . as consolation, and a kind of mirror image of the act of holding an infant in one's arms" (Laurence).

"Vigil: The Named and Unnamed"

Who: Artist, Rebecca Belmore

When: Performed 2002

What: "In *Vigil* Belmore performs a series of intense and labored actions, including scrubbing the sidewalk with soapy water, yelling out the names of the missing women she has written in black ink on her arms, and pulling long-stem roses with their thorns through her lips (typically an offering left at memorial sites). She also lights candles for the women in this vigil, enlisting the help of an audience member who continues the ritual as she proceeds to nail her blood red dress to a nearby post. Belmore stretches the fabric of her dress with all her body weight in movements indicative of trauma, violently attempting to separate her body from this external trapping." (Neville 53)

Goal: To reflect and express the tragedy of the missing women and, more broadly, violence against women and the history of suffering among Indigenous people.

"Missing Women's Legacy Society."

Who: Friends, family and supporters of the missing women. The president of the society was Valerie Hughes

When: 2002- 2006?

What: A non-profit society created to raise funds for Legacy House, a recovery home for women dealing with addictions and involved in the sex-trade which was to be opened in Maple Ridge. The project collapsed due to a lack of funds. The societies fund-raising efforts included a swimathon undertaken by Erin McGrath, the sister of Leigh Miner, a walk from Campbell River to Courtney organized by Rick Frey, a cycling tour, and a quilt auction among other efforts.

Goal: To commemorate the missing women by striving to help women living in similar circumstances

"Missing"

Who: Susan Musgrave, Brad Prevedoros, Amber Smith, Jack Cummer

When: 2006

- What:** A song featuring lyrics written by Susan Musgrave in memory of the missing women. Musgrave was asked to write the lyrics by Jack Cummer in memory of his grand-daughter
Goal: To raise money for Haven Society, a non-profit organization helping women escape violence and sexual exploitation
- “The Buried Heart Society”**
- Who:** Musician Wyckham Porteous
When: 2002
What: A non-profit society set up to raise money to open a treatment facility overseen by the Via Nova Transition Society for addicted women in the DTES. The facility was to be primarily funded by a compilation CD featuring Colin James, Barenaked Ladies singer Steven Page, Gord Downie of Tragically Hip, Jim Cuddy of Blue Rodeo, Neil Osborne of 54-40 and other musicians.
Goal: Commemorate the missing women through seeking to aid others living in similar circumstances
- “Spirits Rising Memorial Society”**
- Who:** non-profit organization (?)
When: 2007
What: a 16 week educational course providing 12 ‘at-risk’ Indigenous women and youth with a living allowances while they worked to create a totem pole to commemorate the missing women. Funding for the program is primarily from the federal government.
Goal: To remember the missing women, pursue healing through the carving, and to offer financial assistance, training, and life skills to women and youth at risk.
- “Sereena’s House”**
- Who:** Atira Women’s Resouce Society, a non-profit organization “committed to the work of ending violence against women through providing direct service, as well as working to increase awareness of and education around the scope and impact on our communities of men’s violence against women and children.” (Atira)
When: Opening announced 2006
What: A 57 unit single-room housing facility for DTES women who have been victims of violence. The facility is named after Sereena Abotsway
Goal: Provide services for women who have been victims of violence

**“Valentines Day
Women’s Memorial
March”**

Who: Indigenous women’s groups, friends, family and supporters of the missing women

When: Annually since 1991

What: A march led by women which moves through the DTES stopping at sites where women have disappeared or been victims of violence in order to remember the women and perform a healing ceremony.

Goal: to “commemorate the women in the Downtown Eastside who die each year due to violence; not just physical violence, but the violence of poverty, homelessness, addictions, and lack of medical care” (12th Annual Women’s Memorial March).

**“CRAB Park
Memorial”**

Who: Friends and Family of the some of the missing women, DTES community organizations, First Nations Groups. The spokesperson for the organizers was Don Larson

When: The memorial boulder was dedicated in 1997 and the bench in 1999

What: A memorial to the missing women built in CRAB Park on the edge of the DTES. The memorial consists of a boulder and a bench.

Goals: To commemorate the missing women and to provide a space for their friends and family to remember and mourn them.

“Montreal Mural”

Who: The project was undertaken by the Living Monument Mural Collective, "an ad hoc group forged through activist networks and personal connections, collaborated with the Coalition for the Rights of Sex Workers", along with individuals from the Native Friendship Centre and Stella. (Cultural Memory Group)

When: The mural was officially unveiled September 18, 2003

What: A brightly colored three storey high mural depicting scenes of violence and healing and dedicated in Vancouver’s missing women.

Goal: To commemorate the missing women and to protest the ‘social indifference’ which the mural suggests allowed the disappearances.

“Vanished Voices”

Who: Deborah Jardine

When: site launched in 2001

- What:** a website launched to commemorate the missing women including specific memorial pages for some of the women
Goal: Remember the missing, and to record “how the system miserably failed us and numerous families suffering in the same situation” (Vanished Voices).
- “Lasting Memorial”**
Who: Announced by Marlene Trick and Carol Martin, community workers from the DTES
When: the memorial was announced in 2005 and was supposed to be unveiled in 2007. It has not been completed to date.
What: a permanent memorial to the missing women slated to cost \$100 000. Some of the funds for this project were raised through the Valentines Day Women’s Memorial March
Goal: To commemorate the women through a permanent and prominent memorial.
- “Sisters in Spirit Campaign”**
Who: Undertaken by the Native Women’s Association of Canada in collaboration with Indigenous women’s groups and the federal government.
When: Began in 2005
What: A “five-year research, education and policy initiative . . . undertaking qualitative (life histories) and quantitative research on racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women with cooperating families who have female family members that are missing or murdered, in order to gain a better understanding of circumstances, root causes and trends . . . NWAC will work with participating families and the community to develop a policy agenda in order to influence required changes with government and community” (Sisters in Spirit).
Goal: Address violence directed against Indigenous women—particularly racialized and sexualized violence.
- “Feminist Media Project”**
Who: A “group of concerned academics and journalists” (Feminist Media Project). The website is under the direction of Dr. Mary Lynn Young of the University of British Columbia School of Journalism.
When: launched 2007
What: “A feminist intervention in media depictions of missing and murdered women, and the related trial of

Robert Pickton in Vancouver, British Columbia” (Feminist Media Project). The project sponsors a website designed to provide a resource for feminist analysis of the ‘event’ of the disappearances and the ensuing trial
Goal: The group hoped to encourage critique of—and resistance to—sensationalist media coverage of the Pickton trial reinforcing “stereotypes about women victims of violence and their perpetrators,” as well as to encourage media stories focusing on the missing women themselves and particularly the material and systemic conditions they faced (Feminist Media Project).

“Missingpeople.net”

Who: Wayne Leng

When: Launched 1999

What: A website devoted to the missing women including an archive of press stories on the women beginning in 1997.

Goal: To tell the stories of the missing women, to encourage attention regarding the disappearances and to facilitate contact between the different parties affected by the disappearances.

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